I. Introduction

In 2007, Governor Gregoire requested legislation under Washington's workers’ compensation laws to improve vocational services for injured workers. Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill 5920 directed L&I to pilot a number of changes to vocational services beginning January, 2008, and ending June, 2013, unless the legislature takes action to make the changes permanent or to extend the pilot period. This report describes the implementation and results to date of that legislation, called the Vocational Improvement Project (VIP).

The University of Washington was chosen to perform an independent review of the VIP changes. The final report from the researchers is due December 2012. The report found significant improvements in:

- the variety of choices available for retraining
- accountability for participants
- the percent of plans approved and reduced recycling time
- the goal of allowing workers the flexibility to pursue training or alternatives on their own. This did occur, and appears to have worked well for some workers.

There were not improvements, however, in:

- the percent of injured workers successfully completing retraining plans
- employment rates and earnings after retraining

It appears that the longer training period may be a challenge for some injured workers, and it’s possible that this may be offsetting the expected positive impacts of more engaging and appropriate retraining programs.

Although UW found no improvement in employment and earnings after retraining, the depth of the Great Recession made it very difficult to compare employment outcomes pre and post VIP. In addition, there has been relatively little time for a significant population of injured workers to complete the vocational process and training so that researchers can determine post-training outcomes. For these reasons, further analysis is needed to more fully understand the long-term effects of VIP.

II. Background:

Vocational Services Overview

A worker is eligible for vocational services when the department determines 1) that he or she is not employable due to the effects of the industrial injury or occupational
disease, 2) that the worker is physically able to participate in training, and 3) that training is both necessary and likely to make the worker employable.

About 2% of all injured workers or 6% of those entitled to time-loss benefits are found eligible for vocational services annually, (about 1,649 State Fund workers and 221 self-insured workers in FY12). Although this is a very small proportion of all workers who filed claims, these claims are generally the most complex with the highest potential to result in permanent disability. Building the knowledge and skill of these workers through formal vocational training is critical to restoring them to the workforce.

Private vocational rehabilitation counselors (VRCs) assist the department in determining whether a worker is eligible for vocational services. They work directly with eligible workers to develop a formal training plan that is submitted to the department for approval. Developing a plan is a complex challenge: the plan must address the worker’s medical conditions and restrictions (both those caused by the injury and those that are unrelated or pre-existing), and resolve all barriers to returning to work including lack of education and experience, lack of skills, language difficulties, and availability of employment in the worker’s labor market.

Prior to the VIP legislation, the existing legal framework presented several challenges to successful return to work:

- Training programs for workers were capped at one year and $4,000.00. *This limited benefit did not allow access to the majority of programs available at community and vocational technical colleges.*
- There were no alternatives to allow workers to decline participation in training. *Anecdotal evidence suggests that some workers were not motivated to complete retraining plans or that plans did not address their personal goals.*
- The system experienced unnecessary costs related to delays, unproductive attempts at retraining, and repeat referrals for plan development.
- L&I had no established links to other organizations in the state primarily involved in helping people with employment and training needs (e.g., WorkSource).

**2007: The VIP Legislation**

VIP (being piloted through June 30, 2013) is intended to “allow opportunities for eligible workers to participate in meaningful retraining in high demand occupations, improve successful return to work and achieve positive outcomes for workers, reduce the incidence of repeat vocational services, increase accountability and responsibility, and improve cost predictability.”
The VIP legislation made sweeping changes to vocational retraining in the worker’s compensation system. These include:

- A significant increase in training benefit levels, both the time and dollar limits for retraining, to improve access to programs.
- A new option for workers (Option 2) to elect self-directed training as an alternative to participating in an identified formal retraining plan.
- A call for increased marketing of on-the-job training opportunities with employers.
- Increased accountability for the department, employers, workers, and vocational providers including time limits on plan development, employer-of-injury job offers, and the department review and approval of plans.
- Direction to develop return-to-work plans for “high-demand occupations.”
- The placement of L&I staff in Washington WorkSource locations to provide vocational services to workers.

Additionally, the VIP legislation mandated an independent review and study of the changes, focused on determining the pilot’s success at achieving several specific outcomes (the results of this study are discussed in more detail further in this report). These include:

- Improved percentage of workers completing their training plans
- Workers being retrained for higher demand occupations
- Reduced cost to the system of delays and unproductive attempts at retraining
- Reduction of repeat attempts at training plan development services
- Partnerships with WorkSource to improve worker outcomes

Vocational Rehabilitation Subcommittee

The vocational rehabilitation subcommittee consists of four members appointed by the director to provide the business and labor partnership called for in the legislation. The current subcommittee members are:

Terry Peterson, Comprehensive Risk Management
Lori Daigle, Sellen Construction
Rebecca Johnson, Washington State Labor Council
Terri Herring, Washington State Association for Justice
The subcommittee has met several times, since the passage of VIP, and has been instrumental in the development of rules, policies, and communications; selection of the independent researcher and identification of research elements; selection of WorkSource sites; and discussion of internal measures to track the effects of the VIP changes. This group is also charged with recommending statutory changes needed to accomplish the goals of the pilot, which can include extending the pilot period, and/or adopting some or all aspects of the pilot on a permanent basis.

**Additional Changes to VIP in 2011**

House Bill 1726, enacted in 2011, addressed recommendations of the subcommittee to clarify and improve some aspects of the original VIP law. The following changes were included:

- It clarified that the time limit for vocational plan development starts the date the worker is notified of eligibility or the date of decision following a vocational dispute.
- An additional 10 days can now be provided for an employer to amend a job offer to a worker who is eligible for vocational services.
- An additional 10 days can be provided for a worker to choose option 2 when they provide an explanation of why the selection was not completed within 15 days. (Option 2, newly created by VIP, allows workers to select a cash vocational award rather than participate in a retraining plan. See page 5 for more explanation.)
- Language was added to clarify that a worker who elects option 2 benefits is not entitled to further time-loss or pension benefits unless their condition becomes worse, making closure of their claim inappropriate. In these cases, the option 2 election is rescinded and any option 2 benefits paid are recovered from time-loss or pension benefits.

**III. Overview of Expected Outcomes and Results to Date**

**Independent Review and Study**

The University of Washington was chosen to perform the independent review and study of the VIP changes. The department worked closely with the researchers and the vocational rehabilitation subcommittee to identify the research elements, which include the specific measures listed in the legislation. The scope includes workers covered by both the State Fund and self-insured employers. The analytical work relied on:

- L&I claims data
- Employment Security Department data for employment and earnings measures
- Two surveys of injured workers who had participated in vocational services
Summary of Outcomes

1) Improve the percentage of workers who successfully complete their training plan.
   - The percentage of workers who successfully complete a training plan has not increased. However, under the new system more workers attain skills to make them employable even if the plans (which are now longer on average) are not completed. In addition, a higher proportion of workers can now be held accountable when the plan fails due to their actions. These cases move to claim closure.

2) Retrain workers for higher demand occupations.
   - 74% of training goals approved for workers are now for high or balanced demand occupations. (A high demand occupation is one that is estimated to have more job openings than there are qualified candidates in a particular Washington labor market. A balanced demand occupation means that the demand for workers in that occupation is approximately equal to the supply of workers.) Baseline data for this outcome is not available for comparison.

3) Reduce costs to the system and employers by eliminating delays and unproductive attempts at vocational plan development and training.
   - VIP requires that training plans be developed and submitted within 90 days, and allows extensions only for good cause. The median time to submit a plan has dropped from 182 days prior to the implementation to 113 days as of June 30, 2011. Using average time-loss costs of $65 per day, and assuming an average reduction of 69 days for each case referred for plan development, reduced system costs equal $7.4 million for the 1,649 cases receiving these services in fiscal year (FY) 2012. Extensions are requested and allowed in 51% of cases; 49% of plans are submitted within 90 days.
   - Option 2, explained below, allows workers with an approved plan the opportunity to move toward immediate claim closure and to pursue self-directed training. This has resulted in more options for workers and savings for the system.

4) Reduce repeat referrals.
   - A second assignment for plan development can add significantly to the cost of a claim. The "repeat referral" rate has dropped by 35% under VIP, meaning that about 160 workers annually do not require a second attempt at
developing a plan. This is a savings of about $24,605 per case, or $3.9 million annually, (based on FY12 data).

5) Create partnerships with WorkSource to improve worker outcomes.

- Vocational services specialists are now helping workers at six WorkSource locations: Mt. Vernon, Renton, Tacoma, Tumwater, Spokane, and Kennewick. They guide workers to WorkSource resources, including workshops on resume writing, interviewing techniques and using the computer for job searches. Results so far suggest that workers are obtaining better outcomes when served under the WorkSource model.

IV. In-depth Discussion

**Self-Directed Retraining Alternative: Option 2**

A worker who is eligible for training is assigned a vocational counselor for development of a training plan. After the plan is approved by L&I, the worker has 15 days to choose either "option 1" or "option 2." A worker who chooses option 1 will participate in the approved training with oversight by the assigned VRC and the claim will remain open until training is completed. A worker who chooses option 2 elects to receive a vocational award equivalent to six months’ time-loss benefits, and will have access to training funds for self-directed training for up to five years. The worker’s claim is closed.

A comparison of claim costs for State Fund workers selecting an option in 2008 shows significantly decreased costs for those choosing option 2 compared to those choosing option 1. This is likely due to a variety of factors including:

- The difference between the option 2 vocational award (equivalent to six months’ time-loss benefits) and the average length of a training plan (the difference is about 460 days)
- Reduced average training costs as not all option 2 workers have chosen to use their available training funds to date
- Lower costs for vocational counselor services as option 2 workers participate in self-directed training

Overall, the current average claim cost compared to the average cost at the time of option choice showed option 1 claims higher by $47,351. Over time, this difference will change as costs further develop.

A total of 2,037 workers (about 27% of those with approved plans) have selected option 2 from January 2008 through June 30, 2011. About 18% of these workers have begun utilizing their training funds. The University of Washington will be reporting on these
workers to determine what types of employment they secure after claim closure and how they use their training funds.

Of these workers, 1,794 are insured with the State Fund. As of June 30, 2012, 119 (6%) have reopened their claim and new claims were filed by 151 (8%) of these workers. To date, the rates for reopening are comparable to the earlier baseline and the incidence of new claims is lower. This may change with additional time.

Of the 243 self-insured workers who chose option 2 and whose claim was closed, 7 (3%) have reopened their claims. New claims were filed by 16 (6%) of these workers.

**Increased Access**

**Increased Training Benefit**

The pre-2008 training benefit of up to one year and $4,000 provided access to few programs offered by community and vocational technical colleges.

VIP significantly increased the training benefit available so that injured workers would have access to a broader variety of programs. The intent was that this increased access would lead to broader skills, increased plan completion, and eventual employment at higher wages.

Specifically, in 2008, VIP allowed training costs of up to $12,000 for tuition, fees, and other costs and up to two years of training time. The tuition/fees limit is indexed annually to increases in Washington’s community college tuition and has increased over time to the current level of $17,599.11.

Schedule of maximum training benefits since VIP implementation:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>For Plans Approved</th>
<th>Dollar Limit</th>
<th>Percentage Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January 1, 2008</td>
<td>$12,000</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 1, 2008</td>
<td>$12,240.00</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 1, 2009</td>
<td>$13,096.80</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 1, 2010</td>
<td>$14,029.29</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 1, 2011</td>
<td>$15,713.49</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 1, 2012</td>
<td>$17,599.11</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As expected, both plan cost and duration has increased since the beginning of the pilot. In FY 2009, the average cost of a plan was about $9,000 for both State Fund and self-insured workers. It is currently at about $12,000 for both State Fund and self-insured workers, likely due to annual increases in state tuition rates. The median training plan duration is at 640 days and has stayed relatively stable.
Valid pre-VIP average data concerning the cost and duration of training plans cannot be determined. This is because the law allowed for a second year and an additional $4,000 at the discretion of the Supervisor of Industrial Insurance in certain cases. In addition, training plans would stop and restart, allowing workers to take full advantage of the limited time available. During these breaks in training, time-loss benefits would continue to be paid. This is not allowed under the new system and, as a result, training more often continues through typical breaks such as summer quarters.

The increased benefit has significantly expanded access to training programs where costs exceeded the pre-VIP benefit. Examples of plan goals approved under VIP include:

- Graphic designer
- Computer network technician
- General office clerk
- Phlebotomy technician
- Medical billing specialist

Higher Demand Occupations

Seventy-four percent of approved plans for State Fund and self-insured workers combined are for high or balanced demand job goals (56% high demand and 18% balanced demand). A high demand occupation is one that is projected to have more job openings than there are qualified candidates in a particular Washington labor market. A balanced demand occupation means that the demand for workers in that occupation is projected to be approximately equal to the supply of workers. It should be noted that while workers and VRCs are encouraged to choose high demand training goals, it is not a requirement.

We have determined that while high demand jobs may indicate a higher likelihood of employment, they do not necessarily equate to higher paying jobs. For example, the occupation of cashier is considered high demand in most labor markets even though the compensation for this work is typically at or just above the state minimum wage.

WorkSource Partnerships

The pilot directs L&I to establish partnerships at a number of WorkSource locations and to provide vocational services to injured workers from those locations. WorkSource is a nationally recognized system of one-stop career centers that offer employment and training services to job seekers and businesses through a partnership of government agencies, colleges, and non-profit organizations. The partnerships with WorkSource are intended to provide insight into whether services provided from this resource-rich, community environment result in better outcomes for workers.
L&I has placed vocational services specialists on site at six WorkSource locations: Mt. Vernon, Renton, Tacoma, Tumwater, Spokane, and Kennewick. These specialists are assessing workers’ ability to work, and helping them identify return-to-work options. They explain WorkSource resources, including workshops on resume writing, interviewing techniques and using the computer for job searches. Examples of vocational outcomes that are being measured:

- Workers who are assisted in return-to-work
- The speed of services delivered

The following table provides a comparison of outcomes of vocational services achieved by staff at WorkSource to services provided through the traditional one-on-one model involving a private VRC. These results suggest that vocational services provided at WorkSource are timelier, and achieve a higher return-to-work rate.
Median duration (days) by referral type (all referrals since 1/1/08)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Referral Type</th>
<th>WorkSource</th>
<th>Traditional Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Early Intervention</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to Work Assessment</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Percentage of return to work outcomes by referral type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Referral Type</th>
<th>WorkSource</th>
<th>Traditional Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Early Intervention</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to Work Assessment</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to providing vocational services to injured workers, we have raised the awareness of all injured workers and VRCs about the services offered at WorkSource by providing open house events for local VRCs, updating our web site, and communicating to workers, referring them to WorkSource for help.

**On-the-Job Training Opportunities**

Some workers are better suited to hands-on training rather than a classroom. The pilot calls for L&I to work with employers to market the benefits of on-the-job training (OJT) programs for injured workers and their employers, so these opportunities can be shared with VRCs and workers to consider when developing a training plan. Regional L&I staff located across the state market employers about the benefits of training and hiring injured workers. A brochure has been developed, “Are You an Employer Who Can Provide On-the-job Training?” We have set up a web site for sharing these opportunities: [http://www.lni.wa.gov/ClaimsIns/Voc/Ojt/Default.asp](http://www.lni.wa.gov/ClaimsIns/Voc/Ojt/Default.asp).

To date, OJT plans represent a relatively small proportion of all approved training plans (2% for both State Fund and self-insured). This is compared to a pre-VIP baseline of about 5%. We are told by vocational counselors that they are less likely to pursue OJT because of the statutory expectation that plans be developed within 90 days. VRCs tell us that it takes longer to develop an OJT. We have attempted to mitigate this concern by considering development of an OJT as valid criteria for granting an extension to the 90-day requirement. We believe the economic recession may have had a negative effect on employers’ willingness to provide OJT opportunities. To date, we have not been successful in increasing the use of OJTs as an alternative to formal training.
Reserve “Slots” with Community Colleges for High Demand Programs

The VIP legislation envisioned the development of “reserved” slots with training institutions that could be utilized for eligible workers. We explored this concept with representatives of the state college system and with private vocational counselors. We were not successful in identifying a viable way to make this concept work, primarily because our system does not allow L&I or a self-insured employer to “direct” workers to attend specific programs, unlike some other entities that provide adult training. As a result, we can’t guarantee to the training institution that slots will be filled.

Additional Vocational Assistance

The VIP law allows for additional time and/or training benefits to be expended, beyond the statutory limit, in cases where it is necessary to support the successful completion of a plan that will provide the worker with skills to become employable and avoid a total permanent disability pension. The decision to allow additional time and/or costs is at the director’s discretion. Since implementation of VIP, a total of 40 State Fund workers and 2 self-insured workers have received additional vocational assistance. The majority of these cases were due to tuition increases that occurred during the student’s program. Others were necessary because of changes in school curriculum. The average additional cost granted per person was $1,400. The average additional time granted was one month.

Reducing Delays

Reduced Time for Plan Development

We are continuing to save time and money by reducing the time it takes to develop a training plan. The target for plan development is 90 days under the law. About 49% of plans are submitted within 90 days. Those plans not submitted within 90 days require the private vocational counselor to request a “good cause extension.” These extensions account for the median being higher than 90 days.

The median time for State Fund plan development is currently 113 days. This is a savings of 69 days from the pre-legislation baseline of 182 days. Using average time-loss costs of $65 per day, and assuming an average reduction of 69 days for each case referred for plan development, reduced system costs equal $7.4 million for the 1,649 cases receiving these services in fiscal year (FY) 2012.
The median time for development of self-insured plans for the one year period ending June 2012 is 97 days. Baseline information prior to 2008 is not available for plans approved for workers covered by self-insured employers.

It’s important to note that plan development work is only one step in managing the vocational aspects of complex workers’ compensation claims. Other considerations such as the timing and completion of assessments of workers’ employability and vocational needs, and the completion of training programs also influence the duration of overall vocational services and costs.

Reduced Repeat Plan Development Referrals

We’ve reduced the number and proportion of workers who require more than one attempt to develop a viable training plan. Getting a result the first time means fewer delays and lower costs. A second assignment for plan development can add significantly to the cost of a claim. The “repeat referral” rate has dropped by 35%. This amounts to about 160 workers annually who do not require a second referral to develop a training plan. Compared to the frequency of repeat referrals prior to the passage of the legislation, this is a savings of $24,605 per case, or $3.9 million annually, (based on FY 12 referral data). We do not have baseline information for this measure for self-insured claims.

We attribute this success to increased accountability for all parties and close review of recommendations made by vocational counselors, resulting in an increase in the proportion of plans accepted:
• Workers and vocational counselors have clear expectations for developing a viable training plan.
• L&I vocational staff make key decisions regarding eligibility for training, helping to ensure that eligible workers are good candidates for a plan.

Employer Job Offers

Considerable effort is made early in every claim to maintain the relationship of the worker and his or her employer. Employers have a legal right to offer work consistent with the worker’s restrictions. The worker is obligated to accept a valid offer of employment or risk losing their time-loss benefits. If a worker can return to work for his or her employer at injury, training is not needed.

The VIP law contains a provision that stops training plan development and time-loss benefits if the employer at injury makes a valid job offer within 15 days of the date of the eligibility determination for the worker. After that, the employer may offer work, but the worker is not obligated to accept it. This right is explained to employers and workers with letters notifying them of the worker’s eligibility for training plan development.

This provision was clarified with the passage of House Bill 1726 (2011). Now, at the department’s discretion, an employer may be allowed an additional 10 days to amend a job offer. This change was made to address cases where an employer made a job offer in good faith, but the offer did not adequately address all job offer elements or the worker’s medical restrictions that may be corrected with additional time.
A total of 87 job offers have been made by employers since the VIP was implemented. This is about 1% of all workers found eligible during the period.

**Department Accountability**

A rehabilitation plan must be acted on in 15 days or it is “deemed approved.” Out of 7,400 plans submitted since January 2008, (including both State Fund and self-insured employers) 13 have been deemed approved. Department vocational staff take action on a plan in less than five days of receipt, on average.

**Retraining Plan Completion Rate**

Under the pilot, 56% of workers who began a retraining plan completed it. 55% of self-insured workers completed their plan. This compares to a baseline of 59% retraining plan completion (baseline is State Fund only). At the start of the pilot, we assumed that access to better training and a higher emphasis on accountability would result in a higher proportion of workers completing their training plan. So far, this has not been the case. We have actively examined possible causes. A study was undertaken in May 2011 to address the following questions:

- What worker characteristics are associated with plan non-completion?
- What is the incidence of plan non-completion for reasons beyond the worker’s control vs. for reasons within the worker’s control?

We closely examined 117 cases to find root causes for plan non-completion. We also examined the same elements in a sample of successfully completed plans. Following is an overview of our findings.

**Reasons Associated with Plan Non-completion**

- 69% of plans that are not completed have medical issues as a contributing factor. Of those, about half were for medical issues that were not covered or related to the claim.
- In 63% of non-completed plans, workers have grade and/or attendance issues.
- Ongoing opioid use is more prevalent in non-completed plans (59% vs. 29%).
- Psychological issues are more prevalent in non-completed plans (34% vs. 21%).
- Other factors include access to courses (about 4%), and death of the worker or an immediate family member (about 3%).
We found that 76% of non-completed plans had at least two factors that contributed to non-completion. Certain factors contributing to plan failure, such as the development of new or the deterioration of medical conditions, could be related to the increased length of retraining plans (more time for these issues to arise).

Likewise, increased retraining time under VIP provides more opportunity for a number of potentially varied issues to arise that could interfere with successful retraining plan completion such as grades and personal issues.

Plan Non-completion and Claim Closure

The VIP law says that a vocational plan interruption (non-completion) is considered outside the control of the worker when it is due to the closure of the accredited institution, death in the worker's immediate family, or documented changes in the worker's medical conditions under the claim. Also included in the non-completion numbers are workers who passed away while in their training plan.

Improvements in spite of Low Plan Completion Rate

Prior to the VIP changes, the system lacked foundation for holding workers accountable for failed plans when the failure was due to the worker’s actions. Now, where appropriate, benefits are suspended and claims moved to closure. This is currently occurring in about 30% of all failed plans. Prior to the VIP, claim managers determined, based on the facts of the case, that benefits could be suspended due to failed plans less than 12% of the time.

In addition, a higher proportion of workers are now found to have gained sufficient skills to be considered employable in spite of plan non-completion (15% vs. 10% of all non-completed plans prior to VIP).

Workers who Require More than One Plan

The VIP statute calls for the department to report on the number of workers who require more than one retraining plan and the industries that those workers were working in when injured, following the first plan. To date, we’ve identified one worker who meets this criterion. In this case, the second employer (where the most recent injury occurred) is eligible for relief of claim costs associated with the second plan. The worker, after having been trained as a welder and whose claim was subsequently closed, returned to work as a concrete cutter and was re-injured. The concrete cutter occupation is very heavy work and outside the worker’s medical restrictions.
Other Aspects of the Vocational Rehabilitation System

As noted previously, a relatively small proportion of injured workers become eligible for training. For example, out of a population of 92,000 State Fund claims (both those involving time-loss or other disability benefits and those for medical benefits only) whose claim closed in FY 2012:

- 27% or 24,493 had time-loss benefits paid
- 13% or 11,590 returned to work without department assistance
- 7% or 6,530 were assisted in return to work with employer at injury
- 6% or 5,197 underwent an assessment of employability
- 2% or 1,649 were determined eligible for training

L&I places primary emphasis on speedy and effective return-to-work assistance for workers and employers soon after an on-the-job injury. While these services are not part of the Vocational Improvement Project, they play a critical role in helping workers return quickly to gainful employment and helping employers maintain their skilled workforce while reducing overall costs.

Ability-to-work Assessment (AWA) is also not part of the VIP changes. AWA is a necessary step for adjudicating a worker’s claim when he or she does not return to work. It addresses whether the worker is able to work, or in need of training. The analysis is done by VRCs. About 700 AWA assignments are made each month. There are about 5,000 workers currently being assessed out of 18,500 active time-loss claims.

The average duration of an AWA has increased by about 100 days during the same period following adoption of the VIP changes. We believe that the VIP, while a contributing factor, is not a primary cause of the increase in duration. We currently have a Lean effort underway to reduce the time it takes to complete an AWA. We have identified clear standards and expectations for our claim staff and vocational counselors to quickly identify and deal with barriers. The effort began in 2011 and has already brought promising results. Since implementing Lean standards, we have reduced the median time for new AWA completion by 51 days.

Conclusions

VIP did not achieve the intended results in all areas. The use of OJTs as an alternative to formal training did not increase under VIP, as anticipated. We were not successful in identifying a viable way to implement the concept of “reserved slots” for workers within training institutions.
We’ve not seen improvement in the proportion of workers who successfully complete their plans. However, we are now able to hold workers accountable when a plan failure is due to their own actions. It should also be noted that the current success rate for our workers is comparable to success rates for similar organizations that provide retraining for adult populations.

Overall, the VIP changes have brought a number of positive results to the vocational system. By creating and clarifying time limitations and accountability, we have decreased time for plan development and re-referral rates, resulting in cost savings that offset any costs for longer training plans. The VIP changes have significantly expanded access for workers to gain broad skills development in high demand occupations. We’ve demonstrated that partnering with WorkSource can improve a worker’s access to employment. And, through VIP, we have created a viable alternative for workers who prefer to exit the system and pursue self-directed training on their own.