



How can workers' compensation systems promote occupational safety and health?

By Gina Ko ■ January 9, 2019

The National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) requested RAND Corporation, an American nonprofit policy think tank, to explore this very question with key stakeholders, in order to find ways to improve workers' compensation policies that better promote occupational safety and health.

RAND conducted a review of published perspectives regarding problems with current workers' compensation policy across the United States and then convened a series of stakeholder conversations with a small number of representatives from five key stakeholder types: workers, employers, claims administrators, state agency leaders, and occupational health care providers.

The review of published opinions highlighted five reoccurring problems with current workers' compensation policies. First, workers' compensation coverage remains less than universal with inadequate benefits. Second, significant problems remain in disability determination and medical treatment. Third, challenges remain in vocational rehabilitation and return to work. Fourth, safety promotion practices created complex claiming incentives. Finally, the complexity of workers' compensation systems dragged down the performance of those same systems.

For the most part, the stakeholders agreed with these problems. They also brought up additional issues, including: the need for greater emphasis on injury prevention and disability management; the erosion of coverage for workers; the failure of alternative work arrangements; dispute resolution processes that harm workers and drive up costs; and, the fragmented nature of the health care process for injured workers. In particular, the stakeholders felt that workers' compensation systems needed to be more integrated with the broader healthcare system to address and manage chronic conditions.

The stakeholders suggested a two-pronged research agenda for improving workers' compensation policies: first, develop new models and interventions for health care delivery, injury prevention, dispute resolution and disability prevention. Second, develop better data sets for monitoring worker health, with an emphasis on better understanding of causation and how occupational diseases and non-traumatic injuries are work-related. The stakeholders believed this would lead to better apportionment of disability between

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Promoting occupational safety and health? (continued)

occupational versus non-occupational causes. Moreover, an increase in available scientific evidence could help minimize dispute costs.

All stakeholders agreed that they wanted NIOSH to play a larger role in the evaluation and dissemination of workers' compensation policies and best practices related to occupational safety and health.

An interesting look into the common problems and pitfalls of workers' compensation systems, the research study – by Michael Dwork and Nicholas Broten – is [freely downloadable here](#).

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