Eight states have launched projects aiming to provide opportunities for people who experience mid-career disabilities to remain in and return to the workforce. After a competitive selection process, the U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy in partnership with DOL’s Employment and Training Administration and the Social Security Administration awarded eight states with funding for RETAIN Demonstration Projects.

The goal of RETAIN, or Retaining Employment and Talent after Injury/Illness Network, Demonstration Projects is to test the impact of early intervention strategies that improve stay-at-work/return-to-work outcomes. Stay-at-work/return-to-work initiatives provide timely and effective supports and services that allow employees to remain in the workforce and avoid long-term unemployment. Keeping people engaged in the workplace benefits all stakeholders including the employee, employer and state.

States hope to reduce long-term work disability and the need for Social Security Disability Insurance through the projects. Successful outcomes of similar programs in Washington state, such as the Early Return to Work (ERTW) program, are used as models.

California, Connecticut, Kansas, Kentucky, Minnesota, Ohio, Vermont and Washington were among the eight states awarded. While each has the same mission, the projects are adaptable to specific state needs. For example, California’s target population is CalSDI Program applicants who are still receiving cash benefits after one quarter of payments, and Vermont’s target population is work-related musculoskeletal injuries/illnesses.

Each state created a leadership team comprised of representatives from state health services, state workforce development, and other public and private stakeholders. The team will work to foster collaboration between health care providers and employers to assist injured or ill workers in remaining in the workforce.

“Starting off with committed partners across state government is going to set us up for strong successes,” Dr. Kathy Sheppard-Jones, a member of Kentucky’s RETAIN leadership team, said during CSG’s National Conference in December.

CSG will be providing technical assistance for Kentucky’s RETAIN Demonstration Project.

“CSG is excited for the opportunity to partner with the state of Kentucky to continue our dedication to creating an inclusive workforce. The RETAIN project is a continuation of our work on disability employment including our work with the State Exchange on Employment and Disability and our recently published Stay-at-Work/Return-to-Work Toolkit,” said Elizabeth Whitehouse, director of CSG’s Center of Innovation.

The projects will be funded in two phases. The eight states mentioned above were funded for the 18-month Phase 1 pilot project. After Phase 1, a subset of the recipients will competitively apply for Phase 2 funding. Phase 2 will include a 30-month project implementation and a 12-month evaluation.
Providing supports and services for people who have acquired mid-career disabilities strengthens quality of life of citizens, allows businesses to prosper, and stimulates state economies.

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