



RETAIN | Retaining Employment
and Talent After
Injury/Illness Network

RETAIN Phase 1 Interim Summaries

The Phase 1 Interim Summaries were completed in January 2021.

What Is RETAIN?

The Retaining Employment and Talent After Injury or Illness Network (RETAIN) is a federally funded initiative aimed at helping workers who become ill or injured remain in the labor force and reduce long-term work absences, including the need for Social Security Disability Insurance and Supplemental Security Income.

In 2018, eight states were awarded funds as part of RETAIN to develop programs that deliver targeted services to support working individuals who experience an injury or illness—either on- or off-the-job—that inhibits their ability to work. With coordinated practices and services from both workforce and health care experts, individuals receive either stay at work (SAW) or return to work (RTW) assistance as early as possible after an injury or illness begins to affect their ability to work. RETAIN will span 6.5 years and have two phases of funding. Phase 1, which began in September 2018 and will end in March 2021, includes planning and start-up activities and the launch of a small pilot program. By mid-2019, each state had started implementing their pilot program to serve injured or ill workers. At the end of Phase 1, a subset of the initial eight grantees will competitively receive funds to implement their programs on a larger scale in Phase 2, which will span 4 years—from April 2021 to April 2025.

RETAIN

*These **Interim Summaries** provide an overview of each RETAIN grantee's progress in implementing their SAW/RTW pilot program during Phase 1.*

Developing SAW/RTW programs that help injured or ill workers remain in the workforce is an ambitious endeavor. RETAIN state programs must develop, coordinate, and implement multiple steps to provide services to injured and ill workers. This process includes recruiting and convening new or existing partnerships across sectors, agencies, and in some cases, geographic areas. In many cases, these health care entities and workforce systems have historically not collaborated to help workers stay-at or return-to-work after an injury or illness. Each state program must appeal to the public and potential partners as they conduct outreach, recruitment, and enrollment activities. Finally, states must ensure that their services and partnership efforts achieve the goal of improving employment outcomes.

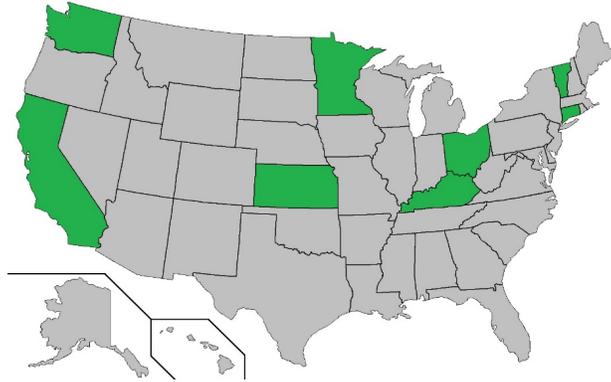
Who Sponsors RETAIN?

RETAIN is sponsored by the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) and Employment and Training Administration (ETA), and the Social Security Administration (SSA). ODEP and ETA lead the grant administration and SSA leads the formal evaluation of RETAIN. ODEP contracted with the American Institutes of Research to provide programmatic technical assistance (TA) to the state programs to help with planning, capacity building, and implementation. SSA contracted with Mathematica Policy Research to lead the formal evaluation and offer evaluation-related TA.

Which States Received Funding in Phase 1 of RETAIN?

The Phase 1 RETAIN state grantees are as follows:

- California
- Connecticut
- Kansas
- Kentucky
- Minnesota
- Ohio
- Vermont
- Washington



What Are Common Features Across RETAIN State Programs?

All the RETAIN state programs include core SAW/RTW services and have the following common elements:

- **Multisector and cross-agency partnerships.** Each program includes partnerships with workforce entities (e.g., workforce boards and American Job Centers), state departments of labor or commerce, vocational rehabilitation agencies, and health care entities (e.g., health care or hospital systems, primary care providers, and departments of health).
- **Integration of and focus on early intervention strategies.** Each program focuses on providing services as early as possible following the participant’s work disability onset, with the intention of enabling the participant’s SAW/RTW as soon as medically feasible. Early intervention practices include coordination among workers, health care providers, and employers; peer-to-peer supports for participants; outreach and training to health care clinical departments, industry, and employers; and individualized counseling.
- **Serving participants with musculoskeletal (MSK) injuries or illnesses.** The RETAIN state programs serve workers with a variety of injuries and illnesses, but every state program is focusing on workers with MSK conditions such as low back pain, sprains, or strains resulting from overexertion. In 2019, MSK conditions accounted for approximately 30 percent of work-related injuries requiring days away from work and were the primary diagnosis for roughly one-third of all SSDI disabled worker beneficiaries.¹

¹ Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020. Survey of Occupational Injuries and Illnesses, 2019, accessed online: <https://www.bls.gov/iif/data.htm>; Social Security Disability Insurance, 2020. “Annual Statistical Report on the Social Security Disability Insurance Program, 2019,” accessed online: https://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/statcomps/di_asr/index.html.

- **Key staff positions in the coordination and delivery of services.** Through positions such as the RTW coordinator, health services coordinator, resource navigator, or nurse navigator, each state has staff positions dedicated to the coordination of RETAIN services. These roles may have varied functions across states based on the expertise provided through the RETAIN partnerships, but generally focus on: providing individualized SAW/RTW planning services; coordinating among the workers, their employer, and their health care providers; screening for participant eligibility; and providing vocational or career counseling or discharge services.
- **Training for health care partners.** To support multisector partnership roles, the RETAIN states provide training for their health care providers in occupational health best practices. These best practices focus on: early communication and coordination across key stakeholders; developing activity plans and work restrictions that incorporate the provider’s treatment plan; and assessing barriers to RTW and developing strategies to overcome them. Additionally, training content may include administrative information about serving workers as part of RETAIN; health effects of unemployment; disability-related terms, accommodations, and state policies; the role of job site analyses, coordinated supports, and peer mentoring; and the impact of an illness or an injury that occurs off the job. This training assists health care providers in both building knowledge and understanding work as a positive health outcome.
- **Data sharing.** The RETAIN states share and integrate data across various systems to better inform service delivery and improve program processes—from outreach, enrollment, and participant placement with an employer to partnership engagement and activities—all with the ultimate goal of improving employment outcomes for workers who suffered an injury or an illness. In addition, data exchanges across partners can highlight strengths to leverage and areas of improvement to address within the RETAIN programs.

What Are Common Challenges Across RETAIN State Programs?

All the RETAIN state programs experienced program recruitment and enrollment challenges and faced COVID-19-related disruptions:

- **Recruitment and enrollment.** As commonly experienced in new service programs, recruiting and enrolling participants was a challenge across all eight states. As the states began implementing their programs, they faced challenges identifying and gaining access to referral pipelines for participants; identifying effective communication approaches and developing outreach strategies to support referrals; addressing the concerns of prospective participants; and delineating roles and responsibilities throughout the recruitment and enrollment process. Each state identified barriers and revised their action plans to address gaps in the communication process, and to leverage the collaborative composition of their programs.
- **COVID-19.** The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic caused many challenges for the RETAIN states, yet each state adapted to the unexpected circumstances. The delivery of intake services and health care provider appointments transitioned from in-person to virtual. Training for staff and RETAIN partners transitioned from in-person events to an online format. In addition, all states reviewed their work plans and service delivery approaches and identified ways to revise or enhance their programs during the pandemic. As RETAIN states resumed daily operations after pandemic-related disruptions, all states continued some elements of virtual service or remote learning as part of their program.

What Are the Differences Across RETAIN State Programs?

Each state's RETAIN program includes core SAW/RTW services, but their program designs reflect aspects specific to their regions, including partnerships, target participant populations, and approaches to outreach and recruitment. The RETAIN state programs vary in a few key areas:

- **Target population.** Although each state's focus population for RETAIN includes workers with MSK conditions, additional criteria for participation vary. These criteria include the restriction of serving only those with a non-work-related injury or illness, geographic criteria based on where a participant lives or works, the time frame of the injury/illness diagnosis, or related medical and age restrictions.
- **Lead agency.** All RETAIN state teams have a lead agency with key roles in the structure and implementation of RETAIN services. The lead agency type and focus vary across the states. This includes commerce, labor, workers' compensation, employment and economic development, vocational rehabilitation, and job and family services.
- **Recruitment processes.** Each state has its own unique process for recruiting and enrolling participants. For example, some states simultaneously conduct outreach to both participants and their workforce and health care providers; other states recruit and train health care providers before initiating participant outreach and enrollment. In both approaches, health care providers are a key source of participant referrals.
- **Established versus non-established partnerships.** Some RETAIN programs are built on existing partnerships within the state—for example, through previous or existing initiatives and networks, whereas other states relied on newly established partnerships. Both approaches involved challenges and successes. For previously established partnerships, strengths included the familiarity, knowledge, and expertise of the partners, processes, and areas of focus. The challenges included a greater need for flexibility to transcend the familiarity of roles or processes that require adaptation of the RETAIN model. For new partnerships, learning about each other's services, expertise, and processes in developing their program supported program planning in order to meet RETAIN goals. For some states, however, those elements served as challenges to efficient implementation.

In addition, specific features in some states might not be applicable in other states. These specific features are as follows:

- **California.** CalJOBS, the state of California's online job search system, is the primary data system for tracking participant activity. RETAIN California effectively uses this system to refine and improve the ways in which supports and allows resource navigators collect baseline data and track participant progress toward SAW/RTW goals.
- **Connecticut.** RETAIN Connecticut established a process for engaging, training, and maintaining relationships with RETAIN health care providers that includes action steps to support SAW/RTW as well as a billing code for providing RETAIN services. This process bolsters health care providers with strategies and information they need to support workers' SAW/RTW.
- **Kansas.** RETAIN Kansas effectively recruits health care providers and businesses to partner with their project through a series of "lunch-and-learn" sessions. Through these sessions, RETAIN Kansas has received referrals from both medical providers and workforce centers.

- **Kentucky.** RETAIN Kentucky uses effective universal design principles to support implementation efforts with a variety of accessible technology tools to provide high-quality services to employees who are at risk of exiting the workforce.
- **Minnesota.** RETAIN Minnesota engaged academic teaching and learning experts to create professional online training programs for clinicians using storyboards, case examples, and input from clinical experts to enhance credibility of the content. Through their health care partner, RETAIN participants also have been recruited based on completed Family and Medical Leave Act forms and a review of surgery schedules.
- **Ohio.** RETAIN Ohio integrated use of a “data lake” that combines data from health systems, Ohio’s workforce case management system, unemployment insurance wage records, and other sources. This secure system facilitates project reporting, and its goal is to support efforts to scale up and sustain SAW/RTW initiatives statewide across time.
- **Vermont.** RETAIN Vermont is developing an SAW/RTW services inventory database. This inventory is being compiled through expert interviews with RTW service providers and others to describe the scope of programs and services available throughout Vermont that support workers with injuries and illnesses. Through this work, the RETAIN Vermont team expanded its connections throughout the state and increased awareness of RETAIN.
- **Washington.** RETAIN Washington offers a dyad approach to service provision, unlike other states where SAW/RTW services are provided through the workforce system. RETAIN Washington participants receive SAW/RTW services from a care coordinator housed in a health care setting *and* a RTW coordinator housed in a workforce system. Care coordinators and RTW coordinators work collaboratively to help participants achieve their health and career goals.

Additional information for individual RETAIN state grantees is available in the individual state annual summaries, which are available at <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/odep/initiatives/saw-rtw/retain>.