



**RETAIN** Retaining Employment and Talent After Injury/Illness Network

## Phase 1 Interim Summary – Vermont

*The Phase 1 Interim Summaries were completed in January 2021.*

**RETAIN Vermont** offers a system of coordinated supports for injured or ill workers. This involves access to experienced care coordinators who serve as a bridge between health care providers, employers, and employees to support the stay at work (SAW) and return to work (RTW) process. They have taken a client-centered approach, driven by the goal of creating a sustainable system of SAW/RTW supports across the state. Their approach has helped to generate significant buy-in among health care providers about the role of early intervention to support SAW/RTW, raise awareness of work as an important health outcome, and underscore the importance of the RETAIN program.

### Program Description

**Partners.** The Vermont Department of Labor Workers' Compensation Division leads RETAIN Vermont. Their key partners are:

- Dartmouth-Hitchcock Workers' Compensation Center
- Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR), Department of Disabilities, Aging, and Independent Living
- OneCare Vermont
- The Vermont Workforce Development Board (WDB)

**Target Population.** The target population includes individuals across the state with work-related musculoskeletal (MSK) injuries.

**Service Coordination.** The RETAIN Vermont program centers on access to experienced care coordinators (CCs) who collaborate with health care providers and employers to support the RTW process. Vermont is working with six primary care provider (PCP) practices during the pilot. Participants are referred to RETAIN through their PCP, and the CC reaches out, conducts eligibility screening, enrolls interested participants, and coordinates services with the participant, employer, and health care provider.

### Program Successes

**Implementation and Participant Successes.** Since launching their program in 2019, a core part of RETAIN Vermont has been to gather information that will support scale up for Phase 2. For example, the program is developing an RTW Services Inventory Database, compiled through expert interviews with RTW providers to determine what types of programs and services are available throughout state to support individuals with injuries and illnesses that inhibit their ability to work. Through this effort, RETAIN Vermont also expanded their connections with programs and organizations throughout the state and increased awareness of RETAIN. Other efforts included conducting a needs assessment with focus groups of injured workers and health care providers to inform program strategy, documenting best practices for workers' compensation, and developing a training



*Vermont is participating in the Retaining Employment and Talent After Injury/Illness Network (RETAIN), sponsored by the U.S. Department of Labor in collaboration with the Social Security Administration. RETAIN states are building connections and improving coordination among employers, health care providers, and other key parties to help newly injured and ill workers stay in the workforce.*

program for occupational and physical therapists. In addition, RETAIN Vermont has automated the process for referrals and implemented an electronic medical records–based referral system for participating practices. The current enrollment rate is approximately 32 percent (158 referrals, 50 enrolled or pending enrollment as of September 2020), and nearly half of these participants have successfully returned to work.

**Outreach and Program Milestones.** RETAIN Vermont received a grant to work with the Recruitment Innovation Center (RIC) at Vanderbilt University. The RIC assessed Vermont’s programmatic approach and study design and developed an optimized strategic recruitment plan. RETAIN Vermont also successfully recruited and trained four PCPs on the administrative aspects of the program and on SAW/RTW best practices. As part of their employer engagement strategy, they are working with DVR, WDB, and the Vermont Chamber of Commerce to engage and train employers on RTW best practices. Even during the pandemic, RETAIN Vermont has successfully increased the program’s visibility among employers through outreach efforts such as presenting at the Governor’s COVID recovery forum, developing an online COVID Readiness to Work module and a COVID Readiness to Work checklist and self-assessment for workers and employers and creating an online forum with COVID-related RTW resources on the state’s Manufacturing Exchange website. Similar supports were also provided for OneCare Vermont.

## Program Challenges

**Challenges.** RETAIN Vermont experienced some challenges with planning and implementation. At the start of the program, there were delays in receiving state-level authorization to use RETAIN funds, which in turn delayed hiring and implementation. RETAIN Vermont also experienced programmatic challenges because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, scheduled trainings for employers were postponed. In addition, plans to train 50 physical and occupational therapists and other RTW service providers, in RTW best practices were put on hold after the pandemic led a partnering university to step back from the program. Further, participant enrollment and participant clinic visits also slowed down as the pandemic evolved.

**Strategies to Address Challenges.** Despite these challenges, the team continues to make progress and has taken steps to minimize the impact of these challenges. In particular, the team worked with state administrators to identify the reasons for the funding delay with the hopes of avoiding this challenge in the future. Due to COVID-19, RETAIN Vermont transitioned to an online format and is delivering the trainings using this approach until it is deemed safe to resume in-person trainings. They also developed a universal screening tool to identify all eligible participants at each practice. They continue to receive referrals from the practices that are currently enrolled in the project, and the rate of enrollment has increased markedly in the last months of the pilot.

## Looking Ahead

RETAIN Vermont continues to work with the RIC to optimize their recruitment, enrollment, and implementation strategies. In preparation for Phase 2, the RETAIN Vermont team continues to expand their RTW services inventory database and identify gaps between existing RTW services and needs across the state, including those related to substance use and mental health disorders. RETAIN Vermont is also planning to train physical and occupational therapists who are interested in providing work rehabilitation services in the community. Finally, the team is developing RTW CC training materials to facilitate the onboarding of new coordinators, a manual of operations, and database upgrades to support a program expansion.

*RETAIN Vermont has increased awareness among health care providers of work as an important health outcome. The shared acknowledgement among RETAIN partners that unemployment can be detrimental to health and ultimately lead to increased use of health services and higher health care costs is an important step in getting injured workers the early intervention services needed to help them stay at work or return to work.*

[vtretain.weebly.com](http://vtretain.weebly.com)