

The Right Help for the Right Workers at the Right Time Can Keep Them on the Job

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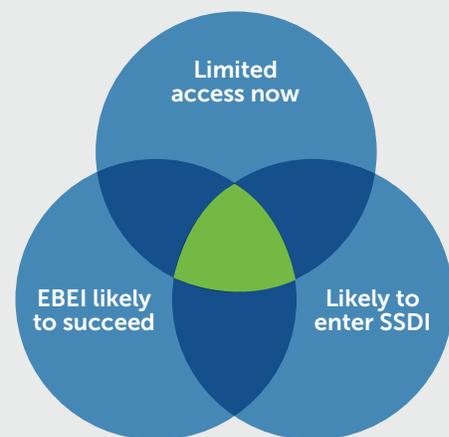
When a significant medical condition threatens a worker's ability to stay on the job, evidence-based early intervention (EBEI) could help the person remain productive, maintain his or her standard of living, and avoid depending on government programs. EBEI services and supports have been shown to be effective in getting people back to work after an absence that is minimal, given the nature of the condition. EBEI varies from worker to worker. It may include health, rehabilitation, or employment services; often involves coordination between the worker, a physician, other providers, and employers; and may provide cash or in-kind assistance to prevent the economic distress that could derail a person's effort to return to work. Once a threatening medical condition is recognized, the sooner EBEI starts, the better.

TARGET POPULATION

If expanding EBEI is to be economically viable, it should be carefully targeted to workers who have the best chance of reaping its benefits. It is most successful for workers who have a job. It should also be targeted to workers who are most likely to stay in the labor force if they have access to a broader range of services and supports. In addition, everyone in the target population has three characteristics in common: (1) limited access to EBEI; (2) are likely to exit the labor force and enter the Social Security Disability Insurance rolls if they do not get EBEI; and (3) are likely to stay in the labor force if they get EBEI (see figure 1).

Beyond these characteristics, research indicates that the target population for EBEI should include workers with musculoskeletal (MSK) or mental health disorders and possibly those with other chronic conditions that can be successfully managed with EBEI—especially workers at small or medium-sized companies who have less education or low

Figure 1.
Target population for EBEI expansion



wages, a low household income, limited access to quality health care, and no private disability benefits. Older workers should be included as well as younger workers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations below are options that states and the federal government may want to consider if they are interested in expanding EBEL. The recommendations were developed by a workgroup with expertise in private disability insurance, workers' compensation, return-to-work programs, occupational medicine, and vocational rehabilitation led by Dr. David Stapleton, director of Mathematica's Center for Studying Disability Policy. Ultimately, states are in a better position to expand this assistance to workers in the private sector, but they are not likely to do so without encouragement and support from the federal government. Furthermore, the states and the federal government can expand EBEL for their own employees in the target population.

Actions for state governments

- State governments should consider developing a strategic plan for expanding EBEL to workers in their target population as part of their Workforce Innovation and Opportunity (WIOA) strategic plan, drawing on resources and programs that are already available.
- States should review their employees' access to EBEL, encourage local governments to do the same, and if necessary, consider how to expand access to workers whose access is limited.

Actions for the federal government

- Federal agencies should identify opportunities in WIOA programs for supporting state expansion of EBEL assistance to workers in the target population.
- To support federal contractors in their effort to bring the share of their employees with disabilities up to at least seven percent, the Department of Labor's Office of Federal Contracts Compliance Programs should encourage contractors to expand access to EBEL.
- The Office of Personnel Management, in collaboration with DOL, should determine how much access federal workers have to EBEL assistance and consider how to expand it to federal workers in the target population.
- Expand the evidence base for early intervention
 - Conduct case studies of state efforts to expand EBEL.
 - Enroll workers in the target population in EBEL demonstrations while they are still employed in order to achieve the greatest success in terms of sustained employment and self-sufficiency.
 - Designers of federal demonstrations that focus on early intervention should consider incorporating and testing proprietary tools that support the delivery of EBEL services.

For more information about the Stay-at-Work/Return-to-Work Policy Collaborative please contact R2WPolicy@mathematica-mpr.com.

Reference

Stapleton, David, Robert Burns, Benjamin Doornink, Mary Harris, Robert Anfield, Winthrop Cashdollar, Brian Gifford, and Kevin Ufier. "Targeting Early Intervention to Workers Who Need Help to Stay in the Labor Force." Final report submitted to the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy. Washington, DC: Mathematica Policy Research, October 2015.

