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Model Systems
Knowledge Translation
Center

Employment After Spinal Cord Injury (SCI)

A resource for individuals with SCI and their supporters



This presentation is based on SCI Model Systems research and was developed with support from the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR).

Visit www.MSKTC.org for additional SCI resources.

What this resource addresses



- Why work is important for individuals with spinal cord injury (SCI)
- Laws that protect individuals with SCI who seek work
- What vocational rehabilitation is and how it works
- How vocational rehabilitation is funded
- How to balance work and benefits
- How to benefit from volunteering

The importance of work



- Work enables you to earn income and benefits.
- Work provides opportunities for social interactions.
- Research shows that those who return to work after SCI live longer, more satisfying, and healthier lives than those who do not.

Returning to work after a spinal cord injury



- Many individuals with SCI want to return to work.
- Some with SCI face barriers (including physical limitations, lack of health care, and/or negative employer attitudes) that can make finding work difficult.
- Support, training, and vocational rehabilitation can help overcome these barriers.

The Americans with Disabilities Act protects you



- The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is Federal legislation passed in 1990 and amended in 2008 that protects the rights of individuals with disabilities.
- Almost all individuals with SCI qualify for protection under ADA.
- ADA prohibits discrimination in employment based on disability.
- ADA requires employers to provide reasonable accommodations to individuals with a disability.

Vocational rehabilitation helps you return to work



- Vocational rehabilitation programs help individuals with disabilities find or keep jobs.
- Services include:
 - Education and training
 - Counseling and guidance
 - Aid in applying for jobs
 - Help with accommodations at work, including assistive technology

Who pays for vocational rehabilitation?



- Some private insurance companies pay for vocational rehabilitation.
- Federally mandated State-funded vocational rehabilitation programs are free.
- State workers' compensation programs also pay for vocational rehabilitation.
- For individuals with military-related disabilities, the U.S. Veterans Administration (VA) provides free vocational rehabilitation.

How does vocational rehabilitation work?

First steps



- Talk to your physician or social worker or click [here](#) to find a local vocational rehabilitation office.
- Your vocational rehabilitation counselor will begin by gathering information on your interests, skills, health needs, work and education histories, and personality type.
- Your counselor will also help you assess the job and wage markets.
- You may need to complete interviews, questionnaires, and aptitude and academic tests.

Practical on-the-job experience



- Your counselor may be able to set up a “trial” work period with a prospective employer.
- These trials may be paid or unpaid.
- The trial lets the employer judge whether you are a good fit for the company and to see what accommodations might be needed.
- The trial gives you a chance to see whether you like the job and are able to perform its duties.

Setting goals



- The end goal of vocational rehabilitation is to help you decide on a rewarding and practical career to pursue.
- There could be, however, some middle steps that you should carefully discuss with your counselor. For example, you may need to reach a certain level of education or physical endurance before you can be hired for a job you want.
- Your counselor can help you assess, plan, and achieve these intermediate goals.

Landing a job



- Once you receive job offers, your counselor can help you judge whether a potential job would be a good fit for you.
- Through job analysis, your counselor can provide insight on:
 - Actual day-to-day tasks
 - Cognitive, social, and physical demands of the job
 - Possible accommodations

Getting support at work



- You may need ongoing support at work after you are hired.
- Typically, your employer does not pay for this assistance, so you must find funding sources beforehand.

Types of accommodations



- Accommodations may include modifying work schedules, shifting tasks, or changing the work environment. Examples include:
 - Raising the height of a desk to accommodate a wheelchair.
 - Providing a private changing area for individuals who have occasional bladder accidents.
 - Shifting to a later start time to give an individual time to attend to morning care needs.

Negotiating work and benefits



- Sometimes, people do not want to start work because they are afraid of losing their benefits from Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), Supplementary Security Income (SSI), or long-term disability (LTD) insurance.
- The cost of getting to and from work might also be a concern.
- Work-incentive programs let individuals with disabilities receive insurance benefits while still keeping some work income.

What if employment is not possible?



- Sometimes, individuals are unable to find work after SCI.
- In this case, a person may be eligible to receive disability payments from the Social Security Administration (SSA).
- A person injured on the job could also receive benefits as a pension from workers' compensation.
- A person who worked before injury could also receive benefits from SSDI or LTD.

What to do if it is likely you will not return to work for at least a year



- You should immediately apply for SSA benefits.
 - Enrollees are immediately eligible for State Medicaid benefits and, after a waiting period, for Federal Medicare benefits.
- You should also apply for SSDI or LTD if you are eligible.

The case for volunteering



- If paid employment is not possible, consider volunteering.
- Benefits of volunteering include:
 - Enjoyment and a sense of accomplishment
 - Opportunity to develop new job skills
 - Professional contacts that could lead to paid employment in the future

Learn more

- [Contact](#) the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission for information related to employment discrimination.
- [Find](#) a local vocational rehabilitation office.
- [Access](#) the Americans with Disabilities Act.
- [Read](#) about Social Security Administration benefits.
- [Review](#) the Model Systems factsheet on SCI and employment.

About the Model Systems Knowledge Translation Center

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