

Chapter 22

Saskatchewan Workers' Compensation Board— Coordinating Injured Workers' Return to Work

1.0 MAIN POINTS

The Saskatchewan Workers' Compensation Board (WCB) is still in the early stages of addressing six recommendations we made in our 2016 audit related to its processes for coordinating workers' return to work. Return-to-work programs are essential to get an injured worker back to suitable and productive employment.

WCB refers to a time-loss claim as claims resulting from reported workplace injury where an injured worker cannot work. WCB reported it accepted 7,963 time-loss claims in 2021 and 7,134 in 2020. WCB's average annual claim duration target is 38 days. The average claim duration was 40.24 days in 2021 and 45.27 days in 2020.

WCB is undertaking a significant claims transformation process initiative under its broader five to seven year Business Transformation Program established in 2020. The transformation affects all six outstanding recommendations. WCB expects to leverage the functionality of a new claims IT system and update to its processes not only to address the six recommendations, but also to support the best outcomes for its customers, claims processes, structures, and systems.

WCB plans to implement the recommendations by December 2025.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes our second follow-up of management's actions on our 2016 recommendations as of January 31, 2022.

In 2016, we assessed the Saskatchewan Workers' Compensation Board's processes to coordinate injured workers' return to work. Our *2016 Report – Volume 2, Chapter 31*, concluded that for the 12-month period ended August 31, 2016, other than in the areas of the six recommendations we made, WCB had effective processes to effectively coordinate workers' return to work.¹ In our follow-up audit in *2019 Report – Volume 2, Chapter 43*, some initial work began on implementing the recommendations we made in 2016.²

WCB operates under the authority of *The Workers' Compensation Act, 2013*. By law, WCB has the duty to consult and cooperate with injured workers in the development of rehabilitation plans intended to return them to positions of independence in suitable, productive employment.³

¹ *2016 Report – Volume 2, Chapter 31*, pp. 217–233.

² *2019 Report – Volume 2, Chapter 43*, pp. 318–321.

³ Section 19(1) of *The Workers' Compensation Act, 2013*.



WCB delivers workplace insurance to Saskatchewan employers and benefits to Saskatchewan workers when they are hurt at work.⁴ It has a return-to-work program as expected by the Act. The Act recognizes that injured workers, employers, healthcare professionals, and WCB must work together in a return-to-work program. It assigns responsibilities to each group.⁵

To conduct this audit engagement, we followed the standards for assurance engagements published in the *CPA Canada Handbook—Assurance* (CSAE 3001). To evaluate WCB's progress toward meeting our recommendations, we used the relevant criteria from the original audit. WCB's management agreed with the criteria in the original audit.

At January 31, 2022, WCB is undertaking a three to five year claims transformation process initiative under its broader multi-year Business Transformation Program. This transformation affects all of the six outstanding recommendations. The transformation initiative includes reshaping its claim processes, systems, and structures. As a result, our audit work included discussions with management and examining plans to change processes.

3.0 STATUS OF RECOMMENDATIONS

This section sets out each recommendation including the date on which the Standing Committee on Public Accounts agreed to the recommendation and the status of the recommendation at January 31, 2022.

3.1 Working to Actively Obtain Requested Reports Timely

We recommended, for claims requiring recovery and return-to-work plans, Saskatchewan Workers' Compensation Board consistently record its communications with injured workers, employers, and healthcare professionals. (2016 Report – Volume 2, p. 225, Recommendation 1; Public Accounts Committee agreement October 10, 2018)

Status—Partially Implemented

We recommended, for claims requiring recovery and return-to-work plans, Saskatchewan Workers' Compensation Board actively obtain requested reports (e.g., injury and recovery progress reports) from injured workers, employers, and healthcare professionals. (2016 Report – Volume 2, p. 226, Recommendation 2; Public Accounts Committee agreement October 10, 2018)

Status—Partially Implemented

Saskatchewan Workers' Compensation Board is still in the early stages of improving its processes to record communication with injured workers, employers, and healthcare professionals. It also still needs to actively obtain reports from injured workers, employers, and healthcare professionals. WCB continues to work on process improvements as part of its claims transformation initiative (to be complete by December 2025).

⁴ www.wcb.sask.ca/about-us (20 October 2021).

⁵ *The Workers' Compensation Act, 2013*, s. 44(1)(a), 51, 53, 55–57.

In 2019, we found WCB changed its expectations for initial contact with injured workers from 10 business days to five business days of assigning cases to its Case Management Unit. Regardless of the standard used, five or 10 business days, initial communication with injured workers occurred within the expected timeframe for 83% of cases tested. This means 17% of the time, injured workers were not having initial contact with WCB in a timely manner, which affects timely return to work.⁶ At January 2022, WCB management indicated challenges regarding timely communications with injured workers continue to exist.

As part of its claims transformation initiative, WCB is developing and testing new communication standards with injured workers and employers. It plans to pilot employer communication standards in spring 2022, and complete the overall transformation initiative by December 2025.

In 2019, WCB set expectations for the receipt of medical reports for certain healthcare providers. For example, receipt of an initial assessment report from a healthcare provider is expected within three business days of the injured worker's initial appointment. In the past, we found WCB was not always receiving initial and progress reports timely from healthcare providers.⁷ WCB management indicated delays continue to occur.

As part of the claims transformation initiative, WCB identified its first priority is to update injured workers' reports required from healthcare providers to only include relevant information to enhance the recovery and return-to-work process.⁸ This work is planned for 2022. WCB also intends to implement a future IT system to allow for electronic reporting capability from healthcare providers by December 2025.

Without early communication to obtain complete information from injured workers, employers, and healthcare professionals, WCB is unable to coordinate an accurate and timely return-to-work plan.

3.2 Complete Return-to-Work Plans Dependent on Complete Information

We recommended, for claims requiring recovery and return-to-work plans, Saskatchewan Workers' Compensation Board verify the completeness and currency of those plans and the agreement of injured worker and related employer with the plan. (2016 Report – Volume 2, p. 228, Recommendation 3; Public Accounts Committee agreement October 10, 2018)

Status—Not Implemented

Saskatchewan Workers' Compensation Board still needs to verify completeness and currency of recovery and return-to-work plans. WCB plans to make process improvements as part of its claims transformation initiative (to be complete by December 2025).

⁶ 2019 Report – Volume 2, Chapter 43, pp. 318–319, testing from August 1, 2017 to August 31, 2019.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Injured Worker Reports include all relevant information to the injury sustained such as type of injury, injury date, and injury cause.



In 2019 we found, WCB was assessing how to standardize its recovery and return-to-work plans and promote consistency in creating and completing the plans. At that time, 30% of the files tested lacked a documented return-to-work plan.⁹ At January 2022, WCB management indicated return-to-work plan documentation challenges continue to exist.

WCB management noted process improvements outlined in **Section 3.1**, which will support receipt of necessary information in a timely manner, are expected to assist in completing timely and accurate return-to-work plans. For example, electronic reporting capability will support timely receipt and documentation of all necessary information.

Incomplete or missing return-to-work plans increase the risk of WCB not knowing whether injured workers receive appropriate support (e.g., WCB staff may not know they need to arrange for alternate healthcare appointments thus delaying recovery and the workers return to work).

3.3 Working to Identify Impediments to Recovery

We recommended, for claims with recovery and return-to-work plans, Saskatchewan Workers' Compensation Board identify and address impediments to timely recovery of injured workers within a reasonable timeframe. (2016 Report – Volume 2, p. 230, Recommendation 4; Public Accounts Committee agreement October 10, 2018)

Status—Not Implemented

Saskatchewan Workers' Compensation Board is beginning to work to identify and address impediments to timely recovery of injured workers since the last follow-up audit in 2019. WCB plans to use its future IT system (to be implemented by December 2025) to identify high-risk claims and help build appropriate return-to-work plans.

WCB undertakes a secondary assessment to determine why an injured worker is not progressing as expected.¹⁰ In 2019, we found WCB outlined when it needed to conduct a secondary assessment based on set criteria (e.g., a broken arm should heal in four to six weeks but did not). However, with inconsistent documentation in the recovery and return-to-work plans (see also **Section 3.2**), it was not always clear when secondary assessment is required.

As part of the claims transformation initiative, in December 2021, WCB began to identify impediments (e.g., case complexity) to injured workers successfully returning to work. It is working on a risk-based model to help identify high-risk (to recovery and/or return to work) claims to help build appropriate return-to-work plans. It plans to pilot the model in 2022. It then expects to use its future IT system (to be implemented by December 2025) to identify high-risk claims.

Without an effective process for WCB to identify and address impediments for a timely return-to-work plan, injured workers may not be receiving appropriate treatments and/or interventions to ensure their recovery within a reasonable timeframe.

⁹ 2019 Report – Volume 2, Chapter 43, p. 320.

¹⁰ Ibid.

3.4 Automation Expected to Support Complete Reports

We recommended Saskatchewan Workers' Compensation Board educate injured workers, employers, and healthcare professionals to increase their submission of properly completed injury and progress reports for the return-to-work program. (2016 Report – Volume 2, p. 231, Recommendation 5; Public Accounts Committee agreement October 10, 2018)

Status—Partially Implemented

Saskatchewan Workers' Compensation Board made progress in educating stakeholders (e.g., injured workers, employers, and healthcare professionals) to increase submission of properly completed injury and progress reports and expects its future IT system to enhance reporting from healthcare providers.

In 2019, we found WCB continued to provide information (e.g., presentations, brochures) regarding its return-to-work program to various stakeholders. WCB provided information on its website for stakeholders identifying the importance of each party's role in the program and the expected report submission times and frequency. WCB often did not receive requested information on time and, where it did receive requested information, at times, it was incomplete.¹¹ Some of the documents provided to stakeholders (e.g., support packages for healthcare providers) outlined report submission timing while others discussed the need for timely report submissions, but did not define what the WCB considers timely.¹²

In addition, WCB plans to promote the National Institute of Disability Management and Research's education models in disability management and return to work to employers and its staff in 2022. This will assist in educating employers and staff on key information needed to support return-to-work plans.

WCB plans to implement a new IT system and address this recommendation by December 2025.

Not receiving timely and complete reporting from employers, injured workers and healthcare professionals may negatively impact an injured worker's treatment, recovery and return to work.

3.5 Monitoring the Success of the Return-to-Work Program to Come

We recommended Saskatchewan Workers' Compensation Board track and analyze key information about the quality and timeliness of its return-to-work program. (2016 Report – Volume 2, p. 232, Recommendation 6; Public Accounts Committee agreement October 10, 2018)

Status—Not Implemented

¹¹ 2019 Report – Volume 2, Chapter 43, p. 321.

¹² Ibid.



Saskatchewan Workers' Compensation Board still needs to track and analyze key information about quality and timeliness of its return-to-work program. WCB continues to work on process improvements as part of its claims transformation initiative.

In 2019, WCB indicated it was in the early stages of identifying the analytic tools it needed to evaluate its return-to-work program.¹³

WCB expects its planned new IT system to have the functions to analyze key information (e.g., high-risk claims). WCB expects to implement the new IT system by December 2025.

Not tracking and analyzing key information about the quality and timeliness of its return-to-work program increases the risk of WCB not identifying opportunities to use this program to reduce the duration of time-loss claims and return injured workers to work.

¹³ [2019 Report – Volume 2, Chapter 43](#), p. 321.