

Evaluation of an Innovative Vocational Rehabilitation Pilot Program in Washington State

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Introduction

Engrossed Substitute Senate Bill (ESSB) 5920 from the 2007 legislative session created a pilot Vocational Improvement Program (VIP) in an effort to make needed improvements to the workers' compensation vocational rehabilitation system. The Washington State Department of Labor and Industries (L&I) contracted with the University of Washington (UW) to conduct an independent evaluation. We recommended that the VIP be continued on a permanent basis, and that a subcommittee remain intact in order to monitor progress and make further adjustments as needed. Research findings are the responsibility of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of L&I.

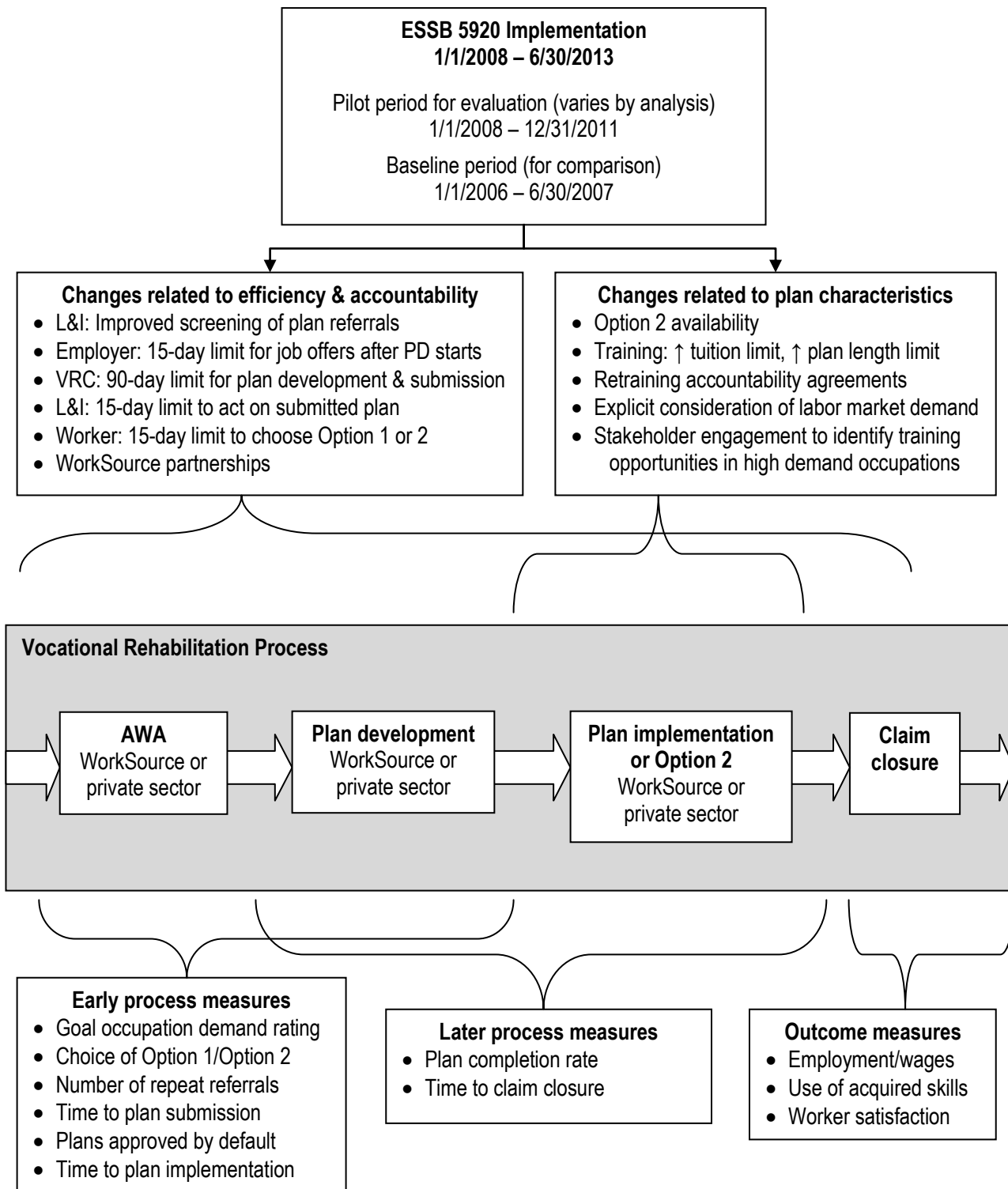
The legislation implemented the following changes from January 1, 2008 through June 30, 2013:

- Provides access to better training opportunities by increasing available tuition to up to \$12,000 and allowing programs up to two years. The benefit amount is indexed to changes in Washington's community college tuition rates.
- Permits eligible workers to select an alternative to retraining (Option 2) and instead receive a vocational award equivalent to six months of time-loss, and immediately close their claim, with the ability to use their retraining funds after claim closure.
- Increases accountability for the worker and VRC by requiring accountability agreements, defining acceptable reasons for interrupting a plan and establishing time limits on plan development.
- Sets expectations for employers by limiting valid job offers by employers that must be accepted by the worker to those within 15 days of plan development commencing.
- Sets expectations for the department by requiring them to act on a submitted plan within 15 days or the plan is deemed approved.
- Establishes partnerships with a number of WorkSource locations and provides vocational services from these locations.
- Creates new return-to-work opportunities by engaging with business and labor organizations to identify or establish training opportunities in high-demand occupations focusing on keeping workers in their industry of choice.

Data Sources

1. L&I's administrative claims and vocational rehabilitation databases (N=57,048)
2. Wage data from the Employment Security Department (ESD)
3. Data from two surveys conducted specifically for this evaluation
 - a. Survey A collected baseline data from 361 workers as they were determined eligible and referred for plan development, before Option1/Option 2 selection
 - b. Survey B collected follow-up information on use of acquired skills, employment outcomes, and satisfaction from 360 workers, 3-6 months after claim closure

Evaluation Approach



Note: Upper brackets indicate process region affected by each change category.
Lower brackets indicate process region captured by each group of measures.

Summary of Key Evaluation Findings

Program Components	Measures & Effect
WorkSource	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RTW for WorkSource EI referrals vs private VRCs ↑ • RTW for WorkSource AWA referrals vs private VRCs ~
Efficiency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Repeat AWA referrals ↑ • Repeat PD referrals ↑ • Repeat PI referrals ↑ • Time for plan submission to L&I ↑ • Time for plan approval by L&I ↑ • Time from plan development referral to retraining ↑ • Percent of plans completed ~ • Time from plan completion to claim closure ↑
Training strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Percent OTJ vs formal retraining (VIP vs pre-pilot) ↓ • RTW for formal retraining plan (vs OTJ plans) ↓ • Plan completion for longer plans ~ • RTW for longer plans (>1 year vs ≤1 year) ~ • Mean RTW wage for longer plans ~
Labor market demand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RTW for high demand plans vs others ~
Option choice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Worker satisfaction (Option 2 vs Option 1) ~ • RTW for Option 2 vs Option 1 ~
VIP outcomes*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RTW for completed plans only (VIP vs pre-pilot) ~ • RTW for all plans (VIP vs pre-pilot) ↓

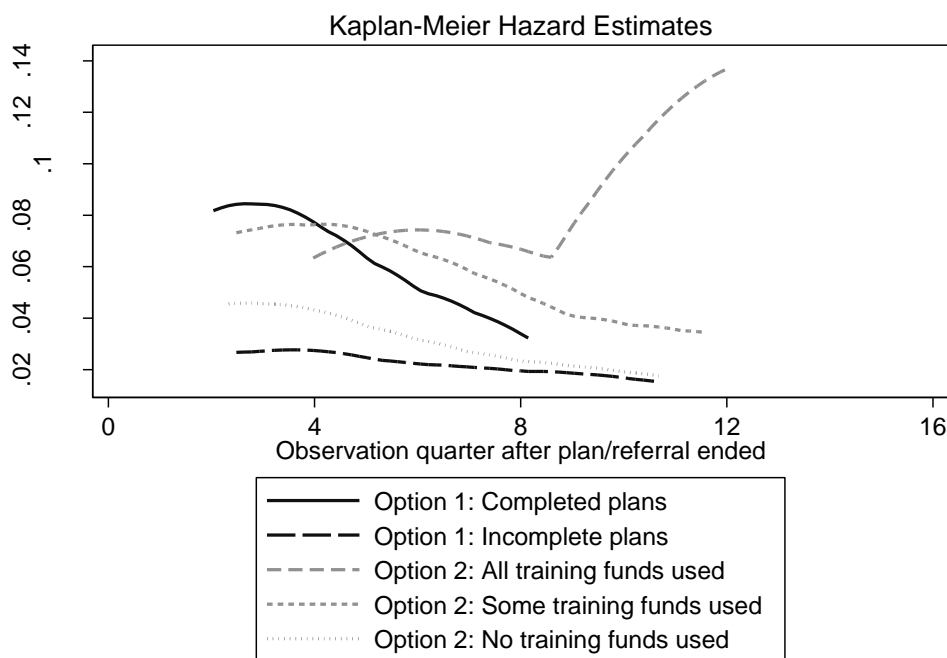
*Although we controlled for unemployment rate, it is unclear how much of the reduction in RTW was due to the economic recession rather than the VIP.

Notes: An upward (vs. downward) arrow indicates a statistically significant benefit or improvement. In some cases the arrows represent a summary of related findings, not all of which may have the same direction of effect or statistical significance. A tilde (~) indicates mixed findings or no statistically significant difference.

Option choice subgroups (plan completion and use of retraining funds)

Subgroup	N	Percent
Option 1: Completed plans	1,209	32.4
Option 1: Incomplete plans	1,059	28.4
Option 2: All retraining funds used	18	0.5
Option 2: Some retraining funds used	223	6.0
Option 2: No retraining funds used	1,220	32.7
Total	3,729	100.0

Probability of first occurrence of any ESD wages over time by option subgroup



Workers' opinions

- Prior to retraining plan development, most workers (69%) had positive opinions about the workers' compensation system in general and the vocational rehabilitation system more specifically. Negative opinions were strongly associated with having been referred for plan development more than once and with more time passing since the injury (among other factors). Workers heading into retraining plan development tended to overestimate their likelihood of future RTW and were more satisfied at that time than they were after vocational rehabilitation services had ended.
- The most frequently reported reasons that workers didn't complete their Option 1 retraining plan were: (1) the training was too hard (38%), and (2) inability to physically continue training (26%).
- The most frequent primary reason for choosing Option 2 was being physically or emotionally incapable of Option 1 (27%). 57% of Option 2 workers stated that their retraining plan would have been a poor fit, either physically, emotionally, logistically, or in terms of their own interests.
- The two most frequently suggested improvements to the vocational rehabilitation system were: (1) that there be more training choices, more worker input into the retraining goal, and/or a better fit of the retraining goal with the workers' experience and abilities (25% overall, and > 36% of Option 2 workers), and (2) that various players listen to, respect, and/or understand the worker (e.g., their interests, goals, and limitations) (17% overall, and > 27% of Option 2 workers).