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CSAC Challenge Award Submission

Category: Government Finance, Administration & Technology

Title: Fire / Risk Management Enhanced Workers' Compensation Unit

Please accept this submission from the County of Ventura, County Executive Office Risk Management Department for the CSAC Challenge Award category of Government Finance, Administration & Technology for 2020.

Overview: Firefighting is dangerous; Workers' compensation is costly. An improper mix spells disaster. Ventura County's enhanced workers' compensation unit is controlling costs and returning personnel to work.

Challenge: By the very nature of their work, few firefighters escape a full career without having suffered an occupational illness or injury. The claims run the gamut from minor first aid to life threatening and debilitating injuries and illnesses. Fire personnel are entitled to enhanced lost time benefits, paying their full salary, tax-free for up to one year while unable to work. This can act as a disincentive to return to anything but full duty. Public safety considerations dictate that field positions must be back-filled with co-workers able to perform the full complement of duties. This causes soaring overtime expenses to make up for the staffing shortage. If Risk Management and Fire Department management don't have the same goals in mind, the benefit structure makes controlling workers' compensation costs difficult to manage.

What common goals can these two departments develop when their missions are so diverse?

Solution: Ventura County Risk Management and the Ventura County Fire Protection District have partnered, setting their sights to 1) expedite medical care, 2) return injured employees to work and 3) control workers' compensation costs. The enhanced program grew out of an ala cart menu of potential options presented to fire management in 2018. From seven options, the Fire District has selected and invested in three enhancements. The first enhancement merely improved communication which led to discovering common goals and methods to improve return to work efforts and managing difficult claims. This led to Fire's investment of their own budget to add claims staff to allow for more individualized attention to claims. The latest enhancement partnered the two county departments with an orthopedic group to sensitize the physicians to the cost drivers and importance of returning employees to work and relieve treatment delays identified by the medical group.

Innovation: The unique feature to Ventura County's fire enhanced program resides in the partnership developed between the County Executive Offices' Risk Management Department and Fire management. The building blocks of maintaining sufficient claims staff to keep file counts low, granting superior levels of authority to cooperative medical groups and finding transitional "light duty" assignments for injured workers while they recover are not entirely novel ideas. But taken together and embraced by the management at the Ventura County Fire Protection District has resulted in a program that is effectively returning emergency responders to work and saving costs, providing return on the program investment.

Results: In the program's first full calendar year of operation, there were **1,519 fewer lost days** due to workers' compensation injuries, as compared to the prior year. It has also led to accomplishing many administrative tasks and discovering innovative programs by injured employees returned to work during their recovery phase.

Replicability: There is nothing about this program that cannot be replicated across the state. It takes a commitment for Fire management and Risk Management to partner to find and mitigate pain points in the program. Understanding of the workers' compensation process and cost drivers will guide decisions for system improvement. It starts with the development of a trusting relationship and willingness to try "something new" by Risk Management and the department they serve

Contact: For further information, you may contact:

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Submission Attachment: Public Safety Enhanced Work Comp Proposal Powerpoint

Sincerely,

Chuck Poda

Chuck Poda
Senior Deputy Executive Officer / Risk Manager