

RETAIN Helps Build a Stronger, More Resilient Workforce

Each year, millions of workers experience an injury or illness that limits their ability to work, costing workers, businesses, and the economy hundreds of billions of dollars per year.

- For workers, an injury or illness can significantly interfere with their ability to obtain or maintain employment and hinder financial and emotional well-being.
- For businesses, a worker's injury or illness can reduce productivity and increase business costs.
- For communities, injury and illness can decrease overall economic activity and increase reliance on disability benefits.

People with work-limiting injury or illness are often left to manage their health care, benefits, and job accommodations on their own. Yet, each of these systems involves stakeholders with their own goals and incentives, which may not always align with the worker's goal of staying employed. This incongruity can lead to needless work absences, creating financial strain for workers and increasing their likelihood of enrolling in federal disability benefit programs.

Timely intervention gets people back to work, which benefits everyone.

Purpose

Retaining Employment and Talent After Injury/Illness Network (RETAIN) programs helped people with recent injuries or illnesses stay at work or return to work by intervening early to provide coordinated health care and employment services. RETAIN programs aimed to keep people employed and reduce the need for Social Security Disability Insurance and Supplemental Security Income.

Funding and Structure

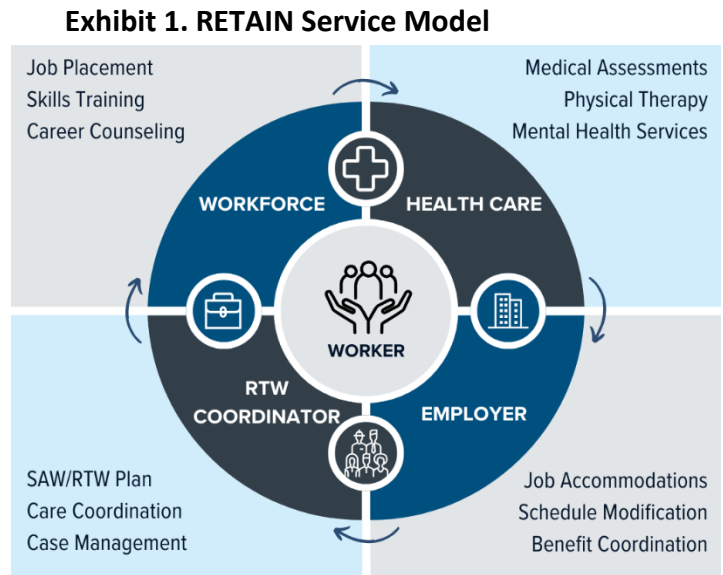
RETAIN was the first federally funded early intervention initiative to coordinate health care and employment services to help people stay at work or return to work after experiencing a work-limiting injury or illness. It was a joint initiative of the Office of Disability Employment Policy, the Employment and Training Administration, and the Chief Evaluation Office at the U.S. Department of Labor, and the Social Security Administration.

RETAIN lasted for six and a half years and was funded in two phases. Phase 1, which focused on planning and piloting stay-at-work/return-to-work programs, included eight states: Kansas, Kentucky, Minnesota, Ohio, Vermont, California, Connecticut, and Washington. Phase 2 included Kansas, Kentucky, Minnesota, Ohio, and Vermont and focused on expanding and improving the programs developed in Phase 1.

The RETAIN Model

RETAIN programs were based on an enhanced version of the successful [Centers of Occupational Health & Education](#) model, which operates within Washington State’s workers’ compensation system. RETAIN sought to improve employment outcomes for injured or ill workers by ensuring timely support and enhanced communication throughout the stay-at-work/return-to-work (SAW/RTW) process.

RETAIN programs also fostered collaboration between workers, employers, health care providers, and the workforce system (Exhibit 1). This coordination helped workers get back to work faster by bridging critical gaps in services and forging partnerships between independent systems and organizations that had rarely collaborated before. Ultimately, RETAIN programs enabled systems change to better serve workers and championed the idea that employment is a positive health outcome and a key social determinant of health.



RETAIN Services

RETAIN programs provided three core services to people in the labor force with recent injuries or illnesses, including people with musculoskeletal or mental health conditions:

Health Care Provider Services

- Developing activity plans and work restrictions
- Assessing participants’ ability to work and identifying strategies to overcome barriers
- Providing alternatives to opioids for pain management

RTW Coordination Services

- Identifying participant needs, developing a RTW plan, and tracking progress
- Coordinating health care and employment services
- Advocating for the worker

Workforce Services

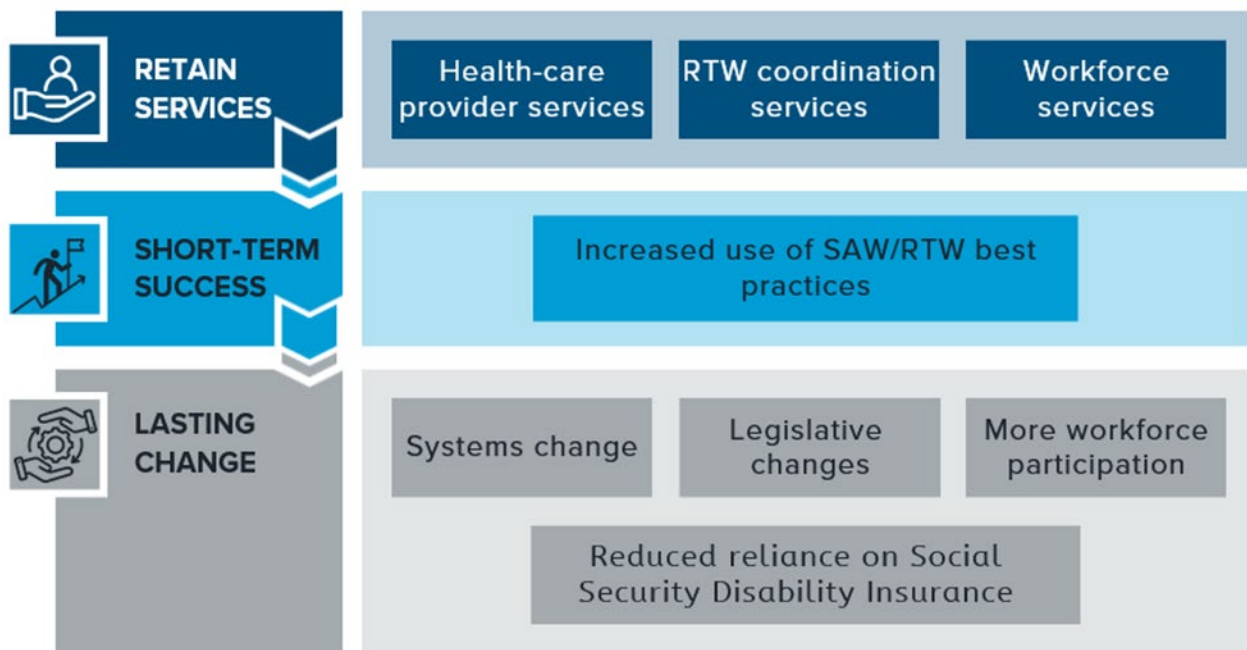
- Providing career assessments, training, and job placement services
- Supporting workplace-based interventions like accommodations for tasks, schedules, and worksites

The RETAIN Difference

State RETAIN programs served more than 14,000 participants through March 2025 and are continuing to enroll people until May 2026. The programs built enduring relationships between health care providers, workforce development agencies, and employers. They also gave providers and businesses a new perspective on SAW/RTW and accessibility.

Many RETAIN programs are sustaining their efforts beyond the grant period, promoting new legislation, and supporting broader use of SAW/RTW best practices among health care providers and employers. Exhibit 2 shows how RETAIN services fostered lasting change.

Exhibit 2. The RETAIN Difference



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