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**A Look at Advocacy Programs:
How They Maximize the Value of Medical Care and Facilitate Recovery**

Advocacy is a concept that has been introduced and advanced within the workers' compensation community in recent years as a way to reduce claims costs, increase productivity, and improve the overall claims experience of the injured employee. While taking many forms, advocacy programs are rooted in making the injured employee a priority and showing concern for the individual's overall health and well-being. Additionally, it can involve explaining the claims process and available benefits, using technology to improve communications, and offering additional resources such as pain coaching or behavioral specialists.

The Importance of Medical Care

Clearly, access to quality medical care and the recovery environment of an injured employee will have a large impact on the outcome of a claim. Effectiveness is driven by how quickly care is administered and the appropriateness of the treatment that is provided. Recovery is also dependent upon claims philosophy, employee engagement, co-morbidities, psycho-social issues, and pain management. It can be improved by explaining the claims process and available benefits, using technology to improve communications, and offering additional resources such as pain coaching or behavioral specialists. Recovery is also improved with a holistic approach that treats the whole person with a focus on both physical and mental well-being.

Claim Complexities Can Delay Recovery and Increase Costs

Industry data indicates that claim complexities lead to higher claims costs. For example, claims requiring surgery are more costly than those using less conservative treatment and they do not always produce the best outcomes. Pain medications can be overprescribed creating greater problems than those instances where alternative pain relief alternatives are used. Further poor medical outcomes generally lead to longer claims durations. Employees may be out of work longer leading to lower productivity and higher costs. Complex claims can also result in higher litigation rates and legal costs.

When questions go unanswered, fear and apprehension set in. Often, workers will seek outside legal counsel for issues that could have been resolved internally. Moreover, these types of situations lead to poor employee experiences and put excessive strain on the injured worker and their families.

Creative Care Solutions Can Facilitate Recovery and Lower Costs

The good news is there are some creative care solutions employers can use to facilitate recovery and lower costs. Employee advocacy programs that underscore employee needs as a top priority have been shown to be extremely effective. These approaches focus on ways to actively engage the injured employee in the recovery process

Some of the more popular advocacy techniques used to maximize the value of medical care and speed recovery are listed below:

Quality Medical Care. Timely access to and delivery of quality medical care is critical. Advocacy models sometimes use provider benchmarking to identify quality physicians who have been shown to consistently deliver effective medical treatment and produce desired outcomes. Advocacy models place less emphasis on negotiating volume discounts with medical providers and more emphasis on treating with proven providers who repeatedly deliver desired outcomes and results.

Increasing Medical literacy. Helping an employee understand their own medical situation and improve their medical literacy are extremely important. This includes sharing information about the potential impact of pre-existing conditions, current medications, and other factors that can impact recovery. It also includes coaching employees about active measures they can take such as exercise and nutrition.

Communications. Communications that explain the claims process up front and provide knowledgeable resources throughout the process are very helpful. Communications should help the employee understand how to access other benefit programs for which they are eligible. These types of communications help alleviate fear, confusion and apprehension during a very stressful and uncertain time. Fewer questions and less uncertainty allow an injured employee to focus on getting well. In many cases, these types of communications can reduce an employee's need to seek outside legal counsel.

Technology. Technology can improve employee experience. Like today's consumers, injured workers have come to expect information access 24/7. Portals that can be accessed from any personal computer or smartphones are convenient ways to share claims or medical information. Moreover, push notifications can provide claim updates or appointment reminders. Some mobile apps provide recovery education and wearables can help track such activities as exercise or sleep. Telehealth is making medical follow-up more convenient and increasing adherence to prescribed treatment plans. While not

intended to replace human compassion and concern, technology has been shown to offer convenience, improve communications and facilitate a faster recovery.

Decision Optimization. The use of decision optimization is another way claim complexities can be addressed. Decision optimization starts evaluating claims at the first report of injury and then continuously looks for specific data points as the claim progresses to ensure early intervention. Decision optimization is also better able to identify those claims that would benefit from case management or another managed care solution. The use of decision optimization has significantly improved the ability to more accurately identify when case management is needed. The decision is now based on methods that have been proven to provide faster intervention and reduce costs. Using technology advancements, decision optimization is one way to use data to make better decisions on when to deploy clinical resources and changing the projected outcome for the claim.

Advocacy Programs Achieve Results

Employers emphasizing advocacy are placing less emphasis on cost reduction and more emphasis on injured employee experience using empathy and advocacy techniques. Early adopters have shown that while advocacy programs can take many forms, they are soundly rooted in making the injured employee a priority and showing concern for the individual's overall health and well-being. Advocacy proponents claim that this approach not only improves injured worker satisfaction, it can create financial dividends by reducing litigation rates, medical costs and claim durations.