

# The Benefits of Volunteering

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## HIGHLIGHTS

Injured workers may struggle with depression related to the significant change a workplace injury has brought into their lives and a program that includes temporary, modified light duty with nonprofit agencies can by providing meaningful, productive transitional work.

Research indicates volunteerism lowers mortality rates, improves functional ability, and lowers rates of depression.

Volunteering can positively influence a person's sense of purpose, providing greater life satisfaction, as it creates a new role for the injured worker, filling the void that the workplace injury created.

Volunteering can boost a person's social network, leading to a greater sense of self-worth and helping to avoid feelings of isolation, buffering stress, and reducing risk of disease.

Studies showed that even those with chronic or serious injury can realize "benefits beyond what can be achieved through medical care."

In a study by United Healthcare and VolunteerMatch, the majority of those who volunteer (93%) reported that volunteering keeps them physically active and (84%) said it improves their physical health.

## If It's "Good for You" It Can't Be Good ... Or Can It?

**We are fortunate to live in a time when modern medicine and technology enable major improvements in many injuries. Yet one of the very simplest of therapies has proven to be one of the most effective—volunteerism. According to an article by the Corporation for National & Community Service, volunteering lowers mortality rates, improves functional ability, and lowers rates of depression. Modern medicine can't hold a candle to the benefits that volunteering offers!**

In the early 1970's, the "Mikey" Life® cereal commercial was one of the longest running and most famous commercials of all time. In a world of sugar-laden cereal goodness with cool names like Lucky Charms® and Sugar Smacks®, it was a pretty tough sell to get kids to try a wholesome grain bowl of something brown sold by adults as "it's supposed to be good for you." The commercial's message was successfully launched as two older brothers pawned their cereal onto their baby brother, "Mikey," the finicky eater of the trio. Miraculously, Mikey actually liked the cereal and changed the way kids looked at nutrition.

In workers' compensation, most employees do not always view their employer's return to work (RTW) program as "good for you" or satisfying. Every state encourages employers to create early return-to-work programs to accommodate injured workers. Clearly, it is designed to reduce claim costs. However, the states also frown upon employers creating boring, mind-numbing modified duty positions, which may cause employees to suffer rather than promote recovery. Some states refer to this as a scheme or in terms such as "make work," sheltered employment or selective employment. No matter the characterization, it's not a good policy.

So, if an employer's RTW program actually made injured employees feel good and they enjoyed performing worthwhile and valuable services while gradually recovering in a safe environment, why wouldn't every jurisdiction support such a concept? Fortunately, most states support employers using RTW programs that offer wages for injured employees to provide services in the community by helping at food banks, animal rescues, outreach centers, thrift stores or disaster aid agencies, just to name a few.

It seems incredulous that an injured worker's attorney would object to an employer paying his or her client wages to work light duty while volunteering for a charitable organization—an organization that relies on the generosity of others and supports the local community where the employee lives. Yet, once the objection is made, despite the physician's approval, the courts must evaluate if this modified duty meets the statutory objective of transitional duty. Have we become

so skeptical that, like Mikey, we do not realize that something good for the employer and the insurance company can be good for the employee too? Can we, as an industry, change the way we look at RTW programs?

## The Benefits of Volunteering

We are fortunate to live in a time when modern medicine and technology enable major improvements in many injuries. Yet one of the very simplest of therapies has proven to be one of the most effective—volunteerism. According to an article by the Corporation for National & Community Service, volunteering lowers mortality rates, improves functional ability, and lowers rates of depression.<sup>1</sup> Modern medicine can't hold a candle to the benefits that volunteering offers!

Study after study shows the struggle that injured workers have with depression related to the significant change a workplace injury has brought into their lives. Even when an injured worker is released to temporary, or modified light duty, the stress of the disability, reduced income, difficulty in returning to work, withdrawal from the labor market, and dealing with the injury itself could lead to depression.<sup>2</sup>

The concept of volunteering at a nonprofit as a means of transitional work for an injured worker is not new, but the significant benefits of this type of work continue to be realized. Employees who have participated in ReEmployAbility's Transition2Work program have experienced these benefits first hand.

*"I'm thankful for the opportunity to work at the {thrift} store. I feel that if I didn't have this opportunity, I wouldn't have a reason to get up each morning. I feel that this is really helping me keep moving and healing and I'm anxious to get back to work."*

- Tim, Service Technician

## Personal Sense of Purpose and Accomplishment

When employees start to send letters to their employers expressing their gratitude for the opportunity to volunteer while recovering, you know you are on to something.

*"Restore (Habitat for Humanity) has been great. I do light duty there. It's close for me and the people are great. I am the store floor walker, as Jack calls me, and I keep very busy every day ... I miss it and them on my days off! I love the people and most love me (so I hear)! I have done a lot of good and hard work within my restrictions. I plan on volunteering in winter when slow at work."*

- Jim, Truck Driver

"Positive feedback from injured workers and employers alike have been the norm for us at ReEmployAbility," said Debra Livingston, co-founder. "It's really a good feeling to see the benefits of volunteering coming to fruition in not one but thousands of cases."

According to the Corporation for National & Community Service article, volunteering positively influences a person's sense of purpose. And, as a result of this positive social psychological factor, volunteers have lower risks for poor health. This is attributed to what is called the "social integration theory," which says that the roles and number of roles a person holds in his/her life (i.e., wife, mother, sister, employee, manager, etc.) can provide personal meaning and drive a sense of purpose and life satisfaction. An injured worker who is out of work loses his/her role. However, it can be enhanced when this person becomes a "volunteer" or "mentor" and even a "friend." Volunteering creates a new role for the injured worker, filling that void that the workplace injury created.

Volunteering can also boost a person's social network, which helps to avoid isolation during difficult periods, buffers stress, and reduces risk of disease. These social ties greatly attribute to a personal sense of accomplishment and purpose. Added with the experience of helping others, volunteering leads to a sense of greater self-worth and trust.

## Live Longer

A study by Van Willigen (2000) confirms that, "in general, volunteers report greater life satisfaction and better physical health than do non-volunteers, and their life satisfaction and physical health improves at a greater rate as a result of volunteering" (p.6). The article also highlights

studies by Sabin (1993) and Rogers (1996) that show that “even when controlling for other factors such as age, health, and gender, research has found that when individuals volunteer, they are more likely to live longer” (p. 8).<sup>3</sup>

“We hear ‘it’s better to give than receive’ and this is a good example of why,” said Frances Ford, ReEmployAbility co-founder. “The life satisfaction and sense of community that an injured worker receives through this volunteer position is the reward he or she receives when they give of their time, and essentially of themselves. Case after case, this is always the outcome.”

## Benefits “Beyond Medical Care”

The benefits of volunteering clearly add up to and sound as if they would be equally beneficial to injured workers. Much of this research was performed on healthy individuals; however, the article also cited several studies that also looked at the effects of volunteering on those with chronic or serious illness. In the case of a workplace injury, this could be the case.

Interestingly, these studies showed that even those with chronic or serious injury, volunteering delivers “benefits beyond what can be achieved through medical care” (p.9). Arnstein et al (2002) proved that, by volunteering, chronic pain sufferers saw a decrease in pain intensity and levels of disability and depression, and a study by Sullivan and Sullivan (1997), showed a reduction in despair and depression, and a greater sense of purpose for chronic pain sufferers.<sup>4</sup>

In a study by United Healthcare and VolunteerMatch, the majority of those who volunteer (93%) reported that volunteering keeps them physically active and (84%) said it improves their physical health. Additionally, 81% of those surveyed reported that volunteering gives them control over their health, including chronic conditions.

The United Healthcare/VolunteerMatch study also showed that the majority (92%) of volunteers attribute an improved well-being and deepened sense of purpose in life because of volunteering, with 73% citing that volunteering lowers their stress levels.<sup>5</sup>

*“I have to say thank you for sending me to Ditto’s for my work assignment. I have been blessed by them in more ways than I can count. I never work a day that someone doesn’t stop me to just say thanks for being here. I know it has been years since I have been this needed and appreciated. I know I will miss these people when I have to go back to the “real” world. In this day and age, they have reaffirmed to me how you are to treat one another in a workplace. I have loved it.”*

- B.W., Truck Driver

## Injured Workers and Volunteering in Practice

All of the research makes a strong case that putting injured workers into volunteer roles can be a boon to their physical and mental well-being. But how does this work in practice? In 2007, ReEmployAbility introduced Transition2Work, a transitional employment program that places injured workers released to modified, light duty on a temporary, volunteer assignment with a local nonprofit organization. The program enables the injured worker to become reacquainted with the work experience following a period of disability.

However, from the results of the program, and feedback from the injured workers, employers, and nonprofit organizations, we’ve been able to attest that the benefits of volunteering really do apply to injured workers.

*“...I have learned a lot about my community...These people really helped with my disabilities in trying to help me in every way possible...Even when my back pain was so great these people cared told me just take my time, whatever they could do to help me they would. These people are very special to me not as an employer I have found new friends which has helped me through a very irritating time in my life back to work...These people were really good to me. I would come back here in a minute. I thank you for this job ... I thank God there are such good people to help me with my back to work program.”*

- Bob, Truck Driver

## Win-win Situation for All

The benefits of volunteering on an injured worker's return to work are significant. Study after study supports the decrease in depression and increase in personal self-worth and purpose. On top of that, our own program's results have shown that the injured worker benefits in "more ways than medical," the nonprofit and the community benefits from the help, and the employer limits the workers' compensation costs. No, volunteerism isn't a newly discovered medicine; it's so much better.

In a time when workers' compensation costs continue to escalate, and RTW programs are necessary for compliance and cost savings, it's refreshing to know that a non-traditional program can be enjoyable and beneficial to all parties. Like Life cereal, it is possible for a RTW program to be good for the employer, the injured worker AND feel good too! One might even say that a RTW program in which an employee performs community service for their wages and benefits provides just the right combination for sweet success.

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<sup>1</sup> Corporation for National and Community Service, Office of Research and Policy Development. The Health Benefits of Volunteering: A Review of Recent Research, Washington, DC, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Kim J. (2013). Depression as a psychosocial consequence of occupational injury in the US working population: findings from the medical expenditure panel survey. BMC Public Health. 2013 Apr 5;13:303. doi: 10.1186/1471-2458-13-303. PubMed PMID: 23560685; PubMed Central PMCID: PMC3635882, Retrieved from: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23560685>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Taylor Nelson Sofres, United Healthcare/VolunteerMatch Do Good Live Well Study, Reviewing the benefits of volunteering, March 2010.