

## **Reasonable Accommodation Case Study – King County, Washington**

### **Effective Disability Services with Centralized Funding for Accommodations**

King County, Washington is located on Puget Sound in Western Washington State, surrounding the city of Seattle. It covers more than 2,200 square miles with King County being nearly twice as large as the average county in the United States.

The County provides services to more than 1.7 million people and ranks as the 12th most populous county in the nation. The county has more than 13,000 employees across 13 departments.

#### Disability Management Services

##### Personnel Interviewed:

Ms. Jenny Haykin, CRC, Lead Disability Specialist  
Ms. Sue Ammeter, Disability Services Specialist  
Ms. Rebecca Hicks, Disability Services Specialist  
Mr. Mark Liberty, Disability Services Associate  
Ms. Beverly Anderson, Manager, Claims Division

Disability Services in King County provides services across a number of departments to include Adult and Juvenile Detention, Assessments, Community and Human Services, King County Council, Development and Environmental Services, District Court, Office of the King County Executive, Executive Services, Judicial Administration, Natural Resources and Parks, Public Health, the Sheriff's Office, and the Department of Transportation. There are two disability services units, one specific to the Department of Transportation, the other under Safety and Claims provides disability accommodation services to all other departments.

Disability Services is under the Director of Safety and Claims, with the Claims section being separate (although there is close and well interwoven communication). The Claims section has a lead person and 9 claims officers as King County is self-insured and self-administered for purposes of Workers' Compensation.

Disabilities services has a lead (CRC), two disability specialists, and one associate. The Department of Transportation also has one disability specialist. The lead specialist is responsible for supervision and a number of ongoing projects including updating County policy on disability accommodation, maintaining the job analysis (JA) bank on all jobs and refining the JA form, and provides training for managers, supervisors, and employees. The disability specialists are principally responsible for disability accommodation and, in some cases, benefits coordination. The associate is responsible for all reassignment activity throughout County departments.

Historically, and as recently as 1997, there was only one disability specialist for the entire County (this is not an unusual Northwest public sector situation as currently there is only

one for the City of Seattle with 12,000 employees and one for the University of Washington). An extensive effort has been made on the part of this unit to render disability services more accessible and user-friendly to all stakeholders. This includes interactions with unions, interactions with the Prosecutor's Office for legal counsel, use of County safety officers / ergonomists for consultation, and close interaction with staff within the County's own Employee Assistance Program (EAP).

The principle goal of Disability Services is to coordinate reasonable accommodations for County employees with disabilities. If the disability prevents an employee from performing their job, Disability Services facilitates medical leave, benefits, transitional duty, and reassignment services as needed. As requested by Disability Services, the long-term disability carrier CIGNA utilizes the county's job analyses in determining vocational capacity and eligibility for long-term disability. This approach avoids an outdated US Dictionary of Occupational Titles' review.

The Disability Services team maintains stringent case standards to include 24 hour phone contact or 48 hour e-mail contact from the date of referral. Case notes reflect all services provided. A server-based system is used so that all Disability Services personnel can access all case notes thus assuring the on-going provision of services during staff absences.

Accommodations are identified internally by Disability Services staff, whenever possible. If an employee requires equipment or devices, The Disability Services Equipment Bank or County funds are utilized for the provision of the equipment. Ergonomic Engineers, Occupational Therapists, Physical Therapists, organizations serving people with disabilities, and other resources are utilized as needed to identify accommodations. In the last fiscal year, the Disability Services staff was responsible for serving 453 individuals.

It is of interest that training on The Americans with Disabilities Act is required for all County supervisors on a continuing schedule. In addition, disability awareness training is available to County employees. The training for supervisors is particularly of interest because case examples are used, it is an interactive process, and supervisors are actually required to "brainstorm" accommodation options through these case studies. There is also an effort on the part of Disability Services to take into account feedback from both supervisors and employees throughout the training offered. This is a very interactive process.

In relation to disability and accommodation needs, employees definitely have a choice. They can approach a supervisor about their needs, seek off-site medical resources, or talk directly to Disability Services personnel who are housed in a confidential setting. Workbooks have been developed (e.g., specific to accommodation or reassignment) so that useful information is easily available to the worker.

#### Unique Aspects of this Program

The services provided by this program are continually evaluated and improved by the program staff.

A continuing effort is made to make this program user-friendly to all stakeholders and to revise it based upon both administration and employee feedback.

Workers have the ability to review the Disability Specialists' background and expertise on the county web site, and use these personnel as resources or other internal and external personnel as beneficial and desirable.

There are collaborative efforts across a number of units to include Claims, the Employee Assistance Program, safety officers, the long-term insurer, etc. and all seem to truly work in the best interest of the worker with a disability.

Due to training and other outreach efforts by the Disability Services unit, there is not necessarily one point of contact with Disability Services. Initial contact can come as readily from a worker as from a supervisor or claims officer. They are efficient in serving the needs of the employee with a disability.

For information regarding this Case Study contact:

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