

## WORKERS' COMPENSATION BOARD

# Injured workers balked by retraining methods

By VERONICA RHODES  
Leader-Post

There is nothing Steve Wagner would rather do than work.

But since suffering a knee injury on the job in 1986, when he was a 22-year-old carpet layer, Wagner has struggled to find a job or to be retrained. His wife is working three jobs to support their three kids while Wagner suffers from overwhelming guilt and becomes increasingly frustrated with the Workers' Compensation Board (WCB) and its efforts to help him find suitable employment.

"I had life by the tail for five and a half, six years," said Wagner, who dropped out of high school at 17 to work as a carpet layer.

But his life since the injury has been "a living hell," he said. Following the injury, he said the WCB tried to find another job for him but he was told that because he did not have a high school diploma, it would be too expensive for him to get his GED and get further training.

For several years, Wagner returned to carpet laying on and off and worked as a bartender but the jobs aggravated his injury.

When he could no longer handle the pain, he opened a small retail store in Moose Jaw in 2001, but Wagner said he closed the shop in December 2003 after his WCB case worker promised the board would cover the costs for him to take a certificate course at SIAST. In written communication obtained by Wagner, the case worker denied advising him to close the shop.

Wagner received his GED and began a business marketing course in September 2005. But in January of this year, the WCB abruptly cancelled his retraining.

In a letter to Wagner, a WCB case manager said his GED qualified him to work as a carpet/flooring salesperson and he did not require further training. But Wagner, who cannot stand for a prolonged period of time, said the job would be impossible.

"How can (a flooring store) have a salesman there who after two or four or eight minutes has to excuse himself and go sit down 100 feet away while the customers are looking at samples?" said Wagner, who has filed an appeal of the decision.

WCB spokeswoman Janice Siekawitch said that due to privacy issues, specific cases could not be discussed.

Speaking generally, Siekawitch explained that if an employee cannot return to their old workplace or to a position using their existing skills, retraining is done as soon as the employee's recovery allows for it. The WCB will cover tuition, books, travel, accommodation and income replacement during their retraining. The WCB compensates a worker up to their pre-injury wage.

"What we're aiming for is in retraining, giving them a skill set that allows them to earn the same wages they were earning at time of injury. That's our obligation," Siekawitch said.

How much the WCB will pay for retraining an employee depends on what work they had been doing and what they were earning at the time of the injury. Someone who had a higher income will have different retraining opportunities than someone who was earning half that income level at the time of their injury, said Siekawitch.

The WCB has an estimated 600 active files dealing with retraining, with roughly 400 of those currently in a course while the remainder may be developing a return-to-work plan with a case manager, said Siekawitch. She added that some of the 200 employees won't be retrained, for reasons that would be specific to their cases.

If a worker is deemed capable of earning a certain amount, such as minimum wage, the WCB may only provide compensation for the difference between minimum wage and the pre-injury wage.

"It can happen that someone is fully recovered, completely retrained and we may say: 'We have met our obligations to you, and we think you're capable of working now,' so we may reduce their level of support," she said.

Such support has been reduced for Jim Taphorn, who said the WCB believes he is capable of working a minimum wage job. But after four years of receiving compensation, Taphorn said he is still waiting to be retrained after a back injury ended his career as an equipment operator.

Taphorn explained it is a lose-lose situation all around when a worker isn't retrained — the employee cannot work, the provincial government cannot collect taxes from the worker and employers in the province must pay premiums to WCB to cover the compensation.

"We're sitting here waiting for this retraining, getting a cheque every month from Workers Comp," said Taphorn. "Basically we're semi-retired because they're not retraining us."