Long-COVID: The Next Challenge for the Staffing Industry

As employers return to pre-pandemic norms, and ask people to return to work—at least a few days a week—some employees may struggle more than others with chronic health problems related to COVID. Many who suffered through COVID are dealing with long-term side effects, the so-called long COVID or "long haul COVID". And like all other business sectors, the staffing industry will feel the impact, as the labor base has shrunk, experts say.

Long COVID, or long-haul COVID, applies to those individuals who have suffered long-term or possibly permanent side effects from COVID, despite recovering from the actual illness itself. Some of these side effects make it challenging, if not impossible, to do their former jobs. According the Centers for Disease Control, these symptoms can include fatigue, heart damage, breathing conditions, difficult concentrating, and even depression and anxiety. Some post COVID sufferers have even reported uncontrollable shaking of the hands and joint pain. Depending on the severity of the conditions, this will have an impact on the number of available employees and the kind of tasks they can perform.

According to the latest data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the overall hiring for temporary help employment was up in August. But in general, unemployment rose in August with some employers closing due to lost business or cutting staff because of the pandemic. While data indicate that small businesses are hiring, some businesses such as construction are struggling to find qualified employees to fill skilled jobs. BLS does not indicate whether that is the result of the pandemic but, it doesn't rule out long COVID.

Some studies estimate that the number of working age adults who have COVID, as much as 33% could develop long COVID, or 10 to 33 million people out of 100 million. A Brookings Institute study says that the impact of long COVID on the work force has resulted in at least 15 % of unfilled jobs.[1] Even employees who work remotely including temporary employees, may have symptoms that will have an impact on whether they can perform their jobs.

To the extent that these stats affect the staffing industry, staffing firms may also be struggling with finding qualified workers that some industries require. Three is little that staffing firms can do to accommodate employees with long COVID.

Effect on Workers' Comp Claims

It's always been a challenge to prove that communicable diseases are covered by workers' comp. A temporary employee would need to prove it happened at work. Being exposed to an employee who was ill and then tested positive for COVID, can help make the case, especially if you were in close proximity. Some industries also pose higher risks, such as health care, first responders, and even employees in the transportation industry, who are likely to be in close proximity to commuters. If lingering symptoms persist and prevent an employee from returning to work, that will extend workers' comp benefits. Depending on how many long-COVID cases effect the staffing industry, X-Mods and premium could increase.

Unfortunately, there is not much information from the insurance industry regarding the impact of long-COVID on workers' comp claims. According to a study done by the Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine in 2021, age was the factor of lost time from work—that is more than 30 days and a claim of $10,000 or more.[2] Much of this could be attributed to long COVID. Most of the costs associated with workers' comp claims were medical, which would indicate the treatment of long-term

symptoms [3]. The Office for Civil Rights and the Department of Health and Human Services considers long-COVID to be a disability, and if the initial illness was found to be work-related, was compensated through workers' comp. Unfortunately, many workers' comp claims, (32%) and those lasting more than 60 days, had not been closed at the completion of the study.

More studies are likely on the way, but the staffing industry should hope for the best, but prepare for the worst. Fewer available workers in some industries and longer medical claims are the greatest challenges.

1. *Is Long COVID Worsening the Labor Shortage?*, Brookings, Author: Katie Bach, January 2022
2. *Attributes of Long-Duration COVID-19 Workers' Comp Claims*, Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, Authors: Bernacki, Edward J. MD, MPH; Hunt, Dan L. DO; Tsourmas, Nicholas F. MD; Yuspeh, Larry BA; Lavin, Robert A. MD, MS; Kalia, Nimisha MD, MPH, MBA; Leung, Nina PhD, MPH; Willams, Leila DO; Green-McKenzie, Judith MD, MPH; Tao, Xuguang (Grant) MD, PhD, May 2022.
3. *Ibid*