

Ohio News Bureau  
2445 St. Clair Ave.  
Cleveland, OH  
44114

(216) 241-0675

Publication:  
Courier, The  
10/8/2011  
Page:  
2  
Circulation:  
24347

County:  
Hancock  
Findlay, OH]

clipper0187

Ord: 000344

Keyword:  
Workers'  
Comp



1498370

# Buehrer trims workers' comp rates

## Increases efforts to prevent fraud

By LOU WILIN  
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Gov. John Kasich gave Workers' Compensation Bureau Chief Stephen Buehrer a mission: The state insurer for work-related injuries should help create jobs.

So Buehrer, who visited Findlay on Friday, said he has been lowering business premiums and finding ways to lower them fur-

ther.

Private employers' premiums were cut last spring by 4 percent. A 5 percent cut on base premiums was recently approved for most public employers, he said.

To nurture new businesses, the agency is offering a 25 percent to 51 percent premium reduction for up to two years.

New businesses are "strapped for cash, they're trying to get organized," Buehrer said. "If we can give them a little break in those first couple of years until they get established, then that's helpful."

Buehrer, a former state senator who represented Hancock County, took charge of the state agency nine months ago.

Buehrer said he has increased efforts to prevent fraud. Studies show that for each dollar invested in fraud prevention, the bureau gets \$6 back, he said.

"The past administration



Buehrer

didn't want to talk about fraud. Well, I talk about it every day, because I think if somebody who's thinking about cheating the system hears that we're out and we're after fraud, (then) they're less likely to do it," he said.

Besides going after workers fraudulently claiming work injuries, the bureau is pursuing fraud by employers and doctors. Some physicians overbill the system.

In southeastern Ohio's Scioto County, where the population of

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# Buehrer

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76,000 is about the size of Hancock County, nine million doses of opiates and narcotics were prescribed last year, he said. One physician the bureau investigated had prescribed one million doses of narcotics and opiates in 2010 for injured workers.

"He was seeing a hundred patients in a single eight-hour shift, which tells you he wasn't practicing a lot of medicine," Buehrer said. "He was writing a lot of prescriptions. That's all he was doing."

The bureau and other agencies conducted a raid last spring. Workers' comp banned the doctor from its program, and the State Medical Board revoked his license.

Some employers commit fraud by underreporting their payroll or misrepresenting workers' jobs to

reduce premiums, Buehrer said.

"When an employer isn't paying their fair share, every other employer is paying the bill because those workers (when injured) are going to get taken care of one way or another," he said.

But the agency faces more complex challenges. Though the number of claims has been decreasing, the average cost per claim is rising. It climbed from \$24,000 in 2000 to \$44,000 last year.

That's because it is taking longer for injured workers to return to work, Buehrer said. Five years ago, about 78 percent of injured workers returned to work within a year. Now about 69 percent return within a year, he said.

"If you're in my (workers' comp) system longer, you're going to be more expensive," he said. "So you've really got to push ... people to get their problem identified, get them quality care and get them back into the workplace."

National statistics report that

those who are away from their job for more than a year likely will never return, he said.

"If they sit at home and depression sneaks in, and they don't feel well about themselves and they gain weight and their diabetes or something like that kicks in, it becomes a downward spiral that people in a lot of cases never recover from," Buehrer said.

While spiraling downward, these people are still collecting workers' compensation benefits. The bureau is still paying benefits on injuries which occurred in the 1940s, he said.

"(The bureau is) still supporting some widows out there, still supporting some people who are on permanent disability," Buehrer said.

There will always be some injured workers who will never be able to return to work.

"It's our job to make sure that's a small group of people, to push them to get back as quick as possible," he said.

Toward that end, Buehrer plans to unveil some programs in the coming weeks:

- Better management and oversight of injured workers' medical care and their progress toward returning to work could prevent drift into complications like depression, he said.

- Improved rehabilitation to aid workers' return to work.

"Some people get hurt and they can't go back to the job they had, but with appropriate rehab, they can come back to some other job," he said. "Right now, the rehab system in Ohio doesn't work very well."

- Get better at settling claims. "Some people will stay in the system because they are waiting for medical treatment or their lawyer is involved and it gets very complicated," Buehrer said. "Sometimes if we come in and make a settlement offer and say, 'Hey, let's make this go away for this amount of money,' that can help move the claim forward."

Buehrer accepts workers' compensation suggestions at: BWC.  
Listens@bwc.state.oh.us.