# OSHA-Compliant Early Intervention: Case Study

## PROBLEM

The employees of a large manufacturer of steel and ductile iron pipe were experiencing increasing numbers of musculoskeletal disorders. Their jobs were extremely heavy, repetitive, and required employees to assume awkward positions, sometimes for prolonged periods of time.

The majority of their injuries were musculoskeletal strains and sprains of the shoulder and low back secondary to the heavy and repetitive materials handling performed by pipe rollers, maintenance, and electrical associates. In addition, they had a considerable number of slips, trips, and falls due to climbing on and off of powered equipment and walking on uneven surfaces. These injuries and the related lost and restricted duty days affected productivity, employee morale, and customer satisfaction.

When their associates were absent from work due to injury, production slows, and customer satisfaction and employee morale decreased. Working overtime to compensate for employee absences exacerbated fatigue and created additional injuries in the remaining workforce.

## SOLUTION

They had implemented worksite physical therapy a number of years before in order to provide convenient, timely, work-related physical therapy for their employees. Their Director of Worksite Physical Therapy noticed that most of their injuries had a gradual, insidious onset - minor discomforts became serious injuries over time. She began discussions with the Directors of Wellness, Safety and the VP of Operations regarding the implementation of an OSHA-Compliant Early Intervention Program. She felt that the implementation of this program would address the minor discomforts before they became OSHA recordables.

At first, the organization was reluctant, fearing that Early Intervention would increase the number of OSHA recordables, lower productivity, and drive injury costs. But as injuries continued to climb, they eventually agreed to try a pilot program. They began the pilot for Maintenance and Electrical Associates. Physical Therapists promoted the program through presentations to departmental safety meetings. They explained that:

- The only requirement to participate was that the employee had minor discomfort and notified the supervisor so the work schedule could be adjusted while they attended the program. They were also allowed to participate in the program before and after their work shift.
- The interventions sanctioned by OSHA as musculoskeletal first aid were heat and cold, massage, non-rigid supports (think kinesiotaping), and employee training in ergonomic best practices.
- Sessions lasted 30 minutes, and in 3-6 sessions, their condition would be improved, or they would be referred to a physician or other health care practitioner for further assessment and possible medical treatment.

The program was slow to take off. The corporate culture was one of hyper-masculinity. There was significant peer pressure to just “suck it up” if anything bothered you. Initially, the program was housed in the worksite physical therapy clinic (inside a centralized wellness facility). However, over time it became apparent that participation was significantly better if satellite clinics were set up in various departments for easier access and less time to “travel” between the worksite and the program.

The program was finally ramping up when the COVID-19 pandemic struck. And like many other programs, Early Intervention was discontinued for approximately 18 months. After returning from COVID, the program again took time to return to full capacity.

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## RESULTS

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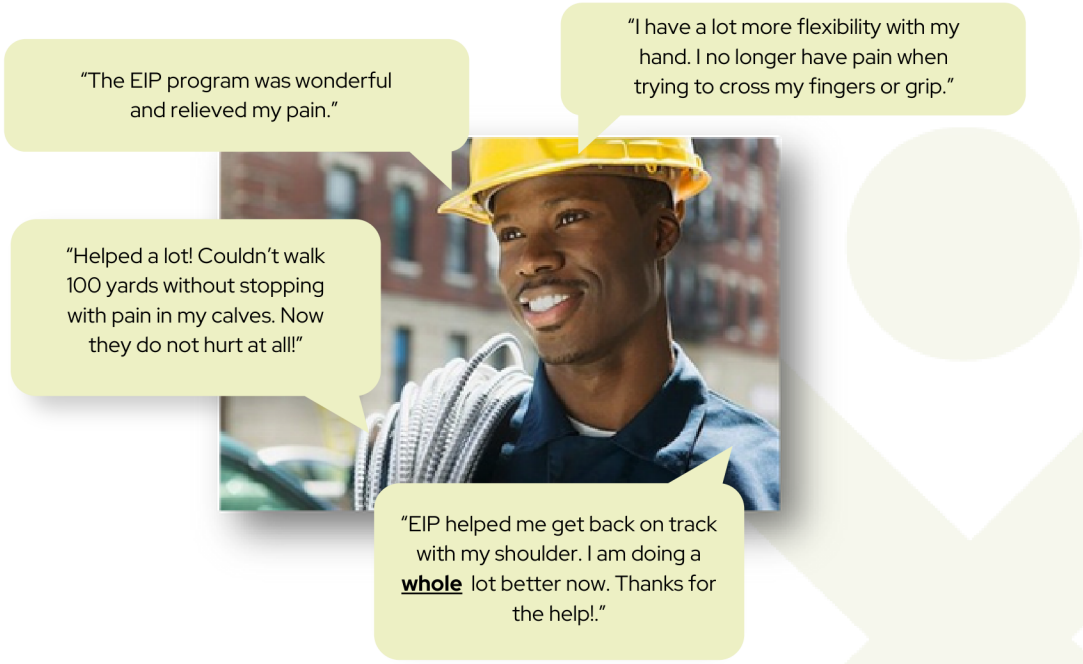
**After approximately 3.5 active years of the OSHA-Compliant Early Intervention Program, we have seen the following results:**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **207**<br>EMPLOYEES HAVE PARTICIPATED IN THE PROGRAM | **87%**<br>IMPROVED THEIR PAIN AND DYSFUNCTION | THEY AVERAGED<br>**4.5**<br>VISITS PER PARTICIPANT |
| **6%**<br>WERE REFERRED BACK TO THEIR PERSONAL PHYSICIANS FOR FURTHER EVALUATION. | **16%**<br>WERE REFERRED FOR MORE EXTENSIVE PHYSICAL THERAPY. | THE TOTAL PROGRAM COST OVER 3.5 YEARS WAS<br>**<1**<br>LOST TIME MSD |

- None were considered a work comp injury.

Overall, this organization was very pleased with the results of its OSHA-Compliant Early Intervention Program. They appreciate the savings in injury costs and productivity but more importantly they value what their employees have to say:




[1] The total is more than 100% because although some improved, it was felt that they needed more extensive physical therapy. One of the benefits of the EIP program is that experienced physical therapists are making decisions about who is appropriate for the program and who would benefit from triage to other care.

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