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News

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Union leaders refuse disability pay change

By Peter Felsenfeld
CONTRA COSTA TIMES

Contra Costa labor leaders have refused to reconsider a policy that allows workers to earn more staying home on disability than reporting to work.

County officials argue the generous benefit has contributed to a 39 percent increase in workers' compensation costs over the past three years. Unions contend there is no connection.

A recent county Risk Management Department study of six counties with similar workers' compensation systems found Contra Costa employees spend the most time off the job and get paid one of the highest amounts per claim.

The Board of Supervisors decided in April that the payments were part of the problem. They asked labor leaders to renegotiate the workers' compensation portion of a multi-union contract approved last year.

The unions have refused.

"A deal is a deal is a deal," said Jim Hicks, business agent of AFSCME Local 2700. "There won't be any more deals until this contract is over. That's something both sides agreed to."

The union represents clerks, managers, engineering technicians and appraisers.

Labor leaders say the county, like most employers nationwide, is feeling the pinch of increased medical costs. Contra Costa's situation is worse than most, they say, because department heads prevent recovering employees from returning to work on a limited basis.

County department heads have acknowledged that changing hours can pose a challenge.

Labor leaders also fault their bosses for failing to implement an effective workplace safety program to avoid costly repetitive stress injuries.

Supervisor John Gioia of Richmond said the unions could have a point. However, amending the payments should be part of the

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overall cost-cutting.

"They consider it a decrease in benefits. We consider it reining in abuse and removing an incentive to stay off work," he said.

Contra Costa's system allows injured workers to receive 86 percent of their salary tax-free for one year. Under the formula, workers net more than they would when taxes are deducted.

State law requires the county to pay employees injured on the job at least \$602 per week in temporary disability payments. But Contra Costa goes a step further, making additional so-called "salary continuation" payments for up to one year that lift employees to the 86 percent mark.

Even so, labor leaders insist the benefit is not the root of the county's skyrocketing costs. They point out the payment has gradually decreased from 100 percent of salary to the current level since 1992.

"Clearly, the one variable that has continued to drop is the compensation package, and yet costs keep rising," said Ian Arnold, a field representative for the Service Employees International Union, Local 535. "So it's time to take a look at the other variables."

The union represents workers in Contra Costa's Employment and Human Services Department, which administers programs such as food stamps and the CalWORKS welfare-to-work program.

Arnold said the county has to make a commitment to getting injured employees back to work and take steps to make work places more ergonomically friendly, he said.

"Our belief is if these changes were made we'd see some real changes in the numbers."

County Administrator John Sweeten said his staff is looking at ways to implement more flexible hours. Also, next year's budget includes \$150,000 to set up a program to address ergonomic issues. That will help reduce the number of injuries, he said.

"But what it will not do necessarily is impact the amount of time employees are out or reduce the number of open cases we have."

Peter Felsenfeld covers Contra Costa County. Reach him at 925-977-8506 or pfelsenfeld@cctimes.com.

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