

Question and answer summary

The following questions were asked and answered at our 2024 Annual General Meeting (AGM) on June 6, 2024. To protect attendee privacy, names and claim/account details have been removed. Questions and answers may be edited for length and/or clarity.

Questions answered on camera

1. Will the Accident Fund be at a level that would allow for ongoing premium rate subsidies for employers in 2025?

That's a hard question to answer. We don't know how the investment markets will fare throughout the rest of the year, or how Alberta's economic recovery will progress.

Our board recognizes that a continued rate setting deficit is not sustainable over the long term and is committed to steadily closing the gap between the premium rate required and the premium rate collected over the next few years.

Our board is also committed to helping Alberta businesses however possible, but our ability to continue subsidizing employer premiums may be impacted as we work to eliminate the gap between the premium rate collected and the rate required.

Employers are in a prime position to help control rising costs. An individual and collective effort to prioritize effective health, safety and disability management practices in our province is critical in controlling costs and maintaining rate stability. The most important thing employers can do to impact the premiums they pay is implement programs that help prevent workers from getting injured and help them stay at work if they do. We have supports and services to help employers manage their performance and reduce the human and financial impact of workplace illness and injury on their business.

When considering next year's employer premium rates, we have confidence that the board will find the right balance between maintaining long-term premium rate stability for employers while ensuring benefits and services for injured workers remain secure. We will share more information regarding 2025 rates later this year.

2. What is the reason for the significant increase in the number of new economic loss awards last year?

New economic loss payments (ELPs) increased significantly last year, up from approximately 1,000 in 2022 to over 1,800 in 2023. The increase is primarily due to the after-effects of the pandemic, not just on the workers' compensation system but on all of Alberta's workplaces.

When a permanently injured worker cannot return to their pre-accident job and salary, economic loss payments make up the difference between their pre-accident salary and what they are able to earn after their injury. Most ELPs are wage top ups because many workers can work in some capacity, but in different jobs that don't pay what they were earning before they were hurt. There are also situations where a worker can't work at all, and these are called zero-based ELPs.

The past few years presented extraordinary economic challenges for our province. One of the impacts we saw is that when businesses shut down or downsized, workers often would not have a position to return to once they were fit for work. Those who could not return to their previous employer were entering a tight labour market with fewer opportunities for re-employment. During these difficult economic times we purposely delayed calculating ELPs until the economy had improved and workers had more positive return-to-work options to maximize their post-accident earnings. Because we processed less ELPs in these years, we built up a backlog.

In addition to that cohort of claims, the number of permanently injured workers who required our support finding new work grew by 133%. With a significant increase in the volume of workers in re-employment services programs, it was inevitable that more would require long-term benefits like ELPs.

We expect ELPs volumes will normalize as these workers progress through their claim journey and achieve successful return-to-work outcomes.

3. What is WCB doing to address the rising costs of claims and the impacts on employers?

Claims costs have increased over the past few years for several reasons. As the economy recovered, we've seen a predictable increase in the number of workers joining the workforce. That's great for the province, but also leads to an increase in the number of workplace injury claims we receive, and therefore higher claims costs. The other main cost driver is the increase in economic loss payment volume, as previously discussed.

There are really two critical ways to contain claims costs. The best possible solution is to invest in good health and safety programs so less workers are injured due to their employment. Secondly, if a worker is injured or falls ill on the job, strong disability management programs help them get back to work. Good disability management includes early intervention and accommodating injured workers with modified work until they are fully recovered.

We are working on some exciting and impactful initiatives with industry groups and employers that focus on prevention opportunities and finding innovative ways to keep more workers connected to their pre-accident jobs.

4. There has been talk about expanding presumptive workers' compensation coverage for workers in a variety of occupations. Can you provide some background on this issue?

It's important to understand that the absence of a legislated presumption does *not* mean claims are not accepted. If any worker covered under the workers' compensation system experiences an injury or illness as a result of their job, we will accept their claim. We look at each individual case and make an entitlement decision based on all available evidence. Presumption is a way to fast track the adjudication process, but it doesn't change the outcome.

Presumptions are added to legislation when scientific evidence shows there is a link between the nature of some occupations and an increased risk of certain illnesses and injuries. For certain conditions for certain occupations, presumptive coverage allows us to assume a specific illness or injury is work related, unless there's evidence to suggest otherwise.

Whether presumptive coverage is in place or not, *work-related illnesses and injuries are covered,*

regardless of the process we take to arrive at the decision.

5. What is WCB doing to ensure decision reviews are handled quickly and efficiently?

In a high-volume, service-based organization such as ours, there will inevitably be times where a person does not agree with a decision we have made. We also acknowledge that we will occasionally make mistakes. We are not perfect and in the event we made an error, we work to catch it and resolve it at the earliest opportunity. Early resolution is important to our clients, and it is important to us. When we engage in constructive conversation early on, we are often able to resolve issues without the need to proceed to the next level of decision review or appeal.

[A summary of our resolution results is provided in our 2023 Annual Report.](#) 83% of issues raised last year were resolved through early resolution efforts by WCB's operations team or by the Dispute Resolution and Decision Review Body (DRDRB). Only 17% of issues raised went to the independent and external Appeals Commission as the final level of review, and the AC upheld 79% of decisions they reviewed.

It's important to note as well that sometimes our clients don't necessarily disagree with a decision we've made, but rather they feel they haven't been treated fairly. That's where the Fair Process Review Centre comes in. This area reviews issues related to fairness, and they work with our clients and our customer service teams to help address issues and identify ways we can improve. [A summary of the timeliness of the FPRC's service is included in our 2023 Annual Report as well.](#)

Questions answered via written Q&A

6. What is being done to retain staff and address high staff turnover?

As an employer ourselves, we are not immune to the changing nature of work in our province. Like many other employers, we have lost some experienced team members over the past few years as people made the decision to move into retirement or onto other adventures.

Recruitment and retention will continue to be a priority for us in the coming years. We know that to deliver the compassionate and effective care we strive for, we need the right people with the right skills to do the job. This is why people and culture emerged as one of the pillars of our new five-year strategic plan.

We need to adapt how we recruit and develop skilled staff in a competitive labour market. Through well-balanced employee benefit and support programs, we aim to attract and retain qualified team members who are dedicated to providing the best possible experience to injured Albertans and their employers.

7. What is being done to make sure the DRDRB and AC are independent of the WCB system?

The [Appeals Commission for Alberta Workers' Compensation](#) (AC) is an external body that exists as the final level of appeal for decision reviews. Their decision-making is completely independent of WCB's processes. The AC's decisions are binding on WCB.

Our Dispute Resolution and Decision Review Body (DRDRB) is an internal body that is designed to provide a dedicated focus on issue resolution. Their reviews are focused on understanding different perspectives and finding common ground for resolution.

8. Would members of WCB's executive team agree to speak with injured workers? How is this possible?

If anyone would like to speak to someone at WCB about a specific claim or account, they can call our toll-free number at 1-866-922-9221.

Our CEO and executive team regularly meet with people who have a vested interest in the workers' compensation system. We always welcome collaborative conversations about how we can enhance the services we provide.

Our executive team does not get involved in decisions on individual claims or accounts. This wouldn't be in the best interest of our staff or our clients, and that's why we encourage people who have a concern about a decision to follow the [decision review and appeals process](#). Part of ensuring we effectively address issues is making sure they are handled by the right person. That's why we review concerns as they arise and triage inquiries through to the most appropriate person to respond based on the nature of the concern. Qualified people on our service teams are most often the best equipped to address claim or account-related concerns.

9. How does WCB ensure service standards are maintained in a hybrid work model?

We have a robust quality assurance process and monitor key performance indicators to ensure our service standards are met. We have continued these processes since moving to our hybrid model.

We measure our performance through a number of metrics, including overall client satisfaction, decision timeliness, accuracy and fairness. If a client shares a concern with us, we work to resolve it at the earliest opportunity.

10. How is clients' personal information protected when claim owners work from home?

We have a number of protocols in place to ensure our client's information remains safe and secure. That's critically important but becomes even more essential in a hybrid work environment. Our hybrid work agreements with staff include requirements to ensure client information is protected at all times, including ensuring their at-home workspaces are private and secured.

11. What is WCB's strategy to increase access to Occupational Injury Service (OIS) in smaller cities and rural areas across the province?

Our [Occupational Injury Service \(OIS\)](#) is valued program and a great way to support timely return to work. Increasing OIS capacity and availability throughout the province remains a focus for us.

We have been looking to grow participation across the province, including in rural locations. We're using a number of strategies to achieve this, such as advertising broadly with the Alberta Medical Association and targeting advertising with physicians in high-needs areas where we don't currently have OIS availability. We're also introducing virtual capability to support rural locations and simplifying the OIS application form for physicians.

12. Alberta's injury rate has gone up in the last several years, and industry premiums have not reflected the full cost of today's injuries. Are programs that are designed to prevent injuries (e.g., experience rating for employers) failing?

Our pricing programs are designed to encourage employers to effectively manage and reduce the

impacts of workplace injuries. There are two primary ways that employers can do this: reduce the number of workplace injuries that occur and have effective disability management and return-to-work practices in place for when injuries happen. We believe these pricing programs do encourage employers to focus on injury prevention.

13. What is WCB doing to address claim duration?

Claim duration has increased over the past few years for several reasons. A challenging economy and access to specialized health care services are impacting the time it takes to help workers return to work. Still, we are achieving excellent return-to-work outcomes, helping nearly 95% of workers return so far this year.

We are working with industry groups, employers and the medical community to find innovative ways to keep more workers connected to their pre-accident jobs. We are also exploring ways to work with our partners to help strengthen illness and injury prevention efforts in the province.