

H.645

An act relating to workers' compensation

The Senate proposes to the House to amend the bill by striking out all after the enacting clause and inserting in lieu thereof the following:

Sec. 1. 21 V.S.A. § 632 is amended to read:

§ 632. COMPENSATION TO DEPENDENTS; ~~DEATH BENEFITS~~

BURIAL AND FUNERAL EXPENSES

If death results from the injury, the employer shall pay to the persons entitled to compensation or, if there is none, then to the personal representative of the deceased employee, the actual burial and funeral expenses ~~in the amount of \$5,500.00~~ not to exceed \$10,000.00 and the actual expenses for out-of-state transportation of the decedent to the place of burial not to exceed ~~\$1,000.00~~ \$5,000.00. Every two years, the Commissioner of Labor shall evaluate the average burial and funeral expenses in the State and make a recommendation to the House Committee on Commerce and Economic Development and the Senate Committee on Finance as to whether an adjustment in compensation is warranted. The employer shall also pay to or for the benefit of the following persons, for the periods prescribed in section 635 of this title, a weekly compensation equal to the following percentages of the deceased employee's average weekly wages. The weekly compensation payment herein allowed

shall not exceed the maximum weekly compensation or be lower than the minimum weekly compensation:

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Sec. 2. 21 V.S.A. § 639 is amended to read:

§ 639. DEATH, PAYMENT TO DEPENDENTS

In cases of the death of a person from any cause other than the accident during the period of payments for disability or for the permanent injury, the remaining payments for disability then due or for the permanent injury shall be made to the person's dependents according to the provisions of sections 635 and 636 of this title, or if there are none, the remaining amount due, but ~~not exceeding \$5,500.00 for burial and funeral expenses~~ no more than the actual burial and funeral expenses not to exceed \$10,000.00 and the actual expenses for out-of-state transportation of the decedent to the place of burial not to exceed \$1,000.00 \$5,000.00, shall be paid in a lump sum to the proper person. Every two years, the Commissioner of Labor shall evaluate the average burial and funeral expenses in the State and make a recommendation to the House Committee on Commerce and Economic Development and the Senate Committee on Finance as to whether an adjustment in compensation is warranted.

Sec. 3. 21 V.S.A. § 640c is added to read:

§ 640c. OPIOID USAGE DETERRENCE

(a) In support of the State's fundamental interest in ensuring the well-being of employees and employers, it is the intent of the General Assembly to protect employees from the dangers of prescription drug abuse while maintaining a balance between the employee's health and the employee's expedient return to work.

(b) As it pertains to workers' compensation claims, the Commissioner of Labor, in consultation with the Department of Health, the State Pharmacologist, the Vermont Board of Medical Practice, and the Vermont Medical Society, shall adopt rules consistent with the best practices governing the prescription of opioids, including patient screening, drug screening, and claim adjudication for patients prescribed opioids for chronic pain. In adopting rules, the Commissioner shall consider guidelines and standards such as the Occupational Medicine Practice Guidelines published by the American College of Occupational and Environmental Medicine and other medical authorities with expertise in the treatment of chronic pain. The rules shall be consistent with the standards and guidelines provided under 18 V.S.A. § 4289 and any rules adopted by the Department of Health pursuant to 18 V.S.A. § 4289.

Sec. 4. 21 V.S.A. § 641 is amended to read:

§ 641. VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION

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(e)(1) In support of the State's fundamental interest in ensuring the well-being of employees and employers, it is the intent of the General Assembly that, following a workplace accident, an employee returns to work as soon as possible but remains cognizant of the limitations imposed by his or her medical condition.

(2) The Commissioner shall adopt rules promoting development and implementation of cost-effective, early return-to-work programs.

Sec. 5. 21 V.S.A. § 643a is amended to read:

§ 643a. DISCONTINUANCE OF BENEFITS

Unless an injured worker has successfully returned to work, an employer shall notify both the Commissioner and the employee prior to terminating benefits under either section 642 or 646 of this title. The notice of intention to discontinue payments shall be filed on forms prescribed by the Commissioner and shall include the date of the proposed discontinuance, the reasons for it, and, if the employee has been out of work for 90 days, a verification that the employer offered vocational rehabilitation screening and services as required under this chapter. All relevant evidence, including evidence that does not support discontinuance in the possession of the employer ~~not already filed,~~

shall be filed with the notice shall be provided to the injured worker. With the notice of discontinuance, the employer shall file only evidence relevant to the discontinuance, including evidence that does not support the discontinuance, with the Commissioner. The liability for the payments shall continue for ~~seven~~ 14 days after the notice is received by the ~~commissioner~~ Commissioner and the employee. If the claimant disputes the discontinuance, the claimant may file with the Commissioner an objection to the discontinuance and seek an extension of the 14-day limit. The Commissioner may grant an extension up to 21 days. The request for an extension shall be specific as to the number of days needed and the reason for the extension and must be received by the Commissioner prior to the end of the 14-day limit. A copy of the request for an extension shall be provided to the employer at the time the request is made to the Commissioner. Those payments shall be made without prejudice to the employer and may be deducted from any amounts due pursuant to section 648 of this title if the Commissioner determines that the discontinuance is warranted or if otherwise ordered by the Commissioner. Every notice shall be reviewed by the Commissioner to determine the sufficiency of the basis for the proposed discontinuance. If, after review of all the evidence in the file, the Commissioner finds that a preponderance of all the evidence in the file does not reasonably support the proposed discontinuance, the Commissioner shall order that payments continue until a hearing is held and a decision is rendered.

Prior to a formal hearing, an injured worker may request reinstatement of benefits by providing additional new evidence to the Department that establishes that a preponderance of all evidence now supports the claim. If the Commissioner's decision, after a hearing, is that the employee was not entitled to any or all benefits paid between the discontinuance and the final decision, upon request of the employer, the Commissioner may order that the employee repay all benefits to which the employee was not entitled. The employer may enforce a repayment order in any court of law having jurisdiction.

Sec. 6. 21 V.S.A. § 696 is amended to read:

§ 696. CANCELLATION OF INSURANCE CONTRACTS

A policy or contract shall not be cancelled within the time ~~limited~~ specified in the policy or contract for its expiration, until at least 45 days after a notice of intention to cancel the policy or contract, on a date specified in the notice, has been filed in the office of the ~~commissioner~~ Commissioner and provided to the employer. The notice shall be filed with the Commissioner in accordance with rules adopted by the Commissioner and provided to the employer by certified mail ~~or certificate of mailing~~. The cancellation shall not affect the liability of an insurance carrier on account of an injury occurring prior to cancellation.

Sec. 7. 21 V.S.A. § 697 is amended to read:

§ 697. NOTICE OF INTENT NOT TO RENEW POLICY

An insurance carrier who does not intend to renew a workers' compensation insurance policy ~~of workers' compensation insurance~~ or guarantee contract covering the liability of an employer under the provisions of this chapter, ~~45 days prior to the expiration of the policy or contract,~~ shall give notice of ~~the its~~ intention to the ~~commissioner of labor~~ Commissioner and ~~to~~ the covered employer at least 45 days prior to the expiration date stated in the policy or contract. The notice shall be given to the employer by certified mail ~~or certificate of mailing.~~ An insurance carrier who fails to give notice shall continue the policy or contract in force beyond its expiration date for 45 days from the day the notice is received by the ~~commissioner~~ Commissioner and the employer. However, ~~this latter provision shall not apply if, prior to such expiration date,~~ on or before the expiration of the existing insurance or guarantee contract the insurance carrier has, by delivery of a renewal contract or otherwise, offered to continue the insurance ~~beyond the date by delivery of a renewal contract or otherwise,~~ or if the employer notifies the insurance carrier in writing that the employer does not wish the insurance continued beyond the expiration date, or if the employer complies with the provisions of section 687 of this title, ~~on or before the expiration of the existing insurance or guarantee contract~~ then the policy will expire upon notice to the Commissioner.

Sec. 8. 2013 Acts and Resolves No. 75, Sec. 14 is amended as follows:

Sec. 14. UNIFIED PAIN MANAGEMENT SYSTEM ADVISORY
COUNCIL

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(b) The Unified Pain Management System Advisory Council shall consist
of the following members:

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(4) the Commissioner of Labor or designee;

(5) the Director of the Blueprint for Health or designee;

~~(5)~~(6) the Chair of the Board of Medical Practice or designee, who shall
be a clinician;

~~(6)~~(7) a representative of the Vermont State Dental Society, who shall
be a dentist;

~~(7)~~(8) a representative of the Vermont Board of Pharmacy, who shall be
a pharmacist;

~~(8)~~(9) a faculty member of the academic detailing program at the
University of Vermont's College of Medicine;

~~(9)~~(10) a faculty member of the University of Vermont's College of
Medicine with expertise in the treatment of addiction or chronic pain
management;

~~(10)~~(11) a representative of the Vermont Medical Society, who shall be a primary care clinician;

~~(11)~~(12) a representative of the American Academy of Family Physicians, Vermont chapter, who shall be a primary care clinician;

~~(12)~~(13) a representative from the Vermont Board of Osteopathic Physicians, who shall be an osteopath;

~~(13)~~(14) a representative of the Federally Qualified Health Centers, who shall be a primary care clinician selected by the Bi-State Primary Care Association;

~~(14)~~(15) a representative of the Vermont Ethics Network;

~~(15)~~(16) a representative of the Hospice and Palliative Care Council of Vermont;

~~(16)~~(17) a representative of the Office of the Health Care Ombudsman;

~~(17)~~(18) the Medical Director for the Department of Vermont Health Access;

~~(18)~~(19) a clinician who works in the emergency department of a hospital, to be selected by the Vermont Association of Hospitals and Health Systems in consultation with any nonmember hospitals;

~~(19)~~(20) a member of the Vermont Board of Nursing Subcommittee on APRN Practice, who shall be an advanced practice registered nurse;

~~(20)~~(21) a representative from the Vermont Assembly of Home Health and Hospice Agencies;

~~(21)~~(22) a psychologist licensed pursuant to 26 V.S.A. chapter 55 who has experience in treating chronic pain, to be selected by the Board of Psychological Examiners;

~~(22)~~(23) a drug and alcohol abuse counselor licensed pursuant to 33 V.S.A. chapter 8, to be selected by the Deputy Commissioner of Health for Alcohol and Drug Abuse Programs;

~~(23)~~(24) a retail pharmacist, to be selected by the Vermont Pharmacists Association;

~~(24)~~(25) an advanced practice registered nurse full-time faculty member from the University of Vermont's Department of Nursing; and

~~(25)~~(26) a consumer representative who is either a consumer in recovery from prescription drug abuse or a consumer receiving medical treatment for chronic noncancer-related pain;

(27) a clinician who specializes in occupational medicine;

(28) a clinician who specializes in physical medicine and rehabilitation; and

(29) a consumer representative who is or has been an injured worker and has been prescribed opioids.

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Sec. 9. 21 V.S.A. § 678 is amended to read:

§ 678. COSTS; ATTORNEY FEES

(a) Necessary costs of proceedings under this chapter, including deposition expenses, subpoena fees, and expert witness fees, shall be assessed by the ~~commissioner~~ Commissioner against the employer or its workers' compensation carrier when the claimant prevails. The ~~commissioner~~ Commissioner may allow the claimant to recover reasonable ~~attorney~~ attorney's fees when the claimant prevails. Costs shall not be taxed or allowed either party except as provided in this section.

(b) In appeals to the ~~superior or supreme courts~~ Superior or Supreme Court, if the claimant prevails, he or she shall be entitled to reasonable ~~attorney~~ attorney's fees as approved by the ~~court~~ Court, necessary costs, including deposition expenses, subpoena fees, and expert witness fees, and interest at the rate of 12 percent per annum on that portion of any award the payment of which is contested. Interest shall be computed from the date of the award of the ~~commissioner~~ Commissioner.

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Sec. 10. 21 V.S.A. § 655 is amended to read:

§ 655. PROCEDURE IN OBTAINING COMPENSATION; MEDICAL
EXAMINATION; VIDEO AND AUDIO RECORDING

After an injury and during the period of disability, if so requested by his or her employer, or ordered by the Commissioner, the employee shall submit to examination, at reasonable times and ~~places~~ within a 50-mile radius of the residence of the injured employee, by a duly licensed physician or surgeon designated and paid by the employer. The Commissioner may in his or her discretion permit an examination outside the 50-mile radius if it is necessary to obtain the services of a provider who specializes in the evaluation and treatment specific to the nature and extent of the employee's injury. The employee may make a video or audio recording of any examination performed by the insurer's physician or surgeon or have a licensed health care provider designated and paid by the employee present at the examination. The employer may make an audio recording of the examination. The right of the employee to record the examination shall not be construed to deny to the employer's physician the right to visit the injured employee at all reasonable times and under all reasonable conditions during total disability. If an employee refuses to submit to or in any way obstructs the examination, the employee's right to prosecute any proceeding under the provisions of this chapter shall be suspended until the refusal or obstruction ceases, and

compensation shall not be payable for the period which the refusal or obstruction continues.

Sec. 11. 21 V.S.A. § 624 is amended to read:

§ 624. DUAL LIABILITY; CLAIMS, SETTLEMENT PROCEDURE

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(e)(1) In an action to enforce the liability of a third party, the injured employee may recover any amount which the employee or the employee's personal representative would be entitled to recover in a civil action. Any recovery against the third party for damages resulting from personal injuries or death only, after deducting expenses of recovery, shall first reimburse the employer or its workers' compensation insurance carrier for any amounts paid or payable under this chapter to date of recovery, and the balance shall forthwith be paid to the employee or the employee's dependents or personal representative and shall be treated as an advance payment by the employer on account of any future payment of compensation benefits. Reimbursement required under this subsection, except to prevent double recovery, shall not reduce the employee's recovery of any benefit or payment provided by a plan or policy that was privately purchased by the injured employee, including uninsured-under insured motorist coverage, or any other first party insurance payments or benefits.

(2) In an instance where the recovery amount is less than the full value of the claim for personal injuries or death, the employer or its workers' compensation insurance carrier shall be reimbursed less than the amount paid or payable under this chapter. Reimbursement shall be limited to the proportion which the recovery allowed in the previous subsection bears to the total recovery for all damages. In determining the full value of the claim for personal injuries or death, the Commissioner shall make that administrative determination by considering the same evidence that a Superior Court would consider in determining damages in a personal injury or wrongful death action, or the Commissioner may order that the valuation of the claim be determined by a single arbitrator, which shall be adopted as a decision of the Commissioner. An appeal from the Commissioner's decision shall be made pursuant to section 670 of this title, except that the action shall be tried to the presiding judge of the Superior Court.

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Sec. 12. 21 V.S.A. § 663b is added to read:

§ 663b. FRAUD

(a) Claims of fraud submitted by an employer or insurance carrier shall be investigated by the Commissioner, and the Commissioner shall make a decision on the claim within 30 days of receipt of the claim. A party may appeal the decision of the Commissioner.

(b) An employee found to have committed fraud in order to receive compensation under this chapter shall be ordered to repay all compensation received. The employer shall not be charged for these payments when the employer's experience rating is determined.

Sec. 13. EFFECTIVE DATES

(a) This section and Secs. 3, 4, and 9–12 shall take effect on passage.

(b) Secs. 1, 2, and 5–8 shall take effect on July 1, 2014.