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Workers' Compensation Court 61st Annual Report

Fiscal Year 2003:

July 1, 2002 through June 30, 2003



Nebraska Workers' Compensation Court 61st Annual Report

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Michael K. High,
Presiding Judge

Michael P. Cavel,
Judge

James R. Coe,
Judge

Laureen K. Van Norman,
Judge

Ronald L. Brown,
Judge

J. Michael Fitzgerald,
Judge

John R. Hoffert,
Judge

Glenn W. Morton,
Court Administrator

Kay E. Peterson,
Clerk of the Court

Letter of Transmittal

Lincoln, Nebraska
December 1, 2003

Honorable John V. Hendry
Chief Justice of the Nebraska Supreme Court

Honorable Mike Johanns
Governor of Nebraska

Honorable Curt Bromm
Speaker of the Nebraska Legislature

Dear Sirs:

We have the privilege of submitting herewith the Sixty-First Annual Report of the Nebraska Workers' Compensation Court, prepared in accordance with the provisions and requirements of Section 48-166, Revised Statutes of Nebraska.

Very truly yours,
NEBRASKA WORKERS' COMPENSATION COURT
By

Michael K. High
Presiding Judge

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General Information

History

The Nebraska Workers' Compensation Act was first passed in 1913 and from then until 1917 the Act was administered by the several state district courts. In 1917, the Legislature created the Compensation Division in the Department of Labor and the commissioner of labor was designated compensation commissioner. The 1935 Legislature established the Workers' Compensation Court and transferred Compensation Division functions to the court. The authority and responsibilities of the court are found in Chapter 48, Article 1, of the Revised Statutes of Nebraska. By 1988, the workers' compensation bench had grown to seven judges who hear disputed cases throughout the state.

Mission

The mission of the Nebraska Workers' Compensation Court is to administer and enforce all provisions of the Nebraska Workers' Compensation Act, except those provisions that are committed to the courts of appellate jurisdiction.

Organization

The Nebraska Workers' Compensation Court is composed of seven judges who are initially appointed by the governor and who then remain on the bench for successive six-year terms upon approval of the electorate. Every two years, one of the judges is elected as presiding judge by the judges of the court. The presiding judge is responsible for the overall functioning of the court. Four judges are located in the State Capitol in Lincoln and three judges are located in the Hall of Justice in Omaha. A judge will travel to any county in the state where an accident occurred to hear a disputed case. A case is first heard by a single judge and, if appealed, the case is then heard by a review panel of three judges of the court. The review is based on the record created at the original hearing, and no new evidence may be introduced. The next level of appeal is to the Nebraska Court of Appeals and ultimately a case may go to the Nebraska Supreme Court.

The court staff is organized into seven operating sections with the court administrator holding overall administrative responsibility.

The **Adjudication Section** receives court filings, docket cases, schedules hearings and motions, corresponds with the parties, and issues opinions of the court.

The **Administration Section** is responsible for the business, financial, and personnel functions of the court, and also administers the Workers' Compensation Trust Fund. Under two federal grants the section conducts a federal survey of work-related injuries and illnesses and a data collection program for fatal injuries.

The **Legal Section** reviews settlement applications for adequacy and compliance with the law, conducts mediation conferences to facilitate informal resolution of workers' compensation disputes, informs injured workers, employers, and others of their rights and obligations under the law, provides legal advice to court staff, and monitors legislation for potential impact on the workers' compensation system.

The ***Coverage and Claims Section*** has responsibilities in three distinct areas. Compliance activities include enforcing insurance coverage requirements and enforcing the claims handling and reporting obligations of insurers and self insurers. Medical services activities include certifying and monitoring managed care plans, administering the independent medical examiner program, revising and maintaining the schedule of medical and hospital fees, and responding to inquiries related to medical issues. Self-insurance activities include reviewing applications for self-insurance, monitoring the financial status and payroll records of self-insured employers, and collecting fees and assessments from self-insured employers.

The ***Vocational Rehabilitation Section*** is responsible for reviewing and approving proposed vocational rehabilitation plans, certifying vocational rehabilitation counselors and job placement specialists, and appointing a vocational rehabilitation counselor if the parties cannot agree on the selection. The progress of injured workers in an approved plan is monitored, and all payments from the Workers' Compensation Trust Fund for plan expenses must be approved by the section.

The ***Public Information Section*** receives and processes all reports of injury and benefit payments, whether filed electronically or in paper format, and responds to requests for records and information. The section also maintains a toll-free information line, prepares court publications, develops educational workshops, and maintains the court's Web site.

The ***Information Technology Section*** is responsible for the computer network, programs, and databases of the court. The section develops and maintains the court's client/server system, develops computer programs and applications, coordinates information technology activities with vendors and other state agencies, and assists other court sections in meeting their goals through the use of technology.

Activities in Fiscal Year 2003

Electronic Data Interchange

At time of publication, 99.9 percent of all first reports and 67.4 percent of all subsequent reports are filed electronically using Electronic Data Interchange (EDI). The percentage of electronic subsequent reports continues to rise dramatically as more trading partners convert from paper to electronic filings. The court has implemented its first secured internet application which allows claims administrators to access court data to assist them in accurately filing injury and payment reports. In addition, the court is in the beginning phases of implementing electronic filing of proof of coverage information, with the ultimate goal of identifying uninsured employers electronically by cross checking various government data bases. A report of cancelled workers' compensation insurance policies is now received on a regular basis, and processes are being implemented to insure that replacement coverage is in place.

Data Sharing

The court has begun sharing injury, payment, settlement, and adjudication information with the Social Security Administration (SSA) to assist the SSA with reducing duplicate payments. Preliminary discussions have also occurred with the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) for a similar data sharing arrangement.

Public Information

In August 2002, the court adopted new policies, procedures, and fees for public records requests, and an electronic version of the new record request form is now available on the “Publications/Forms” page of the court’s Web site. Web site visitors can also email the court’s electronic help desk (newcc@wcc.state.ne.us) from the “Feedback” page with questions, comments, and requests.

Self Insurance

A program for periodic on-site audit of payroll records of self-insured employers was initiated in FY 2002 and continued during FY 2003. A total of 12 audits have been completed to date. The purpose of these audits is to insure that appropriate assessments have been paid and to assess the employer’s continued ability to meet its financial obligations under the Nebraska Workers’ Compensation Act.

Re-engineering

Re-engineering of business processes and information technology systems are underway for the Adjudication and Vocational Rehabilitation sections of the court and for the Compliance unit of the Coverage and Claims section. The goal is to improve operational efficiency and to continue moving the court toward an electronic working environment. In a collaborative effort with other state agencies, the court has also implemented an electronic fax server environment that allows the court to send and receive faxes electronically. These changes will allow the judges, court staff, and others to access court files and information more quickly and conveniently, and will position the court to accept electronic filings of litigation documents as resources permit.

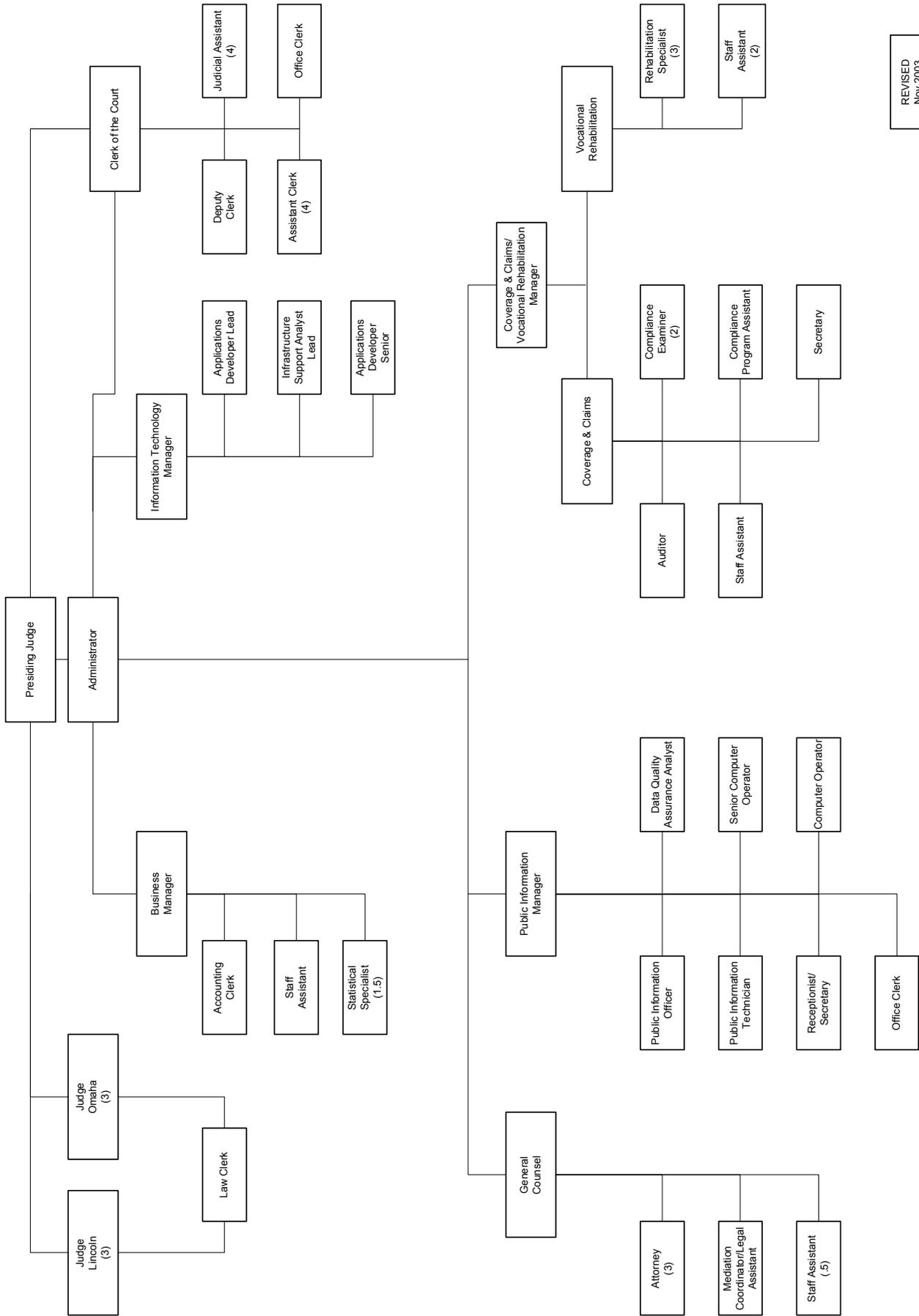
Pending Relocation of Administrative Sections

Due to the expiration of the court’s lease at 525 South 13th Street in June of 2004, negotiations are currently under way for new facilities for the administrative sections of the court. This will not affect the judges, clerk of the court, or any Adjudication section staff, as all litigation related staff and functions will remain at the State Capitol Building.

In addition to the specific activities listed above for FY 2003, the court continues to perform other duties on a regular basis as noted above in the “Organization” section.

The activities of the court in FY 2003 are described in greater detail in the following pages of this Annual Report, together with basic statistics regarding injuries reported in FY 2003. Additional injury statistics and statistics regarding benefit payments are available in a separate statistical report which can be accessed on the court’s Web site at <http://www.nol.org/workcomp/pubs/statisticalreport98-02.pdf>.

NEBRASKA WORKERS' COMPENSATION COURT



REVISED
Nov 2003

Judges

Photo Not Available.

Michael K. High, Presiding Judge

Office Address: State Capitol Building, Lincoln NE 68509-8908, phone (402) 471-3923, (800) 599-5155.

Date Appointed: January 8, 1998.

Biography: Graduate of University of Nebraska—Lincoln (B.S. in Agricultural Economics (1972); M.A. in Economics (1986)); University of Nebraska College of Law (J.D., 1986). Formerly: farmer and rancher (1972–1982); elected commissioner—Gosper County, Nebraska, Board of Commissioners (1978–1982); private law practice (1986–1998).

Judges

Photo Not Available.

Michael P. Cavel, Judge

Office Address: Hall of Justice, 1701 Farnam, Omaha NE 68183-0001, phone (402) 595-3900, (800) 599-5155.

Date Appointed: October 5, 1983.

Biography: Graduate of Creighton University, Omaha, Neb. (B.A.); Creighton University School of Law (J.D.). United States Army, 1968–71; private practice, 1971–1983; Midlands Big Brother of the Year, 1988.

Photo Not Available.

James R. Coe, Judge

Office Address: Hall of Justice, 1701 Farnam, Omaha NE 68183-0001, phone (402) 595-3900, (800) 599-5155.

Date Appointed: October 7, 1988.

Biography: Graduate of University of Nebraska–Lincoln (B.S. in Business Administration); University of Nebraska College of Law (J.D.). Partner of Carpenter, Rowen, Fitzgerald, and Coe, 1974–1988. Member of West Omaha (Neb.) Rotary Club; president of Dora Bingel Foundation.

Judges

Photo Not Available.

Laureen K. Van Norman, Judge

Office Address: State Capitol Building, Lincoln NE 68509-8908, phone (402) 471-3924, (800) 599-5155.

Date Appointed: July 6, 1993.

Biography: Graduate of University of Nebraska–Lincoln (B.A., social work); University of Nebraska College of Law (J.D.). Former Legal Counsel to the Nebraska Department of Labor. Nebraska State Bar Association: past Chair of Government Practice Committee; past member, Executive Board of Women and the Law Section; member, Supreme Court Gender Bias Task Force.

Photo Not Available.

Ronald L. Brown, Judge

Office Address: Hall of Justice, 1701 Farnam, Omaha NE 68183-0001, phone (402) 595-3900, (800) 599-5155.

Date Appointed: April 8, 1994.

Biography: Graduate of Dana College (B.S., cum laude); Creighton University School of Law (J.D.). Former occupations: Douglas County Assistant Public Defender, 1977–1978; Brown Law Offices, P.C., 1979–1989; Brown and Tripp, P.C., 1989–1994. Member of Nebraska State Bar Association, Nebraska Association of Trial Attorneys, Association of Trial Lawyers of America.

Judges

Photo Not Available.

J. Michael Fitzgerald, Judge

Office Address: State Capitol Building, Lincoln NE 68509-8908, phone (402) 471-3924, (800) 599-5155.

Date Appointed: April 12, 1996.

Biography: Graduate of University of Notre Dame (B.S. Business Administration); Georgetown University Law Center (J.D.); Creighton University (Certificate of Completion, Paramedic Training Program). Admitted to practice: Nebraska Supreme Court, United States District Court for the District of Nebraska, United States Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit, United States Tax Court. Employee-associate and stockholder partner: Matthews, Kelly, Cannon, and Carpenter, P.C., 1969–1977. Stockholder partner: Carpenter, Fitzgerald, and Coe, P.C., 1978–1983; Miller, Carpenter, Rowen, Fitzgerald, and Coe, P.C., 1983–1987; Carpenter, Rowen, Fitzgerald, and Coe, P.C., 1987–1988; Carpenter, Rowen, and Fitzgerald, P.C., 1988–present. Member of Nebraska State Bar Association, American Bar Association, American Trial Lawyers Association, Nebraska Trial Lawyers Association, Omaha Bar Association.

Photo Not Available.

John R. Hoffert, Judge

Office Address: State Capitol Building, Lincoln NE 68509-8908, phone (402) 471-3923, (800) 599-5155.

Date Appointed: October 4, 2001

Biography: Graduate of Western Illinois University (B.A., High Honors, Political Science); University of Nebraska College of Law (J.D. with Distinction). Associate/Partner: Knudsen, Berkheimer, Richardson & Endacott, LLP (1980-2001). United States Army (1970-1972). Past member: Legal Services of Southeast Nebraska, Board of Directors; Folsom Children’s Zoo and Botanical Gardens, Board of Directors; Nebraska Association of Trial Attorneys; American Judicature Society and American Trial Lawyers Association.

Compensation Court Cash Fund

Fiscal Year 2003 (July 1, 2002 to June 30, 2003)

The Compensation Court Cash Fund provides for the expense of administering the Nebraska Workers' Compensation Act and for the payment of the salaries and expenses of the personnel of the Nebraska Workers' Compensation Court. The fund was established in 1993 and replaced the use of general funds. The fund is financed by assessments against workers' compensation insurers, risk management pools, and self-insured employers. Contributions to the fund abate for one year whenever the balance of the fund equals or exceeds three times the amount expended and encumbered in the fiscal year just ending. The Nebraska Legislature appropriates a specific sum each year for operations of the Nebraska Workers' Compensation Court, to be funded from the Compensation Court Cash Fund. The appropriation for fiscal year 2003 was \$3,965,985.

BALANCE of fund on July 01, 2002:		\$8,819,967	
Revenue:			
Assessments		3,789,762	
Interest		194,030	
Accounts Receivables Invoiced		(581)	
Accounts Payable		14,487	
Operating Transfers In		286,101	
Operating Transfers Out		(4,000,000)	
Deposits With Vendors		(1,993)	
Miscellaneous		48,509	
Total Revenue:			<u>330,315</u>
Expenditures:			
	Appropriation	Not Expended	Actual Expended
Court Admin.	3,544,565	321,327	3,223,238
Voc. Rehab. Admin.	311,629	0	311,629
Second Injury Admin.	8,590	6,605	1,985
Self-Insurance Admin.	73,397	0	73,397
Federal Grant Admin.	27,804	0	27,804
Totals	<u>3,965,985</u>	<u>327,932*</u>	<u>3,638,053</u>
Less Total Expenditures			<u>3,638,053</u>
BALANCE of fund on June 30, 2003:		<u><u>\$5,512,229</u></u>	
* Does not include FY 2003 expenditures of 65,055 paid in FY 2004.			

Workers' Compensation Statistics Fund

Fiscal Year 2003 (July 1, 2002 to June 30, 2003)

The court conducts a survey of work-related injuries and illnesses and a data collection program for fatal injuries pursuant to two grants from the U.S. Department of Labor—Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). The Survey of Occupational Injuries and Illnesses is mandated by the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970 (P.L. 91-596), and the court was designated as the agency in Nebraska to conduct this work in a letter of March 25, 1971 from Governor J.J. Exon to Secretary of Labor, J.D. Hudgson. In 1991, the court contracted for the additional responsibilities of conducting the Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries as designated by BLS.

Expenses for administering these two federal grants are split 50/50 between the State of Nebraska and BLS. The state share of expenditures is charged against the Compensation Court Cash Fund, and the federal share is charged against the Workers' Compensation Statistics Fund. Federal monies are requested on a monthly basis, dependent upon estimated expenditures for that month, and deposited into the Workers' Compensation Statistics Fund. The Nebraska Legislature appropriates a specific sum each year for expenditures from the Workers' Compensation Statistics Fund. The appropriation for fiscal year 2003 was \$30,250.

BALANCE of fund on July 01, 2002:				\$382
Revenue:				
Intergovernmental Revenue			29,963	
Deposits With Vendors			(95)	
Total Revenue:			<u>29,868</u>	
Expenditures:				
	Appropriation	Not Expended	Actual Expended	
Federal Grant Admin.	<u>30,250</u>	0	<u>30,250</u>	
Totals	<u>30,250</u>	0	<u>30,250</u>	
Less Total Expenditures				<u>30,250</u>
BALANCE of fund on June 30, 2003:				<u><u>\$0</u></u>

Trust Funds

Fiscal Year 2003 (July 1, 2002 to June 30, 2003)

The *Workers' Compensation Trust Fund* was established July 1, 2000 as part of LB 1221 from the 2000 session of the Nebraska Legislature. The purpose of the fund is to make second injury benefit payments in accordance with section 48-128 and vocational rehabilitation benefit payments in accordance with section 48-162.01, and for paying administrative expenses relating to the fund. The fund is financed by assessments against workers' compensation insurers, risk management pools, and self-insured employers. Assessments are made whenever the fund is projected to go below the statutory minimum level.

The *Second Injury Fund* was established in 1913 to encourage employers to hire employees with disabilities. Pursuant to section 48-128, employers could be relieved of liability for disability benefits resulting from an increased amount of disability due to the combination of a preexisting disability and a subsequent work-related injury. Instead, the additional disability was compensated out of the Second Injury Fund.

In 1997 the Nebraska Legislature passed LB 854 which eliminated these provisions for injuries occurring on or after December 1, 1997. The fund remained available for subsequent injuries occurring before that date. Effective July 1, 2000, the Second Injury Fund was eliminated with the creation of the Workers' Compensation Trust Fund. While the substantive requirements for second injury benefits remain the same, second injury benefit payments for injuries occurring before December 1, 1997 are now made from the Workers' Compensation Trust Fund.

The *Vocational Rehabilitation Trust Fund* was established in 1974 to provide assistance to injured workers eligible for retraining or job placement services. Pursuant to section 48-162.01, payments for tuition, room and board, transportation, books, supplies, and related costs were paid from the Vocational Rehabilitation Trust Fund, when a vocational rehabilitation plan had been approved by the court staff or ordered by a judge of the court.

Effective July 1, 2000, the Vocational Rehabilitation Fund was eliminated with the creation of the Workers' Compensation Trust Fund. While the substantive requirements for vocational rehabilitation benefits remain the same, vocational rehabilitation training costs are now paid from the Workers' Compensation Trust Fund. The employer continues to pay temporary indemnity benefits during the course of a vocational rehabilitation plan, as well as expenses related to the development and implementation of the plan.

	Balance July 1, 2002	Interest/ Reimbursement/ Assessments	Total Assets	Benefit Costs	Admin. Costs	Accounts Payable	Balance June 30, 2003
Workers' Comp. Trust Fund	\$4,130,091	\$148,888 \$409 \$0	\$4,279,388	(\$1,415,415)	(\$286,101)	\$14,049	\$2,591,921

Cumulative Totals For Trust Funds

Disbursements (Benefit & Administrative Costs) Made From Trust Funds			
Date	Second Injury Trust Fund	Vocational Rehabilitation Fund	Workers' Compensation Trust Fund
June 30, 2003	N/A	N/A	\$1,687,467
June 30, 2002	N/A	N/A	\$1,430,516
June 30, 2001	N/A	N/A	\$1,549,078
June 30, 2000	* \$899,085	\$1,022,765	N/A
June 30, 1999	\$833,256	\$1,156,770	N/A
June 30, 1998	\$564,840	\$1,022,226	N/A
June 30, 1997	\$492,644	\$918,303	N/A
June 30, 1996	\$564,743	\$761,656	N/A
June 30, 1995	\$555,371	\$825,792	N/A
June 30, 1994	\$566,964	\$1,011,033	N/A

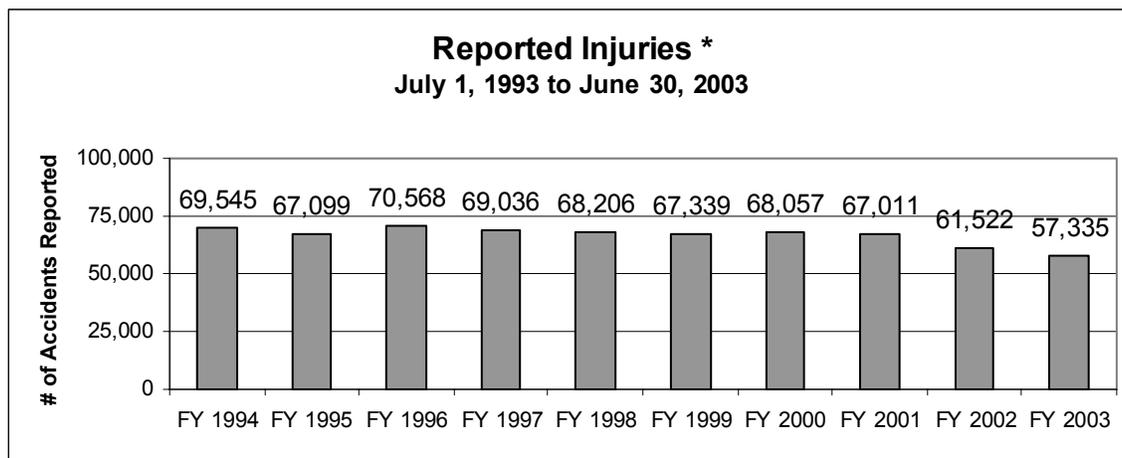
* Administrative costs of \$11,194 were not transferred from the Second Injury Fund to the Compensation Court Cash Fund for the year ending June 30, 2000, and as a result are not included in these figures. These costs were paid from the Compensation Court Cash Fund.

Assessments Made for Trust Funds			
Date	Second Injury Trust Fund	Vocational Rehabilitation Fund	Workers' Compensation Trust Fund
June 30, 2003	N/A	N/A	\$0
June 30, 2002	N/A	N/A	\$0
June 30, 2001	N/A	N/A	* \$26,965
June 30, 2000	\$4,124,826	\$0	N/A
June 30, 1999	\$0	* (\$573)	N/A
June 30, 1998	\$0	\$3,639,445	N/A
June 30, 1997	\$0	\$0	N/A
June 30, 1996	\$0	\$0	N/A
June 30, 1995	\$0	\$0	N/A
June 30, 1994	\$0	* \$34,175	N/A

* Adjustment by the Department of Insurance on assessments paid in prior fiscal years.

Reported Injuries *

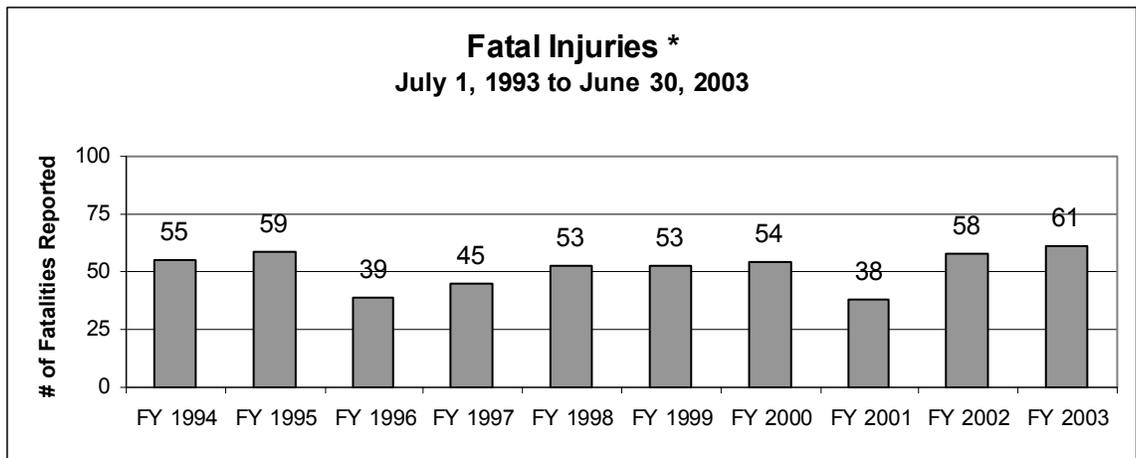
	Male	Female	Unknown	Total
July 1, 2002 to June 30, 2003	32,400	21,312	3,623	57,335
July 1, 2001 to June 30, 2002	35,008	21,503	5,011	61,522
July 1, 2000 to June 30, 2001	39,238	24,100	3,673	67,011
July 1, 1999 to June 30, 2000	41,249	24,544	2,264	68,057
July 1, 1998 to June 30, 1999	41,126	24,734	1,479	67,339
July 1, 1997 to June 30, 1998	43,217	24,549	440	68,206
July 1, 1996 to June 30, 1997	44,059	24,971	6	69,036
July 1, 1995 to June 30, 1996	45,549	25,019	0	70,568
July 1, 1994 to June 30, 1995	43,667	23,424	8	67,099
July 1, 1993 to June 30, 1994	45,574	23,971	0	69,545



* Includes injuries reported in FY 2003 regardless of the year in which the injury occurred.
Includes injuries resulting from occupational disease.

Fatal Injuries *

	Male	Female	Unknown	Total
July 1, 2002 to June 30, 2003	47	11	3	61
July 1, 2001 to June 30, 2002	53	5	0	58
July 1, 2000 to June 30, 2001	38	0	0	38
July 1, 1999 to June 30, 2000	49	5	0	54
July 1, 1998 to June 30, 1999	48	5	0	53
July 1, 1997 to June 30, 1998	49	4	0	53
July 1, 1996 to June 30, 1997	41	4	0	45
July 1, 1995 to June 30, 1996	38	1	0	39
July 1, 1994 to June 30, 1995	56	3	0	59
July 1, 1993 to June 30, 1994	46	9	0	55



* Includes fatal injuries reported in FY 2003 regardless of the year in which the injury occurred. Includes deaths resulting from occupational disease.

Weekly Income Benefits and Maximum Rates

Under the Nebraska Workers' Compensation Act the basic rule regarding weekly income benefits for total disability is that the employee is entitled to two thirds of his or her average weekly wage, subject to maximum and minimum levels. Changes in the maximum or minimum rates apply to injuries occurring on or after the effective date, but not to injuries occurring before that date.

The maximum benefit level is set at 100 percent of the state average weekly wage, as determined by the Nebraska Workers' Compensation Court. The calculation excludes federal employees, and is made in accordance with section 48-121.02 of the Nebraska Revised Statutes. The court recently issued an order setting the maximum benefit level for calendar year 2004 at \$562. The minimum rate remains at \$49 as provided in section 48-121.01(2).

Injury Occurring Between:	Maximum	Minimum
01/01/04	\$562	\$49
01/01/03 to 12/31/03	\$542	\$49
01/01/02 to 12/31/02	\$528	\$49
01/01/01 to 12/31/01	\$508	\$49
01/01/00 to 12/31/00	\$487	\$49
01/01/99 to 12/31/99	\$468	\$49
01/01/98 to 12/31/98	\$444	\$49
01/01/97 to 12/31/97	\$427	\$49
01/01/96 to 12/31/96	\$409	\$49
01/01/95 to 12/31/95	\$350	\$49
06/01/94 to 12/31/94	\$310	\$49
07/01/91 to 05/31/94	\$265	\$49

Litigated Case Summary ¹

Fiscal Year ²	Original Hearing Level		Review Hearing Level		Supreme Court/ Court of Appeals Level	
	2003	* 2002	2003	2002	2003	* 2002
Cases Pending at beginning of Fiscal Year	1,584	1,493	67	71	33	32
Petition or Appeal filed in Fiscal Year	1,424	1,390	153	121	53	52
Reopened	124	107	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Total	3,132	2,990	220	192	86	84
Court Disposition						
Decisions Issued	461	414	106	99	40	43
Settlements	806	689	15	14	2	1
Other Dispositions ³	348	323	27	18	10	6
Total Dispositions	1,615	1,426	148	131	52	50
Total Pending	1,517	1,564	72	61	34	34

Fiscal Year	2003	* 2002	2001	2000	1999
Number of Motions Filed	2,644	2,366	2,156	1,630	1,569
Number of Motion Dispositions	2,262	2,047	1,923	1,377	1,355
Number of Motion Hearings	1,270	1,046	911	842	589

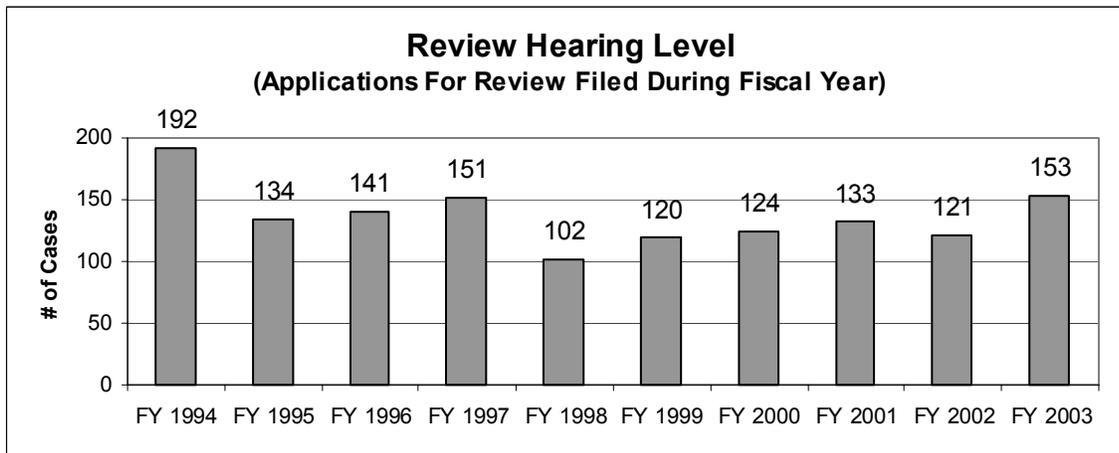
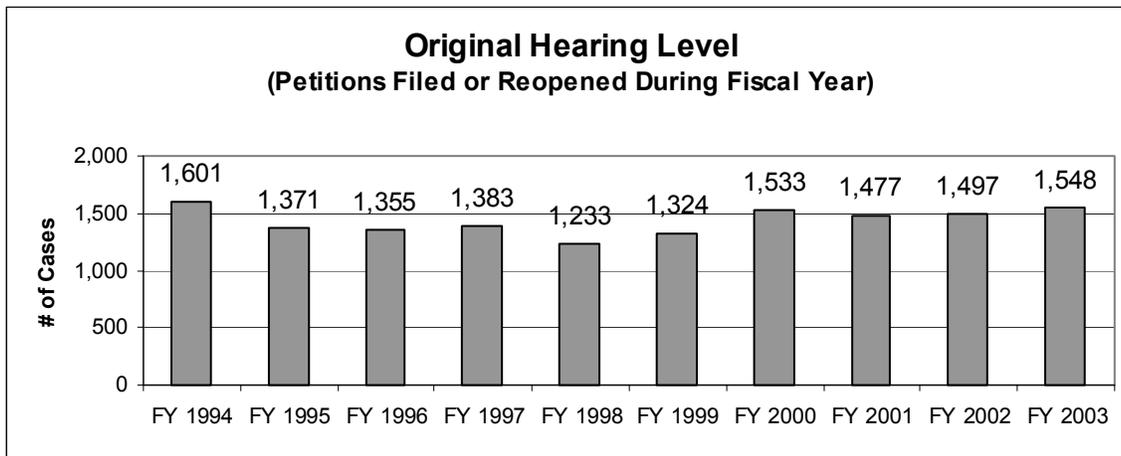
¹ Cases may appear more than once in any year if they are appealed.

² Fiscal Years run from July 1 through June 30.

³ Dismissals without hearings.

* Numbers adjusted as a result of corrections to data.

Hearings and Review Hearings

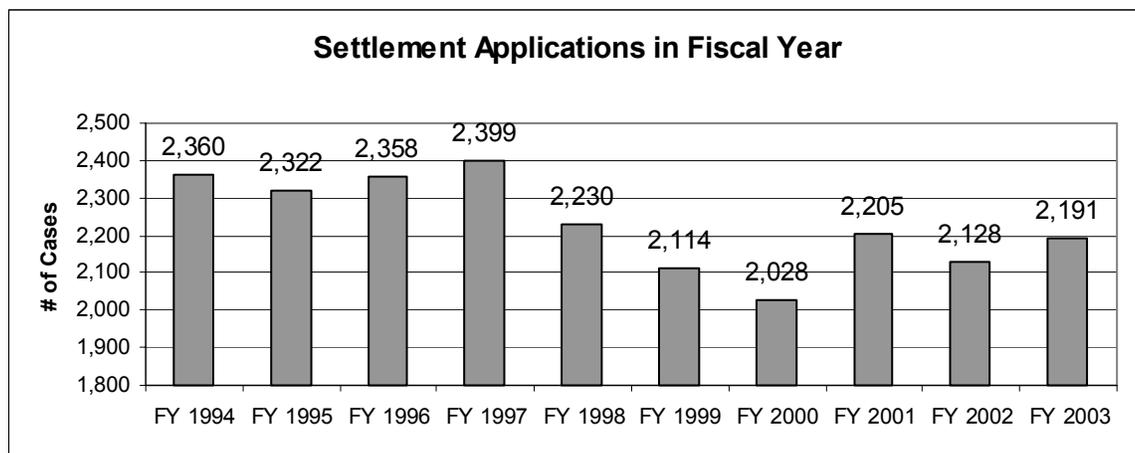


Summary of Settlements

Fiscal Year ¹	2003	2002*	2001	2000	1999
Applications					
Applications Pending at Beginning of Fiscal Year	142	136	159	99	197
Applications Made in Fiscal Year	2,191	2,128	2,205	2,028	2,114
Total	2,333	2,264	2,364	2,127	2,311
Dispositions					
Applications Approved Without Litigation	1,318	1,376	1,366	1,321	1,615
Applications Approved at the Original Hearing Level	806	689	811	596	531
Applications Approved at Review Hearing Level	15	14	23	14	12
Applications Approved at the Sup. Ct./Crt. App. Level	2	1	2	0	4
Applications — Total Approved	2,141	2,080	2,202	1,931	2,162
Applications — Total Disapproved	35	42	26	37	48
Total	2,176	2,122	2,228	1,968	2,210
Applications Pending at End of Fiscal Year	157	142	136	159	101

¹ Fiscal years run from July 1 through June 30.

* Numbers adjusted as a result of corrections to data.



Legal

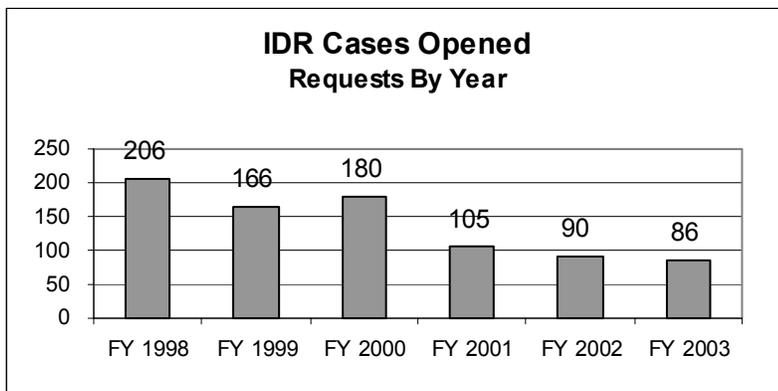
The Legal section of the Nebraska Workers' Compensation Court is responsible for reviewing lump sum settlements, facilitating informal dispute resolution, responding to inquiries from the public, providing legal advice to the court's administrative staff, and monitoring legislation for potential impact on the workers' compensation system. The section includes the court's general counsel, three staff attorneys, a mediation coordinator/legal assistant, and a legal secretary.

Statistics for lump sum settlements processed in FY 2003 (July 1, 2002 through June 30, 2003) can be found in section 1, page 18 of this annual report. Summaries of the Nebraska Supreme Court and Court of Appeals decisions may be found on the court's Web site (<http://www.nol.org/workcomp/about/casesummary.htm>).

Informal Dispute Resolution

Informal Dispute Resolution (IDR) is available to anyone with an interest in a workers' compensation dispute. The process is voluntary and the guidelines for IDR are found in Rule 48. It provides a dispute resolution mechanism for health care providers, vocational rehabilitation counselors, and others who would otherwise have no standing before the court. Attorneys may participate, but parties to the dispute do not have to be represented. The court may also order IDR and, in fact, disputes involving a change in the treating physician must be submitted for IDR before a motion or petition can be filed. IDR is attempted in all litigated cases in which a party is unrepresented.

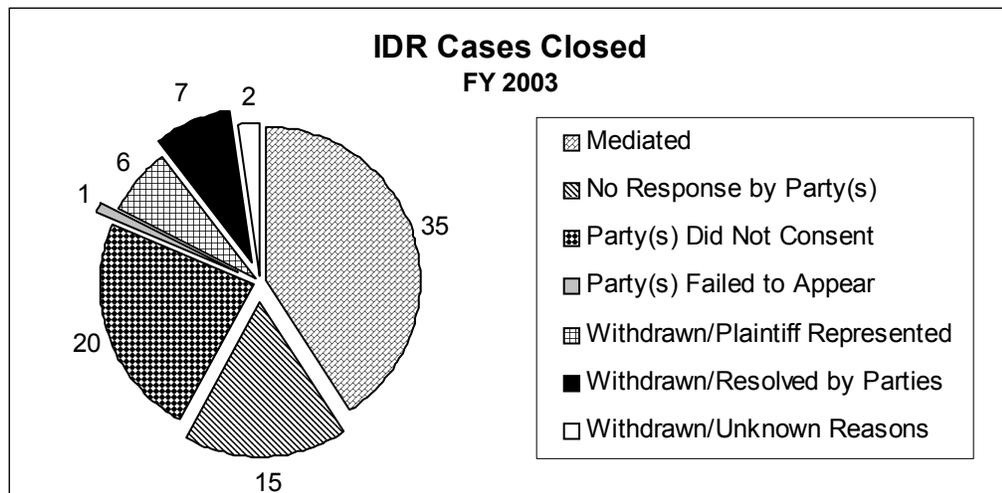
The court's IDR process focuses on interest-based mediation. This means that one of the court's professionally trained mediators assists the parties in reaching a resolution of the dispute that satisfies the underlying interests of the parties. The mediator does not make decisions nor evaluate the case on behalf of either party. Mediation can be an empowering process because it allows the participants to decide the outcome rather than an arbitrator or judge. Many IDR inquiries can be resolved without the need for a mediation conference simply through information and education provided by the mediation coordinator.



The court currently has four attorney-mediators on staff. All of the mediators and the mediation coordinator are trained in the basic skills of mediation through a nationally recognized 30-hour training program through the Office of Dispute Resolution in Lincoln, Nebraska. Advancement of mediation skills is encouraged, and as opportunities arise the mediators receive additional training.

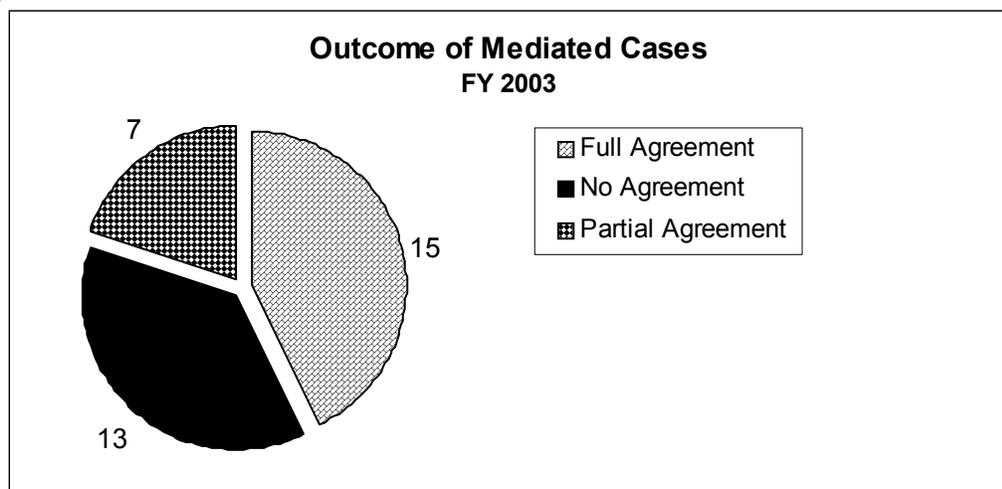
Closed Cases

The mediation coordinator evaluates all requests to determine whether the issues are appropriate for IDR under workers' compensation laws and rules. Sometimes they are not. In seven of the 86 cases closed in FY 2003, the parties came to an agreement while still in the intake process with communication facilitated by the mediation coordinator. Mediation through the court is voluntary; in 35 cases, or 41 percent of all closed cases, one party declined to participate or did not respond to the request. Cases may be closed for a variety of other reasons as shown in the following chart.



Mediated Cases

Of the 86 cases closed in FY 2003, 35 met in a mediation conference either in person or over the telephone. Of those 35 cases, 63 percent reached full or partial agreement.



IDR Evaluation Statistics

The parties who have used mediation for their disputes continue to give high marks to the mediators and the mediation process. A total of 19 people completed a post-mediation evaluation in fiscal year 2003. Of these:

- 63 percent “Agree” or “Strongly Agree” that they were satisfied with mediation;
- 58 percent “Agree” or “Strongly Agree” that they would rather resolve disputes like the one mediated through mediation instead of going to court;
- 90 percent “Agree” or “Strongly Agree” that the mediation process was fair;
- 95 percent “Agree” or “Strongly Agree” that the issues important to them were identified and discussed in the mediation process.

Coverage and Claims

This section includes a manager, two compliance examiners, a workers' compensation auditor, a staff assistant, a program assistant, and a secretary. Section responsibilities are divided into three categories: medical services; compliance; and self-insurance.

Medical Services Activities

Section staff respond to inquiries from a variety of sources concerning the application and use of the court's Schedule of Medical and Hospital Fees, the Independent Medical Examiner program, managed care, the choice of physician rule, and other questions relating to medical, surgical, and hospital services under the Nebraska Workers' Compensation Act.

Fee Schedule

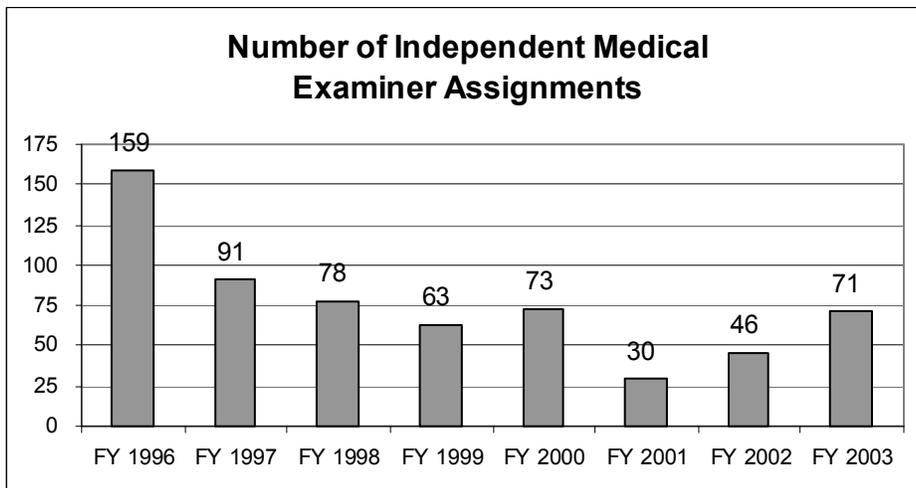
Section 48-120 of the Act requires the court to review the Schedule of Medical and Hospital Fees at least biennially and make appropriate changes when necessary. The current schedule was adopted in April of 2002, and became effective for all payments made on and after June 15, 2002. The schedule is now under review with revisions expected in the spring of 2004.

Independent Medical Examiner (IME) System

Once a dispute arises regarding the medical condition of the employee or related issues, either side may request a finding by an independent medical examiner. The IME system was designed to give the parties an additional means of resolving disputes outside the judicial process.

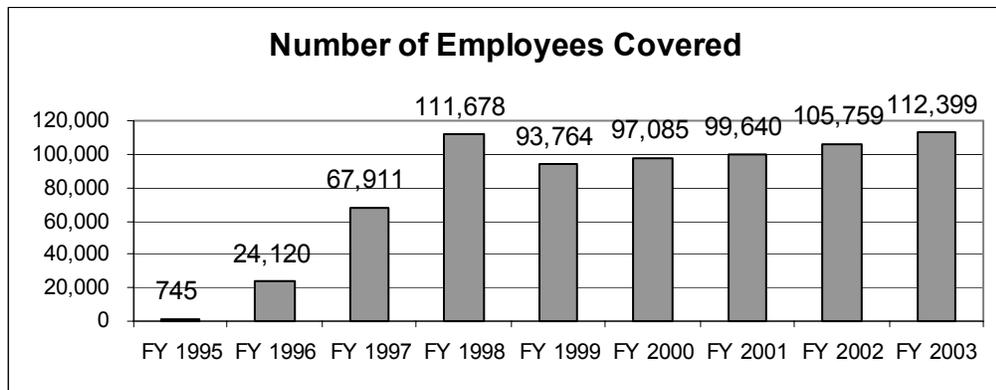
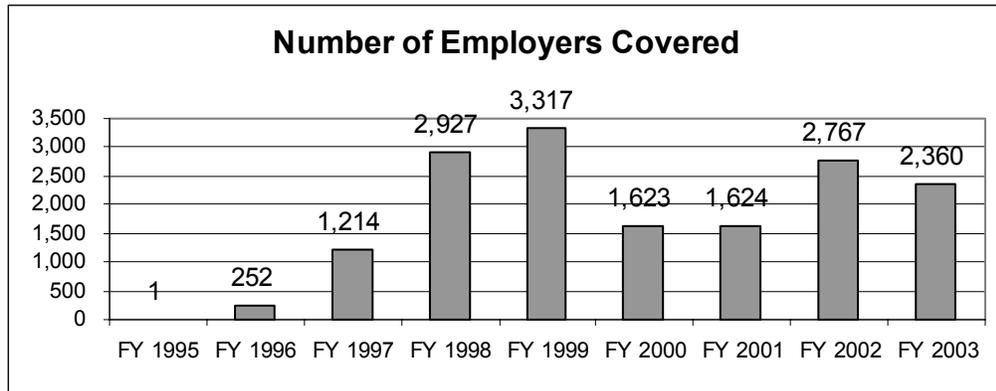
To serve as an Independent Medical Examiner for the court, physicians must complete an application and be approved by the judges of the court. Currently there are 239 physicians on the court's list of Independent Medical Examiners.

The number of requests for assignment of an IME was up considerably during FY 2003, and 71 assignments were made compared to 46 during FY 2002. Sixty-three requests were submitted by employees and their attorneys, employers submitted 30 requests as opposed to 22 the year prior, and five assignments were ordered by a judge of the court. The graph below shows assignments since the system began in 1996.



Managed Care Plans for Workers' Compensation

A table showing current information about managed care plans certified for workers' compensation is available on the court's Web site (<http://www.nol.org/workcomp/misc/mcp.pdf>). No new applications were submitted during FY 2003. On June 30, 2003 there were 2,360 employers and 112,399 employees covered by the certified managed care plans. Bar graphs showing the trend in covered employers and employees follow.



Compliance Activities

One of the primary enforcement activities of the section is to identify employers who do not have insurance coverage as required under the Nebraska Workers' Compensation Act. Compliance examiners first attempt to bring the uninsured employer into compliance; however, if the efforts of the staff do not result in compliance the case is referred to the Attorney General's office for further action.

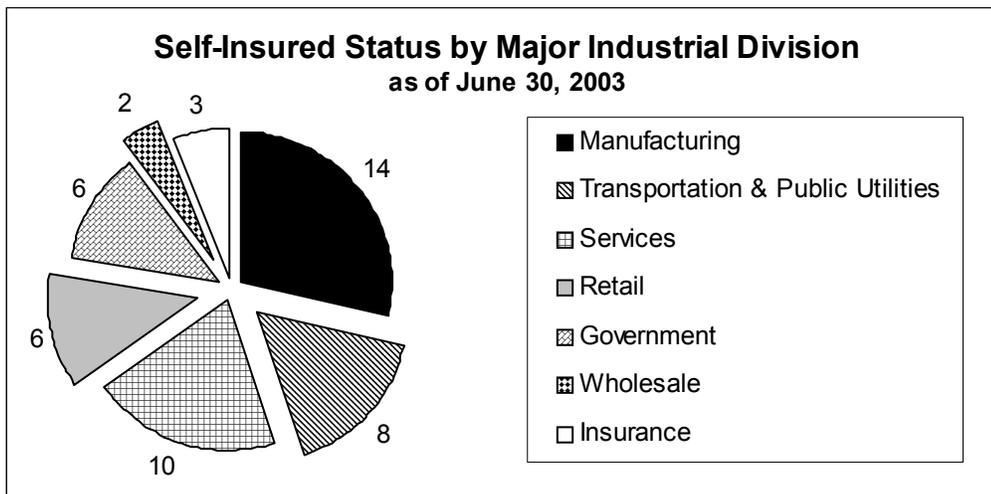
Insurance carriers, risk management pools, and self-insured employers are also required to comply with obligations under the Act, including the obligation to report injuries and payments in accordance with the Act and the court's Rules of Procedure. Coverage and Claims staff enforce those reporting requirements, requesting missing injury reports and monitoring for their receipt, clarifying discrepancies on existing reports and obtaining missing information. The section has devoted an increasing amount of time to the court's Electronic Data Interchange (EDI) initiative. Section staff have worked with Public Information and Information Technology staff on compliance issues, testing, editing for errors, and planning for future EDI activities.

Compliance examiners respond to a large volume of phone inquiries from a variety of sources and on a variety of topics. Topics frequently addressed include: medical issues, insurance carrier identification and contact information, benefit calculation questions, payment explanation, delay in receiving benefits, and general rights and obligations questions. Often, callers identify situations in which employers are uninsured, injury reports are not being filed, and insurers, employers, or risk management pools are not complying with other obligations under the Act. Staff investigate the specific cases, encourage voluntary compliance, and take appropriate legal action when necessary. Compliance personnel made over 5,000 contacts in FY 2003, requiring various levels of service.

Self-Insurance Activities

The Coverage and Claims section is responsible for reviewing applications for individual self-insurance, determining and collecting fees and assessments, and monitoring those employers who have been granted the privilege of self-insurance for continued ability to meet their financial obligations under the Nebraska Workers' Compensation Act. Self-insurance privileges are subject to periodic review and renewal. The program for periodic on-site audit of payroll records initiated in FY 2002 continued during FY 2003. A total of six audits have been completed and six more are planned for FY 2004.

At the beginning of each calendar year, the court calculates and collects from employers self-insured for the prior calendar year necessary assessments for the state's General Fund, the Compensation Court Cash Fund, and the Workers' Compensation Trust Fund. The assessments are based on the number and classification of employees, payroll, and benefits paid during the previous calendar year. Additional assessments are made for carrying out the Insurance Fraud Act. Because much of the information about self-insurers in Nebraska is kept on a calendar year basis, the statistics reported do not always coincide with the end of the court's fiscal year. It is important to note this distinction in the graphics that follow. As of June 30, 2003 there were 50 employers approved for self-insurance. For calendar year 2003 tax and assessment purposes, there were 58 self-insurers (employers who were self-insured for all or part of calendar year 2002). The State of Nebraska is self-insured by statute and is not included in any of the statistics that follow.



Self-Insurance Status By Calendar Year

Calendar Year	# of Self-Insurers	# of Employees	Gross Payroll
2002	58	135,904	\$3,961,076,218
2001	62	139,419	\$3,914,599,183
2000	62	148,113	\$3,785,487,567
1999	64	136,136	\$3,785,362,521
1998	68	130,134	\$3,908,884,324
1997	76	123,282	\$3,095,073,558
1996	89	137,640	\$3,441,007,693
1995	92	130,854	\$3,268,057,718
1994	85	122,475	\$3,044,621,915
1993	83	117,073	\$2,743,717,174

Note: The 2003 figures are not available at this time.

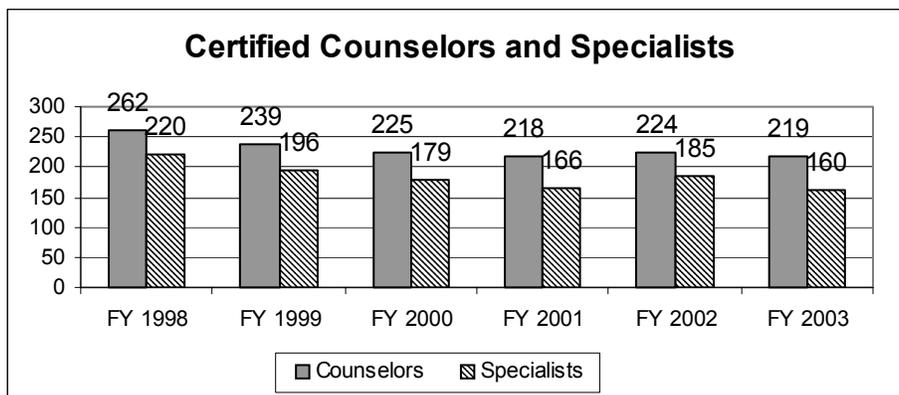
Vocational Rehabilitation

A manager, three vocational rehabilitation specialists, and two support staff are responsible for duties associated with vocational rehabilitation services to which an employee may be entitled under the Nebraska Workers' Compensation Act. The goal of vocational rehabilitation is to return an injured worker to suitable, gainful employment after an injury covered under the Act. A wide variety of services are available, from coordinating return to the pre-injury job with the employer to a period of formal retraining.

The duties of the section can be divided into three broad categories: certifying vocational rehabilitation counselors and job placement specialists, appointing counselors when parties cannot agree, and reviewing, approving, and monitoring vocational rehabilitation plans.

Certification of Counselors and Specialists

Vocational rehabilitation services can only be provided to injured workers by individuals who have been certified by the court. Rules 39-41 contain the requirements for certification. On June 30, 2003 there were 219 vocational rehabilitation counselors and 160 job placement specialists on the directory maintained by the court. Of these, 124 counselors and 65 job placement specialists were located in Nebraska.



Appointment of Counselors

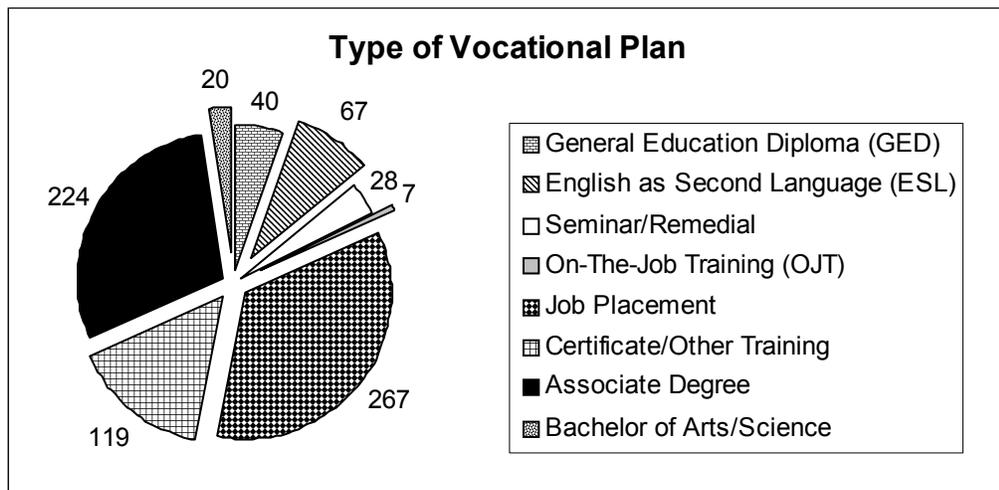
When an injured worker claims entitlement to vocational rehabilitation services, the employee and the employer (or the employer's insurer) must try to agree on a vocational rehabilitation counselor to evaluate the employee and provide needed services. If they can't agree, one of them can ask the court to appoint a counselor from the directory. Of the 698 cases requiring a vocational rehabilitation counselor in FY 2003, the court appointed 135 from its directory and the parties were able to agree upon a counselor in the other 563 cases.

When a vocational rehabilitation counselor is agreed upon or appointed, a vocational rehabilitation case is established. On June 30, 2003 there were 1,075 open cases. A total of 831 cases were closed for a variety of reasons during FY 2003 (training completed, employee returned to work, claim settled, etc.).

Vocational Rehabilitation Plans

Once it is determined that an employee may be entitled to vocational rehabilitation services in order to return to suitable, gainful employment the employee is evaluated and, if necessary, a vocational rehabilitation plan is developed. The level of services to be provided is based on a hierarchy outlined in Section 48-162.01 of the Nebraska Workers' Compensation Act. These services range from coordinating a return to the pre-injury job with the pre-injury employer to a plan of formal retraining.

A vocational rehabilitation plan of some type is involved in a majority of the cases monitored by the section. The following chart shows the type of plan involved in 772 cases either closed during FY 2003 or currently being monitored.



When an employee is in a court-approved vocational rehabilitation plan, the following costs are paid by the Workers' Compensation Trust Fund administered by the court: tuition, books, tools, other appropriate fees and costs, and board, lodging, and/or travel in some circumstances. In addition, salaries, other benefits, and expenses incurred by the court for the purposes of vocational rehabilitation are paid from the fund. Total disbursements from the trust fund for vocational rehabilitation purposes are shown in Section 1, page 11 of this Annual Report.

Vocational rehabilitation counselor fees for the evaluation of the employee, development and implementation of a vocational rehabilitation plan, and preparation of a loss of earning power evaluation are paid by the employer or workers' compensation insurer. This also includes charges by job placement specialists or interpreters, if necessary. The employer or insurer is also responsible for temporary disability benefits while the employee is undergoing vocational rehabilitation.

Public Information

The court's Public Information section exists for three purposes:

- to educate the public regarding Nebraska workers' compensation law and procedural rules. Public Information staff respond to inquiries received on the court's toll-free information line and email help desk, and also disseminate information by means of the court's web site, publications, workshops and seminars.
- to provide access to public records maintained by the court.
- to process and analyze injury and payment reports filed electronically and on paper by the court's trading partners, including insurers, risk management pools, and self insured employers. Public Information staff also administer access to the court's extranet Claims Search database to assist trading partners in complying with their reporting responsibilities.

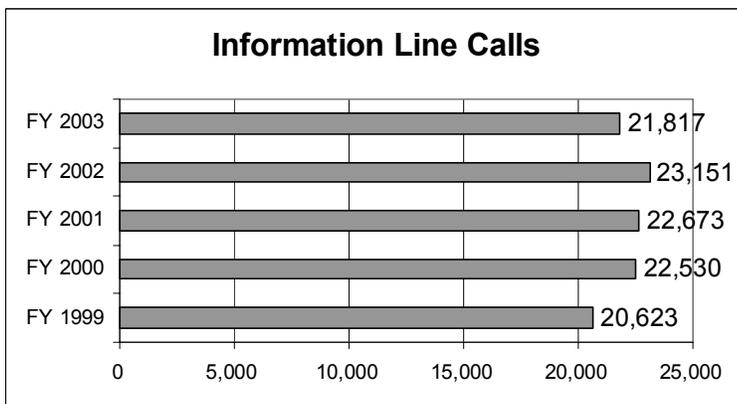
Providing these services requires eight full-time staff members including two public information specialists, a data quality assurance analyst, two computer operators, a receptionist/secretary, and an office clerk. Overall supervision and guidance is provided by the public information manager.

Education

Information Line

The court's toll-free information line enables the court to serve the public more efficiently and saves the cost of long distance calling. Public information specialists assist callers on the information line from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m, Monday through Friday. After hours and during weekends and holidays, callers receive instructions to leave a message so that a specialist can return the call on the next working day.

The specialists provide answers to commonly asked questions about workers' compensation in Nebraska or research inquiries for a response, usually within 24 hours. Calls can also be transferred to other court sections for more information. Court staff do not provide opinions, guesses, or legal advice.



In FY 2003, the information line received 21,817 calls, an average of 419.6 calls per week or 88 calls per day. This is a 5.8 percent decrease from FY 2002. Increased use of the court's

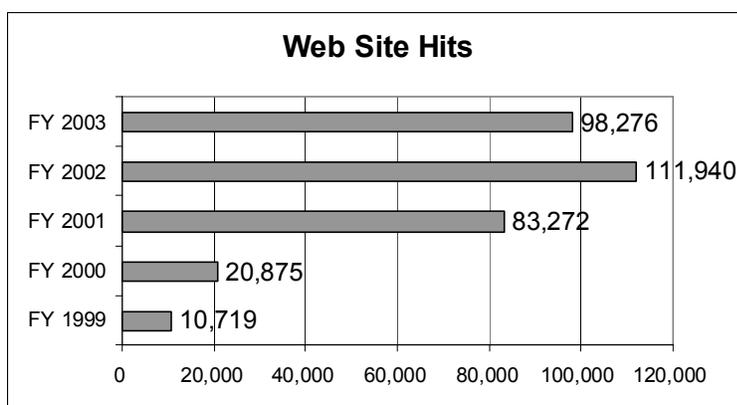
Web site and electronic help desk may have contributed to the decrease in calls. Calls on the information line come from employees, attorneys, employers, insurers, medical and vocational rehabilitation providers, and others in Nebraska and throughout the nation.

Web Site

The Public Information section created the court's Web site, located at <http://www.nol.org/workcomp/>, and maintains the site on a day-to-day basis. In August 2002, the Web site introduced an electronic version of the court's new Record Request form (located on the Publications/Forms page). Web site visitors can now request workers' compensation records online by completing the required form fields and clicking the "submit" button. Also, Web site visitors can email the court's electronic help desk (newcc@wcc.state.ne.us) from the "Feedback" page with questions, comments, and requests. The Public Information specialists respond to emails received at the electronic help desk.

In FY 2003, the Web site received 98,276 hits, a 12.2 percent decrease from FY 2002. The court's Web site server host, Nebrask@ Online, gathers these statistics and it should be noted that these statistics do not include hits to our Web site from State of Nebraska agencies.

Of the Web site activity that was tracked in FY 2003, the files in the "Publications/Forms" page had the most hits with 29,403 (29.9 percent of all hits in FY 2003). More than half of these were for the Rule Book, with a total of 13,148 hits (13.4 percent of all hits). This was followed by the "What's New" page with 5,921 hits (6.0 percent of all hits) and the "Calls and Opinions" page with 5,424 hits (5.5 percent of all hits).



Publications

The Public Information section designs, writes, edits, and maintains an inventory of the following publications and forms.

- Annual Report
- Statistical Report
- Rules of Procedure
- Bulletin (*newsletter of the court*)
- Rights & Obligations (*also available in Spanish*)
- Choosing a Doctor for a Work-Related Injury (*also available in Spanish*)
- Vocational Rehabilitation Services (*also available in Spanish*)

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- Informal Dispute Resolution and Mediation
 - Information for Claimants Not Represented by an Attorney
 - Record Request Form (*paper and electronic versions*)
 - Form 1—First Report of Alleged Occupational Injury or Illness
 - Form 4—Subsequent Report
 - Form 12—Insurance Coverage
 - Form 50—Choice of Doctor (*also available in Spanish*)
 - Form 63-1—Request for Independent Medical Examiner
 - Form 67-2—Notice of Agreement to use a Named Independent Medical Examiner

Workshops and Seminars

Public Information staff also assist with planning, preparing, and conducting informational workshops and seminars presented by the court. During FY 2003, court staff have presented information to approximately 300 people in a total of eight workshops and seminars.

Record Searches

One of the most common requests from the public are for record searches. Public Information staff fulfilled 5,289 formal requests for public records in FY 2003, a 65.3 percent increase from FY 2002. Of the record requests received in FY 2003, 79.7 percent were fulfilled by means of electronic mail or electronic fax. Policy changes effective August 1, 2002 resulted in the creation of a new Record Request form in paper and electronic formats. Five-year searches of first and subsequent reports are fulfilled at no charge if sufficient information is provided to promptly identify the records. Public Information staff fulfill most record requests within four business days.

Data Processing and Analysis

Public Information staff processed 57,335 first reports and 46,509 subsequent reports in FY 2003. At the time of publication, 99.9 percent of all first reports and 67.4 percent of all subsequent reports are filed electronically using Electronic Data Interchange (EDI). Public Information staff process the electronic reports and also code and manually enter the remaining paper reports. Once processed, the data quality assurance analyst examines and maintains the data for statistical purposes.

The court has implemented secure extranet applications within the State of Nebraska's Secure Extranet Web site (Guardian). Access to the court's Claims Search database is administered by Public Information staff. These agency administrators provide the court's trading partners with access to basic claims information that will help them to file accurate subsequent reports with the court. The administrators assist trading partners with the approval process, maintain the approved user list, and provide basic troubleshooting services when problems arise. At the time of publication, 34 of the court's 131 trading partners are approved for access to this database.

Information Technology

The Information Technology section of the Nebraska Workers' Compensation Court is responsible for the administration and maintenance of the court's computer systems and network. This includes the court's databases relating to first reports of injury, subsequent reporting, vocational rehabilitation, and adjudication, which are maintained in Oracle. The court has also made considerable strides in exchanging information through Electronic Data Interchange (EDI). The section maintains an electronic connection with the database at the National Council on Compensation Insurance (NCCI). The court also takes advantage of Internet access to Secretary of State information related to corporation and business records. Providing these services requires a manager, three full-time staff members, and one development contractor.

Fiscal Year Activities

Ending June 30, 2003, the court completed its sixth full year of managing data on its client/server system, which utilizes an Oracle database. The database currently contains eight full years' worth of information, going back to calendar year 1996 for first reports of injury. The court also added to its historical statistical injury-related information for purposes of performing cross-year analysis. At the end of Calendar Year 2002, the court began producing rolling calendar-year reporting data for up to three calendar years.

During the fiscal year the court completed the first deliverable of a comprehensive Vocational Rehabilitation re-engineering project. The court continues to move toward maintaining its documents and records in electronic format, and to familiarize staff with using electronic files and documents in place of paper files and documents.

The court has begun sharing with the Social Security Administration (SSA) injury, payment, settlement, and adjudication information to assist the SSA with reducing duplicate payments. The current information sharing is done locally in Lincoln. The SSA and the court are working towards an ultimate goal of making the information available outside the Lincoln area.

In a collaborative effort with the Nebraska Health and Human Services System (HHSS) and the state government Information Management Services (IMServices), the court funded and implemented an electronic fax server environment that allows the court to send and receive faxes electronically.

Electronic Data Interchange Initiative

The court's Electronic Data Interchange (EDI) reporting initiative allows employers, insurers, and others to file certain reports with the court in an electronic format as opposed to sending forms through the mail. At the time of publication, 99.9 percent of all first reports and 67.4 percent of all subsequent reports are filed electronically using EDI. In conjunction with electronic subsequent report processing, the court implemented a new "claims" oriented data/processing design that facilitates managing the electronic processing of these reports. The court, using the development and hosting services of the state government Information Management Services (IMServices) agency, implemented its first secured internet application which allows claims administrators access to injury reported information. This assists the insurance companies and third party administrators with properly filing injury and payment information.

Proof of Coverage

The court began the analysis phase of receiving electronic transmissions of Proof of Coverage data from National Council on Compensation Insurance (NCCI). The ultimate goals will be to maintain a local repository of this information for records management purposes and to be able to compare this information against employer information as provided to the court by other agencies.

Nebraska Occupational Injury and Illness Survey — 2001

Occupational Safety and Health Act

The Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970 (OSHA) became an official part of the nation's labor laws in 1971. With its passage, Congress declared its intent “. . . to assure as far as possible every working man and woman in the Nation safe and healthful working conditions and to preserve our human resources.”

Under this Act, employers are required to keep records of all work-related deaths, any diagnosed occupational illnesses and any occupational injuries which involve loss of consciousness, restriction of work or motion, transfer to another job, or requires medical treatment beyond first aid. Employers with more than ten (10) workers are required to maintain a log and summary of occupational injuries and illnesses (OSHA No. 300) and a supplementary record (OSHA No. 301)¹ of each occurrence within the calendar year. These records are retained at the work site for five (5) years and must be available for inspection by representatives of the U.S. Department of Labor and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Employers with less than eleven (11) employees and those employers who conduct business in one of the low hazard industries specified by OSHA are generally exempt from these recordkeeping requirements unless they are notified of the necessity to maintain these records for a given year for statistical purposes.

Occupational Injury and Illness Survey

In order to measure and evaluate the efforts in reducing work-related injuries and illnesses, a standardized system to collect, compile and analyze the health and safety statistics was established and implemented. This standardized system enabled data users to identify those industries that need improvement, to further monitoring and education programs, and allow employers to compare their incidence rates with other employers in the same industry.

The Nebraska Workers' Compensation Court has cooperated with the U.S. Department of Labor and the Bureau of Labor Statistics in conducting an annual survey of Nebraska Employers which has provided these essential work injury and illness statistics since 1971. The 2001 sample surveyed 3,189 employing units in the state.

Information regarding the survey and the results of the Occupational Injury and Illness Survey 2001 is available on the court's Web site (<http://www.nol.org/workcomp/about/2001noii.pdf>).

¹In the State of Nebraska the Workers' Compensation Form 1 — First Report of Alleged Occupational Injury or Illness, may be used in place of the OSHA No. 301 form.

Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries (CFOI) — 2002

The Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries (CFOI) Program was developed by the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) to provide a timely and accessible census of work-related fatalities. The CFOI program is a federal/state cooperative program. In Nebraska, CFOI is conducted by the Nebraska Workers' Compensation Court. This is the 11th year that CFOI has been conducted in all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

2002 Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries

CFOI 2002 used multiple data sources including death certificates, workers' compensation reports, medical examiner reports, and other available federal and state administrative records, to compile a complete, verifiable count of Nebraska fatal workplace injuries. The census covers all traumatic occupational fatalities, including those resulting from injuries to the self-employed, laborers on small farms, government workers, and others too difficult to identify from a single data source.

Besides comprehensive counts of fatal work injuries, the 2002 census provides information on the demographic characteristics of the deceased workers (including age, gender, and race), the occupations and industries the decedents worked in and the circumstances of their tragedies. This wealth of information on hazards in Nebraska workplaces yields vital insights to aid in preventing future workplace fatalities. Safety and health researchers will be able to study patterns of fatal work injuries, identify hazardous activities and equipment, and alert workers to these dangers.

2002 Census Results

The Nebraska Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries recorded 83 fatal workplace injuries during 2002, up from 57 the previous year. Other findings of the census include:

- Transportation accidents were the leading fatal event, accounting for 43 (52 percent) of fatal occupational injuries in 2002. Contact with objects and equipment followed with 17 (21 percent), assaults and violent acts contributed 8 (10 percent) and falls contributed 6 (7 percent).
- Among industry groups, the largest number of fatal work injuries was in agriculture with 20 deaths (24 percent). Transportation followed with 18 deaths (22 percent).
- Twenty-two (27 percent) of those fatally injured were 45 – 54 years of age and 16 (19 percent) were 35 – 44 years of age.
- Seventy (84 percent) of those fatally injured were white, non-hispanic.
- Seventy-six (92 percent) of those fatally injured were men.
- Sixty-three (76 percent) of those fatally injured were wage and salary workers. The remainder were self-employed.

Information regarding the census and the results of the Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries 2002 is available on the court's Web site (<http://www.nol.org/workcomp/about/2002cfoi.pdf>).