

WAC 415-106-510 Does my disability qualify me for a PSERS catastrophic duty disability benefit? (1) If the department determines you are disabled and you became disabled in the line of duty, you qualify for a catastrophic duty disability if:

(a) The disability or disabilities that qualified you for a PSERS disability benefit are so severe that considering your age, education, work experience, and transferable skills, you cannot engage in any other kind of substantial gainful activity in the labor market; and

(b) Your disability or disabilities have lasted or are expected to last at least 12 months, or are expected to result in your death.

(2) A person with multiple injuries/conditions, some duty-related and some not, could qualify for a catastrophic duty disability but only if the duty injury or injuries, standing on their own, are catastrophically disabling.

Example 1:

Totally disabled, but not from a duty injury - Not eligible for a catastrophic duty disability benefit.

A PSERS member suffers a knee injury on duty, leaving them disabled from PSERS employment. The knee injury, by itself, is not totally disabling. The member also suffers from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) or Lou Gehrig's disease, a progressive neurodegenerative disease that ultimately leaves the member totally disabled. Pursuant to the ALS diagnosis the member is granted a full disability from the Social Security Administration. In this case the member would qualify for a disability, but not for a catastrophic duty disability because the fully disabling condition, ALS, is not duty related.

Example 2:

Totally disabled, duty injury totally disabling - Eligible for catastrophic duty disability benefits.

A PSERS member suffers a knee injury while fishing. The knee injury, by itself, is neither duty related nor catastrophically disabling. The member also suffers severe injuries on the job while responding to an emergency event at a correctional facility, leaving the member fully disabled. The Social Security Administration grants the member a full disability based on the member's total condition. The member qualifies for a PSERS catastrophic duty disability benefit because the severe injuries, by themselves, render the member totally disabled.

(3) If you receive catastrophic duty disability benefits, the department will periodically review your income and medical status for continued eligibility. This review is not a reassessment of your initial determination, but an assessment of whether there has been any change in your condition. If it is determined that there has been a change in your condition and you are no longer eligible under subsection (1) of this section, or if you fail to provide required documentation or cooperate with the review, your catastrophic duty disability benefit may be discontinued or converted to a different retirement type. DRS will notify you of your review at least 30 days before it starts.

(a) Income review: At least annually, you must submit documentation to verify that your income from earnings is below the defined income threshold as defined in subsection (4)(c) of this section. You must also notify the department within 30 calendar days of any changes in your income that could impact your eligibility including, but not limited to, wages and earnings from self-employment (see subsection (4)(c), (d) and (f) of this section). If DRS is not notified on time, you may be responsible for any resulting overpayment.

Documentation you may need to provide includes a federal or state income tax return from the most recent year, employment security records for the last four quarters, self-employment documents or 1099-R, or other documentation as requested by the department.

(b) **Medical review:** The department will conduct a continuing disability review (CDR) at least once every three years if at the time of your last determination your condition is expected to improve, or every six years if your condition is not expected to improve, until you reach age 65. The department may increase the frequency of your CDRs and reserves the right to require a CDR at any time if notified of a change in your condition, but not more than once every 12 months. The department may also waive the CDR if your disability is determined to be permanent or terminal.

(i) DRS will first review any updated medical information available from any labor and industries claims related to your line of duty injury to determine if additional medical information is needed from you and your primary care provider.

(ii) If needed, the department will provide you with a Disability Review form, which asks for information about whether your medical condition has improved since your last eligibility determination. You will have at least 30 days to complete and return this form to the department or notify the department that you need additional time. Once received, the department will have 90 days to review this information and either notify you of your continued eligibility or the need for additional information. Before making a change to your disability retirement status, the department may consult with a contracted vendor for the purpose of providing an independent medical review.

(4) **Definitions.** As used in this section:

(a) **Catastrophically disabled** means the same as "totally disabled" as defined under RCW 41.37.230(3).

(b) **Continuing disability review (CDR)** means an assessment of your current medical condition to determine if it continues to be catastrophically disabling. The department will review recent documentation, with supplemental assessment by external medical experts at the department's discretion.

(c) **Defined income threshold** means any substantial gainful activity that produces average earnings, as defined in (d) of this subsection, in excess of the federal Social Security disability standards, adjusted annually for inflation. Wages count toward earnings when they are earned, not when you receive them. Self-employment income counts when you receive it, not when you earn it.

(d) **Earnings** are any income or wages received, which are reportable as wages or self-employment income to the IRS.

(e) **Labor market** is the geographic area within reasonable commuting distance of where you were last gainfully employed or where you currently live, whichever provides the greatest opportunity for gainful employment.

(f) **Substantial gainful activity** describes a level of work activity and earnings. Substantial gainful activity is work activity that is both substantial and gainful, and it may be, but is not required to be, from work or self-employment. Earnings as defined in this section include compensated work activity that meets or exceeds the defined income threshold:

(i) Work activity is substantial if it involves doing significant physical or mental activities. Your work activity may be substantial even if it is done on a part-time basis or if you do less, or get paid

less, or have less responsibility than when you worked in your PSERS position.

(ii) Work activity is gainful if it is work activity that you do for pay or profit. Work activity is gainful if it is the kind of work usually done for pay or profit, whether or not a profit is realized.

(iii) Generally, activities like taking care of yourself, household tasks, profits from rental income, hobbies, therapy, school attendance, club activities, or social programs are not substantial gainful activity.

(g) **Transferable skills** are any combination of learned or demonstrated behavior, education, training, work traits, and skills that you can readily apply. They are skills that are interchangeable among different jobs and workplaces.

[Statutory Authority: RCW 41.50.050 and 41.37.230. WSR 24-08-071, § 415-106-510, filed 4/2/24, effective 4/3/24.]