



If you ask injured workers what matters most in a workers' compensation case, most will say medical care, getting wage checks started, and keeping their job. All of that matters. But one number quietly drives the value of the wage side of the case from the very beginning: the average weekly wage.

That figure is not a technical footnote. It is the foundation for temporary disability benefits, and in many cases it affects the entire trajectory of a claim. When the number is too low, an injured worker feels it immediately. Rent still comes due. Car payments do not shrink. Grocery bills in Denver CO are not interested in whether an insurance adjuster misunderstood your payroll history.

A good Workers Compensation Attorney or Workers Compensation Lawyer usually spots average weekly wage problems early, because they show up in real life before they show up cleanly on paper. The worker says, "These checks are way lower than what I actually made." The employer says payroll calculated everything correctly. The carrier leans on a neat spreadsheet. Then the details start to matter, and details are exactly where these disputes are won or lost.

Why average weekly wage matters so much

Under Colorado workers' compensation law, wage replacement benefits are generally tied to the injured worker's earnings before the injury. That sounds simple. In practice, it often is not.

The system needs a number that fairly reflects what the worker was actually earning at the time of injury. If that worker had a stable schedule, one employer, hourly pay, and no overtime, calculation may be straightforward. But many people in Denver have work lives that are less tidy. Construction workers pick up overtime when jobs are busy. Restaurant staff may receive tips. Healthcare workers cover extra shifts. Delivery drivers and warehouse employees may have seasonal spikes. Some workers have been on the job only a few days before the [Denver workers compensation appeals](#) injury. Others work two jobs. Some receive bonuses, lodging, or other forms of compensation that do not look like plain hourly wages.

Every one of those facts can change the calculation.

The average weekly wage is not meant to produce a random snapshot. It is supposed to arrive at a fair measure of earning capacity at the time of the injury. That is where legal judgment comes in. A formula can help, but

formulas alone do not solve cases where the worker's earnings vary or where the payroll records do not tell the whole story.

The practical effect on benefits

For most injured workers, the first place average weekly wage shows up is temporary total disability or temporary partial disability benefits. In broad terms, wage loss benefits are based on a percentage of the worker's average weekly wage, subject to statutory limits. That means even a modest error in the wage calculation can create a painful weekly shortfall.

Picture a Denver roofer who was earning roughly \$1,200 a week with steady overtime during peak season. If the insurer calculates his average weekly wage at \$900 because it ignored recent overtime or used an incomplete pay period, the difference is not academic. It may mean a benefit rate that is hundreds of dollars lower each week. Stretch that over three or four months, and the underpayment becomes serious money.

The same thing happens with lower wage workers, sometimes with even harsher consequences. A home health aide earning around \$700 a week may already be living close to the edge. If the insurance company sets the figure at \$560 because it missed mileage reimbursement that should count, or because the employer failed to include concurrent wages from another job, the worker may suddenly be choosing between utilities and medication.

People often assume there is little room for disagreement because payroll records exist. In reality, payroll is only the starting point. Payroll departments track what they track. Workers' compensation law asks a different question: what is the fair average weekly wage under the law, given the worker's real earnings at the time of injury?

The Colorado approach is flexible for a reason

Colorado law recognizes that no single formula works fairly in every situation. That flexibility helps workers when used properly. It also creates room for disputes.

In many cases, the standard lookback period provides a workable average. But the law also allows departures from a rigid formula when the usual method would be unfair. That matters in cases involving recent raises, irregular schedules, seasonal work, or short-term employment before injury.

I have seen situations where an injured worker had just moved from part-time training to full-time field work. The insurer wanted to use the lower pre-training numbers because they were easy to document. That produced a wage far below what the worker was actually earning when hurt. A careful legal challenge, backed by pay stubs, schedules, and supervisor confirmation, changed the result.

That is the point many workers miss at first. The first number assigned to the case is not always the correct number. It is often just the number the insurance company was willing to accept without a fight.

Where disputes usually come from

Average weekly wage disputes tend to arise from patterns, not from one-off mistakes. Employers may submit incomplete payroll records. Adjusters may rely on narrow date ranges that reduce the average. Overtime may be excluded too aggressively. Bonuses may be treated as irrelevant when they were actually part of regular compensation. Tipped employees may not have complete reporting records. A second job may be ignored entirely.

Denver has a large workforce in construction, hospitality, healthcare, warehousing, and transportation, all fields where earnings can fluctuate from week to week. That makes workers here especially vulnerable to low wage calculations.

Seasonal work creates another recurring problem. Consider a snow removal worker injured during a high-earning winter stretch, or a landscaping employee hurt during a packed spring schedule. If the wage calculation is based on a broad period that includes slower months and does not fairly account for the worker's actual earning pattern at the time of injury, the number may not reflect reality.

There is also a common misunderstanding about overtime. Some workers are told overtime never counts. That is not an accurate blanket rule. The question is whether the earnings were part of the worker's actual compensation and whether including them fairly reflects the average weekly wage. Regular overtime, especially where it had become part of the normal work pattern, is often central to a correct calculation.

Tips, bonuses, and nonstandard pay

This is where average weekly wage cases stop looking simple.

A restaurant server in Denver may have an official hourly rate that looks tiny on paper, while the real earnings come from tips. If tips are not properly documented or reported, disputes become messy. The same is true for bartenders, valets, hotel staff, and others in hospitality. If you depend on tipped income, wage proof often requires more than a single payroll summary. It may require tip records, tax returns, point-of-sale reports, or testimony about how compensation actually worked.

Bonuses can be another fault line. A true discretionary bonus may be treated differently from production-based pay that functions like wages. In sales, delivery, or productivity-driven jobs, what gets labeled a "bonus" can in reality be a regular part of compensation. That difference matters.

Then there are workers who receive room, board, lodging allowances, or vehicle-related compensation. Some of these items count, some do not, and some require a closer legal analysis. Labels alone do not decide the issue. An experienced Workers Compensation Lawyer Denver residents trust will usually dig into what the payment was for, how consistently it was paid, and whether it was part of the worker's economic bargain with the employer.

Recent hires and short work histories

One of the toughest scenarios involves a worker who is injured shortly after starting a job. The worker may have only a week or two of earnings with the employer. If those weeks were atypical, or if the worker had not yet reached the usual schedule, a straight average can badly distort the result.

Imagine a commercial electrician hired in Denver CO for a full-time project at a strong hourly rate. He gets hurt on day eight, before the first normal rotation of overtime kicks in. If the insurer looks only at the brief initial payroll history, it may undervalue the claim. In a fair analysis, the case may require looking at the agreed wage, the expected schedule, and comparable evidence about the position.

The law allows room for that kind of fairness. But it does not happen automatically. Someone has to raise the issue, document it, and push for a realistic figure.

Concurrent employment, one of the most overlooked issues

Many workers in Denver piece together income from more than one job. A warehouse worker may also drive for a catering company on weekends. A nurse aide may work part time at two facilities. A ski industry employee may

have a second summer job lined up. When an injury at one job prevents the worker from earning income from both, the wage calculation can become complicated.

This is one of the areas where workers lose money simply because they do not realize the issue exists. They assume the workers' compensation claim only looks at wages from the employer where the injury happened. Sometimes that assumption costs them dearly.

Whether concurrent wages should be included depends on the facts and the governing legal standards, but it is a question worth asking in almost every multi-job case. A strong Workers Compensation Attorney will not stop at the first pay stub. The lawyer will ask how the worker actually made a living.

Independent contractor labels and payroll games

Denver's labor market includes plenty of workers who are labeled independent contractors even when the working relationship is more complicated than that. Misclassification creates problems at every stage of a workers' compensation case, including the wage calculation.

A worker may be paid by invoice rather than payroll, may receive irregular draws, or may have deductions that make the income look smaller than it functionally was. In some cases, the employer structured compensation in a way that benefited the business but left the worker exposed after an injury.

These cases demand careful factual development. Bank records, job logs, communications with supervisors, tax documents, and proof of regular work patterns all matter. A clean paycheck stub is nice when it exists. Many valid claims do not come with neat documentation.

What insurance companies often get wrong

Most adjusters are not setting out to invent numbers, but they often work from whatever records are easiest to obtain and easiest to defend. Ease is not the same thing as accuracy.

A low average weekly wage often comes from one of several errors. The adjuster may use too short a period, may leave out overtime, may ignore a wage increase, may fail to account for a second job, or may accept an employer's summary without reviewing underlying records. Sometimes the problem is not even legal analysis, it is basic payroll sloppiness. Hours were coded incorrectly. A bonus was posted in the wrong period. A cash tip record never made it into payroll. The injured worker changed positions but the old pay rate remained in the system.

These mistakes are common enough that I never assume the first wage admission is correct without seeing the underlying support.

How a Workers Compensation Lawyer approaches the issue

A seasoned Workers Compensation Lawyer starts with a simple but revealing conversation: how were you actually paid in the months leading up to the injury? Workers usually answer in practical terms. They mention overtime every other Saturday, a differential for nights, regular quarterly production pay, weekend banquet tips, travel time, or the second job they worked after regular hours.

That conversation often reveals what the paperwork missed.

The next step is evidence. Pay stubs are useful, but they are rarely enough on their own. Timecards, direct deposit records, W-2 forms, tax returns, schedules, offer letters, union agreements, and supervisor emails can all become

important. In some cases, testimony from the worker and employer representatives fills in gaps that payroll records cannot.

The legal side then becomes a matter of selecting the fairest calculation method under the facts. Sometimes that means relying on the standard averaging method. Sometimes it means arguing that the standard method produces an unfair result and that a different measure better captures actual earning capacity at the time of injury.

This is where experience matters. A Workers Compensation Attorney who has handled Denver claims knows which arguments judges tend to find persuasive and which facts move the needle. The issue is rarely just arithmetic. It is building a persuasive story supported by credible numbers.

A real-world example of how small details change big outcomes

Take a hypothetical but familiar scenario. A hotel maintenance worker in Denver earned \$24 an hour and regularly worked five hours of overtime a week. He also received a small monthly on-call stipend because he handled weekend emergencies. He was injured after a burst pipe incident and could not work for three months.

The insurer initially set his average weekly wage using only his base 40-hour schedule. No overtime. No on-call pay. The worker accepted the rate at first because he assumed the system knew what it was doing. After two benefit checks, he realized he was short by enough that he had started falling behind on rent.

When counsel reviewed the file, the missing earnings were obvious. Time records showed steady overtime over several months. Pay statements reflected the on-call stipend. Once those amounts were included, the average weekly wage increased substantially, and the disability rate rose with it. Over a three-month period, the correction meant thousands of dollars.

That outcome was not unusual. What is unusual is how often workers never challenge the original number.

What injured workers should do early

The fastest way to protect the wage side of a case is to gather records before they disappear into payroll systems or get buried under later events. Workers are often focused on doctor visits and job status, which is understandable. But average weekly wage issues are easiest to fix when the evidence is fresh.

If you were injured at work and your wage rate looks off, pay attention to a few practical signs:

Your disability checks seem much lower than your normal take-home pay, even accounting for the difference between wages and benefits. Your overtime, shift differential, or tip income was a regular part of your earnings but does not appear in the calculation. You had recently received a raise or moved into a higher-paying role. You worked more than one job and the injury affected both. You had only recently started the job and your initial pay records do not reflect your normal schedule.

Those are not proof by themselves, but they are strong reasons to ask questions.

Why Denver workers should not wait too long

Workers' compensation cases develop momentum quickly. Once a wage figure is accepted and benefits are paid for a period of time, people often assume it is set in stone. Sometimes it can be corrected later, but delay makes everything harder. Memories fade. Supervisors move on. Payroll staff change. Records get archived.

That is especially true in industries with high turnover. Restaurants, staffing agencies, home healthcare companies, and construction subcontractors are not always great at preserving easily understandable records. If there is a dispute, early action matters.

This is one reason people search for a Workers Compensation Lawyer Denver professionals recommend rather than trying to untangle the issue alone. A lawyer who works in this field regularly knows how to request the right documents, spot the missing categories of compensation, and present the issue in a legally useful format.

The difference between fair and convenient

There is a temptation in every workers' compensation system to confuse convenience with fairness. A tidy payroll printout feels objective. But workers do not live tidy payroll printouts. They live the full reality of their earnings, the busy weeks, the night differentials, the extra shifts, the tipped income, the second job that keeps the household afloat.

Average weekly wage is supposed to reflect that reality as fairly as the law allows. When it does, disability benefits make more sense and the worker has a better chance of staying financially stable during recovery. When it does not, the error ripples through the claim at the exact moment the worker is least able to absorb the loss.

That is why this issue deserves attention from the start. For injured workers in Denver CO, it can be the difference between checks that barely cover essentials and benefits that more accurately reflect what was actually lost. A careful Workers Compensation Attorney does not treat average weekly wage as background math. It is one of the first pressure points to examine, because once the number is right, the rest of the case stands on firmer ground.

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Is suing workers' comp worth it?

Suing workers' compensation is only worth it if your claim is wrongfully denied, the settlement offer is severely undervalued, or a negligent third party (not your employer) caused the injury. If your employer retaliates, pursuing legal action is essential to protect your rights.

What not to say to a workers' comp attorney?

Never lie or omit past medical history, exaggerate symptoms, or admit fault to anyone—especially insurance adjusters. Do not give recorded statements or accept settlement offers without consulting your attorney. Keep all communications with your legal team completely honest and 100% transparent to protect your claim.

What does a workers' comp lawyer do?

A workers' compensation attorney can help you recover the maximum compensation you're entitled to, even if your employer or their insurance provider denies your claim. Your attorney can help gather evidence, file paperwork, negotiate with insurance companies, and represent you in court.