

Pick Your Company Passion: VERC Opts For Special Staffing

BY MIKE BERGER

VERC Chief Executive Officer **Leo Vercollone** acknowledges that many of his competitors (Cumberland Farms/Gulf, Tedeschi's, 7-Eleven, etc.) do a great job in raising money to help special causes such as cancer research and other charitable efforts.

But Mr. Vercollone and his brother Paul, company vice president, thought a long time ago, they wanted to find a cause which could link their company culture and their zeal for community service. They decided hiring part of their workforce from the special needs community is where they wanted to go but they also decided they wanted to be the best in this area.

The Vercollones are very proud to announce that their company, **VERC Enterprises**, an independent chain of 23 gasoline stations and convenience stores in Massachusetts and New Hampshire, has achieved a special milestone. VERC has reached its goal of having a workforce made up of more than 15 percent disabled/challenged individuals within their stores. In fact the percentage as of July 21 is 17 percent, or 32 people out of a 200-member staff, and, according to Leo, the 20 percent figure is definitely achievable.

VERC was the recent recipient of a "Community Partnership" Award from Minute Man Arc in recognition of the company's policy to hire workforce from the special needs community. Minute Man Arc for Human Services, Inc. (MMAHS) was founded in 1958 by a group of local families to provide

services for their children with disabilities. Over its 52-year history, the agency has grown into a full-service provider offering programs and services to children and adults as well as their families.

"VERC Enterprises reached out to
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Massachusetts-based employment programs in search of individuals to staff their convenience stores, gas stations and car washes, with Minute Man Arc providing five individuals who are now employed by VERC," said **Marty Martini**, executive director of Minute Man Arc. "We thank Leo for hiring from our populations, and for recognizing that all individuals want and need meaningful work in the community — he is a true hero, making inclusion a reality for the individuals at Minute Man Arc."

Leo said that his company has long believed in the value of reaching out to individuals who have physical or mental disabilities or challenges, and that the stores that his company owns and manage have many employment opportunities for those workers. "We have been going in this direction for a while. For a few years, we were at 10 percent and thought we could do better, so we set a company goal of 15 percent and we have achieved it this year.

"Our efforts began seven or eight years ago when we brought in a few individuals with challenges and found that our store cultures were able to provide the support needed to make a program like this work." Leo also credits the New York Times bestseller, *From Good to Great*, as inspiration for him to develop the program further. "The book essentially says that in order for a business to survive, being good isn't enough — you have to be the best at something."

The effort first began when St. Colletta's of Hanover, Mass., asked VERC to hire some challenged individuals looking for employment. In the early days of VERC, the company had only a few units and Paul and Leo worked hands on with the special staffers and knew exactly what it entailed on a daily basis.

"The employees that we bring in under this program are excellent," said Leo, adding, "They are productive, do great work and add to the culture."

Leo said that once the employees (ranging in age from early 20s to mid 40s) know their tasks he can expect they will do their jobs on a consistent daily



basis and come in with a great attitude. "They show up for work every day, rain, snow, ice and they are happy to be there. They are persistent and consistent. They show up every day to do their work." The retention rate of this group is about 20 to 25 percent.

In addition to local applicants who may apply for work independently, VERC has developed a strong network of resources that includes Minuteman ARC, Plymouth ARC, Best Buddies, BAMS, Eastern Middlesex ARC, Post Program of Duxbury, Road to Responsibility and others. Representatives of VERC Enterprises have gone out to the organizations to speak with them.

Working with the agencies, many of the individuals come with job coaches to help acclimate them to the workforce and this is a great assistance to VERC. Leo said the job counselors help VERC match the person skill sets with the job, explain the tasks to the staffers and help communicate with the managers.

Since the early days, the company has worked as a team to bring the disabled/challenged population to the 15 percent level. Leo and Paul worked closely with VERC Director of Human Resources/Operations Barry Ahern and others on the team to develop, implement and sustain the program. Leo acknowledges it is a team approach and in order to work it takes executives, store managers, and area directors to make it work.

Leo understands that his managers need to be completely on board with the concept for it to work. And, he said, his managers are all very enthusiastic and express patience and understanding. "The store manager needs to be patient and caring toward these individuals. And they are." According to Leo, "The managers we hire are promoted from within so they understand our culture."

If new managers are appointed from the outside they understand from the beginning that each store

will have a member who is challenged.

Positions filled by the employees include stocking, landscaping, cleaning, and assistance with bagging products from counter sales. "The jobs are enthusiastically done, and everyone wins." The mix is 75 percent from state agency placements and about 25 percent from the communities. "We are open to anyone who has a challenge," Leo said, adding, "We know what it takes to run a busy store and this is part of how we help support the communities and the population that supports our efforts."

Leo said, "We look for mature people, who understand the benefit of having a job; we know that work adds to an individual's self-esteem." He said that the company has always done a lot to support communities but that this program is one he considers especially worthwhile and one that he regards with a great deal of pride. And he doesn't plan to rest on his laurels.

Leo's goal for VERC Enterprises is only part of the mission. He is a member of the National Assn. of Convenience Stores (NACS) and actively takes part in many committees and panels. "I invite other companies to come in and see us, see how this program works, and then to get on board and do it themselves." He added, "Think of what could happen if every company set a minimum goal of 15 percent disabled/challenged for their workforce."

Leo admits that there are costs to develop and sustain a program of this sort, but added, "We want to be known as an organization that supports those with intellectual and development disabilities, and we want to be the best in Massachusetts."

Even in a challenging economy, VERC has kept up the internal costs to make the program work and they are committed to the project. "It is a commitment we plan on honoring for many years to come," said Leo. 🐾



Grouped around the Minuteman Arc plaque recognizing VERC Enterprises for its Community Partnership are VERC staffers, **Tina Theran, Jim Fitzgerald, Mike McDonough, Chris Vittorini, Nicole Coppens, Ed Oliverira, Kim Johnson**, and in the back row is **Leo Vercollone**.