



GREG WAHL-STEPHENS for The Columbian

Mai Nguyen, left, and Phat Ha work on a production line at First Aid Only in Vancouver.

FIRST AID for JOBS

WorkSource Vancouver finds 'perfect fit' for employers, employees

By ALITA BOWDER
for The Columbian

It was a match made in HR heaven.

First Aid Only needed employees, fast. A group of laid-off Vietnamese workers needed jobs.

They're together now, thanks to the efforts of WorkSource, a partnership between state, local and private entities that handle work force development and employment services in Washington.

It's been a little more than two years since 29 Vietnamese employees at KVL lost their jobs when the company lost its contract to assemble Leatherman tools.

The owner contacted an employment specialist at the WorkSource branch in Gresham, Ore. When it became evident that many of the displaced workers lived in Vancouver, the case crossed state lines.

Most spoke little or no English, but were interested in what WorkSource had to offer, said Beth Hammer, then business services manager for WorkSource Vancouver.

"We actually were sitting in a team meeting talking about this very situation, and I said to the staff, 'Wouldn't it be great if we could find an employer who could take this entire group on all at once?'" Hammer said.

And that was how Vancouver's First Aid Only came into the picture.

Big need

First Aid Only, which produces first aid and emergency preparedness kits and supplies, had just landed a contract to assemble large first aid kits for Costco.

The kits initially needed between 30 to 40 people to build them, said Kathy Nein, human resources manager. But First Aid Only had trouble getting — and keeping — enough employees.

"Attendance was a huge issue," Nein said. "There are a lot of people in this area that seem to want to work but are not crazy about assembly and production. We had a large turnover at first, and then we find this group of people."

Hammer said they laid out what they could offer First Aid Only: reimbursement for some training costs, a Vietnamese interpreter to help with safety training, new employee orientation and the first few days of work. All at no cost to the employer.

WorkSource helps businesses, workers in many ways

WorkSource is a joint venture of organizations dedicated to addressing Washington state's employment needs, including business, labor, the state Employment Security Department, Workforce Development councils; community and technical colleges; the state Department of Social and Health Services; Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board; and the state Superintendent of Public Instruction.

WorkSource Services are delivered to customers in a variety of ways, including:

- Self-directed efforts, such as kiosks or via the Internet.

- Group programs and activities, such as workshops.

- One-on-one consultations.
- Training programs and business consultations.

Services for businesses include:

- Computer job matching.
- Electronic job postings and résumé banks.
- Help with recruitment and layoffs.
- Assistance arranging customized training.
- Information on business, industry and economic trends.

- Workplace consultations.

— Alita Bowder

Lynn Miller, recruiting specialist and wife of First Aid Only owner Mark Miller, was no stranger to WorkSource or non-English speaking employees.

Miller started at the company in 1989 and

worked with WorkSource back then.

"That's when we first stated hiring immigrants from Russia," she said. When WorkSource called about the Vietnamese group, she added, "we

said we'd do all that we could."

So all that was left was to see if the workers were on board with the plan. Hammer said First Aid Only invited the group to watch a video of what the company did and asked if they were interested.

"Funniest thing. It was the first time I had people stand up and applaud," she said.

Next up was a tour of First Aid Only's facility for those interested in a job. A conversation gave a glimpse into the type of workers the company might be getting.

The plant manager was talking to one of the

Vietnamese workers who spoke a bit of English. The manager asked about production at KVL and what happened when employees did not meet production numbers. The person didn't understand the question — missing a quota was an alien concept.

"That is one of the things that indicates to an employer that these are some pretty stellar staff," Miller said. "What a work ethic."

Breaking language barrier

Nein said each employee got 416 hours of training and picked up his or her new duties quickly.

"I would say in a week or two, they had it down pat," Miller said. "They learn really fast."

Because employees are required to rotate through multiple stations, learning English is very important.

WorkSource helped the company get a simultaneous interpretation device. During staff meetings, groups are separated by language with a bilingual lead at each one to offer instantaneous translations. At the meetings, whoever wants a translation device gets one, Miller said.

And Clark College, one of WorkSource's partners, agreed to allow First Aid Only to pay an instructor to come down to the business and hold ESL classes for its workers. Those ESL classes are



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Lynn Miller, here with a product display, is the recruiting specialist at First Aid Only in Vancouver.

First aid:

still held every Monday and Wednesday.

"Both of us took a big risk," Miller said. "We have a phenomenal instructor. They've really improved."

Two of the employees, 71-year-old Hoai Duong and 52-year-old Quang Nguyen, said that WorkSource was very helpful in finding them jobs.

"At times I was worried," Duong said. "When I came here, I couldn't speak English."

Nguyen, who spoke a little bit of English before joining First Aid Only, said it was very difficult to look for jobs on her own.

"Working with WorkSource. It's easy," she explained.

Duong said he enjoys working at First Aid Only.

"It's like a big family," he said. Nguyen agreed.

Optimistic outlook

Miller said about 15 of the 20 employees First Aid Only had hired are still with the company. She added that some had been

temporarily laid off because of the economy.

First Aid Only President and CEO Mark Miller said the economy has affected the business, especially in the retail market, but had no specific numbers to give at this time.

However, even with the bite from the economy, he predicts 45 percent overall business growth for 2008. He credited the company's new emergency preparedness initiatives with the Red Cross brand and their emergency response center products for the increase.

Both Lynn Miller and Nein praised the Vietnamese employees they found through WorkSource. Miller said that the few that were temporarily laid off would be brought back before any new hires when things pick up. The busy period for the company, she said, starts in February.

"They are just so dedicated and take great pride in their work. They all have spotless attendance records," Nein said. "They are just a perfect fit."

"It has been so much fun learning about their culture," she said. The company has recruited about 10 or so additional

employees based on referrals from the original hires. Miller added some are still with them and about half of the newer group will be back to work the swing shift.

Why WorkSource?

Lynn Miller said over the years, about 30 percent of First Aid Only's operation area workers came from WorkSource. So why do they use WorkSource?

"I know WorkSource," she said. "They are in it to service both the employer and the employee. They are there with full-fledged support."

For instance, the company hired 35 people for a swing shift in January.

"WorkSource provided the interview area, everything we needed to perform 100 interviews in one day," Miller said. "They stayed late, provided translation."

Miller remembers calling Marianne Jones, a WorkSource business services representative, for help. Some of her employees were having trouble making ends meet. Entry-level production workers start at minimum wage.

"I said I needed to build a food bank or find them resources. They just didn't have enough money," Miller said. "So she brought me a full folder of resources. I feel I can call them for anything."

Nein agreed.

"They just have an abundance of resources for the public. We've had job fairs with them," she said.

What Businesses can use WorkSource?

"As long as they are legal and in the state, we can deal with every possible kind of employer," said Hammer, who is now co-director of WorkSource Vancouver. "We emphasize working with employers who can eventually provide family-sustaining wages. Either a starting point to launch into other things, or partner with an employer to move employees up the ladder."

Hammer said WorkSource customizes its services to employers' needs. She estimated her office works with between 400 and 500 employers a year.

"That can be a variety of services, from providing labor market information to holding full-blown recruiting, screening and hiring processes for them."