



For Media Use:
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Communications Office

News Release

Vocational Rehabilitation • Florida Department of Education
Tallahassee, FL 32301 • (850) 245-3415 • Fax: (850) 245-3362 • www.rehabworks.org

Contact: Rachel Smith
850-245-3415 or
850-727-3149

Local Employers Honored for Hiring People with Disabilities

St. Petersburg, FL— Five outstanding employers were honored on Wednesday, October 31, in St. Petersburg for being leaders in the employment of people with disabilities. The event, at Hilton St. Petersburg Bayfront, was in celebration of Disability Employment Awareness Month.

Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) honored these local businesses for their commitment to hiring people with disabilities, and for educating other employers about the many positive benefits of doing so. Honorees were:

- **Bay Pines VA Healthcare System**
- **Innisbrook Golf Resort**, Palm Harbor
- **Valrico Home Depot**, Brandon
- **Walden Lake Car Wash & Service Center**, Plant City
- **Walgreens**, Brandon

VR Director Aleisa McKinlay said, “These businesses have given our customers a chance to show the valuable contributions they can make in a workplace, despite the challenging economic climate and high unemployment rates. That makes them heroes, in our book, and we are extremely pleased to honor them today.”

The businesses honored definitely understand the benefits of a loyal, productive workforce. **Julie Soltes**, with Innisbrook Golf Resort, speaks highly of employee Stephanie Lewis, and says she adds value to the business by making the environment more diverse. “People with disabilities are very capable of working and they bring a lot to the table,” she says. “Stephanie is really a wonderful worker. She’s loved by everyone, and is just a little ray of sunshine.”

Stephanie, who has a developmental disability, is grateful to work in the cafeteria at the resort. “They treat me nice,” she says. “It makes me smile.”

Julie only made a few accommodations to Stephanie’s schedule to allow her to work at the Innisbrook Golf Resort. What many employers don’t realize is that most accommodations for persons with disabilities cost less than \$500, with many being free. In addition, help may be available from programs like VR.

MORE

Jon Webster and Joseph Seifert, concession stand managers with the Tampa Bay Rays, shared their experiences about employing and working with people with disabilities.

Learning about the benefits of hiring people with disabilities can open new doorways to employment. VR is committed to helping people with disabilities become part of Florida's workforce. Our employer-focused website, **FLJobConnections.com**, allows businesses to search at no charge for employees with disabilities who are ready to go to work, as well as post available jobs. VR has 80 offices across Florida, and last year helped 6,071 Floridians with significant disabilities find or keep jobs. For more information about VR and its services, call (800) 451-4327 or visit **Rehabworks.org**.

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REMINDER FOR MEDIA--When reporting on stories about people with disabilities, remember to use language that puts the person first, rather than the disability. For example, use phrases such as "people with disabilities" (instead of "the disabled") and "person who uses a wheelchair" (rather than "wheelchair bound"); and "people with a mental illness" (rather than "the mentally ill").