This project was funded by a grant to Goodwill Manasota from an anonymous donor. Goodwill Manasota thanks the employer representatives in Florida’s Manatee and Sarasota Counties who provided information for this report. The author is grateful to the Goodwill Manasota staff members who collaborated on the design and implementation of the data collection process.
Introduction

Manatee and Sarasota Counties are located on Florida’s southwest gulf coast. In 2014, Sarasota County’s population of 396,962 and Manatee County’s population of 351,746 ranked fourteenth and fifteenth respectively among Florida’s 37 counties (www.florida-demographics.com). These two counties form the region served by Goodwill Manasota, a non-profit organization that changes lives through the power of work. Goodwill Manasota’s initiatives currently focus on two groups in the community that face challenges in finding employment: Military veterans and persons with physical or mental disabilities.

Goodwill Manasota has been hiring people with disabilities since it opened for business in 1981 and continues to do so currently through its Supported Jobs Plus program in addition to job placements in other local organizations. Programs designed specifically to serve veterans and their families began in 2013 and continue today with an emphasis on employment opportunities.

For veterans, as of February 2015, unemployment rates in Sarasota County (5.3%) and Manatee County (5.2%) were lower than the state of Florida’s at 5.6% (www.bradenton.com). Florida’s 2014 unemployment rate of five percent for military veterans was lower than the six percent rate in the United States overall (www.bls.gov).

In 2014, unemployment rates for persons with disabilities were 12.6% in the United States overall and 11.3% in Florida. Manatee County’s rate of 11.2% was slightly lower than Florida’s, and Sarasota County’s rate of 9.5% was even lower (www.disabilityplanningdata.com).
Looking to plan for the future and build on its experience in meeting the employment challenges of both of these groups in the region, Goodwill Manasota undertook a grant-funded community assessment based on two primary questions:

1. What lessons can be learned from local employers with veterans and/or persons with disabilities in their workforces that may help Goodwill Manasota and other companies be more successful in recruiting and retaining qualified veterans and/or persons with disabilities?

2. What are the estimated job prospects with local employers for veterans and persons with disabilities over the next three years?
Goodwill Manasota hired an independent consultant with whom to collaboratively design and conduct this community assessment in the summer of 2015. The term “veterans” was defined as “individuals with at least one day of active service and any type of general discharge;” the term “persons with disabilities” was defined as “individuals with a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities.” All potential respondents were assured that the information they provided would be kept confidential, i.e., that neither their names nor their companies’ names would be associated with their responses.

To explore the first assessment question, the consultant conducted telephone interviews with employer representatives identified by Goodwill Manasota. The convenience sample of 27 eligible respondents was comprised of businesses with more than 50 employees and employers and companies with whom Goodwill Manasota had a relationship, i.e. members of Goodwill Manasota’s Board, donors and volunteers as well as representatives of companies that have placed individuals through Goodwill Job Connections. Goodwill Manasota made an initial contact with those employer representatives via electronic mail to explain the purpose of the interview, request their participation and introduce the consultant. Subsequently, the consultant telephoned all employer representatives as many as three times as needed to obtain their consent to be interviewed and set a date and time for the telephone interview.

Employer representatives who agreed to be interviewed were asked questions from a standardized interview protocol: 29 questions for those with both veterans and persons with disabilities in their workforces, and 17 questions for those who employed either veterans or persons with disabilities. For employer representatives who did not respond to contact attempts, the consultant sent follow-up electronic mail when it was not possible to leave voice messages.

The second assessment question was investigated through a 17-item online survey utilizing Survey Monkey software. Goodwill Manasota developed a convenience sample of 466 non-duplicated recipients from its Foundation database, input from its Job Connections Career Facilitators, and lists of local Chamber of Commerce members and human resources professionals. The interview process began with an electronic mail message sent by Goodwill Manasota through Constant Contact to explain the purpose of the survey, note the electronic mail address from which the survey would be sent and request the recipient’s participation. This was followed up by the first electronic mailing of a cover letter and survey link and two additional e-mails seven to 11 days apart with a different version of the explanatory cover letter and survey link.

Data compilation and analysis as well as report writing were the responsibility of the consultant. Results of this community assessment will be presented at a Goodwill Manasota-sponsored CEO Forum October 23, 2015 in Bradenton, Florida and distributed in a written report to all those invited to participate in an interview or complete a survey as well as upon request.
LESSONS LEARNED

Of the 27 companies identified by Goodwill Manasota as eligible potential interviewees, 15 (56%) were able and willing to participate. The consultant conducted telephone interviews with their representatives by appointment between July 27 and August 10, 2015. The average interview length was 15 minutes; the range was six to 33 minutes.

The 15 participating companies currently employ a total of 10,028 full-time equivalents (FTEs) (average, 669 employees; range, 15 to 4,750) in Manatee and Sarasota counties combined. Nine of the companies (60%) employ both veterans and persons with disabilities; the other six (40%) employ veterans but no persons with disabilities. Of the 8,128 FTEs in the companies employing veterans, representatives estimated that 843 FTEs (10.4%) are veterans (average, 65; range, 1 to 475). Respondents reported that 504 of them (60%) were hired within the past three years (average, 45; range, 1 to 356).

Of the 7,558 FTEs in the companies employing persons with disabilities, representatives estimated that 476 FTEs (6%) are persons with disabilities (average, 68; range, 1 to 238). Respondents reported that 199 of them (39%) were hired within the past three years (average, 40; range, 1 to 119).

HOW CHALLENGING IS IT TO RECRUIT VETERANS?

Asked how challenging it was to recruit qualified veterans for job openings, on a scale of one to 10 where one was “not at all challenging” and 10 was “extremely challenging,” respondents gave an average rating of four (range, two to eight).

The most successful strategies their companies utilized to recruit qualified veterans were:
- job fairs for veterans (four companies)
- connections with veterans in the community (three)
- word of mouth (three)
- Internet sites (e.g., Craigslist.org and Monster.com) (two)
- partnership with Goodwill Manasota (two)
- referrals from CareerSource Suncoast (two)

Individual companies also cited the following strategies:
- Advertising, Express Employment
- giving a bonus for veterans who return to the company after military service
- Goodwill Job Connections
- Lucas Group Insurance & Financial Services (Bradenton)
- outreach to technical schools, placement services for veterans
- posting jobs on other organizations’ websites
- training programs for veterans
- veterans task force
The major challenge two companies encountered in recruiting qualified veterans was that veterans were not applying for their job openings because they did not realize that the companies provide training. Individual companies also cited the following challenges:

- Difficulty assimilating into the organization’s work environment
- Dissatisfaction with wages
- Failing to project the appropriate image for the company
- Getting veterans stabilized in their lives overall (e.g., housing, transportation)
- Inability to meet the company’s physical requirements
- Inadequate preparation for job interviews
- Needing younger veteran applicants for the kind of jobs that were available
- Negative perceptions about working for a particular company
- Not reaching as many potential applicants who were veterans as desired
- Not understanding the company and its needs
- Receiving few referrals of veterans from CareerSource Suncoast and Goodwill Manasota

To be more successful in recruiting qualified veterans for job openings in the future, respondents said their companies would do the following differently:

- Work more closely/partner with local groups to do outreach (six companies)
- Be more proactive in marketing job openings to veterans (two)
- Make the company more visible in the community (two)
- Participate in job fairs focused on existing military personnel (two)
- Recruit veterans in other parts of the United States (one)
- Sponsor a forum for veterans (one)

Asked how challenging it was to retain employees who are veterans, on a scale of one to 10 where one was “not at all challenging” and 10 was “extremely challenging,” respondents gave an average rating of 2.5 (range, one to five).

The most successful strategies companies utilized to retain the veterans they hired were:

- Paying a competitive wage and offering good benefits (two companies each)
- Being a stable company (two)
- Maintaining a strong work environment (two)
- Showing respect (two)
- Acknowledging veterans’ skill sets (one)
- Assigning a partner/coach to set goals and bring resources (one)
- Basing company structure on military themes (e.g., chain of command and rules) (one)
- Engaging external support for employees who are veterans (one)
- Giving a bonus to veterans who return to their jobs in the company after deployment (one)
- Having veterans on the company board and in leadership positions (one)
- Holding veterans’ jobs during deployments (one)
- Making work meaningful (one)
- Offering growth opportunities (one)
- Products the company makes (one)
- Providing company groups that veterans may join voluntarily (one)
- Recognizing veterans for their military service (one)
- Showing more empathy for and understanding of military families (one)
- Supporting personal pursuits of employees (one)
- The company’s mission and values (one)
The major challenges companies faced in retaining employees who are veterans include:

- medical and other difficult issues that affect some veterans (e.g., post-traumatic stress disorders)(two companies)
- competition
- lack of a needed skill set
- leaving the area
- physically demanding work and long hours
- salary (one each)
- To be more successful in retaining employees who are veterans in the future, respondents said their companies would:
  - strengthen relationships with external groups (two companies)
  - build a bridge from the military experience to jobs for returning veterans (one)
  - engage in more outreach (one)
  - get feedback from internal team members (one)
  - provide more skills training (one)
  - seek ways to enhance their workplace for all employees (one)

Two-thirds of interviewees (10/15, 67%) noted that their companies have partnered with one or more community agencies to recruit and hire veterans. They specifically cited

- Goodwill Manasota (four companies)
- CareerSource Suncoast (two)
- State College of Florida (two)
- Bradenton Area Economic Development Corporation of Manatee County (one)
- CareerEdge (one)
- Employ Florida (one)
- Express Employment Professionals (one)
- fljobnetwork.com (one)
- jobfocus.com (one)
- Labor Ready, Inc. (one)
- Suncoast Workforce Board (one)
- and the University of South Florida. (one)

HOW WELL DO VETERANS MEET JOB PERFORMANCE EXPECTATIONS?

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Did not meet expectations  | Significantly exceeded expectations

Asked how well veterans hired in the past three years met job performance expectations on a scale of one to 10 where one is “did not meet expectations” and ten is “significantly exceeded expectations,” interviewees gave an average rating of 7.4.

The one thing interviewees believed would be most helpful in increasing their companies’ future success in recruiting and hiring veterans included:

- accessing veterans where they are in the community
- being intentional and proactive about hiring veterans
- better connections
- better job portals for veterans
- encouraging more companies to hire veterans
- ensuring veterans are aware of job opportunities
- finding younger veterans
- guidance on outreach to veterans
- hosting a job fair on-site, identify military skills that transfer to local industry
- improving skills in finding qualified veterans
- making community partners more aware of what is expected from job applicants
- marketing
- more partnering
- sponsoring veterans for a week before leaving them on their own
- well-attended job fairs
How challenging is it to recruit persons with disabilities?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Not at all challenging Extremely challenging

Interviewees whose companies employ persons with disabilities rated how challenging it was to recruit qualified persons with disabilities for job openings an average of 7.5 on a scale of one to 10 where 1 was “not at all challenging” and ten was “extremely challenging” (range, 5-10).

The most successful strategies their companies utilized to recruit qualified persons with disabilities included:
- agency partnerships, e.g., with CareerSource Suncoast and the Florida Division of Blind Services (Palmetto)(three companies)
- having realistic job expectations (one)
- an internal mentoring program (one)
- job fairs (one)
- making the employment of those with high barriers to employment part of the company’s mission and commitment (one)
- providing a supportive, disability-friendly work environment (one)
- relationships with schools (one)
- soliciting referred candidates (one)
- treating all applicants equally and maintaining a level playing field for employment (one)
- utilizing an external job coach (one)

One company’s Supported Jobs Plus program focused on community partnerships with, for example, Easter Seals Southwest Florida, Loveland Center (Venice) and Manasota ARC (Bradenton).

Major challenges companies encountered in recruiting qualified persons with disabilities included:
- having many job openings that require physical abilities such as walking, standing and lifting (four companies)
- being able to match persons with disabilities to job requirements (three)
- knowing how to structure jobs to bring out abilities and deemphasize disabilities (one)
- lacking awareness of where to find qualified persons with disabilities (one)
- a large campus requiring mobility (one)
- a limited number of positions appropriate for persons with disabilities (one)
- prejudices within the company (one)
- safety concerns because the plant is not designed for persons with disabilities (one)
- skills gaps for a high-tech environment (one)

To be more successful in recruiting persons with disabilities in the future, respondents said their companies would do the following differently:
- Encourage persons with disabilities to utilize a training “bridge” to become qualified job candidates (one)
- get the word out that positions are available to persons with disabilities (one)
- identify positions that do not require manual labor (one)
- obtain training for the company from an expert on recruiting persons with disabilities (one)
- make a special effort to recruit persons with disabilities comparable to recruitment strategies for veterans (one)
- provide more public exposure to the company in the community as a potential workplace (one)
- review internal ergonomics in terms of their appropriateness for persons with disabilities (one)
How challenging is it to retain persons with disabilities?

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Not at all challenging

Extremely challenging

Asked how challenging it was to retain persons with disabilities their companies hired on a scale of one to 10 where one was “not at all challenging” and ten was “extremely challenging,” interviewees gave an average rating of 3.8.

The most successful strategies companies utilized to retain the persons with disabilities they hired were

- accommodating their disabilities as needed (four companies)
- being understanding and patient and providing job coaches for as long as needed (two)
- allowing persons with disabilities to work from home and/or have flexible hours (one)
- assuring that jobs are a good fit for persons with disabilities (one)
- having team leaders and team members experienced in and proud of working with persons with disabilities (one)
- treating persons with disabilities like everyone else (one)
- utilizing company resources to provide needed support (one)

One company described the hiring process it uses as an effective retention strategy: Consulting with the agencies that refer persons with disabilities, conducting an intake assessment followed by standard job interviews, identifying an appropriate external job coach and onboarding that coach, sustaining the involvement of the job coach as long as necessary, then transitioning to an internal “good partner” coach. Another company provides persons with disabilities with a job coach through Diversity Initiative (Palmetto) for up to six months.

Asked about major challenges companies encountered in retaining the persons with disabilities they hired, two interviewees indicated that due to privacy protections, their companies were unaware of persons with disabilities in their workforces unless the employees volunteered that information. Another reported that reaching a clear, upfront, mutual understanding of abilities and expectations was a major challenge. One respondent gave an example of overcoming the challenge of a sight-impaired employee by providing a seeing-eye dog and training the staff about appropriate interaction with the dog.

To be more successful in retaining persons with disabilities in the future, respondents said their companies would increase contact with the employee’s parent or job coach and treat employees with disabilities fairly (one company each). Two interviewees said their companies are satisfied with their retention of persons with disabilities in their workforces and would continue the strategies currently in place.

Four of the six participating companies that currently employ persons with disabilities (67%) partner with one or more community agencies for recruitment and hiring purposes. Their partners have included CareerEdge; CareerSource Suncoast; the Florida Division of Blind Services; Loveland Center; State College of Florida; and the University of South Florida.
HOW WELL DO PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES MEET JOB PERFORMANCE EXPECTATIONS?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Did not meet expectations

Significantly exceeded expectations

The one thing they believed would be most helpful in increasing their companies’ future success in recruiting and hiring persons with disabilities included:

• job fairs (two companies)
• being willing to make accommodations (one)
• creating a more consistent and stable relationship with the state vocational rehabilitation agency (one)
• focusing on employing persons with disabilities (one)
• giving this more visibility in the company (one)
• identifying the right resources to support each person (one)
• making more of an effort to do the right thing (one)
• obtaining assistance to do better (one)
• partnering and using positive word of mouth (one)

Four interviewees added: The company would not seek out persons with disabilities due to the nature of its work; the company could do more; Goodwill Manasota has been helpful; and the company has wonderful stories of longtime, outstanding employees with disabilities who are grateful for their jobs (one each).

Asked how well persons with disabilities hired in the past three years met their companies’ job performance expectations, interviewees gave an average rating of 8 on a scale of one to 10 where one was “did not meet expectations” and 10 was “significantly exceeded expectations” (range, five to ten).
FUTURE EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Of the 466 company representatives that received the invitation to respond to the online survey, 37 submitted a completed questionnaire, for a response rate of eight percent. All of the percentages in this report are based on the number of individuals who responded to a particular item.

The 37 businesses responding to the online survey currently employ a total of 4,219 full-time equivalents (FTEs) in Manatee and Sarasota Counties, ranging from one to 850 and averaging 114. Of those FTEs, • 260 (6%) are veterans and • 127 (3%) are persons with disabilities.

Among the 21 respondents that employ veterans (58% of respondents), the average number of veterans in their workforces is 12; the range is one to 53. Sixteen respondents do not currently employ veterans. Only five respondents (14%) currently employ persons with disabilities; one of them has 109 persons with disabilities in its workforce, while the other four employ ten or fewer.

Respondents projected that their companies would hire a total of 1,854 FTEs in Manatee and Sarasota Counties in the next three years, with numbers ranging from zero to 800 per company. The average among the 29 companies that plan to hire new FTEs is 64.
• Eight companies (22% of respondents) do not plan to hire new FTEs in that time period.
• Sixteen respondents (43%) offered projections for hiring a total of 161 veterans in the next three years, an average of 10 per company (range one to 56).
• Seven respondents (19%) offered projections for hiring a total of 120 persons with disabilities in the next three years.
• One company’s projection was 104 FTEs; the other five accounted for the remaining 16 FTEs, with a range of one to eight new FTE hires.

In response to an open-ended question, employers listed up to three job categories in which they projected there will be the most employment opportunities in their companies in the next three years:
• Sales/retail (eight companies);
• technician (seven companies);
• customer service (five companies);
• assistant, food server, housekeeping, maintenance, manager, operations, professional, repair/service (four companies each);
• drivers and food/beverage servers (three companies);
• administrator, bank teller, clerical/secretary, construction, manufacturing and production (two companies each).

The following job categories were mentioned by one respondent: Advertising, architect, benefits, chemist, human resources, lab technician, laborer, lawyer, marketing, online services, outreach, payroll, phlebotomist, recruiter, teacher and warehouse.
**WRITTEN GOALS, OBJECTIVES, STRATEGIES**

With regard to employing veterans, more than a quarter of respondents (27%, 10/36) had a written goal, objective, strategy and/or plan for hiring veterans; 67% (24/36) did not, and six percent (2/36) did not know.

More than two-thirds of respondents expressed interest in increasing the number of veterans their companies hire (69%, 25/36). One did not; 28 percent (10/36) were unsure.

The number of respondents that did not partner with one or more community agencies to recruit and hire veterans (49%, 17/35) was slightly higher than the number that did (43%, 15/35). Nine percent were unsure (3/35).

Only four respondents (11%, 4/36) have applied for and/or received government-funded incentives for hiring veterans; more than half have not (58%, 21/36). Six respondents were unsure (17%, 6/36), and five (14%, 5/36) were unaware of these incentives.

Four of the 37 respondents (11%) are federal contractors.

Nearly a third of respondents (31%, 11/36) had a written goal, objective, strategy and/or plan for hiring persons with disabilities; 61 percent (22/36) did not, and eight percent (3/36) were unsure.

More than half of respondents expressed interest in increasing the number of persons with disabilities hired (53%; 19/36). Three did not; 39% (14/36) were unsure.

More than two-thirds of respondents did not partner with one or more community agencies to recruit and hire persons with disabilities (69%; 25/36); 17 percent (6/36) did, and 14 percent (5/36) were unsure.

Only three respondents (8%, 3/36) have applied for and/or received government-funded incentives for hiring persons with disabilities; nearly two-thirds (64%, 23/36) have not.

Five respondents were unsure (14%, 5/36); five more (14%, 5/36) were unaware of these incentives.
Lessons Learned

Among the companies participating in this assessment, the average percentage of veterans in the workforce was higher than the average percentage of persons with disabilities (10.4% versus 6%). Employers found it more challenging to recruit qualified persons with disabilities than qualified veterans (an average of 7.5 versus four on a challenge scale of one to 10). The most successful recruitment strategy utilized by respondents was job fairs for veterans and agency partnerships for persons with disabilities. Two-thirds of participants reported partnering with one or more community agencies to hire both persons with disabilities and veterans. Successful partnerships can serve as models and resources both to raise awareness of the need for jobs among local veterans and persons with disabilities and to advise and guide companies ready to recruit more veterans and/or persons with disabilities but unsure about how to proceed.

Discussion

It is important to remember that during this assessment information was collected from two small convenience samples of local companies. The telephone interviews were conducted with employers that had a relationship with Goodwill Manasota and were thought to have experience recruiting and retaining veterans and/or persons with disabilities. The online survey was sent to larger businesses that may have plans to hire veterans and/or persons with disabilities in the next three years. While the small convenience samples preclude generalizing this information to other area companies, they did generate insights and ideas that may be helpful to local employers interested in increasing the presence of veterans and/or persons with disabilities in their workforces.

Six companies said they would work more closely and partner with local groups to do outreach in the future to be more successful in future recruitment of veterans. There was no consensus among interviewees, however, regarding strategies they would utilize for increasing future success in recruiting persons with disabilities.

A higher percentage of employees who were veterans than persons with disabilities were hired within the past three years (60% versus 39%). Both populations earned high ratings from respondents for meeting and exceeding job performance expectations (eight for persons with disabilities and 7.4 for veterans on a performance scale of one to 10).

Although companies found it slightly more difficult to retain persons with disabilities than veterans (3.8 versus 2.5 on a challenge scale of one to 10), retention was not a major challenge with either population. Accommodating disabilities as needed was the most often cited strategy to which companies attributed success in retaining employees with disabilities, while employers cited a variety of strategies for retaining veterans.
Overall, there was little consensus among participants with regard to successful recruitment and retention strategies for veterans and persons with disabilities, but responses suggested three groups of factors that contributed to hiring and retention success, even though the specific factors varied among the companies: Factors that predisposed success, factors that enabled success, and factors that reinforced success:

**Predisposing factors** that contributed to receptivity included:
- Incorporating the hiring of veterans and/or persons with disabilities in the company’s mission statement
- Expressing an explicit commitment and/or intention to hire veterans and/or persons with disabilities
- Maintaining an open and supportive work environment in which employee diversity is valued
- Being visible in the community

**Enabling factors** that contributed to initial recruiting and hiring success included:
- Being knowledgeable about and aware of the abilities and potential challenges of persons with disabilities and veterans
- Being knowledgeable and aware of communication channels and engaging in partnerships with agencies to reach qualified veterans and persons with disabilities
- Being proactive in reaching out to local veterans and/or persons with disabilities
- Collaborating with partners to ensure that job applicants are prepared to be successful candidates (e.g., learn about the company doing the hiring, submit resumes that highlight their abilities, demonstrate how their experiences relate to the jobs for which they are applying; present themselves appropriately during interviews)
- Following up new hires with orientation and training, workforce integration and ongoing support as needed.

**Reinforcing factors** that contributed to longer-term commitment and success included:
- Having positive experiences with the veterans and/or persons with disabilities in the workforce;
- Retaining veterans and/or persons with disabilities as longtime valued employees
- Having qualified veterans and/or persons with disabilities referred for job openings
- Having a positive reputation in the community and receiving recognition as a welcoming, diverse workplace.

Local employers interested in initiating recruitment or increasing the presence of veterans and/or persons with disabilities in their workforces might consider which factors are already in place in their companies and which additional factors may help them enhance their continued success.
FUTURE EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Feedback from online survey respondents suggested that local employers are planning to grow their workforces in the next three years, with opportunities for veterans and persons with disabilities. The 37 companies responding to the online survey projected that their Manatee-Sarasota County workforces combined would expand over the next three years from 4,219 FTEs to 6,073 FTEs, an increase of 1,854 FTEs or 44 percent. They further estimated that 161 of those new FTEs will be veterans (8.7%), and 120 will be persons with disabilities (6.5%). While the greatest number of employment opportunities in respondents’ companies will be in the categories of sales/retail, technician and customer service, over 30 types of jobs were identified as areas of opportunity in the next three years. More than two-thirds of respondents expressed interest in increasing the number of veterans their companies hire, while more than half expressed interest in increasing the number of persons with disabilities their companies hire.

ANTICIPATED HIRING IN THE NEXT 3 YEARS

There is room for improvement in the number of companies that have a written goal, objective, strategy and/or plan to hire veterans (currently 31% of respondents) and persons with disabilities (currently 27% of respondents).

There are also opportunities to increase the number of companies that partner with one or more community agencies to recruit and hire veterans (currently 43% of respondents) and persons with disabilities (currently 17% of respondents).

By exploring and putting in place the predisposing, enabling and reinforcing factors best suited to a company’s needs and intentions, more local businesses can open their doors to qualified veterans and persons with disabilities in search of job opportunities in Manatee and Sarasota Counties and reap the benefits of work for employees, their families, their companies and their communities.