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Corporate Citizenship Summit

Hobbs Brook helps vets rebuild lives through job training

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For as long as anyone at Hobbs Brook Management LLC in Waltham can remember, the office space development and management company has employed participants in the Veterans Affairs Compensated Work Therapy program.

Hundreds of veterans working to rebuild their lives have performed temporary jobs with the company, often in the food services division that operates office cafeterias, gaining skills and working to regain independence.

"I've been here for 27 years and the program predates me," said Hobbs Brook President Thomas Dusel. Veterans who served in Korea took part in the partnership, which has been in place at least 35 years and continues to thrive today. "A lot of people have seen the value over that time."

At least six veterans have been hired as full-time employees after their temporary work assignments were up, and one now manages a cafeteria, while most go on to find full-time employment in other settings after completing the program.

At Hobbs Brook, veterans receive uniforms and on-the-job training, moving progressively from utility work in the kitchen to food-preparation work. Within a week, they are working on their own, receiving free meals along with a competitive hourly wage.

"By then they know where to go and how to get the job done and they usually get the job done right the first time," said Michael Lalli, second vice president for building services at Hobbs Brook. "It doesn't take long before they feel like part of the team."

Because it manages and develops office parks and provides food services to its facilities directly rather than through contracts, Hobbs Brook is especially well-suited to the program. Hobbs Brook uses the workers to stabilize staffing levels in what can often be high-turnover entry-level positions.

"We also get a chance to see some very good workers on the job and evaluate if they would make good permanent fits as well," Dusel said.

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The U.S. Department of Veteran's Affairs Compensated Work Therapy (CWT) often helps veterans take the crucial first step toward improving other areas of their lives, said John Bowers, senior coordinator for the local CWT in Bedford.

Some 600 veterans a year are supported through the Bedford VA in the program, with 40 area companies providing support in a number of fields, with food services making up the largest category.

"Post-Vietnam, especially, there has always been a need for this type of assistance," said Bowers, adding that the benefits of socialization and the increased confidence that comes along with learning a skill or trade can often be as valuable as weekly earnings. "It can be the start of repairing a life."