TEAM ELLSWORTH

Black Hills Workshop Responds During an Emergency

Contracting officer, Ruth Brado from Ellsworth Air Force Base receives a Certificate of Appreciation from NISH's Vice President of Operations, Gene Stillions, during Black Hills recent Annual Board Meeting.

In Rapid City, South Dakota, teamwork and partnership are two key words that identify the relationship between Black Hills Workshop (BHW) and the military command at Ellsworth Air Force Base. Black Hills, which is celebrating its 40th year of service to people with disabilities, is a Community Rehabilitation Program (CRP) which has been providing services under the Javits-Wagner-O'Day Act (JWOD) since 1973. More than 300 people with disabilities receive services at BHW, 125 of which work on JWOD Projects at Ellsworth.

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At Ellsworth, Black Hills currently has JWOD Projects for commissary shelf stocking, warehousing, food service attendants, custodial operations and the newest addition, managing the base supply store. The relationship that has grown since BHW first began operations at Ellsworth is quite remarkable. They call themselves Team Ellsworth and it is truly a team effort that makes the projects so successful for people with disabilities and for the Air Force.

The Air Force has been so satisfied with the work performed on the base that they have consistently looked to expand BHW's role in the day-to-day operations at Ellsworth. In return, the people with disabilities who work on the base have taken great pride in the work they do and have developed strong relationships with the military and civilian personnel on base. However, this partnership was put to the test when, one year ago in the fall of 1997, a B-1 bomber, piloted by crew members from Ellsworth, crashed during maneuvers away from the base.

THE CRASH

There were no survivors from the B-1 Bomber's crash. Base Vice-Wing Commander, Tony Beat, who had been a long supporter and friend of BHW, was among those who lost their lives. "It was very difficult for us on an emotional level when the B-1 went

An employee from BHW operates the cash register at the food service operation at Ellsworth Air Force Base.

down. I knew Tony personally and he knew many of the people with disabilities working on the base. However, we had to put our personal feelings aside when we were asked to respond to the emergency and do our part in supporting the Air Force during their investigation of the crash," reported Paul Stabile, Vice President of Operations for Black Hills.

When a crash or emergency arises, one rarely gives thought to the folks behind the scenes who must respond to the situation. At Ellsworth, one group that responded was Black Hill's food service workers who were asked to set up a mobile kitchen to feed the crash site recovery team, stationed where the plane had gone down. This was not a task that anyone would have found in a work order, nor was this ever intended as a requirement of the job. However, like many other Community Rehabilitation Programs (CRPs) working on JWOD contracts nationwide, Black Hills was quick to respond to the needs of the military personnel.

Workers from Black Hills slept in tents overnight

Within 24 hours of the crash, people with disabilities were transported to the crash site, located 130 miles away from the base, where they began serving food. Workers from Black Hills slept in tents overnight as members from the recovery team took on the painstaking task of gridding out the entire crash site - in search of clues as to what may have caused the accident that claimed four lives. For sixty days, Black Hills maintained the 24 hour mobile kitchen, rotating a crew of 13 people on and off the site.

Black Hills

At their recent Annual Board Meeting, almost on the one year anniversary of the crash, Black Hills invited the group commanders from Ellsworth to attend. Since Ellsworth is such an integral part of the job training and employment offered to people with disabilities at Black Hills, it is imperative that all partners stay up to date with one another. A new set of base group commanders have come on board and BHW wanted to ensure that the spirit of Team Ellsworth is carried on.

Ruth Brado, the base contracting officer, was recognized at the Annual Board Meeting. Brado is the contracting officer who coordinated the efforts of BHW with the needs of the Air Force during the crash investigation. For her part in the Team Ellsworth effort, NISH Vice President of Operations, Gene Stillions, presented Brado with a Certificate of Appreciation.

The trust that Brado and the command at Ellsworth has in Black Hills is testimony to the exemplary working relationship that exists between BHW and the base. As government continues to downsize and reduce budgets, Ellsworth has recognized the quality performance of BHW and sought to expand opportunities for people with disabilities to provide the non-core functions of the base. Black Hills has responded to needs of the base and as result, more and more people with disabilities are gaining employment and job training through the JWOD Program. ■