

Veterans 'great employees'

Saturday, March 12, 2011

By JIM KINNEY

Business writer

SPRINGFIELD - Two of the city's largest employers -Smith & Wesson and Bay state Health - reaffirmed their commitments to hiring veterans with separate events Friday at their respective locations.

Bay state Health had a ceremony detailing its work with the Employer Partnership of the Armed Forces, a public-private partnership that connects veterans and current members of the National Guard and Reserves with civilian employment opportunities.

Gun maker Smith & Wesson hired 10 veterans the same day they graduated from an intensive two-week precision manufacturing course offered by the Mobile Outreach Skills Training program of the Massachusetts Manufacturing Extension Partnership, an industry group that provides technical assistance and training opportunities to manufacturers.

Smith & Wesson is relocating 225 jobs from Rochester, N.H., to its Springfield plant as it consolidates manufacturing of its Thompson /Center rifle brand.

"We know that we have a need to fill some very skilled jobs," said Paul J. Pluff, director of marketing and customer service at Smith & Wesson.

Pluff said these are manufacturing jobs paying from \$17 to\$20 an hour.

At Bay state, David J. Lussier of Chicopee is an operating-room nurse.

In military life, he's Army Capt. David J. Lussier of the 405 Combat Support Hospital based in West Hartford. Many of his Army Reserve colleagues have difficulty getting their civilian employers to work with their military commitments.

"Here at Bay state I've never had problems working around my training schedule. I just give them my orders and they give me the time away," he said. "Others are not that lucky."

Michael D. Tanner is manager of the nuclear medicine program at Bay state Medical Center in Springfield and a Navy veteran having served during the Vietnam era. He said military skills, especially when it comes to the medical fields, are readily transferable to a hospital setting.

"It's fantastic training that the hospital doesn't have to do," Tanner said. "Veterans make great employees."

Tanner said Vietnam veterans often returned home to a lot of animosity and sometimes had difficulty getting jobs.

"Today, people are much more welcoming," he said." Those attitudes have improved."

Also on Friday, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics said the unemployment rate for veterans who served at any time since September 2001 was 11.5 percent in 2010. The jobless rate for veterans of all eras combined was 8.7 percent, a figure likely skewed by the large number of older veterans, compared with 9.4 percent for non-veterans.

The Bureau of Labor statistics placed some of the blame on veterans being younger and more likely to be male than the population at large. Young men have had a hard time in this economy because industries like manufacturing and construction got hit hard.

Young male veterans ages 18 to 24 had an unemployment rate of 21.9 percent in 2010, not statistically different from the jobless rate of young male nonveterans which was 19.7percent.

Young veterans who were current or past members of the Reserve or National Guard had an unemployment rate of 14percent in July 2010, also higher than the national average.

Jim Kinney can be reached at jkinney@repub.com