



Goodwill Industries
Big Bend provides job
training, education and
employment for people
with disabilities.

AN UNTAPPED resource

Stan Womble, director of Contract Services with Goodwill Industries-Big Bend Inc. in Port St. Joe, FL, notes that disabled workers aren't given many opportunities. And that's a missed opportunity for the Green Industry.

"Everyone discounts them," he notes. "But they're loyal. We've retained most of the employees we've hired. They show up to work on time, they follow directions, they're excited to work and they're really appreciative of having a position they love. Even their families appreciate it."

Goodwill-Big Bend is much more than a retail store. With a service area that extends from Santa Rosa County, FL to Taylor County, FL, it has a career training center that provides education and job training for people with disabilities, and barrier-free apartment complexes for the disabled to live in independently. It also provides employment to people with disabilities — and is the first in the country to provide landscape services.

Womble was hired to start Big Bend's new Contract Services program in August 2009. Although other Goodwills around the country already had programs for janitorial work, the location of this one, with its long summers and mild, short winters, made it a natural choice for landscaping.

"Landscaping goes hand in hand with where we live," he

There's a labor pool that few landscape contractors have discovered yet: **the disabled.**

BY JANET AIRD

says. "It was a great way to create more jobs, especially for people with disabilities."

Setting up the program and negotiating the first contract — litter control for the Florida Department of Transportation (DOT) in Bay County — was a joint effort with others at Goodwill. They began with a half dozen employees and had 36 the next year. By 2012, they had seven crews, with a supervisor in each crew. All employees except the supervisors are disabled.

Most of their contracts come from their partnership with Respect of Florida, a state agency that helps non-profits in the state market products and services produced by people with disabilities to government entities. Seventy-five percent of the workers performing the services must be people with disabilities.

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“We go through Respect to negotiate contracts,” Womble says. “We’re a work center for them.” Goodwill-Big Bend gives them prices and an estimate. Respect of Florida negotiates with state agencies on their behalf and handles the contracts. Goodwill hires the workers, performs the work and handles all the insurance.

The workers have either a mental or a physical challenge that prevents them from being competitively employed. They’re screened for disabilities and qualifications and are able to do the necessary work. Many are hearing impaired, for example. Some have autism. One has a prosthetic arm.

“Most are self-sufficient,” he says. “As soon as we get to a jobsite, they really know what they need to do.”

Some are on Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or State Disability Insurance (SDI), so they work limited hours. Others have never applied for aid, so they can work as many hours as they want. Goodwill usually pays them a little higher than minimum wage to start.

“The workers get along well,” Womble says. “We really promote a team atmosphere.”

In addition, the work gives them self-confidence and independence. A lot of them are finding out that they can do something they didn’t know they could, he says. Some are living on their own for the first time. Some drive, and most others have another means of transportation.

Two crews pick up litter and trash on certain state highways in Bay and Calhoun counties using side-by-side ATVs that have trash cans on the front. With ATVs, the visibility’s better, it’s safer, more efficient and a little faster than picking up litter manually, Womble says. At the end of 2010, the DOT Bay County gave the litter crew a grade of 100%. In Bay County, a mowing crew that mows with tractors and batwing mowers follows the litter crew. Another crew uses a Bush Hog with a small tractor to mow the grass around 42 DOT holding ponds in Bay County.

Crews use Gravely mowers at a number of sites. On the highways, they mow right-of-ways and around fixtures to cut closely around signs. They also use them to maintain the lawns at the Goodwill store, the donation center and the 11 Goodwill apartment complexes.

One four-man crew uses them to maintain the turf at the Alfred B. Maclay Gardens State Park in Tallahassee, which is internationally known for its flowers in February, March and April. They use a zero-turn model, a pair of 152 riding mowers and a 48-hp push mower. Maclay Gardens extended its first contract for three years.

Goodwill-Big Bend has begun adding new services now. It’s doing sign replacement for the DOT when old signs are damaged, as well as hedge trimming, turf aeration and fertilization.

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“As new as we are, we’ve promoted manageable growth,” Womble says. “We’re becoming experts in what we do now before we expand.”

So far, all the contracts have been for the state government, but Goodwill could work with privately owned landscaping companies, Womble says.

One key to its success is training. “Training is big for us,” Womble says. “Probably the biggest learning curve was learning how to use the large equipment.”

About half the landscape employees are trained on the Gravelys. Some just aren’t ready to use them, but when they are, the training is available.

Goodwill-Big Bend contracts with AbilityOne, a federal agency that provides employment opportunities to more than 50,000 people with significant disabilities. AbilityOne also offers training courses and provides landscape training for Goodwill-Big Bend’s workers.

It also contracts with National Industries for the Severely Handicapped (NISH), a nonprofit agency that secures federal contracts through AbilityOne, for more worker training.

Goodwill itself provides safety training, stressing the motto “safety first,” Womble says. “All Goodwills have a safety rep. We have two, one for the work we do on the east side of

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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the state and one for the west.”

Each crew has a safety meeting every morning before it starts work, where safe work practices are reviewed. There’s also a monthly meeting with all the crews on topics such as safe lifting and awareness of surroundings.

Part of Womble’s job is to visit work sites weekly and do inspections for quality control, making sure the crews are working safely, the equipment is operating well, and the project is in order and on schedule.

“It’s going great,” he concludes. “The disabled are really not different from anyone else; they’re just like you and me. Don’t be afraid to give them an opportunity — they might surprise you.” **LM**

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