

## Company set to add 800 jobs in St. Lucie

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PORT ST. LUCIE — Beleaguered by a busted housing market, St. Lucie County is about to get some relief.

Diabetes-equipment firm Liberty Medical, already one of the county's largest private employers, revealed Tuesday that it plans to expand its operations in Port St. Lucie, creating up to 800 full-time jobs during the next two years.

As other local businesses are contracting or shutting their doors, Liberty intends to fill jobs ranging from call-center to supervisor positions.

The company, which serves about 4 million diabetics across the country, will need the new hires to handle growth in its existing diabetes-supply business and new initiatives, Liberty Chief Operating Officer Keith Jones said during a meeting of the Economic Development Council of St. Lucie County.

"Diabetes is still an epidemic," he said. "It's growing, therefore the opportunities for us to grow are there."

Jones declined to elaborate on future business plans, citing competitive reasons.

Liberty now employs about 1,800 workers in Port St. Lucie, and it already has started hiring some of the new workers, Jones said. He did not specify a pay range for the positions. Most of Liberty's employees work in call centers, fielding calls from customers who need to reorder diabetes supplies such as test strips and lancets.

As incentive for creating the jobs in Port St. Lucie, Liberty will receive a two-year, \$1.7 million job-training grant from Workforce Florida Inc., the state's economic development arm. The grant will help train the new workers, plus as many as 1,500 existing employees, starting in February.

The jobs are desperately needed in the county, where the unemployment rate has surged during the past 12 months as the housing market bottomed out.

In November, 10.4 percent of the county's workforce was unemployed, up from 6.4 percent the prior year, according to the Florida Agency for Workforce Innovation.

The Liberty positions should help ease the pain, officials said.

"It's an exciting time for Port St. Lucie, especially when we're all looking at 10 percent unemployment," Mayor Patricia Christensen said.

Liberty has four buildings along U.S. 1 in the city, and the jobs will be scattered across the properties, Jones said.

"We have ample space in our existing facilities to grow," he said.

The Economic Development Council has been working on the deal since last fall, when Liberty executives approached them.

"When we first started talking to them, it was around 400 (jobs)," said Larry Pelton, president of the EDC. "But as we kept talking, it grew."

Liberty Medical is owned by Franklin Lakes, N.J.-based Medco Health Solutions (NYSE: MHS, \$44.13), which bought Liberty parent PolyMedica Corp. in October 2007 for \$1.5 billion.

Also Tuesday, the county's business recruiters announced that Jupiter beer distributor J.J. Taylor Cos. will open a 25,000-square-foot facility in Fort Pierce, creating an estimated 72 new jobs.

The building, being constructed at the Crossroads Park of Commerce off Interstate 95 at Okeechobee Road, is expected to be complete in October or November.

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