

Liberty Medical, beer distributor bringing up to 800 new jobs to Treasure Coast

By Jim Turner (Contact)

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PORT ST. LUCIE — As companies across the Treasure Coast cut back, St. Lucie County economic development officials announced on Tuesday that up to 870 jobs are coming to Port St. Lucie and Fort Pierce.

About 800 of the jobs will be new hires for call-center positions with Liberty Medical Supply, one of Port St. Lucie's largest employers, which has already started its hiring process for its facilities along U.S. 1.

Meanwhile, J.J. Taylor Companies, the second-largest beer distributor in the state, intends to move 70 positions from Stuart to a new 25,000-square-foot facility in The Crossroads Park of Commerce, off Okeechobee Road between I-95 and Florida's Turnpike, in Fort Pierce.

The announcements couldn't come at a better time for the county.

"It means filling jobs, it's helping to lower the unemployment rate," said Port St. Lucie Mayor Patricia Christensen. "At a time when people are asking for us to bring more jobs to the area, we're doing it, and at no cost to the city, which in these times is a good thing."

Commissioner Doug Coward called the announcement "wonderful news. I want to thank staff and also the Economic Development Council."

The Treasure Coast is approaching a 10 percent unemployment rate, with the 9.5 percent mark for November representing 24,250 people in Martin, St. Lucie and Indian River qualified for unemployment. The rate is the highest it's been since 1999.

The St. Lucie County Commission approved an incentive package Tuesday night to help J.J. Taylor, which has a corporate office in Jupiter, establish the permanent distribution center by the end of the year. The company received \$277,552 in incentives, including the tax abatement program and job growth incentives from the county.

J.J. Taylor has been renting space on Glades Cut-Off Road in Fort Pierce to serve the Treasure Coast.

Keith Jones, the chief operating officer for Liberty Medical, said the timing was right for his company's payroll expansion of up to 800 jobs over the next two years, as it decided to expand its Treasure Coast workforce rather than at its Salem, Va., facility. That decision is due in part to a \$1.75 million Quick Response Training grant from Workforce Florida, Inc.

Jones said it also helped that Port St. Lucie, where unemployment is approaching 10 percent, had a large available workforce.

"We looked at where we wanted to expand and we were concerned because we are one of the largest employers in St. Lucie County and (we didn't know) whether or not we could expand here," Jones said. "We reached out to the (Economic Development Council), told what positions we were looking to fill, and came up with the plan that they helped us apply to the state."

Liberty Medical, which has seen sales increase as diabetes becomes more prevalent and offers home delivery of prescription drugs, diabetic testing kits and supplies, is a subsidiary of Franklin Lakes, N.J.-based Medco Health Solutions Inc. (NYSE: MHS).

The grant, to be administered by Indian River State College, will pay Liberty Medical for each new hire trained, up to 800, and for about 1,500 of the company's 1,687 existing employees to be trained on new software.

While Jones didn't offer a pay range for the new jobs, Christensen said she was told they will average around \$15 an hour.

Gwenda Thompson, president and CEO of Workforce Solutions, which is assisting Liberty in the hiring, has recommended 35 of the more than 125 candidates who have already been screened for jobs.

"We anticipate placing 200 people within the next six months," Thompson said.

LIBERTY MEDICAL

Liberty Medical Supply, Inc. sells diabetes testing supplies, prescription drugs, and supplies.

Chief Operating Officer: Keith Jones

Employs: 1,687

The company: Almost 20 years old, services more than 1 million patients. Corporate headquarters in Port St. Lucie; was purchased by Franklin Lakes, New Jersey-based Medco Health Solutions, Inc. in 2007.

For information about the jobs with Liberty Medical, visit www.libertymedical.apply2jobs.com or call (866) 691-9277.

Liberty Medical, Workforce Florida

J.J. TAYLOR

Warehouse and beverage distribution business distributes Miller, Coors, Heineken, Guinness, Boston Beer, Sierra Nevada, Yuengling and other beer

President/CEO: John J. Taylor III, who has been involved in the company's expansion since 1980.

Employs: 700 people; serves more than 10,800 retail accounts

The company: Corporate headquarters in Jupiter. In 2004, revenue was \$329 million and represented sales of 23.3 million cases of beer.

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