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Marketing Association of Rehabilitation Centers offers a helping hand – and a paycheck

By Mike McWilliams

For more than three decades, a Western North Carolina nonprofit has helped train and employ those with disabilities and disadvantages.

And now, with the help of a grant, the Fletcher-based Marketing Association of Rehabilitation Centers hopes to expand on that mission.

Earlier this month, MARC received \$137,000 from the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation to support its MARC Parity Initiative, which will add \$1.5 million in revenue and add 20 new jobs.

According to statistics from the National Industries for the Severely Disabled, people with disabilities earn on average one-fourth to two-thirds what people without disabilities earn. Z. Smith Reynolds is partnering with MARC over the next two year to support MARC's efforts "to improve economic parity between people with and without disabilities" and among the organization's member programs, MARC executive director and CEO Noel Watts said.

"New jobs will be targeted for low-income workers with a disability, including a developmental or physical disability or both; or a disadvantage, such as long-term unemployment, mental health or social dependency issues," Watts said. "Over the longer term, three-to-five-year horizon, we expect continued business growth that will support 60-75 full time jobs."

Founded in 1978, MARC supports 14 non-profit Community Rehabilitation Programs (CRPs) in a 21-county region of Western North Carolina. The purpose of MARC is to raise the quality of life and increase contributions to society of people with disabilities through work and effective rehabilitation and enrichment programs.

The MARC work force is involved in manufacturing custom disposable surgical drapes and other healthcare products, packaging, manufacturing and assembly. Collectively, MARC centers generated revenue in excess of \$44 million during fiscal year 2008-09 from sales and contracted work with for-profit partners.

There are about 1,200 people employed among all 14 MARC member programs, with an additional 1,700 people served by MARC, Watts said.

Watts became CEO of MARC in 2005. Prior to that, he worked for the community rehabilitation program in Hendersonville.

"I guess I just have a heart for it and compassion for working to improve others' lives," Watts said.

One MARC member program is Haywood Vocational Opportunities in Waynesville. The company has about 325 full-time employees as well as about 140 clients who have been referred there or enrolled in a training program.

The company recently acquired the former Wellco Enterprises building and plans to expand its operation there next month. HVO has been involved with MARC since the organization started in 1978.

"We've continued to see growth in the core business that we have and MARC has played a very

positive role in us being able to meet the demand of our customers," HVO president George Marshall said. "It's been a win-win situation."
