

Supplying our soldiers

SEKRI one of the largest makers of U.S. military clothing

By SAMANTHA SWINDLER
MANAGING EDITOR

Once teetering on the verge of bankruptcy, Southeastern Kentucky Rehabilitation Services Inc., headquartered in Corbin, is now one of the largest manufacturers for the Department of Defense.

It's a turnaround SEKRI can be proud of... but it's not the main goal of this non-profit company.

SEKRI was founded in 1971 by former teacher Oscar Hauk who saw too many of his students slip through the cracks because of various disabilities.

When SEKRI first opened on Main Street in Corbin, its employees built furniture (some of which is still used in SEKRI offices), performed reupholstering and ran a downtown lunch service and soup kitchen.

In 1984, SEKRI moved to a larger facility and started winning government apparel contracts.

Today, SEKRI employs approximately 650 people.

The company has approximately 126 production workers at its two Corbin locations, 73 in Williamsburg, 36 in Barbourville, 102 in Jellico, Tenn., 97 in Cumberland and 58 in Paris, Ky.

In 1993, SEKRI opened its 30,000-square-foot Corbin bypass location, aptly located on Opportunity Drive. By 1996, SEKRI's manufacturing operations for military apparel had grown to \$1.8 million in annual sales.

In 2004, the company purchased the former Wal-Mart building on U.S. 25 in Corbin, where the company headquarters are located. SEKRI expanded into Barbourville in 2004 and Williamsburg in 2005.

SEKRI spokesperson Veronica Reid said the company hires employees with a variety of physical and other disabilities, "that are barriers to finding and maintaining competitive employment."

"Our goal is to give them the skills and everything they need so they are able to move into competitive employment," Reid said.

To that end, SEKRI offers free, 30-minute daily tutoring classes to employees who chose to use the program. While still remaining on the pay clock, employees can get one-on-one help with former college professor Ken Harp to work toward a GED or prepare for a college entrance exam.

"It's based on individual educational needs," Reid said.

Roughly 83 percent of production workers are considered disabled, allowing SEKRI to bid on government contracts through the AbilityOne program, a federal initiative to help people who are blind or disabled find employment with nonprofit agencies that sell products or services to the U.S. government. Though SEKRI does have some commercial business, roughly 95 percent of its contracts are with the U.S. government — and specifically the military.

To date, the nonprofit has shipped more than 18 million garment pieces to the U.S. government, including caps, first aid kits, T-shirts and other gear worn by soldiers. The company currently has 20 different government contracts. SEKRI employees are also the only manufacturers of the protective combat uniform sold under the brand HALYS.

Corbin plant manager Delena Mills said her operation alone is producing 28,000 pieces a week. All together, SEKRI is shipping out 130,000 pieces weekly.

The Corbin plant is currently manufacturing only two products — a patrol cap for the U.S. Army and a cap for the U.S. Air Force.

The fabric used is first cut by a machine at the U.S. 25 Corbin location. The computerized fabric cutter makes the precise cuts to sheets of fabric, arranged to get the fewest waste pieces possible.

After the pre-cut pieces arrive at the secondary facility, they go through an assembly line process where each employee provides one specific step — such as stitching a lining, adding a label or inspecting the product.

From the time the fabric strips see their first stitch in the factory until they are completed, the patrol caps will go through 27 different steps of production. The Air Force caps will go through 22.

Reid is quick to add that by hiring employees with disabilities, SEKRI never sacrifices quality. The three caps produced by the Corbin facility have ARP quality standards.

Translated from military speak, these Alternate Release Procedures mean SEKRI is on a preferred status because of its history of quality products, and goods can be purchased from SEKRI without the customer and corporate quality authorization normally needed.

For SEKRI, Reid said the biggest accomplishment is finding employment who those who need — or want it.

Donald Hill, a blind man who has worked at SEKRI for more than two years, spends his day deftly inverting freshly sewn cap bills so they can be added onto the rest of the caps. "They gave me a chance to have a job and let me work here," he said, "and I like it, I really do."



PHOTOS BY SAMANTHA SWINDLER

Above, Dena Brown assembles military caps at SEKRI's Corbin location.

"Our goal is to give them the skills and everything they need so they are able to move into competitive employment."

— Veronica Reid



Donald Dozier (above) and Karl Stanton (left) have two different techniques for removing the excess thread from the military caps made by SEKRI. Stanton prefers scissors, while Dozier uses a mounted hair clipper to trim the stray threads.



Complete Orthopedic Care
KENTUCKY ORTHOPEDIC CLINIC




Ronald S. Dubin, M.D.
Amy L. Jones, PA-C

- Sports Medicine
- Arthritis
- Work Related Injuries
- Hand Surgery
- Complete Nerve Testing
- Trauma Fractures
- Auto Injuries
- Arthroscopic Surgery
- Physical Therapy

606-258-0300
1321 Cumberland Falls Hwy, Corbin, KY


For appointment call
1-877-4KY ORTHO (1-877-459-6784)

KBC KENTUCKY ORTHOPEDIC CLINIC

it's personal

UNION COLLEGE

ONE 2 ONE



www.unionky.edu