

Private company thriving at leased space at Ellsworth

Jim Holland Journal staff Jun 18, 2017

Courtesy photo



Virginia-based Advance Health leased call center space on first floor of the Air Force Financial Services Center on Ellsworth Air Force Base nearly two years ago. It now plans to hire as many 200 workers by 2018.

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The first partnership with a private company leasing office space at Ellsworth Air Force Base that was announced nearly two years ago is bearing fruit for the company and the Rapid City job market.

Virginia-based Advance Health recently bolstered its Medicare call center workforce from 50 to 75 employees while working out of the first floor of the Financial Services Center building at Ellsworth.

Chief operating officer David Pierre said the company plans to employ 100 people by the end of this year — then double the number in 2018.

“We’ve been so pleased with the town and the Rapid City workforce,” he said.

Advance Health serves clients in 48 states and needed a central or western call center. The company worked with the Governor’s Office of Economic Development and a lease arrangement with Ellsworth came about through the South Dakota Ellsworth Development Authority, the Rapid City Economic Development Partnership, and the Air Force’s Enhanced Use Lease program, which allows military bases to rent underused or vacant space to private or public companies willing to pay fair-market value.

The Financial Services Center, a military pay processing center, opened in 2007 and employed up to 550 civilian and military employees until federal budget cutbacks cost nearly 400 of the employees their jobs in 2011.

The remaining Financial Service Center employees work on the second floor of Building 4040 at the base. Advance Health is only using about a third of its leased space, even with the recent workforce expansion, Pierre said.

At the time of the announcement at the end of June 2015, Advance Health officials had projected employing 200 at the Ellsworth facility within five years.

“We should be there in about 2-1/2 years,” Pierre said.

Advance Health was founded in 2010. Many of their call-center employees are nurse practitioners helping Medicare patients manage their care.

At the time of the announcement, then chief operating officer Kevin W. Davis had expressed concerns with employee access to their work space inside a secure military installation.

Pierre said those concerns have mostly been unfounded, with employees undergoing their usual background checks and being able to come through base security with their company-issued badges.

New job prospects are sometimes taken aback with the level of security measures, but quickly acclimate when they are hired, he said.

The company has also hired family members of active-duty service members at the base, he said.

Employees are also able to take advantage of other family perks on the base, such as shopping at the base exchange or use of the base theater, Pierre said.

"Business is good, and we've enjoyed the relationship with the folks out at Ellsworth. They've been pretty good to work with," Pierre said.

Advance Health's appeal for potential employees also includes starting wages ranging from \$16 to \$18 an hour.

Pierre said the company looks for employees who are knowledgeable about health care and energetic about helping people keep their medical care costs contained.

A relaxed, fun atmosphere — including employee lounges on site and performance bonuses — augment the strong salaries offered and that allows Advance Health to be competitive with other customer service centers in the area.

"Most of the customer service centers have had to be fairly aggressive in the wage structure just to secure talent and keep it from going to other outfits," said Ben Snow, president of the Rapid City Economic Development Partnership. "We like to see them pushing the upper boundaries of that, because that just means there's an opportunity for those individuals to be a go-getter, and be productive and come to work with a smile on their face and be rewarded."

Advance Health recently celebrated joining the Rapid City Area Chamber of Commerce with a commemorative ribbon-cutting ceremony at the base. Joining the Chamber of Commerce is a way of connecting more with the community, Pierre said.

"I don't think a lot of people know about us because we're not directly in Rapid City, and we're out at the base," he said.

Even with the relative isolation of the base location, Pierre sees the lease arrangement continuing into the foreseeable future.

"I view this as a long-term partnership," he said.

Snow said the partnership with Advance Health should help Ellsworth stay viable as part of the Black Hills community.

"That makes Ellsworth score better, if and when there's ever a time when people start looking at what air bases need to stay open and which bases need to close," he said.