

Richmond Times-Dispatch

Feeding a healthy need

Henrico dietitian saw a gap in her specialty, began agency to fill it

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Ryan and Alicia Davis stand outside the Patterson Avenue office of Dietitians on Demand. Photo By: P. KEVIN MORLEY/TIMES-DISPATCH

By JOAN TUPPONCE
SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

Beth Yesford had trouble filling vacancies for registered dietitians at Providence Hospital in Washington last November. "We searched and couldn't find dietitians that could help supplement my staff while I was looking for employees," said Yesford, the hospital's director of food and nutrition.

A staff member told her about Henrico County-based Dietitians on Demand, a staffing agency for registered dietitians. "Dietary is a specialty area and it was hard to fill the void," Yesford said. "Dietitians on Demand came at the right time. The people they sent melded well with our staff."

Registered dietitian Alicia Davis and her husband, Ryan, started Dietitians on Demand in 2005 with one consultant working for them. Their company will employ more than 80 independent consultants this year, generating an estimated \$1.4 million in revenue. In comparison, the company's annual sales three years ago were about \$10,000.

"This started as something a stay-at-home mom could do out of her house," Alicia Davis said. "Now it's a multi-state operation."

She discovered a growing need in the medical community about five years ago when she took a permanent part-time position

while also working as an independent consultant at various health care centers.

"I had vacation time on my part-time job but I couldn't take it until I had found replacement coverage," she said. "I realized that a lot of dietitians were in my situation." That realization led to her opening the staffing agency.

The company matches health care providers with qualified nutrition consultants for short-term vacancies. Because she had only one consultant when she opened the company, she was sometimes the person who filled in.

Dietitians on Demand saw rapid growth in 2007 when her husband began an aggressive marketing strategy that included an updated Web site, heavy online advertising and participation as a vendor at dietary conferences and exhibitions.

"We started getting calls from dietitians all over the East Coast," Ryan Davis said.

As a result, the company has dietitians and clients from South Carolina to New Jersey. Its largest demand comes from the Washington and Baltimore areas.

RELATED

Dietitians on Demand

What is it?: Staffing firm specializing in staff for clinical and community nutrition needs

Employees: Two full-time, including the owners; more than 80 independent dietitian consultants

Owner: Alicia and Ryan Davis

Location: 8401 Patterson Ave., Suite G102

Contact: (804) 545-9162; www.dietitiansondemand.com

"Most of the time if a hospital has someone that goes on maternity leave or resigns, we fill the gap," Ryan Davis said.

The company has about 20 consultants living in the Richmond area. "On average we have between 30 and 35 consultants working within our footprint during any given week," Ryan Davis said.

Gay Brooks, chief executive officer at Cumberland Hospital for Children and Adolescents in New Kent County, said she is pleased that Dietitians on Demand took the time to understand the needs of her facility. The hospital offers specialized care for young people who have disabilities or other medical conditions.

"They were able to find people that have an interest in children and adolescents," Brooks said. "They do a nice job of matching dietitians with our needs." The consultants sent to Cumberland have been "very qualified and professional."

"We have to have people who are consistent, not just people with a degree," Brooks said. "We needed someone who would be able to work the cases and be invested in the program."

Paul Moody, nutrition services director for Bon Secours Memorial Regional Medical

Center, works with Dietitians on Demand whenever he has a vacancy. "They are very service oriented," he said. "They are always successful in staffing the department quickly."

Only a few firms in the United States specialize in staffing registered dietitians, Ryan Davis said. "We've uncovered that niche here," he said.

Because many of its consultants are located out of state, the owners don't meet with them face-to-face. Instead, the couple uses a clinical competency test that Alicia Davis designed as a screening tool. Consultants must have at least two years of experience and pass the

competency test with an 80 percent score before they can work for the company.

"We also do drug screens as well as credential, reference and criminal background checks," Ryan Davis said.

Dietitians on Demand assigns registered dietitians to hospitals, food service management companies and clinics. It also does outpatient counseling, community wellness, community education events and special projects such as menu analysis for the facilities it serves.

It also will soon offer one-on-one nutrition counseling for individuals.

The company provided a consultant recently to visit Food Lion stores to promote the grocery chain's new Guiding Stars nutritional navigation system.

"Dietitians on Demand has proven to be an invaluable resource to Food Lion this summer and fall with our Guiding Stars mobile marketing tour," Food Lion spokeswoman Karen Peterson said. "The two dietitians we hired from [them] have significantly added to the credibility of our program and represent Food Lion and Guiding Stars with positive attitudes and the highest level of professionalism."