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Compeer splits functions, hires chief executive

By JANICE BULLARD PIETERSE

Rochester-based Compeer Inc. is reorganizing in a major push to improve its services around the globe.

The agency is creating a new leadership team for its international operation and moving that office to a new site in Rochester to establish distinct local and international entities.

The international headquarters, to be led by a Rochester consultant who focuses on major changes for businesses and non-profits, will work to raise money and market Compeer to help its 80 satellite offices in the United States, Canada and Australia, officials said.

Separating international operations lets Compeer Inc. focus its full attention on all of its chapters while Compeer Rochester can create a stronger local identity among its volunteers, clients and funders, an internal study by Altreya Consulting LLC of Rochester states.

"This is another one of those gems in Rochester that some people knew about but many others probably don't," said Peter Palermo III, incoming Compeer Inc. CEO. "This is one of those findings that has national and international impact, right here in our little town."

Current CEO Ben Giambrone will stay on the board of the international operation when he joins a private local human resources consulting firm in January.

Giambrone, who took the reins from founder Bernice Skirboll in 2004 after serving on the Compeer board for four years, said he realized soon after taking the job that most Compeer satellite offices could not come close to matching the services of the Rochester operation, which trains and matches volunteer companions to hundreds of local residents who suffer from mental illness.

"When I came into the role, I knew I didn't want to keep things status quo," Giambrone said. "I knew Bernice had created this gem of an organization. My focus has been on the non-Rochester piece, making the network stronger."

He brought up the matter with Chairman Philip Fain, saying he needed help examining international possibilities.

"Very often while a community will embrace the Compeer model, they only have resources to allocate for one person, who is often part of another organization," Giambrone said. "In the structure now, the corporate level does not provide funds to affiliates."

Compeer commissioned a confidential study by Altreya, where Palermo is managing director.

The study concluded that there is an enormous need for Compeer services elsewhere, Palermo said, with an estimated 45 million people in the United States suffering from mental illness. Many of those people are isolated socially even if they have access to mental health treatment, he said.

The study showed the Rochester organization follows world-class processes, recognized nationally by the psychology community, and that those processes could be copied by other offices, Palermo said.

"The need is tremendous," he said.

"I can equate this to a startup business," Fain said, "a startup business that has been carefully grown over 33 years and a business that was local in nature that exceeded everyone's expectations. Now it's ready to take a major step, and it needs to be turned over. A small business needed to be turned over to those people who have the national and global expertise to take it to the next step."

The reorganization will result in an international network similar to a franchise, Giambrone said, adding that the national operation will focus on revenue generation and use those funds to strengthen and add programs.

Compeer Inc., the international office, plans to move its headquarters from the Compeer Rochester site on Monroe Avenue to the Harro East building on Andrews Street.

Palermo, as president and CEO of Compeer Inc., will focus on strategic direction for the agency. He will keep his position with Altreya. He has been consulting on major changes at large organizations for 10 years and previously served as a business strategist for Eastman Kodak Co. and Xerox Corp.

Palermo's father, Peter Palermo II, has been named co-chairman with Fain. The elder Palermo held several senior management roles during his 30-year international career with Kodak, including positions as corporate senior vice president for several worldwide businesses. He also has considerable experience with non-profit boards such as National 4-H Council, Special Olympics Inc., Mystic Aquarium & Institute for Exploration, and as past president and CEO of the Jason Foundation for Education.

Giambrone is joining the human resources consulting firm Providium Consulting LLC in Rochester.

A separate board is being formed for Compeer Rochester. Dana Frame will continue to manage Rochester operations.

The appointments take effect Jan. 1, but officials have begun the transition.

"I don't think it's all that unusual at all to outsource leadership positions for big changes," Peter Palermo III said.

With the departure of Giambrone, officials thought it made sense to outsource the position—possibly for two years—rather than conduct a search.

The agency needs one kind of leadership to implement changes and another to maintain operations after they are in place, Palermo added. Seven people will work in international headquarters, but the budget has not been determined, he said.

The changes make sense if Compeer wants to maximize its potential for service beyond Rochester, said Jennifer Leonard, president and executive director of the Rochester Area Community Foundation.

"It sounds like a reasonable way to ensure it gets the attention it needs and frees the local organization to focus on direct service and volunteer recruitment," Leonard said.

Compeer Rochester, which employs 13 people full time and runs on an annual budget of roughly \$1 million, will be unaffected by the changes, Palermo said.

Said Giambrone: "I do see a true future: to serve many, many more people with mental illness. Compeer steals your heart."

jpieterse@rbj.net / 585-546-8303