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Workforce Southwest Washington Announces Cowlitz County Recipients of Excellence in Workforce Development Awards

Vancouver, Wash. (Mar. 15, 2018) – Workforce Southwest Washington (WSW) presented its Excellence in Workforce Development Awards to three Cowlitz County organizations at its March 14 board meeting.

Awards were given in two categories: Innovation in Workforce Development and Excellence in Building Workforce Partnerships.

"Business engagement in creating and implementing workforce development programs is critical for the growth and sustainability of our region," said Workforce Southwest Washington CEO Jeanne Bennett.

Two firms – Life Works and Red Leaf Organic Coffee – received the Innovation in Workforce Development Award for their strong engagement in the community and creation of opportunities for jobs and career pathway exploration.

- **Red Leaf Organic Coffee** began business in Woodland in 2008 with an espresso stand and now has four locations in Kelso and Longview. During its growth and expansion, owners Ray and Melissa Vandervalk have maintained a focus on their staff, hiring the right candidates, providing a variety of training and offering promotions.

Red Leaf is committed to its staff and to helping them maintain employment. When an employee sustained an injury that made it impossible for her to continue in her position, Red Leaf sought out ways to retain her and provided training so she could work in a different area of the business.

Red Leaf offers opportunities to all ages in the community and mentors youth in soft skills which are essential in the workplace. The company also participates in career fairs providing valuable information to attendees on resume review, interview practice, career information and guidance on maintaining excellence in the workplace.

Red Leaf is a good example of what happens when a business is focused on workforce training, providing great employees, high-quality products, a friendly, professional staff in a welcoming space – the employees make sure the customer and the community come first.

- Since 1980, the nonprofit **Life Works** has served the needs of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Lifeworks' Vocational Department specializes in finding these individuals meaningful employment.

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Life Works' Vocational Department collaborates with numerous businesses and programs to help change lives, one job at a time. The Vocational Department assists people with a variety of barriers to obtain and maintain employment in the community, providing employers with capable and dedicated employees.

Through partnerships with organizations like Developmental Disabilities Administration, the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation and Department of Services for the Blind, Life Works opens doors to amazing opportunities for individuals.

By enabling individuals to experience work and learn valuable skills, Life Works creates innovative workforce opportunities that may otherwise have been unavailable. Its employment services offer hope, pride and self-confidence to an under-served and important segment of our community.

- **Housing Opportunities for Southwest Washington (HOSWWA)** received the Excellence in Building Workforce Partnerships Award for its efforts to assist homeless veterans and their families in Cowlitz, Lewis, Wahkiakum and Pacific counties with housing, supportive services and employment services.

In 2006, HOSWWA collaborated with local Veterans of Foreign Wars, Disabled American Vets, AmeriCorps, Veterans Affairs, Partners in Careers and WorkSource to establish a plan to assist homeless veterans with housing, supportive and employment services. The plan resulted in the creation of the Veteran Integration Program (VIP) which, through partnerships with community-based organizations and engagement in the community, is helping to break the cycle of homelessness among veterans.

VIP provides case management, food, transportation, volunteer and employment services, rental and financial education, access to computers, health care and housing vouchers to help homeless veterans find and maintain affordable housing. A VA Liaison is available to assist with navigating enrollment into a variety of VA health care programs.

Through VIP, veterans can participate in community service and volunteer opportunities that not only make a difference to the organization and people being served, but also improve the veteran's career prospects. Participating in community service activities enhances a participant's resume by allowing veterans to obtain work-related skills and work references and provides a forum to network with future potential employers. It also helps participants develop civic and social responsibility skills and become more aware of what their community needs.

As of early January 2018, 62 veterans in the VIP program had volunteered more than 1,677 hours of coordinated group service to the Cowlitz/Wahkiakum community. In addition, 28 veterans had individually donated 2,021 hours to enrich the community.

Due to these efforts, VIP has earned the respect and gratitude of those veterans and partners they serve. HOSWWA promotes collaboration and cooperation between various organizations, showing that building a stronger community helps everyone.

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"The award recipients have demonstrated strong commitment to providing job and career opportunities that improve the skills of our workforce and enable companies to hire local skilled talent," continued Bennett.

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Workforce Southwest Washington (WSW), a nonprofit organization founded in 2002, contributes to regional economic growth by providing investments and resources to improve the skills and education of the workforce in Clark, Cowlitz and Wahkiakum counties. WSW-funded programs operated by WorkSource and community-based organizations help businesses find and hire the employees they need and provide people with the skills, education and training to find work or advance in their careers. WSW collaborates with employers, community colleges and universities, labor groups, government and economic development agencies, high schools, nonprofits and community organizations. Learn more at www.workforcesw.org.

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