

MDI wins Hibbing's 2019 Business of the Year award

BY ERIC KILLELEA
HIBBING DAILY TRIBUNE

HIBBING — Minnesota Diversified Industries expanded its business last year when relocating its building from a Greyhound bus terminal to a new 36,000 sq. ft. structure near the Range Regional Airport. The move allowed the non-profit social enterprise to nearly double its size and provide better working conditions for its employees with disabilities who have produced more than 100 million totes and trays for the U.S. Postal Service over the past 25 years.

Lory Fedo, retiring president of the Hibbing Area Chamber of Commerce, publicly recognized such efforts when she announced that MDI has become the 2019 Business of the Year during the association's 114th annual dinner.

At the event, Fedo

told a crowd of city leaders that MDI has been in Minnesota since the 1960s and in Hibbing since 1992, where it has employed a highly capable and dedicated team which manufactures a variety of corrugated plastic solutions such as totes, trays and boxes, as well as offers kitting, packaging, palletizing, assembly and environmental services.

She recalled meeting CEO Peter McDermott, of MDI, several years ago and talking with him and others about their need for a larger, more modern facility in Hibbing. It was great to hear that they needed more space to improve their efficiency and safety for their employees, as well as more room to employ more individuals.

After some leg work, MDI broke ground on June 7, 2018, to build its \$4.7 million facility with the help of funding from agencies and donors.

Today, MDI has been able to staff the Hibbing-based MDI outfit with 143 employees, 68 of whom have disabilities. Statewide, it has employed a total of 502 employees throughout facilities in Minneapolis, Hibbing, Cohasset and Grand Rapids being paid hourly wages of about \$10 to \$15 depending on the position.

"What has impressed me and our board the most about MDI is their deep commitment to Hibbing, it's employees and the region," Fedo said, according to her speech notes. "That commitment is at all levels of the organization and is evident in everything they do. Congratulations to all of you who are here this evening and to the entire organization. You have given so much to our community and are truly deserving of this award."

McDermott sounded lively in a phone interview Tuesday in reac-

tion to MDI's recognition from the chamber.

"It's very positive," he said, adding that about 95 percent of MDI's revenue comes from the sale of products and services. "It's critically important to be recognized as a non-profit enterprise which runs like a business. To have that recognition is special."

McDermott, who lives in Grand Rapids, said that MDI has also continued efforts to pursue an innovative training program aimed at providing professional development opportunities for people with and without disabilities to prepare them for job growth and advancement throughout the Hibbing area.

"My passion is economic development as a volunteer and professional," McDermott said. "I find that working with people with disabilities are the best employees I've ever worked with because they appreciate their

jobs, show up on time and work hard. Getting people placed at jobs in the community is a win. They just want the same opportunities as anyone else."

Last month, state Rep. Julie Sandstede, DFL-Hibbing, introduced legislation for \$450,000 in grants in both Fiscal Years 2020 and 2021 for MDI to provide "progressive development and employment opportunities for people with disabilities," the bill reads. Sandstede was unavailable for comment as of press time. If passed, the measure represents a continuation of dollars MDI has received over the past four years, McDermott said.

Moving forward, MDI

plans on increasing their workforce to 600 employees in the next three years and to 2,500 employees in the next decade, McDermott added.

For Fedo, MDI's goals are more than welcome as the non-profit continues to make right on a promise of creating and maintaining jobs in the area.

"They're just a really great company and they do great things for people and whenever you visit them or have a chance to talk to their employees," Fedo said in a phone interview Tuesday. "It's evident that for the good work they do they deserve to be the business of the year."

Report outlines early outcomes of Minnesota Equity grants

Grants focused on programs that assist Minnesotans of color, women, youth and people with disabilities have helped further develop nearly 15,000 businesses and assist almost 50,000 career seekers and youth with employment, education and support services across the state, according to a new report released by the Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED).

The report outlines the work that resulted from passage of the Equity Article, a

one-year, \$35 million supplemental package of strategic investments that was passed by the legislature in 2016. In 2017, the legislature continued most of this funding, awarding an additional \$23.9 million to equity-related programs for a total of \$58.9 million.

The grants provide funding for education, training and support services needed to overcome employment barriers, and to build the capacity of organizations to better serve participants. The grants also provide small busi-

ness development services aimed at increasing access to capital, job creation and technical assistance.

"The investments made to improve economic equity are starting to have a positive impact in our state," said Governor Tim Walz. "However, our work in this area is far from over. The One Minnesota Council on Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity will work with DEED to continue this effort, as well as find

new ways to address this challenge."

Organizations received grants either through a direct appropriation or through a competitive grant program. Eligible organizations for competitive grant funds included local government units, tribal governments, nonprofit organizations, community action agencies, business organizations, business associations and labor organizations.

SOLAR

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prices, technological innovation, rising demand from both consumers and businesses, and forward-looking public policies."

Kelley added that solar growth in Minnesota is supported by state policies like the Solar Energy Standard, which requires investor-owned utilities to obtain 1.5 percent of their electricity sales from solar by 2020, with a goal of 10 percent by 2030.

Solar-related jobs in Minnesota increased from 1,995 in 2015 to 4,602 in 2018. These jobs include manufacturing, sales and distribution, project development, installation, operations and maintenance.

Minnesota Solar Jobs

2015	1,995
2016	2,872
2017	4,256
2018	4,602

According to The Solar Foundation, solar job growth slowed nationwide in 2018 because of uncertainty about pending tariffs on imported solar modules and cells. The uncertainty resulted in postponement of some solar projects or scaled-back installations during the first three quarters of 2018.

Nationally, the solar

industry has grown dramatically in both jobs and added capacity over the past decade as installation costs have plummeted from about \$6.65 per watt in 2010 to \$2.89 per watt in 2018 for residential systems. National solar employment grew by 159 percent from 2010 to 2018.

"Despite two challenging years, the long-term outlook for this industry remains positive as even more Americans turn to low-cost solar energy and storage solutions to power their homes and businesses," said Andrea Luecke, President and Executive Director at The Solar Foundation. "However, it will take exceptional leadership at the federal, state and local levels to spur this growth and address the urgent challenge of climate change. Expanding solar energy and storage across America will create high-quality jobs, reduce carbon emissions, boost local economies and build resilient and adaptive communities."

The National Solar Jobs Census is based on a survey of solar establishments conducted between September and October 2018. The report is available at www.solarjobsensus.org.



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