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A newly funded learning and employment center will help disabled Hoosier veterans get education and on-the-job training at the Crane Naval Surface Warfare Center.

The pilot program will accept between 15 and 20 disabled veterans, according to program director Jim Schonberger. The pilot phase is expected to run for 12 to 18 months, after which all the initial participants will be hired full time in their selected fields by Crane. The project is funded by a \$400,000 grant from the Indiana Department of Workforce Development and a matching grant from the Lilly Endowment, for a total of \$800,000.

Schonberger said he just received word of Lilly's matching fund last week and is now gearing up to accept applicants. The pilot group will be kept small intentionally, he said.

"This is a fairly unique concept here, and we need to walk before we run," he said.

Thayr Richey, president of Bloomington-based consulting firm Strategic Development Group, which helped Schonberger develop the program and find funding, said the program has garnered interest from the Department of Defense and the U.S. Navy and, if it works, could be used on other military bases or perhaps by the federal government.

"There's a lot at stake riding on this program," Richey said. "This project was one everyone here at SDG was thrilled to be part of."

Here's how it will work: A Crane Learning and Employment Center committee will begin screening disabled veteran applicants within a week or so. Accepted participants will be matched with jobs they're interested in at Crane, where they'll receive on-the-job training and additional education at Ivy Tech or Vincennes University. They'll receive other services they need as well, which could range from transportation, to assisted living, to therapy. Once they've completed the apprenticeship, participants will work full time at Crane.

That's only for the pilot program, because Crane can't absorb dozens of new employees a year, Schonberger said. But if the pilot goes well, the continuing program could be broadened to include regional employers such as Toyota at Princeton or local small businesses. But the military base made sense as a place to start, he said.

"Crane has so much job diversity, it's the ideal place to do this," he said.

The project idea came to light about a year ago after an engineer at Crane, searching for ways to help disabled veterans find jobs, circulated an e-mail proposal. Crane officials shared with Schonberger, who's also involved with Crane Technology Inc., a nonprofit organization that leverages Crane for economic development purposes. CTI hired SDG, and the work began to create the pilot program.

EG&G, a company that provides technical and other support to Crane, will provide space for the learning and employment center's offices at its 25,000-square-foot facility in the newly developed WestGate@Crane technology park. The park covers a three-county area in Daviess, Greene and Martin counties.

Lt. Gov. Becky Skillman announced the new learning and employment center earlier this week, saying it's a way to use Crane's resources to invest in veterans.

"We owe it to our servicemen and women to improve their futures in any way we can," she said in a prepared statement. "The new center gives us the opportunity to show our support for our disabled veterans."

To find out more about the program, or to apply, call 812-863-5044 or 812-863-5004.