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Jeremy Poulson, a Bridgeway consumer productionist, builds beehives in the Bridgeway vocational center. The new building has been in use for about a month.

Bridgeway gains training room

Expansion planned since 1993 finally completed

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BY JOHN R. PULLIAM

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GALESBURG - The new vocational training center at Bridgeway in Hawthorne Centre is being described as a huge improvement over what was the smallest of the five Bridgeway training centers.

Tom Pospeschil, marketing and operations coordinator for BTS, a Bridgeway Corporation, said the old training center "was just a long, narrow area. Now we've got a big, wide open area."

The new center contains about 18,000 square feet and was built by Bond Construction. The workshop area is about 10,000 square feet, with the remaining 8,000 square feet being modern office space for people who work with the employees of the training center. From the outside, the center, which is gray in color, somewhat resembles a school, with the office area similar to the classrooms and the workshop area, with its high ceilings, looking from the outside like a school gym.

"Our company went out and produced this facility," said G.S. Bond of Bond Construction. "We are extremely happy and the customer is happy."

The project had been on the drawing board since 1993 but was delayed over the years for one reason or another. In June 2006 the Knox County Board voted 10-3 in favor of using its tax-exempt status for the \$1.8 million bond issue Bridgeway used to build the new training center.

Pospeschil said many more clients will be able to be trained at the new facility. BTS, which is associated with Bridgeway Corporation, operates work centers in Galesburg, Macomb, Kewanee, Pekin and Keokuk, Iowa. According to the Bridgeway Web site, BTS "meets the work quality and individual contract turnaround demands for each customer, while providing vocational and training programs serving over 300 individuals with disabilities and also providing them with subcontract work experience."



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Becky Hagerty pulls art tissue from the Dick Blick "clean room" in Bridgeway Vocational Center. The colored paper will be shipped to area schools for art projects. The separate room is part of the new vocational center building in the Hawthorne Centre.

"This is going to give us at least double the amount of work area for the contracts we do and much more storage," Pospeschil said. He said the new work center "will probably be almost the largest" within Bridgeway's system.

He said about 20 to 30 clients could be accommodated in the training area of the old facility.

"We definitely could fit in twice as many, if not more" in the new center, he said.

The data entry area of the new center has two shifts, spanning from 7 a.m. until midnight. About 55 people work there.

During Thursday's open house, Brian Pilger, the manager of the data entry department, said, "Our biggest contract is with the Department of Public Aid."

Data entry employees worked Thursday in a large, well-lit office. This day, they were doing imaging work. The Department of Public Aid, through a T-1 line, sent copies of documents containing numbers that were not clear. Employees study the images and correct the problem. Work also is done with paper documents.

Pilger said the data entry accuracy rate is 99.8 percent.

"We certainly have consumers who need work," Pilger said.

"The frosting on the cake is people with disabilities are getting opportunities," said Tom Colclasure, president of BTS in Galesburg.

Pospeschil showed off the new workshop area.

Among items employees make are stencils, including one that allows a person to have a driveway basketball court, including the key, free throw line and three-point line.

"We'll probably sell about 3,000 of those in a year," Pospeschil said. "As a kid, I would have loved that."

Pospeschil showed visitors, including officials from other Bridgeway locations, a product from one of their newest contracts with Dadant of Hamilton. Bridgeway receives wooden sections employees assemble into bee hives.

The area that drew the most interest was a huge container of rice hulls. Government officials and business people put their hands into the container and sifted the hulls through their hands. BTS receives the rice in 50-pound bags. Once employees process the hulls, Griffin Wheel, which makes train wheels, drops the hulls onto the wheels to cool and strengthen them during the manufacturing process.

"I can't figure out how someone would come up with that," Pospeschil said. "We'll do about 4 million bags of these a year."

Stained-glass tabletops, snowplows that can be attached to pickups or other vehicles are also on display, products made by BTS.

NTN Bower, a bearing factory in Macomb, sends the outside ring of bearings that are rusted to BTS. Employees polish the rings, remove the rust and dip them in a rustproofing oil.

Many other displays were available to look at Thursday.

Among the visitors to the open house was Galesburg Mayor Gary Smith, who came away impressed.

"Give the people a chance and let them take it from there," Smith said.