



Salem firm is on call for globetrotting travelers

By April Guilmet

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Chrissy Veloso, a phone operator at On Call International in Salem, assisted a stricken client in Cuba during a recent afternoon at the company's call center.



A digital sign alerts workers to the world's different time zones inside On Call International's Salem headquarters. Located at 1 Delaware Drive, the company employs around 90 workers, with staff onsite to answer the phone lines 24/7. On Call International provides medical evacuations and other services to students, business professionals and expatriates traveling in foreign regions.

Globetrotters take heart: no matter where your travels take you, a group of dedicated workers in Salem is standing by to assure that help is but a phone call away.

For over a decade, On Call International, an agency employing approximately 90 professionals, has been a leading provider of customized medical, security and other assistance services for an estimated 13 million international business and leisure travelers, along with expatriates, students and any others traveling far away from home.

The company was most recently awarded a government contract, providing worldwide medical evacuation services to the U.S. Navy's Military Sealift Command (MSC).

As of late last month, the company has been providing emergency air medical evacuation and in-route medical support to advanced-care mainland medical facilities for government-owned and operated ships as well as units of MSC worldwide. Civilian workers staff most of the ships, officials said, Emergency medical evacuation can cost up to \$100,000 internationally.

In many instances, regular medical insurance doesn't cover such services.

The MSC contract, said Mike Kelly, On Call's president and CEO, is with "a large-scale governmental entity ... Mainly we cover three sectors: travel insurance, students and expatriates/business travelers. The latter two are why our business is growing."

Kelly said Southeast Asia "is a big destination right now. Their health-care quality is rather poor, while the political situation in many of those countries is shaky."

On call

Kelly founded the company 16 years ago. During years working at American Express, Kelly learned about similar assistance companies while working on a travelers' check delivery project.

Eventually, he'd go on to work for a similar, European-owned company in Philadelphia, but noting the need for such services in the New England region, he ultimately decided to start up his own company.

"We tend to find great quality employees," said Kelly. "Whatever the weather is outside, they still show up."

Through a company call center, On Call arranges medical care and travel plans, and acts as a go-between between travelers in need and other service providers.

The company continues to grow, Kelly said, and has doubled its staff in recent years. Currently, there are several positions open in senior management.

The call center never closes. “Christmas, Thanksgiving ... you name it, we’re here,” marketing manager Michelle Shelton said, noting that at any given moment, there could be between 8 and 15 operators on duty at the Salem center. Others work from home.

Kristin Toth, operations supervisor, began working for the company six years ago and has since handled “everything from lion attacks to political and natural disaster.”

“We’ve worked with travelers in Egypt, Mumbai, Japan and Haiti ... all the places you hear about on the evening news,” Toth said.

Training is extensive, with initial orientation taking six weeks, and those with geographical know-how, medical and travel backgrounds welcomed. Bilingualism is also a definite plus.

During a recent visit to the call center, operator Chrissy Veloso was busy assisting two American travelers: an elderly gentleman with a heart condition in Cuba and a college student with an abscessed leg studying in Dominica.

Some problems are simply solved with a return ticket home, though others, such as these two clients, require more in-depth help — arrangement of an air ambulance.

Keeping cool under pressure is a must, said Veloso, who recently received a call from a client traveling in Zimbabwe, whose wife was mauled by a lion during a safari.

Thanks to Veloso’s assistance, the client was safely evacuated to South Africa, where she rested in a hospital for several days until she was stable enough to go home. She’s since made a full recovery.

“They’re under stress from their injury or illness, they’re also worried about getting proper care in a strange country,” said Veloso.

Medical Director Dr. Robert Wheeler said the company always has a doctor on duty: he is one of five physicians employed at On Call.

“Typically we care for travelers and students. People don’t understand always that they can get sick anywhere in the world,” said Wheeler. “But anything that can happen at home can happen when you’re traveling.”

“We have people all over the world. Americans are traveling to more exotic places and U.S. travelers can be naive at times,” Wheeler continued. “I always tell people it’s important to have a plan on how to get out if there’s a problem.”

For more information on On Call International, visit www.oncallinternational.com or call 1-800-575-5014.

<http://www.unionleader.com/article/20111219/NEWS02/712199977/-1/news02>