

# Call center company bringing 1,200 jobs

## Connexions to add Concord workers and a new Charlotte facility

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Gov. Bev Perdue talks with Connexions President Steven Auerbach Thursday. "This area is red-hot" for attracting companies, she said. T. Ortega Gaines - [ogaines@charlotteobserver.com](mailto:ogaines@charlotteobserver.com)

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Parris Bourne, left, and Donte Snowden listen in on an online training session Thursday at Connexions' Concord facility. The company provides call center

services for the health care industry. Wendy Yang -  
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A Florida company that provides call center services for the health care industry is bringing 1,200 jobs to the Charlotte area, the region's largest employment announcement in recent memory.

Connexions has begun hiring 800 agents and managers for a new facility in Charlotte and will add 400 workers to its existing location in Concord.

The privately held firm employs 600 in the region and 4,000 nationwide. It plans to complete local hiring by October.

The jobs are welcome news in a region where thousands remain out of work. The unemployment rate was 10.7 percent in the region in February, down from a 12.9 percent peak but still more than double the typical pre-recession level. Nearly 91,000 people remain out of work in the region.

Connexions jobs will pay \$35,000 to \$45,000, President Steven Auerbach said. The company is providing free training for qualified applicants to get state insurance licenses. Connexions also will reimburse state exam fees and give each applicant it hires a \$400 signing bonus.

Auerbach said Connexions is adding jobs in the Charlotte area because of the high-quality workforce. Jobs are posted at [www.jobs.connexions.com](http://www.jobs.connexions.com).

Workers will help health insurance buyers find suitable plans, benefits and prices. They also will provide customer service on benefits claims and other health matters, and assist people in converting to Medicare as they turn 65. The company serves six of the nation's seven largest insurance carriers, but Auerbach declined to name them.

"These 1,200 jobs will predominantly serve the needs of Americans wanting education and support regarding their health care and health insurance needs," said Todd Baxter, executive vice president of Connexions' consumer division.

Joining Auerbach for Thursday's announcement were Gov. Bev Perdue, Mayors Anthony Foxx of Charlotte and Scott Padgett of Concord, and county commissioners Chairmen Jennifer Roberts of Mecklenburg and Jay White of Cabarrus.

In Charlotte, Connexions will lease a 61,000-square-foot facility in the ForestPark office complex, near Interstate 77 and Arrowood Road. In Concord, it will add workers to its existing location at the International Business Park at I-85.

Connexions never considered locating the call center jobs overseas, Baxter said. Its workers deal with complex health care issues and should be U.S.-based, he said. People seeking help with their insurance plans shouldn't have to deal with a foreign accent over the phone that might be hard to understand, he said.

## **No incentives sought**

The company sought no economic incentives from the state, cities or counties, Auerbach said, because it's solely focused on providing service to clients. The company received about \$90,000 in incentives over four years from Concord and Cabarrus County to open its 40,000-square-foot call center in Concord in 2006.

"If these people are willing to do it (without incentives), why are we paying ... (other businesses) huge amounts of money to locate?" said Bob Orr, a former state Supreme Court justice and a critic of incentives.

Some companies have to hire so quickly, there's no time to seek incentives. Some aren't considering locations outside of North Carolina, which is a requirement for any company seeking state incentives.

In addition, some companies don't seek incentives because they find it cumbersome or might find it hard to meet the job-creation requirements, said Kim McCarl, a spokeswoman for the N.C. Department of Commerce.

Although other companies have announced big plans to bring jobs to the region since the recession ended in summer 2009, none was larger than Thursday's.

In December 2009, Swedish appliance maker Electrolux said it would move its North American headquarters to Charlotte, bringing 738 jobs - and this week, the company announced plans to add 200 more. Shortly after Electrolux's initial announcement, financial services firm Zenta said it would create 1,002 jobs in the area.

Last year, Siemens Energy said it would relocate its gas turbine manufacturing operations to Charlotte from Ontario, creating 825 engineering and manufacturing jobs.

"This area is red-hot," Perdue said.

Added Foxx: "We are having more positive job announcements in Charlotte than most any other city in the country."

## Call centers return to U.S.

After several years of moving overseas, call centers are making a comeback in the U.S., said Layne Holley of the International Customer Management Institute, a Colorado organization that helps improve call centers' performance.

Sometimes, language is a barrier in overseas centers, driving up costs as customers call back multiple times for clarification, she said. In some cases, companies targeting certain demographics use a U.S.-based call center as a selling point. Mobile phone company GreatCall, whose Jitterbug phones target elderly customers, is one example, Holley said.

Didi Caldwell of Global Location Strategies, a Greenville, S.C., site selection consulting firm, said call centers began to move overseas in part because the U.S. economy was booming, unemployment was at record lows and, as a result, workers' wages were pushing higher.

As more workers have become available for lower wages, that trend has begun to reverse, she said. Certain types of call centers might be especially likely to set up shop domestically, such as those where customers call for help with complex issues, Caldwell said.

"It's just more difficult to manage far-flung operations than it is to manage close to where the headquarters is or where customers are," she said.

As the economy rebounds, it's going to be more difficult for employers to find suitable workers, Caldwell said. But she said she thinks Southeastern cities will have an edge because of their quality of life, which continues to draw talented workers. Staff writer Steve Lyttle and David Bracken of the (Raleigh) News & Observer contributed.

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