

[They took a job never existing in greater Richmond before -- building medicine](#)

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(Pictures follow the article)

In their previous careers, the employees at Civica Inc. worked in banking, automobiles and for the state government. They lived in Hopewell, Hampton and as far away as Dallas.

Now they've come to a plant in Petersburg to work in an industry that never existed here before — building medicine.

Although the facility won't start producing insulin until next year, Civica's existence here is already creating ripple effects. After it announced plans to sell generic insulin at 10% of the retail cost, the three biggest insulin manufacturing giants in the United States announced they would slash prices.

Civica's mission of making affordable drugs and eliminating medicine shortages is largely what drew them in. Many of them have relatives who could not afford the high cost of insulin or were forced to wait for a medicine that was on delay.

Civica's work "speaks to a lot of people," said Benjamin Jarvela, who left a career as a state worker last year to become the plant's communications and public affairs manager.

A nonprofit drug maker, Civica was founded in 2018 by hospitals and insurers tired of paying the high cost for drugs. In 2021, it announced it would build a \$125 million facility in Petersburg to make what is essentially generic insulin and other in-demand medicines.

The Utah-based company chose Petersburg because of the conscientious and strategic drug making initiative recently started here. Virginia Commonwealth University's Medicines for All rebuilds drugs with cheaper ingredients, then gives away the formula for free. Phlow Corp., founded in 2020, received a \$354 million federal contract to build a national stockpile of key medicines. The U.S. learned during the pandemic that many medicines Americans depend on are built in China or India and supply chain interruptions or political forces can delay their delivery. Ampac Fine Chemicals, also in Petersburg, builds the medicine's ingredients.

In less than five years, greater Richmond has started a drug manufacturing industry. Now, Civica has hired 111 employees here as it prepares to package and sell insulin beginning next year. *(Note: timelines, which include internal and regulatory steps, were not discussed during these interviews).*

The partnership, known as the Alliance for Building Better Medicine, has gotten a lot of money and attention. Last year, the federal government awarded it \$53 million from the Build Back Better Regional Challenge. In the fall, the government deemed the alliance an official "tech hub," which allows the partners to apply for more federal funding.

Diane Jordan first heard about Civica in 2021, when she read an article in the Richmond Times-Dispatch about the company's plans for the Petersburg facility. About six months later, she saw a job posting on Civica's website.

Though she had worked in the banking industry for 20 years, she applied for a job as a document control administrator. Now she manages Civica's vast library of forms and computer files dictating how Civica's systems comply with the Food and Drug Administration.

Tomeka Fortune was on vacation in San Diego when she received a LinkedIn message from a recruiter. She does not know how the recruiter found her, but the pitch was for a startup in Virginia. At the time, Fortune was living in Dallas and working for Nissan's human resources department.

The timing was right. Nissan was about to move Fortune's job to Mississippi. She watched a video about Civica and its plan for eradicating medicine shortages. She decided she'd rather go to Virginia — her adult son had moved out, and she had family in Charlottesville. She started at Civica in September.

"Why not try something new?" she said.

Civica's work reached Fortune on a personal level, too. Her mother, now in her early 70s, has diabetes and could not always get her medicine because of shortages. So she received smaller doses and went back to the pharmacy when more was available. Fortune's father has psoriasis and needed creams that cost upward of \$1,000.

Erica Brown, a manufacturing technician, saw her aunts and uncles struggle to afford their medications. They might wait to pay the electric bill or go short on food for a few days, she said.

Before she joined Civica, Brown worked in pharmaceutical transportation at DHL. When it shut down its Henrico County warehouse, it gave employees a list of places that were hiring. Civica was on the list, and she was hired last year.

Asked about salaries, Jarvela said that while there are several reasons why people joined the nonprofit, its mission is the primary draw.

A person with diabetes might pay \$500 a month for insulin. Civica said it will do something no U.S. company has ever done — make essentially generic insulin and charge \$30 per vial and \$55 for a box of five preloaded pens.

In March, Civica's work received serious recognition. Eli Lilly & Co., a large insulin builder, announced it would cut prices and cap a patient's cost at \$35 a month. It was a big, happy moment for Civica's employees.

Though the competitors have lowered their prices, Civica is not backing down from its plan. If Civica were to exit, Jarvela said, the other companies might raise their prices again. Civica has to stay in order to hold down the price floor.

"We're going to be the conscience of the marketplace," Jarvela said.

Inside the plant, the employees continue to build and test the high-tech equipment. Much of the building is considered a clean room, and employees wear coveralls to protect the medicines from hair and dirt.

Workers have built two filling lines, one that can fill 400 vials a minute with medicine and then heat them to 600 degrees Fahrenheit, burning off any germs or particles. A second line fills 200 syringes a minute.

Still unfinished is a third line that will fill cartridges that can be inserted into a pen. Each line fills a different kind of container based on the medicine being produced. Civica will produce other medicines at the Petersburg facility, but it has not announced what they will be.

In the back of the building is a large space where workers will package and test the medicine. At a rapid speed, cameras inspect the vials for cracks or unwanted particles that may have contaminated the medicine. Once finished, the medicine will exit through an airlock and board a truck.

When the facility reaches capacity, it will have 250 employees. A research facility in Chesterfield County will hire an additional 50.

To educate the workforce, Brightpoint Community College in Chesterfield created a certificate program in pharmaceutical manufacturing, which began in the fall of 2022. It has drawn 64 students so far and takes two semesters to finish.

The Community College Workforce Alliance, a joint venture between Brightpoint and J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College, created a workforce credential last summer. That program, which takes four months, has attracted more than 30 students.

Pictures from article:



A Civica employee operates a machine that checks vials of insulin for leaks, seal defects and foreign particles on Dec. 20 in Petersburg.

Margo Wagner, Times-Dispatch



People walk through a hallway connecting parts of Civica's "core," where insulin is produced and bottled, on Dec. 20 in Petersburg.
Margo Wagner/Times-Dispatch



From left, Benjamin Jarvela, Tomeka Fortune, Erica Brown and Diane Jordan pose for a portrait outside of Civica's production facility in Petersburg.
Margo Wagner/Times-Dispatch



Civica employees clean for spores in a nest filling line room on Dec. 20 in Petersburg.

Margo Wagner/Times-Dispatch



A machine checks vials of insulin for leaks, seal defects and foreign particles using a photo process Dec. 20 in Petersburg.
Margo Wagner/Times-Dispatch



Vials of insulin are lined up on a table at Civica's production facility on Dec. 20 in Petersburg.



A Civica employee stands by a window on Dec. 20 in Petersburg.
Margo Wagner