

★ *Winner*

# Advancing customer care

BY JOHN ANDREWS, contributing editor

GREENSBORO, NC – “Balance” isn’t a term generally used to describe why a home medical equipment company is top-notch in the field, but it seems appropriate in the case of Advanced Home Care. The winner of the Best HME Provider in the 2004 HME Excellence Awards relies on precision, discretion and stability to serve its patients in a manner worthy of industry-wide recognition.

As CEO Joel Mills describes: “Our company has a good focus on balancing the clinical needs of our patients and satisfaction of our referral sources with financial stability.”

Commitment to serving the customer, whether it be a patient, referral source or payer, is the highest priority at Advanced Home Care, Mills said, adding that the approach is an ingrained philosophy of the organization.

“Every interaction with a customer is the most important interaction we have that day,” he said. “Regardless of whether we’re taking 50 calls a day or making a house call to a patient, the focus is on that particular transaction and doing what it takes to make it successful.”

Employees are instructed to familiarize themselves with the Advanced Home Care “philosophy document” that explains the company’s approach to all facets of the business. The guidelines cover specific details on how to handle each product line so that every customer has a satisfactory experience dealing with the company, Mills said.

A health system-owned operation, Advanced truly lives up to its name through its disease state management programs, the judging panel determined.

“The way they laid out their COPD, CHF and sleep apnea programs demonstrates that this is a company that is taking its mission to task beyond equipment,” one judge said.

Judges also commended the com-

pany for its community involvement, which includes raising \$30,000 in a United Way campaign, \$10,000 in a charity golf tournament and an aggregate \$75,000 in contributions to various causes, collected by individual employees.



ADVANCED HOME CARE sells precision, discretion and stability.

“Advanced Home Care has contributed a phenomenal amount of time and resources into its community,” one impressed judge said.

Under the HME umbrella, Advanced provides durable medical equipment, infusion pharmacy, nutrition, respiratory and home health services.

Creating a customer-focused organization starts with staff development and training and continues with assertive marketing, Mills said. Paraphrasing the movie *Field of Dreams*, Mills said “We don’t subscribe to the notion that ‘If you build it, they will come.’ We go out and compete for the business. We are constantly examining our competitors to try and stay one step ahead of them in what they’re doing to serve their customers.”

## Advanced Home Care

*Headquarters:*

Greensboro, NC

*Age:* 21-year-old company

*Employees:* 454

*Accreditation:* JCAHO

*Memberships:* AAHomecare, NCAMES, MED Group, NHIA, NRRTS

*Payer mix:* 45% Medicare, 30% managed care, 20% Medicaid, 5% private pay.



# Little company, big heart

BY JOHN ANDREWS, contributing editor

ATLANTA – For Mobility Designs, the recipe for success is combining the ingredients of compassion and skill, topped off with just the right amount of integrity. Together they form a quality organization, which is why the company received the Best Rehab Technology Supplier award this year.

“This may sound corny, but we’re a small company with a big heart,” said Kay Koch, director of marketing, education and training. “We have southern charm, but we also have the technical ability. Everyone in this organization is dedicated to the rehab client.”

The technical component went a long way with judges, who cited Mobility Designs as having the highest percentage of credentialed staff in the competition. Seven of the company’s 26 employees – a full 30% – are ATS/ATP certified from RESNA. What’s more, 10 staff members belong to NRRTS.

These qualifications, together with JCAHO accreditation are a strong source of corporate pride, said Koch, an occupational therapist who became a certified rehab technology supplier in 1996.

“In an industry that is basically unregulated, we went ahead and got accredited when it wasn’t required and our RTS’ were certified in an era when they didn’t have to be,” she said. “Now everyone is doing it.”

Financially, reviewers said the company had an “above average” profitability and a sales growth rate of 10% to 20%. Combined with a low employee turnover rate, the consensus among judges was that Mobility Designs “is a very well-run company.”

Judges also mentioned that the company’s staunch independence also proved to be a persuasive factor, given

that others have sold out or closed their doors due to an increasingly tough business climate in rehab. The company has remained in the same location since it began in 1985 and the founders are still involved in day-to-day operations “rather than playing golf everyday,” Koch said.



MOBILITY DESIGNS combines Southern charm and technical ability.

## Mobility Designs

*Headquarters: Atlanta*

*Age: 19*

*Employees: 26*

*Accreditation: JCAHO*

*Memberships: MED Group, VGM, NRRTS, RESNA*

*Payer mix: 50% commercial insurance, 40% Medicaid, 10% Medicare.*

Community activities, another area cited by the judges as a strong suit, also underscore Mobility Designs’ “heart,” as staff members volunteer with family support groups, MDA summer camp and FOCUS – Families Of Children Under Stress. In addition, company officials initiated a wheelchair education program with Atlanta-based Delta Airlines, showing employees how to handle the chairs delicately in order to reduce damage during transport.

“The ironic part is that if we are doing the training correctly, we will actually put ourselves out of work with Delta,” Koch said.

★ *Winner*

## Earning patients' trust

BY JOHN ANDREWS, contributing editor

CONSHOHOCKEN, Pa. – One member of the 2004 HME Excellence Awards judging panel summed it up best when pinpointing why Air Products Healthcare got the nod for Best Respiratory Provider, declaring “If I were a patient, I wouldn’t hesitate in dealing with them. They instill a lot of confidence.”

Generating that kind of trust speaks volumes about the kind of organization President Bob Cucuel has assembled, a company with a strong clinical component supported by muscular financials. Built through a series of acquisitions, judges also pointed out that Air Products has done an admirable job retaining employees as they integrated the new properties.

But keeping the key people in place is actually essential to the business model, said Laraine Forry, vice president of compliance and government relations.

“We are comprised of individual entrepreneurs who take pride in their business,” she said. “They bring a lot of knowledge to the company and that’s why we’re different.”

Judges commended the company for posting excellent profit margin (21%) and cash conversion cycle numbers in particular. The cash conversion cycle is figured using a formula that factors in sales, accounts receivable, accounts payable and inventory.

“This is a company with great leadership, good sales growth and is very well managed overall,” one judge said.

The Air Products staff, which Forry calls “an incredibly great team [of] really bright people,” coalesces in its mission to provide the best clinical care possible, she said. Approximately 150 of the company’s 1,700 employees are certified as a CRT or RRT.

“I’m a clinician and always try to keep in mind why I got into this field – and the rest of the staff thinks the same way,” Forry said. “Our tagline in

training the staff is that we don’t provide products, we provide independence and quality of life. We bundle it with the appropriate bottom line so we can accomplish



AIR PRODUCTS HEALTHCARE was built through acquisition but has retained staff and turned enviable profits.

that mission.”

Employees devote many hours to community projects during the year as well, and judges praised the company’s involvement in activities such as the American Lung Association cruise for COPD patients, the Magic of Life celebration for cancer survivors and wheelchair sensitivity training for college students. At the industry level, several executives participate in trade associations such as AAHomecare, National Board for Respiratory Care, Regulatory Affairs Professional Society, National Home Infusion Association and several state associations.

“They put more time and resources into community and industry involvement than just about anyone,” one judge observed.

### Air Products Healthcare

*Headquarters:*

Conshohocken, Pa.

*Age:* 5

*Employees:* 1,700

*Accreditation:* JCAHO

*Memberships:* AAHomecare, NHIA, National Board for Respiratory Care, Regulatory Affairs Professionals Society, NEMED, AARC, PAMS, GAMES

*Payer mix:* 25% Medicare, 56% managed care, 8% Medicaid, 10% private pay.

## 1st Runner-Up

## Best Home Medical Equipment Provider 2004

## 2nd Runner-Up

## Up the country

BY JOHN ANDREWS, contributing editor

FARGO, ND – The territory is vast, patients live in remote areas and winter weather is some of the harshest in the continental U.S. Yet Healthcare Accessories makes sure everyone gets first-class service, which is why the company made the finals for Best HME Provider.

“Operating in a rural location is tough – the cost is higher because you’re traveling more miles,” one judge observed. “In these rural areas, a company has to offer the entire range of services, even the unprofitable ones. You can’t cherry pick oxygen.”

Indeed, Healthcare Accessories has an expansive service area that encompasses parts of the Dakotas and Minnesota, said Steve Richards, operations manager. Fargo is the main oxygen refilling station and serves as the hub for the region. To optimize miles, the company has locations along the I-94 corridor that stretches across North Dakota.

“We really excel at providing products and services to the communities we serve,” Richards said. “We know how to conduct our business in the most economic manner possible.”

The company maximizes revenues through meticulous intake and reimbursement processes, Richards said.

“We shine at the intake and customer service levels – we have a refinement committee that tears apart every bit of paper flow and communications they handle,” he said. “They are able to figure out what works best.”

## Healthcare Accessories

Headquarters: Fargo, ND

Age: 16

Employees: 111

Accreditation: JCAHO

Memberships: AARC, AOPA,

VGM, US Rehab, NRRTS

Payer mix: 40.7% private

insurance, 28.6% Medicare,

18.8% commercial, 8.9%

medical assistance, 2.32%

worker's compensation and

1.36% organizations.

## The personal touch

BY JOHN ANDREWS, contributing editor

MORGANTOWN, West. Va. – Positive financial scorecard rankings aside, Mon Health Care Equipment made the top three in the 2004 HME Excellence Awards because of a quality that is much harder to define — an approach judges called “that personal touch.”

“Everyone says they have it, but the more you say it the less you do it,” one judge pointed out. “West Virginia is a tough state to do business in – it is primarily rural and has a poor population. For a company to do well in that environment is an accomplishment.”

Reviewers commended the company for consistent profitability and cycling cash on a timely basis. “They are good at collecting their money,” one judge said.

Executive Director Pamela Kaehler said it’s “an obsession to detail” that keeps Mon in the black.

“Mon carries absolutely no debt beyond normal vendor payables and accrued wages,” she said. “We keep it under very tight control, managing inventory and assets under extraordinarily disciplined standards.”

The company may be bottom line-conscious, but that doesn’t come at the expense of displaying sensitivity with patients, however, Kaehler said.

“Our mission is to improve the safety, security, comfort and independence of patients by providing them with the products and services they need,” she said. “The essence is that customers don’t care about the product itself, but the comfort and relief the product provides. Products are simply a means to that end.”

## Mon Health Care Equipment &amp; Supplies

Headquarters:

Morgantown, West Va.

Age: 18

Employees: 30

Accreditation: JCAHO

Memberships: West Virginia

Medical Equipment

Suppliers, VGM,

Morgantown Area Chamber

of Commerce, AARC, NRRTS

Payer mix: 41% Medicare,

21% private insurance, 14%

Medicaid, 13% self-pay,

11% commercial accounts.

## 1st Runner-Up

## Best Rehab Technology Supplier 2004

## 2nd Runner-Up

## Communication prowess

BY JOHN ANDREWS, contributing editor

NEWINGTON, Conn. – Hudson Home Health Care/Rehab has a flair for communicating with the communities it serves and its well-organized approach carried a lot of weight with judges in the 2004 HME Excellence Awards. Hudson’s thoughtfully produced educational and marketing materials garnered the company a spot among the top finalists.

In one judge’s opinion, “their catalogs were very professional. If they’re servicing those products, it’s a good educational tool for their clients and informs them so they can make their own healthcare decisions.”

To educate their clients about the company, owners Ed and Shirley Curley launched the inaugural issue of *Hudson News* in April, which featured profiles of the organization’s sales and sales administration staff. Topics for future editions included reimbursement information, product advancements and regulatory issues.

Hudson also got accolades for their community service, grassroots involvement through the New England Medical Equipment Dealers Association and “strong support from management for employee training.” The rehab equipment staff consists of 12 RTS’s, including eight with CRTS credentials; as well as one RPT and three NRRTS members working toward certification. Additionally, Hudson employs four seating technicians.

The company also posted robust financials, with judges singling out a particularly strong 39-day cash conversion cycle, which the panel cited as “excellent” in a challenging rehab market.

## Hudson Home Health Care/Rehab

Headquarters: Newington, CT

Age: 25

Employees: 92

Accreditation: JCAHO

Memberships: AAHomecare,

NEMED, MED Group, RESNA

Payer mix: 35% Medicare,

30% Medicaid, 25% private

insurance/managed care,

20% private pay/other

## Above and beyond

BY JOHN ANDREWS, contributing editor

CLEVELAND – Exceeding expectations is business as usual at Health Aid of Ohio, which explains why the company has made the HME Excellence Awards finals in rehab for two consecutive years.

The company’s drive and passion for success is personified by President Carol Gilligan.

“Carol works extremely hard for her company and the industry,” one judge said. “She makes a difference.”

A complex and demanding market, rehab is about finding the best solution for each patient and doing whatever it takes to achieve that result, Gilligan said, adding that educating payers about it is a full-time job in itself.

“It’s about doing what’s right for the patient no matter the cost,” she said. “I spend a lot of time talking to funding sources about what we do and how important it is. It takes time away from day-to-day operations, but we constantly need to take our case to them.”

In her discussions with payers, Gilligan takes them through each step of the process and the time and resources involved in providing quality care.

“When I quote a wheelchair, I include the time it takes for evaluation, authorization, product assembly, arranging a loaner, delivery, fitting and billing,” she said. “They need to know how many hours are involved in rehab and the consequences of when it’s done wrong. This effort has paid off, though, because I have established some strong relationships with the payer community.”

## Health Aid of Ohio

Headquarters: Cleveland

Age: 20

Employees: 60

Accreditation: JCAHO

Memberships: OAMES, Ohio

Respiratory Care Board,

RESNA and AAHomecare

Payer mix: 25% Medicare,

40% Medicaid, 35% private

pay/managed care.

## 1st Runner-Up

## Best Home Respiratory Provider 2004

## 2nd Runner-Up

## The right way

BY JOHN ANDREWS, contributing editor

KINGSPORT, Tenn. – Whether it's patient care, financial management or corporate growth, Resp-I-Care is a finalist for Best Respiratory Provider because it does things "the right way."

Resp-I-Care dazzled judges in several categories, including a tidy 26-day cash conversion cycle, comprehensive disease state management programs and flourishing internal growth. As opposed to growth through acquisitions, the company is following a homegrown philosophy, which judges said is "the hard way and the right way."

By nature the respiratory business requires extraordinary effort from providers, such as round-the-clock availability, a high degree of technical expertise and fastidious attention to billing and reimbursement. Resp-I-Care is doing things "the right way" on all counts, said Donna Buchanan, director of accounts receivable.

"We go out of our way to satisfy every patient – they are what is most important," she said. "For apnea patients, we will do everything possible to make sure they are compliant with their CPAP therapy. We'll switch out masks as long as it takes to get one that works."

From an organizational standpoint, Resp-I-Care has put all the right pieces in place – state-of-the-art equipment, information technology, knowledgeable employees and a cohesive, effective marketing program, Buchanan said.

"We have everything we need to be a leader in the marketplace," she said.

**Resp-I-Care**  
 Headquarters: Kingsport, Tenn.  
 Age: 21  
 Employees: 77  
 Accreditation: JCAHO  
 Memberships: Tennessee Association of Home Care, AAHomecare, Tennessee Society for Respiratory Care  
 Payer mix: 48% Medicare, 26% commercial insurance, 21% John Deere HMO, 3% Medicaid, 2% other.

## Commitment to customers

BY JOHN ANDREWS, contributing editor

BOISE, Idaho – "Serve your customer well and the rest will take care of itself" is a motto that seems to be working very well at Norco. Steadfast dedication to its client base has lifted the company onto the winners' podium for the 2004 HME Excellence Awards.

In examining the company's performance, judges made special note of its 20% pre-tax margins, measured growth rate and sound leadership qualities.

"This is a company that has a firm handle on serving its marketplace," one judge said. "Their financial results are good and they have a very strong management group behind them. It's difficult for a mid-sized company to remain profitable while it grows, but they have managed it."

Started in 1968 as an industrial gas company, Norco has grown to 42 locations across the western U.S., having a presence in Idaho, Oregon, Washington, Montana, Nevada and Utah. Getting to that point means the company has made a distinct impression in the marketplace, said Robbie Roberts, corporate compliance officer.

"In our industry, everyone has the same products and prices, so the one thing we can do to shine is make a commitment to customer service," Roberts said. "This is how we stand out."

Norco manufactures its own specialty gases for distribution in the welding, industrial safety and medical markets. This diversity has given Norco access to customers that specialty providers may not normally have and it has been instrumental to the company's success, Roberts said.

**Norco**  
 Headquarters: Boise, Idaho  
 Age: 35  
 Employees: 598  
 Accreditation: JCAHO  
 Memberships: AAHomecare, Big Sky AMES, PAMES, VGM, AARC  
 Payer mix: 53% Medicare, 20% private pay (patients, hospitals, physicians), 19% third party resources, 8% Medicaid.

