

A Publication of National Industries for the Blind

OPPORTUNITY

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NIB associated nonprofit agencies sow the seeds for a new generation's career success

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A SOLID INVESTMENT

As our economy finds its way out of the recession, employment for youth and young adults has been one of the last sectors to recover. Today's official unemployment rate of nearly 12 percent for 16- to 24-year-olds is more than double the rate for adults. And that statistic only reflects those in the labor force who are not working and actively looking for work.

It's clear that finding a first job today is a bigger challenge than ever before for young people. Add a visual impairment to the picture, and getting a foothold in the working world can seem almost impossible.

At National Industries for the Blind, we're working to alleviate the difficulties young people who are blind face in breaking into the job market. Our associated nonprofit agencies offer a spectrum of services to people who are blind or visually impaired, starting in childhood and extending into adulthood. Income derived from the manufacture and sale of SKILCRAFT® and other AbilityOne® Program products and services is invested in programs that provide everything from teachers for visually impaired

students, to job training and independent living skills.

This issue of Opportunity explores programs that give youth and young adults who are blind or visually impaired experience in the working world. Because experience is often a prerequisite to employment, our associated agencies invest in programs that help young people learn responsibility, professional behavior, good work ethics and how to take pride in a job well done – things that can be talked about in a classroom, but are best learned in a real-world setting.

Participants come away from the programs not only with experience, but with confidence that they can learn new skills and take on the challenges necessary to succeed in the workplace, achieve their goals and lead independent lives. And that's a solid return on investment.



Kevin A. Lynch
President and
Chief Executive Officer



OPPORTUNITY

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JAMES KESTELOOT: READY TO LEAD THE U.S. ABILITYONE COMMISSION

An inspired advocate committed to increasing employment opportunities for people who are blind assumes leadership of the AbilityOne Commission.

BY VONNETTA CORNISH

James Kesteloot has proven himself to be an inspired and enterprising advocate who is committed to increasing employment opportunities for people who are blind or have significant disabilities. Kesteloot has dedicated his career to taking a stand on critical issues and now is poised to lead the U.S. AbilityOne Commission®.

Kesteloot was elected to serve as Chairperson of the Commission in July. The Commission administers the AbilityOne® Program, which is one of the nation's largest employment resources for people who are blind or have significant disabilities. Through its nationwide network of 565 nonprofit agencies, the AbilityOne Program employs more than 45,000 people who are blind or have significant disabilities. These employees are on the front end of delivering a broad range of quality product and service solutions to federal customers.

"I am honored to serve as the next Chairperson of the U.S. AbilityOne Commission," Kesteloot said. "I envision a strong team going forward as we work to find new and innovative ways

to increase employment opportunities for people who are blind or have significant disabilities."

Initially appointed to the Commission in 2010 by President Barack Obama, Kesteloot had served as vice chairperson since 2011. In addition to his new role as chairperson of the Commission, Kesteloot will continue to serve as chair of the Employment Growth Subcommittee.

Kesteloot's ongoing efforts to improve the lives of people who are blind or have significant disabilities will solidify his legacy. He retired from his post as executive director and president of the Chicago Lighthouse for People Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired after spending 40 years with the agency. Under Kesteloot's leadership, the Lighthouse became a nationally acclaimed social service organization widely respected as being among the most comprehensive programs in the nation.

Drawing on his expertise on employment obstacles impacting people who are blind, Kesteloot has served as an organizational consultant as well as a



 U.S. AbilityOne Commission Chairperson James Kesteloot.

participant on numerous councils. For example, Kesteloot was appointed to the Illinois Blind Services Planning Council by Governor James R. Thompson and by Governor Jim Edgar; Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley appointed Kesteloot to his Task Force on the Employment of People with Disabilities.

As chairperson of the Commission, Kesteloot will work alongside Lisa M. Wilusz, elected in July to serve as vice chairperson. Wilusz was appointed to the Commission by President Obama in 2011 as a representative of the United States Department of Agriculture. Kesteloot looks forward to continuing the type of team approach his predecessor, former Commission Chairperson J. Anthony Poleo, had in place.

"I really appreciate how when he [Mr. Poleo] was Chairperson, he involved me with everything, so that we became such a strong team," Kesteloot said. "I look forward to having that same kind of relationship with Lisa Wilusz." 

Vonnetta Cornish is Communications Project Manager at National Industries for the Blind.



▲ Georgia Industries for the Blind (GIB) CEO Kevin Kelley and Public Relations Coordinator Luis Narimatsu (left) presented Rep. Sanford Bishop, Jr. (D-GA2) with a tactile American flag during his August 18 visit to the agency. NIB President and CEO Kevin Lynch (right) attended the presentation, which recognized Rep. Bishop's extensive efforts on behalf of GIB and all NIB associated agencies, and his commitment to creating employment for people who are blind.

AGENCIES LEARN ALL POLITICS IS LOCAL

Local, state and federal legislators got a first-hand look at the work NIB associated nonprofit agencies do in their communities during the fourth annual NIB/NAEPB Grassroots Forum.

BY RICK WEBSTER

NIB associated nonprofit agencies hosted members of Congress, congressional staffers and many state and local elected officials during the fourth annual NIB/NAEPB Grassroots Forum. The Forum coincides with the August recess, when elected officials traditionally spend time meeting with constituents back home.

Members of NIB's Advocates for Leadership and Employment program arranged and participated in the visits aimed at helping their agencies cultivate new relationships, and grow existing ones, to support their mission of providing employment and opportunity to people who are blind.

Outlook Nebraska kicked things off with a July 31 visit by Rep. Brad Ashford (D-NE2), a freshman member of Congress who serves on the Armed Services and Agriculture committees. Ashford toured the facility and visited with President and CEO Eric Stueckrath to learn more about the agency.



▲ West Texas Lighthouse for the Blind Executive Director Dave Wells, State Rep. Susan King and Rep. Randy Neugebauer (R-TX19) cut the ribbon officially opening the agency's new facility in Abilene, Texas, on August 27.

Lighthouse Central Florida hosted AbilityOne Congressional Champion Rep. Daniel Webster (R-FL10) August 6. A number of state and county officials, as well as congressional staff members of U.S. Senators Bill Nelson (D) and Marco Rubio (R), and Rep. John Mica (R-FL7), also visited the agency throughout the month.

Inland Northwest Lighthouse President and CEO Kirk Adams gave Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers (R-WA5) a tour of the agency's expanded 50,000 square foot facility in Spokane, Washington, on August 13. McMorris Rodgers, a leading advocate in Congress for people with disabilities, currently serves as Republican Conference Chair.

On the same day, Rep. Tom Marino (R-PA10) met with North Central Sight Services President and CEO Bob Garrett in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, to learn about issues surrounding Essentially the Same (ETS) purchasing and how his office can support efforts to increase compliance with the Javits-Wagner-O'Day Act.

Unable to attend the annual picnic at Industries for the Blind Inc., Milwaukee, on August 18, Sen. Ron Johnson (R-WI), chair of the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs – which has jurisdiction over the AbilityOne® Program – sent a video thanking the agency for its terrific work providing employment for people who are blind.

VisionCorps President and CEO Dennis Steiner met with Rep. Charlie Dent (R-PA15) on August 20 to discuss recent challenges posed by language in the House Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education funding bill. Rep. Dent, who serves on the subcommittee of the House Committee on Appropriations that adopted the language, was very interested in learning more about the issue. □

Rick Webster is vice president, public policy at National Industries for the Blind.

ENTERING THE LIMELIGHT

A long-established SKILCRAFT® product is leading NIB associated agency Alphapointe into the commercial marketplace on a national level.

BY ANDY BROWNSTEIN



▲ Pauline Doling sews mesh pockets for Speedy Scrubbers. She found a career and more at Alphapointe in Brooklyn, New York.



▲ Tomas Lopez inserts sponges into mesh pockets as part of the Speedy Scrubber production team.



▲ Anthony Jording provides the finishing touches and prepares Speedy Scrubbers for packaging.

Alphapointe in New York City has manufactured the Speedy Scrubber, a simple kitchen sponge designed for military commissaries, for more than 25 years. It's the number one seller for the National Industries for the Blind (NIB) associated agency, selling as many as 100,000 units a year, and a product so popular that Brenda Mee, Alphapointe's director of business development, said it's not uncommon for "folks, including retired colonels, to call us if their commissary is out of stock."

Given its devoted customers in the federal marketplace, Speedy Scrubber was a natural product to turn to when NIB forged a new partnership with Walmart. In May, the retail giant began selling SKILCRAFT® Speedy Scrubbers at 114 stores, mostly in the northeast. The partnership is a milestone for NIB – while some of its 95 associated agencies have partnered with retailers in local markets, this is the first time NIB has aligned with

a retailer of Walmart's size to provide products for a national market.

"The unemployment rate for people who are blind is 70 percent nationally," said Reinhard Mabry, president and CEO of Alphapointe. "Although many hiring professionals view people who are blind as difficult to employ, we are demonstrating that people who are blind are extraordinarily capable and talented when given the opportunity. And we're demonstrating that by delivering performance, quality and timely delivery to the largest retailer in the world. If we can do it for Walmart, that sets an example for other employers about what people who are blind can do."

The partnership began in July of 2014 as part of Walmart's U.S. Manufacturing Initiative. The retailer, which envisions a national effort by companies, industry leaders, lawmakers and

others to jump-start U.S. manufacturing and rebuild the middle class, has pledged to do its part by spending \$250 billion by 2023 on products supporting the creation of American jobs. Representatives of hundreds of organizations descended on Walmart's Bentonville, Arkansas, headquarters for an open-call event that Russell Shaffer, a senior manager of corporate affairs at Walmart, describes as "a Shark Tank-style pitch presentation."

Walmart's housewares' merchants liked what they saw from NIB. Elizabeth Ganey, associate buyer for dishsoap and sponges at Walmart, said she particularly liked Speedy Scrubber's high sales rates at military commissaries—an attribute that struck a personal chord, as her father works at Scott Air Force Base outside St. Louis.

"The piece that is even more exciting is that this collaboration isn't just

putting Americans to work, it's creating employment opportunities for Americans with disabilities, for people who are blind," Shaffer said. "It takes a good story around American manufacturing and makes it even better."

That story begins at Alphapointe's Brooklyn manufacturing facility, where nearly 100 employees who are legally blind work on an assortment of products, many for the U.S. government. The Speedy Scrubber team is comprised of four people under the helm of John Perez, supervisor of Needlecraft, Assembly and Plastics.

A sighted employee cuts the nylon mesh to be sewn around the green, yellow or blue sponges. Pauline Doling sews the mesh on the left and right sides, trimming any hanging threads. Tomas Lopez inserts the sponge into the mesh. And Anthony Jording closes the sponge and makes sure the tag is centered. Then the sponges are put in sleeves and packaged in groups of two.

The employees use wood or metal guides to determine where to sew; once they touch the mesh with the guide, they know they can go no further. After that, it's a matter of having straight hands and good control of the foot pedal on the sewing machine.

"You have to have a straight hand, and a not-so-heavy foot," said Perez. "It's basically like driving a car. If you're too heavy on the gas pedal, you're going too fast."

Jording, blind from birth, is an Alphapointe veteran, having joined in 1996, when the organization was known as New York Industries for the Blind. Prior to that, he worked at Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired and at Helen Keller Services for the Blind. "You could say I've been all over the place," he quipped. Lopez, also blind from birth, has

been at Alphapointe since 1997, having previously worked at the Lighthouse as well. He came to the United States from Ecuador to join his family.

Doling lost her sight later in life. Diagnosed with diabetes when she



▲ A favorite among commissary customers, the Speedy Scrubber is now available at select Walmart stores in the northeast.

lived in Jamaica, she was unable to afford proper medication. One day, while watching television, her sight went red. Several weeks later, she was declared legally blind.

Her troubles didn't end there. After her husband left Doling and her daughter, she moved to New York City to find a job, but could no longer perform the nanny work that supported her previously. "It was an unbelievably difficult time," she said.

Then she got a second chance – two second chances actually. She found her way to Alphapointe and began sewing for the organization's military and government customers. And she met and fell in love with the man who answered the bell on her first day at the agency, Ronnie McNeil, who works with plastics. The two were married earlier this year.

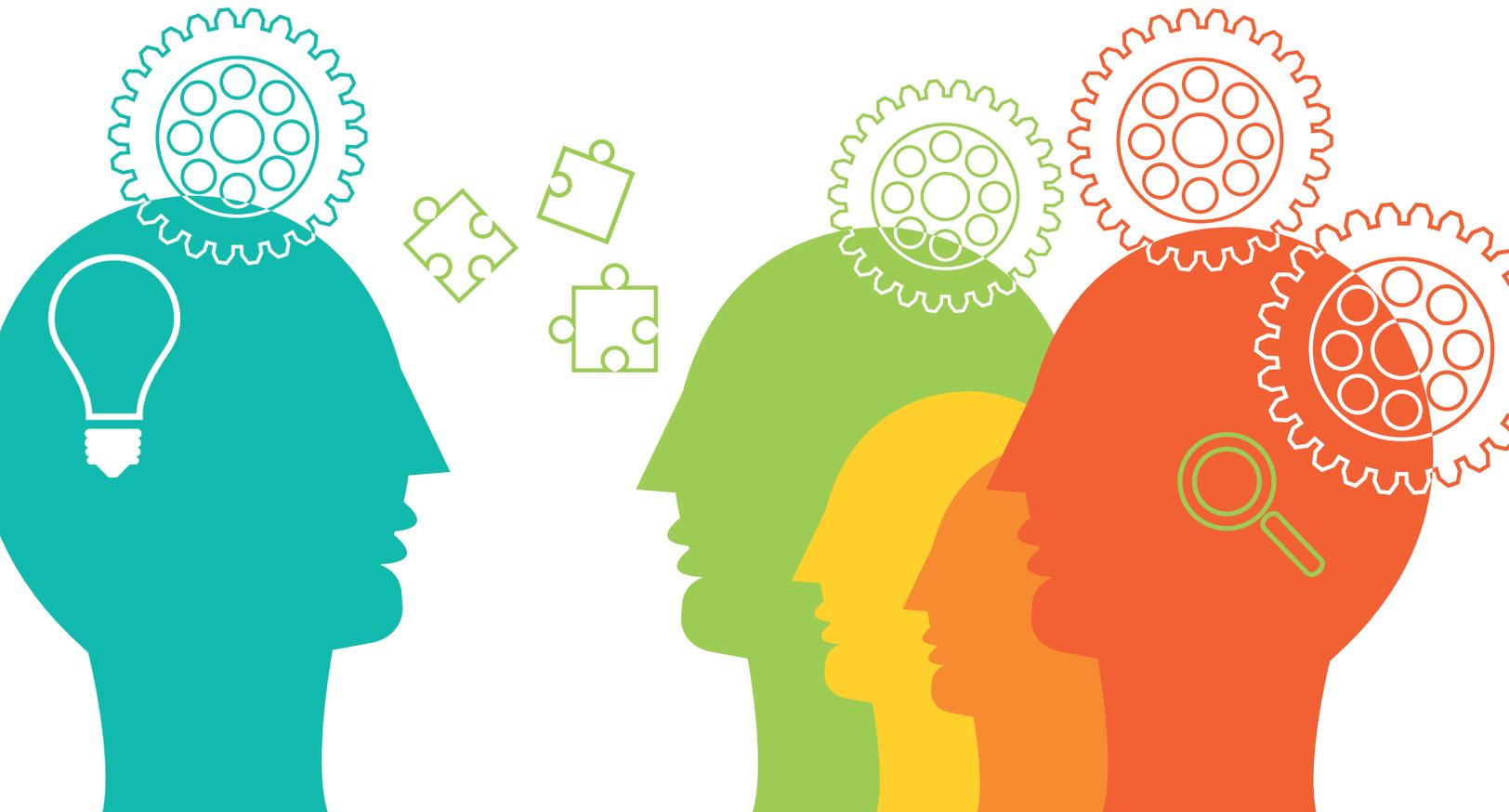
The partnership with Walmart sparked a lot of interest among the crew, marking the first time the products they produced were available at a major retailer. "When I mentioned it to Pauline, Tomas and Anthony, there was some excitement," said Perez. "They like knowing that the products they make every day will be sold at a place like Walmart."

The sponge may be the beginning of a larger partnership with Walmart and a higher visibility for NIB and its associated agencies among private sector retailers. Russell said NIB made a pitch at this year's open call for new products. Walmart's Ganey noted that the Speedy Scrubber is selling well, prompting discussions about expanding inventory of the sponges, as well as adding dish cleaning products produced by NIB agencies, to the retailer's offerings.

NIB President and CEO Kevin Lynch said the organization "continues to focus on the federal marketplace, which is at the core of our mission, and is always interested in new partnerships that will create jobs for people who are blind. We hope that being recognized as a reliable business partner by a national retailer of Walmart's stature will enhance our reputation and help us grow employment opportunities."

In the meantime, the partnership has other advantages. "With a company as large as Walmart and as sophisticated in its logistics, we have to be on our toes, be at our peak level of performance," Mabry said. "Working with a company like Walmart makes us better, and that's going to be benefit every customer we have, government or commercial." □

Andy Brownstein is a freelance writer based in the Washington, D.C. area.



CULTIVATING THE FUTURE: INTERNSHIPS PAVE THE WAY TO EMPLOYMENT

Research shows that work experience during high school and college helps young adults who are blind succeed in the job market. At NIB associated agencies, internship programs are providing young people with the work experience they need to find meaningful employment.

BY SHARON HORRIGAN

It's the catch-22 of new job seekers everywhere: To get a job, you need experience, but it's nearly impossible to get experience without a job. In today's economy, it can be a challenge for any young person to get that first foot into the working world, but for those who are blind or visually impaired, it can be nearly impossible.

"Kids who are sighted can get that experience at any fast food restaurant," explains Melanie Wells, employment services manager for Indianapolis-based Bosma Enterprises. "For kids who are blind or visually impaired, those kinds of entry-level jobs are simply not an option."

Internships and other work experiences like those offered by NIB associated agencies are helping young people who are blind or visually impaired gain that much-needed experience, and the outcomes – including permanent job placement for many participants – have been extremely positive. These experiences also confirm what studies have suggested – that there's a positive correlation between work experience during school and job entry.

Studies have found work experiences like internships, summer jobs and part-time employment are a key factor in the successful transition into the workplace for youth with disabilities. But students who are blind or visually impaired, the studies found, were less likely to engage in those types of work experiences. Internships and other work experience programs like those offered by NIB associated agencies are critical in planting the seeds for young people who are blind to find meaningful employment as adults.

Starting Small

Internship programs come in all shapes and sizes. Envision, in Wichita, Kansas, launched a formal internship program in 2014, hosting one intern for the summers of 2014 and 2015. Program participants – who are paid – are drawn from Envision's Kids Club, its Assistive Technology camp that teaches career and educational skills, and Heather's Camp, a camp for teens and young adults. Interns go through a formal interview process that identifies personal goals, objectives and tasks.

"Our internships are tailored to our intern's interests, but they are also exposed to a wide range of departments, including marketing, development, sales, customer service and our broadcasting subsidiary, Envision Broadcast Network," says Heather Hogan, senior vice president of foundation and mission services at Envision.

Envision's careful planning in crafting its internship program with an eye toward the intern's current and potential future interests made Charles Wilks' 2015 internship a success.

Wilks recently started his junior year at Kansas State University pursuing a double major in music and business. His internship was designed with those majors in mind – he learned how a radio station works, from DJ "tricks of the trade" to how to make sales calls.

"The internship taught me the value of clear communication and the strength and weight of making statements," says Wilks. He also realized that he has a real passion for teaching and helping people with visual impairments become more fully integrated into the world around them.

And if anyone can do that, it's Wilks. He lost his vision at age 5 due to a brain tumor, but never let blindness stop him. Mainstreamed in school, Wilks says he "grew up as normally as my condition allowed." He played football in high school, wrestled and competed in shot put on the track team. He also participated in band and theater, all the while maintaining honor roll status.

Like the Envision program, the program at the Louisiana Association for the Blind (LAB) is new. Christina Jimenez, their first participant at the Low Vision Services Division, recently completed her summer-long internship. The experience has been so positive, LAB is already putting together another internship. "We have a young man in mind for a position coming up in human resources," says Nan Magness, director of Low Vision Services at LAB. "Our goal for our internships is to facilitate real-world experience outside of the school room, but they are also designed with the interns in mind – all the assignments are geared to help them with their personal career goals."

Even though Jimenez, age 19, was a familiar face – she's attended programs at LAB since age 5 – she was still required to apply and interview for the position, both good experiences for real-world entry in and of themselves. Serving as the receptionist at the Low Vision Rehabilitation Center required not only good interpersonal skills – skills Jimenez has in abundance – but also memorizing extensions, answering the phone, running errands to three different buildings and helping clients get around.

"I loved the experience because I got to interact with people," says Jimenez. "I love helping people. And the skills will help me down the line." Jimenez plans on going to college soon, and like so many teenagers, isn't quite sure what she wants to do. But with the internship, she proved to herself that she can do whatever she sets her mind to. "The entire experience was really confidence-building for me. I now know that I can learn anything."

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CULTIVATING THE FUTURE

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The experience has been equally valuable to LAB. “It’s important for our staff to work with folks with no work experience and to help them,” says Magness, who is legally blind. “Employers really need to be educated about people with low vision and no vision. No vision doesn’t mean not employable. Employers need to be educated as to what people who are blind can do – which is just about everything except driving.”

Michele O’Hare, director of communications and development at the Northeastern Association of the Blind at Albany (NABA), agrees. Unpaid internships at NABA are open to all college students, many of whom receive college credit for their experience. Although most NABA interns have been sighted, they have worked in all areas of the agency and O’Hare feels their experiences have allowed them to better understand that people who are blind or visually impaired can do anything they set their minds to. “They learn that there are no limits for people who are blind,” O’Hare says. “I hope they take that with them to their future workplaces.”

Getting Bigger

At the Chicago Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired, the internship program was born out of a strong conviction that such experiences matter. “Internships are so essential. They really do – and have – saved lives,” says Janet Szlyk, Ph.D., president of the agency.

Since 2009, 90 people have participated in the paid program, which is sustained through fundraising and, by all accounts, very successful. Sheila Perkins, senior vice president of employee services, closely follows the numbers. “Of the 90 people who have gone through the program, 68 have completed 30 days of internship, 60 have completed 60 days, and 56 have completed their entire internship,

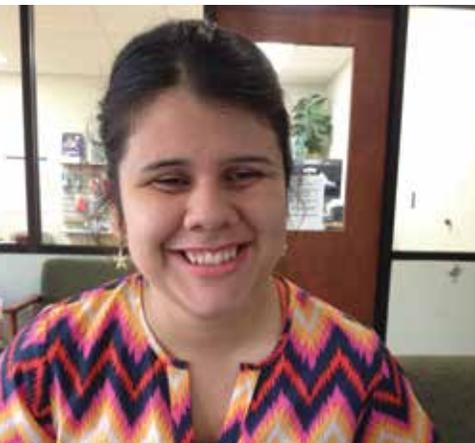
which usually runs anywhere from three to six months, but can be expanded depending on the intern’s readiness to go into a job,” says Perkins. “Forty interns have been placed into permanent jobs, including ten placed in jobs outside of the Lighthouse,” she adds with pride.

There is no age range for the internships at the Chicago Lighthouse. Dawn Hale, for example, was a 32 year-old married mother of two young children (then ages 3 and 1) when she learned about the program. “The children were about to start daycare and I wanted work in the city to be closer to them,” she recalls.

Hale, who has Stargardt disease – a juvenile form of macular degeneration – began losing her sight when she was 10 years old. “I remember riding a bike as a child,” she says. “Now I can’t see five feet in front of me.” Hale also had an associate’s degree in business administration and some work experience under her belt before she found the Lighthouse program through her brother, who is also blind.

She interviewed for the program and was offered a six-month internship in the Lighthouse’s customer service program. “Within three weeks, I was asked to cover the front desk and to fill in at the switchboard,” she proudly recalls. Two months into the internship, Hale found herself in the Lighthouse’s executive offices, where she worked hard to gain administrative experience. In September 2001, Hale landed a permanent job at the Lighthouse as a contract clerk, a position she loved.

But Hale had bigger plans. “I scanned documents, created spreadsheets, and really took on other duties, so when a contract close-out specialist job became available about a year and a half later, I was promoted,” says Hale. “When I set



▲ Christina Jimenez gained both job skills and self-confidence in her internship at the Louisiana Association for the Blind’s Low Vision Rehabilitation Center.



▲ Sam Hancock worked as a STEP intern at The Computer Guy. After he graduated from the program, the company hired him to service computer equipment and assist customers with inquiries.



▲ Students in the Bosma Enterprises Student Training and Employment Program (STEP) washing windows at a local YMCA.





my goals, I go for them.” Hale, who had previously worked as a purchasing agent in an office where all of her co-workers were sighted, loves working at the Lighthouse. “I love working in an environment where everyone is using assistive technology,” says Hale. “It makes me feel more comfortable.”

When asked what advice she would give young people who are blind or visually impaired seeking internships, Hale is quick to answer. “Learn to be assertive, but not aggressive,” she says. “Be your own advocate. Be confident in what you want and go for it. And work hard.” Hale said she lives by this advice, which is obviously working for her: She was the agency’s 2015 nominee for the Milton J. Samuelson career achievement award.

A Different Kind of Program

Bosma’s Wells is quick to point out that although the agency’s Student Training and Employment Program (STEP) isn’t technically an internship program, it offers participants the same benefits – meaningful, real-world work experience. The 20-year-old program was originally funded as a partnership between Bosma Enterprises, the Indiana School for the Blind and Visually Impaired (ISBVI), and the Indiana Office of Vocational Rehabilitation Services. Although the state ceased funding in 2007, Bosma Enterprises and ISBVI continue the valuable program.

The four-week summer program is offered to in-state high school students aged 16-21 who are blind or visually impaired. Participants stay on the school’s campus Monday through Friday during the program and are paid an hourly minimum wage for their work. This year, approximately 30 students participated in the program, with the \$5,000 per-student cost paid by the partnership.

Students are assigned internships with local employers Monday through Thursday, and spend Fridays learning job acquisition skills such as resume writing and effective interviewing. This year, 10 organizations offered internships. Some students worked at Bosma as receptionists or in the agency’s bistro; others worked in warehouse settings or at nonprofits like the local YMCA, where they performed maintenance tasks or provided child care; and some were placed with the city of Indianapolis performing clerical work. Job coaches are assigned to each work site and remain on-site for the duration of the internship.

“The goal of the program is simple,” says Wells. “We want to prepare kids for entry into the workforce.” After participating in the program, students are surveyed regularly to see what difference, if any, the experience has made in their lives. Wells found nearly half of the students are still involved in secondary training, 20 percent are involved in post-secondary training and 12 percent are working (one STEP participant was hired by the city when she completed her education). And 100 percent of participants said the STEP program “helped them become who they are now.”

Wells acknowledges that the program is a significant expense for Bosma Enterprises, but looks at it as a long-term investment that gives students a chance to build the skills, confidence and independence they need to find meaningful employment and participate fully in society. “It’s our mission to create these opportunities for students who are blind or have low vision. We know experiences like this help them with future employment,” she says. “But it’s also our pleasure – they’re great kids!” 

Sharon Horrigan is a freelance writer based in Asheville, North Carolina.



 As the customer service intern at the Chicago Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired, Dawn Hale worked hard to gain administrative experience that prepared her for a permanent position as a contract closeout specialist.



 Sammi Grant’s internship tracking in-kind donations at the Chicago Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired expanded to include coordinating volunteers, and led to full-time employment as a financial development assistant and volunteer coordinator.

SERVING THOSE WHO SERVE

Twenty years ago, one NIB associated agency re-imagined a drive to cut military spending as an opportunity to create jobs for people who are blind. The rest, as they say, is history.

BY ANDY BROWNSTEIN



▲ Eric Northern and Greg Valenti are ready for a busy day at the Department of Defense Washington Headquarters Service BSC in Alexandria, Virginia.

In the mid-1990s – before 9/11 and the armed forces expansion that accompanied the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq – military bases were under pressure to cut costs. On-base stores that provided everything from office supplies to cleaning products for thousands of military personnel became prime targets. Once the stores closed, personnel began using newly issued impact credit cards to buy supplies at large retailers like Walmart and Office Depot, but not without complaint.

“We heard rumors that people were unhappy,” said Bill Hudson, president and CEO of LC Industries (LCI), the largest National Industries for the Blind (NIB) associated nonprofit agency. “People were spending a lot of time off-base,” he explained, “taking military vehicles downtown, which is obviously very dangerous.”



▲ The first Base Supply Center opened at the U.S. Army installation at Ft. Bragg, North Carolina, on October 11, 1995.

LCI had a longstanding relationship with the U.S. Army installation at Fort Bragg, outside Fayetteville, North Carolina, for whom it manufactured mattresses, among other products. The agency offered to operate the on-base supply store – a wooden, World War II-era building – and staff it heavily with people who are blind.

“I just knew this was a winner,” said Hudson, who explained that over the years, LCI invested more than a million

dollars in building its program “because I knew it was going to be successful.”

But on October 11, 1995, when the first Base Supply Center (BSC) opened at Fort Bragg, success was not assured. Skeptical military brass gave LCI a 6-month contract to see if the idea could work. LCI, meanwhile, invested \$250,000 to renovate that first building.

The idea didn’t take long to catch on. After just three months of operation, the Army awarded LCI a long-term contract for the Fort Bragg store.

“Word started circulating very rapidly,” Hudson said, “and we started getting phone calls from bases all over the country.”

LCI, which employs more than 400 people who are blind in 13 states, began operating BSCs at Fort Jackson

in Columbia, South Carolina, and at Fort Drum, in upstate New York. After that, NIB began opening BSCs at military bases and government centers throughout the country.

Twenty years later, there are 151 BSCs serving all branches of the armed forces – Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps and the Coast Guard – and two stores supporting the Defense Logistics Agency. Elsewhere in the federal government, BSCs serve the Census Bureau, the Securities and Exchange Commission, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, and the departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Energy, Justice, Transportation, Treasury and Veterans Affairs. The newest store is expected to open later this fall at Tyndall Air Force Base, near Panama City, Florida.

The program currently employs more than 230 people who are blind stocking shelves, working the cash register and performing customer service duties, and 15 people who are blind or visually impaired in management positions.

Since 1995, the BSCs have provided a vital distribution link for SKILCRAFT® and other AbilityOne products produced by

NIB associated agencies. In total, more than 5000 AbilityOne and commercial items are available through the BSCs.

“The BSCs not only created new retail jobs for people who are blind, but more importantly, they ensured the continuity of AbilityOne products,” Hudson said.

But it goes beyond that.

“The bigger picture is what it does for the associated agencies as a whole,” said John Qua, vice president of services at NIB. “As nonprofits, the associated agencies invest net proceeds generated by the BSCs back into their rehabilitation programs, which teach people who are blind how to live independently and read braille, among other things.

Recent events underscore the opportunities to expand the BSCs in new directions.

One idea, oddly enough, came from an NIB compliance audit of a BSC, and a visit to a restroom.

In the spring of 2014, NIB conducted an audit of the BSC at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, outside Dayton, Ohio. The auditor noted the BSC’s restroom “consumables” – which

include toilet paper, hand soap and paper towels – were commercial rather than AbilityOne products.

“The auditor suggested to the store manager that we should take a look at that – that there might be an opportunity,” said John Mitchell, CEO of the Cincinnati Association for the Blind & Visually Impaired, the NIB associated agency that operates the BSC at Wright-Patterson.

The Wright-Patterson BSC at the 88th Airbase Wing was also the 88th BSC – a fact Mitchell calls “a pretty neat coincidence.” Opened in March of 2001, it employs two people who are legally blind. But after the audit and six months of negotiation with Wright-Patterson, the BSC expanded its offerings, contracting with associated agencies Outlook Nebraska and Horizon Industries in Tyler, Texas, to supply hand towels, toilet paper and hand soap for all of the restrooms on the Base.

Mitchell called the move “very helpful” to the BSC and one that could prove a good opportunity for other stores across the nation. “The most important thing that’s come out of this BSC program is the number of opportunities it has created for people who are blind,” he said.

Qua at NIB, agreed. He called the 20th anniversary of the BSCs “an important milestone” with impacts beyond the retail level.

“I believe the BSCs have a very rich legacy, not only in terms of their employment of people who are blind in the stores themselves, but in terms of increased manufacturing and training opportunities,” said Qua. “Plus, the stores are integrated into the fabric of their base community, providing valued mission support. They’re a win-win for our program and our customers” □

Andy Brownstein is a freelance writer based in the Washington, D.C. area.



▲ Victor Carino helps a customer find the SKILCRAFT product that best meets his needs at the Base Supply Center on the U.S. Army Installation at Fort Belvoir, Virginia.

THE NEXT 100 YEARS

Building on a proud history, Lighthouse Louisiana is entering its second century focused on opportunity and outreach.

BY ROSEMARIE LALLY

As Lighthouse Louisiana celebrates its 100th anniversary, it's clear that dedication to continual improvement is the driving force behind the agency's success.

CEO Renee Vidrine also makes clear that the NIB associated nonprofit agency is not resting on its laurels, but instead focusing on new ways to fulfill its mission of service to individuals who are blind or visually impaired.

With certified manufacturing facilities in New Orleans and Baton Rouge, as well as Gulfport, Mississippi, Lighthouse Louisiana is the largest employer of people who are blind in the state of Louisiana. Manufactured items include paper towels, household scrubbers, paper cups, deck swabs and pillow

cases. The organization also packages mess trays and paper plates.

In addition, Lighthouse Louisiana offers job training to people who are blind or visually impaired, helping them become call center operators and receptionists. The agency has provided call center operations to the Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Biloxi, Mississippi, and to Barksdale Air Force Base in Shreveport, Louisiana, for the past 14 years.

Serving the Community

As another critical part of its mission, Lighthouse Louisiana offers social services, including outplacement services to match people who are blind with jobs at local businesses; life skills classes to help people learn to safely



▲ Providing jobs is just one way Lighthouse Louisiana serves people who are blind in New Orleans and Baton Rouge.

cook for themselves, organize their homes and live independently; and a low vision clinic that can help retrain the brain to maximize diminishing sight.

The agency places a special emphasis on serving young people in need of services, according to Vidrine. For example, Lighthouse Louisiana employs certified teachers for the visually impaired to provide services to 28



▲ Stepania Alvarez and Devine Wilson make a new friend on an outing to the Barnum & Bailey Circus, part of the outreach and support programs Lighthouse Louisiana provides to youth who are blind.



▲ Ricky Randall works on the paper towel production line at Lighthouse Louisiana's New Orleans facility.



▲ Celebrating the agency's 100th anniversary, Rep. Steve Scalise (R-LA1) and employee Norman Demolle join in the "100 Reasons to Love the Lighthouse" campaign.



▲ Patrick White packs paper cups at Lighthouse Louisiana's Baton Rouge facility.



▲ Lighthouse Louisiana camper Alex Vallieu takes a turn behind the wheel with volunteer Wade McDaniel.

students in New Orleans area schools. The itinerant teachers go from school to school, providing services and assessing individual students' needs. Lighthouse Louisiana then makes sure the children get teaching aides and any other accommodations necessary for them to succeed in school.

A month-long summer camp for children and youths aged 5-19 allows the campers to try many new experiences – such as horseback riding, go-kart racing and ziplining – that build confidence and life experience. Older campers also receive training in using assistive technologies to help prepare them for the working world. The program makes an amazing difference in the lives of some young people, according to Vidrine.

For example, a 5-year-old boy came to the camp in June after losing his sight in a drive-by shooting a year earlier. At first, he was so shy and traumatized that he wouldn't speak to anyone. But with understanding and encouragement from counselors and teachers, he "came out of his shell and really opened up," Vidrine said. "By the end of the camp, he was laughing and talking with people, trusting the

staff, and trying new things. Our camp made a really big difference for him – it was an incredibly dramatic change."

Investing in the Future

Despite these obstacles, Vidrine makes sure that there's still time for fun and encourages all employees to celebrate their achievements. A Centennial Block Party in October will celebrate the organization's anniversary. Other morale-building programs continue to run throughout the year, like "100 Reasons to Love the Lighthouse," a campaign in which employees provide a reason they love working at the agency; the reason is then posted with the employee's picture on the organization's social media pages and throughout the workplace.

Vidrine continues to concentrate on community outreach efforts and continuous improvement for Lighthouse employees. "We're reinvesting in our employees, trying to increase their skills and education, offering supervisory training, and forming employee committees to maintain morale and offer opportunities for advancement," she said. Additional funds have also been committed to social services. For example, Lighthouse's daily

living skills program was recently upgraded by hiring a certified occupational therapist assistant.

The agency also is trying to diversify its business by moving from a client base largely composed of government agencies to building relationships with more private-sector firms. In the last two years, the Lighthouse Louisiana has expanded its paper cup manufacturing business from white cups for the government to printing custom designed cups for the commercial market. Its efforts are meeting with success in the regional market, Vidrine said, noting that the agency recently secured a contract with the popular and growing food chain, Krispy Krunchy Chicken.

"Our vision for the organization is just to continue to grow," said Vidrine. "Grow our community presence for more stable revenue, grow our services and programs to bring them to the next level, and grow through encouraging staff to improve their education, so they can learn more about what they're doing and how to do it even better." □

Rosemarie Lally is a freelance writer based in Washington, D.C.

EVERYDAY ESSENTIALS WITH AN EXTRAORDINARY MISSION

In Winston-Salem, North Carolina, a common office product is helping to provide people who are blind year-round employment in a variety of positions.

BY JENNIFER CLICK



▲ Pam and Booker T. Winn package SKILCRAFT® Standard Staples at Winston-Salem Industries for the Blind. Married for 15 years, the couple met at the agency.



▲ Packaging staples is one of many activities that keep Anthony Biondolillo busy at Winston-Salem Industries for the Blind.



▲ Tonya Johnson operated a sewing machine at WSIFB before developing new job skills as a customer service representative.

Look at a desk in any office and you're likely to see a similar collection of office supplies: pens, notepads, sticky notes, a stapler. Most people don't give the items a thought as long as they're within reach when needed. But at Winston-Salem Industries for the Blind (WSIFB) in North Carolina, one everyday office essential represents much more: employment, self-sufficiency and dignity.

In 2008, WSIFB began producing SKILCRAFT® spring powered staplers through a co-branding arrangement with PaperPro. While the product was – and is – popular, it's a durable good, explains Dan Kelly, vice president of operations at WSIFB. "People buy a stapler and it lasts for years; we wanted to produce a commodity item that would drive years of employment for people who are blind."

A Team Effort

Thus began the quest to develop SKILCRAFT Standard Staples for the AbilityOne® Program. Working with NIB product management director Kevin Campbell, consultants who help the agency obtain raw materials, and representatives from PaperPro, WSIFB found a natural breaking point in the production process that allowed it to bring in, shape, chisel and punch out staples that could then be packaged.

Understanding the production process was just the first step – WSIFB also needed specialized equipment to produce the staples. A federal community block grant of \$75,000 from the City of Winston-Salem helped purchase the machinery, and a source of raw materials was secured. The final step, adding SKILCRAFT Standard Staples to the federal Procurement List, was completed in August 2014.

Now, this everyday essential is creating opportunities for people who are blind at WSIFB.

“There are so many positive aspects to this project,” Kelly explained. “First, we are re-shoring manufacturing of a product that hasn’t been made in the U.S.A. in decades; second, we’ve developed a manufacturing process where each step is performed by people who are blind; and third, adding this product to our portfolio allows us to cross-train employees and provide steady, year-round employment.”

Currently, SKILCRAFT Standard Staples provide about five full-time-equivalent positions; if the product meets sales projections – and there’s every reason to expect it will – WSIFB estimates the staples will create 12 jobs for people who are blind by 2017.

A Spectrum of Opportunities

“The other wonderful thing about this product is it creates careers at all levels across our organization,” Kelly said. “It creates jobs in manufacturing. It creates jobs in packaging. It creates jobs in customer service.”

Pam Winn and her husband of 15 years, Booker T., are both packaging SKILCRAFT Standard Staples. Pam has been associated with WSIFB off-and-on for more than 30 years – the agency’s flexibility allowed her to take time off to

raise four children. Booker T. first joined the agency in 1993. For both, WSIFB provides more than a job, it provides a community. “We have long-time friends here, we have a Thanksgiving dinner here,” explained Pam, who sings in the agency’s choir with Booker T.

Tonya Johnson epitomizes the flexibility and upward mobility offered at WSIFB. Johnson joined the agency 10 years ago in manufacturing. She sewed t-shirts for four years before applying for a customer service position.

After learning the inventory of the agency’s online office supply store, Johnson now supports the e-commerce site full time, checking order status, helping customers with returns and exchanges, and walking those who need assistance through the ordering process. She enjoys talking with the store’s diverse clientele. “I like e-commerce because you can sell to anyone, anywhere,” she says. “We have customers from Alaska to Puerto Rico and everywhere in between.”

David Minton also welcomes the addition of SKILCRAFT Standard Staples to the agency’s product line. Minton, who lost his sight in an accident in 1998, joined the agency as a sewing

machine operator in 2005, then worked as assistant manager at an AbilityOne® Base Supply Center operated by WSIFB. Now he puts his BSC sales experience and product knowledge to use as a customer service representative for the agency’s online store. “I enjoy talking with customers, helping them research items and find the right product for their needs,” he says.

“Many people are surprised to learn that the production of commodity office supplies can be seasonal, but it is,” Kelly said. WSIFB started ramping up production of SKILCRAFT Standard Staples in March of 2015 to meet fiscal year-end purchasing demands. The addition of this high-volume commodity to WSIFB’s product portfolio helps avoid layoffs during periods of slow production for other WSIFB products, Kelly explained, as cross-trained employees can move to other production lines.

And so, a simple office product – one few people think twice about – is helping WSIFB provide steady, year-round employment for people who are blind, allowing them to live independently and participate in society more fully. Quite an accomplishment for a simple staple. 

Jennifer Click is a communications consultant and editor of Opportunity magazine.

NEW PRODUCTS LAUNCH THIS FALL

In addition to SKILCRAFT® Standard Staples, the AbilityOne® Program is launching a new line of presentation easels and a two-in-one touch screen stylus and retractable ball point pen this fall.

Available in a variety of sizes, SKILCRAFT Presentation Easels feature dry-erase surfaces, flip chart holders,

adjustable legs suitable for floor or table use, and 10-year warranties.

The touchscreen-compatible combination stylus and ballpoint pen, designed after SKILCRAFT’s popular U.S. government pen, makes it easy to work on iPhones, iPads, Android devices and tablets, and provides easy writing on paper when needed.

These and thousands of other products are available for purchase at AbilityOne.com, GSAAAdvantage.com, your local Base Supply Center or through AbilityOne authorized distributors. For more information about how to purchase SKILCRAFT and other products produced by people who are blind, visit www.nib.org/products.



KEVIN LYNCH ADDRESSES AMERICAN COUNCIL OF THE BLIND



▲ NIB President and CEO Kevin Lynch addresses attendees at the American Council of the Blind's 54th annual conference and convention

NIB President and CEO Kevin Lynch spoke about twenty-first century jobs for people who are blind at the general session of the American Council of the Blind's (ACB) 54th annual conference and convention in July. ACB is a national organization that works toward independence, security, equality of opportunity and improved quality of life for people who are blind or visually impaired.

Lynch discussed the way advances in accessible technology have opened up not only more manufacturing jobs, but also professional services positions for people who are blind, citing NIB's Contract Management Support Program and the cybersecurity pilot program now underway. □

CABVI OPENS NEW FACILITY IN SYRACUSE

State and local officials joined agency representatives in June to cut the ribbon at CABVI Syracuse Industries, a satellite operation of the Central Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired (CABVI) in Utica, New York. Pictured left to right are Carrie LoGalbo, CABVI; Dennis Webster, Vice President of Manufacturing and Business Services, CABVI; Julie Cerio, Director, Onondaga Dept. of Economic Development; Mark Nicotra, Town of Salina Supervisor; Rudy D'Amico, CABVI President & CEO; Ed Welsh, CABVI Board Chair; Joe Merlan, Manager, CABVI Syracuse Industries; Brian Daniels, Associate Commissioner, NYS Commission for the Blind; Carrie Laney, Executive Director, New York State Preferred Source Program; Debra Chaiken, President, Aurora of Central New York; Ron Tascarella, Chairman, Empire State Employment Resources for the Blind; Mary Fletcher, CABVI. ▶



JOSHUA HARPER RECEIVES ROEDER SCHOLARSHIP

Joshua Harper, a senior at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) in Murfreesboro, received the 2015 Joseph Roeder Assistive Technology Scholarship from NIB in September. Harper, whose major is Special Education with a minor in information systems, plans to become an adaptive technology teacher. He is currently a student employee in MTSU's Adaptive Technology Center, where he helps people with all types of disabilities use technology to improve their lives.



The Roeder scholarship provides a one-time award of \$2,500 to a person who is blind pursuing an education in computer science, information systems or a related field leading to a career in access technology. It is named for Joe Roeder, senior accessible technology specialist at NIB from 1997 until his death in 2010, who was instrumental in development of the Section 508 electronic and information technology accessibility standards of the Rehabilitation Act. □

NIB PUBLIC POLICY MANAGER FEATURED IN NEW VIDEO



NIB Public Policy and Advocacy Manager Tony Stephens is featured in a new video from the American Council of the Blind, “BlindAbility: Willing, Able and Seeking Opportunity.” Stephens is one of four professionals who are blind profiled in the video designed to educate hiring managers, human resource professionals and others interested in diversifying their workplace. The video includes interviews with the employees’ supervisors, who explain the assets each brings to the workplace and how they fit in with other team members.

The video is available in conventional and audio-described formats on the American Council of the Blind YouTube channel; search BlindAbility. [▶](#)

ABVI AND 3M CELEBRATE 25 YEARS OF PARTNERSHIP AND JOB CREATION

The Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired (ABVI) and 3M celebrated the 25th anniversary of their partnership this summer. “No other single partnership the Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired has had over the last 25 years has provided such an opportunity to empower people who have significant vision loss like our partnership with 3M has,” said Gidget Hopf, ABVI president and CEO.

In the beginning, ABVI manufactured three self-stick notepad products using 3M materials. Today, the agency uses 3M materials to manufacture 33 products, with more on the horizon.

“3M has always strived to be a good citizen in the communities we serve. We believe in NIB and want to share in its mission of employing people who are blind.” said George Foley, 3M government business development manager. Since its first partnership with ABVI 25 years ago, Foley said 3M has “partnered with many NIB associated agencies and helped create hundreds of jobs for people who are blind.”

To celebrate the partnership and all it has done to empower people who are blind or visually impaired, ABVI presented 3M with its Community Partner award, a prestigious award given annually to organizations or individuals that have supported ABVI in promoting its mission. [▶](#)

NIB REACHES OUT TO VETERANS

Darren Wyatt, program advocacy specialist, Doug Goist, accessible technology program manager, and Ned Rupp, veterans affairs specialist – wounded warriors, represented NIB at the 70th national convention of the Blinded Veterans Association (BVA) in Louisville, Kentucky, in August. BVA Executive Director Al Avina, a graduate of NIB’s Fellowship for Leadership Development program, said nearly 500 people attended the event. [▶](#)



OPPORTUNITY MAGAZINE READER SURVEY RESULTS ARE IN!

Thanks to all who participated in our reader survey! We had a very strong turnout and collected some fantastic feedback that will be used to improve future issues of Opportunity. Here’s what respondents indicated in their survey answers:

- The cover story and new products feature are the articles most popular with readers.
- Readers consider Opportunity magazine their “number two” source of information about NIB, right behind the www.NIB.org website.
- Most readers prefer to receive the magazine in an accessible electronic form.
- Readers who receive the magazine in the mail “Can’t wait for the next edition!”

Respondents also said they’d like future issues of Opportunity magazine to include more stories about Base Supply Centers and information on technology for people who are blind.

Stay tuned to discover how we’re using your feedback to make Opportunity magazine your premier source of news and information about NIB and its associated nonprofit agencies. If you have feedback or story ideas, please email opportunity@nib.org. [▶](#)



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