Another Way to Serve

Employees at NIB associated agencies serve their country by supporting warfighters at home and abroad
LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT
SERVING
WITH HONOR

Love of country and community runs deep in the veins of Americans. The idea of serving our fellow citizens brings to mind images of soldiers, sailors, Airmen, Marines, police, firefighters, and other public servants. In our diverse society, everybody – including people who are blind – can answer the call to serve in their own way.

In this issue of Opportunity, you’ll learn how employees at NIB associated nonprofit agencies are serving their communities and country: providing the U.S. military with uniforms and life-saving medical equipment; ensuring ordered supplies arrive at destinations at home and abroad on-time, every time; connecting military members with loved ones; and saving taxpayer dollars by identifying more than $2 billion in contract funding to be de-obligated.

Employees at NIB associated agencies take pride in supplying our military with the best, and regularly exceed performance standards set by the Department of Defense. They know lives may depend on the quality of the extreme weather garments they sew, the field stretchers they assemble, or the supplies and equipment they pack and ship to U.S. military troops.

It’s been said that the highest honor comes from serving community and country. NIB and its associated agencies provide people who are blind the opportunity to answer the call to serve with honor.

Kevin A. Lynch
President and Chief Executive Officer

CORRECTION
A photo on page 14 of the summer 2017 Agency Spotlight about North Central Sight Services (NCCS) identified Tony Butler, of Lions Volunteer Blind Industries, as Kenny Bower, of NCCS. We sincerely regret the error and have corrected the online edition.
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ANOTHER WAY TO SERVE
Employees who are blind working at NIB associated nonprofit agencies serve their country by supporting warfighters at home and abroad.

ON THE COVER
Paul Washington, a material handler at Industries of the Blind in Greensboro, North Carolina, folds moisture wicking T-shirts worn by U.S. Army soldiers.
FIGHTING FOR OPPORTUNITIES IN THE WORKFORCE

Deputy Assistant Secretary of Labor Jennifer Sheehy breaks down workplace barriers and stereotypes for people with disabilities.

BY AMY GRAY

Job seekers typically find obstacles to overcome while navigating the job market, but for people with disabilities, those challenges can be even greater.

Jennifer Sheehy, deputy assistant secretary of labor in the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) is one of the nation’s top experts and activists for people with disabilities. She also knows firsthand the trials people with disabilities can face in the workplace.

“There’s deep societal prejudice against people with disabilities,” she explains. “To gain and keep employment, we have to be more qualified and work three times harder than our nondisabled counterparts.”

In the midst of pursuing an MBA at Georgetown University, Sheehy suffered a severe spinal cord injury in a swimming pool accident that left her in a wheelchair with limited mobility. Driven and highly motivated throughout her life, Sheehy didn’t let the injury stand in the way of achieving her goals. She completed her MBA at Georgetown and embarked on a career advocating for employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

After graduation, Sheehy went to work for the National Organization on Disability as special assistant to the president, becoming a member of its board of directors in 1997 and moving up to vice-president and director of its CEO Council in 1998. From there she joined the Presidential Task Force on Employment of Adults with Disabilities as a senior policy advisor and an associate director on the White House Domestic Policy Council.

From the White House, Sheehy moved to the U.S. Department of Education, where she served ten years in positions including director of policy and planning in the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services and acting director of the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research. In her current role as deputy assistant secretary of labor at ODEP, Sheehy oversees strategic planning and performance management for a number of policy initiatives that increase opportunities for people with disabilities to prepare for and succeed in employment.

As an agency, ODEP works to influence national policy and endorses effective workplace practices to ensure an inclusive workforce, serving as a resource employers can turn to for assistance in creating an inclusive environment and culture. The agency coordinates with private and public employers to promote access to not only jobs, but also the training and support people with disabilities need to prepare for, secure, and succeed in employment.

“We have a long, long, long way to go educating, especially hiring managers, but we see some good statistics and hiring trends,” Sheehy says. “We have a big goal, a big challenge, trying to improve employment for people with disabilities, and there are lots of ways to get there.”

One of ODEP’s most successful educational campaigns is National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM). Observed each October, NDEAM celebrates the contributions of employees with disabilities and educates employers about the value of a diverse and inclusive workforce.

“People with disabilities need to be able to know they are part of an organization where they have the same career advancement opportunities, training opportunities, and networking opportunities that anyone else has,” Sheehy explains. “That’s really what inclusion is.”

Amy Gray is communications project manager at National Industries for the Blind.
Sue Pettit, an assembler and packer at IFB Solutions in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, packages moisture-wicking t-shirts that the agency produces for the Coast Guard and U.S. Army.

Given some adaptive technology, training, and a chance, there are few things people who are blind or visually impaired cannot do. Disappointingly for many, though, serving our country in the military is one of them. But employees who are blind and visually impaired working at NIB associated nonprofit agencies throughout the United States are finding another way to serve their country: Producing a wide range of products that protect today’s warfighters and offering valuable services to support the troops at home and overseas. It’s their way of serving the country.

Stability and a Human Touch
NIB associated agency NewView Oklahoma has a 60-year history of serving the military by providing wheel chocks for aircraft, explains CEO Lauren Branch. Ranging in size from 14 to 52 inches – the largest is big enough to hold a B-52 bomber securely in place – the chocks, which are made of wood and composite materials, have been a consistent source of employment for NewView employees who are blind; the agency will soon add ground chocks for land vehicles to its inventory.

Producing wheel chocks is just one facet of NewView’s support for the troops. Employees also package 20,000-60,000 emergency ration kits and 70,000 general purpose...
ration kits each year, as well as producing fire hoses for U.S. Navy ships and the U.S. Forest Service.

NewView employees also support active military personnel on-site at Travis Air Force Base in California. Thirty-two employees – 24 of whom are blind or visually impaired – work at the installation’s consolidated switchboard to ensure that calls are routed correctly the first time. Another seventeen employees work in the agency’s on-base reclamation center, reclaiming fiber board and wood crates the military uses to ship equipment and parts throughout the world, a service that saves the federal government about $4 million a year.

“We have to meet the same quality standards as everyone else with military contracts, but we want to do better, so our quality standards are even higher,” says Branch. “We strive to provide outstanding service for our active duty military, so our switchboard employees always go the extra mile to make a personal connection with their callers who are serving our country.”

**Saving Lives in the Field**

Arizona Industries for the Blind (AIB), headquartered in Phoenix, has been supporting U.S. warfighters for more than 30 years, making litters – stretchers used to transport patients short distances – and field operating tables since the 1980s. The litters, made of aluminum and a flame retardant polypropylene mesh material that is resistant to chemical warfare agents and decontaminating solutions, include injection-molded handles. They can last a lifetime, says Daniel Martinez, communications and public relations unit manager, but despite their durability, exigent circumstances often result in the litters being discarded in the field or left behind for humanitarian use, keeping demand steady.

AIB employees who are blind make several thousand litters and about 200 field operating tables each year. “Our litters and portable operating tables save lives, and that means everything to us,” says Martinez. The agency is currently working on updating the litter so it can be folded and carried on a soldier’s back, making it much more portable – and potentially saving more lives in the field.

**Keeping the Supply Chain Humming**

Just as important as producing supplies are the logistics of warehousing those supplies and getting them to the troops. At AIB, 63 employees, 50 of whom are blind or visually impaired, are doing their part to ensure the troops have what they need, when they need it. The agency stocks 43 million items – including lighting products, insignia patches, banners and flags, shims, spacers, webbing, Velcro, strapping, and springs of all sizes – for the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) in a 175,000-square-foot warehouse.
Each night, the warehouse receives an average of 1,000 orders from DOD, which employees process the next day and ship all over the world. The quantity of orders processed each day is impressive, but the performance in processing them is even more so: The warehouse and its employees maintain a 99.78 percent on-time performance rating, exceeding DOD’s required standard of 98 percent, and a 97.5 percent on-time shipping rate for routine orders, exceeding the 93 percent standard. The agency’s inventory accuracy rate has stood at 99.8 percent for more than 14 years.

North Carolinians Outfitting the Troops
At Industries of the Blind (IOB) in Greensboro, North Carolina, nearly 260 employees who are blind or visually impaired are proud to support the U.S. Army by sewing combat uniform jackets, advanced physical fitness pants, and t-shirts. The agency makes approximately 200 combat uniform jackets each day, a complex process that involves 70 different operations to produce a single jacket, according to Richard Oliver, director of sales, marketing, and business development for the agency. In addition to the jacket, each day IOB employees make 300 advanced physical fitness pants and 1,200 moisture wicking t-shirts to be worn under soldiers’ uniforms. Recently awarded a contract to make an improved hot weather combat uniform, the agency is gearing up to produce 280 of those uniforms per day.

“Our employees are proud to support our troops. It’s their way of saying thanks for serving,” says Oliver. All products are inspected by a quality inspector from the Defense Contract Management Agency (DCMA) but, according to Oliver, IOB has its own quality inspector whose standards are higher than the DCMA standards. “Our internal quality control inspector recently gave us a 98.9 percent quality grade, which exceeds the expected quality standard,” says Oliver.

In addition to uniform pieces, in 1968 IOB began work on the SKILCRAFT® U.S. Government ballpoint pen used in federal offices and by members of the armed services. The pens are required to meet stringent manufacturing specs, including the ability to fit undetected in U.S. military uniforms; to write continuously for a mile in temperatures ranging from -40 degrees to +160 degrees Fahrenheit; and to resist fading. Today, the agency produces 46 different types of ballpoint pens, manufacturing 20 million pens annually.

Employees at IFB Solutions, headquartered in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, are proud to make two layers of a seven-layer fire resistant environment ensemble for the U.S. Army. The system, which includes an extreme weather outer layer (EWOL) parka, is fire- and water-resistant, and
designed to withstand temperatures from -60 degrees to +120 degrees Fahrenheit yet still be breathable.

IFB’s Little Rock, Arkansas, location makes the ensemble’s inclement weather outer layer (IWOL), which requires 86 different operations to produce one jacket, says Jay Swindle, director of operations. To get the job done, 22 employees, 17 of whom are blind or visually impaired, work in seven cells, each focused on making a specific part of the jacket, such as sleeve pockets or the back yoke. When the facility first received the government patterns in October 2015 “we had no machines and no people,” Swindle recalls. IFB worked hard to locate and purchase the right equipment, design appropriate clamps and other adaptive technology for employees who are blind or visually impaired, and hire and train employees to meet the first shipment due date in May 2016. Since then, IFB has made 13,500 jackets for the Army.

In addition to the jackets, Little Rock employees make more than 85,000 t-shirts for the armed services each month – 60,000 for the Army and 25,000 for the Navy – in addition to 8,000 per quarter for the Coast Guard.

“The pride our employees have in the work they are doing to support our troops is frankly incredible,” says Swindle. “Many wanted to serve but couldn’t because of their vision, so for them, this is another way to serve our country.”

IFB Solutions’ Asheville location makes 300 to 350 EWOL parkas a month for the Army. Each parka, says Randy Buckner, director of operations, requires 214 operations – 116 of which involve sewing – and 62 different machines to ensure the parka, which sports seven zippers and five pockets, is resistant to wind, water, and fire. Twenty-four IFB employees, 18 of whom are blind or visually impaired, produce parkas in 18 different sizes. The facility started production of the EWOL parka in December 2016 and completed its first order nearly flawlessly this past June, says Buckner.

While “nearly flawlessly” is good, the IFB employees who produce the parkas believe perfect is better, because the garments literally protect the troops. Mary Davenport, who is legally blind, relocated to Asheville from her home of 55 years in Raleigh, North Carolina, specifically for the job. She sews the parka before it is topstitched, making 200-400 pieces a day, sewing sleeves, pencil pockets, tabs, and snaps. “I love my job, and feel great about what we do for the military,” says Davenport. “I take great pride in making sure I do it right the first time, so I can move it along to get the parka made.”

Chuck Gilbert, who is also legally blind, moved to Asheville from Greenville, South Carolina, to join IFB Solutions. His first job was sewing poncho liners for the Army – the Asheville facility makes 91,000 poncho liners a year – but he switched to working on the parka when the facility received the contract. Today Gilbert sews the yoke and adds Velcro, and can also sew lower sleeves. “I always wanted to serve, but I couldn’t because of my eyesight. This work makes up for it.”

Cleaning up the Paperwork

Work that supports the military doesn’t always touch warfighters directly, but its impact can be just as vital to their mission. Employees who are blind working in the Contract Management Support program at Lancaster, Pennsylvania-based VisionCorps are among the more than 100 employees working at NIB associated agencies who have identified more than $2.2 billion in taxpayer funds to be de-obligated in the course of closing out completed federal contracts.

Patrick Spellman, legally blind since birth, worked at VisionCorps as a contract closeout specialist from 2013 until taking a position as a contract specialist for the General Services Administration in Philadelphia earlier this year. Spellman, who also has a law degree, says “The contract closeout specialist position not only gave me valuable skills that helped me move into my current position, it also let me support the military, and that was truly rewarding because I can’t serve myself.”

Gina Marie Natoli agrees with Spellman. She joined VisionCorps as a contract closeout specialist nearly three years ago, after graduating from Kutztown University in Pennsylvania. Natoli, who is also legally blind, takes pride in closing contracts and returning money back to DOD and that pride has made her a top performer: She has successfully closed more than 2,000 contracts with an accuracy rate of 99.5 percent.

From sewing uniforms and producing field equipment, to making sure military members’ phone calls to their loved ones go through, to helping the federal government recoup billions of dollars in unspent contract funding, employees at NIB associated agencies go the extra mile in performing their jobs to support the men and women in our military. It’s their own way of serving. ⚡

Sharon Horrigan Leonard is a freelance writer based in Asheville, North Carolina.
GET TO KNOW NIB ASSOCIATED NONPROFIT AGENCIES

Bosma Enterprises

Headquarters: Indianapolis, Indiana
President/CEO: Lou Moneymaker
Founded: 1915

Capabilities at-a-glance: Packaging disposable medical supplies, prepackaged kits, and ice melt; providing rehabilitation services.

Did you know? In 1984 the agency was renamed in honor of state Assemblyman Charles E. Bosma, who was an advocate for people who are blind.

More info: bosma.org

Arizona Industries for the Blind

Headquarters: Phoenix, Arizona
President/CEO: Richard Monaco
Founded: 1952

Capabilities at-a-glance: Warehousing, distribution, fulfillment, document conversion, invoice processing, assembly, packaging, kitting.

Did you know? Arizona Industries for the Blind stocks more than 43 million items to support Defense Logistics Agency customers and exceeds requirements with 99.78% on-time performance for “Super High Priority” orders worldwide.

More info: azifb.com
Southern Tier Association for the Visually Impaired

Headquarters: Elmira, New York  
President/CEO: Timothy K. Hertlein  
Founded: 1921

Capabilities at-a-glance: Product assembly of Lexmark-, HP-, and Xerox-compatible laser toner cartridges, packaging medical/dental face masks and industrial N-95 masks. Provides low vision eye exams, occupational therapy, assistive technology, in-home training, and support groups.

Did you know? Southern Tier Association for the Visually Impaired operates two low vision clinics that serve an average of 135 people each year.

More info: st-avi.org

Lighthouse Louisiana

Headquarters: New Orleans, Louisiana  
President/CEO: Renee Vidrine  
Founded: 1915

Capabilities at-a-glance: Manufacturing custom-print and stock paper cups, paper towels, mess trays, deck swabs, pillowcases, scrubbers, and paper plates. Lighthouse Louisiana also provides vision and vocational rehabilitation and deaf services.

Did you know? Each year during Mardi Gras season, a local group called the Krewe of Thoth passes through the halls of the Lighthouse to give beads to employees.

More info: lighthouselouisiana.org
The U.S. AbilityOne Commission empowers people who are blind or who have significant disabilities to achieve their maximum employment potential.

BY ROSEMARIE LALLY

Since President Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed the first commissioners to oversee implementation of the Wagner-O’Day Act in 1938, the program has worked to fulfill its primary mission of providing employment opportunities to people who are blind or have significant disabilities through the manufacture and delivery of products and services to the federal government.

As passed in 1938, the Wagner-O’Day Act provided employment opportunities for people who are blind by establishing the federal government as a customer for the mops and brooms they manufactured. Congress created a presidentially appointed agency, the Committee on Purchases of Blind-Made Products, as an independent federal agency with responsibility for overseeing and administering the program. National Industries for the Blind (NIB) was created shortly thereafter by the nonprofit organizations employing people who are blind as a central nonprofit agency (CNA) to administer the program and distribute orders among them.

Growing the Program

The Wagner-O’Day Act was amended in 1971 to include the work of people who have significant disabilities and expanded to include the provision of services as well as products to the federal government. Under the Javits-Wagner-O’Day (JWOD) Act, the federal agency was renamed the Committee for Purchase of Products and Services of the Blind and Other Severely Handicapped (referred to as the Committee for Purchase), with National Industries for the Severely Handicapped (NISH) established as a counterpart to NIB in 1974.

By 1980, 7,500 people were employed in the JWOD Program, providing 3.8 million direct labor hours, and earning $11.6 million in direct labor wages. The expanded program had the opportunity to show what it could really do in the early 1990s, when its employees supplied American troops in Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm with critically needed products in record time.

Innovative Offerings

In 2006, the Committee for Purchase began operating as the U.S. AbilityOne Commission* and renamed the program the AbilityOne® Program to leverage collective marketing efforts and present a unified brand with broad capabilities and a clear purpose. Under the Commission’s oversight, the program has grown from manufacturing mops and brooms in its early days to handling a wide range of business lines. Services and products run the gamut, from outfitting the nation’s military, to developing medical and dental product solutions for federal customers, to packaging and distributing food in support of U.S. troops and humanitarian relief efforts around the world, to producing more than 5,000 SKILCRAFT® products.

The Commission’s primary functional areas are oversight and compliance,
business operations, policy and programs, and veterans employment and initiatives. With the assistance of staff, it handles a wide range of responsibilities that include establishing rules, regulations, policies, and procedures designed to ensure effective implementation of the law and program.

An important aspect of the compliance function is the responsibility to monitor nonprofit agencies in the AbilityOne Program to ensure they comply with established rules and regulations. Among mechanisms the Commission uses in this role are onsite compliance reviews of agency operations and annual certification.

In addition, the Commission is responsible for establishing fair market prices for products and services sold to federal government customers.

As one of the largest sources of employment for people who are blind or who have significant disabilities in the United States, the AbilityOne Program employs more than 46,000 people, including 3,000 veterans, through a nationwide network of more than 550 participating nonprofit agencies.

From its beginnings nearly 80 years ago, this innovative program has grown to provide federal customers with a wide array of quality products and services at competitive prices, all while bringing to life its vision “to enable all people who are blind or have other significant disabilities to achieve their maximum employment potential.”

Rosemarie Lally, J.D., is a freelance writer and editor based in Washington, D.C.
The 2017 NIB/NAEPB National Symposium, held June 26 – 28 in Arlington, Virginia, brought together 78 employee of the year nominees from 48 NIB associated nonprofit agencies across the nation, as well as 40 members of the Advocates for Leadership and Employment program, including 25 Advocates-in-training. In a busy two days attendees got to know the employees of the year, learned about critical issues affecting employment for people who are blind, and held more than 200 meetings with lawmakers offices on Capitol Hill.

“I feel empowered with tools to seek whatever it is I want to seek.”

Mitch Erwin, Milton J. Samuleson Career Achievement Award nominee, East Texas Lighthouse for the Blind

“I’ve learned that the only thing that’s going to stop me is me.”

Robert Perez, Peter J. Salmon Employee of the Year Award nominee, Travis Association for the Blind

Let everyone hear your voice and you will help shape our America.”

Kim Zeich, Deputy Executive Director, U.S. AbilityOne Commission
We all have something in common: We love and have a passion for what we do every day.”

Irenessa Olmo, Peter J. Salmon Employee of the Year Award recipient, Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired in Rochester, New York

We have unprecedented opportunities to create a world with no limits.”

Kirk Adams, President and CEO, American Foundation for the Blind

The only thing I know I can’t do is drive – and trust me, that’s a blessing for you!”

Jill Barbon-Fish, Peter J. Salmon Employee of the Year Award nominee, Blind Industries and Services of Maryland

Blindness is not a characteristic that defines you or your future.”

John Pare, Executive Director for Advocacy and Policy, National Federation of the Blind

I never imagined life would bring me to where I am today.”

Misty Stenberg, Milton J. Samuleson Career Achievement Award recipient, MidWest Enterprises for the Blind
AGENCY SPOTLIGHT

FINDING THE PERFECT FIT

A willingness to challenge the status quo opens the door to opportunities.

BY ANDY BROWNSTEIN

In 2015, after 17 years at the helm of a publicly traded international aviation company, Hugh McElroy decided it was time to retire. But settling down, it turns out, wasn’t in his nature.

“That lasted about 3 months,” he said. “I just realized I can’t retire, ever. I’ll go crazy.”

McElroy brought that sense of restlessness, and experience in leadership at a number of nonprofits, to his current position as CEO of NIB associated nonprofit agency Dallas Lighthouse for the Blind.

Established in 1931, the Dallas Lighthouse serves a massive North Texas territory just slightly larger than the states of Connecticut and Rhode Island combined. The organization employs 267 people, mostly in textiles and manufacturing.

The territory, much of it former cattle and horse country, is seeing a huge growth spurt, with an influx of 1,500 new families per month. That fact – and the general unpredictability of federal contracting – led McElroy to seek out new opportunities for the Lighthouse in the private sector. The textile industry, which brings in $3-$4 trillion annually worldwide, seemed like a natural fit.

That’s when the magic happened.

“It’s interesting how, when you leave yourself open, things will present themselves to you,” McElroy said. “The status quo is the safer place to be. You don’t have to deal with change. But if you do keep yourself open, and you look at the whole spectrum of availability, you surprise yourself. The opportunities have just continued to flow for us.”

Earlier this year, the organization partnered with Two Blind Brothers, a New York City startup that is the brainchild of Bryan and Bradford Manning. Both men are in their twenties and were born with Stargardt’s disease, which causes deterioration of central vision. They left top-flight careers in Manhattan finance to launch the company, which devotes 100 percent of profits to finding a cure for blindness.

The Mannings spent close to a year selecting fabrics, focusing on the tactile feel and quality, before settling on a line of supersoft casual shirts. After they were featured on The Ellen DeGeneres Show in January, things really took off for the company, which now manufactures thousands of shirts a year – all at the Dallas Lighthouse.

Each shirt carries a braille tag with a word like “feel,” “brother,” or “vision.” That last word is central to the Manning’s message: Lack of eyesight does not mean lack of vision. Profits from the business currently support more than 20 clinical trials.

“Working with the Lighthouse is incredible for us,” said Bryan Manning.
“On the research front, we can now donate money to curing these diseases, and at the same time, help a community we love so much to improve their quality of life and have incredible jobs. And the quality of our shirts has never been higher. The people at Dallas Lighthouse do just perfect work.”

Approximately 10 employees work on the shirts. Each sewing machine is customized to the individual employee. Finger guards surround the sewing needles, and strips of packing tape serve as a guide to make straight lines. The machines are outfitted with adjustable lamps that use LED or fluorescent lights, depending on the employee’s visual capacity. Those who don’t wear glasses must wear a clear plastic shield that swings down to protect the eyes in case a needle breaks.

Sewers can feel their place with pegs that are put on the fabric. Lighthouse employees tend to work assembly-line style, sewing the same section of multiple garments.

Blind from birth, Elaina Beth Tillinghas came to the Lighthouse eight years ago. Wearing high-magnification glasses that she compares to a telescope, Tillinghas uses guards and guides to keep her fingers where they should be. She enjoys the challenge. “I like it when I can hold up a piece, and it looks nice, and the inspector says it passes,” she said. “I can say, ‘I did that.’ ”

The expansion of the Two Blind Brothers business, as well as other newly added commercial contracts, is part of an overall growth agenda for the Dallas Lighthouse. In 2015, when McElroy started, the facility employed 104 people. It now has 267 employees and is ahead of schedule to hit its target of 575 employees by 2020.

Recent revisions to its strategic plan have led the Dallas Lighthouse to increase its focus on technology in both careers and services. The agency is working to expand assistive technology training aimed at increasing career opportunities in high-demand, upwardly mobile fields within as well as beyond the Lighthouse.

The agency recently purchased a call center and marketing company, where approximately half of the 40-plus employees are people who are blind. Operators there seamlessly handle calls using multiple forms of assistive technology that utilize sound and touch rather than sight. McElroy said another acquisition to be integrated with the call center will be geared toward people who are blind who are interested in careers in inbound and outbound tech support.

“Some people are going to say, ‘How in the blazes are people who are blind going to do that?’ ” McElroy said. “Around here, we truly believe where there’s a will, there’s a way. We don’t waste time talking about the realm of the impossible.”

McElroy’s confidence is well placed. After a stroll through the textile manufacturing floor, where brightly-colored fabric lines rows of sewing operators lost in their work, nothing seems impossible.

Andy Brownstein is a freelance writer based in the Washington, D.C. area.
Connect to what matters

Products and Services with an Impact

By procuring quality products and services through National Industries for the Blind, an AbilityOne® Authorized Enterprise, you provide meaningful employment for people who are blind. Get connected at NIB.org/Connect.

SKILCRAFT® is a registered trademark owned and licensed by National Industries for the Blind.
As I stepped out onto my balcony, a pleasant female voice in my bone-conducting headset said, “I can see it’s dark and rainy. There is a grayish building with large glass windows across from you and there are lots of distant bright blue flashes of lightning reflected all over the rain-streaked windows.”

As a participant in the Aira Explorers program, I am one of at least 400 users who are blind or visually impaired testing the capabilities of this “live visual agent” service in locations across the country. The above experience was part of my free 30-minute onboarding session for users activating the subscription service.

Aira started in 2014, after company co-founders Suman Kanuganti and Yuja Chang struck up a friendship with Matt Brock, a communications professional in San Diego who is blind, and began discussing ways Google Glass could be used to help people with vision impairments navigate more efficiently and be more independent. Thus was born the concept of visual agents or interpreters – a network of certified agents who see what users see in real time via wearable smart glasses and an augmented reality dashboard. The agents help users perform tasks such as navigating tricky streets, reading mail, identifying products, spotting friends in a crowd, or anything else requiring vision.

Aira sends all of the technology required for the service free of charge – Google Glass or Vuzix smartglasses, a bone-conducting headset, and a cell-phone-sized data hot spot device. The hot spot is paired with AT&T’s priority data service, a top tier data connection that minimizes dropped signals and maximizes Aira’s bandwidth-hungry video and audio connection. Users only need to download the free Aira app from Apple’s App Store before going live (the Android version is still in development).

Cost will most likely a top consideration for using Aira – I chose the lowest tier subscription and found it very easy to max out the time allotment engaging in regular time-consuming visually-heavy projects around the house and outside. The good news is that the service doesn’t require a one or two year contract; users pay month-to-month and can change or cancel the service at any time.

Aira users choose one of three pricing plans, currently offered with special introductory pricing: $89 for 100 minutes of use per month (doubled to 200 minutes during the three-month introductory period); $129 for 200 minutes per month (doubled to 400 minutes during the introductory period); or $199 for 400 minutes per month (increased to unlimited minutes during the introductory period).

For people who are blind or visually impaired, Aira is a breakthrough technology for personal independence. It may one day become a powerful tool for access to greater employment opportunities and upward job mobility in larger and more diverse segments of the job market.

For more information on how Aira works, visit the website at www.aira.io.

Doug Goist is program manager for IT services projects at National Industries for the Blind. A recognized leader in the field of technology accessibility, Doug has worked with the U.S. Department of Defense, the military services, federal agencies, and private sector partners. In 2013, he served as the technical steering committee representative for the U.S. Agency for International Development on a study of mobile money transfer and handset accessibility in Africa.
NEW PRODUCTS

READY TO LAUNCH

These new products produced by NIB associated agencies are now available to federal government customers through the AbilityOne® Program.

Office Products

1. SKILCRAFT® Privacy Shield® Privacy Filter with Frame
Prevent visual hacking in any environment with the SKILCRAFT® Privacy Shield® Privacy Filter with Frame for desktop computers. Quality 3M materials provide world class “black out” privacy that delivers incredible screen image clarity when the monitor is viewed from the front, but makes images appear dark when viewed from an angle. Lightweight filter removes easily for shared viewing without damage to desktop monitor. Available in two sizes, produced by Beyond Vision in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

2. SKILCRAFT® Self-Stick File Tabs, Dura Tabs, and Page Markers
Organize, label and color-code papers, project files, and binders with SKILCRAFT® Self-Stick File Tabs, Dura Tabs, and Page Markers. Durable, secure self-stick tabs in assorted colors are easy to write on and simple to reposition or replace. Self-stick Page Markers in assorted neon colors stick securely and remove cleanly. TAA compliant Self-Stick File Tabs and Dura Tabs come in a convenient dispenser, Self-Stick Page Markers are made using 30 percent recycled content. Produced by the Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired-Goodwill in Rochester, New York.

3. SKILCRAFT® Project File Jackets
Keep documents secure in colorful SKILCRAFT® Project File Jackets made of durable, water- and tear-resistant polypropylene material. Opaque file jackets, closed on two sides with a tuck flap closure, are available as translucent jackets in five colors or with clear front and opaque backs in five colors. Organize papers in three-ring binders with Three-Ring Slash-style Project File Jackets featuring diagonal slash pockets on each side, available in clear or assorted translucent colors. Produced by the Association for Vision Rehabilitation and Employment in Binghamton, New York.

4. SKILCRAFT® Side-Loading Expansion Envelopes
Keep project files, important documents, and keepsakes secure in SKILCRAFT® Expansion Envelopes. Choose from translucent side-loading or top loading or three-ring expansion envelopes, all made of durable, water-and-tear resistant polypropylene. All envelopes are closed on three sides and expand to 1¼ inch to hold bulky items or more than 200 sheets of paper. Made of acid-free material for archival quality storage, choose string-tie or hook-and-loop closures in clear or a variety of colors. Produced by the Association for Vision Rehabilitation and Employment in Binghamton, New York.

5. SKILCRAFT® Folding Chairs
Ergonomically contoured with an extra-wide seat and back for all day-support, these lightweight, weather resistant, folding chairs are the perfect solution when additional seating is needed, indoors or out. Highly durable chairs nest for easy storage and feature a frame of 1-inch round, powder-coated steel tubing, sturdy cross-bracing, and blow-molded, high-density polyethylene seats and backs that resist dents, scratches, and scuffs. Made with approximately 35 percent pre-consumer waste, all chair parts are recyclable. TAA Compliant with a 5-year limited warranty covering manufacturing defects; available in two colors. Produced by MidWest Enterprises for the Blind in Kalamazoo, Michigan.

6. SKILCRAFT® Level 3/P4 Paper Shredder
Shred papers, credit cards, CDs, DVDs and even paper clips with this Level 3/P4 cross-cut paper shredder that meets DIN 66399. Offers secure paper destruction with a 2.4 meter per minute...
shred speed that can shred up to 17 sheets per pass to a particle size of 4 x 37 mm. Recommended for 1 to 3 users, this TAA compliant shredder has a maximum continuous shredding run time of 15 minutes and includes a 6.9 gallon bin. Assembled in the U.S.A. Produced by L.C. Industries in Durham, North Carolina.

**Personal Care and Safety**

7. **Class 2 ANSI 107-2010-Compliant Safety Vests**

Class 2 ANSI rated safety vests ensure high visibility in a variety of complex backgrounds. Class 2 safety vests are made of inherently fire-resistant fluorescent lime modacrylic material and feature 2-inch 3M Scotchlite™ reflective stripes. Two large lower pockets are subdivided to create six storage and six pen pockets. Machine washable with hook-and-loop front closure, available in large and extra large. Assembled in the U.S.A. Produced by Bestwork Industries for the Blind, in Cherry Hill, New Jersey.

**JanSan Products**

8. **SKILCRAFT® Linear Low Density Eco Can Liners**

SKILCRAFT® Linear Low Density Eco Can Liners are the only UL ECOLOGO certified can liners available for federal procurement. Closed-loop post-consumer recycled (PCR) resin produces a higher quality product with less plastic, lowering environmental impact and using fewer non-renewable resources. Tubular construction eliminates slit seal splits; star-sealed bottom maximizes carrying capacity and virtually eliminates leaks. Made using 30 percent to 70 percent PCR resin, these TAA compliant can liners meet comprehensive and EPA Procurement guidelines, as well as requirements for the USGBC LEED® rating. Produced by Envision in Wichita, Kansas.

9. **SKILCRAFT® Cellulose Scrubber Sponges**

Perfect in the kitchen, garage, or outdoors SKILCRAFT® Cellulose Scrubber Sponges have a scrubbing pad on one side and an absorbent cellulose sponge on the other. Use on walls, tables, countertops, or floors, then toss in the washer to sanitize and reuse. Biodegradable sponges are available in two sizes, sold in packs of three. Produced by Mississippi Industries for the Blind in Jackson, Mississippi.

**Food Service**

10. **SKILCRAFT® Clamshell Hinged Lid To-Go Food Containers**

Bio-based pulp food trays with hinged lids and secure closures are ideal for transporting and storing hot or cold foods. Square microwaveable trays have high insulation qualities yet resist grease. Available in three sizes, with choice of single or triple compartment trays in medium and large sizes. Certified by the Biodegradable Products Institute, trays degrade in approximately 90 days under appropriate conditions. TAA compliant; produced by the Lighthouse for the Blind in New Orleans.

**Maintenance, Repair and Operating Supplies**

11. **Hand Trucks**

Essential for facilities management, maintenance shops, and shipping and logistics operations, heavy-duty hand trucks make transporting even the heaviest loads effortless. Built to last with robotic welds on a steel frame with channel axel supports for durability. Made in the U.S.A. of U.S.A. components, available in five sizes to meet every moving need.

These and thousands of other products are available for purchase at AbilityOne.com, GSAAdvantage.gov, your local AbilityOne 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 NIB.org/products.
DAN BOUCHER RECEIVES R.B. IRWIN AWARD

The NIB Board of Directors has named Dan Boucher the 2017 R. B. Irwin Award winner. The highest honor given by NIB, the R.B. Irwin award recognizes a professional in the NIB family who has devoted his or her career to creating and improving employment for people who are blind, or a volunteer who has demonstrated exceptional and longstanding service and commitment to the mission of NIB. Boucher retired from IFB Solutions in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, earlier this year after 47 years of working to expand employment opportunities for people who are blind.

Boucher joined NIB in 1969, working his way up to vice president of marketing over the course of 25 years. Among Boucher’s biggest projects at NIB are the launch of the writing instruments program with the SKILCRAFT® U.S. Government pen, the office products line, and AbilityOne Base Supply Centers™. Not content to rest on his achievements, Boucher took on the role of president and Chief Executive Officer at Winston-Salem Industries for the Blind, today known as IFB Solutions, serving from 1996-2007 before assuming an advisory role as executive chairman. During his time at IFB Solutions, Boucher looked for ways to grow and expand career opportunities at the agency beyond manufacturing, to include service lines and other enterprises. In 2014 he managed IFB’s merger with Arkansas Lighthouse for the Blind, which helped both organizations leverage workforces and resources. The merged entity is now one of the largest agencies in the U.S. for people who are blind, and employment in Arkansas has grown from 40 employees to more than 70.

The award is named in memory of Dr. Robert B. Irwin, who was executive director of the American Foundation for the Blind (AFB) in the 1930s and worked with AFB’s Chairman M. C. Migel and Peter Salmon, of the Industrial Home for the Blind in New York, toward passage of the Wagner-O’Day Act and the formation of NIB.

ARIZONA AGENCY ACHIEVES NONPROFIT STATUS

NIB associated agency Arizona Industries for the Blind (AIB) was named a private, nonprofit organization under Internal Revenue Code Section 501(c)(3) effective July 1, 2017. President Richard Monaco deemed the timing “perfect for a new beginning,” noting that AIB has operated as a self-supporting program under the Arizona Department of Economic Security since the 1980s. “AIB is well positioned to successfully operate as a private, independent nonprofit organization,” NIB President and CEO Kevin Lynch said, noting the agency “has created and maintained hundreds of jobs for people who are blind in Arizona, helping them lead more independent lives through meaningful employment.”

DLA AGAIN NAMES NIB A SUPERIOR SUPPLIER

The Defense Logistics Agency (DLA) once again named National Industries for the Blind a Superior Supplier in the Silver category for fiscal year 2017. The recognition is part of the Department of Defense Superior Supplier Incentive Program, which is “designed to incentivize contractor performance by identifying suppliers with the highest rankings in areas such as cost, schedule, performance, quality, and business relations.” Awardees are selected based on level of business with DLA and consideration of scores in the Contractor Performance Assessment Reporting System (CPARS) for FY14, FY15, and FY16, with more recent scores more heavily weighted.
JOE JEU RECEIVES NIB SPIRIT OF INDEPENDENCE AWARD

Joseph H. Jeu, former director and CEO of the Defense Commissary Agency (DeCA), received the NIB Spirit of Independence Award at a retirement celebration in June. The award recognizes an individual in government who has demonstrated a commitment to advancing economic and personal independence for people who are blind.

Jeu was named DeCA director and CEO in 2011, the capstone of a 38 year career in public service that included appointment to the AbilityOne Commission in 2010. Since assuming leadership of DeCA, Jeu proved a steadfast ally, supporting employment opportunities for people who are blind and expanding the number of SKILCRAFT products offered in commissaries, as well as shelf and display space. More than 400 people who are blind work in NIB associated nonprofit agencies producing nearly 800 different products for commissaries as part of the Military Resale program.

OCTOBER IS NATIONAL DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT AWARENESS MONTH

October is National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM) and NIB and its associated agencies across the country are planning activities to raise awareness about disability employment issues.

The 2017 theme, “Inclusion Drives Innovation,” emphasizes the value people of differing backgrounds and experiences bring to the workplace. “Smart employers know that including different perspectives in problem-solving situations leads to better solutions,” said U.S. Secretary of Labor Alexander Acosta.

“Hiring employees with diverse abilities strengthens their business, increases competition, and drives innovation.”

NIB associated nonprofit agencies, AbilityOne Base Supply Centers, and authorized distributors and wholesalers received toolkits from NIB to help them recognize NDEAM and communicate the importance of creating meaningful employment for people who are blind. Readers can join NIB in celebrating NDEAM and contribute to the conversation on social media using the hashtag #NDEAM.

JACK DUFFY-PROTENTIS RECEIVES JOSEPH ROEDER SCHOLARSHIP

Jack Duffy-Protentis, a rising sophomore at Worcester Polytechnic Institute, in Worcester, Massachusetts, was awarded the 2017 Joseph Roeder Assistive Technology Scholarship.

Duffy-Protentis is majoring in robotic and mechanical engineering with a minor in business. He plans to focus on entrepreneurship.

Determined to follow his dream of being an engineer – a field that presents challenges for people who are blind – Duffy-Protentis said “I love engineering and science, and my passion is to help others.” His extracurricular activities include serving as a National Federation of the Blind STEM mentor and a robotics team mentor for a local high school, as well as volunteering for an HIV-AIDS fundraising walk.

The Roeder scholarship provides a one-time award of $2500 for an undergraduate or graduate student who is legally blind to pursue a college degree in a business-related field. It is named for Joe Roeder, senior accessible technology specialist at NIB from 1997 until his death in 2010, who was instrumental in the development of the Section 508 electronic and information technology accessibility standards of the Rehabilitation Act.
NIB is doing its part to keep the American economy strong with thousands of jobs in nearly every sector of the economy.

Visit NIB.org/USJobs to learn what makes NIB the Great American Jobs Story.