When Disaster Strikes
At many NIB associated nonprofit agencies, preparing for natural disasters is business as usual
LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

AT THE READY

As a new year begins, many will remember 2017 as a year of unprecedented natural disasters. The drenching rains that ended California’s years-long drought brought landslides and flooding; tornado outbreaks in the Midwest and Plains states damaged homes and businesses; Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria wreaked unparalleled damage in Texas, Louisiana, Florida, and Puerto Rico; and wildfires in the West forced hundreds to flee as their homes were engulfed in flames.

Responding to disasters like these requires a massive effort by state and federal agencies to provide rescue services, shelter, and assistance with recovery and rebuilding. People who are blind working at NIB associated nonprofit agencies play important roles in assisting with those efforts.

This issue of Opportunity profiles several of the NIB agencies that provide critical resources to federal, state, and local emergency responders. From specialty hoses used to fight wildfires to the unique spoon that comes with the meals that sustain disaster response teams, employees who are blind working at NIB associated agencies produce essential relief provisions.

Employees at NIB associated agencies take pride in supporting response and recovery efforts. They know the products they produce not only provide sustenance and relief, but can help people facing the worst times of their lives find a bit of normalcy and hope for the future.

NIB and its associated agencies are ready to answer the call when disaster strikes.

Kevin A. Lynch
President and Chief Executive Officer
WHEN DISASTER STRIKES
At many NIB associated nonprofit agencies, preparing for natural disasters is business as usual.

ON THE COVER
Members of the National Guard deliver supplies to more than 20 families in Barranquitas, Puerto Rico. U.S. Air National Guard photo by Maj. Patrick Cordova.

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A passion for improving daily life for people who are blind drives ACB Executive Director Eric Bridges.

BY RITZA HENDRICKS

Eric Bridges, executive director of the American Council of the Blind (ACB), was a journalism major at the University of Iowa when he caught the public policy bug. After completing a summer internship with Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA), who brought him along to many events related to the tenth anniversary of the signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act, Bridges was convinced his future lay in public policy. After graduation, he landed a position managing public policy issues at National Industries for the Blind (NIB). Recognizing his leadership potential, NIB nominated Bridges for the Brookings Institution's Legislative Fellowship. As part of the program, Bridges worked for Congressman John Kline (R-MN2), who later hired him as a legislative assistant. In Kline’s office, Bridges focused on immigration policy, gun control, homeland security, telecommunications, and accessibility issues, including a refusal by Minneapolis cab drivers to allow service animals in their vehicles.

When Bridges came to ACB in 2007 as director of advocacy and governmental affairs, the issues were similar to those he worked on in Kline’s office, but focused on people who are blind, deafblind, or visually impaired. “The ability to go begin work on issues that pertained to blind people is something that intrigued me,” Bridges explained in a 2015 interview on ACB’s “Speaking out for the Blind” radio show. “[T]o be able to have the autonomy to take on lots of different policy issues was something I thought I would enjoy, and I have.”

For Bridges the common thread in those issues has always been accessibility and increasing independence, opportunity, and quality of life for people who are blind.

Working at ACB, Bridges was a key contributor to passage and implementation of the Twenty-First Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act of 2010, which provides groundbreaking protections to make broadband, digital, and mobile innovations accessible to people with disabilities.

Beneficiaries of Bridges’ advocacy often extend beyond people who are blind. He played a key role in implementation of the accessibility provisions in the Food and Drug Administration Safety and Innovation Act of 2012, securing a seat for ACB on the U.S. Access Board’s stakeholder working group on making prescription drug labels accessible to people who are blind, visually impaired, or elderly. And he was a strong advocate for the Pedestrian Safety Enhancement Act, which requires electric and hybrid light vehicles to make an audible noise when traveling at low speeds, making the streets safer for everyone.

Named executive director in 2015, Bridges now leads efforts to grow ACB and services to its affiliates and members while maintaining the organization’s financial health and stability. A Strategic Action Plan released in 2017 focuses on areas such as advocacy, policy, and legislation; development; and marketing and communications. The plan’s ambitious goals include increasing awareness of and helping to shape attitudes towards major issues for individuals who are blind within the sighted community.

To help achieve those goals, ACB continues the collaborations with private industry that have become a hallmark of the organization’s culture, such as partnerships with corporations like Microsoft, JP Morgan Chase, and Google that have improved accessibility and customer experiences for people who are blind.

From championing legislation, to collaborating with federal agencies and commissions, to partnering with private industry, Eric Bridges and ACB are working to make everyday life better for people who are blind, and everyone.

Ritza Hendricks is a communications consultant at National Industries for the Blind.
By procuring quality products and services through National Industries for the Blind, an AbilityOne® Authorized Enterprise, you create and sustain U.S.-based jobs for people who are blind. Get connected at NIB.org/Connect.
Natural disasters often strike without warning. At many NIB associated nonprofit agencies, preparing for disaster is business as usual.

BY SHARON HORRIGAN

Natural disasters happen every year, but 2017 was one for the record books. The deadly wildfires in the West and massive hurricanes that decimated parts of Texas, Florida, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the entirety of Puerto Rico highlight the need to be prepared for disasters and provide aid when tragedy strikes. At many NIB associated nonprofit agencies, preparing for disaster is business as usual.

Ready for Anything
For years the Lighthouse for the Blind in St. Louis, Missouri, also known as LHB Industries, has run a successful business packaging a wide variety of medical kits. When an opportunity arose in 2014 to buy Quake Kare, a small, woman-owned, California-based business producing emergency preparedness and survival kits, they wasted no time sizing up the opportunity.

“We knew this was right in our wheelhouse, and we saw the opportunity to take a mostly California-centric business nationwide,” says Brittney Bettonville, marketing manager at LHB Industries. Originally made with earthquake survival in mind, the Quake Kare line now includes survival kits for offices, schools, and tornado shelters, as well as “bug out” bags. The kits, which include everything needed to survive for 72 hours in just about any type of disaster, are available as backpacks or large 5-gallon buckets that can be used as a latrine if necessary. They include food and water with a five-year shelf life, first aid supplies, 12-hour light sticks, military-style can openers, thermal blankets, rain ponchos, tube tents, plastic sheeting, matches, duct tape, Swiss army knives, radios, and more.

LHB Industries offers 65 different types of kits for homes, schools, and offices to use for hurricanes, pandemic flu, and traumas, including a recently introduced emergency blood stopper kit. Individuals can also purchase Quake Kare kits online.

Fitting all of the Quake Kare kit contents into buckets is a bit like a jigsaw puzzle, says Johnny Savisky, production supervisor for the product line. Savisky developed detailed instructions on what goes where in the kits and personally trains all employees on how to pack them. The Quake Kare line employs six full- and part-time employees, all of whom are blind or visually impaired. During periods of high demand, up to 20 employees may be needed to fill orders.

Bettonville says the agency saw a huge increase in business in September 2017 that it was able to meet through flexible staffing. “We had a lot of rush orders from Florida and California,” she explains.

Johnny Savisky, production supervisor at LHB Industries, stresses the importance of the product when training employees on how to pack Quake Kare kits, explaining that “each kit could save lives.”
Savisky sees the Quake Kare line as more than another kitting product. “We are doing an important job here,” he says. He emphasizes the importance of the work when training employees, explaining that “each kit could save lives.”

Alphapointe’s New York division also assembles emergency preparedness kits as part of New York state’s “Aware Prepare” program, an initiative started after Hurricane Sandy hit New York City in 2012. The program offers two-hour emergency preparedness courses in locations across the state. At the end of each course, attendees receive an Alphapointe emergency preparedness kit. The kits include drop cloths, light sticks, batteries, flashlights, first aid supplies, face masks and gloves, safety goggles, radios, water, food bars, blankets, and more. Alphapointe Vice President Gina Gowin says that by the end of 2017, 15-20 employees, 80 percent of whom are blind or visually impaired, had assembled 30,000 emergency preparedness kits for the program.

On the Fire Line
In Oklahoma City, NewView Oklahoma employees are proud of the work they do to support wildland firefighters. For the past 12 years the agency has had 20 or more full-time employees who are blind or visually impaired – including the plant manager – assembling wildland fire hoses for the U.S. Forest Service as the primary provider of the hoses to the U.S. government. NewView employees cut the hoses to 25, 50, and 100-foot lengths, depending on specifications, then add couplings, stamp the hoses, roll them into coils, and ship them to the U.S. Forest Service.

Wildland fire hoses are different than the fire hoses used by municipal fire departments, explains NewView CEO Lauren Branch. Municipal fire hoses are heavier and wider than wildland fire hoses, which have a smaller diameter and are lighter weight, so they can be carried more easily over longer distances in rough terrain.

Fire hose production provides steady employment, Branch said, because there is a constant need for replacement hoses.

Employees at NewView Oklahoma assemble wildland fire hoses for the U.S. Forest Service. NewView is the primary provider of the hoses to the U.S. government.

When Hurricane Harvey hit Texas, employees at the Austin Lighthouse for the Blind (also known as Travis Association for the Blind) pitched in roughly $4,400 in personal and Lighthouse-matching donations to support hurricane victims. But Lighthouse Executive Director Jerry Mayfield says one employee was a real hero: Lance Fenter. Fenter, a national account manager for the Lighthouse, took time off from the agency to help with clean-up efforts in the Houston area in the immediate aftermath of the hurricane.

Fenter, who worked nine years for the Denton, Texas, sheriff’s department before coming to the Lighthouse, drove nearly 500 miles to lend a hand. Initially headed toward Port Aransas – a city on coastal Mustang Island that holds special memories of time well spent with family and friends – Fenter had to turn around when he found the island inaccessible.

He headed to the Houston area instead and spent nine days in Houston, Rockport, Beaumont, Refugio, and Victoria, putting tarps on roofs, cutting up fallen trees, removing debris, and helping with search and rescue. In addition, he distributed more than 20 cases of Lighthouse hand sanitizer and soap samples and spent about $1,000 of his own money on tarps and cases of water. Part of that money was also used to buy out all of the insect repellent in stock at the Walmart in south Austin. Unfortunately, despite all of the damage done, mosquitos survived the hurricane in droves.

“I went because I just wanted to help,” says Fenter. “That’s why I work where I work.”

“It was so good to see everyone come together and work to help those in need,” he says. “I really appreciated the support the Lighthouse gave me, but I hope not to see anything like that again in my lifetime.”
While efforts are made to reclaim used wildland fire hoses, many are burned up or left behind. The demand for wildland fire hoses has increased significantly in recent years in the wake of three consecutive highly active fire seasons, says Branch. “We made 4,000 miles of hoses last year. That’s enough to stretch across the United States and back.”

Providing Relief — and Hope
When the New York City Administration for Children’s Services contacted the New York State Preferred Source Program for New Yorkers Who Are Blind (NYSPSP) in late October 2017, the regular customer’s request was far from business as usual. The mayor’s office asked NYSPSP to assemble custom kits to help with Puerto Rico’s recovery efforts after the island was hit by Hurricane Maria. The rush order would supply families with much-needed clothing and personal care items. It was an order NYSPSP and Alphapointe employees, who worked with NYSPSP to assemble the kits, were honored to fulfill.

Tim Fiori, director of business development for NYSPSP, and Alphapointe’s Gowin say a variety of more than 100 items were included in the kits, ranging from clothing, undergarments, and pajamas in sizes from infant through larger child sizes, to personal hygiene items – supplies hastily evacuating families wouldn’t necessarily have had time to gather and take with them. Alphapointe shipped 360 kits immediately after the order was placed and assembled an additional 16 pallets containing 350 kits, says Sharon Smith, director of operations at the agency.

The order was about more than just material items, Gowin says. It was also about providing hope to families in Puerto Rico whose lives were completely upended by the hurricane. For some Alphapointe personnel, the work assignment was also deeply personal. Two employees involved in filling the order are originally from Puerto Rico and worked on the project while awaiting news about family members on the island. Thankfully, all were found safe.

Employees at LC Industries in Durham, North Carolina, also did their part to assist with recovery efforts in Puerto Rico. The agency sells chemical light sticks to the Defense Logistics Agency (DLA) under a contract that considers a stick expired when less than 75 percent of its shelf life remains. Expired sticks are pulled from the DLA inventory but can be sold through retail stores because, as LC Industries Vice President of Business Development DuWayne Gilbertson notes, there is still plenty of life left in them. After seeing news accounts of Maria’s devastation,
Gilbertson pulled light sticks from inventory and shipped them to Puerto Rico to assist the island, whose entire electrical grid had been knocked out. The agency sent an additional $15,000 worth of light sticks to an organization in Barbados supporting relief efforts on other affected islands.

More than Just a Spoon
The recent spate of natural disasters has caused a serious uptick in the need for other products LC Industries provides, in particular disposable flatware and the specially designed spoon shipped with every Meal Ready-to-Eat (MRE). As part of its response to the hurricanes and wildfires, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) bought as many MREs as possible. But current stocks of MREs weren't enough to meet the need, so FEMA dipped into DLA's military stock, depleting the military's reserves of MREs and the spoons that come with them.

The MRE spoon isn’t an average plastic spoon. Designed to meet stringent standards, it must be durable – able to hold one pound at one end and not deflect more than 1/2 inch – and it must withstand extremely high and extremely low temperatures. At seven inches in length, MRE spoons are longer than standard plastic spoons to reach the bottom of the standard MRE pouch. According to Gilbertson, the spoons are so valuable that U.S. Army Rangers are instructed to drill a hole in the handle of their MRE spoon, put it on a string, and wear it around their necks. Urban legend has it that a U.S. Army Ranger once used an MRE spoon to kill an enemy combatant.

“Demand for all of our plastic cutlery has skyrocketed recently,” says Gilbertson. “But the MRE spoon stock was particularly hard hit because of the hurricanes and wildfires. We have been told that DLA will be increasing orders of MREs by more than a million cases next year to replenish the war stock.” As the sole producer of the MRE spoon, Gilbertson said LC Industries will be adding two more packaging lines to keep up with increased demand for all its plastic cutlery, including the MRE spoon.

LHB Industries’ Bettonville says, “Our unofficial motto for the Quake Kare line is ‘be prepared, not scared.’” It’s a motto that can easily apply to a number of NIB associated agencies where employees who are blind stand ready to respond quickly when disaster strikes.

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

Blind Center of Nevada

Headquarters: Las Vegas, Nevada
President/CEO: Cory Nelson
Founded: 1955

Capabilities at-a-glance: Product assembly, packaging, data destruction, electronic recycling. Provides art, music, and vocational training and rehabilitation.

Did you know? The Blind Center of Nevada’s new “Visions of Greatness” facility offers a first-of-its-kind culinary arts academy and complete event center for people in Southern Nevada who are blind or visually impaired.

More info: Blindcenter.org

Envision

Headquarters: Wichita, Kansas
President/CEO: Michael Monteferrante
Founded: 1933

Capabilities at-a-glance: Plastic bags, sewing, private labeling, custom assembly and kitting, product development, co-branding partnerships, Envision Print and fulfillment.

Did you know? Envision manufactures three million plastic bags a day and prints two million business cards a month.

More info: envisionus.com
Olmsted Center for Sight

Headquarters: Buffalo, New York  
President/CEO: Tammy Owen  
Founded: 1907

Capabilities at-a-glance: Warehousing and fulfillment, contact center training and employment, education, low vision clinic, vision rehab, National Statler Center, and job placement.

Did you know? More than 600 people from all over the country who are blind, visually impaired, or physically disabled have participated in Olmsted’s National Statler Center career training and employment placement program, with 77 percent of the graduates obtaining competitive employment.

More info: olmstedcenter.org

Vision Rehabilitation Services of Georgia

Headquarters: Smyrna, Georgia  
Executive Director/CEO: Sharon Croyle  
Founded: 1983

Capabilities at-a-glance: Vision and vocational rehabilitation, assistive technology and orientation and mobility training, visual aids, diabetes education and support, and social and professional networking for people with sensory disabilities.

Did you know? Vision Rehabilitation Services of Georgia offers a transition academy for teens.

More info: vrsga.org

BSC Fort Leonard Wood

Location: Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri  
Operated by: Alphapointe, Kansas City, Missouri  
Year opened: 2003

More info: alphapointe.org/retail
Creative people find inspiration in all sorts of places. While thinking about ways to grow a signature product line, Dr. Janet Szlyk, president and CEO of NIB associated nonprofit agency The Chicago Lighthouse for People Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired, found inspiration in her daughter’s college dorm.

When she went away to college, Szlyk’s daughter Charlotte decorated her dorm room with a rug and curtains featuring the Chicago city flag to remind her of home. On a shopping trip to purchase additional Chicago flag décor for her daughter, Szlyk discovered a glaring omission: There were no Chicago flag wall clocks to be had.

For the leader of an agency that is the last large manufacturer of clocks in the United States, the remedy was obvious. A Chicago flag clock added to the agency’s new fashion clock line has quickly become a best seller.

**A Proud History**

The Chicago Lighthouse has been in the clock business for four decades, since it landed a contract to manufacture clocks for the federal government in 1977. Today, 25 people who are blind are employed in the agency’s clock factory, which produced its 6 millionth clock in the summer of 2017.

Chicago Lighthouse clocks can be found in federal buildings and offices across the country and U.S. embassies around the world. In New York City’s National September 11 Memorial Museum a display about the terror attack on the Pentagon includes a seat belt from American Airlines Flight 77, the jet that crashed into the western side of the building, and a SKILCRAFT® clock produced by The Chicago Lighthouse. Damaged by the heat of the conflagration, the clock’s hands are fixed at 9:36, the time of the crash.

“Our clocks represent the true American clock, a symbol of our country,” says Szlyk. But the clocks also
represent much more: employment and opportunities for people who are blind.

Production Supervisor Mike Wallace, who will celebrate 48 years with The Chicago Lighthouse in March, is proud to be a part of the clock line’s history. Legally blind himself, Wallace not only supervises and trains employees, he performs maintenance on the equipment and fabricates fixtures for the clocks in a machine shop at the agency.

“We’re like a family here,” he says. “Most of the employees I supervise have been here 20, 25, 30 years.”

‘Stepping It Up’
As it prepared to celebrate 40 years in the clock making business, the agency wanted to “step it up,” Szlyk says. A board member suggested that developing a line of fashion-forward clocks for the commercial market would be a good way to reach new customers and create more jobs for people who are blind.

To help develop the line, Szlyk called in Nancy Perkins, former president of the Dallas Lighthouse for the Blind and a Fellow in the Industrial Designers Society of America. A natural choice for the project, Perkins was not only well-versed in the capabilities of people who are blind but, as a native of Chicago, was familiar with the area and available resources. As she designed graphics for the fashion clock line, Perkins focused on enhancing contrast and readability of the clock face - improvements that could be made without undertaking expensive changes to existing manufacturing operations. The fashion clock line includes designs suitable for home offices, kitchens, living areas, and children's rooms.

Perkins says the fashion clocks are a good example of customizing an existing product for a new market. “You don’t always have to make huge investments. In this case, there was a lot of opportunity to just graphically take existing products in a new and different direction to appeal to a different audience.”

While the city flag and Chicago Transit Authority “L” map are among its biggest sellers, the Lighthouse also developed a number of clocks with other iconic Chicago images on the face. Using photographs from the book “Chicago Monumental” by Larry Broutman, a member of the agency’s board of directors, the images have made the clocks popular as honoraria for community leaders from Mayor Rahm Emanuel to the Reverend Jesse Jackson.

Finding a Market
Chicago Lighthouse clocks have been available to federal customers for years through the AbilityOne® Program, and to the general public through the agency’s online store and Amazon storefront. Through a bit of serendipity, the clocks are now available at three Target stores in the Chicago area.

At an outing with her friend Elizabeth Johnston, Szlyk mentioned the fashion clock project and the goal of expanding the agency’s signature product to a broader audience. To her surprise, Johnston told Szlyk that her sister, Alexandra, was a buyer for Target’s locally relevant products program. Introductions were made and Alexandra Johnston toured the Lighthouse. After hearing the agency’s pitch, she was sold and worked to bring the clocks into three of the retail giant’s stores in the Chicagoland area.

With the popularity of the line, the Lighthouse is looking into expanding to other major cities. Perkins has begun developing clock graphics with iconic images of New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C. Plans are underway to make the clocks available on Target.com, and the agency looks forward to hiring employees to staff an additional production line to keep up with demand.

“It’s a great story of people coming together and community support for a great venture,” says Szlyk. A great venture that’s expanding to communities around the country.

Jennifer Click is editor-in-chief of Opportunity magazine.
The 2017 NIB/NAEPB Training Conference and Expo, held Oct. 4-6 in Arlington, Virginia, delivered a crystal clear message: Building and maintaining relationships is essential to expanding employment opportunities for people who are blind.

The 2017 event, which attracted more than 700 attendees from 51 nonprofit agencies and nearly 100 exhibitors, focused on the AbilityOne® Program and expanding employment through business development.

Echoing the conference theme – Connect To – L.C. Benson of Lighthouse Central Florida kicked off the general session by explaining that building relationships is critical to change. “Relationships allow us to become leaders and innovators, to see opportunities in developing business lines in various market sectors, to create something new. We must always continue to ask ourselves ‘What’s next?’”

Opening remarks by NIB President and CEO Kevin Lynch focused on the value of strong ties with clients and continuing collaboration among NIB associated agencies to maximize new opportunities.

**View Challenges as Opportunities**

While a panel of U.S. AbilityOne Commission® members and executive staff acknowledged that times are challenging, Commission Vice Chairperson Thomas Robinson noted that apparent barriers can often be opportunities.

“We’re on the cusp of change with tremendous opportunities,” Robinson...
Future supply needs may be very different, Robinson counseled. “In 10 years, there may be fewer pens needed. What will be needed instead? Figure it out and prepare to fill the next need. Capitalize on areas in which we’ve been successful.”

Robinson advised attendees to “think about where we want to be in 15 to 20 years. If we keep our eye on the ball, we can persevere through anything.”

Deputy Executive Director Barry Lineback added that the Commission’s charge to “Buy American, Hire American” is being emphasized by the current administration, presenting another opportunity.

Commission Chairperson James Kestleloot suggested now is a good time to examine how NIB and associated agencies advocate for their mission. “How many of us take a congressman to our nonprofit to see it in action?” he asked.

Executive Director Tina Ballard urged agencies to “be proud of who we are and what we do.” Noting that reluctance can accompany change, Ballard advised attendees to “tap into your strengths; not the ones you were born with, but the ones you’ve developed because of challenges you’ve faced. Choose courage over fear.”

Training Sessions and Expo Exhibits
Training sessions offered throughout the conference focused largely on AbilityOne Program goals, including business development, expanding employment, and growing sales to create more jobs for people who are blind.

The Expo gave conference attendees an opportunity to visit nearly 100 exhibitors representing NIB associated agencies, government agencies, and commercial vendors. The NIB Marketplace provided attendees a chance to chat with NIB marketing and business development

MAKING MUSIC AND ART

It’s difficult to imagine a more energetic, life-embracing individual than singer-songwriter Robert “Blind Dog” Cook.

Cook, who offered a stirring rendition of “The Star-Spangled Banner” at the NIB/NAEPB Training Conference and Expo general session, is a professional musician who writes and plays an eclectic mix of folk, alternative, indie, and country music.

Born with degenerative cataracts, Cook has been legally blind since birth, but the condition never deterred pursuit of his first love, music. “My first memories as a child were of music,” says Cook. “That’s all I’ve ever wanted to do, and I’ve been very lucky in that way.” He has released several CDs and frequently can be found playing guitar and singing at local nightspots.

But low vision in childhood did thwart his passion for art. Encouraged by an artist and gallery owner, Cook decided to give photography a try last year, but with limited vision, his photographs captured only a small part of a subject, rather than a sweeping vista. “The photography thing is something I never thought would take off and the art thing is something I never even considered,” he said.

That all changed when Cook heard about NuEyes low vision glasses, a removable visual prosthetic featuring ODC smart glasses that allows wearers to adjust images, colors, magnification, and brightness through voice commands. When his daughter posted a GoFundMe appeal to raise the purchase price, the fundraising goal was easily exceeded within a week.

In April, Cook tried the smart glasses for the first time at a music venue with 100 people in the audience. He says putting on the glasses was a life-changing experience for him as a musician, allowing him to see his audience for the first time. The technology also allowed the audience to see what he sees as he plays. “People were crying,” Cook said. “It was amazing and pretty emotional.” Even more emotional was the experience of seeing his wife, daughter, and closest friends for the first time.

With his vision corrected to 20/30, Cook has put some ambitious plans into action. “This was a gift, and I’ve got to pay it forward,” he said. He began by using the excess money raised through the GoFundMe appeal to provide smart glasses for a Dallas teenager who is blind. Now he is part of an effort to find corporate sponsors to fund smart glasses for at least 12 children each year.

In addition to releasing a new music CD, “The Folk Singer’s Bedside Companion,” and co-sponsoring a successful photo and art exhibit featuring his work, titled “Seasons of Light,” at the Visual Art Center in Marshall, Texas, he is organizing a juried art show featuring works by artists who are visually impaired. And he has crossed “item #213” off his bucket list: attending a performance by his favorite guitarist and seeing his hands at work.

“Social media and Facebook are easy for blind people,” says Cook, who encourages others to take advantage of available technology. “The tools are there, just find ways to make them work for you.”

“I’m finally doing the things I’ve always wanted to do,” he says, “making music and art.”
FEATURED STORY
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representatives, as well as to check out innovative SKILCRAFT® products.

Dan Boucher Receives R.B. Irwin Award
Dan Boucher, former president and CEO of Winston-Salem Industries for the Blind, now known as IFB Solutions, received the 2017 R.B. Irwin Award, the capstone on a career spanning more than 45 years with NIB and NIB associated agencies. The Irwin Award is the highest honor bestowed by NIB on a professional who has devoted his or her career to creating and improving employment for people who are blind.

After joining NIB in 1969, Boucher worked his way up to vice president of marketing. His signature achievements at NIB include expanding the SKILCRAFT® brand from household products to a well-known name in the government marketplace with the launch of the SKILCRAFT U.S. Government Pen and office products lines. Boucher also helped found the AbilityOne Base Supply Center™ program.

After serving as the agency’s president and CEO from 1996 to 2007, Boucher assumed an advisory role as executive chairman. In the latter position, he managed the 2014 merger with Arkansas Lighthouse for the Blind, creating one of the largest agencies in the U.S. employing people who are blind.

Rosemarie Lally, J.D., is a freelance writer and editor based in Washington, D.C.
Not long after I praised the text recognition capability of Microsoft’s free smartphone app Office Lens in a summer 2017 review, Microsoft introduced a new app that, unlike Office Lens, was built specifically for people who are blind.

Named Seeing AI, the new app was developed by Saqib Shaikh, a London-based software engineer who has been with Microsoft for 11 years and is himself blind, having lost his vision at age seven. Built using existing algorithms developed under Microsoft’s Cognitive Services program, Seeing AI harnesses the power of machine learning, computer vision, emotional interpretation, big data, and the cloud to interpret the user’s visual world.

The app itself is very straightforward, using different “channels” of operation. To operate the Short Text channel, users hold their smartphone’s back-facing camera within range of any printed text and Seeing AI immediately begins reading what it sees aloud. I found this channel most useful for tasks such as quickly scanning through mail or book titles.

The Document channel allows users to capture and save printed documents with formatting intact, much like Office Lens. The Document setting gives users substantial spoken feedback to correct alignment and distance, automatically snapping the photo once it detects the document is in frame and saving users the added hassle of finding the “take picture” button on their phone’s touch screen.

The Product channel is a bar code scanner for use on products around the house. Users who cannot see the label on a can, for example, may hold it in front of the camera and slowly rotate it while the app’s intermittent “pinging” tone increases in speed as it gets closer to centering the bar code within the camera frame. When the app gets a lock on the code it automatically snaps a picture and uploads it to Microsoft servers hosting millions of relevant product bar codes.

The Person channel is jaw-dropping and, frankly, a bit alarming. On this setting, the app can take a picture of a person several feet away and determine within seconds age, gender, and emotional expression. Seeing AI will even announce whether the person is wearing glasses or a hat.

Additional channels allow users to recognize currency notes, including Canadian dollars and Euros; identify colors; read handwritten text; and gauge the brightness in their surroundings. Images in apps such as Mail, Photos, Twitter, and more can be described by Seeing AI, while the most ambitious channel, Scene, currently in early preview stages, provides users an overall description of surroundings they capture in a photo.

Seeing AI is currently available in 35 countries. Shaikh and his fellow developers at Microsoft plan to expand the app’s reach and may add more channels as their research progresses. Regardless, Seeing AI is a breakthrough in helping people who are blind complete everyday tasks.

One drawback – at least on the iPhone version I tested – is that Seeing AI is a battery killer. Performing extended document and/or product scans can drain a fully charged battery to less than 50 percent within 15 or 20 minutes.

And Seeing AI may not be the best choice for text recognition on sensitive documents. Using the Document channel setting requires that images be uploaded to Microsoft servers for text processing, then returned to the user’s smartphone. I did test the Short Text channel in airplane mode and the app appeared to perform all of its text recognition processes using only the phone’s onboard resources.

iOS users can find Seeing AI in the App Store under Business and Productivity.

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.
AGENCY SPOTLIGHT

POISED FOR SUCCESS

A new world of opportunities opened up in 2017 when Arizona Industries for the Blind secured status as an independent nonprofit agency.

BY ROSEMARIE LALLY

After 65 years as an affiliate of the state, Arizona Industries for the Blind (AIB) is starting a new chapter as an independent nonprofit agency with an existing track record of excellence. Headquartered in Phoenix, AIB operates three AbilityOne Base Supply Centers™ providing military and government personnel with offerings from office products and furniture to cleaning supplies, tools, and military uniforms. Its Digital Data Scan (DDS) unit offers both public and private customers a wide range of confidential document conversion services at competitive prices.

AIB’s Distribution Services unit, which ships 250,000 orders annually from a 175,000 square-foot distribution center, stocks 92 million inventoried items. The unit processes 26,000–28,000 orders for the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) each month while maintaining a 99.78 percent on-time performance rating, exceeding DOD requirements. The unit’s inventory accuracy has been rated at 99.8 percent for over 14 years.

Despite these impressive achievements, President and CEO Richard Monaco is confident AIB is capable of much more. “Privatization is key to our movement forward,” he says. As an independent nonprofit, AIB can compete for business with private firms, receive nonprofit discounts, determine its own salaries and benefits, and purchase – rather than lease – office and warehouse space.

Monaco currently is developing a strategic growth plan. “As part of creating a solid infrastructure, we’re focusing on defining our target markets,” he says. “It’s important to make sure the target market matches up with our capabilities and core competencies so that we continue to deliver excellence and maximize employment. It’s about managing opportunities by focusing on the type of projects most likely to achieve success.”

AIB is also focusing on winning more business for its award-winning distribution unit, which employs 50 percent of AIB’s workforce. The unit has for many years provided logistical support to the Defense Logistics Agency (DLA). Noting that start-ups often need help with distribution, Monaco plans to court those businesses and grow with them.

Underpinning AIB’s success is its commitment to excellence, according to Monaco. “We provide ‘concierge services’ and are willing to do anything for a customer.”

Tim Adams, distribution services unit manager, agrees. “Customer service is an area in which we have a tremendous advantage.” Noting AIB’s consistently high marks on the federal Contractors Performance Assessment Reporting System – the agency is often rated “exceptional” in all categories – he credits AIB’s ability to take initiative and respond quickly to customers’ needs. “Service is what we’re all about.”

AIB doesn’t simply fulfill contract requirements; it proactively reports and addresses problems that surface with customers’ processes to preempt the payment cycle – in some cases from 120 days to as few as ten.

The unit currently scans 10,000 documents, totaling more than 1 million pages each month, according to David Steinmetz, DDS unit manager. “Understanding where the market was moving and how to stay relevant to the customer saved the business,” he says.

Christine Helvoigt, a supervisor in distribution services, sorts and prioritizes work assignments for the unit.

Identifying and Seizing New Opportunities

AIB has long been adept at identifying new opportunities that play to its strengths, as evidenced by the growth of its DDS unit. With companies bringing scanning functions in-house in recent years to cut costs, the unit had to be creative in developing a niche for its services. “We found an opportunity to turn a competency into a back-office function,” explains Monaco.

To secure the line of business, AIB developed a centralized service that can scan invoices, perform audits, verify invoice data, and report discrepancies to customers, all while greatly reducing
Monaco attributes AIB’s success to its employees. “Our core values are ‘Do your best, do the right thing, and treat others as you’d like to be treated.’ We really believe in those values.” As part of the U.S. AbilityOne Commission® Quality Work Environment initiative, the agency is currently working on redefining employee recognition to make it more immediate, improving communication with employees, and ensuring a safe work environment.

“We focus on our people, and try to provide a supportive and safe environment,” explains Adams. “Our people are enthusiastic and happy, and happy employees get better results.”

AIB makes a serious commitment to promoting capable and qualified people who are blind: 50 percent of both the supervisory staff and the administrative staff are people who are legally blind. Daniel Martinez, communications unit manager, says “It’s just the right thing to do.”

Legally blind himself, Martinez started in production at AIB and, after advancing through several positions, was promoted to his current job in communications. Similarly, Steinmetz started in distribution services, was promoted to the DDS unit, and offered the opportunity to participate in NIB’s Business Leaders Program through the University of Virginia’s Darden School of Business. Following graduation from the program, he was promoted to DDS unit manager.

Christine Helvoight started at AIB four years ago as a material handler. “I’m always looking to grow and have taken every opportunity offered,” she says. Following her promotion to a supervisory position in distribution services, Christine attended NIB’s Effective Supervision program to further hone her skills.

“I love working here,” says Helvoight. “The people are fantastic, from the top down. What we do every day has meaning; everything we touch is going to support our troops. People care, and you see it in the results.”

“The people are the best thing about working here,” agrees Justin Vincent, a material handler hired in 2015. “It’s just a great environment – things are geared toward people succeeding if they want it.”

“Every person here has a story,” Monaco says, “and every person has overcome huge obstacles and difficulties in their lives just to get in the door. Our employees don’t see blindness as an obstacle, they see it as a challenge, they overcome it, and get on with doing the best job they can. There’s success everywhere here.”

With its commitment to excellence, outstanding workforce, and ability to identify promising opportunities, AIB is well positioned to write more chapters in its own success story.
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Shelter-in-place kits meet basic needs in emergency situations. Includes a towel, blanket, pillow, sheet, toothbrush, soap with soap dish, hand sanitizer, and two washcloths. Produced by Bosma Enterprises.

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Prevent slips and falls while protecting floor surfaces with absorbent three-mat entry systems produced by Beyond Vision.

Available for purchase at AbilityOne.com, GSAAdvantage.gov, AbilityOne Base Supply Centers, or through AbilityOne authorized distributors.
These new SKILCRAFT® products produced by NIB associated nonprofit agencies are now available to federal government customers through the AbilityOne® Program.

1. SKILCRAFT® Armband Badge Holder
Keep military ID badges visible and secure with the SKILCRAFT® Armband Badge Holder. Featuring two fully adjustable elastic armbands and a clear vinyl display for IDs, these badge holders are great for personnel working in flight lines or other active environments where identification must be displayed but secured. Available in tan or black. Produced by West Texas Lighthouse for the Blind in San Angelo.

2. SKILCRAFT® Dual Card ID Holder
Keep IDs and smart cards visible yet secure and accessible with the SKILCRAFT® Dual Card ID Holder. Clear rigid holder with slot and chain holes for easy attachment to lanyards, strap clips, and badge reels accommodates two standard size credit cards, IDs, or Smart Cards. Choose vertical orientation with top-load design, or side-loading vertical/horizontal orientation. Produced by West Texas Lighthouse for the Blind in San Angelo.

3. SKILCRAFT® Smart Card Holder
Protect TWIC, PIV, CAC, and other forms of identification from RFID scanners with the SKILCRAFT® Smart Card Holder. FIPS 201 and HSPD-12 compliant, this scan-blocking card holder with open face design can be displayed vertically or horizontally. Attaches easily to neck lanyards or ID card reels; available with or without 36-inch black lanyard. Produced by West Texas Lighthouse for the Blind in San Angelo.

4. SKILCRAFT® Neck Lanyard
SKILCRAFT® 36-inch neck lanyards make it easy to display ID badges without attaching them to clothing. Detachable braided loop attachment with no metal or conductive material attaches easily to badge holders. Breakaway connector detaches when lanyard is pulled taut for safety around machinery or in hazardous work areas. Produced by West Texas Lighthouse for the Blind in San Angelo.

5. SKILCRAFT®/ZEBRA Retractable Ballpoint Pen
The SKILCRAFT®/Zebra stainless steel pen combines style, strength, and value in a durable, lightweight writing instrument with a sleek, attractive appearance. Narrow pen with stainless steel barrel and sturdy metal pocket clip is ideally sized for pockets, planners, or clipboards. Oil-based easy-glide ink provides a smooth, smudge-free writing experience. Available in blue or black ink with fine or medium point. Produced by ibMilwaukee in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

6. SKILCRAFT® Barricade Tape
Easily identify hazards or outline restricted areas with SKILCRAFT® Barricade Tape available in OSHA-designated yellow or red with bold 2-inch black lettering for high visibility. Premium grade polyethylene material provides greater tensile strength to prevent breaking; dispenser box for easy use and storage without unspooling. Produced by West Texas Lighthouse for the Blind in San Angelo.

7. SKILCRAFT® Instant Disposable Cold Pack
Latex-free, FDA-approved SKILCRAFT® Instant Disposable Cold Packs offer immediate soothing relief for a wide variety of injuries. Easy to activate with a single squeeze, the flexible material conforms to body contours for maximum relief. Available in a variety of sizes, these cold packs are ideal for first aid treatment on-the-go. Produced by Central Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired in Utica, New York.

These and thousands of other products are available for purchase at AbilityOne.com, GSAdvantage.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.
NIB, AGENCY EMPLOYEES COMPLETE LEADERSHIP TRAINING

Seventeen employees who are blind from NIB and 14 NIB associated nonprofit agencies celebrated completion of the Effective Supervision program with a graduation banquet October 19, 2017. Over the course of eight months the participants completed three intensive 2½ day training sessions at NIB headquarters, in addition to 20-30 hours of reading and coursework to prepare for each session.

The program focused on the foundations of leadership, developing participants’ abilities to perform their jobs more productively and effectively, and take on ever-increasing levels of responsibility.

NIB WELCOMES NEW ASSOCIATED AGENCY

NIB is pleased to welcome the Sight Center of Northwest Pennsylvania to the NIB family.

The Sight Center provides a variety of prevention programs, including vision screening, a low income eye glass and eye exam program, and a public education program on child eye safety. In addition, the agency offers support services such as transportation, talking books, and counseling, and rehabilitation services that include a low vision clinic, occupational therapy, and a youth program that supplements the school curriculum by teaching daily living skills to kids with visual impairments.

The Sight Center serves residents of Northwest Pennsylvania in Erie, Warren, McKean, Elk, Cameron, Jefferson, and Potter Counties.
**EAST TEXAS LIGHTHOUSE FOR THE BLIND DEBUTS PROMOTE TRAINING**

East Texas Lighthouse for the Blind in Tyler conducted the first NIB associated agency-sponsored Professional Mastery of Office Technology for Employment (ProMOTE) training program in October 2017. Lead instructor Jan Lynch guided three students through the four-week program which provides advanced assistive technology training using the most common office software programs – Microsoft Word, Excel, and PowerPoint – as well as instruction in internet research and creating accessible documents.

In March, ten assistive technology trainers from seven different NIB associated agencies participated in a Train-the-Trainer session designed to prepare them to present the ProMOTE program at their agency locations. NIB developed the curriculum in partnership with TCS Associates with the goal of creating a program agencies could deliver in their communities to equip more people who are blind with skills for professional upward mobility and employment opportunities.

**CANTOS BROTHERS ARE FIRST TRIPLETTS WHO ARE BLIND TO EARN EAGLE SCOUT RANK**

![Nick, Leo, and Steven Cantos became the first blind triplets to earn the rank of Eagle from the Boy Scouts of America. Nick and Leo were interns at NIB headquarters in 2017.](image)

Six years of hard work paid off in October 2017 when Leo, Nick, and Steven Cantos became the first triplets who are blind to earn the rank of Eagle Scout. Leo and Nick, who also completed internships at NIB, were profiled in the spring 2017 issue of Opportunity.

Since its founding in 1910, more than 110 million Americans have been participants in Boy Scout programs. In that time, approximately 2.25 million have achieved the rank of Eagle Scout.

To earn the Eagle rank, boys must fulfill requirements in the areas of leadership, service, and outdoor skills, including leading a community service project. The Cantos brothers’ projects focused on helping people in need. Steven organized donations of 88 units of blood and collected 77 blankets for a local hospital; and Nick collected donations of nearly $2,000 worth of hygiene supplies for a nonprofit helping people escape homelessness, domestic violence, and sexual assault.

**LC INDUSTRIES OPENS BSC AT RED RIVER ARMY DEPOT**

![IT Support Technician Cesar Lopez, Order Processor Curlie Bailey, and Employment Services Specialist Craig Ellis completed ProMOTE training at East Texas Lighthouse for the Blind.](image)

LC Industries’ newest AbilityOne Base Supply Center™ at Red River Army Depot celebrated its grand opening on October 18, 2017. Customers and representatives from NIB, Red River Army Depot, and the LC Industries executive team came out to show their support for the new store and the AbilityOne Program. After the formal ribbon cutting ceremony, a vendor show was held with support from both national and local suppliers.
NIB is proud to deliver products, services, and custom solutions to U.S. military combat forces and support activities.

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