As interest in reshoring U.S. jobs grows, National Industries for the Blind and its associated nonprofit agencies have a trained and experienced American workforce already in place.

There’s an eagerness these days to bring jobs back to America and provide consumers with the quality products and services long associated with the phrase “Made in the U.S.A.” For more than 5,800 employees who are blind working in National Industries for the Blind’s (NIB) nationwide network of associated nonprofit agencies the movement is of little consequence: The products they produce and services they provide have always been made and delivered right here in the United States. That’s because since 1938, NIB’s mission has always been to create job opportunities for Americans who are blind or visually impaired in their own communities, helping them become valued contributors to the U.S. economy and reducing reliance on government benefits.

NIB associated agencies make more than 7,000 different products in the U.S. each year – many of which support the U.S. military – and offer high-demand professional services like contact center staffing and contract close-out services, while providing training, competitive pay, benefits, career growth, and upward mobility to Americans who are blind or visually impaired.

Supporting the Troops
The San Antonio Lighthouse for the Blind and Vision Impaired produces about 30,000 items daily, mostly for the U.S. military and federal government, says Nancy Lipton, director of public relations and events at the agency. Those items include military supplies such as helmet systems, combat shirts, and extreme and inclement weather pants. More than 75 percent of the 125 employees working in the sewing area are blind or visually impaired and the Lighthouse has a dedicated training area where employees can learn to sew complex garments. “We want to offer upward mobility, so if someone on our assembly line shows interest, we offer training on how to use the sewing machines to assemble our products,” says Lipton.

All employees are paid a prevailing wage and are offered a comprehensive benefits package that includes health care and retirement, but for Lipton, the jobs at the Lighthouse mean so much more. “It’s about empowerment for people who are blind or visually impaired. We take great pride in the quality of our products. Our military are wearing them as they protect us, and they deserve our very best. Everyone here takes that mission very seriously – it’s our way of supporting our country and our troops,” she says.
Partnering with the Aerospace Industry

In Washington state, The Lighthouse for the Blind Inc. contracted with Boeing in 1951 to produce parts for airplanes. The partnership has been going strong ever since. Today, The Lighthouse, which is the largest employer of people who are DeafBlind in the nation, employs 90 people who are blind or visually impaired in its aerospace machining area to produce 2.4 million airplane parts each year using injection molding and other complex manufacturing methods – all with a 99.9 percent quality rating. The Lighthouse – which operates 11 facilities – opened a new bolt assembly facility in South Carolina in 2016 that currently employs seven people, six of whom are blind. Still in the process of staffing the location, the agency’s goal is to employ 20 people at the facility by the end of the year.

Like many other NIB associated agencies, The Lighthouse for the Blind Inc. has diversified its operations over the years to include contract management services, contact center services, and manufacture of a variety of office products such as hanging file folders, wallboards, and standing easels. The agency also makes canteens and entrenching tools for the military. In addition to Boeing, Lighthouse customers include federal agencies, the Department of Defense, and commercial firms including Triumph Composite Systems Inc. and BAE Systems.

“We always have and always will provide U.S.-based jobs,” says Mike May, The Lighthouse’s president and CEO. “We are proud to offer superior products and services to our customers because it allows us to offer high-quality training and job opportunities for more than 260 people who are blind, DeafBlind, and blind with other disabilities.”

Improving Sight

At IFB Solutions in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, a strategic business decision in 2000 to enter the optical field has been a win-win for the agency and U.S. veterans, says Seth Anderson, director of marketing and communications for the agency. Several factors supported the agency’s entry into the optical industry, Anderson said. First, IFB leadership realized that as the U.S. population continues to age, the demand for corrective glasses and contact lenses will continue to increase. Second, Americans have become accustomed to receiving their eyeglasses quickly – within as little as 24 hours and no longer seven days – and this quick turnaround time, combined the unique qualities of each prescription, has kept the optical industry in the United States.

Another advantage of getting into the optical field for IFB Solutions was the machinery. “People who are blind can operate the machines to make the lenses with few if any changes,” notes Anderson. “Our lab is literally the same as any other optical lab.” IFB Solutions offers extensive job training to optical services staff, providing a mix of classroom instruction and hands-on training in using the equipment. The employees
are so highly skilled, they could work at any optical manufacturing facility in the country.

The computerized process to transform what is essentially a clear plastic hockey puck to a customized lens is a highly technical one that the agency’s optical services division employees have mastered. The lab makes nearly 2,000 pairs of lenses each day – about 263,000 pairs each year – mostly for the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) hospital system and U.S Navy Exchange Command (NEXCOM) centers. The agency is looking to expand that customer base to the commercial market and recently entered into a partnership with Walmart Vision Centers. With pricing that’s competitive with – if not better than – other commercial entities, IFB must be doing something right: Business is brisk enough to warrant adding a second shift to accommodate demand.

In addition to the central lab that makes the lenses for glasses and contacts, IFB Solutions has opened 31 dispensing rooms in 24 VA hospitals throughout the United States, all staffed by IFB Solutions employees. These dispensing rooms allow veterans and their families to walk directly from a doctor’s office in the hospital to the dispensary to select their frames and order glasses or contact lenses.

The optical services division at IFB Solutions has opened new career paths for employees like Demarrious Bowens. Born legally blind with glaucoma, Bowens began working at IFB Solutions in the manufacturing facility as a sewing operator, then moved to the customer service department in the optical services division.

Impressed with Bowens’ skills, his supervisor encouraged him to pursue certification through the American Board of Opticianry (ABO), the largest opticians’ certification organization in the world. After months of intensive study, Bowens took and passed the exam, making him only the third visually impaired person in the United States to complete the certification requirements. Bowens says the certification process helped him gain valuable technical knowledge that he uses in reviewing incoming customer orders and ensuring IFB can manufacture lenses to the requested specifications.

Rather than rest on his achievement, Bowens has chosen to give back. He recently worked with nine other optical services employees, including three who are visually impaired, to prepare them for the ABO exam. As part of that effort he developed a customized study guide and hosted weekly one-hour review sessions.

Many employees in the optical services division welcome the opportunity to give back to U.S. veterans. Rick Gaefe, an Army veteran himself, operates polishing equipment in the eyewear lab. When a prescription is made into a lens, the lens blank creates a rough, matte texture. Gaefe runs simultaneous finer machines that polish the lenses into a clear, smooth surface. In addition to his work in the lab, Gaefe mentors other employees and participates in the agency’s blind veterans support group and guide dog support group, making him a valuable member of the IFB Solutions family.

Providing Outstanding Customer Care

For more than 20 years, callers to the Albany Stratton VA Medical Center have reached a live person who can discuss their needs and direct their call to the right department. Employees of the Central Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired (CABVI) in Utica, New York, have taken care of these veterans and their families under a long-standing contract. CABVI employees run the medical center switchboard and coding system and more recently, began staffing the front reception desk. The contract employs eight to ten people, 75 percent of whom are blind or visually impaired.

In addition, CABVI recently renewed a five-year contract with a federal customer, handling faxes, emails, and phone calls from customers in all 50 states, Canada, and Mexico. That operation, headquartered in Utica, employs 32 full-time employees. Both contracts, says Jessica Watson, vice president of services at the agency, require high levels of knowledge and computer skills.

“Our employees need to know a lot about the contracting organization and their products and services, so we can respond to customers correctly and direct them to the right
places. Our calls average 10 to 12 minutes – most call centers average about three and a half minutes,” says Watson. “Our folks working on the federal contract learn a lot about federal rules, regulations, and operations.”

They are also highly skilled with computers. Watson says employees typically toggle between five to seven screens per phone call. All employees at both locations are fully trained by CABVI and high employee satisfaction levels generally keep attrition low. But Watson admits a few good customer service representatives have been lured away by other employers in the community who appreciate their skills and professionalism – a loss for the center, but an indicator that CABVI is succeeding in its mission of helping people who are blind build meaningful careers.

“We have veterans working in Albany and Utica – we specifically target veterans when recruiting – and they take great pride in supporting their fellow veterans,” notes Watson.

“But really, all of our employees take great pride in their jobs because it enables them to contribute to their communities, to be independent, and to support their families.”

CABVI’s mission, says Watson, is to offer people who are blind or visually impaired a variety of job opportunities – to give them career choices similar to their sighted peers. To that end, CABVI has diversified its business, also manufacturing dress neckerchiefs for the Navy that are made in the U.S.A. from start to finish. The agency also packages all of the examination gloves purchased by the Transportation Security Administration.

“We are constantly growing, offering career-track jobs for people who are blind or visually impaired,” says Watson. “We’re proud to be able to fulfill our mission to provide U.S.-based jobs, goods and services.” It’s a sentiment shared by all of NIB’s associated agencies.