Developing Tomorrow’s Leaders

NIB’s Business Management Training program prepares high-potential employees who are blind for leadership positions
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Opportunity welcomes news and stories about the careers and capabilities of people who are blind. Contact communications@nib.org.

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Since 1938, National Industries for the Blind (NIB) has focused on enhancing the opportunities for economic and personal independence of people who are blind, primarily through creating, sustaining, and improving employment. NIB and its network of associated nonprofit agencies are the nation’s largest employer of people who are blind through the manufacture and provision of SKILCRAFT® and other products and services of the AbilityOne™ Program. For more information about NIB, visit NIB.org.
In today’s fast-paced world, there’s no disputing that talented leaders are often a key factor in organizational success. Ensuring that success is carried into the future involves a continuous process of identifying employees with leadership potential and developing their skills and knowledge.

NIB has a long history of helping its associated nonprofit agencies identify employees who are blind who have leadership potential, and empowering them to chart their own course to success. Our Business Leaders Program provides career training and development programs ranging from basic education on business and workplace concepts, to developing business perspective and management abilities that prepare people who are blind for leadership positions.
The centerpiece of these offerings is Business Management Training (BMT), a rigorous, 15-month program for qualified employees who are blind that teaches them to analyze tough business issues, think through solutions, and apply critical thinking skills in the workplace. Since the program’s launch in 2004, nearly 100 people who are blind have graduated from BMT, with 7 out of 10 earning at least one job promotion.

In this issue of Opportunity you’ll read about the unique approach of BMT and how it is preparing the next generation of leaders to carry forward our mission. With this pipeline of talented and motivated leaders ready to meet new challenges, NIB and its associated agencies are well prepared to carry our successes into the future.

Kevin A. Lynch
President and
Chief Executive Officer
DEVELOPING TOMORROW’S LEADERS

For 15 years, NIB’s Business Management Training program has been preparing high-potential employees who are blind for leadership positions with remarkable results.

ON THE COVER

Business Management Training student Melva Henderson is a program specialist at Dallas Lighthouse for the Blind.
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Imagine it was your job to spend $54 billion every year. That’s exactly the task Emily Murphy is charged with, but as you might imagine, it’s not simple.

Murphy leads the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA), which supplies more than 1 million government employees with everything they need to get their jobs done. GSA’s responsibilities run the gamut, from managing approximately 368 million square feet of real estate to buying millions of pens – most of which have the SKILCRAFT® logo on the barrel.

Not only does GSA buy thousands of products from NIB associated nonprofit agencies, it is a steadfast supporter of the AbilityOne™ Program, having partnered with NIB over the years to launch projects like the SKILCRAFT U.S. Government Pen that revolutionized product lines and created jobs for hundreds of people who are blind.

Murphy assured Congress of her support for the program when answering questions prior to her confirmation as GSA administrator in 2017. “I take seriously GSA’s responsibilities in assisting those with disabilities finding a place in the workforce in support of federal agencies,” she wrote.

She has served just over a year in her current position, but Murphy is no neophyte when it comes to the world of government acquisition.
Born in St. Louis, Missouri, Murphy earned a bachelor’s degree from Smith College. After a stint working at the Republican National Committee she returned to school, receiving a law degree from the University of Virginia in 2001. From there she went straight into the field of government acquisition, working on the private sector side as an attorney in a private law firm.

As her interest in government and contracting grew, Murphy joined the George W. Bush administration in 2004 as a senior advisor on government contracts and business development at the Small Business Administration. She served at GSA from 2005 to 2007 as the agency’s first-ever chief acquisition officer.

With the change in administrations Murphy spent a few years in the private sector before returning to government service as
counsel to committees in the House of Representatives. She returned to GSA in 2017 as White House Liaison and served as senior advisor to the agency’s acting administrator before being selected for the job.

In remarks at her swearing in ceremony, Murphy emphasized her commitment to maximizing value for taxpayers. To achieve that goal, GSA is undertaking several initiatives. The first of these, required by the Fiscal Year 2018 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), is an initiative to examine how government agencies could procure products through commercial e-commerce portals. In a joint implementation plan issued with the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), GSA emphasized the need for compliance with mandatory sources, and included explicit references to the AbilityOne Program requirement. NIB continues to work with GSA and other stakeholders to represent the interests of people who are blind.

Another ambitious undertaking is the effort announced in November 2018 to modernize federal acquisition by consolidating the agency’s 24 Multiple Award Schedules (MAS) into a single Schedule with one set of terms and conditions for both products and services. The move is one more facet of a strategic goal to establish GSA as the premier provider of efficient and effective acquisition solutions.

The MAS transformation is just one part of GSA’s Federal Marketplace strategy to make the government buying and selling experience easy, efficient, and modern — and meet Murphy’s goal of having the people of the United States get the best value for their tax dollars.

Jason Fields is a journalist in the Washington, D.C. area.
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Forward-thinking organizations know the key to long-term survival is the strength of their leadership pipeline. For these organizations, developing high-potential employees is a priority, so that when change comes – as it inevitably will – they have the right people in the right places, ready to step up and step in.

Since 2004, NIB’s Business Management Training program has been preparing high-potential employees who are blind for leadership positions with remarkable results.

BY SHARON HERRIGAN

NIB and its associated nonprofit agencies are
The BMT class of 2019 includes 22 students from 18 NIB associated nonprofit agencies, NIB itself, and the program’s first international student, David Demers, a general manager with the Quebec Division of the Canadian National Institute for the Blind Foundation.

no exception. Leadership development has long been a priority – NIB launched its first leadership development track in 2003 as part of its Business Leaders Program (BLP), expanding the offerings in 2004 to include Business Management Training (BMT), a rigorous, 15-month program where participants who are legally blind gain business knowledge, critical thinking skills, and much more.

A Mini-MBA
BMT students receive executive-level education through the program, according to Karen Pal, BLP program director. “It’s really a mini-MBA,” says Pal. Over the course of 15-months, students travel to George
Mason University in Arlington, Virginia, to attend five 3½ day-long educational sessions. The curriculum, taught by George Mason faculty, includes much of the same coursework the university teaches to corporate executives. NIB covers the majority of costs for the program, including instructor’s fees, training materials, classroom facilities, and student travel, lodging, and group meals.

The program uses a flipped classroom approach: Students pre-learn material through reading assignments, then spend classroom time in faculty-guided discussion and application. While onsite, students analyze case studies, apply concepts to real-life scenarios, and exchange ideas with one another. Pre- and post-session reading assignments, group project work, and team conferencing.

Samantha Long (left) and Tevin Price exchange ideas during one of the program’s classroom sessions at George Mason University in Arlington, Virginia.
keep students in touch and engaged between sessions. Another critical component of the program are coaches who work with the students at their associated agencies, helping them apply their classroom learning to real-life situations on the job.

The challenging curriculum includes business strategy, business development, finance, marketing, operations, and leadership skills for personal, team, and organizational performance.

It is perhaps this last learning objective – leadership development – where the flipped classroom approach has the most impact. Students learn how to analyze tough business issues, think through solutions, and apply critical thinking skills in a business environment. Class sizes are limited to about 20 participants, allowing students to know their peers and professors better than they would in most college programs.

Getting into the program isn’t easy. Applicants must demonstrate their motivation to learn and leadership capacity. “Students are selected based on work experience and their ability to demonstrate strategic enterprise thinking. Admission is highly competitive,” says Pal, who notes that students must be proficient in the Microsoft Office Suite and use of the internet, and have mastery-level proficiency in the use of assistive technology.

The fifth BMT class, launched in September 2018, will graduate in 2019. “This class has 22 students,” notes Pal. “We had 43 applicants, so it was very competitive to get in.” The students represent 18 NIB associated agencies, NIB itself, and the program’s first-ever international student.
Demographics for the current class differ from previous years, according to Pal. More than half of the current students are 35 years of age or younger, a big change from previous classes, and half are women, an increase over previous classes where only about 25 percent of students were women.

“The goal of the program is to provide upward career mobility,” says Pal, a goal the program is realizing. Of the 98 graduates from previous classes, 73 percent have earned at least one job promotion.

Kevin Lynch, NIB president and CEO, says the promotions also reflect the dedication of NIB associated agencies to making career growth possible. “They are creating career paths,” says Lynch. “When they send employees to BMT, agencies not only assume the employees will learn and contribute that learning back at the agencies, they are creating opportunities for win-win advancement.”

**BMT’s First International Student**

The current BMT class welcomed its first international student, David Demers, currently general manager for the Quebec division of the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB) Foundation, which provides advocacy, rehabilitation, and job skills services to people in Canada who are blind. “My president and the president of NIB have discussed collaborating more, so when NIB offered to open the BMT program to CNIB, I was nominated.” says Demers.

Each BMT student has a unique career background and journey to the program, and Demers is no exception. Before losing his eyesight at the age of 29, he was a professional photographer and co-owner of a
restaurant. “I lost my vision quite suddenly,” recalls Demers. “One day I was a photographer, and the next day I was legally blind.”

“I worried about how I could continue to contribute to society,” says Demers. As is often the case, it took some time to adapt to his new circumstances. After taking assistive technology courses through CNIB and learning to travel by subway, he went to university and graduated at the top of his class with a major in public policy and community affairs. The former client also volunteered at CNIB, eventually serving on its board. He became general manager of CNIB Quebec in 2017.

For Demers the BMT program is a unique experience. “I like that I am learning with

Following classroom sessions at GMU, participants Henry Allen (left), James Martino, and others regroup after dinner to work on collaborative projects.
Paying It Forward
When Gary Wagner heard about the BMT program in 2014, his manager at the Olmsted Center for Sight in Buffalo, New York, encouraged him to apply. “I didn’t major in business and I wanted to learn,” Wagner recalls. Currently director of VA contracts for the Buffalo, New York, Veterans Affairs (VA) Medical Center, Wagner has retinitis pigmentosa, a hereditary condition that causes blindness over time. Before his vision deteriorated, Wagner had worked as an operations manager and had owned two small businesses. He reached out to Olmsted for help with assistive technology.
and was hired as a part-time switchboard operator for the Buffalo VA Center, a job that eventually turned into full-time employment. While grateful for the job, Wagner had other career aspirations. The BMT program, he believed, could help him move into a management role.

Wagner says the support he received at Olmsted was a key factor in his success because he had opportunities to apply the curriculum he was learning during the sessions to real-life situations at the agency. “Throughout the 15 months, they helped me reinforce my learning by appointing me to the strategic planning committee and giving me stretch assignments,” he recalls.

Participation in the BMT program prepared Wagner for promotion to switchboard manager at Olmsted’s call center for the VA’s Erie, Pennsylvania, Medical Center. “I was the first person who is blind to hold that role,” says Wagner. “My goal then, and to this day, is to eliminate any barriers to success for the person who succeeds me.” His successor in the Erie contact center was blind, as is the person who may ultimately succeed him in Buffalo, Samantha Long.

Long, assistant supervisor for the Buffalo VA call center, is a student in the current BMT class; Wagner serves as her coach. He says the agency is as supportive of Long as it was of him, appointing her to committees and providing stretch assignments.

Long learned about BMT during her job interview with Wagner and told him she would love to go through the program one day. Wagner agreed to support her application for the next class, and she
successfully made it through the application process.

Diagnosed with Stargardt Disease during her last semester of college, Long has a master’s degree in communications and leadership from Canisius College. Her involvement as a client and an employee with Olmsted spans 10 years. After earning her master’s degree she left the agency to pursue other professional opportunities, but returned to the switchboard position in 2017 because she had heard Olmsted wanted to hire a person interested in career development.

Long says the most recent BMT unit on finance “definitely took me outside of my comfort zone.” But with Wagner as her coach and the support she receives from Olmsted, she is confident she will get through it. The BMT program, she says, has given her an opportunity to expand her network and that, in turn, will bring even more opportunities.

“For me, meeting all of these people who are blind working in different departments, at different levels in their organizations, has been amazing,” says Long. “It’s been a real boost to my confidence.”

Wagner agrees the BMT experience provides a huge confidence boost. He says the program inspired him to go back to school to earn a business degree, something he would never have contemplated before participating in the BMT program. His ultimate goal is to one day become executive director at an NIB associated agency.

Olmsted President and CEO Tammy Owen, who served as Wagner’s coach, believes the BMT opportunity is
invaluable. “As a nonprofit, we don’t have a lot of resources to develop talent like Gary and Samantha,” she says, “but as employers, it’s our job to encourage people to develop and advance.” The BMT program, she says, not only assists employees with career development, it pushes agencies internally to develop opportunities for advancement.

Understanding the ‘Why’
Jamie Musson, print production supervisor at Envision Print, a division of Envision Inc. in Wichita, Kansas, says she has always been a big-picture person. “For something to make sense to me, I have to understand the ‘why,’” she says. That curiosity made Musson a perfect fit for the BMT class of 2010.
WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

The Business Management Training program is designed to prepare people who are blind for ever-increasing levels of responsibility and management positions. All four of these graduates believe the program put them squarely on the path to career success.

Dan Kelly
Dan Kelly was a national account manager for federal accounts at NIB when he enrolled in the BMT program in 2004. Today, Kelly is chief operating officer at NIB associated agency IFB Solutions in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. “The Business Management Training program provided the perfect combination of world-class education and practical application of learned concepts, especially in the capstone project we completed for not-for-profit agencies serving people who are blind,” Kelly says. “I have no doubt the program accelerated my career.”

Deborah Ambro-Crandall
Deborah Ambro-Crandell was the lead e-commerce customer service representative at Virginia Industries for the Blind when she joined the BMT Class of 2015. Now executive customer relationship manager at Industries for the Blind and Visually Impaired (IBVI) in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, she says the BMT program “expanded my business understanding and gave me the confidence to seek a management position. IBVI gave me an opportunity to manage a team of customer service and inside sales reps and now,
after nearly 3 years with the company, my team has grown from seven to 13 and my position has grown into a hybrid business development/business unit leadership role.”

Lee Tilson
Lee Tillson was materials and distribution manager at Horizon Industries, a division of East Texas Lighthouse for the Blind, when he joined the BMT class of 2007. Now vice president of sales and manufacturing at the organization, he praises BMT’s educational model that promoted out-of-the-box thinking with its case study approach to learning. “The format helped improve my presentation skills and provided me with the tools to better understand and navigate the team approach to project management,” he says. “In addition, the program provided a valuable opportunity to collaborate and grow relationships with other blind and visually impaired professionals and future leaders from across the country.”

Luis Narimatsu
Georgia Industries for the Blind Co-director Luis Narimatsu was a production employee and learning center instructor at the agency when he joined the first BMT class in 2004. “Looking back at my participation in the first class of BMT, I am humbled to have been part of a unique breed of professionals who have been bringing down barriers and expanding their careers into fields once exclusively reserved for sighted individuals,” he says. “The thought of what the future can hold for successive BMT classes fuels my passion to keep pushing the envelope.”
Musson attended college for two years and worked as a certified nursing assistant in a nursing home for four years before joining Envision in 1998. She started at Envision Print as a sales associate and then became printing lead for second shift. After she moved back to first shift and expressed an interest in management roles, her supervisor recommended the BMT program. To this day, Musson says, she applies BMT learning on the job.

Promoted to her current leadership position while going through the program, Musson says her responsibilities overseeing Envision Print operations have continued to expand over the years, keeping her challenged. In addition to supervising and coaching seven employees, she is in charge of coding invoices, tracking inventory, and handling most of the purchasing for Envision Print.

Musson credits the BMT program with helping her see the bigger picture, particularly when it comes to accounting, strategy, and production. “I came out of the program with a different kind of confidence,” she says. “It helped me develop an executive presence. I am really grateful I had the opportunity to go through the program.”

Learning for the Future
When Jonathan Sherbert entered the BMT program in 2014 he was director of finance and accounting at Alabama Institute for the Deaf and Blind in Talladega. Today, as the institute’s chief financial officer, he says the program built his business acumen and improved his management skills.

BMT “pushed me to a higher point faster than I would have
alone. It allowed me to grow as a manager and improve my leadership abilities,” he says, adding that he might not be in the position he has today if he hadn’t gone through the program.

“I learned strategic management, and that opened doors and windows for me. I could see more clearly how things worked,” says Sherbert. “It really changed my mindset and helped me make the jump to executive-level thinking.”

Sherbert, who started an MBA but never finished, earning his CPA instead, believes the BMT classes are on par with the MBA classes he took. “The caliber of the professors and the education was outstanding. I was so impressed,” he says. “The professors taught us just like they would Fortune 500 executives.”

Sherbert distinctly recalls what he terms his “Aha” moment during the program. “I realized that what the professors were giving me was preparation and knowledge to use at a time when it needed to be used. That it didn’t necessarily have to be used now,” says Sherbert. “Education like that gives you tools to pull out in the future.”

While success in the program depends on individual effort, Sherbert said being successful also requires family support. “My wife and family truly supported me when I was traveling and studying, not only for the BMT program, but also throughout the CPA process and my auditing career,” he says. “They always made me believe that I could do anything.”

Confidence Building

Tony Stephens was NIB’s manager of public policy and advocacy when he decided to apply for the BMT
class of 2015. “I wanted to expand my wheelhouse,” Stephens explains. “I’ve been really lucky. I’ve worked for nonprofits for 30 years, from the time I was 16 years old and worked at a camp for kids with disabilities. I had spent the past 8 years before I started the BMT program as a policy person. I wanted to spread my wings a little.”

Stephens, who was born legally blind due to a rare genetic disease, earned a bachelor’s degree in journalism and telecommunication and a master’s degree in mass communications from the University of Georgia. He worked as a journalist for a time after graduation because, he says, he wanted to be an advocate for people by telling their stories. Stephens says the BMT program helped him step up to another level in terms of advocating for others. The program also taught him financial and budgeting skills and leadership skills he uses today.

Perhaps most importantly, Stephens says, the program taught him to trust others. “As a person who is blind, you feel like you have to prove that you can do things. In doing that, you develop an independent streak and you don’t ask for help,” he explains. “Through the BMT program I learned that it’s okay to ask for help because we worked in teams.” Asking one another for help, Stephens said, built trust among team members.

Stephens says the BMT program also helped him build the self-confidence to seek out new opportunities. He left NIB in 2016 to become director of advocacy and governmental affairs at the American Council of the Blind, and was recently named executive director for the Downtown Baltimore Family Alliance. He
Tony Stephens, a graduate of the BMT class of 2015, spoke at the NIB/NAEPB National Symposium in 2018 as director of advocacy and governmental affairs for the American Council of the Blind. Today he is executive director for the Downtown Baltimore Family Alliance.

credits the BMT program with giving him the confidence to grow in his career.

“I was an amazing experience,” Stephens says of the BMT program. “As a person with a disability, you are told all your life that you can’t. This program is all about ‘can.’ ”

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

READY FOR THE FUTURE

National Industries for the Blind (NIB) has a new place to call home. Our new headquarters and national training center at 3000 Potomac Avenue in Alexandria, Virginia, is more than a place of business—it’s a strategic investment in the future of NIB and its mission to increase the independence of people who are blind. The 100,000-square-foot, LEED Gold-certified
building’s architecture makes a bold yet welcoming statement, blending sleek, modern design with inviting finishes.

The 10,000-square-foot event and training center, expected to open in spring 2019, will provide an ideal setting for NIB’s associated nonprofit agencies, customers, and partners to collaborate on ways to advance the interests of people who are blind.

Working with renowned architect Chris Downey, a specialist in universal design who is blind, the building design team incorporated open interiors, flexible workspaces, and state-of-the-art technologies that exemplify the function and spirit of the new building, and create an ideal setting for meaningful interactions.

The building is a prominent new addition to Alexandria’s Potomac Yard neighborhood. Once a busy railroad depot, Potomac Yard is transforming into a premier destination in the national capital region: Amazon will be opening its East Coast headquarters there and Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech) has committed to building an Innovation Campus nearby that will host graduate degree programs in computer sciences and software engineering, with specializations in fields like data sciences, analytics, and cybersecurity.

With the future of innovation literally in its backyard, the opportunities for NIB to carry out its mission have never been more promising.
HQ BY THE NUMBERS

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The 2018 NIB/NAEPB Training Conference and Expo, held November 13-16 in Arlington, Virginia, highlighted the strong partnership between NIB, its associated nonprofit agencies, and the U.S. military and military veterans. On November 15, an enthusiastic crowd of more than 800 general session attendees enjoyed presentations by Lieutenant General Darrell Williams, director of the Defense Logistics Agency; Administrator Emily Murphy, of the U.S. General Services Administration; Robbie Makinen, CEO of the Kansas City Area Transportation Authority; and members of the U.S. AbilityOne Commission™ In addition, Army veteran Steve Baskis shared insights learned on his inspiring journey of recovery from vision-destroying wounds sustained in Iraq to mountain climber and adventurer.

In the afternoon, nearly 100 exhibitors had the opportunity to meet face-to-face with decision makers representing government agencies to exchange ideas and build valuable business relationships on the floor of the Expo and NIB Marketplace.
“NIB agency employees present a positive and inspiring example of resilience. We consider you important partners and are committed to expanding job opportunities for differently abled people.”

Lt. Gen. Darrell Williams
Director, Defense Logistics Agency

“Our collective work will continue to change perceptions of what people who are blind are capable of.”

Reinhard Mabry
President, NAEPB
President and CEO, Alphapointe
“We have a great foundation here at NIB. Now we have to build on it to generate more jobs.”

Thomas Robinson
Chairperson, U.S. AbilityOne Commission

“The jobs that your nonprofit agencies provide are important to our communities.”

Rep. Sanford Bishop
D-GA2

Reinhard Mabry (left) and NIB President and CEO Kevin Lynch (right) recognized U.S. military veterans (left to right) Daryl Wells, IOB Greensboro; Rick Medina, Arizona Industries for the Blind; Ava Ward, IFB Solutions; and Herbert Humphrey, Mississippi Industries for the Blind, for service to their communities and our country.
“Blindness is a life-long challenge. Stare into the darkness and you’ll never find your way. Explore through the darkness and you’re bound to stumble upon a great adventure.”

Steve Baskis
U.S. Army veteran, Purple Heart recipient, adventurer

“People who accomplish things are those who charge ahead when change is needed. NIB has done this, and I thank them for it.”

Tina Ballard
Executive Director, U.S. AbilityOne Commission

“I have a diversability, not a disability, which I define. It doesn’t define me.”

Robbie Makinen
CEO, Kansas City Area Transportation Authority
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Available for purchase at AbilityOne.com, GSAAAdvantage.gov, AbilityOne Base Supply Centers™, or through AbilityOne authorized distributors.
AGENCY SPOTLIGHT

CIRCLE OF SUPPORT

Alabama Industries for the Blind has been keeping military service members looking sharp for more than 60 years.

BY ROSEMARIE LALLY, J.D.

Serving the needs of the men and women of the U.S. military as they serve our country is a longstanding point of pride for employees at NIB associated nonprofit agency Alabama Industries for the Blind (AIB).

AIB is a division of the Alabama Institute for Deaf and Blind (AIDB), which celebrated its 160th anniversary in 2018. AIDB provides comprehensive education and rehabilitation services to almost 25,000 infants, children, adults, and seniors throughout the state who are deaf, blind, or have multiple disabilities. Its myriad programs include schools for students who are deaf, blind, DeafBlind, or multiply disabled; its E.H. Gentry Technical Facility, which provides rehabilitation and education for adults; a statewide network of eight regional centers; and AIB, which provides job training and employment opportunities.

AIB got its start in 1932, when Mattie Gilbert Smith set out to improve employment opportunities for women who were blind. Armed with a borrowed sewing machine and accompanied by one seamstress who was blind, she attended women’s club meetings and local fairs, demonstrating how expert sewing projects could be completed by women who were blind. Local clubs responded enthusiastically, and the Lions Club donated sewing machines. Soon AIB was hiring more seamstresses to keep up with the volume of orders. Associating with NIB,
The agency began making pillowcases for the military and secured its first federal contracts for sewn goods. From this modest beginning, AIB has expanded dramatically, now operating four AbilityOne Base Supply Centers™ (BSCs) at the U.S. Army’s Redstone Arsenal and Fort Rucker Army posts in Alabama and at Moody Air Force Base and Robins Air Force Base in Georgia. The BSCs supply military and government personnel with everything from office products and furniture to computer

David Marshall sews “the loop” on a military necktie. The agency manufactures 400,000-500,000 neckties at its Talladega facility each year.
equipment, tactical supplies, and weapons accessories.

AIB employs roughly 280 people, most of whom work in manufacturing facilities in Talladega and Birmingham producing a variety of office and art supplies, maintenance and safety products, packing materials, and military equipment.

True to its roots, AIB still produces an array of sewn products for the military, including flyer’s kit bags, maintenance cases for M-16 rifles, and pillowcases. The agency is most proud of its status as the sole provider of military neckties to the U.S. Armed Services for the past 60 years. Diversity and Outreach Coordinator Donovan Beitel says on average, the agency manufactures 400,000-500,000 neckties yearly at its Talladega facility. “Our employees take great pride in providing a high-quality garment.”

“Every long necktie you see a servicemember wearing is made in this plant. We’re serving them, just as they are serving us,” says Beitel. “To some people it may be ‘just a tie,’ but to us it’s much more – it’s an opportunity for people to work and produce a meaningful product every day. Our true mission is that we serve the military, but we also create something beyond that tie – we create opportunities for people who are blind to live independent lives.”

AIB is one of a handful of NIB agencies funded through appropriations from a state legislature, making the agency employees state employees. AIB also administers Alabama’s state use program, serving as the mandatory source for state government agencies for an assortment of products. “Operating as a sort of mini-JWOD [Javits-Wagner-O’Day Act] agency, AIB can tailor
Determined to find work for women who were blind during the Great Depression, AIDB vocational instructor Mattie Gilbert Smith secured a donated sewing machine and put 10 seamstresses who were blind to work in a room at the Alabama School for the Blind in 1932. The sewing operation later merged with other vocational opportunities to form Alabama Industries for the Blind.

products to state agencies’ needs,” Beitel explains.

In addition to its federal and state contract work, AIB holds commercial contracts such as providing custom screen printing and embroidery services. It recently began recycling DVD cases and is pursuing additional opportunities in recycling.
The screening shop has an exclusive contract with Troy University to print its special event T-shirts, and holds a contract with a large barbecue company to screen print logos and sew drawstring bags for take-home biscuit mix. The company, which had been importing the bags and having them screen printed in the U.S., was happy to find AIB provided a single-source, made-in-the-U.S.A. solution. So far, 1 million bags have been produced.

Looking ahead to new opportunities for expansion, AIB wants to develop a customer contact center to support its own operations and ultimately, to serve state and federal agencies. “Our long-term goal is to be agile enough to quickly identify growth areas and develop good jobs for people who are blind and visually impaired,” explains Beitel.

Focusing on Employee Advancement
“In the spirit of AbilityOne, we try to provide opportunity for upward mobility to people coming to work here,” Beitel says. “We have eight regional centers so employees can move throughout the state to follow opportunities for better jobs.” Rushie Cochran, recipient of the agency’s 2018 Milton J. Samelson Career Achievement Award, has both benefitted from, and given back to, AIB and AIDB. Cochran is an alumna of the commercial sewing course at the E.H. Gentry Center.

In her 47 years at AIB, Cochran has done it all, from working in the commercial sewing unit, to operating switchboards, to her current position managing a group of 32 employees as supervisor of the military necktie department. “I’ve enjoyed all of it,”
Cochran says. “I’ve been given many opportunities here; AIB has taught me a lot about taking care of myself and made me independent.”

Even after nearly 50 years with AIB, Cochran is in no hurry to retire. “We have a nice group of people here and I try to encourage them to think and be as positive as possible,” she says. “I want others to see me as an example, a light to focus on to say, ‘if that person can do it, so can I.’ ”

Jonathan Robinson came to AIB in 2006 after a corneal disease, keratoconus,

*Production employee Andres Robinson packs bowl brushes for shipment.*
ended his employment as a millworker. Now employed as a line assistant at AIB, Robinson has developed computer skills, learned to use assistive technology, and completed several job training programs at the agency.

“I like helping and empowering other people, that really gives me confidence and pride,” Robinson says. “I’m inspired by my co-workers. The things they do are amazing. I enjoy coming to work every day.

I’ve never had a job before that I could say that about.”

Beitel agrees, saying that he looks forward to each day at AIB. After a successful career as a manager with the Alabama Farmers Cooperative, he returned to the organization where he had attended and graduated high school.

“I did all the things I’d wanted to do and proved what I needed to prove to myself as a business person,” he says.

Broom making was one of early trades taught at the Alabama School for the Blind, which became part of Alabama Industries for the Blind when the Adult Blind Department was created in the 1930s.
"I realized this life isn’t just about me and I wanted to help people who are visually impaired along their way, just like I’d been helped. I don’t have to come to work, I get to come to work.”

The spirit of service to country and others that runs so strongly through AIB employees continues to power the agency’s work as it explores future opportunities for growth and employment.

Rosemarie Lally, J.D., is a freelance writer and editor based in Washington, D.C.
NEW PRODUCTS

READY TO LAUNCH

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

1. SKILCRAFT® Industrial Wipes
Made with hydroentangled fibers, these low-lint, tear-resistant, multi-use shop towels stand up to tough industrial cleaning tasks even when wet. Great for general manufacturing and maintenance applications, and compatible with commonly used industrial solvents, these reusable wipes offer cloth-like absorbency and streak-free cleaning at a fraction of the cost. Packaged in convenient dispensers that hold 100 wipes, sold in boxes of five dispensers. TAA compliant, produced by Horizon Industries in Tyler, Texas.
2. SKILCRAFT® LED Folding Work Light
Illuminate a work area or shine a single beam of light with this folding work light featuring 10 energy-efficient surface-mounted LEDs, plus a single LED light on an extended arm that can function as a stand-alone, focused beam. Compact, lightweight, and portable, the light has an arm that opens to 180 degrees from the folded position, plus a magnetized spine and fold-away hook for hands-free use. This battery-operated light with variable settings emits 250 lumens at the highest setting and comes with three AA batteries. Produced by Industries for the Blind and Visually Impaired in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.
3. SKILCRAFT® Shipping Packaging Tape with Dispenser
Secure packages with this ultra-clear, moisture-resistant packaging tape that adheres easily to most surfaces. Easy-to-unwind tape includes dispenser with built-in blade to prevent sticking back on the roll, while clear-to-the-core design makes it easy to determine when it’s time for a refill. This made-in-the-U.S.A. tape is BPA free and meets U.S. Postal Service regulations. Produced by Alphapointe in Kansas City, Missouri.
4. SKILCRAFT®
Packing List Envelope
Protect packing lists throughout the shipping process with SKILCRAFT® Packing List Envelopes. Tamper-resistant, waterproof envelopes have a self-adhesive backing that sticks to cardboard, wood, plastic, or metal and a distinctive orange header that reads “Packing List Enclosed” in bold black font. These 4½ x 5½ inch side-loading clear envelopes, sold in packages of 100, are produced by West Texas Lighthouse for the Blind in San Angelo, Texas.

These and thousands of other products are available for purchase at AbilityOne.com, GSAAAdvantage.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.
After renowned composer Ludwig van Beethoven lost the remainder of his hearing around age 45, witnesses reported seeing him clench a wooden stick between his teeth while holding the other end of the stick against his piano, so he could feel the vibrations of the notes he produced.

In today’s vernacular, this method of sensing auditory vibrations is known as bone conduction: Soundwaves are transmitted through the human face and skull to bones within the inner ear. The bone conduction phenomenon, well known for centuries, has been an integral component in hearing aid designs since they first appeared in the marketplace in the 1970s. More recently, bone conducting transducer headphones have been used as an effective tool in specific military operations, for example, to allow enhanced situational auditory awareness by keeping ear canals unobstructed.

Today, a portable headphone company called Aftershokz...
which, for readers who are blind, is spelled with “kz,” rather than “cks” at the end of the word), is using bone conduction headphone technology to market its sports headphones to health enthusiasts who exercise in noisy or conversational environments.

And while sighted runners, joggers, and hikers alike use Aftershokz to enjoy listening to their music playlists and podcasts while crossing busy intersections or conversing with other hikers on nature trails, white cane users and service dog owners have discovered that both the wired and wireless Aftershokz headphone models are effective for many of the same uses.

While the Aftershokz line of headphones are not the cheapest in the market, it also is not the most expensive: Suggested retail prices range from $49.95 for wired models to $149.95 for wireless models. All four models of Aftershokz use rechargeable lithium ion batteries. Wireless units afford listeners up to six hours of continuous listening time, while wired units stretch that number to 12 hours. Both wireless and wired headphones take about two hours from depletion to reach full charge.

The wired, entry level Aftershokz Sports Titanium headphones ($49.95 MSRP) come in three colors – Ocean (blue), Onyx (black), and Lava (red/black) – are sweat-resistant, and include a 60-day stand-by charge. For an extra $10, a sibling model includes a microphone for making mobile phone calls.

The two wireless additions to the Aftershokz headphones line, the Trekz Titanium ($99.95 MSRP) and the ultra-lightweight flagship Trekz Air ($149.95 MSRP), are also sweat-resistant
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and include dual noise-canceling microphones and 33-foot Bluetooth wireless connectivity ranges. Both are available in an array of colors.

In addition, both wireless options utilize proprietary technologies called PremiumPitch™ (refined sound with extra bass) and LeakSlayer™. The latter purports to significantly reduce sound leakage while the dual transducers transmit soundwaves through user’s cheekbones.

The Aftershokz Trekz Titanium also includes a built-in voice assistant, called “Audrey Says,” which assists the user in performing basic headphone functions, such as controlling volume levels and activating voice calls.

All of the Aftershokz headphone models take advantage of the strength, flexibility, and durability of titanium metal – hence the use of the word Titanium in product names – and all models can be used effectively by people who rely on hearing aids.

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.
NIB Veterans Affairs Specialist Col. James Edward “Ned” Rupp, USA (Ret.), was recognized for his service in Vietnam at a presentation hosted at NIB headquarters on December 17, 2018. The presentation was part of a U.S. Department of Defense program to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Vietnam War and honor Vietnam-era veterans.

Rupp was commissioned in the U.S. Army after graduating from Arizona State University. Over the course of his military career, he served in a variety of assignments in the U.S. and overseas, including two tours in Germany and three in Vietnam.

Following his retirement from the Army, Rupp joined NIB as a product development specialist. After more than three decades with NIB, he now oversees the Wounded Warrior Program, helping transitioning veterans find opportunities for training, internships, and careers through NIB and the AbilityOne™ Program.
Employers are increasingly aware of the capabilities of employees who are blind, according to results of a 2018 survey commissioned by NIB. The survey, a follow-up to NIB’s 2012 study of employers’ attitudes about hiring people with disabilities including blindness, found that recruiting, training, and retaining employees with disabilities has grown in importance by 12 percentage points.

While hiring managers believe there are a greater number of jobs that can be successfully performed by employees who are blind, the survey found their likelihood of hiring someone who is blind stalled at 58 percent. NIB plans to use the survey results to build on current initiatives that aim to dispel common misconceptions about capabilities and the relatively low cost of providing workplace accommodations.

“The survey findings show that our efforts have raised awareness and understanding among employers across the country about the capabilities of people who are blind,” said Kevin Lynch, NIB president and CEO. “Even as we continue to make positive strides, it’s apparent that there is still more work to be done to translate education and awareness into creating meaningful employment opportunities for individuals who are blind.”
ABILITYONE COMMISSION VISITS BVI WORKFORCE INNOVATION CENTER

U.S. AbilityOne Commission™ Chairperson Thomas Robinson and Executive Director Tina Ballard visited the William L. Hudson BVI Workforce Innovation Center in Wichita, Kansas, December 17-18, 2018. The Workforce Innovation Center is a joint initiative of NIB associated nonprofit agencies Envision Inc. and LC Industries.

NIB’s Business Leaders Development Center is part of a strategic alliance formed with the Workforce Innovation Center to deliver world-class training and professional development for people who are blind. NIB is holding the classroom sessions of its next Effective Supervision training program at the Center.

AbilityOne Commission Executive Director Tina Ballard with Michael Monteferrante, president and CEO of NIB associated agency Envision Inc., at the William L. Hudson BVI Workforce Innovation Center.
NIB HONORS LOCAL VETERANS

NIB served as presenting sponsor for the Alexandria Chamber of Commerce “Salute to Veterans” breakfast on November 8, 2018. The annual event, which recognizes and celebrates the positive impact military veterans have on the city, is attended by local veterans, veteran-owned businesses, and other business that employ and support veterans.

NIB Executive Vice President and Chief Program Officer Angela Hartley, a member of the Alexandria Chamber of Commerce board of directors, chaired the planning committee for the event and delivered welcome remarks. “We are grateful for the opportunity to honor our nation’s veterans and employers who recognize the important contributions veterans make in the workplace,” Hartley said.

NIB and its network of associated nonprofit agencies employ more than 600 veterans across the country, including veterans who are blind, and provide employment and rehabilitation services to veterans and wounded warriors transitioning to civilian life. Many of the 30 veterans who work at NIB’s headquarters office in Alexandria attended the event.
FLYERS KIT BAG DELIVERS AT ARMY VS. NAVY GAME

ESPN broadcaster and football analyst Lee Corso, a former defensive backs coach at the U.S. Naval Academy, got a little help deciding which team to back in the annual Army vs. Navy football game when a headpiece representing Navy mascot Bill the Goat was delivered in a flyer’s kit bag. NIB associated agencies Alabama Industries for the Blind; BISM in Raleigh, North Carolina; IFB Solutions in Asheville, North Carolina; and Westmoreland County Blind Association in Greensburg, Pennsylvania, all produce the flyers kit bag.

SAVE THE DATE! 2019 NIB/NAEPB NATIONAL EVENTS

Mark your calendars for the 2019 NIB/NAEPB national events! The 2019 NIB/NAEPB National Symposium, scheduled for April 29-May 2, 2019, in Alexandria, Virginia, will bring together associated agency employees of the year from across the nation and will include training and Capitol Hill visits for the Advocates for Leadership and Employment. The 2019 NIB/NAEPB Training Conference and Expo, scheduled for October 15-18, 2019, in Arlington, Virginia, will focus on training and business development for NIB associated agencies, customers, and partners. Additional details on each event will be provided as they become available.
NIB is proud to deliver products, services, and custom solutions to U.S. military combat forces and support activities.

Visit NIB.org/Military to learn more. At NIB, our mission is to support yours.