

# VIRTUAL ADVOCATES SCORE TANGIBLE WINS

**In the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, NIB's Public Policy program adapts to develop leaders and preserve jobs and services for people who are blind.**

BY DOMINIC CALABRESE

Launched in 2012, the Advocates for Leadership and Employment program is a signature initiative of the public policy team at National Industries for the Blind (NIB). Like most in 2020, the Advocates program had to recalibrate and find a new way to carry out its mission in a world with limited in-person contact, and it did not disappoint. Not only did eight new Advocates complete initial training in a virtual environment, they helped NIB's public policy team score an important bipartisan victory in an age of deep political division.

The two-year Advocates training program targets high-potential employees who are blind at NIB associated agencies who are interested in learning about the public policy process. Before the coronavirus pandemic, Advocates selected through a competitive process came to NIB headquarters in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., for two days of intensive training.

The program is staggered, so each training session includes a class of novice Advocates and a class of Advocates who have completed the first year of training and can serve as mentors to the newcomers. In addition, program graduates share insights and tips with the newer Advocates. On-site training culminated in a day on Capitol Hill, where graduates and newer Advocates met with the offices of U.S. House and Senate members to discuss issues of importance to people who are blind and the AbilityOne® Program.

Vivian Fridas, NIB public policy specialist and Advocates manager, said that in addition to promoting the work done by NIB agencies, Advocates perform a number of important tasks like providing public policy updates to their agencies and representing them locally.

"Advocates who complete the program not only have a better understanding of the public policy process and how it affects our mission, they also develop relationships with their



▲ NIB's public policy team and the Advocates for Leadership and Employment give people who are blind a voice in the halls of Congress.

legislators and the people working in their offices and become empowered voices within their local disability community."

In 2020, in-person training gave way to virtual, but the results were still impressive. Working together, the Advocates and the public policy team organized a Virtual Grassroots Advocacy event in August, meeting with the offices of approximately 40 federal lawmakers.

"Our advocates were thrilled to be able to take the initiative and schedule sessions and then meet with either a lawmaker or member of their staff," Fridas says. "What excited them most was being heard and appreciated."

## Working to Save Jobs

The biggest accomplishment of 2020 for the Advocates and the NIB public policy team was passage of H.R. 4920, the Department of Veterans Affairs Contracting Preference Consistency Act of 2020, which will save hundreds of jobs for people who are blind, including many veterans.

Signed into law in August 2020 after receiving strong support from the leadership of the Veterans' Affairs Committees in both the House and Senate, the measure protects a majority of contracts with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) currently on the AbilityOne Procurement List, without affecting existing contracts held by veteran-owned small businesses.

"We are proud that for several decades, AbilityOne contracts with the VA have furnished steady employment for hundreds of people who are blind, who in turn, produce more than 1,300 products and provide critical services for the VA," says NIB Vice President for Public Policy Rick Webster. "Thanks to these VA contracts, this skilled and dedicated workforce has had great opportunities for employment and advancement in their careers."

## MEET THE 2020 CLASS OF ADVOCATES

Webster explains many of the jobs were threatened in the wake of recent court decisions that Congress intended the “Rule of Two” created by the Veterans Benefit Act (VBA) in 2006 to have priority over the AbilityOne® Program.

Under the Rule of Two, the VA was required to award contracts to service-disabled veteran-owned small businesses and veteran-owned small businesses when at least two such entities were identified as qualified offerors.

Until mid-2019, the VBA provisions were implemented alongside other contracting programs, including the AbilityOne Program. But following the court rulings, the VA’s implementation of the rule effectively pitted people who are blind against veterans for federal contracting opportunities.

“The competition between two worthy groups meant everyone was losing,” Webster explains, noting that without passage of H.R. 4920, not only would hundreds of Americans who are blind, including veterans, lose their jobs, there would be other dire consequences.

“Dozens of nonprofit organizations that employ these individuals and provide critical services in local communities across the country for thousands of people — including services for children, aging adults, and veterans — would have been irreparably harmed. Some would have had to close their doors permanently.”

Although the compromise spelled out in H.R. 4920 likely sacrifices the opportunity for AbilityOne providers to do new business with the VA, the law is estimated to preserve roughly 65% to 70% of AbilityOne contracts with the agency. Webster is gratified that the agreement allows two critical programs to co-exist and serve their respective constituencies.

“Passage of this legislation was a great victory for hundreds of people who are blind, including blinded veterans who have jobs through NIB associated agencies.”

“It was an intensive negotiating process,” Webster recalls, “but we ultimately prevailed by listening to each other, forging effective coalitions, and agreeing to compromise for the larger goal of saving jobs for blind and visually impaired Americans.”

Webster saluted NIB agencies and Advocates for their tireless efforts to forge an agreement acceptable to all parties.

### Compromise Preserves Services

Among agency employees who are blind assisting with the H.R. 4920 effort was Scott Thornhill, who serves as director of public policy at Alphapointe, an NIB associated agency based in Kansas City, Missouri.

Thornhill agrees the H.R. 4920 negotiations were ultimately successful because all parties had the same goals: Securing jobs for veterans and people with disabilities. “It was never an us versus them situation,” he says. “Many AbilityOne organizations like ours employ vets.”



**RON BARON**  
General Manager,  
Central Association for the  
Blind and Visually Impaired  
Utica, New York

Ron oversees daily operations converting raw products into packaged finished products, acts as liaison between the Utica and Syracuse locations, and coordinates public policy and community outreach within the Syracuse area.



**CRAIG ELLIS**  
Community Relations  
Administrator  
East Texas Lighthouse  
for the Blind  
Tyler, Texas

Craig directs his outreach efforts in marketing, public relations, vision awareness training, fundraising, public policy, and employment services.



**ALISON FORTNEY**  
Customer Service  
Representative  
IBVI  
West Allis, Wisconsin

Alison is responsible for custom apparel quoting, order management, and managing art proofs. She attended her first Capitol Hill meeting with legislators to discuss issues affecting people who are blind in 2019.



**EARNEST GLOVER**  
Marketing Assistant  
The Lighthouse  
for the Blind, Inc.  
Summerville, South Carolina

Earnest leveraged previous business experience to move into his current position, and also serves as the agency’s public-facing liaison, meeting with government officials and local community groups.

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“The important thing is that these contracts represent real jobs that matter, that provide a good living for many people who are blind, including veterans, so they can still give back to their communities and their country.”

Passage of the Act also represents a triumph of bipartisanship in a time of deep political divisions in the country.

Lise Pace, vice president of external affairs at NIB associated agency Bosma Enterprises, explains the passage impacts more than just jobs.

“The signing of this bill into law was critical for Bosma,” Pace says, pointing out that nearly 95% of the Indianapolis-based agency’s ability to provide employment and services is linked to its VA contracts.

“The loss of those contracts would have been devastating to the state of Indiana,” she says. Pace estimates services for approximately 1,000 people annually — in addition to more than 200 jobs — were saved thanks to the legislation.

“We are the largest employer and statewide service provider for people who are blind, passing this legislation will allow us to continue the mission-driven work we do in this community for decades.”

Dan Kelly, executive vice president of strategy and programs at NIB associated agency IFB Solutions, based in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, agrees, saying the agency “can now continue creating jobs and providing training and other services to people who are blind or visually impaired.”

Fridas notes that the effort was more like a marathon than a sprint. Whenever possible, Advocates engaged lawmakers and their staffs in support of H.R. 4920. “We’re very proud of the way they did their part in helping ensure the legislation passed,” she says.

Rounding out the year, the advocates assisted with an NIB-supported resolution introduced by Mike Braun (R-Indiana), Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska), David Perdue (R-Georgia) and Tim Scott (R-South Carolina) in August that recognized the contributions of essential workers with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic and thanked them for continuing to provide vital services to the country.

Despite the difficulties of the pandemic, NIB’s public policy team and the Advocates for Leadership and Employment will continue giving people who are blind a voice in the halls of Congress, and working to secure jobs and recognition for the thousands of NIB associated agency employees assisting the nation in responding to one of its greatest challenges. □

*Dominic Calabrese, a freelance writer, professor, and consultant in Columbia, South Carolina, previously served as senior vice president, public relations, at The Chicago Lighthouse for People Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired.*

## MEET THE 2020 CLASS OF ADVOCATES



**ALICIA HOWERTON**  
Community Relations Specialist  
Cleveland Sight Center,  
Cleveland, Ohio

Alicia, who has held a variety of positions in nearly 10 years with the agency, acts as liaison to a range of external stakeholders and advocates on issues and policies that impact people who are blind.



**SOPHIA MCCALL**  
Contact Center Agent  
Lighthouse Works!  
Orlando, Florida

Sophia ensures needed data is collected and kept confidential, provides customer service internally and externally, and participates in committee meetings within the agency.



**AARON PETERSON**  
Customer Experience Associate  
Outlook Nebraska,  
Omaha, Nebraska

Since transitioning from a manufacturing position, Aaron has taken responsibility for all ordering processes, shipping, price quoting, and customer credit applications.



**SUELLEN PORTER**  
Customer Services Supervisor  
North Central Sight Services,  
Williamsport, Pennsylvania

SuelLEN, who previously worked as a purchasing logistics agent, now serves as customer services supervisor. She also represents the agency as an advocate at the state capitol and has participated in two local public policy forums.