Answering the Call
NIB associated agencies provide critical supplies to those on the front lines battling COVID-19
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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.
Unlike anything most of us have ever experienced, the global coronavirus pandemic poses a once-in-a-century challenge. As the dimensions of the threat came into focus in early March and the economy shut down in an effort to slow the spread, people who are blind working at NIB associated nonprofit agencies rose to the challenge.

Many NIB associated agencies were designated a part of the nation’s essential critical infrastructure, requiring them to remain open and provide the federal government and military with essentials such as face masks, gloves, sanitizers, and cleaning supplies. At other agencies, employees who are blind stayed on the job to answer community referral lines and assist the newly unemployed with accessing much-needed benefits to help their families survive. Unlike other
challenges they have responded to, the coronavirus presented agencies with new obstacles, as measures had to be quickly implemented to keep employees safe while they worked to answer the nation’s call.

In this issue of Opportunity magazine, you’ll read about the efforts of our associated agencies to provide critical supplies to help those on the frontlines of the battle, including an agency in Texas that tripled its yearly output of hand sanitizer to provide 3 million bottles in just five months, agencies in the New York State Preferred Source Program for New Yorkers Who Are Blind that provided a year’s worth of exam gloves in just 45 days, and agencies coordinating to fulfill a U.S. Air Force order for more than 500,000 protective face masks.

As they have done in times of national crisis since the Second World War, people who are blind working at NIB associated agencies are showing their willingness and ability to not only answer, but exceed expectations, when the nation calls.

Kevin A. Lynch
President and Chief Executive Officer
ANSWERING THE CALL

NIB associated agencies provide critical supplies to those on the front lines battling COVID-19.

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WASHINGTON AGENCY PRODUCES ONE MILLIONTH WALLBOARD

The Lighthouse for the Blind, Inc., in Washington, celebrated production of its one millionth wallboard in June. The agency used innovative technology to create an accessible production line, resulting in nearly 150 employment opportunities for people who are blind.

“Producing 1 million wallboards strongly highlights the jobs that have been created through this great partnership between the Lighthouse, Quartet®, and the AbilityOne® Program,” said

Employees at the Lighthouse for the Blind, Inc., Spokane facility celebrate the 1 millionth Quartet®/SKILCRAFT® wallboard produced at the agency. Pictured left to right are David Fair, machine operator; Monica Stugelmeyer, machine operator; Karl Schafler, easel set up; and Dustin Bradford, plant manager.
NIB LAUNCHES WEEKLY BLOG

NIB launched a weekly blog, NIB Connection, in April to share news and stories about its mission and the people working at NIB associated nonprofit agencies. In addition to stories about individual agencies, the blog provides readers with information about the many aspects of employment for people who are blind — from training to advocacy to assistive technology — as well as the innovative SKILCRAFT products and services they provide.

THE 2020 TRAINING CONFERENCE AND EXPO IS GOING VIRTUAL

This year’s NIB/NAEPB Training Conference and Expo will be a virtual event the week of October 12, 2020. NIB and NAEPB decided against holding an in-person event out of an abundance of caution and concern for attendee health and safety.

The first-ever NIB/NAEPB Virtual Training Conference and Expo will be a memorable event with ample opportunities to learn and collaborate. Save the date and look for more information on NIB.org/2020TCE.

President and CEO Cindy Watson. “It symbolizes the foresight and vision within the Lighthouse.”

“The millionth wallboard is a landmark event, but the future is what we’re looking toward,” said Chief Operating Officer Pat O’Hara. “The expansion of the line will bring new products into this building so we may continue to grow with our partner Quartet. We’ll continue to serve our customers to ensure that they have the best high-quality product, built by people who are blind.”
NIB ANNOUNCES NEW BOARD LEADERSHIP AND MEMBERS

NIB announced updates to the organization’s board leadership and membership following its January board of directors meeting. NIB’s board is comprised of 12 private sector representatives and eight NIB associated agency CEOs.

Paul Healy, Ph.D., was announced as the new chairperson of the NIB board of directors. Dr. Healy, who previously served as the board’s vice chairperson, is the James R. Williston Professor of Business Administration and Senior Associate Dean for Faculty Development at the Harvard Business School. Dr. Healy has served on the NIB board since 2017.

Board member A. Robert Bloom, CPA, was named vice chairperson, and board member Vikram Agarwal, Esq., was named treasurer. Prior NIB board chairperson Susan Costlow will remain on the board as a private sector member.
To the thousands of people working at NIB associated nonprofit agencies to produce critical supplies for those on the front lines of the battle against COVID-19,

As they have since 1938, people who are blind are answering our nation’s call to service and helping to keep the U.S. Defense Industrial Base strong in difficult times.

THANK YOU.

Kevin A. Lynch
President and CEO
National Industries for the Blind

Reinhard Mabry
President, National Association for the Employment of People Who Are Blind
President and CEO, Alphapointe
When the coronavirus pandemic presented a once-in-a-century challenge to communities across the U.S. and around the world, NIB associated nonprofit agencies sprang into action, providing critical supplies to those on the front lines of the battle. Designated as part of the country’s essential critical infrastructure, agency leaders worked

From the pandemic’s epicenter in New York to the San Francisco Bay area, people who are blind working at NIB associated agencies are doing their part to fight COVID-19.

BY DOMINIC CALABRESE

At San Antonio Lighthouse for the Blind and Vision Impaired, a team of 13 has been making masks for local health care organizations and other members of the community.
with rehabilitation engineers to design safe, socially distanced workspaces and health protocols so employees who are blind could produce personal protective equipment and cleaning supplies, and even help one hard-hit state deal with an unprecedented onslaught of unemployment claims.

In all, nearly 4,000 people who are blind working at 40 NIB associated agencies across the country are providing nearly 1,600 COVID-related products and services. As they have in crises and conflicts since the Second World War, people who are blind are answering the nation’s call in the fight against this incomparable foe and helping to keep the U.S. Defense Industrial Base strong.

San Antonio Lighthouse Steps Up
When the calls for help came in, Mike Gilliam, the agency’s CEO and president, couldn’t say no to University Hospital and the Southwest Research Institute. The organizations desperately needed washable, reusable cloth masks for local healthcare professionals fighting the coronavirus.

“I explained that we were already committed to fulfilling our contractual obligation to deliver military uniforms and helmet chinstraps to our Army and Air Force customers,” Gilliam recalls. “But I knew that we couldn’t turn them down, especially during a national emergency.”

So Lighthouse employees who are blind and visually impaired added mask making to their already busy days manufacturing military apparel and helmets. To make it happen, the Lighthouse quickly implemented some major changes, including readjusting workspaces and reassigning employees.
To increase mask production, Gilliam added temporary team members and moved some existing trained sewers and others into the group, making a total of 13 people involved in the mask-making process. To make the most of existing resources, the team utilizes material with an outdated camouflage design that the agency previously used in making military uniforms.

By mid-April the Lighthouse, along with partners Jon Hart Design and Dixie Flag Company, had provided nearly 10,000 masks, increasing production to 1,500 per day. The cloth masks were sent to medical clinics, local businesses, doctor’s offices, and the general public, as well as Lighthouse team members and their families.

Gilliam attributes the agency’s success to the “can-do” attitude of Lighthouse team members, who are committed to making life “better and safer for all San Antonians.” Through it all, his top goal has been ensuring the safety of his team.

“We needed to do everything we could to protect the personal and financial health of our Lighthouse family,” Gilliam explains. “We had to prevent exposure to the virus, while at the same time meeting our ever-increasing customer commitments.”

To lessen the chance of disease spread in the workplace, employees with other risk factors were sent home to telework when possible. Concerned about the economic toll the coronavirus could take if an employee got sick, Gilliam obtained board approval to provide five extra days of paid time off to all team members.

That measure, along with existing time off plus the federal government stimulus
checks, enabled a majority of Lighthouse employees to receive the equivalent of full pay for roughly four to six weeks, Gilliam says.

To ensure the well-being of onsite staff, everyone wears masks and has their temperatures taken upon entering the facility, and social distancing is strictly enforced. And, Gilliam says cleaning crews are keeping the Lighthouse virtually spotless.

“I wish that my own home was as clean,” he says, “but please don’t tell my wife I said that.”

**New Safety Measures Help Beyond Vision Continue Critical Services**

NIB associated agency Beyond Vision, founded in 1903, provides a broad array of services from call center support to machining, assembly, packaging, and providing supplies to the federal government, military,
KEEPING AMERICA STRONG

PEOPLE WHO ARE BLIND ARE HELPING THE NATION FIGHT COVID-19

40

NIB associated nonprofit agencies manufacturing COVID-related products

3,780

People who are blind producing COVID-related products

1,580

Different COVID-related products available
Using sewing expertise to produce hundreds of thousands of face masks

Leveraging call center capabilities to help aid in the surge of unemployment claims

Partnering with plastic suppliers to manufacture face shields

Producing vinyl shower curtains for use as hospital bed dividers

Altering Army construction kits with components to build emergency field hospitals

Using cutting equipment to make protective hospital gowns
and major corporations. But coping with the global coronavirus pandemic presented a special challenge.

Taking quick and decisive action to protect its employees from COVID-19 has allowed Beyond Vision to continue providing essential products to the federal government, U.S. military, and such major companies as Harley-Davidson, Caterpillar, and General Electric.

“As soon as the threat posed by the coronavirus became evident, developing a clear and comprehensive response became our top priority,” says President and CEO Jim Kerlin.

Kerlin and his leadership team crafted a COVID-19 Response Plan to ensure Beyond Vision follows guidelines established by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). In addition, they benchmarked best practices from other NIB agencies.

In mid-March, when the coronavirus intensified, Beyond Vision implemented a work-from-home policy for as many positions as possible. Managers conduct daily Zoom briefings on employee safety and operations. Text messages, email, social media, and video messaging keep employees updated.

Key to the organization’s success has been its corps of dedicated and talented employees, about 60 of whom are blind.

“From the very beginning, we made a commitment to employee safety and well-being,” says Senior Director of Relationships and Business Services Rob Buettner, who has Stargardt’s Disease, which causes loss of central vision. “We made a conscious
decision to trust our people and our culture, and that trust is the reason we have been able to weather this storm.”

For employees who can’t work from home, the commitment to safety includes steps to maintain social distancing in the workplace, including moving workstations on the manufacturing floor and splitting lunch shifts to reduce the number of staff in community areas. In addition, personal protective equipment and masks are available to all onsite employees, and the agency uses no-touch thermometers to conduct daily temperature screening. To deal with vacancies of production team members who needed to self-isolate due to health concerns, temporary staff were hired to ensure Beyond Vision could continue to meet customer needs.

Kerlin is proud of the team and how well they have handled the crisis. “It has been amazing to observe how the entire staff has grown through this experience,” he says. “The leadership team and employees from all parts of the company have stepped up to be innovative. They really embody the team spirit and never-give-up-even-in-the-face-of-great-adversity attitude that’s at the heart of our culture.”

**Bosma Expands Medical Glove Production**

To do its part in the fight against the coronavirus, NIB associated agency Bosma Enterprises is continuing its long tradition of supplying medical gloves and other supplies to aid hospitals run by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), which are on the forefront in battling COVID-19.

Established in Indianapolis in 1915, Bosma is Indiana’s only comprehensive provider of rehabilitation and training
services for people who are blind, and the state’s largest employer of people who are blind. For the past 20 years, it has also been a leader in providing medical gloves to the VA, shipping well over a half-billion gloves each year.

“To accommodate the VA, we are working with our glove suppliers, shifting staff, reallocating resources, and moving up shipments to meet as much demand as possible,” explains Bosma President and Chief Executive Officer Jeffrey Mittman.

A U.S. Army veteran who himself was injured and ultimately lost his eyesight, Mittman was helped during his initial recovery by many of the same products Bosma provides today. He emphasized that protecting Bosma staff, the majority of whom are blind or visually impaired, from COVID-19 was foremost in his mind as the agency increased production to assist the VA.

To ensure employees’ wellbeing, the agency continues to make every effort to fully comply with CDC guidelines, as well as with

At Bosma Enterprises in Indianapolis, employees who are blind ordinarily package a half-billion exam gloves for VA hospitals each year. In 2020, the agency expects to far exceed that number.
those issued by state and county health departments.

In addition, about half of Bosma’s employment force of 200 people are teleworking, and those who come in to produce medical products wear gloves, gowns, and masks. Hand sanitizer is readily available throughout the facility and social distancing is strictly adhered to, with workstations spaced six feet apart.

“I couldn’t be prouder of our team,” Mittman says. “They haven’t missed a beat and every day are giving their best effort to help their fellow Americans who are engaged in the battle of a lifetime against coronavirus.”

Among them is John Rowland, who supplies the exam glove line with raw materials and checks the quality of final products before they are sent to customers. Rowland’s eyesight was damaged by a treatment he received as a premature infant. As he got older, his vision deteriorated until he could no longer perform the job he had held for 21 years. In 2010, Bosma gave him a chance to work again and he has been employed with the agency ever since.

Rowland appreciates Bosma’s vote of confidence in him and says that he couldn’t be happier to step up and supply healthcare workers at the VA with the personal protective equipment they need. Amidst the discouraging news and the difficulties of the pandemic, remaining focused on his work helps him stay positive. “I remember the good that we’re doing across the country,” he says.

Austin Lighthouse Ramps Up Production of Hand Sanitizers and Soaps

Just a year ago, employees at the Austin Lighthouse for the Blind would never have dreamed that the hand sanitizers and soaps they
produce would become key weapons in the fight against one of our nation’s most formidable foes.

As the nationwide threat from the coronavirus became more apparent, the agency started making plans to increase production and shipments beyond the approximately 100,000 bottles of GOJO Purell hand sanitizers it produced each month (1.2 million bottles annually). Given that track record, Austin Lighthouse was a natural choice for federal and state officials to call upon.

By April, the agency had more than tripled its normal output of the products, according to Jim Meehan, Austin Lighthouse president and CEO. To accomplish this, the agency slowed production in other areas and transferred staff members to hand sanitizer production.

“We increased staffing from 32 people to 96 and the number of production lines from 3 to 8, as well as investing in additional equipment to increase our daily capacity,” he explains. On May 12, the agency shipped its 3 millionth bottle of Purell hand sanitizer.

The products go to federal agencies, Texas state agencies, Austin government offices, U.S. military bases, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), VA hospitals, and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS).

In addition, Meehan’s team began producing cloth face masks.

“We provided at least one face mask to every employee, plus hundreds to area nonprofits like Central Texas Food Bank, Boys and Girls Club, Meals on Wheels, and a local shelter for women and children,” he says.

Designated by both the federal and Austin city governments as an essential business,
Austin Lighthouse for the Blind tripled the number of employees like Brandon Colvin (above) working on hand sanitizer and soap products, and increased production from 1.2 million bottles of hand sanitizer annually to 3 million bottles in just five months.

the Lighthouse kept 250 employees who are blind working, with approximately 120 producing hand sanitizer, dispensers, and cloth masks.

Like his counterparts around the country, Meehan puts a premium on the safety and wellbeing of his employees. “Everyone is screened and their temperatures are taken upon entering our buildings,” he says. All work stations, lunch room, and break room tables are set at least six feet apart. Additional custodians have come on board to disinfect spaces and additional hand sanitizer dispensers are placed in high traffic areas.

Among the employees who have stepped up to deliver
Jennifer Holloway is one of the essential employees who are blind working to fill a spike in orders for cleaning products at the Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired in San Francisco. Photo copyright Frederic Neema/laif/Redux.

COVER STORY Continued from page 23

is Joe Perez, a warehouse specialist who lost his eyesight at age 56. Perez credits technological innovations like the voice-activated Bluetooth headset that helps him do his job with maximum efficiency.

“The technology is awesome,” Perez said. “It allows me to travel through the warehouse by myself, pick up and drop off boxes, then return to the main shipping area.”

Meehan appreciates Perez and the whole team, “I am so proud of them for stepping up and delivering when their community and their country needed them most.”
IFB Solutions Produces Masks for U.S. Air Force, VA Hospitals, and Public

Utilizing its extensive textile operations and its team of experienced sewing operators, many of whom are blind, NIB associated agency IFB Solutions is manufacturing thousands of cloth face masks for the United States Air Force and the general public, as well as donating hundreds to VA hospitals.

Based in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, IFB, which is one of the largest employers of people who are blind or visually impaired in the U.S., produces a wide variety of goods for the federal government, including apparel, mattresses, and office supplies.

“Throughout the pandemic, we’ve been honored to do our part and produce important PPE for the U.S. military, the public, and our veterans at VA hospitals,” says IFB President and CEO David Horton.

IFB is one of six AbilityOne-participating agencies working to deliver up to 576,000 masks under a contract with the U.S. Air Force. Horton says his team was ready when the first purchase order for 10,000 masks came in on April 23.

“We had already set up a line for masks that we were making for our own employees, so the switch was easy,” he says. More than 25 employees have moved to the Air Force mask production line.

The agency is also selling masks to the general public through its online retail store. “We want everyone to have the opportunity to protect themselves and their co-workers,” says Horton.

Horton emphasizes that IFB is mindful of the danger posed by COVID-19 and is doing everything it can to keep employees safe.
As New York became an epicenter of the coronavirus pandemic, many agencies that are part of the New York State Preferred Source Program for New Yorkers Who Are Blind (NYSPSP) stepped into the breach. Deemed essential early in the crisis, these agencies became a lifeline for hard-hit state and local government agencies and the New Yorkers they serve.

Having adopted “just-in-time” inventory methods to save costs, New York State and New York City government agencies, as well as public hospitals and transit systems, were in desperate need of personal protective equipment (PPE), sanitizing solutions, and safety gear. As the inventory of many essential items was quickly depleted, suppliers ran out of stock and were unable to replenish shelves, prompting NYSPSP agencies to begin directly sourcing items and finding new vendors for products in high demand.

The efforts paid off. Central Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired (CABVI) in Utica, had an abundant inventory of exam gloves while numerous large medical supply companies were out of stock. In 45 days, NYSPSP supplied state and New York City hospitals, the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA,) and other New York City agencies with more gloves than many of them order in an entire year. Exam and food service gloves were bought for use as cleaning gloves by organizations that needed to clean and disinfect offices and public facilities. The MTA, responsible for buses and subways in New York City, needed immediate supplies of masks and gloves to protect employees, and NYSPSP was able to supply them.
Many agencies that are part of the New York State Preferred Source Program for New Yorkers Who Are Blind stepped into the breach when the state became an epicenter of the coronavirus pandemic. Deemed essential early in the crisis, these agencies became a literal lifesaver by providing personal protective equipment, gloves, and sanitizers, as well as services, to state and local government agencies.

A number of NYSPSP affiliated agencies retooled and started making products they had never made before to answer the call of government officials in desperate situations. Among those agencies was Northeastern Association of the Blind at Albany (NABA). NABA had long produced cleanroom coveralls using Body Filter 95+ material, which protects against particulates as small as 0.3 microns, similar to the N95 respirator masks so critical for health care employees on the frontlines of the pandemic.

“As the pandemic worsened and New York became the nation’s most infected state,
we retooled operations and added face masks made from the Body Filter 95+ material we use in coveralls to our production flow, to support the efforts of those on the frontline fighting the disease,” explains NABA CEO and Executive Director Christopher Burke.

NYSPSP agencies provided critical services as well. In Rochester, employees who are blind working at the Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired (ABVI)-Goodwill of the Finger Lakes put in long hours answering the region’s 211 crisis hotline, which fields calls for crises from job loss to mental health issues. The hotline, which typically receives 200-300 calls per day, was receiving 500 daily calls by the end of March from area residents seeking assistance in dealing with the financial devastation that resulted when many lost their jobs due to the nationwide shutdown of the economy. Associate Commissioner Brian Daniels, of the New York State Commission for the Blind, summed up the feelings of many in the state when he said “The New York State Preferred Source Program for New Yorkers who are Blind has been a literal lifesaver by providing PPE, gloves, and sanitizer to the Office of Children and Family Services and the entire state of New York.”
and healthy. The agency set up a Coronavirus Response Team that handles communications, policies, and safety; onsite medical staff provide free health care and consultation for employees who have questions about COVID-19 or are coping with high-risk conditions.

In addition, IFB enforces a strict social distancing policy, routinely sanitizes all work areas, strongly encourages employees to wear masks, and requires temperature checks before entering the building.

Among those working on IFB’s mask production line is Winter Robinson, 25, who is visually impaired and deaf in one ear. Previously employed in the agency’s optical lab before being retrained to join the mask production team, she has family members serving in the Army and Navy, including several who have served in combat.

“I can’t see, so I can’t serve, but I can help out by making these masks,” she says. “I love knowing I can contribute something. This job gives me an opportunity to keep working, earn a paycheck, and support my community.”

Robinson’s sentiments are typical of those Horton hears from agency employees each day. “I am thankful for their commitment to IFB and our mission,” he says. “We are truly a family.”

Lighthouse Central Florida Helps Unemployed Stay Afloat
Tourism is the heart of Central Florida’s economy, so when the nation went on lockdown and travel ground to a halt, the home of Disney World, Universal Studios, and other popular tourist attractions was especially hard-hit. In Orlando, employees at the Lighthouse Works 4Sight360 call center team put in long
hours to help local residents who lost their jobs access unemployment benefits. “I couldn’t be prouder of our dedicated and talented team members helping their fellow citizens secure benefits to take care of their families during this emergency,” says Kyle Johnson, president and CEO of Lighthouse Central Florida and its subsidiary Lighthouse Works.

The agency is Central Florida’s only private, professional nonprofit offering a comprehensive range of vision-specific rehabilitation services to residents in Orange, Seminole, and Osceola counties. Johnson notes that the agency is no stranger to community service, having provided education, independent living skills, and job training and placement to more than 100,000 people who are visually impaired and their families since 1976.

**Cole DeLuca is one of more than 25 IFB employees working to produce tens of thousands of masks for the U.S. Air Force.** When the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity
reached out for assistance in March, as the pandemic caused massive layoffs, Lighthouse Works had the infrastructure and in-house trainers in place. “One of our first business lines was a commercial contact center in which we were handling unemployment calls for the Department for a little more than a year,” Johnson explains.

To accommodate the extra workload, he expanded the full-time staff from 15 to about 40. All but one team member is blind or visually impaired. The Bank of America Charitable Foundation provided a $20,000 gift to help support employment training and procurement activities at Lighthouse Works.

“At a time of such volatility and economic uncertainty, it’s incredibly reassuring to have the stability of a partner who shares your values and supports your mission,” Johnson says of the Foundation.

The funding also allowed Lighthouse Works’ Supply Chain division to continue purchases of personal protective equipment like masks, gloves, and hand sanitizers to support the efforts of local hospitals and state agencies, including the Division of Emergency Management, Department of Health, and Department of Corrections.

Like its counterparts across the country, Lighthouse Central Florida adopted procedures to ensure the safety of employees. All staff and visitors receive temperature checks as well as face masks upon entering the agency’s main facility, and hand sanitizer is available throughout the building.

Despite the stress of dealing with the pandemic’s
At Lighthouse Central Florida, Sophia McCall is one of 40 employees who are blind or visually impaired working to help Floridians access unemployment benefits.

challenges, staff members count their blessings. “The hardest part has been reassuring my children that everything will be okay, even though things are so uncertain,” says Sophia McCall. A customer care professional who has been with the agency for three years, she currently processes unemployment claims.

“I’m grateful to have a job where I can make a difference in peoples’ lives and offer a little hope when some situations are so bleak,” she says. “It makes me realize how fortunate I am.”

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.
NIB’s one-of-a-kind ProMOTE program offers in-depth computer training that levels the playing field, closes skills gaps, and enhances career options for people who are blind.

BY SHARON HORRIGAN

NIB has always been dedicated to creating innovative career opportunities for people who are blind. “It’s our — and our associated agencies’ — core mission,” says Billy Parker, NIB’s program director for employment support services. “So when we realized we were having
trouble recruiting people into higher-level positions here at NIB, we had to ask why.”

The analysis revealed one big outlier: candidates’ computer skills. Many assistive technology (AT) users had only a basic level of computer training — enough to complete essential tasks, but not enough to meet the demands of higher-level jobs.

“Once we identified the barrier, we started looking for existing training to help correct it,” says Parker. “We assumed this level of in-depth training already existed, but it didn’t. So we decided to create it ourselves.”

**Designing the Program**

“People who are blind can’t just point a mouse, click on the ‘Help’ button, and watch

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*ProMOTE students (left to right) Akosua Asaber, from The Lighthouse for the Blind, Inc.; Katy Ng, from NewView Oklahoma; Cindy Van Winkle, also from The Lighthouse for the Blind, Inc.; and Allie Parrish, of East Texas Lighthouse.*
a tutorial,” explains Parker. Working with TCS Associates, now known as TCSA, a Maryland-based firm that provides accessibility and AT services, NIB created the Professional Mastery of Office Technology for Employment (ProMOTE) program to provide advanced computer skills training for AT users.

Originally designed as an immersive 40-hour-per-week, four-week program — a mix of formal classroom learning and hands-on, time-sensitive projects reflective of the kind of work participants would encounter in the workplace — Parker says ProMOTE is unlike any other training program offered. Since the pilot in 2016, instructors have flexed the curriculum to accommodate part-time and remote instruction.

Participants master the AT they use — either JAWS, a screen reading program, or ZoomText, a screen magnification program — and learn more than 100 different keystrokes to perform tasks in Microsoft Word, Excel, PowerPoint, and Outlook without using a mouse. They also learn to conduct advanced Internet research, navigate Windows, and create well-organized accessible documents. At the end of the training, students showcase their mastery by developing and delivering a final project.

“Once we built the foundation, we tested it in two pilot programs,” explains Parker. The first pilot was held at The Carroll Center for the Blind in Newton, Massachusetts; the second, at the Olmsted Center for Sight (now VIA) in Buffalo, New York.

**The Pilots**
The pilots proved the program was workable, Parker says, “but it’s asking a lot for participants to be
away from home for that length of time.” Nonetheless, Aaron Simoneau, a contract administrator at NIB who participated in the first pilot, says it was time well spent.

Simoneau, an associate contract administrator at NIB when Parker asked him to participate in the pilot, became legally blind in 2003, after he had completed college. “I had two unpaid internships, but they didn’t lead to any job offers,” recalls Simoneau. He was unemployed in his native Massachusetts for eight years before learning about NIB’s contract management support training program. After completing the training, Simoneau was hired by NIB in 2011 and was just about to move from ZoomText to JAWS when the ProMOTE opportunity came up. The timing couldn’t have been better.

Because he was just starting out with JAWS, Simoneau often found ProMOTE exhausting. But it was also invaluable. “I learned so much through the experience, and that positioned me to be a lot more efficient and confident at my job,” says Simoneau, who was promoted to his current position shortly after completing the program. “I feel very fortunate that NIB supported me through the training.”

Nichelle Morris recently relocated from Minnesota, where she was a contract specialist for the Department of Veterans Affairs, to the Washington, D.C., area to work for another federal agency. She credits the ProMOTE pilot in New York with keeping her career moving forward. “I couldn’t have gotten to where I am today without ProMOTE,” she says. “It was an answer to my prayers.

Before ProMOTE Morris, who has Stargardt Disease, a
A degenerative eye condition had hired an editor to review her work — an expensive proposition. “I couldn’t proofread my writing anymore and my work was sloppy — a misplaced comma here, a period there,” she recalls. In ProMOTE she learned to use keystrokes instead of a mouse and how to more effectively use ZoomText.

The experience, she says, also helped build her confidence. “Because of ProMOTE, I know I can accomplish everything I need to do,” says Morris. “If I ran a school for people who are blind, it would be a class everyone would be required to take to graduate.”

Replicating Success

With the success of the pilots, NIB wanted to get the program into as many hands as possible. In March 2017, a ProMOTE train-the-trainer program, hosted at NIB headquarters, taught training

Sarah Lucas, an accounting clerk at Blind and Rehabilitation Services of Pittsburgh, participated in the agency’s modified schedule program. She says the format helped solidify new skills by allowing her to put them into practice right away.
Assistive technology instructor Art Rizzino (left) with ProMOTE student Diane Faust, who left her job in the insurance industry due to vision loss. After completing ProMOTE, Faust joined BVRS as a rehabilitation instructor.

staff from NIB associated nonprofit agencies how to deliver the curriculum at their agencies. Today two agencies — East Texas Lighthouse for the Blind in Tyler, Texas, and Blind and Vision Rehabilitation Services (BVRS) of Pittsburgh — have provided multiple sessions of the program.

Jan Lynch, technology services administrator at the East Texas Lighthouse, was the first train-the-trainer alumnus to teach the ProMOTE curriculum at an NIB associated agency. Lighthouse Client Services Manager Amy Anderson calls Lynch “the ProMOTE program superstar.”

But Lynch credits great teamwork for the successful launch of the agency’s pilot
program, which had three participants and followed NIB’s four-week residential model. After receiving positive feedback, the Lighthouse held another class with four participants. “The feedback about the program and the quality of delivery was still good, but students said four weeks away from home was a big hurdle,” says Lynch.

Lynch and her IT department brainstormed solutions, deciding to use the web conferencing app Zoom to deliver some of the curriculum remotely. “The people at Zoom spent a lot of time listening to us and helped us design a classroom in the app,” says Lynch, who first held a one-week Excel pilot via Zoom. “By the end of the second day, I knew it was going to work.”

Given that success, the Lighthouse adapted the program to offer two weeks of virtual instruction using Zoom and two weeks of residential instruction. Initially concerned that the approach might hinder formation of the tight bonds students in the four-week residential program had, Lynch says her worries were unfounded. When she met the students at the hotel for the last two weeks of residential training, she knew instantly that the bonds were already there, developed during their two weeks of working together online. With the advent of the coronavirus pandemic, Lynch has been at work designing an online-only ProMOTE session to be held in August.

Lynch hasn’t stopped there. The train-the-trainer program identified a skills gap among associated agency assistive technology trainers who themselves lacked the skills necessary to teach the ProMOTE program. In response, Lynch and her team developed the Assistive Technology Instructor
Program to provide instruction on JAWS and ZoomText, and best practices for teaching the programs. The first program was piloted last summer.

Anderson says the ProMOTE program has been a game changer. “It’s a huge benefit. Anytime I hire someone in administration, I require them to go through the program,” she says, noting students have earned job promotions after completion.

ProMOTE certainly made a difference for Jill Thurmond, who completed the Lighthouse pilot in 2018. A microbiologist forced into retirement due to retinitis pigmentosa, Thurmond was out of the workforce for nine years when she went to the Beacon Lighthouse in Wichita Falls, Texas, to learn how to live more independently. Soon hired to work at the AbilityOne Base Supply Center® (BSC) Beacon Lighthouse operates at Sheppard Air Force Base just outside of Wichita Falls, she was excited to apply for the ProMOTE program.

“It was such an empowering experience,” says Thurmond, who learned both JAWS and ZoomText during the program. “My vision loss was so gradual that I never learned either program.”

It wasn’t just what she learned that changed her life, Thurmond says, it was the relationships she made. “Jan is such a wonderful, patient teacher and I also had wonderful classmates. We were a class of three, and my two other classmates took me under their wings and really helped me learn the technology. We still keep in touch.”

When Thurmond returned to Wichita Falls, she wanted to share what she had learned. “I went into the medical
field to help people and I really missed that. When I returned, I wanted to help people by teaching them what I learned through the program.” Today, Thurmond spends several afternoons a week teaching interested co-workers who are blind basic computer skills; she hopes to expand the classes to veterans and seniors in the local community.

As an IT guy who keeps technology running, Cesar Lopez, from Horizon Industries in Tyler, Texas, thought he was fairly adept when he entered the ProMOTE program — he wanted
to participate so he could help his co-workers who use AT. “I actually learned a lot of commands that I didn’t know,” says Lopez, who is legally blind. “I learned a lot more about ZoomText and I use it more now thanks to the program.”

For Lopez, ProMOTE has made his work more rewarding. “I’ve been able to help others here, particularly our JAWS users. They can only get what JAWS reads to them. Now, I can show them how to do something a little differently that they had no way of knowing before,” he says. “ProMOTE gave me perspective on ways to do things that’s made me much more efficient in my work, and that I’ve been able to pass along to others.”

**Flexing the Curriculum**

After successfully completing the train-the-trainer program,
two AT instructors — Tracey Morsek and Art Rizzino — from Blind and Vision Rehabilitation Services of Pittsburgh returned to the agency and started raising money to provide scholarships for students to attend their first four-week residential session. Four students were in that class, recalls Leslie Montgomery, vice president of external affairs for the agency. Of the four, one was hired by BVRS and one works in the private sector.

As in Texas, the four-week on-site requirement proved challenging. When the time came to design a second session for internal employees, BVRS looked for ways that participants would be able to continue in their regular jobs during training. The result was a schedule of classes held Monday through Wednesday for six weeks, giving students a chance to work two days a week and apply what they were learning in class.

The program had a great impact at the agency, says Montgomery. “It increases students’ efficiency, confidence, and skills.”

JAWS user Diane Faust couldn’t agree more. A student in the first class, Faust, was an insurance company business manager before leaving her position due to vision loss. When she learned about the ProMOTE program, she felt the timing was perfect. After she completed the program, BVRS hired Faust as a rehabilitation instructor.

In her role at the agency, Faust not only teaches others how to live independently, she spends a lot of time on the computer, creating schedules, entering information into databases, and writing reports. The ProMOTE program, she says, taught her keyboard shortcuts that make her much more efficient and give her confidence in
troubleshooting technical issues both at the office and with her home computer.

Sarah Lucas, an accounting clerk at BVRS, went through the second ProMOTE program and agrees with Faust that it really boosted her confidence and efficiency. She says the three-day-a-week format helped solidify her new skills. “I was learning stuff Monday through Wednesday that I could immediately use on the job Thursday and Friday,” she recalls. “Learning all the keystrokes has really made me faster and more efficient. Who needs a mouse?”

“It’s also a wonderful program for folks who haven’t worked in a while,” says Faust. “When you lose your vision as an adult, you can sometimes reach a panic point. This program really gives you confidence and allows you to feel as though you can re-enter the workforce.”

Erika Petach, president of the agency, agrees. “We are very proud of the success our participants have achieved as a result of their experience with the ProMOTE program,” she says. “We have seen first-hand the impact this program can have on their lives.” BVRS is currently raising money to offer a training session for AT users who are blind living in the local community.

Like many program participants, Lucas agrees that ProMOTE does more than give people job skills. “It gives people hope,” she says.

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

It’s hard to remember a time when audible crossing signals didn’t chirp at busy street corners, subway platforms lacked raised dots on their edges, and ATM machines were devoid of braille. Yet before July 26, 1990, the day the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed into law, none of those public accommodations existed. The ADA made it illegal to discriminate against people with disabilities in employment, government services, education, public accommodations,
telecommunications, and transportation. In the process, it changed the way we live.

Its passage, says Doug Goist, program manager, workforce development/services technology at NIB, was monumental. “If you say ‘ADA,’ it’s instantly recognizable. Everyone knows what it is. It has given disability visibility. Without it, accessibility would have had to be done solely through lawsuits and advocacy.”

Bruce Howell, accessibility services manager at NIB associated nonprofit agency The Carroll Center for the Blind in Newton, Massachusetts, agrees. “The ADA was the first attempt to level the playing field for people with disabilities. In that sense, its impact has been great,” says Howell. “It improved workspaces, walking, and transportation for people who are blind.”

The year 1990 is notable for another, less well-known event: The invention of hypertext markup language (HTML) by British researcher Tim Berners-Lee, then a fellow at CERN Laboratory in Switzerland. HTML became the standard markup language for documents designed to be displayed in a web browser. Berners-Lee went on to create the first website the following year.

It is understandable, then, says Howell that the text of the ADA does not address internet accessibility. “When the ADA was passed,” he says, “the internet and all the recent technological advancements simply could not have been predicted.”

Fast forward to 1998 and enactment of Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act, which requires federal agencies to develop and use communications technology
that is accessible to people with disabilities, regardless of whether they work for the federal government.

Section 508 compelled federal agencies and private-sector businesses holding federal contracts to think more inclusively, and that is a legacy worth noting, says Korey Singleton, manager of George Mason University’s (GMU) Assistive Technology Initiative. “Business responds to what people ask for,” says Singleton. “The ADA and Section 508 put accessibility in the back of people’s minds, and that helps.”

The Technology Explosion, Litigation, and Accessibility

Whether the ADA requires private companies to provide
accessible websites under the theory that they are “places of public accommodation” has been the subject of much litigation. In addition, the ADA requires employers to provide accessible technology as part of “reasonable accommodations” — an undefined term — that enable employees with disabilities to perform their work. As with accessible technology requirements, what constitutes reasonable accommodation has been honed by litigation, says Goist. But as Howell notes, mixed decisions have been made by various courts. “Some courts have ruled in favor of requiring websites attached to brick-and-mortar businesses to ensure accessibility,” says Howell. “Other courts have not.”

Goist and Singleton both agree with Howell that lawsuits filed under the ADA regarding accessibility of technology and the internet, many of which targeted the higher education sector first, have helped push the needle in the right direction. Part of Singleton’s job at GMU is ensuring that the university provides equal access to technology for students, staff, and faculty with disabilities. Today, he says, many colleges and universities practice risk mitigation and make it a point to proactively ensure accessibility to minimize lawsuits.

Rapid technological advancements in the past five years or so have also helped improve accessibility, says Goist. “Before that, if you wanted videoconferencing, for example, to be accessible, you would have to buy an app that wasn’t accessible and then purchase add-on software that would try to make it accessible — and that was cumbersome and often prone to failure.”

He credits a combination of the ADA, lawsuits, and
advances in technology with helping to put accessibility on the radar of software developers. “Zoom had accessibility on their radar screen early on, and within the last five years, Microsoft has put in a lot of effort too — Microsoft Teams is accessible, and those apps work really well on iPhones,” says Goist, who notes that most people who are blind use iPhones.

There are still challenges to be sure — keeping up with software updates that may inadvertently break accessibility for the user, for example — but Goist sees accessibility becoming more a part of

Korey Singleton, manager of the Assistive Technology Initiative at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia, says the move to telework and online learning brought about by the coronavirus pandemic has dramatically changed how professors deliver instruction and how students learn.
the software development process. “Facebook, Google, and other big developers have definitely included accessibility as a step in their processes,” he says.

Advocacy for people who are blind has also helped improve awareness about the need for accessibility when it comes to technology, and Goist believes that may be the ADA’s biggest achievement. “The biggest challenge over the past 30 years has been raising awareness,” he says, admitting that before he lost his eyesight, he never considered the needs of people who are blind in accessing technology.

Bigger software developers may be more aware of the need for accessibility, says Howell, but smaller players still need some help. The Carroll Center for the Blind launched its accessibility consulting service to help developers at mid- and smaller sized companies improve accessibility. “Enterprise-wide apps like those used for payroll, human resources, finance, and customer management systems are usually

Noting that large employers like Twitter and Facebook have announced employees can telework permanently, Greg Stilson, head of global innovations at American Printing House, hopes this change in attitudes will level the playing field and result in more hiring of people who are blind.
purchased by employers from outside vendors, and we find that they are often not accessible for people who are blind,” explains Howell. He says one of the biggest challenges for jobseekers who are blind are online application apps that are not accessible.

For anyone concerned about accessibility for their employees and customers, Howell says buyers should build accessibility into the procurement process. “When purchasing software, one of the first questions to ask is whether it’s accessible,” he advises, noting that many private-sector companies lack an employee dedicated to ensuring accessibility across the organization, which is why accessibility is often overlooked. Still, Howell has seen some improvement in recent years in organizations thinking about accessibility from the outset when purchasing enterprise-wide software.

Increased accessibility in technology has brought improvements for people who are blind and visually impaired in all walks of life. Online apps make it possible to grocery shop, bank, and access government websites. What hasn’t improved, though, is finding employment that can be done from home, largely because of employers’ reluctance.

“If you live in an area where it takes two buses and a train to get to work, and you can’t drive because you are blind, it makes sense to telework,” notes Goist. “All the tools are available today.”

Yet employers have been slow to offer telework as a reasonable accommodation for people with disabilities. Although advances in technology couldn’t change attitudes, the global coronavirus pandemic may be the push employers needed. With millions of employees
Bruce Howell, accessibility services manager at The Carroll Center for the Blind in Newton, Massachusetts, says buyers should build accessibility into the procurement process when purchasing enterprise software.

Adapting to telework seemingly overnight, many employers are realizing that working from home is working out pretty well.

**COVID-19 and Telework**
Before the coronavirus outbreak, many employers just had not considered telework. “No one ever envisioned this circumstance with the pandemic,” says Singleton.

“I think it has forced people to think very differently about how work gets delivered. It’s been eye opening for a lot of employers.” He credits the ADA with laying the groundwork that enabled the development of assistive technology that makes today’s telework possible.

But, says Singleton, employers need to think about...
the kind of tools they have in place for employees who have shifted to telework. He says GMU and many larger universities with assistive technology divisions were in a good position when they moved to online learning and telework, because they had shifted to a cloud delivery model before COVID-19. “Now we can troubleshoot issues remotely. We couldn’t have moved to cloud delivery so easily 10 or 15 years ago because the technology wasn’t as accessible as it is today.”

Singleton. The challenges can be compounded when professors post readings and class assignments that are not accessible for people who are blind or have other print disabilities.

Still, the transition to online learning and telework has been challenging for the university. It has dramatically changed how professors deliver instruction and has affected how students learn. “We have professors who have had to quickly learn accessible tools like Zoom, that they weren’t familiar with,” says Singleton’s daily work has changed. “Since the pandemic forced us to shift to virtual learning, there has been a 90 percent drop in requests for ASL interpreters and a 90 percent increase in requests for live captioning and transcription,” he says.

Higher education as an industry sector may have had a bit of an edge when it came to moving to a virtual model as a result of COVID-19, but other learning institutions have faced challenges. Greg Stilson, head of global innovations at American Printing House (APH), headquartered in Louisville, Kentucky, says their move to virtual learning has come with challenges.
APH is a non-profit organization that creates educational, workplace, and independent living products and services for people who are blind or visually impaired. As a result of COVID-19, APH launched a series of educational webinars for students. Through a partnership with Paths to Literacy and California State University, Los Angeles, these daily courses were offered at no charge to students, their parents, and teachers as they moved to a learn-from-home environment. Stilson says that when they had to take this education virtual, they began to encounter accessibility issues.

“When we could teach students in person in a classroom setting, we could troubleshoot issues they may experience with accessibility immediately — accessing Zoom, for example. Now, we find that parents are trying to do the troubleshooting, and they aren’t familiar with the technology or aren’t available to troubleshoot at all because they are teleworking.” It may take some time, but Stilson is confident they can work through the issues.

APH as a whole, though, was in a good place when about 60 percent of its employees moved to remote work in March. Stilson — who joined APH in January but who has worked remotely from his home in Wisconsin for the past 15 years — says the organization was in a good position to move to telework because of work it had put in before the pandemic. “We were already using Microsoft Teams and Zoom and our communication and virtual private network (VPN) access was already in place.”

Stilson, who is blind, believes telework is here to stay, noting that Twitter and Facebook
have already announced that their employees can work permanently from home. “And I think you will see more and more tech companies following them. There was definitely some resistance at first, but employers quickly realized that it was working. COVID-19 has shown employers that telework can be done, and I hope this will level the playing field and result in more hiring of people who are blind,” says Stilson.

**Changing Mindsets**

Goist is also hopeful that the telework phenomenon resulting from the coronavirus pandemic will change minds. “I hope this opens employers to the possibilities of hiring people who are blind. We are resilient and used to working in relative isolation. We’ve been ordering groceries, paying bills, and getting shipping labels online for years, and we would be happy to share our knowledge about how to live in a global shutdown.”

People who are blind have been asking employers to telework from home for years, but employers have been reluctant, says Goist. “I think it’s mostly because of a lack of experience with the disability,” he says. “Few interviewers have first-hand experience with a person who is blind.”

Goist advises people who are blind to explain to interviewers up front how they use technology to do their jobs. “It helps put the interviewer at ease because they don’t have to ask,” he says.

Singleton is also hopeful that the pandemic will ultimately open opportunities for people who are blind, particularly in IT and higher education. “Telework during the pandemic has proven that web conferencing tools and software can allow employees to work from
home effectively — and those tools are accessible to people who are blind,” he says. “I hope that this opens employers’ eyes and their minds. With enterprise solutions that are accessible, people who are blind or who have low vision can work effectively from home and at a low cost to the employer.”

Goist says NIB is ready to help employers and people who are blind along the path. From its 508 compliance services and workforce development initiatives to skills training programs for people who are blind, he emphasized the organization is dedicated to developing new opportunities that meet the needs of both.

Howell sees awareness among employers increasing, and believes telework during the pandemic has helped. “The corporate world is becoming more aware of the value of hiring people who are blind. They are moving in the right direction.”

Stilson agrees but offers a note of caution. “I will tell you,” he says, “Zoom fatigue is real.”

Sharon Horrigan is a freelance writer based in Asheville, North Carolina.
AGENCY SPOTLIGHT

WHAT’S IN A NAME

Visually Impaired Advancement plans to carry on the mission of New York’s Olmsted Center for Sight and expand its reach.

BY DOMINIC CALABRESE

When she first learned she was legally blind back in 2017, Buffalo, New York, resident Geraldine Wilson was stunned and didn’t know where to go.

“I was really scared and felt that my entire world had been turned upside down,” the 61-year-old recalls. “Then my social worker referred me to what was then called the Olmsted Center for Sight. My life has never been the same since.”

First established in 1907 as the Buffalo Association for the Blind, the NIB associated nonprofit agency, which recently changed its name to Visually Impaired Advancement or VIA (pronounced vee-ah), is a dynamic, multi-faceted organization offering a broad array of services encompassing vision care, assistive technology, job preparation and placement, mobility training, education, and rehabilitation. VIA also operates a social enterprise serving multiple state, federal, and commercial customers and employing more than 50 people who are blind in market-competitive jobs in telecommunications, sewing, production, and fulfillment. The organization currently serves 2,500 people who are visually impaired each year in eight western New York counties.

Upon her arrival at VIA, Wilson, who previously worked as a preschool teacher, soon discovered that being blind would not prevent her from leading a rich and fulfilling life.
“Through all the services I received there, including instruction in assistive technology, mobility training, and job readiness coaching, I found that I could still retain my independence and acquire additional skills that would better prepare me for new and exciting career opportunities,” she says.

Currently employed as a task force organizer for Grassroots Gardens of Western New York, Wilson is studying to become a certified peer support specialist in the mental health field.

“I could never repay them for everything they did for me,” she says. “From the moment I walked into the door, everyone, starting with the receptionist, the social worker, and many...”
others were wholeheartedly committed to my success!”

New Name, Same Passion
By officially changing its name to VIA this year, leaders of the former Olmsted Center believe they will not only continue to help people like Wilson, but will be able to broaden the agency’s appeal to others who may not be familiar with the 100 plus-year-old organization.

“Frankly, we’ve long endured an identity problem,” explains Tammy Owen, president and CEO of VIA. “Many residents in the Buffalo area often confused us with the extensive park system here that also bears the Olmsted name.”

Owen maintains that the new name and comprehensive rebranding initiatives will not only clarify the organization’s identity, but will more effectively communicate its mission and help attract and engage new audiences.

*Vision Rehabilitation Specialist Jessica Scanlon provides instruction similar to the instruction she received as a client.*
VIA call center contracts include a 24/7 information referral service providing updates to 500 people awaiting organ transplants.

“VIA is not only simpler and easier for people to remember, but it better represents the progressive nature of what we do, and boldly communicates the high level of personal and professional accomplishment and independence achieved by people who are visually impaired.”

Owen says the new name was developed by an outside firm that engaged an interactive panel of all the key constituencies within the organization. “We decided that the best way to unveil our new name and alleviate any possible confusion was through a thoughtful and gradual process,” says Brooke Kibrick, marketing and events coordinator.
The rollout of the new VIA name will take place this fall, with a ribbon cutting ceremony along with the introduction of VIA’s new website. The agency is working on a comprehensive publicity campaign, with news releases, media interview, and billboard announcements.

Owen says VIA will build on the strong legacy that the former Olmsted Center and its predecessors established. “In addition to our vision clinic, school-based programs, job training and placement programs, and rehab services, we do everything from operating a glove factory employing people who are blind, to running switchboards at two Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) hospitals, to servicing multiple telecommunication contracts including a 24/7 information referral service providing updates for 500 people on an organ transplant waitlist.”

**Building Meaningful Careers**

Most importantly, Owen adds, VIA, like Olmsted before it, will continue to enhance the quality of life for people who are blind or visually impaired. She points out that many individuals who came to the agency for training and support have found rewarding positions there.

Among them is Mike Quinn, a Boston native who serves as a production handler on VIA’s glove line.

“Mike does an amazing job for us and is an inspiration to others,” Owen says. “His only drawback is that he is a diehard New England Patriots fan in a town that adores the Buffalo Bills.”

Quinn, who was born legally blind due to macular micro degeneration, works with other people who are visually impaired as part of the team packaging medical gloves.
It’s a team that includes his son, Kyle, who has the same medical condition.

With the agency designated an essential business during the coronavirus pandemic, the production team has kept busy producing and shipping industrial nitrile gloves to state and federal government agencies and regional grocery chains. Quinn applauds the organization for giving hope to people like him, who often face discrimination and unemployment.

Wagner commends NIB for its training programs, including Business Management Training, which he completed in 2015, and the Advocates for Leadership and Employment program, both of which have been essential to his job in management. He looks forward to VIA assisting even more people who are blind and preparing them for upper management roles.

“VIA has given me the chance to be proud again, to get up in the morning with a job to look forward to and a purpose in life!”

Gary Wagner, of the Buffalo area, also found a home at VIA. Since joining the agency as a switchboard operator, he has worked his way up to director of VA contracts and public policy. In that capacity, he works with state and federal legislators on issues of interest to people who are blind.

VIA provides recreation and support programs for children who are blind and visually impaired and their parents.
Jessica Scanlon, a vision rehabilitation specialist who earned a masters degree from Hunter College, is another VIA success story.

“Thanks to the training I received there, I am now assisting others like myself who cope with vision loss, by offering them instruction in assistive technology, braille, and other areas,” she says.

Owen, who in April marked her seventh anniversary with the agency after a distinguished health care career in which she served as president of two area hospitals, is optimistic about the future.

“Through our strategic partnerships with business, government, and other non-profits, I am confident that we will continue to excel in helping people with vision loss lead richer and more fulfilling lives.”

Gerldine Wilson shares that sentiment. “There is no reason for anyone who is blind or losing their vision to feel trapped in their homes,” she says. “There are places like VIA that can help!”

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
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.

OFFICE SUPPLIES

1. SKILCRAFT® Vista Gel Ink Pen
Refillable, retractable SKILCRAFT® Vista Gel Ink Pens with quick drying, smooth gliding, acid-free inks will not fade, run, or smear. Choose medium or bold point pens with grips and tinted barrels that match the ink color. Transparent barrels allow users to monitor ink supply at-a-glance. Produced by Industries of the Blind in Greensboro, North Carolina.

2. SKILCRAFT® Anti-static Screen and Lens Cleaner Kit
Safely clean glass and plastic screens and lenses with the streak-free SKILCRAFT® Anti-static Screen and Lens Cleaner Kit. Safe for plasma and LCD screens and scientific and optical lenses, the ammonia- and alcohol-free formula removes dirt, grease, makeup, and fingerprints from all electronic devices. Kit includes one 12-ounce bottle, sprayer nozzle, and 12 inch x 12 inch microfiber cleaning cloth. Produced by Chicago Lighthouse Industries in Chicago, Illinois.
3. **SKILCRAFT® 2021**
Wall Calendars and Appointment Planners

SKILCRAFT® 2021 Wall Calendars and Appointment Planners help you keep track of important dates and meetings. Made of 100% post-consumer recycled paper and printed with soy inks, planner books also feature covers made using 50% recycled content bound with wire of 90% post-consumer materials. Available in a variety of sizes and styles including monthly, weekly, and daily wire bound appointment planners, 12-month wall calendars in three sizes, and two-sided erasable laminated calendars. Produced by Chicago Lighthouse Industries in Chicago, Illinois.

4. **SKILCRAFT® Precision Liner Correction Tape**

Make fast, easy, and precise corrections with SKILCRAFT® Precision Liner Correction Tape. Tear-resistant film-based single line white tape suitable for left-handed or right-handed use requires no dry time, so you can immediately write or type over corrections. Ergonomically designed pen-shaped dispenser with comfort grip features a translucent body so you can see when a refill is needed. Sold in packs of four. Produced by IBVI in West Allis, Wisconsin.
NEW PRODUCTS Continued from page 65

5. Dymo®/SKILCRAFT® Labeling Tools
Complete labeling, filing, and mailing tasks quickly and efficiently with Dymo®/SKILCRAFT® Labelers. Connect the LabelWriter 450 to your PC or Mac® to print up to 51 standard size labels per minute from Microsoft® Word and other popular programs or choose the LabelWriter® 4XL to print extra-large shipping labels. Thermal printing technology lets you print impressive labels and more without a standard desktop printer or costly ink or toner. For industrial labeling jobs, the Dymo®/SKILCRAFT® All-Purpose Labeling Tool-Rhino™ 4200 Case Kit with QWERTY Keyboard lets you create and format wire/cable wraps, flags, fixed-length labels, and more on flexible nylon, permanent polyester, or durable vinyl materials, or directly onto heat-shrink tubes. Produced by Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired-Goodwill of the Finger Lakes in Rochester, New York.

CLEANING & JANITORIAL SUPPLIES

6. SKILCRAFT® Heavy-Duty Scouring Pad Sponge
Great for heavy-duty and general cleaning, the SKILCRAFT® Heavy-Duty Scouring Pad Sponge features a green abrasive surface permanently bonded to one face of the sponge, while the other face is a soft, absorbent, flexible, synthetic material. Gunk and grime are no match for this open-celled synthetic sponge.
with aluminum oxide scouring surface ideal for pots, pans, and utensils. Not recommended for glass, plastic, or coated surfaces such as enamel or ceramic pots and pans. Produced by Lighthouse Louisiana in New Orleans, Louisiana.

7. SKILCRAFT® Microfiber Dust Mop
Clean tile, laminate, and most hard surface floors with the SKILCRAFT® Microfiber Dust Mop. Great for use in industrial settings, hospitals, offices, schools, or home, the microfiber attracts and traps dirt and dust without scratching surfaces. Easy to clean — simply shake out to remove dirt and dust or detach mop head from the painted steel handle to machine wash. Produced by Mississippi Industries for the Blind in Jackson, Mississippi.

8. SKILCRAFT® Industrial Work Wipes
Tackle tough industrial cleaning tasks with SKILCRAFT® Disposable Industrial Work Wipes. These low-lint, multi-use shop towels are made of double re-creped material that provides unique stretch and strength. Great for general manufacturing and maintenance applications, these towels are compatible with commonly used industrial solvents. TAA compliant and made of 40% post-consumer waste. Produced by Horizon Industries/East Texas Lighthouse for the Blind in Tyler, Texas.
9. SKILCRAFT® Industrial Shop Towels
Clean oil, grime, and solvents even on rough surfaces with SKILCRAFT® Disposable Industrial Jumbo Shop Towels made with hydro-entangled fibers. Compatible with commonly used industrial solvents, 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, including heavy-duty machine and part wiping, metal shaving cleanup, and surface prep. TAA compliant; produced by Horizon Industries/East Texas Lighthouse for the Blind in Tyler, Texas.

10. SKILCRAFT® Multi-Fold Paper Towels
Save money and the environment with SKILCRAFT® Multi-Fold Paper Towels. Made of 100% recycled fibers and free of processed chlorine, these environmentally friendly single-ply towels dispense one-at-a-time, unlike C-fold paper towels which can over-dispense. Compatible with most multi-fold dispensers. TAA compliant; produced by Outlook Nebraska in Omaha, Nebraska.
11. SKILCRAFT® Household Roll Paper Towels
Clean up spills and messes and help the environment with SKILCRAFT® Kitchen Paper Towels. Process chlorine-free and made with 100% recycled fiber with at least 40% post-consumer content, these absorbent paper towels fit most roll towel dispensers. TAA compliant; meets EPA recycled content guidelines. Produced by Outlook Nebraska in Omaha, Nebraska.

HARDWARE & PAINTS

12. SKILCRAFT® Sandpaper
Ideal for painted surfaces, bare wood, and metal, SKILCRAFT® all-purpose aluminum oxide coated sandpaper can be cut to fit a sanding block or power tool sander or used for hand sanding. Made with quality 3M™ materials and available in multiple grits to meet any need. Produced by IBVI in West Allis, Wisconsin.
13. SKILCRAFT® Wet or Dry Sandpaper
SKILCRAFT® Wet or Dry silicon carbide-coated sandpaper made of quality 3M™ materials can be used dry, with water, or with cutting oil to reduce clogging and extend abrasive life. These 1500 grit sheets with a flexible, waterproof, A-weight paper backing are ideal for contour sanding or use between coats of paint, varnish, or other finishers. Produced by IBVI in West Allis, Wisconsin.

14. SKILCRAFT® Sanding Sponge
Reusable SKILCRAFT® all-purpose foam sanding sponges made of quality 3M™ materials are ideal for wet or dry sanding on wood, paint, metal, plastic, or drywall. Easy to rinse and reuse, these comfortable-to-hold, conformable sponges are available in two grits. Produced by IBVI in West Allis, Wisconsin.
15. Purell®/SKILCRAFT® ES8 System
The PURELL® SKILCRAFT® ES8 Dispenser System combines the most trusted name in hand hygiene with a revolutionary dispenser system. Monitor product levels quickly with the AT-A-GLANCE™ design and use the optional SMARTLINK™ plug-in modules to track hand hygiene compliance and receive alerts when dispensers need service. Dispenser system comes with choice of gentle-on-the-skin soaps that remove 99% of dirt and grime, or fragrance-free hand sanitizer clinically proven to maintain skin health and kill more than 99% of most common germs. Dispensers provided free with qualifying orders. Produced by Travis Association for the Blind in Austin, Texas. Contact the agency at 1-888-217-7232 for more information on SMARTLINK.

SAFETY SUPPLIES

16. SKILCRAFT® Lockout Devices
SKILCRAFT® Lockout Devices provide the components needed to build a comprehensive lockout program. Devices include a variety of lockout tagout hasps, plugs, clamps, fuse blockers, squeezer cables, and safety
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.

17. **SKILCRAFT®**

**Lockout Tagout Kits**

SKILCRAFT® Lockout Tagout Kits provide a variety of products needed to perform lockout procedures, in a heavy-duty tool bag for on-the-go maintenance and repair operations. Choose the valve kit, electrical kit, or maintenance department kit, each with durable tool bag with carry handles, heavy-duty zipper with oversize pull for easy use with work gloves, and an area for owner information. Made in the U.S.A. Produced by Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired-Goodwill of the Finger Lakes in Rochester, New York.
I am a little embarrassed to say this, but at last count I own at least six portable power bank chargers. I have given away at least another five chargers to friends, family, and colleagues. Some were bought, others were free, and they all range in size from lipstick cases to bricks as big as smartphones — one is both waterproof and solar-powered.

As any regular business traveler will tell you, access to a portable charger is critical both while conducting business on the road and while sitting at crowded airport gates where it seems everyone has a power cord in hand and is jockeying for position around the limited number of available power outlets (at least the ones that actually work).

So, when I stumbled across the “Power Accessories for the Visually Impaired” exhibitor booth at the 2020 Consumer Electronics Show, my curiosity was piqued. Did
someone actually design a power charger that doesn’t rely solely on an LCD display to let me know that I am attempting to charge my depleted smartphone with a dead charger?

The answer, happily, is yes! Two of them, in fact.

The flagship VS150X power bank, developed by a San Jose, California, company called Energrid is, as far as I am aware, the first portable power bank designed exclusively for people who are visually impaired or blind. After a brief introduction on how it works, Energrid reps shipped a demo VS150X to my office so that I could test it out and provide feedback.

The $75 VS150X power bank is a large (5.7 inch x 2.8 inch) solid, well-built 15,000 milliamperes (MA) charger that comes with a reversible USB charging cable (additional cables sold separately for $15) and a soft drawstring travel pouch.

Simple to operate, the VS150X has two reversible USB output ports and one micro USB input charging port. Not only can both output ports accept any USB cable, the USB plug can be inserted into the power bank in any direction, meaning the user does not need to worry about whether the plug is inserted right-side up or upside down.

Near the top right is a single power button with tactile dots. Upon pressing the button, the VS150X emits audible beeps and vibrates in patterns that signify the level of charge available. Four quick beeps and vibrations equate to a 75%-100% charge; three beeps and vibrations indicate the power bank is 50%-75% charged; two equal a 25%-50% percent charge; and one equals a charge of less than 25% remaining.
The VS150X also emits a beep and vibrates when connected to AC power and upon successful connection to a smartphone, tablet, rechargeable headset, or any other portable, USB battery-powered device. The end result is the user knows exactly what the VS150X is doing during the charging process without need for visual confirmation. A fully charged VS150X can fully charge an iPhone 7 or Samsung Galaxy S7 three times. Not only that, I found both charging the VS150X itself and using the VS150X to charge smartphones to be very speedy.

Energrid’s 3 inch x 2 inch, 5.4MA travel model, the VC161X, which sports many of the same features and can used in over 150 countries, is available for $42.

For more information on both models and to order, point your browser to: https://accessibility.energrid.us.com/

Doug Goist is program manager, workforce development/services technology 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.
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