2020 Employees of the Year
NIB celebrates the accomplishments of outstanding associated agency employees
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Editors note: Some photos used in this issue of Opportunity were taken prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.
Opportunity welcomes news and stories about the careers and capabilities of people who are blind.

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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.
As the world begins to emerge from a challenge unlike any most of us have ever experienced, we are all excited to move forward from the coronavirus pandemic. Yet in the midst of the past year’s challenges, we learned many important lessons about adaptability, innovation, and perseverance.

People who are blind working in NIB associated nonprofit agencies led the way in many respects. Many worked longer hours and extra shifts to keep the military and federal agencies equipped with critical pandemic supplies; AbilityOne Base Supply Center® (BSC) teams scoured the country to secure items their customers needed; and rehabilitation professionals and community outreach specialists surveyed the changing
landscape and devised new ways to deliver crucial services to clients who found themselves more isolated than ever.

In this issue of Opportunity, you’ll get a chance to meet some of those employees: Our national Peter J. Salmon employee of the year award winner, our Milton J. Samuelson career achievement award winner, and employee of the year award nominees from NIB associated nonprofit agencies across the country. You’ll also read about our outstanding Contract Management Support (CMS) program employee, and BSC teams who excelled in serving their customers.

As we begin the return to a more normal life, we can all reflect on the lessons of the past year and celebrate what we have been able to achieve together. Recognizing the outstanding professionals who are blind working in our nationwide network of associated agencies is a great way to start.

Kevin A. Lynch
President and
Chief Executive Officer
2020 EMPLOYEES OF THE YEAR

NIB celebrates the accomplishments of outstanding associated agency employees.

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MAKING AN INDELIBLE MARK

Lee Nasehi is on a mission to expand public awareness and understanding of the capabilities of people who are blind.

BY DOMINIC CALABRESE

Many leaders would be content to have a dramatic impact on one organization. Lee Nasehi, however, has a broader vision.

Currently the president and chief executive officer (CEO) of VisionServe Alliance (VSA), a St. Louis-based consortium of nonprofits located throughout North America that provide vision rehabilitation services, Nasehi previously was CEO of Lighthouse Central Florida. There, she helped launch a subsidiary organization that creates employment opportunities and promising careers for people who are blind.

A New Jersey native, Nasehi’s family relocated to central Florida when she was about 10. She earned her bachelor’s degree as well as a Master of Social Work from Florida State University. The birth of her son Joe, now 40, was a pivot point in her life and career.

Lee Nasehi is working to establish a sustainable revenue model for vision rehabilitation services nationally, to lessen dependence on fundraising.
Joe — who was born premature and is blind with cerebral palsy and cognitive impairments — received vision-specific early intervention services at Lighthouse Central Florida. Just as important as those services, she says, the Lighthouse gave Nasehi, her husband, and other family members hope that Joe would lead a rich and fulfilling life, which he has!

Nasehi began working in vision rehabilitation at the Lighthouse, including in the areas of job readiness, development, and placement. After a decade she, along with then-Lighthouse vice president Donna Esbensen, realized just how difficult it was for people who are blind to get a good job, even after completing rehabilitation and developing great independent living skills.

“We wanted to change that by establishing Lighthouse Works! which would offer sustainable entry-level opportunities and serve as a launching pad for careers.”

Setting up Lighthouse Works! was challenging for herself and the organization, but Nasehi says the results are well worth it.

“Central Florida now has a sustainable community-based organization dedicated to comprehensive state-of-the-art vision-specific education, vision rehabilitation, and employment services for people of all ages with all types of visual impairments,” she explains. When the coronavirus pandemic hit, the state of Florida turned to the Lighthouse Works! call center for support in fielding calls from Floridians who lost their jobs due to the lockdown.

After a two-decade run as CEO at the Lighthouse, with a formidable leadership
team and succession plan in place, Nasehi was open to other opportunities. When Roxann Mayros announced her retirement as CEO of VisionServe Alliance, Nasehi decided to apply.

As VSA’s new CEO, Nasehi says her daily tasks run the gamut from administrative to strategic. Her goal is to grow the organization’s annual revenue to $1 million, with a value proposition of effort to match.

“I want to establish a sustainable revenue model for vision rehabilitation services nationally, so no one living with blindness, low vision, or other visual impairment has to rely on their community’s ability to fundraise in order to receive good quality and easily accessible services.”

Looking back on her experiences with both organizations, Nasehi is grateful for the chance to serve.

“The two organizations are amazing and honorable,” she reflects. “I love them both and am happy my experiences came in the order they did. It’s a privilege to work in this field.”

Nasehi maintains that the greatest challenge facing people who are blind is a lack of awareness among the general public. “Let’s change that and expand awareness and understanding because all things are possible once we begin there,” she says.

“Diversity, equity, and inclusion begin with us — let’s be the change we all want to happen!”

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.
TECH CORNER

TEEN INVENTORS SCORE WIN WITH ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY

BY DOUG GOIST

This quarter’s Tech Corner is a little different. Instead of a product, NIB spoke with four 16 year-old students — Raffu Khondaker, Irfan Nafi, Pranav Ravella, and Eugene Choi — from Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology in Fairfax County, Virginia, near NIB headquarters. The young inventors are first place winners of the Virginia 8th Congressional District 2020 Congressional App Challenge.

Each year, Congressional districts sponsor a challenge to encourage middle and high school students to learn to code and inspire them to pursue careers in computer science. Real life experience inspired the students, mentored by faculty advisor Sean Burke, to enter the 2020 contest.

Two years ago, Ravella began investigating technology for his cousin, who is blind. The friends decided to develop an app for people who are blind because Ravella never saw his cousin using adaptive devices.

Interviewing members of the visually impaired community, including an avid dancer and trapeze artist who is blind and who they consider a co-designer, they prototyped Atheia, a wearable battery-powered haptic glove equipped with camera sensors that allows users to point to objects in their surroundings and hear an announcement of what the object is.
"We wanted to make sure the voices of the visually impaired community were heard when developing the product," says Choi.

"Hearing our co-designer’s enthusiasm toward our design helped us understand that there was a clear need for such a project and that current solutions did not address their specific use cases," adds Nafi.

"Computer Vision has made some major progress in the past decade," explains Khondaker. "We’re applying..."
those developments to assistive technology, at a price that won’t break the bank.”

Ravella, whose cousin inspired Atheia, says they intentionally designed the glove to encourage other young inventors.

“By open-sourcing our project, we hope to inspire other young developers to utilize their technical skills to contribute to their community,” he said.

“We plan on continuing our journey in electronics and computer science, so that we can make a meaningful impact on lives,” the group said in a statement. “In college we plan on furthering our knowledge in artificial intelligence and getting involved in Silicon Valley startups. Hopefully, we can one day garner enough resources to make innovation in assistive tech more common.”

Among many influences, the teens credit their middle school engineering and tech teacher, Ms. Kim Gadson. “She was always enthusiastic about each and every one of the projects she assigned. She taught us that any engineering goal is achievable as long as we put in the work and are not afraid of failure.”

Gadson’s classes were a big factor in cementing the teens’ passion for science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). YouTube was another.

“In 5th grade, we saw Mark Rober’s Halloween video, where through his iPad and some electronics, he made it seem like his costume had a see-through hole on his chest. We realized the power of computer science — you could make a basketball hoop that moves to make you score, or you could send a rover to Mars!”
Doug Goist is program manager, workforce development 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.

“I am inspired by these brilliant young people who saw an opportunity to use their skills to assist the visually impaired community with the Atheia glove,” says Congressman Don Beyer, who represents Virginia’s 8th Congressional District. “Even after submitting their project to the Congressional App Challenge, they continued to improve on their work and showcased their updates at our virtual reception, which shows how committed they are to using technology to help people.”

To learn more about the Congressional App Challenge, visit https://www.congressionalappchallenge.us/.
Widely respected for her exemplary work record, professionalism, and positive attitude, it was Pam Chesser’s reputation as the ‘go-to’ person at NIB associated nonprofit agency Travis Association for the Blind, better known as the Austin Lighthouse, that helped her bring home the Peter J. Salmon Award.

The Award, which honors employees who excel in their positions at NIB associated agencies, is named for the late Dr. Peter J. Salmon, who was instrumental in passage of the Wagner O-Day Act and the formation of NIB.

“There are not many people around that have such a large impact in the community as well as at work, but Pam is one of them,” says Lighthouse President and CEO Jim Meehan. “We are incredibly fortunate to have her on our team!”
Meehan said Chesser is the go-to person for coworkers who need support and assistance with the technologies used to run the Lighthouse’s large distribution center. She is also frequently called upon to provide demonstrations to U.S. Department of Defense officials, community organizations, and other groups explaining how technologies allow Lighthouse employees to process orders accurately and efficiently.

“I can’t say exactly how I first got the reputation as a go-to person,” Chesser says, “but it most likely began with my position as a back-up receptionist, which I held for about nine years.” Chesser initially came to the Lighthouse in 2005, left for a few years, then returned in 2009 and has remained at the agency ever since.

In addition to her formal job duties, Chesser provides training to community members and new employees about working with people who are blind, and assists employees facing language barriers or who need to build self-confidence.

“I feel a great sense of accomplishment when some of those employees I’ve worked with start advocating for themselves,” she says.

Chesser strongly believes that everyone can be successful with the proper tools and training. “All of the challenges we face in life help us become stronger and self-advocacy skills give us the power to be the best that we can be.”

A Houston native, Chesser earned a bachelor’s degree in psychology and a master’s in education with an emphasis on autism and developmental disabilities from the University of Texas. She is a mother of six, including twin boys, and also
active in the community, where she plays beep baseball with the Austin Blackhawks, is involved with the Girl Scouts, and participates in several events sponsored by the National Federation of the Blind.

Acknowledging that balancing all those activities became more difficult during the pandemic, she nonetheless expresses great confidence in the future.

“I deeply appreciate everyone who supported me for the Salmon Award,” she says. “I promise to continue working hard and motivating others to feel more confident about themselves.”
Praised as a self-starter and team player with a tireless commitment to helping others, the recipient of the 2020 Milton J. Samuelson Award, Sarah Heesen, credits her success to other women who are blind who have inspired her.

“While I am enormously grateful, I must admit that the Samuelson honor came a bit out of left field,” says Heesen, who works in business development at Beyond Vision, an NIB associated nonprofit agency based in Milwaukee. The award is named in honor of Milton J. Samuelson, a former NIB board member and executive director of The Chicago Lighthouse for People Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired, who was a strong advocate for upward mobility and placement programs benefiting people who are blind or visually impaired.

Heesen is friends with two previous Samuelson award
recipients, Sandra Werner, her supervisor at NIB associated agency IBVI from 2006 to 2012, and Virginia Gay Young, whom she met through NIB’s Business Management Training program.

“I looked up to Sandra and Gay for their accomplishments, integrity, ambition, and leadership qualities,” Heesen says. Both women would be among the first people she would call on for advice in a challenging situation she says, because both could provide wise counsel.

“This award honors leadership, which is what I aim for. I have been inspired by Sandra, Gay, and other Samuelson achievers I’ve met through the years.”

Heesen’s solid record of achievement, coupled with her own leadership skills, made her a popular choice at Beyond Vision for the award. In her time with the agency, she has placed 100 people in temporary or permanent jobs.

“Sarah continuously challenges herself to accomplish new tasks and learn new skills,” says Beyond Vision President and CEO Jim Kerlin. “She’s passionate about doing her best and helping others do the same.”

Heesen encourages those who wish to become leaders to start by taking the initiative to find improvements in the positions they currently occupy.

A native of Janesville, Wisconsin, Heesen was born blind, inheriting her mother’s visual condition. She excelled in her studies and also was a top swimmer throughout middle and high school.

Her career at Beyond Vision started when she was hired
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.

Heesen balances her career with taking care of her son, Sam, who is also blind. To relax, she plays piano, sings, and is embarking on a new venture — taking guitar lessons!

“I’d like to spend the next 10 years developing my network and growing my business unit,” she says. Her ultimate goal is to be part of senior leadership at a business-oriented non-profit.

To help with a large customer service campaign in 2016. She was promoted into a recruitment position three months later, and now works in business development, where she brings in new contracts with commercial companies looking to expand and better serve their existing customers.

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<td>North Central Sight Services</td>
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2020 EMPLOYEES OF THE YEAR

Herberth Galan
San Antonio Lighthouse for the Blind

Arthur Jones
Mississippi Industries for the Blind

Romia Hall Jr.
Alphapointe

Gary Jones
Alabama Industries for the Blind

Virginia Hernandez
Lighthouse for the Blind of Fort Worth

James Jones
Northeastern Association of the Blind at Albany

Mia Hixon
Lions Industries for the Blind

Erickson Jorgboyan
MidWest Enterprises for the Blind

Michael Hora
VisionCorps

John Koigi
The Lighthouse for the Blind, Inc.

Joanne Johnson
Blind and Vision Rehabilitation Services of Pittsburgh

Easton Kons
IBVI

★ PETER J. SALMON AWARD ★ MILTON J. SAMUELSON AWARD

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<th>Employee Name</th>
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<td>Laurie Ledwell</td>
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<td>Gina Rowell</td>
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<td>Wilfredo Martinez</td>
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<td>Joshua Scarborough</td>
<td>Outlook Nebraska</td>
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<td>Christopher Mendenhall</td>
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<td>Scott Smith</td>
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**PETER J. SALMON AWARD**  **MILTON J. SAMUELSION AWARD**
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Sharon Elosser
Industries of the Blind

John Enders
Central Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired

Kellie Gerdts
Envision

Floyd Goree
Lighthouse for the Blind, St. Louis

Faith Harding
IFB Solutions

Randy Holmes
Blind Industries and Services of Maryland

Deng Kong
The Lighthouse for the Blind, Inc.

Gale Levitan
Envision Dallas

Brittany Long
Alphapointe

Eddie Martinez
South Texas Lighthouse for the Blind

George Mason
LCI

Jill Munro
Chicago Lighthouse Industries

⭐ PETER J. SALMON AWARD ⭐ MILTON J. SAMUELSON AWARD

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2020 EMPLOYEES OF THE YEAR

Owen Neil
Lions Volunteer Blind Industries

Richard Rivers
East Texas Lighthouse for the Blind

Jessica Scanlan
VIA

Jamie Sibson
Travis Association for the Blind

Derek Suarez
Association for Vision Rehabilitation and Employment

Christina Taylor
Alabama Industries for the Blind

Jimmy Yocom Jr.
Louisiana Association for the Blind

PETER J. SALMON AWARD  MILTON J. SAMUELSION AWARD
In addition to the associated agency employee of the year nominees and national winners, each year NIB recognizes the outstanding achievements of a participant in the Contract Management Support (CMS) program and three AbilityOne Base Supply Center® teams.

**Outstanding CMS Participant: Tanee Wall**  
**VisionCorps, Lancaster, Pennsylvania**
Tanee Wall joined NIB associated nonprofit agency VisionCorps in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, as a contract closeout specialist in January 2017. Since then, she has been assigned to a number of contracts and always identified as a top performer in terms of output and quality of work product. After her exceptional performance was commended at Fort Dix and INSCOM (Army Intelligence Command), she was tasked with developing a standard operating procedure that has been adopted and utilized for training government personnel in contract closeout processes. Wall is currently a supervisor of the General Dynamics Information Technology initiative, where she oversees the work of nine people working remotely from three different states.

- Tanee Wall joined VisionCorps in January 2017 as a contract closeout specialist and soon was recognized as a top performer. Today she supervises nine specialists working remotely from three different states on a contract with General Dynamics Information Technology.
Base Supply Center Excellence: Hurlburt Field Operated by LCI

The Hurlburt Field AbilityOne BSC is a leader in support of new AbilityOne products. Hurlburt has been free of essentially-the-same (ETS) products for multiple years and received best practice scores of 100% on its last two compliance visits. The BSC provides an incredible level of support to the 1st Special Operations Wing, and as a result was awarded a contract to build Special Tactical Personal Equipment Management System Kits used to outfit individuals deploying to Hurlburt Field for advanced training. The kits are comprised of highly specialized equipment and have hundreds of sized line-items, sourced from dozens of vendors, making them difficult to cost, order, track, receive, build, and release.

The Hurlburt BSC team, pictured left to right: Jim March, manager; Veniesha Woodbury, assistant manager; Prime Miley, warehouse employee; Cody Jones, warehouse employee/driver; Julio Cruz, assistant manager; Michael Winn, customer service representative; Danna Rose, customer care coordinator.
Base Supply Center Excellence: Edwards Air Force Base Operated by IBVI

The Edwards Air Force Base AbilityOne BSC is known as a well-merchandised, operationally sound BSC. Edwards received a best practice score of 100% on its last two compliance visits and has maintained an ETS-free record for multiple years. The team has an outstanding track record of customer service and are considered pivotal in the ongoing deployment and readiness success of the command.

* Pictured left to right are Edwards BSC team members Rebecca McCartin, assistant manager; store employees Marcus Estevane and Joshua Riviera; Jeremy Davidson, delivery driver; and Victor Sais, manager.
Base Supply Center Excellence: Robins Air Force Base
Operated by Alabama Industries for the Blind
The Robins Air Force Base AbilityOne BSC opened in 2018 and promptly set out to become essential to the command. Robins received a best practice score of 100% on its first compliance visit and has been ETS-free from its very beginning. Despite being understaffed for its first two years, the Robins team continues building a strong track record of customer service with their ‘can-do’ attitude.

Members of the Robins Air Force Base BSC pictured above are (left to right) Douglas Neil, store manager; Drew Bell, purchasing tech; Betty Morton, warehouse clerk; and Mona Lenz, customer service representative.
FEATURE STORY

EXPERTISE ON LOAN

NIB’s first time participating in the U.S. Department of Defense Public-Private Talent Exchange program definitely won’t be its last.

BY SHARON HORRIGAN

When leaders at NIB learned about the Public-Private Talent Exchange (PPTE) program offered through the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD), interest in participating was immediate. “We work with DOD quite a bit, and we knew it would be a great opportunity to share information, learn more about how each other’s business operations work, and learn innovative practices,” says Jon Katz, NIB vice president of business development.

The PPTE program offers participants professional development opportunities to expand their functional expertise and acquire the new skills and knowledge critical to innovation. It also strengthens DOD and industry partnerships to help meet national security needs, notes Maggie Sizer, program manager for the Defense Acquisition PPTE Program for the office of Human Capital Initiatives at DOD.

Trading Talent

Talent exchanges between the government and the private sector are not new; the PPTE program was modeled after several existing programs, including the Secretary of Defense Executive Fellows program, the U.S. Air Force Education With Industry program, and the U.S. Army’s Training with Industry program.

A new feature is that PPTE provides the opportunity for private sector employees
to do exchanges at DOD organizations. PPTE is not a job “swap” program. Private sector companies can participate in PPTE by offering an exchange assignment for a DOD participant, without sending one of their employees to DOD. The program offers flexibility in matching assignments to maximize the benefit for DOD, private sector companies or organizations, and individual participants. The exchange participants are typically mid-career, high-potential employees with demonstrated leadership potential. After their assignments — which are typically six months — end, DOD participants return to their previous positions and private sector participants to their company or organization.

Authorized by Congress in 2017, the Human Capital Initiatives team of the Office of the Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment in 2019 piloted the inaugural program, which had 13 participants — six from DOD and seven from the private sector. Participant feedback was overwhelmingly positive, according to Sizer. Participants find working onsite at the exchange organization a transformational experience, she says, and “return as ambassadors for the program.”

Word must have gotten around — in 2020, there was a significant increase in the number of DOD employees seeking to participate in the program. “We had more requests from DOD employees than available private sector exchange assignments,” says Sizer. “There is a need for more private-sector participation.”

NIB Joins In
NIB — which had been looking to add a new service...
Marine Corps veteran Rob Clemens, now a civilian employee at Marine Corps Systems Command, was attracted to NIB because the mission resonated with his personal values of serving others.

line of business that would offer high-skilled, upwardly mobile jobs for people who are blind or vision impaired — was happy to become one of the needed private-sector participants. “When we learned about the PPTE program, we thought it would be the perfect opportunity to dedicate the resources to make that service line of business happen,” says Katz.

After drafting and submitting exchange experience job descriptions to DOD, “we reviewed resumes of their employees who wanted to participate in the program, and returned a list of people we were interested in,” explains Kyna Kirkland, NIB vice president of human resources. “We were delighted when Rob Clemens and Kariym Smith said yes.”

Clemens, who served in the Marine Corps and now fills a civilian role at Marine Corps Systems Command as a senior program analyst, signed up for the PPTE program believing exposure to the best practices of private business would enhance his leadership and managerial skills. He was attracted to NIB, he says, because the mission “resonated with my personal values of serving
others and improving an individual’s quality of life.”

Kariym Smith, a program analyst for Naval Sea Systems Command, joined the PPTE program because he has worked as a civilian for DOD since graduating college. “The program gave me the opportunity to work in the private sector without having to officially leave DOD,” he explains.

Their impressive backgrounds made Clemens and Smith perfect fits for the job at hand, says Katz. “We had two highly talented, full-time resources in Rob and Kariym. Without them, we would have had to pull existing staff away from their regular work, and it would have significantly lengthened the timeline for development of the new service line of business. Rob and Kariym compressed that timeline from what could have been a year or more into six months. And their work was outstanding.”

Clemens and Smith used NIB’s contract closeout model to conduct market research, write job descriptions, and assess the viability of jobs as program and finance analysts for people who are blind or visually impaired.
They reported their results to NIB President and CEO Kevin Lynch, who gave them the go-ahead to move the project into the pilot program phase, targeting partnerships with the armed forces, says Clemens.

**Welcome to the Family**

Clemens and Smith agree that NIB knocked it out of the park onboarding them into the organization.

“My onboarding experience was amazing,” says Smith. “My computer and all accessories were ready to go on Day One. A member from each department met with us, told us what their department did, and answered any questions we had. It helped us get an overview of how all the departments intertwine with each other.”

Clemens and Smith also went through NIB’s Mission Possible program. “It’s a passport-type document they give new employees that lists each department head,” explains Smith. “To complete the passport, you set up meetings with each one and they give you a deep dive about their department and how it fits into NIB’s overall mission.”

Clemens agrees with Smith about the impact of Mission Possible. “Over the course of 60 days, I understood NIB, its culture, and its leadership. I felt welcomed and part of the team, or, as some called it, the family. The more people I met, the more I was impressed by their positive attitude and mission-oriented mindset.”

**And Then, Pandemic**

The pandemic didn’t cut their PPTE experience short — Clemens and Smith completed their project and the pilot is set to launch — but it did compel them, like so many others, to switch to remote work.
“Because NIB has employees located in various states, they had already implemented technology to make interactions easy. Therefore, when the pandemic happened, we were already equipped to make the transition to 100% telework,” notes Smith.

But the pandemic definitely affected their experience. “The week prior to everything shutting down, we had to cancel a trip to one of their associated agencies in Baltimore,” recalls Smith. Other trips in the works also had to be cancelled.

NIB Director of Enterprise Risk Management Harlan Erker, a 15-year employee of NIB who is visually impaired, also found his participation in the PPTE program impacted by the pandemic.

Erker joined the Acquisition Directorate of DOD’s Washington Headquarters Service (WHS) in early January 2020, and set to work conducting a cultural assessment of the organization from a private-sector perspective. While at WHS, Erker observed daily operations and employee interactions, and interviewed DOD employees to learn how they viewed the organization’s culture, what was working, and what could be improved, with an eye toward increasing the employee retention rate.

Although the assignment was intended to last six months, after the pandemic hit, all WHS personnel went to full-time remote status and Erker could not continue the assessment. “It’s hard to get a sense of an organization’s culture when all employees are teleworking and interaction is strictly electronic,” he noted.

Mission Accomplished
Although his last day with DOD was in early April 2020,
Erker did submit a report with recommendations based on the work completed pre-COVID-19.

Clemens and Smith say the experience was amazing and they achieved their goals of acquiring new perspectives and best practices to further their professional development. Both say they would recommend the program to others.

So would NIB. “It was a wonderful experience for us, and an eye-opening one, I think, for Rob and Kariym,” says Kirkland. When asked if he would do it again, Katz doesn’t hesitate: “In a heartbeat.”

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

DOD Public-Private Talent Exchange Program participants network during the December 2018 orientation session at the Pentagon.
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 PRODUCTS

1. SKILCRAFT® B3 Aviator Multifunction Pen
Specially designed to fit flight suit and military uniform pockets, this medium-point, multifunction twist pen comes with black and red ink, plus a 0.5mm pencil with eraser. Featuring a non-reflective, flat sand finish on a brass-plated steel barrel, this pen is FOD and TAA compliant. Produced by Alphapointe in Kansas City, Missouri.

2. SKILCRAFT® Luminator LED Light Pen
The SKILCRAFT® Luminator LED Light pen has a green LED light that illuminates where you write. Pressurized filler writes in extreme weather, including cold and wet conditions or upside down. Stylus works with capacitive touch screens. Built with a rugged, non-reflective metal barrel that withstands heavy-duty use. Battery included. Produced by Alphapointe in Kansas City, Missouri.
3. **SKILCRAFT® Gel Highlighters**
Gel highlighters available in fluorescent yellow, green, orange, and pink can be left uncapped for up to a week without drying out. Bright, see-through fluorescent ink resists smears and works on all paper types, including glossy and vellum. Produced by West Texas Lighthouse for the Blind in San Angelo.
4. Kensington®/SKILCRAFT® Fully Articulating Gas-Spring Ergonomic Monitor Arm
Use the Kensington®/SKILCRAFT® Fully Articulating Gas-Spring Ergonomic Monitor Arm to adjust flat or curved monitors with one-touch ease. Easy to mount with c-clamp or grommet, the arm rotates and swivels 360 degrees. Includes tilt adjustment and supports monitors up to 34 inches in size and 19.8 pounds in weight. Attach arm Vesa plates and ergonomically adjust for height and screen distance. Cord management system included. Produced by Chicago Lighthouse Industries.

5. SKILCRAFT® Correction Tape
Make easy, mess-free corrections to notes and documents with dry application SKILCRAFT® Correction Tape. Ideal for on-the-go corrections, brightly colored, non-refillable transparent dispensers show amount of tape remaining. Produced by West Texas Lighthouse for the Blind in San Angelo.
6. SKILCRAFT® 3D Printer Filament
Transform your creative ideas into tangible objects with help from this printer filament by SKILCRAFT® that works with a variety of common 3D printers. Durable 1.75mm filament on a 1kg spool is ideal for creative projects or decor items. Produced by North Central Sight Services in Williamsport, Pennsylvania.

7. SKILCRAFT® Corner Desktop Sit-Stand Workstation
Help employees avoid the detrimental health effects associated with sitting for extended periods of time with this two-tiered, adjustable-height, corner unit standing desk designed to accommodate dual monitors. This workstation can be placed atop any desk or table and raised to a standing position or lowered to a sitting position. Desktop workstation constructed of wood and steel is 42 inches wide and has a 35-pound capacity. Fully extended height is 20 inches. TAA and Berry Compliant; assembled in the USA. Produced by Beyond Vision in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.
SAFETY SUPPLIES

8. Cloth Face Mask – Universally Sized
Universally sized 8½ x 5 inch cloth face coverings made with two layers of 50/50 poly-cotton knit fabric have a 3⅞ inch bendable nose wire and two ⅛ inch wide black elastic bands to fit securely. Machine wash and dry, available in five colors in packages of five or 50. Produced by IFB Solutions in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

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.
AGENCY SPOTLIGHT

INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS KEEP NABA THRIVING

Years of experience thinking outside the box helped Northeastern Association of the Blind at Albany rise to the challenges of the coronavirus pandemic.

BY ROSEMARIE LALLY, J.D.

The Northeastern Association of the Blind at Albany (NABA) is adept at finding solutions to difficult problems, so its ability to rise to the tremendous challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic is no surprise.

The NIB associated nonprofit agency offers a full range of rehabilitation services for people who are blind throughout 13 counties in eastern New York. NABA also creates employment for people who are blind through its manufacturing operations and the sale of products through the New York State Preferred Source.

After in-person programs like this art class for children were suspended during the pandemic, NABA reassessed processes and quickly adapted to provide virtual services.
Program for New Yorkers Who Are Blind (NYSPSP) and the AbilityOne® Program.

**Creative Crisis Response**

NABA manufactures personal protective equipment (PPE) such as protective “cleanroom” coveralls; drug test kits; reflective work vests; disinfectants; and military uniform components and supplies. When the pandemic hit in early 2020 and protective masks were in short supply, NABA’s response was ingenious. The agency used its cleanroom coverall fabric, made with a propylene material similar to that used in N95 respirators, to make face masks. The innovation allowed the agency to provide about 25,000 masks to direct service providers at local and state nonprofits, the New York State Office of Children and Family Services, and state transit systems, while also keeping its manufacturing employees fully employed, says CEO and Executive Director Christopher T. Burke.

**Responding to a Crisis**

“During the widespread business shutdowns related to the pandemic, NABA was deemed an essential business by New York state,” explains Burke. The agency installed barriers, enforced social distancing, monitored employees for virus symptoms, and went to a four-day workweek to free one day each week for deep cleaning. With these measures in place...
to protect employees, NABA’s manufacturing operations have remained up and running throughout the pandemic.

Innovative approaches to problem solving didn’t start with the pandemic. For several years, NABA has partnered with Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI), which sends engineering students to work on cutting-edge solutions to manufacturing problems.

“As part of students’ senior projects, they build or reconfigure machines to allow people who are blind to do jobs performed by sighted employees, figure out how to improve inventory controls, reconfigure floor layouts to improve process flow, and find ways to reduce scrap,” Burke says. “They’ve helped us tremendously. I can’t say enough good things about RPI.”

Building Skills
Linette Stevens has held a variety of positions in her 18 years at NABA and embodies the agency’s “nothing we can’t do” attitude. Currently coordinator of the document shredding program, she’s willing to try nearly any task or new challenge. “If you think there’s a way a person who is blind can do a particular job, I’m willing to try,” she says. “Or show me a job and maybe I can find a way to do it. You either quit

NYSPSP employee of the year nominee Eric M. Clark is praised for his technical skills and willingness to take on new tasks.
or you keep on going, and I choose to keep on going.”

Stevens, who has a rare syndrome that stunts growth and affects facial features, loves working at NABA because her co-workers don’t judge her. “No one says rude things about my condition here; everybody accepts everybody for who they are.”

Eric M. Clark, a machine operator and NABA’s 2021 nominee for the NYSPSP Employee of the Year Award, shares this enthusiasm for taking on new challenges. Praised for his outstanding work ethic and mastery of technical skills, Clark feels well-supported at NABA and comfortable trying new tasks. “I’m not sure what is coming, but I’m up for the challenge of new jobs and learning new skills.”

The pandemic had a more direct impact on NABA’s rehabilitation programs, requiring the agency to suspend in-person services for a little over a month and reassess processes in light of COVID-19 risks, Burke says.

However, the agency quickly adapted to the new normal. Its KidSight vision-screening program adopted use of a specially designed plexiglass shield to continue serving nearly 6,000 children aged 18 months to 5 years annually in
day care centers. The agency continues providing low vision examination services by limiting facility capacity, surveying incoming clients for virus symptoms, and frequent deep cleaning.

Some in-person programs required rethinking, like the summer programs for children and teens. But retooling for virtual delivery allowed NABA to introduce new topics, such as money management, and increased the number of young people served.

**Commitment to Community**
Temporary closure of the rehabilitation program didn’t

*NABA helped Entsar Alkhazrajy learn English, get a job, and live independently with her sons.*
lesser NABA’s commitment to its clients. “We don’t say no to anyone for our rehab services, so even when we had to shut down, we manned the phones to check in on our clients and help them deal with the isolation, anxiety, and depression,” Burke says. As the situation evolves, employees are helping clients sign up for vaccinations and partnering with Lions Club volunteers for transportation to the sites.

In addition to jobs at the agency, NABA has been successful in helping people who are blind find highly desirable state jobs that provide competitive salaries and benefits in Albany and surrounding areas. “We usually have a case load of two to three dozen people we’re working to place in jobs,” Burke says. At any given time, the agency is also helping secure short-term placements for a couple
dozen recent high school and college graduates.

From Client to Employee
Some of NABA’s best employees are former clients who came for rehabilitation services and appreciated the welcoming environment, like Entsar Alkhazrajy, who arrived in the U.S. from Iraq in 2010, unable to speak English and having never used a white cane. At NABA she learned to speak the language, received rehabilitation and mobility services, and ultimately began working in the manufacturing department.

Currently sewing neckties for women’s U.S. military uniforms, Alkhazrajy loves her job. “It is challenging, but I learn new things and I can handle it,” she said. “I get so much support here — people help me with filing my taxes, with training, with any questions I have.” In addition, NABA adapted appliances
in her home and helped her budget, enabling her to live independently and raise two children. “I like everybody here so much, they’re like my family,” Alkhazrajy says, noting that she doesn’t get to see her family in Iraq often.

Production specialist James Jones first came to NABA for rehabilitation services in 2009 after losing much of his eyesight. Rehabilitation prepared him to work as a medical transcriptionist, but after several years he found computer work too much of a strain for his remaining sight. Remembering the welcoming atmosphere at NABA, he contacted the agency, interviewed for a job, and was hired in 2018.

Today, Jones has worked on everything from sewing projects to assembling headwear and police boots to document imaging prep. “I enjoy all of it. It’s been great, this is the most satisfying and rewarding job I’ve ever had,” he says. “I love my co-workers; I’d do anything for them.”

“NABA is enormously important to the community,” Jones adds. “Where else can people who are blind go for education and rehabilitation services? The icing on the cake is that they employ people too. I could retire in a couple of months, but why quit when I really enjoy what I’m doing? I’m going to stay a while longer.”

Rosemarie Lally, J.D. is a freelance writer and editor based in Washington D.C.
NEWS & NOTES

NIB Launches NSITE Talent Management Enterprise

In January, NIB launched NSITE, a new talent management enterprise that connects employers seeking to broaden their talent pool with qualified job seekers who are blind, visually impaired, and/or veterans. NSITE supports employers and job seekers alike throughout the career life cycle by providing a continuum of employment services including talent development, job placement services, and accessibility support.

“NIB has been a leader in supporting the employment of people who are blind for more than 80 years,” explains NIB President and CEO Kevin Lynch. “NSITE leverages this knowledge and experience to provide tremendous value to employers and job seekers alike.”

NSITE provides employers with everything they need to find, hire, onboard, and retain talented people who are blind or visually impaired as an essential part of their workforce. By helping employers recruit and support these employees, NSITE allows organizations to focus on putting the employees’ skills and talents to good use.

Jonathan Lucus, head of NSITE, stresses the enterprise is about more than just job placement or finding talent. “We’re forging relationships between employers and job seekers who are blind or visually impaired in a way that isn’t being done anywhere else right now,” he says. “NSITE is about ensuring that the job seeker is ready for the 21st-century workforce through industry-recognized trainings and certifications, and that the employer is well-equipped to support employees who need
accommodations in order to fully demonstrate the range of their skills and abilities.”

In March, NSITE received a grant of $95,700 from the Mitsubishi Electric America Foundation (MEAF) to fund NSITE’s Cisco Academy training program. The NSITE program is the United States’ first Cisco Academy adapted to the learning styles of people who are blind. It provides people who are blind or visually impaired the opportunity to enter the cybersecurity industry and secure a Cisco Certified Network Associate certification, an industry-recognized standard for IT expertise.

The MEAF grant will strengthen NSITE’s capabilities and empower the enterprise to offer economic opportunities to people who are blind or visually impaired, as well as help demonstrate that they are a capable and reliable source of talent to fill vital, in-demand cybersecurity jobs.
MICHAEL WOOTEN JOINS NIB

In April, Michael Wooten joined NIB as Vice President, Strategic Direction. In this new role at NIB, Wooten will provide thought leadership and promote strategies in direct support of NIB’s mission and priorities.

Prior to joining NIB, Wooten served as the 15th Administrator for Federal Procurement Policy at the Office of Management and Budget. As Administrator, he oversaw all U.S. federal procurement regulations, federal procurement data systems, and the acquisition workforce for the federal government enterprise, which manages over $3 trillion in total contract value.

SAVE THE DATE! NIB/NAEPB 2021 TRAINING CONFERENCE AND EXPO OCTOBER 12-15


Plans for this year’s event include recognition of the 2021 associated agency employees of the year, exciting speakers, comprehensive training on the AbilityOne® Program, and the Expo. As with all events during the COVID-19 pandemic, plans may be altered if necessary to minimize health risks. For the latest details, check the Events page on NIB.org.
NIB recently launched a new public service announcement (PSA), “Hire Me!” that aims to dispel misconceptions about the capabilities of people who are blind in the workplace and encourage private and public employers to hire them. The message of the PSA is particularly relevant as calls grow for greater diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace.

“Hire Me!” complements NIB’s new talent management enterprise, NSITE, which offers people who are blind many paths to career success through award-winning training and professional development programs that enhance leadership, business, and technology skills (see related story on page 18). The PSA, which is being distributed to local and national television stations across the country, can also be accessed on NIB’s YouTube page, NatIndBlind1938.
NIB JOINS THE NATIONAL DEFENSE TRANSPORTATION ASSOCIATION

Following a recommendation from the NIB/NAEPB Business Development Working Group, NIB has become a member of the National Defense Transportation Association (NDTA). With a history dating back to 1944, NDTA provides an environment for government, military, and private sector professionals to solve pressing challenges in the fields of logistics, transportation, and passenger travel services.

Membership in NDTA affords NIB and its associated nonprofit agencies a chance to showcase their capabilities, solutions to support the COVID-19 response, and long history of service to federal customers. A story on NIB’s kitting capabilities was recently featured in The Source, NDTA’s weekly e-newsletter distributed to more than 5,000 professional members.
Kayla Rosemeyer completed NIB’s Association Management Fellowship in February. The 18-month fellowship, developed in 2019, provides an opportunity for people who are blind to obtain experience in event planning, marketing and communications, accounting and finance, and human resources at NIB.

A graduate of Wichita State University and NIB’s Professional Mastery of Technology for Employment (ProMOTE) training program, Rosemeyer was an assistant office manager at Lathrom Manufacturing in Wichita. She relocated to Virginia and joined NIB as an e commerce customer care representative in 2018, before being selected for the fellowship.

As part of the fellowship program, Rosemeyer earned a Certified Nonprofit Professional credential from the Nonprofit Leadership Alliance.
The Story of U.S.
A Great American Workforce

Learn more at NIB.org/workforce