A Decade of Representation
Advocates for Leadership and Employment support their agencies and the greater community
LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

ADVOCATING FOR ALL

Americans have a long tradition of advocacy. Whether championing increased school funding, a new traffic light or crosswalk to make their neighborhood safer, or weightier subjects, the ability of individuals to make their voices heard on issues that matter to them is ingrained in our culture.

The most effective advocates are those who put their hearts into the work, who feel a personal connection to the cause they are working to advance. Ten years ago, NIB recognized this key to effective advocacy and created the Advocates for Leadership and Employment program. The Advocates program teaches employees at NIB associated nonprofit agencies about the public policy process and how they can be effective messengers on behalf of themselves, their agencies, NIB, and the larger community of people who are blind.

Members of NIB’s Advocates for Leadership and Employment program are effective precisely because their work has a personal component. When they speak on matters affecting employment for people who are blind, their experience and passion make an impression on leaders that is not easily forgotten.

In this issue of Opportunity, you'll get to know some of the outstanding NIB associated agency employees who are Advocates and learn about the impact this comprehensive program is having on Capitol Hill, local communities, and the lives of the Advocates themselves.

The Advocates program is just one of the many ways NIB is empowering people who are blind to build rewarding careers, become contributing members of their communities, and uncover talents they never knew they had.

Kevin A. Lynch
President and
Chief Executive Officer
A DECADE OF REPRESENTATION

Advocates for Leadership and Employment support their agencies and the greater community.

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LEADERSHIP WITH VISION

R.B. Irwin Award winner A. Gidget Hopf, Ed.D., embodies all that is best about NIB’s vision.

BY SHARON HORRIGAN

NIB associated nonprofit agency Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired-Goodwill of the Finger Lakes (ABVI-Goodwill) in Rochester, New York, has grown significantly over the years, thanks in large part to the leadership and vision of A. Gidget Hopf, Ed.D., who retired as president and CEO of the agency in June 2020, after nearly 34 years of service.

When Hopf joined the agency in 1986, ABVI was the only organization in a seven-county region providing comprehensive vision rehabilitation and employment for people who are blind or visually impaired. By the time she retired, her leadership had helped ABVI-Goodwill become a major service provider in the community. Today, 90% of the agency’s revenue comes from its employment of more than 700 people in four divisions: manufacturing, food service, contact center services, and Goodwill retail.

At this year’s National Symposium, NIB is recognizing Hopf with its highest honor, the R.B. Irwin Award, for her career achievements in creating employment opportunities for people who are blind. The award is named for Dr. Robert B. Irwin, executive director of the American Foundation for the Blind in the 1930s and a member of the team that helped form NIB.

“The Irwin Award is NIB’s highest honor, given to those who have made outstanding contributions to creating and improving employment opportunities for people who are blind,” says Paul Healy, chairperson of the NIB board of directors. “Considering all that Gidget has done in her career to help people who are blind gain personal and economic independence, we are pleased to honor her in this way.”

One of Hopf’s earliest achievements was securing a contract with 3M corporation in 1989 to produce and distribute self-stick notes to the federal government, a contract that would require people who are blind to operate high-tech industrial equipment. Hopf recalls many doubted that ABVI’s employees who are blind could do the work, but she had faith. And the employees have proved themselves many times over since: Today, the agency produces 37 different products using 3M materials, and nine other NIB associated agencies produce products that are co-branded or made with 3M materials.

New and exciting employment opportunities followed the success of the self-stick notes. Contracts for sewing Coast Guard and Air Force uniforms, production of eco-friendly cleaning products, and a myriad of other products sold to New York State and federal government customers provided additional job opportunities and revenue to fund local services.

Determined to create upward mobility opportunities for her team members who are blind, Hopf launched a call center at the agency more than 20 years ago. What started with just two people working on a contract with the U.S. Department of Environmental Protection has grown to 100 employees who support a variety of commercial and governmental customers, including 1-800-Goodwill and 211/LIFE LINE, a 24-hour crisis and suicide hotline.

“Over her career at ABVI, her entrepreneurial spirit and passion for the people she serves in the greater Rochester area has had a profound impact on their lives. Gidget truly embodies all that is best about our program.”

— Kevin Lynch
President and CEO, NIB

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

Learn more at NIB.org/SKILCRAFT

SKILCRAFT® is a registered trademark owned and licensed by National Industries for the Blind, an AbilityOne® Authorized Enterprise and the nation's largest employment resource for people who are blind.
Sophia McCall joined the Advocates for Leadership and Employment program in 2020. After two years of virtual training, she looks forward to meeting her fellow Advocates in-person in April.

A DECADE OF REPRESENTATION

NIB’s Advocates for Leadership and Employment program prepares high-potential employees who are blind to advocate for themselves, their agencies, and the greater community.

BY SHARON HORRIGAN
The brainchild of NIB President and CEO Kevin Lynch, the Advocates for Leadership and Employment program is celebrating ten years of representing NIB, its associated nonprofit agencies, and people who are blind.

The two-year training program is open to high-achieving employees who are blind working at NIB associated agencies who want to learn about and engage in the public policy advocacy process. Advocates in training and graduates of the program help NIB and its agencies fulfill their mission of providing meaningful employment for people who are blind.

NIB launched the program in 2012, Lynch says, because NIB and its associated agencies were “the world’s best kept secret.”

“Before the Advocates program, our agency CEOs would go out to promote NIB and their agencies,” he recalls. “But the story, and the importance of our mission, really needed to come from the people participating in the program. It’s so much more powerful when our Advocates communicate to legislators and their staff members about what having a career means to them.”

NIB maintains a small staff of public policy professionals to advocate on issues surrounding employment for people who are blind. The Advocates program was a force multiplier, Lynch says, “to amplify our voice and the voices of the people working in our program.”

The first class of Advocates had 13 people, three of whom are still active today, says NIB Public Policy Specialist Vivian Fridas, who manages the Advocates program. “We’re celebrating 10 years, but there have actually only been nine classes,” explains NIB Public Policy Vice President Rick Webster. “The program was initially planned to be held every other year, but after that first training, we realized it should be an annual event.”

Today, the training program consists of one class of “first years” and one class of “second years.” The second years and program graduates help mentor the first years. Of 84 NIB associated agency employees who have successfully completed Advocates training, 44 remain active Advocates, while others have moved on to new careers or new chapters in life. The program not only promotes the mission of NIB and its associated agencies, but it also helps employees who are blind develop self-confidence and leadership skills that can lead to career advancement and even employment outside NIB agencies and the AbilityOne® Program.

A Rigorous Process

Admission into the Advocates program is a competitive process that requires nomination by the employee’s supervisor or CEO and a letter of reference submitted to NIB with the application, explains Fridas. Agencies can have only one Advocate per location, but those with satellite locations or AbilityOne Base Supply Centers® (BSCs) can have an Advocate for each congressional district where they have a facility. So, for example, NIB associated agency The Lighthouse for the Blind, Inc., headquartered in Seattle, can have multiple Advocates representing its headquarters location; its Spokane, Washington, and Summerville, South Carolina, satellites; and the BSCs it operates in three states.

Traditionally, each Advocates class meets virtually through an introductory video call, then journeys to the Washington, D.C., area for in-person training during the public policy conference put on each spring by NIB and the National Association for the Employment of People Who Are Blind (NAEPB). The experience culminates in visits to legislators and their staff members on Capitol Hill. During the pandemic, the training and Capitol Hill visits became virtual, but as the country reopens, both new members of the program and seasoned Advocates are looking forward to meeting together in person.
The training program not only teaches Advocates about the public policy process, it helps them develop strategies to communicate about issues effectively throughout the year using a variety of tactics, Fridas says.

“A lot of time is focused on teaching Advocates the ins and outs of the public policy process,” says Webster, noting that having that level of detail helps Advocates know how to effectively work within the system. Equally important is the time focused on communication: one-on-one, in groups, and as a public speaker. In addition, Advocates learn to effectively communicate their personal stories.

William Quist, store manager of the Minot Air Force Base BSC in North Dakota, operated by NIB associated agency Envision, has held several positions during his 11 years with the agency. When the agency CEO approached him about the program, he felt unsure. “I didn’t know much about the Advocates program at the time, but I was very interested,” he recalls. “With our mission, it seemed like the right direction for me to go.”

Although all of Quist’s training was completed over Zoom, he was impressed with how in-depth the program is. “Learning how to tell my story was a great experience. I’ve also loved learning about public policy issues and how we Advocates can make a difference.”

“The Advocates training taught me how to craft my story and how to best convey it,” he says. “That’s been really valuable for me, not just in my advocacy work, but here at the store as well.”

It’s those personal stories, Webster says, that are so critical to the Advocates program’s success. “When our Advocates go to Capitol Hill, their personal stories resonate with legislators and their staff members. They own that story — no one is going to question it because it’s their story — and their stories make them memorable. It’s all about making that personal connection.”

**Year-Round Education and Advocacy**

The training doesn’t stop when the public policy conference ends, Webster explains. NIB’s public policy team holds quarterly conference calls with the Advocates that provide public policy updates, Q&A sessions, and time for shout-outs about their activities.

The program creates a peer group for Advocates new to the program and those who have been with it for years. Advocates are encouraged to reach out to the public policy team and each other for information or advice, and Fridas recently added a quarterly newsletter for the group. “It allows us to go a little more in-depth on public policy issues,” she says, “and helps keep information flowing in all directions.”

As the training continues, so does the advocacy. During the summer, Advocates work with staff members from legislators’ offices to schedule tours of their facilities or to meet in legislators’ district offices during the August recess. Sophia McCall, who joined the Advocates program in 2020 representing Lighthouse Central Florida in Orlando, remembers the excitement of scheduling and leading her first August recess visit in 2021.

Before the recess, McCall visited her representative’s website and sent an email inviting her to tour the Lighthouse facility. “A staffer got back to me fairly quickly and asked me if I had any dates available,” she says. “It was big!”

Cheryl Rayburn, a member of the 2019 class of the Advocates, welcomed Missouri Governor Mike Parson to her agency, Alphapointe, located in Kansas City, Missouri, for a tour in April of 2021.

Advocate William Quist says the communications training Advocates receive also makes him more effective as store manager of the Minot Air Force Base BSC in North Dakota.
In August, McCall led U.S. Representative Val Demings on a tour of the agency. Demings was able to meet employees who are blind or visually impaired and see the variety of work they do. “These tours are so important,” says McCall. “It really helps people become aware of our work at the agency.”

Since then, McCall has been involved with White Cane Day at the agency and is increasingly being invited to speak at local churches. She credits the training she received through the Advocates program with helping her become a better public speaker and getting more involved in her local community.

**Advocating for Everyone**

Advocates provide public policy updates at their agencies and also reach out to other community stakeholders to establish personal relationships and educate them about their agency’s mission.

Alicia Howerton, who joined Cleveland Sight Center in 2010, works to cultivate and maintain key agency relationships as manager of strategic partnerships. Howerton caught the public policy advocacy bug in 2017 when she had a chance to go to the state capitol with her CEO and a coalition of other NIB associated agencies in Ohio to speak with legislators about the need for insurance coverage for white canes.

“Legislators thought white canes were used for identification purposes,” recalls Howerton. “I have used a white cane for 20-plus years. I explained that it is a navigation device. I told them that without it, I couldn’t safely cross the street.”

Although the legislature did not enact a law covering the issue, in 2019, the state Medicaid department became the...
first in the U.S. to amend its rule for ambulation aides such as canes, crutches, and walkers to include white canes as durable medical equipment — a move that benefits people who are blind across Ohio.

“It was because of that experience that I applied to the Advocates program,” says Howerton. “I wanted to do more. The Advocates program not only solidified for me everything that I had learned up to that point, but it also helped me feel more comfortable in sharing my story and my agency’s story.” Since joining the program, Howerton has used her skills to advocate in her community and joined several advisory boards for people with disabilities.

In terms of high-visibility goals, the Advocates’ hard work in developing personal relationships paid off in August 2020 with the passage of H.R. 4920, the Department of Veterans Affairs Contracting Preference Consistency Act of 2020. Passage of the act saved hundreds of jobs for people who are blind at NIB associated agencies, including many veterans.

H.R. 4920 corrects court interpretations that the “Rule of Two” clause in the 2006 Veterans Benefit Act meant the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) was required to award contracts to service-disabled, veteran-owned small businesses only, thereby putting NIB associated agency jobs at risk. “The Advocates stories of how working on those VA contracts affected their own quality of life, and that of their coworkers, definitely played an important role in correcting this issue and preserving those jobs,” says Webster.

**Personal Growth**

The Advocates for Leadership and Employment program has been a success not just for NIB, its associated agencies, and local communities, notes Fridas. Participants in the program do more than offer a unified message and increase awareness of NIB and associated agencies on Capitol Hill, and at the state and local level: Advocates embark on a journey of significant personal growth, improving their soft skills and becoming more involved in their communities as champions for their peers, their agencies, and themselves.

Manuel Zavala, who joined the West Texas Lighthouse for the Blind in San Angelo, Texas, in 2008 after losing his eyesight to diabetes, is an example of the personal growth many Advocates experience.

Despite being rather shy by nature, Zavala says “I suppose I’ve always been an advocate here at the agency — conducting fundraisers, helping organize holiday parties, that...
sort of thing. When my CEO asked me if I’d be interested in becoming an Advocate, I said I definitely was.”

Although the training was very intimidating at first, Zavala says the program has helped him build confidence, leading him to become the agency’s tour guide. He also credits the Advocates program with inspiring him to go back to school to not only earn his high school diploma, but to start taking college-level classes to earn a degree in business administration.

As for Capitol Hill visits, Zavala admits that the first few meetings were pretty overwhelming, but over time, he’s come to enjoy them. When the Lighthouse moved to a new location, it was Zavala who issued the invitation and arranged for U.S. Representative August Pfluger to tour the facility. Unbeknownst to him, others at the agency also made arrangements with Congressman Pfluger — to have him present the West Texas Lighthouse employee of the year award to Zavala during the visit.

The Payoff
“’To see our Advocates personal growth through involvement with the program is amazing,’ says Lynch. ‘They become more confident and continue to grow their skills. And the impact they’ve had in their communities and on Capitol Hill is incredible,’ he says.

It is also directly in line with the mission of NIB and NIB associated agencies, he notes. “NIB’s mission is all about supporting the economic independence of people who are blind. The Advocates program is right at the top of achieving that independence. It’s a natural — and vital — connection to the mission.”

In the next 10 years, Lynch would like triple or even quadruple the number of Advocates. “We want to have Advocates in every congressional district where our agencies are located.”

Webster agrees that growth is vital to the program’s continued success. “To grow the program, we have to expand our influence across more congressional districts. To do this, our agencies need to think more broadly — to have an Advocate at every Base Supply Center, for example, so we can cover more of the nation.” As representation grows, Webster also wants to continue to deepen the Advocates skills sets. “That way, they have the tools to amplify their own voices.”

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

The Advocates for Leadership and Employment program helps people who are blind develop effective communication and leadership skills, as well as self-confidence. The program participants spotlighted below believe those skills helped them advance in their careers.

Herb Humphrey

Hired at Mississippi Industries for the Blind in 2014 as a call center agent, Herb Humphrey joined the Advocates program the following year. His career progressed at the agency, leading to a position as advocacy coordinator. In 2020, he accepted a position as Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) coordinator for the city of Jackson, Mississippi. “Being an advocate prepared me to speak with local, state, and federal legislators about issues affecting the blind community, which eventually led me speaking on issues that affect the entire disability community in Jackson,” says Humphrey. “I didn’t know it at the time, but the Advocates program also prepared me to begin work on my ADA Coordinator certification.”

Greg Szabo

Greg Szabo joined The Lighthouse for the Blind, Inc., at its Inland Northwest Lighthouse in Spokane, Washington, as a production employee in 2011. Over the years, he took advantage of the learning opportunities and teams available through the Lighthouse, including being accepted to the Advocates program in 2017 and earning his college degree in 2020. “The Advocates program showed me how important advocacy is at all levels of government and gave me the confidence to reach out to our organization’s CEO to discuss it,” says Szabo, who is now the agency’s director of government and public relations. “I would have never guessed that I would be working in a role like this 10 years ago, but here I am, and I love it!”
The Pacesetter

BY SHARON HORRIGAN

2021 PETER J. SALMON EMPLOYEE OF THE YEAR AWARD

EMILY KANIS

BOSMA ENTERPRISES
INDIANAPOLIS, INDIANA

NIB associated nonprofit agency Bosma Enterprises packages and ships more than half a billion exam and surgical gloves a year, so the need for speed and accuracy is critical. The agency got both in Emily Kanis, the 2021 national Peter J. Salmon Award winner.

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 the passage of the Wagner O-Day Act and the formation of NIB.

Kanis enrolled in a Bosma rehabilitation program after graduating from the Indiana School for the Blind in Indianapolis. The timing couldn’t have been better: Bosma was about to move to larger facilities and expand its workforce, and Kanis was looking for a job.

She started at Bosma in 2006, working on the medical glove packaging line. Today, she not only keeps up the pace, she sets it, despite having the use of only one hand and being legally blind.

Kanis started out packing gloves, taping boxes, and loading pallets. Today, she oversees quality control on the line because she has an uncanny ability to identify noncompliant boxes and pull them before they ship, “Nothing gets past me,” she says.

Always on the lookout for a new challenge, a few years ago Kanis also started working at The Bistro, Bosma’s breakfast and lunch café for employees. “I do everything at The Bistro — the cash register, stocking, getting lunches ready, answering the phone, taking orders,” explains Kanis. “I really enjoy it.”

Pursuing a personal goal of learning to speak more confidently in front of others, she became involved in the agency’s Toastmasters group and has since worked with a coworker to present Lunch and Learn sessions on healthy eating as part of Bosma’s Healthy Work initiative. She also introduced Bosma President and Chief Executive Officer Jeff Mittman at a company-wide event, something she says she never would have done before joining Toastmasters.

Kanis, who frequently works long days, admits she sometimes surprises even herself with what she can accomplish. Her can-do spirit and willingness to give anything a try make her an invaluable team member. “I don’t look at what I can’t do,” says Kanis. “I focus on what I can do — which is actually quite a bit more than you’d think.”

Yet despite all her accomplishments and dedication, Kanis remains humble.

“When we announced at a company-wide meeting that Emily had won the award, I went to personally congratulate her and her parents, who we had invited to the meeting” says Mittman. “We had been chatting for maybe 45 seconds when Emily looked at me and said she had to get back to work.”

Emily’s mother, Amy Kanis, says her daughter “has always been really down to earth about all of her accomplishments.”

Mittman praises Emily as one of the agency’s most flexible employees. “She can float wherever we need her on any given day, and she’s happy to do it. I don’t think Emily has ever had a bad day.”

“She’s a shining light,” says Mittman. “There is no one who has done more or cares more about others, the organization, and the mission than Emily.”

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A Dreamer and Doer

BY SHARON HORRIGAN

REYNALDO VILLAREAL

VALLEY CENTER FOR THE BLIND
FRESNO, CALIFORNIA

Reynaldo Villareal’s rise at NIB associated nonprofit agency Valley Center for the Blind (VCB) in Fresno, California, has been meteoric, and for good reason. “His ability to connect with people and support them through challenges has made him invaluable at the agency,” says VCB Executive Director Shellena Heber. “Reynaldo is a wonderful leader, a caring colleague, and a never-ending dreamer.”

These qualities led NIB to award Villareal the 2021 national Milton J. Samuelson Award. The award is named for former NIB board member and executive director of The Chicago Lighthouse for People Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired, Milton J. Samuelson, who advocated for upward mobility and placement programs benefitting people who are blind or visually impaired.

Villareal joined VCB as a volunteer in 2015 and soon was offered an internship in rehabilitation training. He joined the staff as an assistive technology trainer in January 2017, teaching students the latest technology to help them land jobs. Under his guidance, says Heber, students made tremendous progress in both academics and self-confidence.

At the time, VCB was primarily engaged in rehabilitation training, but the agency realized offering meaningful employment opportunities was crucial to meeting its mission: Many clients successfully completed rehabilitation programs and were ready to enter the workforce, but struggled to find employment.

When an opportunity arose to launch a call center with NIB associated agency Beyond Vision, based in Milwaukee, VCB wasted no time. In need of a compassionate leader who could adapt technology to make the jobs available to its clients, VCB found Villareal not only had those skills and more, he also had a call center background. Villareal was so effective in the role that VCB promoted him to workforce development director in May 2020.

“The call center helped VCB grow from 19 employees in February 2019, to 41 employees today.

“All of us here know that Reynaldo has been absolutely instrumental in the growth of our agency. His passion for our mission, leadership, and reach-for-the-stars attitude is contagious,” says Heber. “We had long conversations over the years about how we could better serve our community. Reynaldo helped make that dream come true.”

“I am passionate about what I do and who I help,” says Villareal, who, at the age six, was diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa, an eye disease that causes vision impairment, including decreased vision at night or in low lighting and the loss of peripheral vision. “I was lucky. I had a supportive family and good opportunities in my life. I want to be able to give those opportunities to others who haven’t.”

Villareal, who is deeply honored to receive the Samuelson award, says “It’s not just my award, it’s the entire agency’s award. Our team rose — and continues to rise — to the challenge.”
**2021 EMPLOYEES OF THE YEAR**

- **Linda Audain**
  Chicago Lighthouse Industries

- **Julia Barger**
  North Central Sight Services

- **Willie Faye Barrow**
  Alabama Industries for the Blind

- **Robert Brown**
  Alphapointe

- **Milton Clyburn**
  Lions Services

- **Alex Curtis**
  Outlook Nebraska

- **Nicholas Hlifka**
  VIA

- **Jimmie Johnson**
  Central Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired

- **James Jones**
  Georgia Industries for the Blind

- **David Justice**
  Northeastern Association of the Blind at Albany

- **Emily Kanis**
  Bosma Enterprises

- **Betty Lau**
  Associated Industries for the Blind

- **Jean Michel**
  Lighthouse for the Blind, St Louis

- **Fred Morgan**
  Beyond Vision

- **Michael Newman**
  VisionCorps

- **Hector Nieves**
  Industries of the Blind

- **Toni Walters**
  Lighthouse for the Blind

- **Kerry Smith**
  Lighthouse Louisiana

- **Terry Strader**
  Clowescook Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired

- **Diana-Marie Soto**
  IFB Solutions

- **Elizondro Torres**
  South Texas Lighthouse for the Blind

- **Terese Goren**
  Envision

- **Tommie Johnson IV**
  MidWest Enterprises for the Blind

- **Kelly Jones**
  Industries of the Blind

- **Cesar Lopez**
  East Texas Lighthouse for the Blind

- **Robert Pellechia**
  Travis Association for the Blind

- **Marianne Raia**
  Lighthouse Works

- **Reynaldo Villarreal**
  Valley Center for the Blind

- **Dana Van Dussen**
  The Lighthouse for the Blind, Inc.

- **Tonia Walters**
  Lighthouse for the Blind, St Louis

- **Heather Young**
  Lions Volunteer Blind Industries

- **Jeffrey Young**
  IBVI

- **Manuel Zavala**
  West Texas Lighthouse for the Blind
BUILDING CONSENSUS FOR THE FUTURE

The National Association of the Employment of People Who Are Blind, NIB, and other organizations are working to provide a unified voice on policies affecting opportunities and independence for people who are blind.

BY DOMINIC CALABRESE

NIB and the National Association for the Employment of People Who Are Blind (NAEPB) are working with the National Policy Collaborative (NPC), a recently formed consortium, to improve life for people who are blind. Long aligned with NIB, the NAEPB traces its roots to 1938, when CEOs from 20 nonprofit agencies serving people who are blind met at American Foundation for the Blind (AFB) headquarters in New York to discuss ramifications of the recently passed Wagner-O’Day Act.

"The CEOs wanted to discuss the tremendous opportunities that the new legislation would bring to them, as well as the responsibilities they were about to take on," explains Mary Jane Surrago, assistant secretary for the NIB board of directors, who worked with NAEPB’s predecessors from 1979 to 2001.

In the early days, the CEOs formed an advisory group and elected Dr. Peter J. Salmon its first chairperson. The group considered having AFB allocate the expected federal contracts, but instead opted to form a new organization — National Industries for the Blind (NIB) — incorporated on August 10, 1938.

Dr. Salmon, who had been executive director of the Industrial Home for the Blind in Brooklyn, served as the group’s chairperson through 1946, a time when the agencies were heavily involved in supplying the military with essential products for World War II.

“A few years later, the group adopted the name The General Council of Workshops for the Blind, changing the name to The General Council of Industries for the Blind (GCIB) sometime in the 1980s,” Surrago says. Both organizations had an eight-member board of directors — president, vice president, secretary, past president, and a representative for agencies in each of four regions: Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, and West.

As a new century dawned, the GCIB was replaced by the NAEPB in 2001, an organization created with the goal of forming a stronger group to meet the challenges of the future. One big change was replacing the regional representatives on its board of directors with vice presidents representing different functional interests of the agencies, including operations, Base Supply Centers, and public policy. Unlike the GCIB, the NAEPB is a member-driven organization, and members pay dues to support its activities.

Strength in Numbers

With a functional group dedicated to public policy, the NAEPB and NIB began a more formal collaboration on issues of concern, such as endorsing payment of the federal minimum wage to employees who are blind.

Recognizing the greater impact of their combined efforts, NAEPB and NIB joined in the formation of the NPC, comprised of national entities dedicated to advancing educational, employment, health equity opportunities, and civil rights for people who are blind or have low vision. The group is the brainchild of Lee Nasehi, president and CEO of VisionServe Alliance (VSA), who served as president and CEO of NIB associated agency Lighthouse Central Florida for nearly 20 years.

"We have many organizations that serve people who are blind or visually impaired,” notes new NAEPB President Jeff Mittman, who is also president and CEO of NIB associated nonprofit agency Bosma Enterprises in Indianapolis. “However, all of us need to do a better job of coordinating on issues that we agree on in order to increase our numbers, bandwidth, and influence with the people who make policy decisions that impact the careers and lives of our employees.”

Echoing the need for unity is Cindy Watson, an NAEPB board member who recently assumed the role of vice president of public policy. Watson, CEO of NIB associated agency The San Antonio Lighthouse for the Blind and Vision Impaired, previously served as CEO of The Lighthouse for the Blind, Inc., in Seattle. In her NAEPB role she works closely with the NIB Public Policy team.
Watson is excited to have NAEPB and NIB be part of the NPC, working with VSA, AFB, the American Council of the Blind (ACB), National Federation of the Blind (NFB) and other national organizations to formulate a unified policy on issues affecting people who are blind or have low vision. The goal is to speak in a collective voice that can improve the lives of people who are blind across a broad spectrum of issues.

“Just bringing those groups — with their separate histories and missions — to the table to build consensus is a major accomplishment,” Watson says.

Members of the NPC are exploring ways to support one another while finding common ground on policy matters such as strengthening employment opportunities for people who are blind, providing psychosocial supports, and making accessible technology more affordable.

**Building for the Future**

Mittman, Watson and the NPC agree that transformation of the AbilityOne Program is critical to expanding employment opportunities for people who are blind.

While recognizing that the program has matched hundreds of thousands of people who are blind with meaningful employment over its 80-plus years, Watson emphasizes the need to evolve with the changing global economy to ensure long-term stability and relevancy. In an effort spearheaded by NAEPB, NIB President and CEO Kevin Lynch and leaders of other AbilityOne national organizations expressed these concerns in letters sent to members of Congress last spring.

Among the issues raised in the letter are the types of positions held by people who are blind or who have significant disabilities. The AbilityOne Program currently requires that 75% of employees performing direct labor be blind or significantly disabled, yet employees holding positions in management and administration who are blind or significantly disabled are not counted in this calculation, giving critics the impression that they cannot attain these jobs.

“This impression is a false one,” the letter explains. Noting that all AbilityOne jobs are paid a full and fair wage and have opportunities for advancement, the organizations contend that all positions within the AbilityOne Program should count toward the ratio requirement and qualify as Competitive Integrated Employment under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). Doing so, would allow those employees to “remain eligible for training and other vocational resources that ensure they remain independent and self-sufficient.”

Mittman said NAEPB and NIB are working to address other unintended consequences of WIOA. Signed into law in 2014, the Act was designed to strengthen and improve the workforce and provide people who face significant barriers to employment with access to training, education, and jobs.

“We need to take a hard look at WIOA and assess its practical effects on organizations employing people who are blind and their employees,” Mittman says.

He notes that private sector employers have an important role to play in increasing employment for people who are blind that will require listening and overcoming their own misconceptions.

Mittman believes people who are blind and organizations representing their interests have a big part to play in correcting those misconceptions. “We must be willing and determined to push out into the community and engage others. The more we are present at conferences, meetings, and in the places where decisions are made, the more successful we will be.”

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.
FOSTERING OPPORTUNITY

A singular philosophy motivates Blind Industries and Services of Maryland: Opening up possibilities for employees who are blind and preparing them to attain their dreams.

BY ROSEMARIE LALLY, J.D.

Headquartered in Baltimore since 1908, NIB associated nonprofit agency Blind Industries and Services of Maryland (BISM) provides employment opportunities and life skills training programs to people of all ages who are blind or have low vision. BISM also includes multifaceted manufacturing operations employing nearly 500 associates at three locations in Maryland — Baltimore, Federalsburg, and Salisbury — and in Raleigh, North Carolina, in addition to seven AbilityOne Base Supply Centers® (BSCs) it operates on military bases in Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, and the District of Columbia.

A longstanding commitment to providing opportunities for upward mobility means BISM is dedicated to promoting from within, explains agency vice president Dr. Michael Gosse. “My vision is for BISM to provide opportunity that grows with an individual’s commitment and capabilities.”

A recent pilot program in Baltimore aims to offer employees promotion opportunities aligned with their personal aspirations. Following aptitude assessments, personal training programs were developed tailored to the specific needs of two production employees who expressed interest in new production planning positions. The employees receive four hours of paid training per workday to learn the skills needed to succeed in the new positions. The pilot will soon be extended to other locations.

“Now the challenge is helping the rest of our associates identify their dreams and aspirations,” Gosse says. “With the additional training, employees can develop skills that help them succeed at BISM or at an outside organization where they can have a positive impact on the broader community. I’ll be happy with either outcome.”

Vice President for Sales and Marketing Ken Barnett also stresses the importance of ensuring employees have the tools to succeed, including the latest assistive technology. The BSCs Barnett oversees now have text-scanners and registers, and all BISM employees can download software to their phones to access personnel information 24/7. The embrace of technology helps employees who are blind succeed in challenging positions in accounting, communications, sales, customer care, and retail, at BSCs and across the agency.

Trying Out New Positions

Trying out new tasks that could lead to job advancement is popular with BISM employees. Edward Cokley, an associate at the Raleigh facility, says the training is excellent, noting that employees are carefully evaluated to see where they will best succeed. Currently a sewing machine operator, Cokley, who is sometimes called on to operate a forklift in shipping and receiving, says “I like being busy and learning new aspects of the job.” He recently volunteered to teach coworkers to use a new accessible payroll system.

Cokley also serves on the agency’s Activities Committee, which organizes lunches, holiday parties, and talent shows. “We have a diverse workforce, with people with varying levels of vision from all over the world, so we try to keep everyone involved. We want to make it a place where people enjoy coming to work.”

John Toliver, a sewing machine operator in Salisbury, Maryland, started at BISM on a material fusing machine and worked up to sewing military jackets. “I always wanted to join the Army as a kid, so I feel like I’m serving our country in a small way,” he says.
“We have very supportive supervisors who give everyone an opportunity to try new things and are there to support you when you have questions,” Toliver says. “People with vision impairment often second-guess themselves and their abilities, but when a place like BISM opens its doors to you, there’s a freedom to try new things.”

Building Self-confidence a Key
The agency’s commitment to unlocking doors is reflected in its Comprehensive Orientation, Rehabilitation, and Empowerment (CORE) program, an intensive residential curriculum that teaches people who are blind self-sufficiency and skills to regain control of their lives over the course of 8-12 months.

CORE Manager Laura Shroyer says participants “learn life in a non-visual way” through critical thinking and problem-solving. “Independence is a personal thing,” she says. “It’s up to individuals to choose what they want to be and do, and it’s up to us as instructors to make sure that happens.”

CORE sessions run year-round, providing one-on-one training for 10 to 12 students at a time. Within the fixed curriculum, students have an individual plan tailored to their personal goals. Mandatory classes include braille, cane travel, independent living, computer technology, woodworking, job readiness, and adjustment to blindness.

Confidence-building activities are key components of the program. Before graduating, each student prepares a four-course meal for friends from start to finish, including creating a braille invitation, choosing a menu, preparing a grocery list, shopping for ingredients, setting the table, cooking the entire meal, and cleaning up afterward.

In woodworking class, students learn to build a wooden braille block to practice their braille skills and use a “click ruler” to make measurements. Using power tools with no modifications other than braille labeling, students’ self-confidence soars as they create beautiful wood projects of their choosing, such as table and chair sets, toy boxes, and benches.

A sister program, Seniors Achieving Independent Living (SAIL), provides older adults with the skills to remain independent and active through a curriculum similar to the CORE program, but with an emphasis on peer support and group activities.

Shroyer noted many CORE graduates land jobs before they complete the program. Juniel Goode, who came to CORE for training in cane travel and to brush up on his computer skills, says the program enriched his life. Shortly after completing it, Goode was hired as an associate at the BSC at the U.S. Naval Research Laboratory, where he now aspires to becoming a team leader.

“It’s really about empowering people who are blind to live the life they envision,” Shroyer said. “With the right teaching, skill set, and mindset, people can do anything.”

Shroyer is both a graduate of the CORE program and an example of BISM’s commitment to providing opportunity. After taking a break to raise her three children, she returned to the agency to work in the sewing department. When a position as an independent living instructor opened, she applied and was hired. Three years later, she is managing CORE.

Investments that Benefit Everyone
BISM’s philosophy of investing in employees’ growth and development strengthens the agency’s performance with a “deep bench of talent,” Gosse says. “Every dollar invested in our associates returns to the community at least 10 to 1, by creating productive, independent, taxpaying citizens.”

Communications Manager Nikki Jackson, who arrived at the agency in 2013 to teach cane travel to high school students, can attest to the wisdom of that philosophy. After holding several positions at the agency, she was encouraged to “get out of her comfort zone” and apply for a communications opening.

“The message was ‘we want you to succeed and we’re going to support you in your efforts,’” recalls Jackson, who is now the first person who is blind to fill the role.

The BISM workforce embraces the philosophy of providing opportunity for everyone to reach their personal goals as well, and are doing their best to make that ideal a reality – for themselves and for the people who come after them. Rosemarie Lally, J.D. is a freelance writer and editor based in Washington D.C.
NEW PRODUCTS

READY TO LAUNCH

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

OFFICE SUPPLIES

1. SKILCRAFT® Wall Clocks
Help employees keep track of time in any setting with SKILCRAFT® battery-operated wall clocks. Quartz movements ensure accuracy to within two minutes per year and the shatter-resistant clear lens with UV coating prevents fading. These TAA-compliant clocks are assembled in the U.S.A. using earth-friendly materials that biodegrade in approximately two years in landfills. Choose from traditional, American Flag, safety message, or high-contrast clock faces, or contact Chicago Lighthouse Industries in Illinois for custom logos.

2. LED Self-set Digital Clock
SKILCRAFT® LED Self-set Digital Clocks automatically adjust for daylight savings time so the display is always correct, even in buildings that can't receive radio-controlled atomic signals. Energy-efficient LED screens with bright red digits for enhanced contrast can be wall mounted or placed on a flat surface. TAA-compliant with battery backup capability; assembled in the U.S.A. Produced by Chicago Lighthouse Industries in Illinois.

3. Kensington®/SKILCRAFT® Computer Locks
Protect data and secure physical devices with Kensington®/SKILCRAFT® Computer Locks. Compatible with 90% of devices, this innovative security solution meets industry-leading standards for tamper resistance, reliability, and durability and comes with your choice of keyed or combination locks. TAA-compliant; produced by Alphapointe in Kansas City, Missouri.

4. SKILCRAFT® Full Screen Privacy Filter
Made using quality 3M™ materials, SKILCRAFT® Full Screen Privacy Filters prevent visual hacking by darkening on-screen data viewed from any angle. These 16:9 aspect ratio borderless privacy filters are easy to attach and remove from flat borderless computer monitors and reduce 35% of blue light transmission. Packaging made with 35% recycled material is 100% recyclable. Essentially the same as 3M™ Black Privacy Filters; produced by Beyond Vision in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

5. Plastic Sheeting
Protect surfaces from dust and water with polyethylene plastic sheeting for general purpose surface protection, packaging, construction, and agricultural uses. Not intended for use as food wrapping. Made in the U.S.A. to ASTM D4397 standards. Produced by Envision in Wichita, Kansas.

CLEANING AND JANITORIAL SUPPLIES

6. Just Add Water System (JAWS®) Disinfectant Cleaner
Get the cleaning and disinfection you need while saving storage space and helping the environment with the JAWS® Just Add Water System Disinfectant Cleaner. Each kit includes a plastic bottle and four cartridges of JAWS' ultra-concentrated, no-rinse agent that cleans, disinfects, and deodorizes in one step. Simply mix cartridge contents with water in the refillable plastic bottle to eliminate grease, dirt, and grime, and kill SARS-CoV-2 on hard, non-porous surfaces. Free of bleach, phosphates, and ammonia; produced by Association for Vision Rehabilitation and Employment in Binghamton, New York.

7. Food Services Gloves
Multi-purpose disposable gloves made of clear polyethylene are latex- and powder-free. Designed to fit right or left hand and embossed to aid grip, these gloves are excellent for food preparation and serving, and comply with FDA regulations. Produced by Bestwork Industries for the Blind in Cherry Hill, New Jersey.

These and thousands of other products are available for purchase at AbilityOne.com, GSAAdvantage.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.
TECH CORNER

BOOKSHARE: A SUMMER READING LIST TREASURE TROVE

BY DOUG GOIST

In the fall 2020 issue of Opportunity, I introduced BARD Mobile, the talking books smartphone app released by the United States Library of Congress. The excellent BARD Mobile app provides access to the world’s largest collection of free talking books for people with print disabilities. In fact, it is my portable go-to for accessing fiction and nonfiction classics and popular magazines.

As good as BARD Mobile is however, it is only half of the solution to becoming a well-rounded reader. The other half — especially for me lately — is Bookshare, an online treasure trove of up-to-date e-books and e-textbooks for people with print disabilities. If I need a technical textbook from a company like Cisco, I can usually find it on the Bookshare website.

Admittedly, I did not always find much use for Bookshare. In the early years of my vision loss, it was just easier to load a Talking Book cassette or digital cartridge into my battery-powered Talking Book Player than strain my eyes scrolling through Bookshare e-texts or listening to them in a still unpolished synthesized voice. At that time, I also found the selection of e-texts lacking.

Bookshare has come a long way since those days — it now has over one million titles and volumes of current fiction and nonfiction releases. For students and working professionals, the Bookshare catalog has become an invaluable resource for educational and professional career development.

The force behind Bookshare is Benetech, a Silicon Valley nonprofit whose mission is using “technology to create social change.” With support from the U.S. Department of Education, Benetech has partnered with 1,000 publishers to provide the world’s largest collection of accessible e-texts, supporting 70 countries in 34 languages.

The best part is that Bookshare is free to both educational institutions and students. For everyone else, a $50 per year annual subscription to Bookshare’s vast up-to-date catalog is manageable and worthwhile, providing unlimited downloads in a variety of formats, including EPUB, MS Word, and DAISY (digital accessible information system).

Additionally, the e-texts are available in braille and large print, or can be converted on the fly into both downloadable audio files and audio with highlighted text files using Bookshare’s modern, built-in human speech synthesizer.

To join Bookshare, prospective users with disabilities such as blindness, dyslexia, cerebral palsy, and other print disabilities will need to show proof of their print disability — a very straightforward, quick, and painless process given that Benetech’s goal is to provide greater inclusion for all without adding any unnecessary barriers.

This commitment is most evident in the Bookshare web platform itself. The website is highly accessible and intuitive, as one would expect, and the web reader is second to none. Readers who are blind or visually impaired are able to use almost any device, including computers, smartphones, tablets, Chromebooks, and other assistive technologies to instantly start reading from their web browser or download reading lists of e-texts for offline enjoyment. Starting this summer, readers will also be able to access Bookshare through Amazon Alexa devices, the Alexa app for smartphones, and two brand new Bookshare Reader apps for iOS and Android devices.

I highly recommend a visit to the Bookshare website to get your 2022 summer reading treasure hunt off to a great start!

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.
NYSPSP NAMES CORNELL WILLIAMS 2021 EMPLOYEE OF THE YEAR

The New York State Preferred Source Program For New Yorkers Who Are Blind (NYSPSP) named Cornell Williams, of NYSPSP affiliated agency Alphapointe in Queens, its 2021 Employee of the Year. Williams, who serves as lead porter at Alphapointe, was recognized for both his unwavering dedication to excellence at work, and the numerous volunteer roles he fills in New York City.

“It’s a huge honor and sign of respect for what I do and my craft,” says Williams. “I’m really humbled to receive this award because what I do on and off the job, it’s just what I love doing. I never expected to be acknowledged for doing what I love.”

The NYSPSP Employee of the Year program recognizes and rewards outstanding work by a person who is blind or visually impaired employed within the program. Award criteria include not only work performance, attitude, and professional success, but also volunteerism and community involvement.

“It would be hard to find an individual who is more representative, deserving, and fitting for an award of this magnitude,” says Alphapointe Human Resource Director Rebecca Thybulle.

Williams’ started at Alphapointe in 2008 but left after three years following a serious car accident. After undergoing multiple surgeries and rehabilitation, he returned to the agency in 2015 and worked his way up to lead porter, overseeing a team of eight. In 2019, he took on additional roles as head of the building security team and member of the crisis situation team.

Williams credits his mother with instilling a strong sense of volunteerism. “My mother told me that I was put on this planet to give back. Since I was young, that’s all I’ve wanted to do.”

A long-time volunteer with the Red Cross, New York State Chaplin Task Force, and the New York City Police and Fire Departments, his volunteer work took a turn when the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

To serve his community, Williams delivered groceries, packages, and medicine to people who could not safely leave their homes. Being hospitalized with COVID-19 himself further solidified his belief in service to the community. After completing quarantine, he embraced his role as an essential employee, returning to work and his volunteer efforts.

“I seek to bring hope to the hopeless,” he says. “My gift is to understand other people.”

Today, Williams looks forward to earning new work-related licenses, training to be the assistant fire safety marshal at Alphapointe, reconnecting with the Red Cross, and expanding his support to people who are homeless.

SAVE THE DATE: NIB/NAEPB TRAINING CONFERENCE AND EXPO

Mark your calendars for the 2022 NIB/NAEPB Training Conference and Expo, scheduled for October 3-7 at the Hyatt Regency Crystal City in Arlington, Virginia. This year’s Training Conference and Expo will recognize the 2022 NIB associated agency employees of the year in addition to focusing on business development and comprehensive training on the AbilityOne® Program and other topics relevant to growing sales and employment. It will also include the Expo and NIB Marketplace, deep-dive breakout sessions, informative speakers, and recognition of outstanding customers and partners.
**DECA RECOGNIZED FOR OUTSTANDING SUPPORT OF MILITARY RESALE PROGRAM**

NIB President and CEO Kevin Lynch presented William F. Moore, director and CEO of the Defense Commissary Agency (DeCA), with a plaque recognizing the agency’s outstanding support of the Military Resale program. At a February 28 meeting at U.S. Army Garrison Fort Lee in Virginia, Lynch commended the 3.5% percent increase in NIB’s DeCA sales during Fiscal Year 2021, despite the constraints of the ongoing COVID 19 pandemic. The sales increase, Lynch said, “translates to more work and more opportunity for people who are blind.”

Citing DeCA’s addition of 33 new military resale products to the AbilityOne Procurement List, Lynch said the additions “give people who are blind the opportunity to build careers in support of our military customers.” Noting the more than 60-year partnership between DeCA and NIB, Lynch said NIB associated nonprofit agencies are “honored to help DeCA fulfill its important mission of serving military families.”

**TOM LEHRICH JOINS NIB LEADERSHIP TEAM AS SPECIAL ADVISOR**

In March Thomas Lehrich, a leader in government for more than two decades, joined the NIB leadership team as Special Advisor. In his role at NIB, Tom — who most recently served as Inspector General for the U.S. AbilityOne Commission* — will work with and support NIB associated nonprofit agencies, networks, partnerships, and future opportunities, as well as advise NIB President and CEO Kevin Lynch on innovative new employment efforts and agency support.

**NIB AGENCY STEPS UP TO AID HUMANITARIAN EFFORT IN UKRAINE**

NIB associated nonprofit agency Alphapointe, headquartered in Kansas City, Missouri, is donating thousands of life-saving tourniquets and medical supplies to aid humanitarian efforts in Ukraine. The donation is the result of an existing relationship between Alphapointe and representatives from the U.S. Department of Commerce’s International Trade Administration (ITA).

ITA representatives shared a list of medical supplies sought by the Embassy of Ukraine with Alphapointe, which discovered it either manufactured a number of the items or had them within its inventory. Among the items being sent are 2,000 of Alphapointe’s innovative Tactical Mechanical Tourniquet, created in collaboration and at the request of the U.S. Army, and more than 2,500 individual items, including emergency and compression bandages.

“As the tragic events in Ukraine unfolded, we realized that the medical devices we manufacture could help save lives if we could get them in the hands of the people who desperately need medical assistance,” says Alphapointe President and CEO Reinhard Mabry. “We are grateful to the International Trade Administration for providing a path for us to make that happen.”
A Great American Workforce

Building Rewarding Careers

Learn more at NIB.org/workforce