Adapt and Advance

Adaptations made for the COVID-19 pandemic lead to new business practices
LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

ADAPT AND ADVANCE

As 2021 winds down, COVID-19 has thrown us another curve and we find ourselves in a place few expected — recovering from the Delta surge and looking forward to an end to the pandemic that has disrupted plans across the globe.

Though not where any of us wanted to be, NIB and its associated nonprofit agencies have not skipped a beat in carrying out their duties as part of the essential workforce keeping our military and the defense industrial base strong. Throughout the pandemic, we have adapted practices to work more efficiently, keep employees and community members safe, and meet the changing demands of our customers. Even as we carry on through the pandemic, we’ve been evaluating those adaptations and determining which ones should be continued as we advance into a post-pandemic world.

In this issue of Opportunity, you’ll read about NIB agencies that have turned this challenging time into an opportunity to innovate — finding new ways of working, investing in their employees and facilities, and delivering programming essential to their communities. You’ll also learn about outstanding employees in some of our programs, and federal and Department of Defense customers who have shown their support in helping NIB carry out its mission.

NIB and its associated agencies are honored to meet the nation’s needs in these unprecedented times. Even more, we look forward to advancing into the recovery phase and putting the lessons we’ve learned to good work as our nation rebuilds.

Kevin A. Lynch
President and
Chief Executive Officer

Editor’s note: Some photos used in this issue of Opportunity were taken prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.
ADAPT AND ADVANCE

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ON THE COVER

Alphapointe employee Jose Quezada Pena assembles pilot relief bags for the military.

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Chairperson Jeff Koses combines his deep understanding of the federal marketplace with a strong appreciation for people working in the AbilityOne Program.

BY DOMINIC CALABRESE

Selected to lead the AbilityOne Commission® as chairperson in February 2020, Jeff Koses, who is also senior procurement executive at the General Services Administration (GSA), has outlined an ambitious agenda for the agency which oversees the employment of more than 42,000 Americans who are blind or have significant disabilities.

Emphasizing that he intends to serve as both an effective steward and champion of the AbilityOne® Program by successfully engaging customers and exploring new growth opportunities, Koses says topping his agenda are proposals to boost federal contracts for people who are blind or have significant disabilities and forge ahead with more knowledge-based jobs.

Koses believes the future of the AbilityOne Program depends on adding more knowledge-based jobs, which he says are “essential in meeting the needs of tomorrow’s federal customers.”

Extraordinary Workforce Praised
To illustrate the value of employees working in the AbilityOne Program, Koses points to the COVID-19 pandemic and salutes them for their “extraordinary response on behalf of the American people.”

Since the pandemic began, AbilityOne Program employees have been on the front lines against the coronavirus, providing such critical personal protective equipment (PPE) as masks, gowns, gloves, and hand sanitizers while also serving as essential workers in U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) hospitals and on military bases where they operate switchboards, staff kitchens, and perform other vital tasks.

“Employees working in the AbilityOne Program have played a pivotal role in helping to keep the U.S. government and military operating during this national emergency,” he says. “Their response when our country needed them the most is something everyone working in our program can be tremendously proud of.”

Noting that the pandemic is not over, Koses said he fully expects employees working in the program will remain vigilant and continue their superb efforts.

Looking beyond the crisis, he observed that the AbilityOne Commission is fully committed to achieving equity for all employees and embracing a future of opportunity for everyone. The agency’s goals and accomplishments were outlined in a special report sent to President Biden and members of Congress, as well as key stakeholders, in March of this year.

Deep Understanding of Federal Marketplace
Koses, first appointed to the U.S. AbilityOne Commission in 2019, has a deep understanding of the federal marketplace. As senior procurement executive for GSA, he is widely recognized as an innovative and visionary leader in the field of acquisition.

From 2008-2014, he was director of acquisition operations for GSA’s Federal Acquisition Service, where he led several Federal Strategic Sourcing Initiatives. He also created GSA’s premier vehicle for integrated professional services, OASIS; managed 25 multiple award schedules with annual sales of over $22 billion; supported emergency acquisition; and oversaw acquisition for GSA Global Supply. Prior to that, he directed GSA’s Office of Contract Management and played a host of both operational and policy roles.

Koses holds a master’s degree in acquisition management from American Graduate University. Previously, he earned a bachelor’s degree in history and political science from Washington University in St. Louis.

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.
OCTOBER IS NATIONAL DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT AWARENESS MONTH

By purchasing SKILCRAFT® products and services through the AbilityOne® Program, you provide meaningful employment for people who are blind or have significant disabilities.
Out-of-the box thinking to meet the challenges of COVID-19 leads to adaptations in business practices that help NIB and its associated agencies advance their mission.

BY DOMINIC CALABRESE

Like many organizations attempting to meet the extraordinary challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, National Industries for the Blind (NIB) and its associated nonprofit agencies made numerous changes to meet the safety needs of employees while continuing to fulfill their critical mission.

Now, many are opting to keep a number of those changes in place because they provide greater flexibility to employees who are blind, make overall good business sense, and will assist in meeting future goals.

“Throughout the pandemic, employee safety has been our top priority,” explains NIB General Counsel Tom Mikrut, who co-chaired the “Return-to-the-Office” committee, “but we also understood that our mission could not suffer and that we needed to continue to provide services and support for the nonprofit agencies, their employees who are blind or visually impaired — many of whom are deemed essential workers providing the products and services needed during this emergency — and the community members the agencies serve.”
Mikrut is working closely with NIB’s Vice President of Human Resources Kyna Kirkland in developing procedures and protocols that keep employees safe while successfully carrying out operations.

From the very beginning of the pandemic, Kirkland says, President and CEO Kevin Lynch held daily Zoom meetings with NIB’s leadership team to address work issues and provide updates, with her department implementing policies as needed.

“We then put together a committee of people across the organization to make sure that we were capturing a wide variety of viewpoints,” explains Mikrut. “We especially wanted to hear from people who are blind, because they face unique challenges during the pandemic, and we want all of our procedures to be well-defined and easy to follow.”

“One our fundamental goals has been to optimize employee engagement through developing policies and procedures, including telework and other flexible work options,” Kirkland explains.

The AbilityOne.com customer care team, which handles online sales of SKILCRAFT® and AbilityOne® Program products to federal customers, will continue to work remotely. Since many department employees are blind or visually impaired, taking the commute out of the workday equation not only improves their quality of life, but opens the positions up to additional qualified applicants who are blind.

Both Mikrut and Kirkland say ongoing measures to ensure employee safety will be implemented to align with guidelines from the state and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

“Despite the very real dangers posed by the virus, it confirmed my belief in the dedication of our employees,” says Lynch. “They have worked even harder during the pandemic in incredibly challenging circumstances, as did the employees in our agencies. They are truly answering the call when our nation needs them.”

Investing in Today and Tomorrow

One NIB associated agency meeting the challenges of the pandemic head-on is Kansas City-based Alphapointe, a comprehensive provider of vision rehabilitation services in the state of Missouri and leading producer of products for government and commercial customers.

In addition to steps the agency took to keep employees safe, Alphapointe invested in its future.

“The largest take-away from the pandemic experience for Alphapointe has been that the general public realizes how incredible our team is,” says agency President and CEO Reinhard Mabry.

The larger community began recognizing Alphapointe’s contributions, he says, when it was deemed an essential business by federal and state governments.

“Not only has our agency carried on with our important work during the largest global crisis in more than 100 years, but, in many circumstances, we have amplified our work significantly,” Mabry explains, pointing out that the agency delivered when the U.S. Air Force asked for 30,000 face masks and other partners collectively required an 800% increase in the production of plastic spray bottles.

To not only cope with the pandemic, but position itself for the future, Alphapointe has made significant investments in its machinery. “COVID-19 placed enormous stress on our capacity, so to meet the demand, we purchased and installed new molding equipment,” Mabry says.

The agency has also upgraded its power, water filtration, air compressors, material handling, conveyors, and other support systems as needed to operate the new equipment. “In total, Alphapointe has invested more than $4 million in its plant and equipment to support the growing needs of customers,” Mabry says.
In addition, the agency broadened its capabilities with two major acquisitions.

First, Alphapointe acquired an innovative nonprofit based in Kansas City, Rightfully Sewn, which creates jobs in the fashion industry and provides training programs for people from disadvantaged backgrounds. In addition, the agency formalized an arrangement with KC Vision Performance to increase the scope of services provided through its low vision clinic.

“These investments increase Alphapointe’s capabilities for our customers, and expand job opportunities for people who are blind,” Mabry explains.

Another COVID-era initiative with far-reaching consequences is renovation of Alphapointe’s adaptive training apartment, which has added several hundred square feet of training space, installed modern appliances for activities such as cooking and laundry, and incorporated a new adaptive lighting system that allows for simulations of different environments.

The agency’s decision to shift its popular Technology Camp to a virtual setting in 2020 was in response to a slew of requests from parents and family members who wanted to proceed with the event for youth and not wait until after the pandemic.

“We had always understood the importance of our camps, but the outpouring of requests really helped put things in perspective,” Mabry acknowledges. By the time summer arrived, children and teens had been stuck at home for months, unable to engage with their friends.

“Our Technology Camp provided an opportunity to reconnect, and our staff was adamant that the camp wouldn’t be another thing lost to the pandemic,” Mabry says. While transitioning to a virtual camp setting was a challenge, the feedback received from families motivated the team to overcome the technical challenges.

This year, Alphapointe adopted a hybrid approach, allowing some campers to attend in-person when COVID numbers dipped, but continuing the remote Technology Camp option as a way to reach more students. This year’s participants logged in from as far away as Washington state and Puerto Rico.

“The work with our Technology Camp is a good microcosm for our approach to the well-being and safety of not only our employees, but the thousands of people of all ages who we serve through our youth programs and our rehabilitation programs each year,” Mabry says. “We listen to their concerns and then determine the best path toward ensuring their safety.”

Mabry observes that Alphapointe provided rehabilitation services to more people in 2020 than in any other year in its history. “I am incredibly proud of our staff members,” he says. “The Alphapointe team rose to the occasion and performed admirably facing new challenges and unforeseen circumstances every day.”

Overcoming Multiple Challenges
Another NIB associated agency successfully meeting the challenges of the pandemic and as a result, better positioning itself for the future, is the LightHouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired in San Francisco.

Established in 1902, the LightHouse focuses on promoting the independence of people in the greater Bay area who are blind or have low vision. The organization currently has more than 140 staff members providing a broad array of services in areas such as independent living skills, orientation and mobility, and access technology. Its online Adaptations store is a “go to” site for tools, technology, and accessible solutions.
When the pandemic hit in 2020, the organization quickly shifted gears to minimize risks to employees while continuing to provide vital programs.

“We had to pivot, and pivot fast to deliver our services firstly from our kitchen tables and living-rooms, and then using PPE and social distancing to provide one-on-one training like orientation and mobility,” says LightHouse CEO Bryan Bashin.

Even as the agency develops reopening plans, Bashin emphasizes that it will continue serving people who are more comfortable taking classes and connecting online as long as there is a need for such services.

“For some people, online is more favorable,” he points out. “They don’t have to travel or deal with public transportation to still receive high-level professional instruction.”

Bashin says the numbers of people learning braille online is one of the standout class successes during the pandemic.

“We thought this would be a course that would be difficult to emulate online,” he explains. “How wrong we were. It’s fair to say that while we always look forward to welcoming people in person, we now know just how well our classes have been, and can be, adapted for students who wish to take them online. We believe that this hybrid model of service delivery means we’ll be able to serve more people wherever they are along their blindness or low vision journey.”

One LightHouse program enjoying a new beginning is its popular Enchanted Hills Camp (EHC). Located on more than 300 acres of land in the foothills west of Napa Valley, the camp was founded in 1950 by Rose Resnick, a woman who credited her confidence and feelings of self-worth as a person who is blind to the time she spent at a camp in the Adirondacks for children who are blind.

“Enchanted Hills has the distinction of being the first camp for people who are blind west of the Mississippi,” notes Bashin. “It provides a quintessential camp experience including hiking, horseback riding, archery, and swimming. It’s a place where campers make lifelong friends and meet motivated mentors who are blind.”

In the past ten years, the facility has served more than 25,000 campers who are blind. But in 2017, a large part of the camp was destroyed on day three of Napa county’s 10-day wildfire siege. Included in the damage were 10 cabins that housed campers and counselors as well as a large staff house, which burned to rubble.

“These cabins were homes for camp employees, retreat guests, and many blind and visually impaired people for whom EHC is a treasured sanctuary,” explains Bashin. “We are determined to rebuild and provide that sanctuary for years to come.”

To make rebuilding a reality, the LightHouse embarked on a bold fundraising campaign, while continuing to hold camp in the remaining facilities. After holding virtual sessions in 2020, for the summer of 2021, Bashin and his team made the decision to open the camp to in-person gatherings in July at 50% capacity.

“The decision to operate the camp was not taken lightly,” he emphasizes, pointing out that it had to be made well before officials knew what to expect for COVID-19 case numbers and vaccination protocols in the summer.

“It was felt that because camp is so spacious and most activities are in the open air, with stringent procedures in place and in practice, camp was the one face-to-face set of programs we could safely offer,” Bashin explains.

To provide the safest experience possible given the pandemic, the sessions were limited to teens age 13-20 and COVID vaccination was required for all staff members and campers, except those with a documented medical or religious exemption. Those with an exemption were advised to follow CDC guidance for travelers and provide proof of a negative viral test taken one to three days before arriving at camp.

Campers younger than 13 and older than 20 were not allowed onsite, but were encouraged to participate in age-appropriate virtual camp activities such as game nights, audio-described movie screenings, discussion groups, technology classes, arts and crafts, orientation and mobility classes, and more.

“We want to keep our community connected to EHC,” explains Bashin. With the summer’s hybrid, virtual, and in-person programming the LightHouse seems to have achieved that, keeping campers in touch until they can all come together again in person.

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.
Base Supply Center Excellence Awards
The AbilityOne Base Supply Center® (BSC) program does more than provide retail jobs for people who are blind. As an outlet for sales of SKILCRAFT® products, it also provides people working in NIB associated nonprofit agencies opportunities for employment and training in manufacturing. Each year, NIB recognizes three outstanding stores with the BSC Excellence Award.

Base Supply Center Excellence Award
Camp Atterbury
Operated by LCI
The Camp Atterbury AbilityOne Base Supply Center has always championed LCI’s effort to promote the AbilityOne program. Despite the BSC’s small footprint, this high-volume store maintains the highest inventory turn of all the LCI retail facilities and received best practice scores of 100% on its last three compliance visits. It provides an incredible level of support to the State of Indiana Joint Force Headquarters, which serves as a major training site for individual, collective, and joint operations. The Atterbury BSC team has received several awards from base leadership for dedication and delivery of service over the years.

Base Supply Center Excellence Award
Whiteman Air Force Base
Operated by Envision
The Whiteman Air Force Base AbilityOne BSC has solidified itself as the center of gravity for supply requirements on the installation. To improve the customer shopping experience as well as improve efficiencies and accountability in retail operations, the store initiated a transformation that included resets to improve merchandising of products and reconfiguring the warehouse space to provide a more efficient process for managing individual equipment elements for warfighters. The Whiteman BSC presents a focused vision to support the AbilityOne® Program with strong customer relations resulting in an overall best practice score of 98%.

Base Supply Center Excellence Award
Naval Station Great Lakes
Operated by Beyond Vision
Since 1997, the AbilityOne BSC at Naval Station Great Lakes has supported the Navy’s training mission and other federal government customers as a one-stop, ready-source of SKILCRAFT and other AbilityOne products to meet customers’ daily supply needs. Naval Station Great Lakes is the Navy’s largest training installation and the home of the Navy’s only boot camp. Over the last two compliance visits, the Naval Station Great Lakes BSC received best practice scores of 100% and 99% respectively. This is a first BSC Excellence award for Beyond Vision.
QUALITY WORK ENVIRONMENT AWARD

The Quality Work Environment (QWE) initiative is a collaborative effort with the U.S. AbilityOne Commission® to strengthen the commitment of associated nonprofit agencies to enhance daily work experiences and develop future growth opportunities for people who are blind. This year’s QWE Award winner is:

Beacon Lighthouse
Wichita Falls, Texas

Since establishing its QWE Committee, the Beacon Lighthouse has put in place a process for employees to make recommendations to upper management, implemented several safety improvements in the manufacturing area; developed a cross-training program with a goal that all employees can perform any of the various jobs in the plant; and seen an increase in the number of employees enrolling in online training courses. Overall, employees at the agency are more engaged and are showing a greater spirit of teamwork.

AGENCY ACHIEVEMENT AWARDS

For almost 40 years, NIB has been recognizing associated agencies that achieve excellence in compliance and contract performance and efforts to retain or increase employment for people who are blind, or in job placement and upward mobility for people who are blind. This year’s winners are:

Small Agency
Lighthouse Works!

Medium Agency
Lighthouse Louisiana

Large Agency
Travis Association for the Blind

Inventory Control Technician Jeffrey “Scott” Aukerman, chair of the QWE EPIC committee at Beacon Lighthouse for the Blind, and Machine Operator Mark Kestler on the production floor. Scott also serves on the U.S. AbilityOne Commission QWE Steering Committee.
BUSINESS PARTNER AND CUSTOMER RECOGNITION

Every year, NIB and NAEPB present awards to government and private-sector business partners and customers whose outstanding efforts have helped advance the mission to create, sustain, and improve the employment of people who are blind.

NAEPB Supplier of the Year Awards

The NAEPB Supplier of the Year awards recognize outstanding suppliers that provide quality products and services to our industry through the AbilityOne® Program, allowing agencies to not only employ people who are blind, but also meet stringent customer demands.

Large Business Supplier of the Year: GOJO Industries

GOJO is a co-brand partner with NIB and Travis Association of the Blind (also known as Austin Lighthouse) for the PURELL® SKILCRAFT® product line. As the premier supplier to the U.S. government, GOJO and Austin Lighthouse are devoted to helping government customers stay healthy during the pandemic. GOJO and Austin Lighthouse packaged products in available containers during the pandemic to quicken the time-to-market for specialized customers like the U.S. government, U.S. military, first responders, and essential workers.

Small Business Supplier of the Year: Bottom Line Military Sales

Over many years, the Bottom Line Military Sales team has repeatedly shown LCI that they can find any product, on time and on budget, allowing the agency to assist countless customers in sourcing difficult-to-find items so customers can focus on their missions. In addition, Bottom Line has been involved in countless AbilityOne Base Supply Center® (BSC) set-ups, including merchandising and marketing the BSC program. Bottom Line CEO Bill Beckett meets with key decision makers and helps identify customer pain points and needs so the BSC staff can address them.

ETS Champion Award

LeAnna Redmill
AbilityOne Program Coordinator and DataOps Team Lead
Supply Chimp

Ridding sales outlets of commercial products that are essentially-the-same (ETS) as AbilityOne products is paramount in driving sales and increasing employment opportunities for AbilityOne Program employees. The team LeAnna leads at Supply Chimp regularly consults NIB’s ETS team to ensure compliance with the Javits-Wagner-O’Day Act and requirements of the Authorized Distributor Program. LeAnna submits all contract modifications to NIB to scrub for ETS before adding products, and she and her team react swiftly and aptly to any NIB request related to ETS. LeAnna truly sets the standard for authorized distributors when it comes to rooting out ETS.

Partnership in Excellence Award

Ben Wiest
Senior Manager
Contract Operations Compliance
W.W. Grainger, Inc.

Nick Liolios
Vice President
G-Commerce Division
Noble Sales

Dan Edwards and Team
Sales Vice President
Government Division
GOJO

Tom Myers
Chief Operating Officer
PURE Bioscience
Federal Customer Appreciation Award

Department of Homeland Security
Life Cycle Logistics, Logistics Integration Office
Office of the Chief Readiness Support Officer

Jamen Adamson
Pandemic Personal Protective Equipment, Contracting Officer Representative

Amy Driver
Contracting Officer

Malik Jalloh
Contracting Specialist

Ronald Jean-Baptiste
Contracting Officer Team Lead

Katie McDermott
Contracting Specialist

U.S. Census Bureau

Molly Shea
Procurement Chief

Thomas Sherman
Contracting Officer

Defense Logistics Agency-Troop Support

Janice DiBuono
Acquisition Specialist

Tyrone Lyles
Special Programs Liaison

Kimberly Sabo
Acquisition Specialist

Brian Schott
Division Chief
Medical/Surgical Manufacturer Direct Division

Transportation Security Administration
Mission Essentials Acquisition Division

Kevin Newton
Contracting Officer

DOD Customer Appreciation Award

Defence Logistics Agency-Land and Maritime

Brian Walker
AbilityOne Program Manager

Army National Guard Bureau

Major Deidra Carter
Patient Administration Officer, Office of the Chief Surgeon

Cole Cook
Contracting Officer, J1/G1/A1 Team Lead

Neal Dedicatoria
Contracting Officer, National Guard Bureau
REMEMBERING KAREN PAL

More than a believer in the abilities of people who are blind, Karen Pal developed programs that helped people reach their full potential.

When Karen Pal, director of the Business Leaders Program (BLP), passed in early June, colleagues at NIB and hundreds of employees at NIB associated nonprofit agencies lost a friend, advocate, and true believer in the abilities of people who are blind.

Karen, who joined NIB in 2003, was a passionate thought leader, advocate, educator, and mentor whose innate and endless drive to develop the potential of others touched many during her almost two decades at NIB. She will be remembered for many things, but perhaps most of all, for her relentless drive to ensure people who are blind have the professional training, tools, and education needed to be their best.

Launching the groundbreaking and award-winning Business Leaders Program will forever be one of Karen’s many signature achievements. Always looking ahead to what was next, Karen also developed, launched, managed, and grew BLP to encompass five professional development tracks helping thousands of people who are blind attain their career goals.

Born and raised in Tacoma, Washington, Karen was a first generation American who knew the richness of being raised in a European home where multiple languages were spoken, community was valued, and eating well was a priority. No doubt her upbringing influenced her academic studies and career choices, as Karen held master’s degrees in nutrition and public health.

A lifelong learner, Karen continued to enhance her ability to contribute by earning the Society for Human Resource Management’s Senior Professional in Human Resources (SPHR) credential and becoming a Certified Nonprofit Professional (CNP) through the Nonprofit Leadership Alliance. Regardless of her achievements, learning was second to Karen’s passion to share that knowledge with others and help them reach their potential.

Karen is survived by her husband Michael Bailey and her beloved Labrador, Max; mother, Trudy Pal; sister Linda Pal Chauncey and her husband, Joe Chauncey of Seattle, Washington; and hundreds of people whose lives were changed for the better by completing one of Karen’s innovative development programs.
As the hot summer days wane into cooler fall, there is still time to start that neglected workout routine outside in the elements and, most importantly, in fresh air far away from any face masks or yoga mats. Those of us who can’t appreciate nature’s visual distractions during a solo trail run don our ear buds and load our workout playlists or podcasts to block out our labored breathing on a stationary bike, treadmill, or elliptical machine.

Perform this routine enough times and you start to feel like your ear buds are a permanent fixture — and walking around all day wearing those dangling devices doesn’t do much for spatial awareness, let alone promoting positive social interactions in or out of the gym.

So, resisting the temptation to buy yet another pair of ear buds, I cut my budget and saved up enough to purchase the latest sport version of Bose’s audio sunglasses — the Bose® Frames Tempo

Following on Bose’s previous classical Alto, Soprano, and Tenor audio frames, the Bose Tempo frames are designed for the more active user: They are sportier and include the ability to swap out UV-blocking lenses based on light conditions. The base model includes black mirrored polarized polycarbonate lenses; additional pairs of lenses in amber, blue, or yellow can be purchased for $39 each. The amber lenses, for example, could be ideal for wearers with retinal conditions like retinitis pigmentosa, where photosensitivity is impacted in bright sunny conditions. The frames can also be customized to incorporate eyeglass prescriptions.

Bose’s Open Ear Audio™ down-firing stereo speaker technology is truly remarkable. While others in proximity may be able to hear faint noise in quiet indoor settings, using them outside with turn-by-turn pedestrian navigation greatly improves one’s safety by keeping ear canals unobstructed for greater awareness of one’s surroundings, which can be difficult using typical ear buds.

The Tempo also received an upgrade in both sound quality and battery life over previous models, bumping up battery life from four hours to a generous eight hours of active use. And they are appreciably moisture and sweat resistant, incorporating an IPX4 rating. They may not survive total immersion if dropped into a swimming pool, but they will survive a rain shower.

A dual microphone array also gives wearers easy access to make and receive clear hands-free phone calls, although I did have occasional issues losing connection when answering calls.

Smartphone pairing was a breeze, however, as a single button below the right frame both powers on the frames as well as allows wearers to pause and advance podcasts and playlists. Also helpful is a spoken status report — a pleasant voice speaks the frame’s battery level, connection status and even warns wearers when the battery is running low.

Volume is quickly adjusted by simply swiping your right index finger forward or backward on the top edge of the right frame.

Add to all of this that the Bose Frames Tempo turns itself off whenever you remove the frames and place them upside down, such as on a table.

Bose Frames Tempo include a zippered hard carrying case, three sizes of silicone nose pads, a USB-C charging cable, free shipping, and a 30-day return guarantee. They can be purchased new for $249 or refurbished from Bose or on Amazon.

Doug Goist is program manager, workforce development at NIB’s talent management enterprise, NSITE. 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.
IFB Solutions credits continuous innovation and a “people-first” philosophy for its longevity and growth.

By Sharon Horrigan

IFB Solutions had a humble start in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Established in 1936 in a two-room building, the first employees canned chairs and made mattresses and brooms throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Fast forward to 2021 and today the NIB associated nonprofit agency employs nearly 1,000 people at facilities in Winston-Salem and Asheville, North Carolina, and Little Rock, Arkansas.

A lot has changed over the years, but one thing has remained the same: IFB’s mission to create employment for people who are blind or visually impaired. To meet that mission, the agency embraces a “people first” philosophy as it continues to innovate and, as a result, thrive and grow.

Growth by the Numbers

That growth, says David Horton, IFB Solutions president and CEO, can be attributed to being inventive and embracing new technology — and making sure that new technology is accessible for all employees.

Given the rapid growth of accessible technology since the turn of the century, IFB’s embrace of new ways of working has created growth in not only the number but also the types of job opportunities for people who are blind. Since 2002, the agency has seen a 400% increase in the number of employees on its payroll who are blind, working in jobs from manufacturing and IFB’s state-of-the-art optical lab, to providing professional services and serving military and government customers at the 14 AbilityOne Base Supply Center® (BSC) stores the agency operates.

Offering upward mobility in employment is also key to IFB’s mission. In 2002, five employees who are blind or visually impaired were in management or supervisory positions. In 2020, the number had grown to 55, demonstrating IFB’s commitment to career advancement for all.

“We are proud to offer jobs of choice,” says Nicole Ducoeur, IFB’s senior director of corporate communications. “For 54% of our employees who are blind or visually impaired, this is their first job. We take pride in offering training to help them move up in the organization if they want, or into careers with other employers.” That type of upward mobility can’t be achieved, says Ducoeur, without continual innovation, both in the products and services the agency offers and in ensuring an increasing number of jobs are accessible to people with visual impairments.

Innovation at Work

Innovation at IFB includes partnering with the U.S. military to create or improve combat gear and uniforms for military personnel. The Asheville location, for example, shipped its first fuel handler coverall in July 2019, a traditional one-piece garment the military had used for decades. When military designers wanted to offer a two-piece suit, IFB worked closely with them on the redesign. The first batch of the redesigned suits shipped in May 2021, says Randy Buckner, vice president of operations support at the Asheville location. IFB will make more than 3,300 suits this year, and production will go into full swing in 2022, with nearly 15,500 fuel handler suits slated to be made.

When IFB landed a contract with the U.S. Army to make its Modular Lightweight Load-Carrying Equipment (MOLLE) 4000 rucksack, IFB wanted to make the manufacturing process more accessible to people who are blind. To that end, the agency bought 20-30 sewing machines with clamps and guides so employees who are blind can assemble the rucksack. Today, 60 employees produce 800 MOLLE 4000 rucksacks each month.
Not Just Jobs, Careers
IFB is not only dedicated to job creation, but to career advancement as well. Employees can participate in the agency’s Upward Mobility program, which encourages personal and professional growth. One alumna of that program, Anastasia Powell, is a testament to IFB’s commitment.

Powell joined IFB Solutions in 2005 as a sewing machine operator. Over the years, she has grown with the agency, gaining skills and receiving promotions. Today, she is IFB’s manager of corporate culture and internal communications. It’s a role Powell loves. “Now I’m giving back to the [IFB Solutions] community that supported me from the start,” she says.

IFB’s Workforce Services Program, which provides customers with skilled full- and part-time employees to fill their customer service, data collection, and analysis and sales needs, is another area where employees can grow their careers. When it started in 2011, the program employed five people who are blind or visually impaired. Today, more than 20 people who are blind or visually impaired living in 14 states are working in call centers or from their homes, for customers that include Denny’s, Magellan Health, the U.S. Department of Education, and more.

Giving Back
The steady growth in employment also allows IFB to give back to the communities it serves. The agency’s Student Enrichment Experience (S.E.E.) programs and summer camps, offered in-person in North Carolina and virtually throughout the country, serve students who are blind and visually impaired in kindergarten through high school. S.E.E. helps students acquire essential life and social skills while having some fun in the process.

Tracy’s Little Red Schoolhouse also offers after-school programs for students who are blind or visually impaired. First opened on the agency’s Winston-Salem campus in 2012, the Tracy’s Little Red Schoolhouse program has since expanded to the Charlotte, North Carolina, area, where more than 250 students in Mecklenburg County participate. Thanks to programs like S.E.E. and Tracy’s Little Red Schoolhouse, hundreds of children and teens have learned to live their lives more independently.

IFB also runs Community Low Vision Centers in Winston-Salem, Asheville, and Little Rock that offer eye exams and tools to help adults and students live more independent lives. In the Greensboro-Winston-Salem-High Point Triad area of North Carolina, the Community Low Vision Centers serve more than 1,200 people annually. In addition, the agency takes its low vision services on the road with a mobile unit that has offered services in each of North Carolina’s 100 counties.

Because it is deemed an essential business, IFB hasn’t closed during the pandemic, although it did shift gears. The S.E.E. and Tracy’s Little Red Schoolhouse programs went virtual so participants could remain in touch without leaving home. In addition, IFB realigned manufacturing lines to make more than 100,000 face masks for the U.S. Air Force, its employees, and their communities. Through it all though, the agency never lost sight of its foremost mission: its people.

People First
“We knew COVID-19 would hit our folks hard,” says Horton. “Many have other disabilities and high-risk health concerns.” In March 2020, IFB’s executive team and board of directors established the People First Fund, and with support from the IFB Foundation, donor gifts, and grants, set aside $1.1 million to help IFB employees.

“The fund helped our employees with everything pandemic related — from paychecks when business slowed or employees couldn’t work because they had to quarantine or were sick with the virus, to childcare assistance when schools closed,” explains Ducouer.

“Nearly 800 of our employees were helped by the fund,” says Horton. “The pandemic has been a life-changing experience, and we have been honored to support our employees through it. We look forward to continuing to support them for the next 85 years.”

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

WRITING INSTRUMENTS

1. SKILCRAFT® Draft Pro Mechanical Drafting Pencil
Eliminate the need for sharpeners with these black-barrel mechanical drafting pencils weighted at the fingertips with stainless-steel etched grip, dual-action retractor, and stationary eraser and tip. Built-in lead hardness indicator is ideal for creating smooth, legible handwriting. Available in fine or medium point with refillable lead and replaceable eraser. Produced by San Antonio Lighthouse for the Blind in Texas.

OFFICE SUPPLIES

2. SKILCRAFT® 2022 Wall Calendars and Appointment Planners
SKILCRAFT® 2022 Wall Calendars and Appointment Planners help you keep track of important dates and meetings. Made of 100% post-consumer recycled paper and printed with soy inks, planner books also feature covers made using 50% recycled content bound with wire of 90% post-consumer materials. Available in a variety of sizes and styles including monthly, weekly, and daily wire bound appointment planners, 12-month wall calendars in three sizes, and two-sided erasable laminated calendars. Produced by Chicago Lighthouse Industries in Chicago, Illinois.

3. SKILCRAFT® Synthetic Paper
SKILCRAFT® Synthetic Paper has the appearance, smoothness, and printability of paper, yet is made using polyester film with a deluxe matte coating that eliminates the need to laminate documents. Resistant to water, oil, grease, tearing, weather, wrinkling, and fading, SKILCRAFT synthetic paper is food safe, foldable, and will not bubble or crease. Ideal for wet surroundings and extreme weather conditions, it can be wiped down with a wet cloth or mild cleanser. Compatible with laser, offset, and flexo printers; TAA compliant. Produced by Louisiana Association for the Blind in Shreveport.

4. SKILCRAFT® Retractable Key Reel
This key reel with a retractable 48-inch cord and 2-inch case size features a swivel key ring that holds multiple keys and a carabiner that easily attaches to belt loops. Produced by West Texas Lighthouse for the Blind in San Angelo.
5. SKILCRAFT® Card and Credential Holders
Choose from closed-face radio-frequency identification (RFID) blocking dual card holders with side release buckle and removable braided loop or three-pocket credential holders made of polyester nylon with a clear vinyl insert area and top-loading zipper closure in rear. Both feature a cord-style lanyard with safety breakaway and cord adjuster. Produced by West Texas Lighthouse for the Blind in San Angelo.

CLEANING AND JANITORIAL SUPPLIES

6. Purell®/SKILCRAFT® ES8 System
The PURELL SKILCRAFT® ES8 Dispenser System combines the most trusted name in hand hygiene with a revolutionary dispenser system. Monitor product levels quickly with the AT-A-GLANCE™ design and use the optional SMARTLINK™ plug-in modules to track hand hygiene compliance and receive alerts when dispensers need service. Dispenser system comes with choice of gentle-on-the-skin soaps that remove 99% of dirt and grime, or fragrance-free hand sanitizer clinically proven to maintain skin health and kill more than 99% of most common germs. Produced by Travis Association for the Blind in Austin, Texas.

FOOD SERVICE AND OPERATING SUPPLIES

7. PURE® Hard Surface Disinfectant
PURE® Hard Surface Disinfectant is an EPA-registered food contact surface sanitizer and disinfectant that meets EPA criteria for use against SARS-CoV 2. Kills germs in as little as 30 seconds and offers 24-hour residual protection. This ready-to-use, odorless, non-caustic, non-irritating formula containing no VOCs delivers board spectrum power to eliminate dangerous pathogens in a wide range of environments. Produced by the LightHouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired in San Francisco.

8. SKILCRAFT® Disposable Paper Bowls
Generous capacity USDA bio-preferred disposable paper bowls are a must-have for break rooms, dining facilities, and any event where food is served. Microwavable bowls perfect for hot and cold foods resist moisture, grease, and cuts. Made of 100% pre-consumer waste, compostable and bio-degradable for minimal impact on the environment. Produced by Lighthouse Louisiana in New Orleans.

9. SKILCRAFT® Bio+ Flatware Pre-soak
This unique, enzyme-fortified presoak quickly softens the toughest food soils on kitchenware, silverware, pans, and flatware without using harsh chemicals. Safe on soft metals; works in all water conditions. Approved by the EPA Safer Choice/Design for the Environment Program (DFE). Produced by Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired-Goodwill of the Finger Lakes in Rochester, New York.

10. SKILCRAFT® Bio+ Manual Dish Soap
This highly concentrated soap is perfect for dishes, glassware, pots, pans, utensils, and equipment. Suspends
NEW PRODUCTS
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Greasy soils for easy rinsing without leaving a slippery residue. Pleasantly fragranced, 100% biodegradable formula has a neutral pH that assures safety for employees. Color- and number-coded bottles must be used in product-specific dispenser. Approved by the EPA Safer Choice/Design for the Environment Program (DfE). Produced by Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired-Goodwill of the Finger Lakes in Rochester, New York.

11. SKILCRAFT® Bio+ Dishwasher Detergent
Designed for use with automatic dishwashing machines, SKILCRAFT® Bio+ Solid Dishwasher products provide excellent cleaning while preventing water spots and cutting drying time in half. Boost your dishwasher’s performance with this fast-acting trio that easily removes food, even in areas with hard water. Approved by the EPA Safer Choice/Design for the Environment Program (DfE). Produced by Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired-Goodwill of the Finger Lakes in Rochester, New York.

12. SKILCRAFT® Bio+ Solid Multipurpose Cleaner

13. SKILCRAFT® Bio+ Solid Floor Cleaner

SAFETY SUPPLIES

14. SKILCRAFT® Doorstop
Heavy-duty wedge-style, non-slip doorstops made of impact-resistant vulcanized rubber with extra-wide footprint hold standard and oversized doors securely in any position. The extra-large, high visibility, fluorescent yellow doorstop, designed for oversized, heavy doors with clearances up to 2 inches high and spring closures, features a magnetic base for easy attachment to any metal surface and reduces the likelihood of tripping over the doorstop in small spaces or doorways. Produced by North Central Sight Services in Williamsport, Pennsylvania.

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.
CHUCK BASA JOINS NIB AS VICE PRESIDENT, DISTRIBUTION AND CHANNEL SALES

Chuck Basa recently joined NIB as vice president, distribution and channel sales, reporting to President and CEO Kevin Lynch. Basa will lead global fulfillment strategy and optimization and scalability efforts at NIB and its associated agencies, including efforts to devise and implement a supply chain and support operations strategy ensuring all stakeholders have the information and capabilities required to meet customer and partner expectations.

Basa has extensive supply chain experience in the private sector in addition to his early career as a U.S. Navy Supply Corps officer that included a tour aboard the U.S.S. Roark and reserve service with Cargo Handling Battalion 11. After military service, he held roles of increasing responsibility and complexity, including facility startups in both e-commerce and distribution, network modeling, and strategy implementation. These roles include positions with a number of premier retailers such as The Home Depot, Macy’s, Target, and Kohl’s, as well as serving as the primary supply chain operations leader at Retail Process Engineering.

ABILITYONE COMMISSION ANNOUNCES NEW MEMBERS, LEADERSHIP

The summer brought several changes to the U.S. AbilityOne Commission®. On August 13, President Biden announced the appointment of four new private-sector members to the Commission, including Bryan Bashin, CEO of NIB associated nonprofit agency LightHouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired in San Francisco. The president also named to the Commission noted disability rights advocate Chai Feldblum, who was the lead attorney on the team drafting the Americans with Disabilities Act. AbilityOne Commission members elected Feldblum to a two-year term as vice chairperson in early September.

Also appointed to the Commission were Christina Brandt, CEO of SourceAmerica associated agency AtWork!; and policy expert Gabe Cazares, who is blind and serves as director of the Mayor’s office for People with Disabilities for the City of Houston, Texas. Past Commission Presidents Jim Kesteloot and Robert Kelly stepped down from the AbilityOne Commission, each having provided more than 10 years of distinguished service to people who are blind or have significant disabilities.

Earlier in August, the AbilityOne Commission announced long-time Deputy Executive Director Kimberly M. Zeich will serve as acting executive director following the retirement of Executive Director Tina Ballard on July 31, 2021. Ballard led the staff at the independent federal agency, which is responsible for directing and managing the AbilityOne® Program, since March 2008. Zeich has more than 25 years of Commission experience in a range of staff roles including director, program operations; and director, business development.

Stefania Pozzi Porter, deputy inspector general in the AbilityOne Commission Office of Inspector General (OIG), was designated acting inspector general in July following the departure of the Commission’s first permanent inspector general, Thomas K. Lehrich, who was appointed in May 2017. Porter has held leadership positions in the AbilityOne Commission Office of Inspector General since joining the office in 2017. Her responsibilities in her previous roles included enhancing management of OIG business units and developing and overseeing the OIG operations of audit and investigations.

ARMY HONORS WISCONSIN TEAM ASSEMBLING EVIDENCE COLLECTION KITS

Mr. Clayton Haney, deputy product manager for sets, kits, outfits, and tools (PM-SKOT) for the U.S. Army visited the kitting team at NIB associated agency IBVI in West Allis, Wisconsin, to present certificates in appreciation of their dedicated work on the evidence collection and detainee processing kit program as it winds down. Since its addition to the AbilityOne Procurement List in 2017, IBVI has shipped more than 20,000 kits to the Army.
UNC GREENSBORO AND INDUSTRIES OF THE BLIND EXPAND MULTI-SENSORY PUBLIC ART INSTALLATION

NIB associated agency Industries of the Blind (IOB) and the University of North Carolina, Greensboro (UNCG), College of Visual and Performing Arts (CVPA) presented the second iteration of a public art piece which tells the stories of people who are blind or low vision using sight, sound, and touch. The installation — located at the IOB building at the corner of Gate City Boulevard and Tate Street, one of the main entrances to the UNCG campus — is the culmination of an innovative collaboration between IOB and UNCG Greensboro’s School of Art, Department of Interior Architecture, University Libraries, and Creative Writing Master of Fine Arts programs.

“This is a project that has the potential for far-reaching impact not only to UNCG students and Industries of the Blind employees, but for the entire community,” said Adam Carlin, director of community engagement for CVPA who initiated and leads the project. “Creating public art that is experienced through sight, sound, and touch has allowed UNCG students to expand their artistic practice to be more accessible for the community. It is our hope that this approach can inspire countless other artists in our community. The project will also act as a window into Industries of the Blind, allowing employees to share their thoughts, feelings, and hopes for anyone who passes by the building.”

Richard Oliver, director of community outreach at Industries of the Blind, called the partnership a success. “Industries of the Blind is proud to collaborate with UNCG on such a tremendous project. These pieces of art capture the journeys of our associates and show the empowerment and sense of achievement they strive for as they work towards their American Dream.”

The public art installation tells the stories of people who are blind or have low vision using sight, sound, and touch.

IOB employee Tanessa Brown touches one part of the art installation, a relief sculpture that used her as the subject.

CELEBRATE NATIONAL DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT AWARENESS MONTH

October is National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM) and NIB and its associated agencies across the country are joining together to raise awareness of disability employment issues. The 2021 theme, “America’s Recovery: Powered by Inclusion” emphasizes the importance of including all people as the nation works to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Our national recovery from the pandemic cannot be completed without the inclusion of all Americans, in particular people with disabilities,” said U.S. Secretary of Labor Marty Walsh. “Their contributions have historically been vital to our nation’s success and are more important today than ever. We must build an economy that fully includes the talent and drive of those with disabilities.”

NIB associated nonprofit agencies, AbilityOne Base Supply Centers®, and authorized distributors and wholesalers received toolkits from NIB to help them recognize NDEAM and communicate the importance of creating meaningful employment for people who are blind. Readers can join NIB in celebrating NDEAM and contribute to the conversation on social media using the hashtag #NDEAM.
OKLAHOMA, WASHINGTON AGENCIES OPEN BASE SUPPLY CENTERS

NIB associated nonprofit agencies NewView Oklahoma and The Lighthouse for the Blind, Inc., opened two AbilityOne Base Supply Centers® (BSCs) serving U.S. military forces.

In the heart of the country, NewView Oklahoma opened a 2,500 square foot store with nearly 1,000 products on hand at Vance Air Force Base in July. The opening was attended by Base Commander Col. Jay Johnson and Base Command Chief Kristy L. Earls, as well as Mission Support Group Col. Paul Miller, and Chief of Security Forces Eric M. Thomas.

On the West Coast, the 6,256 square foot BSC opened by The Lighthouse for the Blind, Inc., at U.S. Coast Guard Base Seattle provides support to more than 1,650 active duty and reserve Coast Guard employees assigned to numerous vessels and shore commands. The BSC has approximately 400 products available onsite and more than 50,000 items to select from online. Coast Guard Base Seattle also provides key support to more than 30,000 local military retirees and family members from all of the armed services.

CHRISTOPHER T. BURKE TAKES THE HELM AT NYSPSP

Christopher T. Burke embarked on a new role as executive director of the New York State Preferred Source Program For New Yorkers Who Are Blind (NYSPSP) at the end of August. NYSPSP creates and sustains employment for New Yorkers who are blind through the production and sale of products and services to state and local government entities.

Burke joins NYSPSP from Northeastern Association of the Blind at Albany (NABA), an NYSPSP affiliated agency where he was executive director and chief executive officer responsible for overall agency management, leadership, and vision. In addition, he was responsible for the day-to-day operations of the Northeastern Association of the Blind Foundation.

NIB manages NYSPSP through a related 503(c) entity, Empire State Employment Resources for the Blind (ESERB). ESERB oversees the daily operation of NYSPSP, as designated by the New York State Office of Children and Family Services/New York State Commission for the Blind.

“Chris has been a valuable part of our network for many years,” said Kevin Lynch, president and CEO of NIB. “His leadership, professional experience, and insight are sure to be great assets to the NYSPSP team.”

IFB SOLUTIONS TEAMS WITH LOCAL OPTOMETRIST FOR COMMUNITY IMPACT

NIB associated nonprofit agency IFB Solutions has teamed up with a local optometrist Dr. Lindsay Totten to offer patients convenience in purchasing stylish and affordable eyeglasses. In late August, Totten opened her Wise Eyes Family Eye Care office next door to IFB Solutions’ Twenty200 Eyewear store.

Twenty200 offers a range of eyewear in approachable styles with a focus on kind, patient service. The name reflects the mission powering the brand: while 20/20 is perfect vision, 20/200 is the threshold for legal blindness. Twenty200 supports community members’ vision while creating opportunities for people who are blind.

“When I began planning for my own practice after many years of working for larger eyecare companies, I knew I wanted to make a difference in the community,” says Dr. Totten. “As someone who cares deeply about vision, I cannot think of a better local partner than IFB Solutions, which is doing so much for children and adults who are blind or low vision.”