Careers of Choice
NIB associated agencies offer professional career paths that lead to advancement within the NIB network and beyond
CAREER BUILDER

LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

In 2012, NIB conducted a survey of hiring managers that found 58% were unlikely to hire a person who is blind. Unfortunately, our 2018 follow-up survey found that number unchanged. Persistent attitudes like these are part of the reason the unemployment rate among working-age Americans who are blind remains at nearly 70%.

At NIB we know that when talented, capable people are denied the opportunity to use their skills in the profession of their choice, it’s a lose-lose proposition for them and for our country. That’s why NIB provides employment opportunities that are more than simply jobs – they open up pathways to meaningful careers, both inside the network of NIB associated nonprofit agencies and in the larger business world.

In this issue of Opportunity, you’ll read about some talented people for whom NIB and its associated agencies provided a springboard to their career of choice. Some started on the manufacturing floor and have moved into management positions within the NIB network. Others translated training for a specific career into positions with state and local government. And still others completed NIB professional development programs and charted their own course to success.

At NIB, we know that for many people who are blind, the biggest obstacle in their career path can be the attitudes of others. That’s why we continue to develop innovative tools and opportunities that prepare people who are blind for success in any career they choose.

Kevin A. Lynch
President and Chief Executive Officer

Since 1938, National Industries for the Blind (NIB) has focused on enhancing the opportunities for economic and personal independence of people who are blind, primarily through creating, sustaining, and improving employment. NIB and its network of associated nonprofit agencies are the nation’s largest employer of people who are blind through the manufacture and provision of SKILCRAFT® and other products and services of the AbilityOne™ Program. For more information about NIB, visit NIB.org.
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**SERVICE LEARNING**

Marrying her personal and business experience, Susan Costlow found a passion for serving others.

BY JENNIFER CLICK

When her supervisor at Lockheed Martin learned in 2012 that National Industries for the Blind was looking for a new board member with a background in finance, he approached Susan Costlow with the opportunity. Given her background in operations finance, internal audit and treasury, and her then-current position in corporate development, where she executed mergers and acquisitions and created the company’s $100 million venture capital fund, there was no question about her qualifications.

But Costlow, currently serving as chairperson of the board, had more than professional achievements to bring to the table: She could also provide the perspective of a person living since birth with low vision.

“I was born totally blind, meaning that I was nonresponsive to light,” recalls Costlow. “At the time, doctors did not believe I would ever have any usable sight.” When she was about eight months old, her mother noticed Costlow putting her hand up in front of the light and realized she had some ability to see. “I was diagnosed with Pale Optic Nerve,” she explains. “Today, doctors know that if you have a pale optic nerve, you can never see, so that was probably a misdiagnosis.”

Thus began a long series of visits to doctors to work on strengthening her eyesight. Compared to the medical and technological advances of today, some of the methods seem quite unsophisticated. “At the age of 5, I was taught how to ‘alternate’ my eyes so that I can see distance with one eye and close up with the other eye. One teaching technique was painting nail polish on one lens [of my glasses] to make the other eye work harder,” Costlow recalls.

For most of her time in school, Costlow wore glasses with thick, heavy lenses. Over time, her eyesight gradually improved until, at age 17, she underwent surgery that dramatically improved her vision, bringing it to almost 20/20. But surgery wasn’t a permanent fix, and Costlow’s vision deteriorated over time, causing her to undergo the procedure again in her 40s.

When it came time for college, Costlow pursued her interest in business, earning a Bachelor of Science degree in procurement and materials management from Bowling Green State University in Bowling Green, Ohio. She later earned a Master of Business Administration from Rutgers University in New Jersey.

As a member of NIB’s board of directors, Costlow has applied her talents to a number of positions before assuming the role of chairperson, including stints as secretary, chairperson of the investment committee, and as a member of the strategic planning committee.

“I enjoy working with the public-spirited individuals who serve on the NIB board of directors,” she says. “They bring a wealth of talent to the organization as we all focus on NIB’s mission: Advancing careers for people who are blind through training and employment opportunities.”

It’s a mission that dovetails nicely with Costlow’s current professional position as vice president of leadership and learning communities at the Manufacturers Alliance for Productivity and Innovation (MAPI), a nonprofit professional organization that aims to help manufacturing leaders make smarter business decisions. MAPI provides programs for manufacturing executives including professional development events, live meetings, and online communities, as well as providing manufacturing-focused business insights and research. Costlow oversees the organization’s 22 functional councils and online community network.

Of her current work, Costlow says “I thoroughly enjoy working with manufacturing industry leaders, but my time with NIB has also been very rewarding. It has been a great opportunity to give back to the community in a field that will always be very near and dear to my heart. As much as the board of directors is tasked with guiding the organization, NIB has helped guide me to a new passion.”

Jennifer Click is editor-in-chief of Opportunity magazine.
Connect to what matters

Employing Americans Who Are Blind

By procuring quality products and services through National Industries for the Blind, an AbilityOne™ Authorized Enterprise, you create and sustain U.S.-based jobs for people who are blind including our nation’s veterans.

Get connected at NIB.org/Connect.

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NIB associated nonprofit agencies offer more than jobs for people who are blind or visually impaired. They offer professional career paths that lead to advancement within the NIB network and beyond.

BY SHARON HORRIGAN

NIB and its associated agencies have long known that given the right training and opportunities, there are few limits to what people who are blind can do. NIB’s Contract Management Support (CMS), Business Management Training (BMT), and Professional Mastery of Office Technology for Employment (ProMOTE) training programs – and good, old-fashioned mentoring – prepare high-potential employees who are blind to reach their career goals. For some, that goal is a leadership position in the NIB network; for others, the goal is a professional career in government or the private sector.

Growing Skills for a Growing Field
Nichelle Morris was in her second year of college pursuing a Bachelor of Science degree in marketing and international business when she was diagnosed with Stargardt Disease, a degenerative condition that eventually leads to blindness.

“I pretty much ignored the diagnosis and went about my business,” recalls Morris. “I finished my degree and moved my daughters to Hawaii to go to grad school.” But by the time Morris had completed her master’s degree in global leadership in 2005, she had lost her eyesight.

After graduation, Morris didn’t have much luck finding jobs related to her degree and ended up working multiple unfulfilling entry-level jobs to get by. “I was frustrated. I really wanted a job where I could use my education,” she recalls. She eventually founded her own consulting firm and worked
part-time with a nonprofit as a workforce job trainer. “I worked with grounds maintenance staff to develop a training curriculum. It was meaningful work.”

Through that experience, Morris learned about the AbilityOne™ Program. When she relocated to Memphis, Tennessee, she immediately reached out to a representative from Tennessee Services for the Blind and Visually Impaired who forwarded job openings to Morris. “One of the agencies that contacted me was the Cincinnati Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired (CABVI), who wanted me to work as a contract closeout specialist,” recalls Morris. “I resisted because I didn’t see how the job related to my degrees.”

But after a year in Memphis and only one job interview, Morris reassessed her options and sent her resume to CABVI. “They contacted me in less than a day and offered me a job in Ohio, so I moved there in February 2016.” Morris completed the CMS training program in preparation for a contract opening and also completed NIB’s ProMOTE program, an experience that she says was “an answer to my prayers.” She credits the program with giving her the skills and confidence to work and be competitive in any workplace.

In October 2016, CABVI moved her to Richmond, Virginia, to work on a government contract. Morris soon realized how much she enjoyed what she was doing and how her college degrees did relate to the job.

But her time in Richmond was brief. After only four months on the job, Morris was offered and accepted a contract specialist position with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in St. Paul, Minnesota, and packed her bags again. “I love St. Paul, and I love my job,” says Morris. After years of frustrating job searches, “I am finally using my whole brain!”

Travis Cattenhead’s tenure as a CABVI contract closeout specialist in Richmond was even shorter than Morris’ – after just three months in the position he was hired away by the Defense Logistics Agency (DLA), a job he credits to the training and skills acquired through the CMS training program.

Legally blind since birth, Cattenhead, who holds Bachelor of Science and Master of Business Administration (MBA) degrees, also found the search for meaningful work challenging after completing his studies. After applying for scores of federal government jobs without getting a single interview, he turned to part-time work as a store associate for the Defense Commissary Agency at Fort Eustis, Virginia. He also contacted NIB.

“That’s when I learned about the CMS program. It allowed me to get back into the federal government and expand my network,” Cattenhead says. “I wouldn’t be at DLA today if it wasn’t for the CMS program.”

Hired by DLA as a contract specialist, Cattenhead was recently promoted to a contracting officer position. Thanks
Continued from page 7

to DLA’s support, he earned his Level II certification under the Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement Act (DAWIA), a certification he says will transfer to other federal agencies.

As for his future, Cattenhead wants to give back. “I have been blessed to have people support me,” he says. “NIB is amazing about giving people opportunities, and I want to support other people too. I want to show everyone that my disability isn’t a disability. It limits me only if I allow it.”

Moving on Up

Richard Oliver, director of community outreach and government relations at Industries of the Blind (IOB) in Greensboro, North Carolina, shares Cattenhead’s sentiment.

Oliver was declared legally blind in his early 20s, a factor that complicated his job search. “I heard that some organization called IOB was looking for people to work in a distribution center. I didn’t even know what IOB was,” he recalls. “As soon as they realized I was blind, they hired me.”

Oliver started at IOB in 1995 as a material handler. Over the course of four years he was promoted from packing orders to shipping them, and then became a computer operator. From there he moved into accounts receivable and customer service.

“In the middle of all that,” says Oliver, “I taught myself HTML coding and built IOB’s first website for fun. That’s when they realized they needed someone in that type of position and chose me.” While he worked in the IT position, IOB’s head of supply chain and logistics mentored Oliver, teaching him all about inventory control and manufacturing. Oliver also participated in NIB’s BMT program, an experience that he says “taught me so much about business that I didn’t know.” During the program, he moved into business and product development.

In 2012, Oliver became IOB’s director of sales, marketing, and business development. As he built a network with suppliers and people at other NIB associated agencies, he realized he had a passion for talking with people and advocating for people who are blind. In 2016, he was selected to join NIB’s Advocates for Leadership and Employment training program.

Now director of community outreach and government relations, Oliver serves as the public face of IOB, representing the agency in the media and in the community. He is, he says, dedicated to changing people’s minds about blindness.

“Thanks to IOB, I’ve had opportunities over the years to learn and grow and to discover not what I can’t do, but what I can do,” says Oliver. “I want people to know that given the right adjustments, people who are blind can do anything.”

Like Oliver, Greg Szabo had difficulty finding a job. Diagnosed at age three with the degenerative eye condition retinitis pigmentosa, by the time he reached high school, Szabo could not longer read print. Still, he says he was lucky in the services he found in the public schools in his hometown of Aurora, Illinois, where he earned an associate degree in journalism from a local community college.

On a trip to train his guide dog, Finn, Szabo fell in love with the Pacific Northwest and relocated to Portland, Oregon. After a stint working at an indoor dog park, he was unemployed for a while and getting restless. A friend told him about a facility operated by The Lighthouse for the Blind, Inc., in Spokane, Washington, and he applied for a job, relocating in August 2011 to take a position.

From his first job packaging wallboards, Szabo was promoted to senior machinist, then to setup specialist. “I was the first person who is blind to do that job,” he says. “I figured out how it could be done by a person who is blind, and now it’s a blind-accessible position – in fact, my successor is blind.”

Szabo took advantage of everything the Lighthouse had to offer. “I took all the classes, joined all the teams, earned my Lean Six Sigma certification – you name it, I did it,” he recalls. The opportunities included participating in the company’s Toastmaster’s Club, where he realized his passion for public speaking.
Using the tuition assistance program offered through The Lighthouse for the Blind, Inc., Greg Szabo is completing his degree in communications while working as director of public relations and development at the agency’s Spokane, Washington, location.
When the director of public relations and outreach position became available, Szabo applied for it, even though it called for a bachelor’s degree he didn’t have. “They gave me the job with the caveat that I need to finish my degree,” says Szabo. Through its college assistance program, the Lighthouse is helping him pay costs for a bachelor’s degree in communications, which he will complete in December.

“I love my job, this organization, and our mission,” says Szabo. “I love telling people about the great things the Lighthouse is doing and showing them what ability—not disability—means.”

Moving On

Being blind since birth, Rebecca Bridges always felt strongly that work experience would be critical to landing a job—and she walked that talk. By the time she graduated from college in Indiana, Bridges had completed three internships, one of which was at the American Council of the Blind in Washington, D.C.

“I fell for the D.C. area,” says Bridges. She recalls fending for herself on the transit system after only a few hours of orientation. “It was terrifying and exhilarating at the same time,” she recalls. “The transit system gave me independence I had never had before.”

Bridges returned to Indiana to complete her degree but flew back to D.C. to visit the man who would become her husband—and who worked at NIB. During the visit, she went to NIB headquarters, learned about the BMT program, and dropped off a resume.

The day after graduating from college she was offered an internship as a special project coordinator in NIB’s services division. The internship grew into a full-time job that lasted six years and included several promotions. Completing NIB’s first-ever BMT program not only piqued her interest in business and organizations, but gave her the confidence to get her master’s degree in organizational development and knowledge management.

Bridges left NIB after completing that degree to join FMP Consulting, a small firm that caters to the federal sector. “I was the first person with a disability they had ever hired,” says Bridges. “They had a lot of questions for me, and I was fully prepared with the answers.”

She spent seven years with FMP, where she focused on leadership development, succession planning, and strategic planning.

When she realized it was time to move on, Bridges brushed off her networking skills and joined The Paciello Group, an organization that helps businesses make their technology accessible, where she works today as a senior project manager.

Chris Ledding is also a strong proponent of networking. A budget analyst for the VA in Salt Lake City, Ledding completed NIB’s 22-month Fellowship for Leadership Development in 2010.

Ledding’s eyesight began to deteriorate when he was an undergraduate at the University of Utah, but undeterred, he went on to earn an MBA. Recognizing that being blind could make his job search more difficult, he began building his network while still a student.

“When I was going through grad school, I started exploring options,” he recalls. “I went to a conference for the blind and met a representative from NIB who was talking about jobs. That’s how I learned about NIB’s fellowship program.”

The representative contacted Ledding when the fellowship application process opened. “I was about to graduate with my MBA, so I got really lucky, because the Great Recession had just hit,” he says. Ledding’s wedding was held three days before he left for his first fellowship rotation in Washington, D.C.

After four months working in marketing at NIB headquarters, Ledding went to South Texas Lighthouse
for the Blind in Corpus Christi, where he worked in product costing. He completed the fellowship with another nine-month stint at Beyond Vision in Milwaukee, where he developed the agency’s contact center.

Ledding believes the fellowship set him up to succeed. At its conclusion, he had several job offers, ultimately opting for a financial analyst position at the East Texas Lighthouse for the Blind.

After four years with East Texas Lighthouse for the Blind, young children, the desire to be closer to family, and the lure of the great outdoors drew Ledding back to Utah, where he took his current budget analyst position at the VA in Salt Lake City. In January 2017, he added a 10-hour-per-week position as a financial management analyst for the University of Utah School of Medicine, where he “translates finance into English.”

If Ledding’s forte is in translation for the financially challenged, Sylvia Stinson-Perez’s forte is helping others develop professional and life skills.

After graduating from college, Stinson-Perez, who has been visually impaired her entire life, joined the Miami Lighthouse in Florida, where she eventually became director of services running teen work transition, vocational rehabilitation, independent adult programs, and more, for five years. When her daughter Olivia was born, she took a few years away from full-time work, but kept up with the field as an adjunct professor at a local college, teaching skills to help students succeed personally, academically, and vocationally.

She learned about NIB when she returned to the workforce full time as CEO of the Lighthouse for the Visually Impaired and Blind in New Port Richey, Florida.

“The Miami Lighthouse hadn’t been associated with NIB,” she recalls. “I started learning about NIB, attending conferences. When I learned about the BMT program, I wanted to go through it right away, but they weren’t offering it that year.”

Instead, she enrolled in an MBA program. “I was a couple of semesters into my MBA when NIB announced that a new BMT class would be starting. I decided to do both, and completed them within a few months of each other.”

While both programs were great experiences, Stinson-Perez believes that for her, the BMT program was as good, if not better, than the MBA program. “The projects we did, the communication, collaboration, and teamwork we built through the BMT program were much better suited to my areas of interest,” she says.

The skills and learning she acquired through the BMT program are being put to good use today in her new role at the National Research and Training Center on Blindness at Mississippi State University. As director of the Older Individuals Who Are Blind Technical Assistance Center, Stinson-Perez helps state agencies serving people age 55 and older to improve the administration, operation, and performance of their programs.

“It’s a different role,” she says, “but it’s fun to take my experience in direct service to help problem-solve with the agencies.”

Stinson-Perez says people who are blind or visually impaired should always be open to learning new skills and stepping out of their comfort zone. “Experiences like the BMT program made me realize that I can always learn something new.”

She sums up her advice to others seeking professional growth in two words: “Be fearless.”

Sylvia Stinson-Perez, a director at the National Research and Training Center on Blindness at Mississippi State University, says being open to learning new skills has helped her advance professionally.

Sharon Horrigan is a freelance writer based in Asheville, North Carolina.
Longstanding partnerships between NIB associated nonprofit agencies and the Department of Veterans Affairs employ hundreds of people who are blind and provide rehabilitation services to thousands of veterans.

BY RACHEL F. GOLDBERG

Focused on expanding opportunities for people who are blind, NIB and 34 of its associated nonprofit agencies have grown partnerships with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), providing products and services – and often jobs – to veterans who are blind and sighted. The partnerships also provide a meaningful way for people who are blind to serve their country.

Medicine bottles, prescription eyewear, and surgical gloves are a few of the products NIB associated agencies provide to the VA, along with call center, contract closeout, and rehabilitation services. According to the VA, more than 130,000 veterans who are blind live in the United States, with several thousand losing eyesight annually. In addition, approximately 17% of evacuated wounded service members in Iraq and Afghanistan sustain serious eye injuries.

**Products Meet Needs, Create Jobs**

Kansas City, Missouri-based Alphapointe has been producing medicine bottles for the VA since the mid-1990s. The agency had been using injection molding to produce specimen bottles for the Department of Defense (DOD) so it was a natural fit to provide the VA with medicine bottles, explains Alphapointe President and CEO Reinhard Mabry.

In the beginning, two employees who are blind worked on the medicine bottle line; now, more than 20 employees who are blind work around the clock to manufacture, pack, and ship bottles to meet the VA’s needs.

Indianapolis-based Bosma Enterprises has been producing surgical gloves and disposable medical kits for the VA since 2001. About 120 Bosma employees who are blind work on the glove line, shipping more than half a billion gloves each year. The agency also provides surgical kits with replacement supplies that reduce changeover time in VA operating rooms, says retired Master Sgt. Jeff Mittman, the chief operating officer at Bosma who will become CEO at the beginning of August. Similarly, the agency produces patient transport kits with disposable sheets, pillowcases, gloves, and other items that help control infection by reducing contact with bodily fluids and eliminating the need for laundry services, he says.

While producing and distributing products is the heart of the agency, employees who are blind are its lifeblood. “A lot of employees [at Bosma] see this as their service to the nation. They take pride knowing that every item touches a veteran,” Mittman says. “A lot of their motivation comes from the fact that people who are blind are able to serve in this way when many could not serve in the military because of their blindness.”

IFB Solutions of Winston-Salem, North Carolina, contracts with the VA for 98% of its specialized optical work. “We’ve gone from 15 pairs a week to 1,200 pairs a day with our VA customer.”
Chief Operating Officer Dan Kelly says, “And more importantly, what started as one job for a person who is blind has turned into 76 jobs.” IFB started its optical manufacturing in the mid-1990s and is “always on the lookout for new opportunities that will create that next job for a person who is blind,” Kelly says.

A perfect example of the entrepreneurial spirit is a more recent partnership with Luxexcel, through which IFB became home to the world’s first 3D printer of specialty ophthalmic lenses. In all, the agency has provided 2.5 million pairs of eyeglasses to veterans in the past 10 years, distributed at dispensaries in VA hospitals along the East Coast and in Alabama.

“Employees take such pride in giving back to our country, mostly because they cannot serve,” says Nicole Ducouer, senior director of corporate communications and programs at IFB. “Even the veterans who served and became blind later feel that their military service has come full circle.”

In addition to tangible products, NIB associated agencies provide myriad services to the VA, such as call center staffing performed by employees of Alphapointe and Columbia Lighthouse for the Blind (CLB) in Washington, D.C.

In all, CLB has 18 service contracts with the VA and other federal agencies. In addition to staffing call centers, CLB employees provide 508 compliance review at the VA, document scanning at the White House, and contract closeout services at Patuxent River Naval Air Station, as well as work on projects at the Internal Revenue Service and U.S. Department of State. Tony Cancelosi, CLB president and CEO, says contracts requiring security clearances, such as the one at the State Department, are excellent options for veterans who had clearances during their military service and understand the process.

**Supporting Wounded Warriors**

NIB associated agencies also support veterans with rehabilitation and job training services. Alphapointe, Columbia Lighthouse, Bosma, and others provide rehabilitation programs to veterans who are blind on behalf of the VA, whether the visual impairment results from military service, aging, or other causes.

Bosma also provides rehabilitation services on behalf of the State of Indiana, Mittman says, last year serving 800 Hoosier veterans and civilians.

CLB, founded in 1900 to educate and foster employment opportunities for Washingtonians who were blind, traces its engagement with veterans to World War I, when CLB provided rehabilitation services to enable service-disabled veterans to live independently. World War II brought jobs for people who were blind through various contracts with DOD. Today, collaboration with the VA continues for vocational training and assistance to wounded veterans returning from deployments, Cancelosi says.

In their desire to bolster employment opportunities for people who are blind, all agencies embrace strategies for growth, whether that translates to developing new products and services, expanding sales of existing offerings, or growing rehabilitation and job training programs. Cancelosi notes that veterans who are blind have a particular benefit: “We have some unique opportunities because veterans’ blindness doesn’t affect their ability to be trained, to learn, or study. In many cases, our pay and benefits are better than what they earned before the military as police, firefighters, or mechanics, for example.”

**A Holistic Partnership**

Veterans, like all people participating in rehabilitation programs, benefit most from a whole-person approach. Veterans Engagement Boards (VEBs), a public-private partnership created by the VA to enable a more comprehensive delivery of services for veterans who are blind, work with NIB agencies and other entities offering education, financial support, and housing. Cancelosi co-chairs the Capitol Network board, which, like VEBs across the country, comprises local veteran community leaders, spouses of veterans, and community stakeholders all working to improve connections between veterans and those who provide services and resources.

Through the myriad efforts of NIB associated agencies, people who are blind take pride in serving veterans and their country. “We see the VA as an important customer,” Mabry says. “Alphapointe, founded in 1911, has served active duty and veterans in every war since the Great War and we’ve always done so with a great deal of respect and admiration for those people and their service.”

Rachel F. Goldberg is a communications consultant at National Industries for the Blind.
The 2019 NIB/NAEPB National Symposium, held April 29 – May 2 in Alexandria, Virginia, brought together 73 employee of the year nominees representing 45 NIB associated nonprofit agencies from across the nation, along with seven new Advocates for Leadership and Employment. Activities included public policy training, employee of the year recognition, and more!

After a busy day on Capitol Hill, where Advocates and agency representatives visited 165 Congressional offices, everyone came together at the awards banquet to recognize R.B. Irwin Award winner Bill Hudson, retired CEO of LCI, and national employees of the year Brian Rutherford, winner of the Peter J. Salmon award, and Elton Thomas, winner of the Milton J. Samuelson award.

NIB welcomed the 2019 class of Advocates for Leadership and Employment during the Symposium. Pictured left to right are Miles Kiel, Calvin Brandon, David Steinmetz, Brian Lichtenstrahl, Daniel Phillips, Cheryl Rayburn, and Patrick Stemmel.

“Each one of us has a great piece of magic to offer.”

Bryan Rutherford
Peter J. Salmon Employee of the Year Award winner
Blind and Vision Rehabilitation Services
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

“There is great hope in the AbilityOne Program.”

Elton Thomas
Milton J. Samuelson Career Achievement Award winner
Lighthouse for the Blind
St. Louis, Missouri
“This agency, that I thought had nothing to offer me, changed my life and offered me everything.”

Brandye Lacy
Milton J. Samuelson Career Achievement Award nominee
Travis Association for the Blind
Austin, Texas

“I can’t explain the joy I felt at being back at work again.”

Byron Jones
Peter J. Salmon Employee of the Year Award nominee
Lions Industries for the Blind
Kinston, North Carolina.

“What others see as disability, we here turn into possibility.”

Ted Rios
Milton J. Samuelson Career Achievement Award nominee
Alphapointe
New York City, New York

“After two years of searching for a meaningful job, I was overjoyed when IBVI took a chance on me.”

Alison Fortney
Milton J. Samuelson Career Achievement Award nominee
IBVI
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

“Once I entered the doors at Lighthouse Louisiana a whole world instantly opened up for me. My life had new meaning.”

David Green
Peter J. Salmon Employee of the Year Award nominee
Lighthouse Louisiana
New Orleans, Louisiana
KEEPING AN EDGE IN A CHANGING WORLD

A drive to stay ahead of workplace changes and technological advances inspires continual improvement at Cincinnati Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired.

BY ROSEMARIE LALLY, J.D.

Since its inception in 1911, the Cincinnati Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired (CABVI) has been forward-thinking, offering both social services and employment for people who are blind and visually impaired.

Over the years, the NIB associated nonprofit agency solidified its reputation as an innovator, with employment opportunities that encompass manufacturing, contract closeout services, office supply sales, and operation of an AbilityOne Base Supply Center (BSC) in addition to multi-faceted vision and information services for people who are blind.

Responding to a competitive business environment with new offerings and services continues to drive CABVI, according to President and CEO John Mitchell. “We are always open to new opportunities and trying to evolve with the rapidly changing world in which we live.”

CABVI’s innovative programs and its integrity in achieving results have not gone unnoticed. The agency received the 2018 Torch Award for Marketplace Ethics from the Cincinnati Better Business Bureau in recognition of its board governance procedures and its principled approach to employees, clients, and customers.

Services Aid Thousands in Ohio

The agency’s positive reputation in the Cincinnati area is reflected in its robust 725-member volunteer program. Innovative reading services offered by CABVI for people who are blind, visually impaired, or have other disabilities, are powered by volunteers.

The agency partners with the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped to provide Talking Books free to people who qualify. Noting that the broadcast team has only six employees, Jennifer Holladay, manager of volunteer services, says “We couldn’t do all the good work we do without the help of our volunteers. They put in 40,000 hours in 2018.”

Volunteers with CABVI’s Radio Reading Service are on the air all day on every day of the year, providing 92 hours of live and pre-recorded programming each week, covering subjects from sports and travel to supermarket ads and job postings drawn from a variety
of newspapers and magazines. Listeners are provided free radio receivers pre-tuned to a public radio station subcarrier that broadcasts the content, which is also available on cable and closed-circuit TV in hospitals and senior facilities. The program serves more than 13,000 people.

Other innovative CABVI programs include podcasts of daily news stories for smartphone users and the agency’s One on One program, which matches volunteers with individual clients to assist with daily tasks.

“I love working here,” Holladay says. “We have such a great partnership between our staff, volunteers, and clients. We’re all here to achieve our mission.”

Holladay has a deeper understanding of the mission than many. She first came to CABVI as a client in third grade, receiving orientation and mobility services and access technology training through high school and college. “It absolutely helped me to succeed in college,” she says.

While in college, she served as an intern for the Yes You Can 5K run/walk; upon graduation, she was hired to coordinate the One on One volunteer program.

Although she loved what she was doing, Holladay realized the depth of her interest in the program and decided to pursue a Master of Public Administration degree. Working full-time and taking classes in the evenings was difficult, she says, but her CABVI colleagues “were supportive and excited for me.” Shortly after receiving her degree, she applied and was selected for her current position, which she describes as a “dream job.”

The agency’s Vision Services department provides support in six core areas: early childhood and youth services, low vision services, orientation and mobility training, social services, vision rehabilitation, and access technology services.

CABVI’s pre-employment transition services encourage high school students to think about employment or college options, and its growing counseling program serves 22 students under a contract with Ohio’s Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation.

Growing Employment in Many Fields
In 2001, the agency opened a 9,000-square-foot BSC at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio, staffed in part by employees who are blind. Today the store sells office supplies to base customers online as well.

The BSC’s success sparked the idea for VIE Ability, a commercial office supply service that provides jobs to people who had established careers prior to losing their eyesight, Mitchell says. Launched in 2014, all VIE Ability operations are run by people who are blind or have severe vision loss, using advanced computer magnification and screen reading software to provide excellent customer service at competitive prices.

CABVI branched out into Contract Management Support (CMS) services in 2011. Through a partnership with NIB and the Department of Defense’s Defense Acquisition University, people who are blind gain the skills needed to fulfill a critical need for qualified
specialists to close out executed government contracts. Today, 23 CABVI employees provide CMS services to the Air Force Materiel Command at Wright-Patterson and the Quantico Marine Base in Virginia.

Mitchell attributed the program’s rapid growth to “a lot of hard work and excellent management by our very capable team,” adding that the CMS work experience has created opportunities for careers in contract administration in the federal government.

“I’m very pleased with the number of professional positions created since 2011,” he said. “We’ll continue to explore new employment opportunities and try to diversify in the non-government space in coming years.”

Manufacturing employees produce diverse products, including tape and rolled paper, kitchen gadgets, photoluminescent exit and safety signs, door hardware, sticky notes, and batteries. Core capabilities include converting mill-sized rolls of paper and tapes into retail products, as well as assembly, packaging, slitting, rewinding, and kitting.

David Perry, two-time winner of CABVI’s Bradley L. Kaylor Blind Employee of the Year award and NIB’s 2016 Peter J. Salmon Employee of the Year, has worked in a variety of manufacturing positions. In addition, he’s served on CABVI’s OSHA compliance committee and the agency’s wellness committee.

As a 19-year-employee of CABVI, Perry clearly enjoys his work, and he also enjoys serving as an advocate for people who are blind. “It’s very rewarding to change people’s perceptions of what we can do,” he says. Perry has traveled to Washington, D.C., on several occasions to advocate on important issues. In 2008, he met with Congressional staffers to support minimum sound standards for hybrid and electric vehicles – standards incorporated in the Pedestrian Safety Enhancement Act signed into law in January 2011.

“I like being involved in our outreach program, helping to educate people about what we’re capable of as blind employees,” says Perry, who also enjoys working on CABVI’s annual fundraisers, such as the upcoming Yes You Can 5K.

“The most important thing I’ve learned at CABVI is how to be a leader at all levels,” he said. “CABVI has been very supportive in helping me reach my personal and professional goals.” Striving for continual improvement is clearly a goal shared by CABVI and its employees.

Rosemarie Lally, J.D., is a freelance writer and editor based in Washington, D.C.
Standing at a starting line, marathon runner Irwin Ramirez always has one thing on his mind: a purpose. In his most recent race – the Boston Marathon – the NIB product development support specialist says he was not running just for himself, but as a representative of the Washington, D.C., chapter of Achilles International.

Achilles International focuses on personal achievement by providing training, coaching, and guiding that empowers runners with all types of disabilities to reach the finish line at mainstream running events. Through its network of 65 chapters in the United States and around the world, the organization provides a framework to pair runners with disabilities with volunteer guides.

Ramirez began running independently, joining Achilles as his eyesight deteriorated – a move that enabled him to continue participating in races. He completed his first half marathon in 2014, and then a full New York City Marathon. Eight marathons later, Ramirez has two more on the horizon: a repeat of the Twin Cities Marathon he first completed in 2017, and the California International Marathon, the only marathon-distance run for people who are blind, organized by the U.S. Association of Blind Athletes (USABA). Ramirez is looking forward to competing with other runners who are blind in a division all their own.

Headquartered in New York City, Achilles International left the starting line in 1983. Seven years prior, Dick Traum, who lost his right leg above the knee in a car accident, began running to change his sedentary lifestyle. He became the first person with a prosthetic leg to run a marathon when he finished the New York City Marathon in 1976. The experience inspired him to create the Achilles Track Club, now Achilles International, to enable others to enjoy the benefits he experienced.

The organization believes running is a powerful tool for bringing hope, inspiration, and the joys of achievement to its members, whose improved physical strength and newfound confidence translates to other parts of life. Ramirez says he reaps the benefits of increased productivity at work, greater self-confidence, improved interpersonal skills, and a growing social network and circle of support.

Achilles International runs additional targeted programs. Achilles Kids provides training, racing opportunities, and an in-school program for children around the country, while the Tri Achilles team supports athletes interested in the multi-sport competitions of swimming, biking, and running. Achilles’ Freedom Team of Wounded Veterans focuses on training, access to specialized equipment such as hand-crank and push-rim wheelchairs, and marathon opportunities for U.S. military veterans with disabilities, whether or not the disability is combat related.

Ramirez joined the Washington, D.C., chapter of Achilles after completing NIB’s Fellowship for Leadership Development in 2018. Now president of the chapter, Ramirez and Karla Gilbride, vice president, have rejuvenated the club and are aiming to double its numbers to 50-60 member runners and volunteers this year.

Ramirez finds a connection between Achilles and NIB despite their different missions. “The outcome is the same,” he says, “to influence misperceptions of the abilities of people who are blind or disabled. The truth is that with the right tools or accommodations, whether it’s having a guide in a race or accommodations at work, people who are blind can be fully integrated in society and do great things.”

When Ramirez crossed the Boston Marathon finish line, placing fourth in his division, he enjoyed completing the journey of goal setting, training, exceeding expectations, and racing. Ultimately, however, it is about perception. “If we help change the misperceptions of people who are blind,” he says, “we can turn the world into a better place for everyone.”

Rachel F. Goldberg is a communications consultant at National Industries for the Blind.
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.

1. SKILCRAFT® 2019 Wall Calendars and Appointment Planners
SKILCRAFT® 2019 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.

2. SKILCRAFT® Disposable Paper Bowls
These USDA bio-preferred paper bowls are a must-have for break rooms, dining facilities, and any event where food is served. Microwavable bowls that resist moisture, grease, and cuts are perfect for hot and cold foods. Generous 12-ounce capacity bowls made of 100% pre-consumer waste are compostable and bio-degradable for minimal impact on the environment. Sold in boxes of 1,000 bowls; produced by Lighthouse Louisiana in New Orleans, Louisiana.

3. SKILCRAFT® Electrical Components Tiedown Strap
Keep electrical components secure with these black plastic nylon tie down straps. Weather-resistant, 12-inch long cable ties have a capacity of 120 pounds per square inch to stand up to tough conditions and satisfy MIL-M-20693 requirements. Ties measure 12 x 0.310 inch with 0.083 inch thickness. Sold in boxes of 100; produced by North Central Sight Services in Williamsport, Pennsylvania.

These and thousands of other products are available for purchase at AbilityOne.com, GSA Advantage.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.

Alphapointe Secures Patents for Innovative Medical Devices

NIB associated agency Alphapointe received approval from the Department of Defense Committee for Tactical Combat Casualty Care for two medical devices created to save life and limb for warfighters. Both the Tactical Mechanical Tourniquet (TMT) and Tactical Pneumatic Tourniquet (TPT) were designed in collaboration with the U.S. Army.

Designed to ensure ease of application and definitive hemorrhage control while substantially reducing tourniquet failure rates, the TMT requires minimal training to use. Troops can be taught to apply the tourniquet to their own or another soldier’s injury to instantly treat life-threatening bleeding in an arm or leg.

The TPT is designed to wrap around most human limbs and control bleeding at lower pressures. It can be kept in place for a longer period of time with less likelihood of nerve or vascular damage.

While the devices are intended for use in severe situations, they differ in their intended applications. The TPT offers a solution when access to medical attention may be unavailable for an extended period; the TMT is more suitable when treatment is known to be nearer at hand.
SUNU BAND: HANDS-FREE OBSTACLE AVOIDANCE

BY DOUG GOIST

In today’s gadget-obsessed culture, technology is often portrayed as the cure-all for every inconvenience experienced in our daily lives. What isn’t portrayed so much are the times a technology “cure” gives rise to even greater discomfort.

This is particularly true for travelers who are blind. For those among us who rely on white canes or service animals, technological pain frequently manifests when one finds oneself toting around enough battery-powered assistive gadgets to stock an aisle at Best Buy.

Enter Fernando Albertonio and Cuauhtli Padillas from the Boston and Guadalajara-based upstart Sunu. Albertonio and Padillas hope their relatively new Sunu Band will minimize the pain felt by travelers who are blind.

I first met the Sunu co-founders several years ago at an Assistive Technology Industry Association (ATIA) conference, where they were exhibiting their brand-new, teal-colored Sunu Band. The device resembled a small smart watch with a touch panel “screen” and a couple of small buttons on the side.

A novel way of using the power of sonar and echolocation to help travelers who are blind, the Sunu Band sends out ultrasonic sound pings to locate obstacles at waist level or above, and vibrates on the wearer’s wrist when tree limbs, poles, benches, trash cans, signs, and the like are approached.

The technology Sunu uses is identical to the beeping car bumper sensors we’ve all seen and heard that activate when parallel parking. At the ATIA booth, the closer I came to people, tables, and signs, the faster and more intense the band vibrated. I could also sweep an area for obstacles off to my sides by simply rotating my wrist to the left or right.

I thought the best feature of the band was its discreet size. Wearers could walk along with their arms to the side like anyone else. The sonar sensor located above the thumb at the edge of the “watch face” reached out to a maximum distance of 16 feet in a cone-shaped spread, searching for obstacles.

But the device had one major drawback: I needed a third hand that I didn’t possess to pull out my smartphone and locate points of interest well beyond 16 feet. At that time, the Sunu Band was another case of the familiar conundrum: more technology and not enough hands.

Fast forward to 2019, when I ran across a small huddle of people around the Sunu booth at the California State University – Northridge (CSUN) international technology conference for people with disabilities. I was a bit surprised, but I’m glad I waited around long enough to learn that the Sunu Band had incorporated some major enhancements.

The most important of these is the ability to pair the band to the new Sunu Place Finder App for iOS and Android smartphones. Using a wireless ear bud, Sunu users can leave their phones in a pocket and receive vibrational and spoken step-by-step directions to such things as metro transit stations and stops, ATMs, restaurants, and businesses more than half a mile away.

This new GPS feature, paired with compass directions, vibrating time indicators, and real-time obstacle detection, make the Sunu Band a technology cure worth checking out.

Sunu Band, priced at $299, is currently available online only.

Doug Goist is program manager for IT services projects 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.
EAST TEXAS LIGHTHOUSE GRADUATES THIRD PROMOTE CLASS

Employees from four NIB associated agencies graduated from East Texas Lighthouse for the Blind’s Professional Mastery of Office Technology for Employment (ProMOTE) training session on April 12, 2019. The session piloted a new approach to teaching the four-week ProMOTE curriculum using two-weeks of distance learning followed by two weeks of on-site instruction.

NIB launched ProMOTE in 2016 to provide the advanced level of training people who are blind need to not only operate common software programs, but also to navigate the way those programs interact with assistive technology. Staff from East Texas Lighthouse for the Blind have now trained three classes of ProMOTE program graduates.

The immersive, 40-hour-per-week, four-week training program is modeled on a common workplace schedule with time-sensitive deadlines. Participants attend lectures and complete exercises in the morning, then tackle projects in the afternoon based on the material introduced earlier in the day.

SAVE THE DATE: NIB/NAEPB TRAINING CONFERENCE AND EXPO

Mark your calendar for the 2019 NIB/NAEPB Training Conference and Expo, October 15-18, at the Hyatt Regency Crystal City Hotel in Arlington, Virginia.

Don’t miss the engaging speakers, informative breakout sessions, and unparalleled business opportunities available at the Expo and NIB Marketplace.
WORKFORCE INNOVATION CENTER HOSTS EFFECTIVE SUPERVISION TRAINING

NIB kicked off the first of three in-person classroom sessions for its Effective Supervision training program at the William L. Hudson BVI Workforce Innovation Center in Wichita, Kansas, April 23. The program is the first national training program presented at the center.

NIB is working with the BVI Workforce Innovation Center to expand the reach and geographic accessibility of professional development opportunities for people who are blind or low vision, with a goal of creating 500 new skilled, professional jobs by 2022.

The 2019 Effective Supervision class includes employees from 17 NIB associated agencies and partner CNIB in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Over the course of the program, the group will visit Wichita a total of three times for in-class training sessions.

FOLLOW NYSPSP ON SOCIAL MEDIA

The New York State Preferred Source Program for New Yorkers Who Are Blind (NYSPSP) now has a presence on Facebook and LinkedIn to support its mission of creating and sustaining employment opportunities for New Yorkers who are blind. Like and follow #NYSPSP to keep up with the latest product and service news, advocacy activities, and updates from NYSPSP and its 10 affiliated nonprofit agencies.

NIB HOSTS HUMAN RESOURCES FORUM

NIB welcomed 43 human resource professionals representing 25 associated nonprofit agencies to the 2019 Human Resources Forum, held at the NIB Conference and Training Center in Alexandria, Virginia. With the theme “Recruit, Attract, Retain,” the Forum included workshops on talent acquisition highlighting recruiting and sourcing techniques, and on the use of total rewards as a tool for retaining employees.

The sessions also covered accessible payroll systems, enhanced health benefits, and Health Reimbursement Accounts (HRAs) and Health Savings Accounts (HSAs). Presenters on day two of the forum addressed public policy changes effecting the HR community, including the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), Quality Work Environment (QWE) initiative, and Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) issues.
NATIONAL INDUSTRIES FOR THE BLIND INVITES YOU

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Save The Date