Supplying the Troops

NIB’s kitting, warehousing, and distribution services are intricately choreographed global operations.
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Opportunity welcomes news and stories about the careers and capabilities of people who are blind. Contact communications@nib.org.

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Since 1938, National Industries for the Blind (NIB) has focused on enhancing the opportunities for economic and personal independence of people who are blind, primarily through creating, sustaining, and improving employment. NIB and its network of associated nonprofit agencies are the nation’s largest employer of people who are blind through the manufacture and provision of SKILCRAFT® and other products and services of the AbilityOne® Program. For more information about NIB, visit NIB.org.
In today’s dynamic environments, a quick response can mean the difference between success and failure. Nowhere is this more true than in the military, where the ability to respond effectively to a variety of scenarios can literally mean the difference between life and death.

It’s a requirement made all the more difficult by the fact that forces are deployed to more than 150 countries, and constantly on the move. Working with the Defense Logistics Agency, NIB associated agencies are developing, storing, and delivering specialized kits that provide the tools and materials military members need to meet varied and complex missions around the world.

In this issue of Opportunity magazine you’ll read about the work our associated nonprofit agencies do to supply our
troops in the field. From putting together first responder and investigation kits to providing all of the pieces to equip a mobile operating room, employees who are blind gather materials and assemble them to exacting specifications so that military members have the right instrument at the right time, whether performing surgery or constructing a building.

People who are blind working in NIB associated agencies are proud to play a critical role in the carefully choreographed operations of our military’s global supply chains that help our nation’s warfighters successfully execute their missions in every corner of the globe.

Kevin A. Lynch
President and
Chief Executive Officer
SUPPLYING THE TROOPS

NIB’s kitting, warehousing, and distribution services for the U.S. military are intricately choreographed global operations.

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Remembering the support he first received from NIB agencies as a soldier, Army Brigadier General Gavin A. Lawrence, commander of Defense Logistics Agency Troop Support (DLA-TS), looks forward to growing the partnership between the two organizations.

“We are committed to building on our partnership because you are crucial to our success,” he told attendees at the 2019 NIB/NAEPB Training Conference and Expo.

A native of the Philadelphia area, Lawrence returned to his hometown in June to oversee a global workforce of approximately 2,900 civilian and military personnel who annually provide more than $17 billion worth of food.

Defense Logistics Agency Troop Support Commander Brigadier General Gavin Lawrence is committed to supporting the AbilityOne® Program and breaking down barriers for people who are blind.
clothing, medical supplies, pharmaceuticals, equipment, and other necessities to all branches of the U.S. military.

In a July interview with DLA public affairs, Lawrence emphasized that he wants DLA to be warfighters’ first choice when it comes to supply chain solutions. He said his plans include re-examining processes to ensure the organization is as effective and efficient as possible.

“I firmly believe that the American taxpayer wants our military to be the best fighting force in the world,” he said. “In order to maintain a premiere and ready fighting force, DLA Troop Support must focus on developing responsive and innovative solutions across all of its supply chains.”

Pointing to the strong ties NIB and the U.S. military have long shared, Lawrence commended NIB’s track record of success, affirming his own commitment to breaking down barriers for people who are blind or visually impaired.

“While we recently marked our 58th anniversary, the relationship between NIB and the U.S. military, including DLA, goes all the way back to World War II, when NIB delivered tens of millions of pillowcases, brooms, and other materials to assist our men and women in uniform,” he noted.

Before assuming command of DLA, Lawrence compiled a distinguished military career, including service in Iraq and three deployments to Afghanistan. He also served as executive officer to the U.S. Army, deputy chief of staff, G-4; deputy director of operations at Department of the Army headquarters (HQDA) G-4; and aide de camp to the commander of
the DLA Defense Supply Center Philadelphia. His service decorations include the Legion of Merit, Bronze Star, and several medals for Meritorious Service.

Lawrence earned a Bachelor of Science degree in International Relations from the United States Military Academy at West Point, a Master of Arts in National Security and Strategic Studies from the U.S. Naval War College, and a Master of Arts in Strategic Studies from the U.S. Army War College.

A self-described “diehard sports fan,” he plans to take full advantage of his time in Philadelphia to root for the Eagles, Flyers, Phillies, and 76ers. The city’s rich history as the birthplace of U.S. freedom resonates with Lawrence, who was honored to administer the oath of enlistment to new soldiers during special Fourth of July observances at historic Independence Hall.

Lawrence appreciates the opportunity to return to Philadelphia and to DLA. “To come back to your hometown and lead an organization like this is special.”

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.

“We are committed to building on our partnership because you are crucial to our success.”

— Brigadier General Gavin A. Lawrence
Our Mission is to Support Yours

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A.J.
Navy Veteran, Machine Operator

Connect to what matters

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NIB associated agencies are always on the lookout for ways to expand business offerings that help carry out their mission of creating jobs for people who are blind.

Rachel Kunkel assembles a leader point-of-capture kit, one of several kits for evidence collection and detained processing produced by NIB associated nonprofit agency IBVI.

NIB associated agencies’ kitting, warehousing, and distribution services for the U.S. military are more than well-oiled machines—they’re intricately choreographed global operations.

BY SHARON HORRIGAN
To grow opportunities for steady employment, some are now providing kitting services to the Defense Logistics Agency (DLA) for the U.S. Armed Services. Kits of all shapes and sizes are needed for troops on the move, from basic first-aid kits to portable surgeries and more. It’s an exciting area to move into that requires the precise movement of people and goods.

**The Choreography of Kitting**

When leaders at LCI in Durham, North Carolina, decided in 2014 to try their hand at kitting for the U.S. military, they knew they could make a valuable contribution, says DuWayne Gilbertson, vice president of business development.

“We knew that DLA’s kitting structure wasn’t satisfying the military’s needs,” explains Gilbertson, who says the agency also believed it could cut the time needed to develop and launch a new kit. The key, LCI Business Development Manager Robert Renquist said, was working closely with customers and vendors in a collaborative role.

Today, LCI provides custom kits with as few as 25 items and as many as 2,500 items. The King Kong of kits produced by LCI is the U.S. Navy Expeditionary Medical Facility Roll 2 Light Maneuver Equipment Set (R2LM), which is a mobile operating room.

Employees at Arizona Industries for the Blind know the work they do is vital to keeping U.S. troops supplied and ready to move.
**NIB associated agency LCI is ready to ship this completed U.S. Navy Expeditionary Medical Facility Roll 2 Light Maneuver Equipment Set containing 2,500 pieces packed in 23 separate cases that ship on eight pallets.**

**COVER STORY Continued from page 13**

used to support Special Operations Forces around the world. “The Navy had been using a kit adapted from a mobile operating room kit originally developed for the U.S. Air Force,” explains Gilbertson. “But a mobile operating room designed for land and air operations wasn’t going to work on Navy ships.”

LCI worked closely with the Navy, holding countless meetings with all stakeholders who would touch the kits to design one with their specific needs in mind. Waterproof cases were a “must,” as were cases designed to fit through tight shipboard doorways and submarine spaces. Equally important was a snug fit for the tools and supplies inside the cases to keep them in place even when ships encounter rough weather at sea.

Gilbertson says once LCI understood stakeholders’
needs, it developed the custom product in less than six months.

The kit contains 472 unique line items and 2,500 different pieces, with each piece fitted into a custom configuration within the cases to meet the functional requirements of expeditionary surgery. Assembling a kit takes 5-6 hours because the pieces must be placed precisely — in some cases, the ability to quickly grab the right instrument could be a matter of life or death. The full kit comes in 23 different cases that ship on eight pallets.

LCI also makes smaller trauma kits for Special Operations forces in Africa, and three distinct medical kits for the U.S. Navy’s Sixth Fleet, each with different components but using the same portable, water-resistant medical pack. The agency also provides the U.S. Air Force with a custom surgical kit consisting of six unique surgical packs that give medical personnel everything needed to care for a patient.

Regardless of size or number of pieces, each kit is unique and requires careful planning. “Medical personnel need to not only know what’s in each kit, but where they can find it at a moment’s notice,” explains Renquist.

The 23 employees who work in the kitting division at two LCI locations — Durham and Fayetteville, North Carolina — enjoy the challenge the work entails because each kit is so unique. But it’s more than that, Renquist says. “They know they’re supporting our troops and that the kits are saving lives.”

More than a Typical Tool Kit
In 2015, when C.J. Lange assumed the role of president and CEO of Industries for the Blind and Visually Impaired (IBVI) in West Allis, Wisconsin, the agency was
already contemplating making some strategic changes.

“Until that point, we had focused more on one-time transactional, customer-focused functions like running base supply centers (BSCs),” says Lange. Developing kitting capabilities would allow IBVI to take on contracted work and build long-term relationships with customers to create more jobs for people who are blind. The agency still operates BSCs, but the expansion into kitting puts it in a better position to retain employees during economic downturns.

“We knew kitting would move us in a new direction while helping us fulfill our
mission of offering meaningful employment to people who are blind or visually impaired,” explains Lange.

IBVI launched its kitting program in 2014, starting with the design and assembly of a small machinist tool set for the U.S. Army. Today, the agency makes first responder and investigation kits for the military, and kits for evidence collection and detained processing used by military police, special operations, military intelligence, and criminal investigation units.

The agency’s largest kit is the massive Vertical Skills Engineer Construction Kit (VSECK), which Army engineers use to build structures in the field. The VSECK kit is comprised of 1,000 different pieces, including enough scaffolding to reach the second story of a building and seven tool chests with custom-cut trays to keep tools securely in place during transport. Since 2018, 22 IBVI employees have made 1,300 VSECK kits.

Easton Kons, one of the employees who are blind that works on the kits, builds the cases that go into the crates. “I’ve been doing that for about three years now, and I’m proud of my work,” says Kons. “I know what we are doing is important, so I always try to exceed expectations.”

When Matt Baumeister joined the team as a tool kitter, he imagined a completely different type of work. “I thought it would be like putting together an automotive tool kit, like the ones you used to see in the Sears catalog,” recalls Baumeister. “I’d be picking up some tools and tossing them in the right drawers.”

“It’s nothing like that. We fit entire hardware stores into giant cases with foam cutouts designed to fit each tool
exactly. We need to assemble them accurately so Army engineers can find and use the tools they need on the fly.”

Baumeister, who is legally blind, takes advantage of his nearsightedness to examine tools for quality, and to make sure all of the parts work.

“We know they are going to our troops in the field. If a tool or part is defective, they can’t run to the store and swap it for a new one,” he explains. “That’s why I inspect every piece of equipment that goes into a kit. I take my work very seriously and I’m proud of what I do to support our troops. Each and every one of us are.”

**Warehousing and Distribution**

Putting together kits and supplies for the troops is only half of the story — materials need to be delivered to the field. That’s where NIB associated agencies experienced in warehousing and distributing supplies to DLA come into play.

**Meeting and Exceeding Standards**

In 1995, Arizona Industries for the Blind in Phoenix opened its first warehouse and distribution center to house, package, and ship goods to the U.S. military. The 40,000 square foot facility that employed 13 people has grown to 175,000 square feet and employs 63 people who manage more than $100 million in inventory — including more than 25,000 SKUs — and ship packages all over the world.

Launching the warehouse and distribution center nearly 20 years ago wasn’t easy, says Tim Adams, manager of fulfillment services, but agency leaders had faith their workforce could go toe-to-toe with other DLA depots. “We knew soon after
we opened that we could compete, because we had better customer service, faster response times, and outstanding inventory control,” says Adams.

Arizona Industries for the Blind currently has three contracts with DLA: one for lighting products, one for military insignia, and one for springs. The center ships about 325,000 orders annually, consistently meeting or exceeding DLA guidelines for order turnaround.

“We take great pride in meeting or exceeding DLA guidelines,” says David Steinmetz, manager of community and public relations. The agency has a 99.7% on-time fill rate, a performance level that has twice led DLA to name the agency its AbilityOne Vendor of the Year. In addition to this outstanding fill rate, Arizona Industries for the Blind has a 99.8% inventory accuracy rating and a 100% rating for quality control.

Achieving those ratings requires a team of dedicated employees who work together seamlessly to consistently deliver for the troops. It’s an intricate dance that is re-choreographed on a near-daily basis as order types and volume fluctuate.

Susan Vawter, a shipper-packer at Arizona Industries for the Blind, wears a Talkman headset that guides her in picking items for a customer order.
Three different but integrated software systems help fulfill orders. A warehouse management system transmits orders to Talkman, a voice-activated picking software system that provides audio directions to employees who are blind to help them locate and pick items.

After the items are picked, employees move the orders to packaging, where they undergo quality control checks before being packed. Packaged orders move on to shipping, where a software system that interfaces with DLA computers loads the latest shipping address on file for the customer. The interface with DLA’s system is vital to ensure the most up-to-date address for military customers who are frequently on the move.

Behind all this technology are agency employees who locate, retrieve, pack, and ship orders as they are received. It’s a mission warehouse and distribution employees take great pride in carrying out, says Adams.

“We’re successful because of the incredible work ethic of our workforce,” says Adams. “Our employees who are blind know their work is vital to keeping our troops supplied and ready to move.”

**Saving Time and Taxpayer Dollars**
Industries of the Blind (IOB) in Greensboro, North Carolina, also entered the DLA warehouse and distribution business in 1995. “At the time, we knew that if a soldier needed a single lightbulb, he or she would submit a request to DLA and DLA would ship an entire case,” explains Richard Oliver, director of community outreach and government relations. “We told DLA that we could break the case and send the single lightbulb the customer needed.”
Today, IOB warehouses and distributes not only light bulbs, but also springs, wire ropes, cables, and chains of all sizes. The order fulfillment process is similar to Arizona’s, using integrated software systems to receive and process orders and a cadre of dedicated employees working together to pick, pack, and ship. IOB’s warehouse and distribution center fulfills an average of 600 orders each day, says Oliver.

IOB is proud of its track record for meeting or exceeding DLA guidelines for processing orders. “We operate under the same DLA delivery guidelines as Arizona,” says Oliver. “Our internal goal, though, is to have every order processed and shipped within 24 hours. We meet that internal goal 99 percent of the time, a metric all warehouse and distribution employees are extremely proud of.”

At IOB Greensboro, Daryl Wells inspects bins to ensure the product and quantity are correct before orders are processed for shipment to government customers.
“A government official once told me that IOB’s warehouse and distribution center was 54 percent more efficient than when they ran it,” says Oliver. “Our work has saved government labor and warehouse dollars.”

When IOB opened its warehouse, it was 80,000 square feet and employed 12 people. Over the years, they’ve expanded to 150,000 square feet and 38 employees.

“Since joining IOB Greensboro in 1990, Jolie Harding has worked her way up to become the agency’s expert on troubleshooting software issues in the warehouse and distribution center. We’ve worked hard to make as many positions as possible accessible to employees who are blind,” notes Oliver.

Jolie Harding, who has been with IOB since 1990, recalls moving to the warehouse and distribution center as a shipping and receiving clerk when it was “an empty shell.” Harding worked her way up to her current position of EDI programmer, where she serves as the...
go-to for employees who need help troubleshooting a software issue.

“The work we do here is so important,” says Harding. “We’ve seen Desert Storm, Afghanistan, 9/11. Troops can’t move if they don’t have the materials they need. A single lightbulb can ground an aircraft.”

Daryl Wells has seen the value of warehouse and distribution center operations from both sides. Wells, who served in the military until a head injury left him legally blind, joined IOB in 2004 and moved to the warehouse and distribution center in 2006.

Like Harding, he learned new skills and took on responsibilities to his reach his current supervisory position, where he ensures work orders meet quality standards and keep moving. “Having served in the military, I know first-hand how important it is to have supplies delivered quickly and accurately,” says Wells.

And as for the daily dance: “We have a great staff,” he says. “We all take great pride in what we do. We really are a family.”

Sharon Horrigan is a freelance writer based in Asheville, North Carolina.
NIB associated nonprofit agencies provide programs that help families prepare children and teens who are blind for life as independent adults.

BY ROSEMARIE LALLY, J.D.

NIB associated nonprofit agencies are known for providing employment opportunities for people who are blind, but many provide a continuum of services that help children and teens who are blind learn to navigate the world independently and achieve their dreams.

First Steps, a one-week summer residential program for very young children with vision loss, including those with multiple disabilities, addresses vision rehabilitation, orientation and mobility, and sensory and socialization challenges. “The program allows specialists to identify deficits and let parents know about home services available through the New York State Commission for the Blind,” explains Cathleen McGuire, director of vision rehabilitation and outreach.

A second residential program, Rehab and Rec, serves children aged 6-10 and includes siblings and parents. The children participate

Serving Young Children

Learning that a child is blind or has a significant visual impairment can be overwhelming for parents. VISIONS, an NIB associated agency serving the greater New York Metropolitan area, provides services for the whole family to help parents and siblings learn to navigate their “new normal.”
in group skill-building activities, such as cooking, communication skills, and sports, while siblings enjoy recreation programs. Parents participate in discussion groups and share information learned through their own experiences. “It’s an amazing experience to bring these families together and allow them to build friendships with other parents of kids with multiple disabilities,” McGuire says. “They become a community, a support system for each other — not just the children, but also their siblings and parents. Many come back year after year.”

**Connecting with Teens**
As children grow, services provided by NIB associated agencies guide them

![Image of Jose Torres and son Dylan enjoying a family activity during the Rehab and Rec program at VISIONS. The program provides skills-building activities for kids who are blind, support programs for parents and siblings, and fun.](image)

© Jose Torres and son Dylan enjoy a family activity during the Rehab and Rec program at VISIONS. The program provides skills-building activities for kids who are blind, support programs for parents and siblings, and fun.
toward independence. At the LightHouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired in San Francisco, monthly recreational activities and family programs foster friendships and greater confidence, while providing parents with support and counseling on common issues, such as developing Individual Education Plans for their children attending public school.

Youth Services Coordinator Jamey Gump says the monthly events focus on teaching young people life skills while having fun.

The students gain confidence through the activities, especially mastering independent travel and using a white cane rather than relying on a guide. “Some take more time to open up to trying new things — it may take years,” Gump says. “Everyone works on their own internal schedule to get there, but the results are exciting to see.”

Many recreation program participants progress to the Youth Employment Series (YES), which prepares teens and young adults aged 16-24 for higher education and employment, explains Transition Program Coordinator Ann Wai-Yee Kwong. Strong friendships formed through the recreation programs encourage students to take on challenges in this transitional phase together, she said.

One weekend each month, eight to 16 YES participants practice life skills and cooperative learning in the city. The agency provides residential space in its offices for themed sessions that range from pitching a business plan and collaborating on makerspace projects to practicing advocacy skills.

“Mentorship and friendship are the key,” Kwong says. “Building a rapport with teens is critical and the relationship has to be built on trust and respect.”
Interns in the agency’s four-week Summer Academy are paired with a local business partner. The first week of the internship is spent on foundational skills; in the second week participants travel to the National Federation of the Blind annual convention. The final two weeks are devoted to commuting in small groups to and from their internship placements in San Francisco.

“Most participants go on to college or employment, continuing to network and build on what they’ve learned,” Kwong says. “The partner organizations sometimes hire our students because they realize they’re assets to their business.”

Transitional Activities for Pre-Employment and Socialization — a pilot program launched in 2019 by VISIONS in New York — is a six-weekend experience designed to guide children ages 10-15 toward higher education and employment. The program mixes fun activities with an
introduction to the skills needed for post-secondary success, says Director of Workforce Programs Heather Hanlon.

“We have guest speakers, field trips, a college visit, a visit to a vocational institute, job shadowing, and public speaking opportunities,” Hanlon says. “It’s important that students hear from successful adults who are blind about steps they took to get where they are. We want to open up kids’ ideas about what they want to do.”

The program also advises parents on career expectations for their children, with social workers explaining how parents can encourage independence to groom their children for success. “Parental involvement is key,” Hanlon said. “Parents who believe their kids have the same opportunities to achieve as their sighted peers are a huge component in their children’s ultimate success.”

VISIONS’ Summer Transition Program provides a four-week residential experience for 20 high school students. Melissa Phipps, senior director of youth services, says participants build independence through mastering everyday activities from cleaning, laundry, and meal planning, to learning to use assistive technology, note-taking apps, and public transportation.

VISIONS also offers a summer pre-college program for high school juniors and seniors at Manhattanville College in Purchase, New York, that introduces students to college life, teaching them safe independent navigation to and from dorms and around campus. Participants learn how to access campus disability services, the college library, and the cafeteria, while an online writing course covers techniques critical for college success, culminating with a required three-page paper.
Serving the Community
At IFB Solutions, based in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, community service programs include demonstrating that “people who are blind can — and do — excel,” says Executive Vice President of Strategy and Programs Dan Kelly.

Kelly says the agency’s Sensitivity to Blindness Training is one of its most impactful outreach initiatives. The program, taught by people who are blind, educates community members about issues that many are unfamiliar with, such as proper etiquette for interacting with a guide dog and how to give change to a person who is blind.

Focused on the capabilities of people who are blind, the program has been offered to law firms, businesses seeking diversity training, and even staff at a local McDonald’s. “It is a memorable experience that participants can call on in the future, regardless of setting,” Kelly says.
Blindside, a version of the program for grades K-12, helps students understand what it’s like to navigate with a white cane and use assistive technology to do schoolwork. Kids are less inhibited, Kelly says, “so we often get better questions from them, like ‘How do you match your clothes?’”

IFB’s support groups for adults who are blind include working with guide dogs, mastering public transportation, living with retinopathy, losing weight, and a special group for military veterans.

Included in its variety of youth programs is the Student Enrichment Experience (SEE), which offers two one-week residential summer camps for rising 8th-12th graders. At SEE Camp Abilities H₂O, 15 teenagers can swim, row, kayak, paddleboard, and fish at Lake Norman and visit the National Whitewater Center in Charlotte, North Carolina.

SEE Adventure Camp hosts 18 teens for a week of hiking, rafting, climbing, swimming, and ziplining around the Nantahala Gorge in western North Carolina. Staff members include certified teachers of the visually impaired, orientation and mobility specialists, and counselors, both blind and sighted.

“It’s encouraging for families to see people who are blind living independently and mastering life skills,” says Kelly. “The path to employment starts with giving kids responsibility for taking out the garbage when they’re 5 years old. Whether through fun or practical skills building, the most important thing is to develop self-reliance and responsibility.”

Rosemarie Lally, J.D. is a freelance writer and editor based in Washington D.C.
More than 700 registrants attended the 2019 NIB/NAEPB Training Conference and Expo, held October 15-18 in Arlington, Virginia, where the refreshed SKILCRAFT® brand was introduced. Each day was packed with activities, informative training tracks, and interest group meetings. Attendees at the general session enjoyed presentations by DLA Troop Support Commander Brigadier General Gavin Lawrence; Kim Herrington, acting principal director of Defense Pricing and Contracting; Tom Robinson, U.S. AbilityOne Commission® chairperson and director of contracting for the Air Force Life Cycle Management Center at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base; Tina Ballard, Commission executive director; Jim Kesteloot, a private citizen who is the immediate past chair of the Commission; and GSA Senior Procurement Executive Jeff Koses, whose nomination to the Commission is pending confirmation.

Training tracks and interest group meetings laid the groundwork for participants to reach new goals in the coming year as they work to increase employment opportunities for people who are blind. Thursday afternoon’s Expo and NIB Marketplace gave prospective customers an excellent chance to learn more about the wide variety of products and services available through NIB associated agencies and business partners, and provided opportunities to discuss future needs and business prospects.
“Working with Seattle, NIB, and the AbilityOne Program has helped me to regain my self-confidence.”

Tamara Airhart
Team Lead, Contract Management Support
The Lighthouse for the Blind, Inc., Seattle, Washington

“I have confidence in the fact that I am a valuable asset and bring purpose to the people who I work for and who work for me.”

Peggy Jackson
Site Supervisor, Contract Management Support
Virginia Industries for the Blind

“NIB’s Business Management Training and the Advocates for Leadership and Employment program “have really helped to mold me to become a leader and find a voice to advocate for people who are blind.”

Richard Oliver
Director, Community Outreach and Government Relations Industries of the Blind, Greensboro, North Carolina
“The NIB conference is an opportunity for us to share our passion for what we do.”

Tina Ballard
Executive Director,
U.S. AbilityOne Commission

“I went into the interview knowing that I actually had a chance, and that’s not something I can say with every job interview I’ve been on.”

Derek Suarez
Switchboard Supervisor,
Association for Vision Rehabilitation and Employment
“The Department of Defense is ‘all in’ on working to bring more jobs to our nation and to the AbilityOne Program.”

Kim Herrington
Acting Principal Director,
Defense Pricing and Contracting
Office of the Secretary of Defense

“The agencies represented here today are crucial to our mission success and the support we provide to the warfighter.”

Brigadier General
Gavin Lawrence
Commander,
Defense Logistics Agency
Troop Support
AGENCY SPOTLIGHT

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

In just 20 years, NIB associated agency Outlook Nebraska has expanded to provide innovative community support programs in addition to jobs for people who are blind.

BY SHARON HORSRIGAN

When Outlook Nebraska opened its doors as a nonprofit organization in February 2000, it had just four employees who were blind or visually impaired and a single mission: To provide employment opportunities for people in the Omaha area who were blind or had low vision. It wasn’t long, though, before that mission expanded.

“As we grew, we realized there were other services and experiences we could provide to enrich the lives of people who are blind and visually impaired,” says Eric Stueckrath, president and CEO of the NIB associated nonprofit agency. Outlook Nebraska expanded its offerings to include assistive technology training, recreational opportunities like sports teams and camps, and other educational opportunities.

Rachel Carver, senior public relations specialist at Outlook Nebraska, educates community members about blindness at the agency’s monthly Insight and Impact lunches. As the mission expanded, so did the agency. “As we continued to physically grow, we bought our building and
some adjacent land,” says Stueckrath. Leasing space in the building to other organizations created an income stream that helped support other agency initiatives operated under the Outlook Nebraska name.

“Over time, we realized that we needed to take a more enterprise-wide approach to our operations,” says Stueckrath. “We needed a way to operate that could provide administrative support to each area, while still allowing them to work independently to fulfill their goals.” Outlook Collaborative was formed in 2019 with four subsidiaries: Outlook Nebraska, Outlook Enrichment, Outlook Business Solutions, and Outlook Properties.

The newly formed parent organization gives each subsidiary a degree of autonomy to meet its unique

Employee Michelle Poteet produces the Natural Roll Towel on the Amica Unica Converting Swingline. The new machinery increased production capacity at the agency by 40%.
mission, while providing centralized support services to consolidate costs. Outlook Business Solutions will offer marketing services to local businesses and Outlook Properties will manage the Collaborative’s real estate assets and lease holders. With 75 full-time employees, Outlook Collaborative is the largest employer of people who are blind or low vision in a seven-state region.

**Educating the Community**

The agency’s robust offerings aimed at helping Omaha area residents who are blind or visually impaired meet goals for personal growth and career enhancement will continue under the Outlook Enrichment name. In addition to assistive technology training, Outlook Enrichment hosts art workshops, bowling leagues, tandem bike clubs, a golf academy, goalball team, and more. The agency’s assistive technology training includes digital eyewear demonstrations and computer and digital device training.

Outlook Enrichment also has an outreach function that educates service providers and community members about working with people who are blind or visually impaired. The community education offerings include Insight and Impact lunches, monthly events where Omaha residents can learn more about Outlook Nebraska’s mission, experience what it’s like to use assistive technology, and see how Outlook Nebraska employees who are blind put assistive technology to work.

Outlook Enrichment also hosts an annual Vision Resource Fair, where people who are experiencing vision loss or supporting a family member with vision loss can learn more about the latest technology,
tools, and services available. In 2018, Outlook Enrichment’s programs saw approximately 4,500 participants, providing nearly 17,000 hours of services.

Providing Jobs and Upward Mobility
Outlook Nebraska will continue its work through the AbilityOne® Program, including making paper towels and toilet paper using 100% recycled fiber with at least 30% post-consumer materials that meet or exceed federal procurement guidelines. The agency recently added a new multifold towel to its product line, the thirty-sixth unique, sustainable paper product it produces, and plans to add more products to the line this year. Eighty percent of employees working on AbilityOne products are blind or visually impaired.

To meet those ambitious plans, the agency purchased a new production machine in 2019. The Amica Unica Converting SwingLine, which increased production capacity by 40%, can produce products that Outlook Nebraska previously made using two different machines.

Purchasing and installing the machine was a huge undertaking, says Johnny Botsford, assistant converting manager, who worked on the installation. Botsford, who is blind, was part of a four-person team who traveled to Bologna, Italy, where the SwingLine is made, to examine the machine and make sure it would meet the agency’s needs. He was excited to participate in the process of finding the right machinery and installing it because the SwingLine promises new jobs and new challenges for people who are blind and visually impaired.

“I love what I do,” says Botsford, who started at
Outlook Nebraska in 2012 as an entry-level machine operator and has steadily risen through the ranks since joining the agency. “I love the hands-on nature of the work we do and working with people.”

One of the first participants in NIB’s Emerging Professionals program, Botsford said he also loves “how Outlook invests in people and our growth.”

Rachel Carver, senior public relations specialist at the agency, agrees. For Carver, who has been blind all of her life, joining Outlook Nebraska as a communications associate was the culmination of an 18-month search for a career position after she earned a degree in media studies and English. “When I interviewed here, there was no communications department,” she recalls.
In the communications role, Carver interviewed agency associates and wrote a bi-monthly newsletter. “About six months into my job they told me I was heading to Washington, D.C., to participate in NIB’s Advocates for Leadership and Employment program,” she recalls. Through the program, Carver learned to advocate for the interests of people who are blind on Capitol Hill and in the Omaha community.

Today, Carver’s role includes writing, government relations, managing freelance writers, and supporting the entire Outlook Collaborative. “I love working here,” she says. “I’ve been given great opportunities to learn and develop.”

As the agency looks to the future, Stueckrath is quick to recognize that being part of NIB’s network of associated nonprofit agencies has helped fuel Outlook Nebraska’s exponential growth in only 20 years. “People at NIB and in NIB associated agencies are always willing to share information and their experiences,” he says. “This helped us immensely as we grew, because we could learn from the lessons others had learned before us.”

“We all do this because it’s our mission and passion” Stueckrath says. “We want to show the world the abilities of people who blind and visually impaired.”

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.

1. SKILCRAFT® Hanging File Folders
Keep documents organized with these versatile SKILCRAFT® letter-size hanging classification folders featuring 2-inch Tyvek expansion gusset bottoms and pivoting hangers that can be folded down for carry-along convenience. Choose folders with one divider and four sections, or two dividers and six sections with choice of straight top or right-of-center tabs. Folders contain 60% total recycled fiber including at least 30% post-consumer waste, while dividers contain at least 30% post-consumer waste. Made in the U.S.A. and TAA compliant. Produced by Clovernook Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired in Cincinnati, Ohio.

2. SKILCRAFT® Eco-Bottle Pens
Help reduce plastic waste with SKILCRAFT® pens made of recycled water bottles. Smooth-writing stick or retractable pens with a unique water-bottle inspired design are an ideal option for those who prefer eco-friendly products. Choose black or blue ink in medium or fine point. TAA compliant; assembled in the U.S.A. Produced by West Texas Lighthouse for the Blind in San Angelo.
NEW PRODUCTS Continued from page 41

3. SKILCRAFT®/Zebra® Retractable Gel Pen
Jot down notes or compose a masterpiece with SKILCRAFT®/Zebra® retractable, non-refillable gel pens. Designed with a latex-free, non-slip grip for comfort, the ultra-smooth, quick-drying, water-based gel provides a flowing, crisp writing experience. Available in blue, black, red, or green ink with your choice of 0.5mm, 0.7mm or 1.0mm tips. Produced by Industries of the Blind in Greensboro, North Carolina.

4. SKILCRAFT® Laser Toner Cartridges – HP Compatible
Competitively priced, remanufactured HP-compatible SKILCRAFT® Laser Toner Cartridges are designed using precision color cartridge technology to meet HP standards for page yield, image quality, and color precision. Cartridges are made using 35% post-consumer content and meet ISO 14001 recycling standards. Satisfaction guaranteed with one-year warranty from date of purchase. Assembled in the U.S.A. and TAA compliant. Produced by Alabama Industries for the Blind in Talladega.
5. **SKILCRAFT® Fiberglass Extension Handle**
Extend the reach of paint rollers, brushes, squeegees, and more with this heavy-duty fiberglass extension handle featuring a 1¼-inch outer tube and 1-inch inner tube. Telescoping 5-foot pole extends to 10 feet, with plastic hand grip and a threaded end made of zinc. TAA compliant; made in the U.S.A. Produced by IBVI in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

6. **SKILCRAFT®/FlexSweep® Cleaning Tools**
Keep surfaces in industrial environments clean with SKILCRAFT®/FlexSweep® Cleaning Tools featuring the Flex-Power connector. Attached to brooms, brushes, or squeegees, the shock-absorbing, unbreakable Flex-Power connector maneuvers tools around obstacles with little impact to the head and withstands even the toughest environments. EasyFlip™ blades double the lifespan of the squeegee with a simple flip. Made in the U.S.A. Produced by IBVI in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

*These and thousands of other products are available for purchase at AbilityOne.com, GSAAAdvantage.gov, your local AbilityOne Base Supply Center®, or through AbilityOne authorized distributors. For more information about how to purchase SKILCRAFT and other products produced by people who are blind, visit NIB.org/products.*
In the spring 2019 issue of Opportunity Magazine’s Tech Corner I reviewed WeWALK, a device developed in Istanbul, Turkey. WeWALK transforms a standard white cane into a “smartcane” that detects obstacles using sonar, provides spoken turn-by-turn walking directions, and incorporates Amazon’s Alexa voice assistant.

Winner of the 2019 Pioneer Award for accessible technology at the renowned international Consumer Electronics Show (CES) held each January in Las Vegas, WeWALK is one representation of the work of a growing group of young assistive technology startups located in areas well outside the U.S.

Another international startup I visited on the CES exhibitor floor in 2019 has a back story very similar to WeWALK’s. Like the WeWALK smartcane, Bonocle — a device its inventors proclaim is “the next big thing in the assistive technology market” — was invented by young university students and friends, this time from Doha, Qatar, on the Arabian peninsula.
Twenty-five-year-old co-founder Mahmoud Eltouny said the idea for the device came after a university friend broke his right hand in a car accident and had tremendous difficulty taking notes in class. Seeking an assistive device from the Qatari university’s disability office, Eltouny and his friend were shocked by the complexities involved in helping students who are blind transcribe electronic class notes into physical braille documents.

In a recent TED Talk, Eltouny used the comparison of the seventh volume of the Harry Potter series to prove his point. While the paperback version of the book weighs in at a little over a pound, Eltouny said the same Harry Potter novel weighs in at a staggering 20 pounds when embossed on braille paper.

With a scant 5% of the world’s literature available in printed braille, Eltouny said there have been no significant breakthroughs in Braille technology in the past 30 years.

Bonocle, a shortened name for “braille monocle,” is a computer-mouse-sized handheld device that bypasses the need for braille embossers, which can cost anywhere from $2,000 to $150,000 each. Using Bluetooth to connect to a computer, tablet, iOS, or Android device, Bonocle instantly and wirelessly translates electronic text source material from any of these devices into braille under the user’s fingertip.

Moving the device left-to-right as one would move a computer mouse across any flat surface, users feel small metal pins push each translated Braille letter into their fingertips in real time. What’s more, Bonocle purports to have the ability to download and store thousands of e-textbooks and documents internally for easy braille reading in any environment, a feature that can be particularly helpful for people who frequent noisy spaces or
who have difficulty hearing audiobooks, talking books, or text-to-speech synthesizers due to hearing loss.

Bonocle’s three bright, 20-something co-founders include a mechanical engineer, an electrical engineer, and a computer scientist. The team was hoping to release Bonocle to the public in late 2019, but are still striving to find sufficient funding for a large rollout.

In the meantime, interested braille readers can submit their email addresses and contact information on Bonocle’s website and be among the first to know when the device, projected to cost around $350, is ready for pre-order and ultimately, distribution.

Eltouny said the biggest lesson the team of inventors has learned through their four-year journey developing Bonocle is a message they constantly share with others: Don’t sympathize with and for people with disabilities — empower them.

For more information on the portable, battery powered Bonocle, go to http://www.bonocle.co

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.
NEWS & NOTES

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT TRAINING CLASS OF 2019

Twenty-one employees who are blind from 17 NIB associated nonprofit agencies, NIB, and CNIB in Canada graduated from NIB’s Business Management Training (BMT) program in September. Over the course of

- Graduates of the 2019 class of NIB’s Business Management Training program, pictured left to right (front row) Shawn Dobbs, Lighthouse for the Blind, Inc.; Marisa Beekman, Outlook Nebraska; Josh Crunkleton, NIB; Chris Helvoigt, Arizona Industries for the Blind; David Demers, CNIB; Christian Gorshing, NewView Oklahoma; (middle row) Thomas Stivers, Travis Association for the Blind; Nikki Bare, LCI; Aaron Simoneau, NIB; Tevin Price, IFB Solutions; Georgia Woods, Lions Volunteer Blind Industries; Henry Allen, Lighthouse for the Blind, St. Louis; Samantha Long, Olmsted Center for Sight; Brandon Smith, Louisiana Association for the Blind; (back row) Katrina Martin, NIB; Jim Martino, Central Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired; Gay Young, Lighthouse Louisiana; Danara Barlow, Envision; Jake Schmude, Blind Industries and Services of Maryland; Sarah Heeson, Beyond Vision; and Melva Henderson, Envision Dallas.
the 15-month program the participants, who were selected through a competitive application process, attended five intensive 3½ day graduate-level educational sessions taught by faculty from George Mason University’s (GMU) School of Business.

Roy Hinton, associate dean of the business school at GMU, joined NIB President and CEO Kevin Lynch to present each graduate with a certificate for completing the 15-month program; graduates also earned a Certificate in Business Management from GMU. The 2019 class joins 98 graduates of the program, 70% of whom report earning at least one job promotion since completing BMT. To date, 47 NIB associated agencies have participated in the BMT program.

NIB SPONSORS SALUTE TO VETS

NIB was a presenting sponsor of the 2019 Alexandria Chamber of Commerce Salute to Veterans event on November 6. The event celebrates the impact of servicemen and servicewomen on the local community by recognizing veteran-owned local businesses and businesses making significant strides in employing veterans. NIB President and CEO Kevin Lynch provided opening remarks at the event, where he was joined by several NIB employees who are veterans.
Eighteen participants graduated from NIB’s Effective Supervision: Making an Impact training program on October 24, 2019, at the William L. Hudson BVI Workforce Innovation Center in Wichita, Kansas. Effective Supervision helps participants develop skills to perform supervisory jobs with greater productivity, effectiveness, and responsibility. The unique program includes self-study and classroom sessions, plus a session on performance coaching for managers, who play a significant role in guiding participants as they apply classroom learning to real-life situations in the workplace.

Graduates of the 2019 Effective Supervision Training program, pictured left to right (front row) Shelley Adams, CNIB; Jimmy Dean, Alabama Industries for the Blind; Doug Wampler, Outlook Nebraska; Michael Edwards, Lighthouse for the Blind, St. Louis; Tim Wills, Bosma Enterprises; Tanee Wall, VisionCorps; Todd LaFlame, Lighthouse Works!; (back row) Vanh Vue, LCI; Amber Wallenstein, Cleveland Sight Center; Brian McCann, IBVI; Anne Cyboron, Envision; Derek Suarez, AVRE; Dustin Bradford, The Lighthouse for the Blind, Inc.; Daniel Molina, Envision; Rosemary Nedimyer, Olmsted Center for Sight; Mike Mote, IFB Solutions; Gerald Robertson, NewView Oklahoma; Heather Tuck, Lighthouse for the Visually Impaired and Blind.
COALITION FOR GOVERNMENT PROCUREMENT RECOGNIZES NIB ADVOCACY FOR VETERANS

NIB received the 2019 Excellence in Partnership Award in the Advocating for Veterans category from the Coalition for Government Procurement. The Coalition’s Advocating for Veterans Awards recognize organizations or individuals in the Department of Defense, civilian federal agencies, and private industry that promote and execute successful programs in support of our nation’s veterans.

NIB President and CEO Kevin Lynch accepted the award at a November 20, 2019, ceremony that brought together dozens of organizations and individuals across the federal government, military, and private sector. “NIB has been an important voice in advancing federal procurement through the AbilityOne Program,” said Roger Waldron, president of the Coalition for Government Procurement. “We’re pleased to recognize NIB for these contributions and for the work they do in support of our nation’s veterans.”

Bill Gormley, chairman of the Coalition for Government Procurement (left) with NIB President and CEO Kevin Lynch; Aubrey Wolley, Coalition vice president of public policy; and Coalition President Roger Waldron; at the Coalition’s Excellence in Partnership awards dinner.
NIB Board of Directors Chair Susan Costlow accepted the Columbia Lighthouse for the Blind (CLB) Lighting the Way Gala Achievement Award on October 29, 2019. The award recognizes NIB’s success in promoting independence for people who are blind through employment. CLB provides programs and services for people of all ages living in the Washington, D.C., region who are blind or visually impaired.

NIB Board of Directors Chair Susan Costlow accepted the 2019 Lighting the Way Gala Achievement Award from CLB President and CEO Tony Cancelosi.

SAVE THE DATE! 2020 NIB/NAEPB NATIONAL EVENTS

NIB and the National Association for the Employment of People Who Are Blind (NAEPB) are changing the format for 2020’s national events. The Public Policy Forum, slated for May 19-20 at NIB headquarters in Alexandria, Virginia, will bring together members of the Advocates for Leadership and Employment program and other NIB associated agency personnel from around the country to discuss key issues affecting employment for people who are blind with members of Congress and their staffs.

The Training Conference and Expo, scheduled for October 13-16, at the Hyatt Regency Crystal City in Arlington, Virginia, will feature recognition of NIB associated agency employees of the year, comprehensive training on the AbilityOne Program, exciting guest speakers, an awards luncheon recognizing outstanding customers and partners, and the Expo and NIB Marketplace.

Mark your calendars and stay tuned for additional details.