Supporting Military Families
NIB’s Military Resale Program creates jobs for people who are blind and supports military families
LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

THE COMFORTS OF HOME

A military career involves a number of hardships: Separation from loved ones, frequent moves around the country or across oceans, and of course, the uncertainty of combat during deployments. Through all these hardships, the often-unseen heroes of our armed forces are the families who love and support the troops.

Military families face their own unique set of hardships — relocating every few years means getting children settled in new schools and making a new set of friends that one can depend on as a single parent during deployments. One constant for military families are the commissary and exchange stores found on military bases in the U.S. and around the world. Like an old friend, the stores provide a much-needed sense of familiarity and comfort, allowing families to continue purchasing the products they have come to rely on in day-to-day life. But what’s more, the stores provide an important financial benefit for military families and retirees, selling grocery items at a substantial savings over retail prices.

In this issue of Opportunity, you’ll read about the important role NIB associated nonprofit agencies play in supporting military families through the Military Resale (MR) program. The MR program, which employs 400 people across 18 agencies, provides nearly 1,000 unique items made or packaged by people who are blind, including quality SKILCRAFT products.

Just as NIB is proud to support our warfighters with uniforms and other essential equipment, we’re proud to support their families and provide a few of the familiar comforts of home, wherever home may be.

Kevin A. Lynch
President and
Chief Executive Officer
NIB’s Military Resale Program creates jobs and supports military families.

ON THE COVER
Jaynee Boehm produces totes for military commissary shoppers at the West Texas Lighthouse for the Blind in San Angelo.

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SOCIAL CAPITALIST

AbilityOne Commission Inspector General Tom Lehrich works to preserve and grow one of the program’s most valuable assets.

BY DOMINIC CALABRESE

Relationships, partnerships, confidence, and trust are essential pillars supporting AbilityOne® Program associated nonprofit agencies, according to Thomas K. Lehrich, inspector general (IG) for the U.S. AbilityOne Commission®, who refers to these elements collectively as social capital.

Lehrich, who became the Commission’s first inspector general in May 2017, leads an office responsible for conducting audits and investigations; recommending policies and procedures that promote economy, efficiency, and effectiveness of agency resources and programs; and detecting and preventing fraud, waste, abuse, and mismanagement.

Speaking at the NIB/NAEPB Virtual Training Conference and Expo in October 2020, Lehrich explained that recognizing the importance of social capital and enhancing it is key to the overall success of the AbilityOne Program.

The value of social capital “is larger than the $4 billion value of the program itself” he said, noting that preserving social capital underlies the efforts of his office to protect the integrity of the AbilityOne Program by rooting out cases of potential fraud.

“False claims against the program exclude people who are blind or significantly disabled from opportunities, and harm law-abiding AbilityOne contractors,” he explained.

Lehrich saluted the leadership and employees of associated nonprofit agencies that partner with AbilityOne for their tireless efforts during the pandemic on behalf of people who are blind or have significant disabilities.

Agency tours and meetings with personnel conducted virtually during the pandemic have been a real lifeline, as well as an exciting learning experience, for himself and his staff, Lehrich said.

Among the things learned during the visits, Lehrich noted that “the customer experience is paramount” for associated agencies. Observing that most agencies have developed a niche business based on expertise, Lehrich said he and his team have been especially impressed by the power of the AbilityOne Program to transform the lives of people who are blind.

Returning to the theme of social capital, Lehrich expressed hope that agency employees “will continue to build confidence in your programs. This, in turn, maximizes social capital and gives it strength.”

Prior to standing up the AbilityOne Commission Office of Inspector General, Lehrich had extensive IG experience. Most recently, he served as deputy inspector general and counsel for the Architect of the Capitol.

Prior federal postings included 10 years as chief counsel with the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) Office of Inspector General. At DOT, he advised on complex transportation, general law and oversight issues, and managed the office’s ethics program.

In addition, Lehrich served as assistant chief counsel for the Transportation Security Administration Office of Chief Counsel, and as counsel to the managing director for the Federal Maritime Commission.

Lehrich is the recipient of numerous honors for his work in the federal government, including several President’s Council on Integrity and Efficiency Awards of Excellence for highway-rail grade crossing safety, NAFTA, and AMTRAK. He has written extensively on legal topics related to transportation, including commercial space and drones, and also excels as a teacher and lecturer, serving as an instructor at the Inspector General Academy of the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center.

A native of Pennsylvania, Lehrich is a Boston University graduate and an active member of its alumni group.

Dominic Calabrese, a freelance writer, professor, and consultant in Columbia, South Carolina, previously served as senior vice president, public relations, at The Chicago Lighthouse for People Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired.
TECH CORNER

BIG TECH OFFERS EASY ACCESS TO REAL-TIME SUPPORT

BY DOUG GOIST

If the coronavirus pandemic has taught us anything, it’s the importance of self-sufficiency — or at least learning how we might become more self-sufficient during times of great uncertainty.

This is especially true for people with disabilities who sometimes rely on others to be within six feet to assist with a particular task, routine, or, in the case of my friend, Gary, potentially catastrophic computer snafu. His predicament reminded me that, although we don’t hear much about it, Big Tech does have free remote help resources for people with disabilities to save the day when things go awry.

Gary, an experienced JAWS user, was in the process of adding a Gmail account to his Microsoft Outlook client when he accidentally deleted his master account along with hundreds — if not thousands — of emails and contacts, and dozens of archived folders of pretty much everyone with whom he had ever corresponded.

It was not a rookie mistake — it was a simple glitch where Gary’s computer cursor remained focused on his primary account, rather than the secondary email account he wished to delete, but JAWS read the secondary account information. Once he pressed “delete” his fate appeared sealed. Not even the familiar “Are you really-really-really sure?” prompt could save him.

Running out of options, Gary fortunately remembered Microsoft’s telephone hotline specifically for people with disabilities. The Microsoft Disability Answer Desk is a 24/7 resource comprised of both live chat and live phone and American Sign Language (ASL) videophone agents versed in at least 20 different disabilities who help users troubleshoot Microsoft products like Office, Windows, Skype, Teams, and Xbox.

In particularly sticky situations like Gary’s, a live agent can — with permission — “remote-in” to a user’s computer, quickly resolve many Windows problems, and spare both the user and IT staff in the user’s workplace major headaches and potential delays.

This year, Microsoft added Twitter functionality to the Answer Desk, so users can send and receive Twitter Direct Messages (DMs) while working out their technology problem.

But the piece de résistance remains live Microsoft support through the Be My Eyes smartphone app, available for free download on the iOS App Store and Google Play. Similar to a Facetime session, Microsoft support agents use Be My Eyes to access users’ smartphone cameras and microphones and help solve some of our most frustrating tech support questions like: “Is your device LED on or off?” and “Do you see an error message at computer startup?”

Google has also jumped on board with Be My Eyes and, like Microsoft, offers free live specialized help to describe accessibility features, functionalities, and native assistive technology support for products like G-suite, Android OS, and Chrome. The Google Disability Support Team can also be contacted through phone, live chat session, and email, provided users have a functional Google account.

Apple, which has long supported people with disabilities, has an Apple Accessibility Support team that can be reached by phone or chat. Users can also submit written accessibility feedback for any Apple product.

FREE ACCESSIBILITY SUPPORT

• Microsoft users: Search Microsoft Disability Answer Desk
• Google users: Search Google Disability Support team
• Apple users: Search Apple Accessibility Support
Or visit NIB.org/TechCorner

Doug Goist is program manager, workforce development at National Industries for the Blind. A recognized leader in the field of technology accessibility, Doug has worked with the U.S. Department of Defense, the military services, federal agencies, and private sector partners. In 2013, he served as the technical steering committee representative for the U.S. Agency for International Development on a study of mobile money transfer and handset accessibility in Africa.
Shoppers in the commissary at Travis Air Force Base in California practice social distancing as they wait to check out during the coronavirus pandemic. Photo by Tech. Sgt. James Hodgman, 60th Air Mobility Wing Public Affairs.

SUPPORTING MILITARY FAMILIES

NIB’s Military Resale program not only creates jobs for people who are blind, it supports military personnel and their families.

BY SHARON HORRIGAN

Two of the best perks available to military personnel, retirees, and their families are the commissaries and exchanges found on military bases. Commissaries — the equivalent of grocery stores — and exchanges — the equivalent of a department stores — sell goods at substantial savings, helping military members, retirees, and their families stretch their budgets. Products produced in NIB’s military resale (MR) program has been included on those commissary and exchange shelves since the 1950s.

“The MR products made or packaged at our participating agencies are sold in military commissaries and through the exchanges,” explains Anne-Marie Wallace, director of the military resale program at NIB.

The commissary benefit, originally available only to officers, was expanded to include enlisted personnel 153 years ago. The Defense Commissary Agency (DeCA) oversees commissaries for all branches of the military, purchasing all of the goods sold in 236 commissaries located in the United States and around the world, and providing grocery items at substantial savings.

“It’s a great benefit for those in the military and their families,” says Wallace. It also represents a great partnership for the 18 NIB associated nonprofit agencies that comprise the military resale program.

“The program employs 400 people who are blind across those agencies,” notes Wallace. “Not only that, many people working in the program have disabilities in addition to blindness, which can often make it even more difficult to find a job.”

Nearly 1,000 unique items — including ironing board covers, oven mitts, latex gloves, and kitchen scrubbers, to name just a few — are made or packaged by NIB associated agencies participating in the MR program and sold in commissaries.
“We have a home care section, a kitchen section, a gourmet section, and a gadget center,” says Wallace. “These sections comprise the MR line.”

Because commissaries are considered mission essential (DeCA is considered mission critical), they have remained open throughout the pandemic — as have NIB associated agencies in the military resale program. “The agencies did experience some supply chain issues, but for the most part, they did what they needed to do to keep their programs running,” says Wallace. The Chester County Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired (CCABVI) in Pennsylvania, for example, was proactive in responding to supply chain issues, she says. “They worked with their suppliers on the fly to keep their program running.”

**Small but Mighty**

And keep running it did. CCABVI has been making items for the military resale program for 30 years. “We’ve employed up to 30 people in that textile division,” says Executive Director Chad Thomas, although the division is currently down to five employees due to retirement and attrition.

The military resale division makes ironing board covers, laundry bags, kitchen towels and dish clothes, oven mitts, polishing cloths, and potholders, working with two companies to ship the products to commissaries around the world.

Military resale textiles, says Thomas, give the agency the chance to train people who are blind in valuable job skills. Jean Butler, MR division manager, is proud of the work they do. “I’m from a long-time military service family, and am behind the military 100%,” she says. “I visited a commissary and was proud to see our products displayed there.” As proud as she is of the agency’s work supporting the military, “I’m even prouder that we also employ veterans on the line.”

Lauren Mazzotta is a relative newcomer to the division, having joined CCABVI about three years ago. In that time, she has learned a great deal. “I love the work I do for the military resale program, and the people I work with,” she says. “I’m happy that through my work, I can help support military families.”

Employee Krystyna Lapszynski, who lost her eyesight due to a stroke three years ago appreciates the work and the agency. “I love the job, and the people here, but most of all, I’m grateful that a place like this exists. I wouldn’t have a job without it.”

**A Win-Win**

LCI, headquartered in Durham, North Carolina, runs two distribution centers — one in Las Vegas and one in North Carolina — and has seven manufacturing plants in multiple states. As part of the military resale program, LCI produces SKILCRAFT plastic and biodegradable flatware, mops, and brooms, among other products.
Anne Kramer, a commercial account manager at LCI, was a military spouse for 20 years. She says commissary discounts helped her feed her young children a healthy diet during two tours in Germany. “It’s a win-win because it helps employ people who are blind and benefits military families with quality, U.S.-made products at excellent prices.”

Approximately 60 people who are blind work at an LCI manufacturing plant in Mississippi on the MR line Kramer represents. “I am so proud to work for an organization that is so passionate about its mission.”

That mission has kept the plant running during the pandemic with no slowdown in production. “We took extra safety precautions to stay open, and in cases where there were supply-chain issues, all the agencies pulled together because we all share the same mission. All of our folks pitched in and said, ‘We’re going to do this.’”

Pivoting in a Pandemic
That ability to pull together, pitch in, step up, and adapt to change on a dime — or in a pandemic — is a common theme among NIB agencies. Carroll Foreman, general manager of Alphapointe’s Queens, New York, facility says that employees were extremely willing to pivot when the pandemic hit and the facility subsequently experienced supply-chain challenges. Alphapointe packages latex gloves and makes cleaning items like the SKILCRAFT Speedy Scrubber, as well as brushes, brooms, and mops for the MR program.

Foreman says they experienced raw material and latex glove shortages at the start of the pandemic, but never shut down. “We kept everyone busy by adapting and retraining people. And everyone was more than willing, because they wanted to contribute, to get the job done. It’s a remarkable place to work.”

Foreman, who came out of retirement in January 2020 — just as the pandemic hit — to take the job at Alphapointe, says the Queens facility adopted COVID-19 safety measures before even the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention required them. “We were taking temperatures and requiring masks from the outset. We went over the top to keep our people safe.”

Aretha Mayers and David Brown, both employees in the military resale division at the Queens facility, agree that being able to contribute makes the work meaningful for them. Mayers, who worked other jobs before joining Alphapointe, feels she’s found her match at the agency. “I like the work and I fit well here,” she says. “I want to work here another 20 years.”

Brown, who has filled various roles over 12 years with the agency, recently returned to the glove line. “It’s a vast improvement from when I worked on the line before,” he says. “The line is more productive. We can process the product much faster now.”

Brown likes working at Alphapointe. “This company is invaluable to people who are blind. It provides us jobs, allows us to earn a living. People with disabilities want to contribute. Agencies like this allow us to do that. And for that, I am very grateful.”

Impulse Buying at Its Best
Headquartered in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, IFB Solutions’ Impulse Merchandise Program falls under the MR line. The agency sources, packages, and distributes products for military commissaries through the Impulse line, whose employees are responsible for packaging and shipping items like the packs of straws shoppers see hanging in the grocery aisle near the soda pop.

“We get hundreds of products and our employees package them as part of the Impulse program,” explains Julie Cooper, IFB Solutions’ senior manager of military markets.

Packaged at the agency’s Asheville, North Carolina, facility, Impulse products range from pet leashes to birthday candles.
“We’ve packaged plungers, apple dippers, onion choppers, vegetable peelers, turkey basters, baby bibs, straws. We currently have more than 400 different products in the program,” Cooper notes. Impulse products are shipped to commissaries around the world.

Like other NIB agencies, IFB Solutions’ and the Impulse program experienced some supply-chain issues when the pandemic first hit. “We were fortunate, though, to have backup sources for many of our products,” says Cooper, who adds that the commissaries have seen an increase in foot traffic since the start of the pandemic.

Started in 1998 at IFB Solutions’ Winston-Salem location, the Impulse program — which employs about 35 people who are blind — has been in Asheville for more than 20 years.

Denice McKinnon Drake is one of those employees. She started out sewing military ponchos and coveralls, and then worked for a time in the IFB Solutions Community Low Vision Center. She learned about an Impulse job opening about 18 months ago and knew she had found her niche. A self-proclaimed introvert, McKinnon Drake says the job is perfect because she can work independently, picking and packaging products, and set her own pace. She also likes the exercise she gets through the job.

But even introverts need encouragement every once in a while. “One of the great things about working here is that we encourage each other. We’re good for each other, and that lets us all rise to the challenge,” says McKinnon Drake. “Only people who are blind should put limits on what we can and cannot do. And there’s not much we can’t do.”

Employee Lisa Berry also likes to keep moving, and the picking and packaging she does for the Impulse program fits the bill. Berry joined IFB Solutions in Asheville about six and a half years ago and like McKinnon Drake, started out sewing but eventually found her way into the Impulse program. “I love the work I do. It gives me and my co-workers purpose. And it also allows us to be ourselves.”

Berry, whose daughter is in the Air Force, is also proud to be able to support the military. “When she was in basic training, everyone was given kit bags that we make here and told that they were made by people who are blind,” Berry recalls. “My daughter told everyone that her mother works for that company.” Berry admits that she makes her daughter take pictures of the Impulse products in the commissary. “I like to say ‘look, I packaged that,’ ” she adds with a laugh.

**DeCA’s Invaluable Support**

At the end of the day, DeCA’s long-term support of the MR program has fueled continual growth and expanded employment over the years. “They are really supportive of us,” says LCI’s Kramer. “They allow us to bring our products into the stores and whenever possible, will use our items first.”

Wallace says that without DeCA’s support, the MR program would not have seen the growth in sales that it has the last five years — growth that translates into jobs. “DeCA’s support has allowed us to meet our mission — to create meaningful employment for people who are blind or visually impaired.”

“It’s a great partnership supporting the military benefit and people who are blind,” she says. “In fact, we just added a new product line for military service members and their families.”

“DeCA’s support for us is outstanding. Without it, we would not have the sales growth we’ve experienced, which means more jobs for people who are blind. And that is what we’re all about.”

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

VIRTUAL ADVOCATES SCORE TANGIBLE WINS

In the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, NIB’s Public Policy program adapts to develop leaders and preserve jobs and services for people who are blind.

BY DOMINIC CALABRESE

Launched in 2012, the Advocates for Leadership and Employment program is a signature initiative of the public policy team at National Industries for the Blind (NIB). Like most in 2020, the Advocates program had to recalibrate and find a new way to carry out its mission in a world with limited in-person contact, and it did not disappoint. Not only did eight new Advocates complete initial training in a virtual environment, they helped NIB’s public policy team score an important bipartisan victory in an age of deep political division.

The two-year Advocates training program targets high-potential employees who are blind at NIB associated agencies who are interested in learning about the public policy process. Before the coronavirus pandemic, Advocates selected through a competitive process came to NIB headquarters in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., for two days of intensive training.

The program is staggered, so each training session includes a class of novice Advocates and a class of Advocates who have completed the first year of training and can serve as mentors to the newcomers. In addition, program graduates share insights and tips with the newer Advocates. On-site training culminated in a day on Capitol Hill, where graduates and newer Advocates met with the offices of U.S. House and Senate members to discuss issues of importance to people who are blind and the AbilityOne® Program.

Vivian Fridas, NIB public policy specialist and Advocates manager, said that in addition to promoting the work done by NIB agencies, Advocates perform a number of important tasks like providing public policy updates to their agencies and representing them locally.

“Advocates who complete the program not only have a better understanding of the public policy process and how it affects our mission, they also develop relationships with their legislators and the people working in their offices and become empowered voices within their local disability community.”

In 2020, in-person training gave way to virtual, but the results were still impressive. Working together, the Advocates and the public policy team organized a Virtual Grassroots Advocacy event in August, meeting with the offices of approximately 40 federal lawmakers.

“Our advocates were thrilled to be able to take the initiative and schedule sessions and then meet with either a lawmaker or member of their staff,” Fridas says. “What excited them most was being heard and appreciated.”

Working to Save Jobs

The biggest accomplishment of 2020 for the Advocates and the NIB public policy team was passage of H.R. 4920, the Department of Veterans Affairs Contracting Preference Consistency Act of 2020, which will save hundreds of jobs for people who are blind, including many veterans.

Signed into law in August 2020 after receiving strong support from the leadership of the Veterans’ Affairs Committees in both the House and Senate, the measure protects a majority of contracts with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) currently on the AbilityOne Procurement List, without affecting existing contracts held by veteran-owned small businesses.

“We are proud that for several decades, AbilityOne contracts with the VA have furnished steady employment for hundreds of people who are blind, who in turn, produce more than 1,300 products and provide critical services for the VA,” says NIB Vice President for Public Policy Rick Webster. “Thanks to these VA contracts, this skilled and dedicated workforce has had great opportunities for employment and advancement in their careers.”
Webster explains many of the jobs were threatened in the wake of recent court decisions that Congress intended the “Rule of Two” created by the Veterans Benefit Act (VBA) in 2006 to have priority over the AbilityOne® Program.

Under the Rule of Two, the VA was required to award contracts to service-disabled veteran-owned small businesses and veteran-owned small businesses when at least two such entities were identified as qualified offerors.

Until mid-2019, the VBA provisions were implemented alongside other contracting programs, including the AbilityOne Program. But following the court rulings, the VA’s implementation of the rule effectively pitted people who are blind against veterans for federal contracting opportunities.

“The competition between two worthy groups meant everyone was losing,” Webster explains, noting that without passage of H.R. 4920, not only would hundreds of Americans who are blind, including veterans, lose their jobs, there would be other dire consequences.

“Dozens of nonprofit organizations that employ these individuals and provide critical services in local communities across the country for thousands of people — including services for children, aging adults, and veterans — would have been irreparably harmed. Some would have had to close their doors permanently.”

Although the compromise spelled out in H.R. 4920 likely sacrifices the opportunity for AbilityOne providers to do new business with the VA, the law is estimated to preserve roughly 65% to 70% of AbilityOne contracts with the agency. Webster is gratified that the agreement allows two critical programs to co-exist and serve their respective constituencies.

“Passage of this legislation was a great victory for hundreds of people who are blind, including blinded veterans who have jobs through NIB associated agencies.”

“It was an intensive negotiating process,” Webster recalls, “but we ultimately prevailed by listening to each other, forging effective coalitions, and agreeing to compromise for the larger goal of saving jobs for blind and visually impaired Americans.”

Webster saluted NIB agencies and Advocates for their tireless efforts to forge an agreement acceptable to all parties.

Compromise Preserves Services
Among agency employees who are blind assisting with the H.R. 4920 effort was Scott Thornhill, who serves as director of public policy at Alphapointe, an NIB associated agency based in Kansas City, Missouri.

Thornhill agrees the H.R. 4920 negotiations were ultimately successful because all parties had the same goals: Securing jobs for veterans and people with disabilities. “It was never an us versus them situation,” he says. “Many AbilityOne organizations like ours employ vets.”
“The important thing is that these contracts represent real jobs that matter, that provide a good living for many people who are blind, including veterans, so they can still give back to their communities and their country.”

Passage of the Act also represents a triumph of bipartisanship in a time of deep political divisions in the country.

Lise Pace, vice president of external affairs at NIB associated agency Bosma Enterprises, explains the passage impacts more than just jobs.

“The signing of this bill into law was critical for Bosma,” Pace says, pointing out that nearly 95% of the Indianapolis-based agency’s ability to provide employment and services is linked to its VA contracts.

“The loss of those contracts would have been devastating to the state of Indiana,” she says. Pace estimates services for approximately 1,000 people annually — in addition to more than 200 jobs — were saved thanks to the legislation.

“We are the largest employer and statewide service provider for people who are blind, passing this legislation will allow us to continue the mission-driven work we do in this community for decades.”

Dan Kelly, executive vice president of strategy and programs at NIB associated agency IFB Solutions, based in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, agrees, saying the agency “can now continue creating jobs and providing training and other services to people who are blind or visually impaired.”

Fridas notes that the effort was more like a marathon than a sprint. Whenever possible, Advocates engaged lawmakers and their staffs in support of H.R. 4920. “We’re very proud of the way they did their part in helping ensure the legislation passed,” she says.

Rounding out the year, the advocates assisted with an NIB-supported resolution introduced by Mike Braun (R-Indiana), Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska), David Perdue (R-Georgia) and Tim Scott (R-South Carolina) in August that recognized the contributions of essential workers with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic and thanked them for continuing to provide vital services to the country.

Despite the difficulties of the pandemic, NIB’s public policy team and the Advocates for Leadership and Employment will continue giving people who are blind a voice in the halls of Congress, and working to secure jobs and recognition for the thousands of NIB associated agency employees assisting the nation in responding to one of its greatest challenges.

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.
As the coronavirus pandemic forced the cancellation of in-person events, NIB embraced the challenge and continued delivering quality programming for federal customers and agency personnel.

BY JENNIFER CLICK

As people around the world roll up their sleeves to receive the coronavirus vaccine and look to a future where social distancing is no longer required, it’s important to remember the lessons the global pandemic has taught. One lesson NIB’s events team learned was the value of delivering programming virtually.

Each year, NIB presents a full menu of conferences and training opportunities to assist associated nonprofit agency personnel on a range of topics — from human resource practices to compliance to growing employment through the AbilityOne® Program.

When the initial coronavirus pandemic lockdown occurred, NIB had already announced dates for two annual events it hosts with the National Association for the Employment of People Who Are Blind (NAEPB), the Public Policy Forum and the Training Conference and Expo, in addition to a number of smaller, specialized events.

**Reaching More Attendees**

“It took some time to investigate new technologies and determine the best formats for delivering our programming,” says NIB President and CEO Kevin Lynch. “But our event planners and department heads worked together to develop flexible approaches that not only allowed our robust training schedule to continue, but allowed many more people to participate virtually.”

And participate they did. The 2020 NIB/NAEPB Training Conference and Expo hosted more than 850 attendees using a virtual format, including more NIB associated agency staff and government officials than in previous years. In addition to participating in individual sessions, attendees could access recordings of nearly 20 sessions in the four concurrent training tracks for two weeks after the conference concluded.

“The virtual format made it possible for many more people to participate, and they didn’t have to incur travel and lodging expenses” explains NIB Event and Meeting Planner Michelle Hobby.

“While nothing can take the place of our in-person conferences, as we return to a ‘new normal’ we will definitely be looking into ways to use a hybrid approach. That way, the information and learning can be shared not just with people who are able to attend for a full two or three days in person, but also with associated agency employees who may only be interested in attending one or two training sessions.”

**Adopting Varied Formats**

Another approach adopted by leaders at NIB was the initiation of regular interactions with agency peers in finance and IT, who grappled with a whirlwind of changes as a result of the pandemic.

Bi-weekly video conferences among agency chief financial officers now help them understand the intricacies of the federal Paycheck Protection Program, COVID-19 Economic Injury Disaster loans, and other measures designed to help employers through the crisis. In place of the annual Technology Forum, regular IT Director Updates are providing opportunities to discuss a range of topics including compliance mandates, cybersecurity practices, accessible technology, and new trends in technology.

Some training forums were re-invented in the form of lunch-and-learn sessions. The popular Textile Apparel Group meeting became a series of four 90-minute lunchtime sessions that included representatives from Defense Logistics Agency Troop Support and PEO Soldier. NIB’s human resource department also jumped into action, providing sessions on adapting to COVID-19, safely returning employees to the workplace, and new recruiting tools, in addition to a virtual version of its annual two-day New Executive Orientation, which provides new executives at associated agencies with an introduction to NIB senior leadership and an overview of NIB support in a variety of areas.

As plans take shape for a slate of conference and training events in 2021, NIB will investigate the best ways to most effectively reach participants, whether that be virtually, in-person, or a hybrid of the two.

Jennifer Click is Editor-in-Chief of Opportunity magazine.
NEW PRODUCTS

READY TO LAUNCH

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

Office Supplies

1. SKILCRAFT Keyboard and Mouse Wireless Combo
The SKILCRAFT® Wireless PC Keyboard and Mouse Combo featuring a low-profile keyboard with quiet soft-touch keys and an ambidextrous mouse design is perfect for the workplace or home office. Easy connectivity — just plug the dongle into a USB port and get to work. Keyboard and mouse use 2.4GHz wireless connectivity for seamless, interruption-free use within a 30-foot range and transition to low power consumption mode when not in active use. Keyboard requires one AAA alkaline battery; mouse requires one AA alkaline battery. Batteries not included. Produced by LCI in Durham, North Carolina.

2. SKILCRAFT Portable External Hard Drive
SKILCRAFT® Portable External Hard Drives are an easy to use solution to instantly add storage to a computer or take files on the go. Available in 1TB, 2TB, and 4TB storage capacity, these hard drives are equipped with software to schedule, automate, and individualize backups. USB powered with 3.0 connectivity for fast data transfers, they also work with USB 2.0 ports and meet plug-and-play standards. Produced by North Central Sight Services in Williamsport, Pennsylvania.

3. SKILCRAFT HP-Compatible Laser Toner Cartridges
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 Birmingham.

Cleaning and Janitorial Supplies

4. SKILCRAFT Toilet Tissue
Enjoy fewer roll changes with SKILCRAFT® individually wrapped single roll toilet tissue, made with 100% recycled content and a minimum of 20% post-consumer fibers. 1.5 inch core fits most dispensers. Produced by Outlook Nebraska in Omaha.

5. SKILCRAFT LED T8 Tube Light
SKILCRAFT® LED T8 Tube Lights with 180 lumens per watt are the most efficient in the industry and use the least amount of energy in retrofit applications. Ideal for reducing the number of tubes used per fixture, the easy-to-install tube replacement bypasses the ballast and is inserted in shunted or non-shunted sockets of existing T8 light fixtures. Available in several wattages and lengths; 10-year warranty. Produced by Industries of the Blind in Greensboro, North Carolina.

Personal Care

6. PURELL® SKILCRAFT® Advanced Instant Hand Sanitizer with Biobased Content
PURELL® SKILCRAFT® Advanced Instant Hand Sanitizer with Biobased Content kills 99.99% of most common germs that may cause illness. This Alcohol based sanitizer produced with ethanol made from renewable natural resources is only available during times of natural disasters and medical emergencies. 4 per box. Produced by Travis Association for the Blind in Austin, Texas.

These and thousands of other products are available for purchase at AbilityOne.com, GSAAdvantage.gov, your local AbilityOne Base Supply Center®, or through AbilityOne authorized distributors. For more information about how to purchase SKILCRAFT® and other products produced by people who are blind, visit NIB.org/products.
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**GO-BRITE® Liquid Highlighters**
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In the eastern Mojave Desert, the Blind Center of Nevada has dealt itself a winning hand by nurturing the artistic talents of people who are blind and creating a venue to showcase those talents.

BY ROSEMARIE LALLY, J.D.

Since its founding in 1955, NIB associated nonprofit agency The Blind Center of Nevada, located in Las Vegas, has focused on helping people who are blind adapt to vision loss. But the Center also helps members develop their creative potential through a variety of social service programs focused on the arts.

Empowering Talent

The Blind Center’s strong performing music program offers beginning and advanced classes on keyboard, guitar, and ukulele. Creating music together is an empowering, unifying experience, explains Communications Director Gustavo Garcia, a musician who developed the curriculum in 2015 and teaches beginner classes several times a week for groups of six to 15 people. After mastering the basics, students can move on to advanced classes, generally one-on-one sessions, with Garcia.

The pinnacle of achievement in the instrumental music program is an invitation to join the Broken Spectacles, the Center’s performance band, which plays an eclectic mix of genres from alt rock to Latin jazz to pop. The group has entertained audiences at popular local spots including the House of Blues, Hard Rock Café, and Suncoast Hotels and Casinos.

“IT doesn’t matter how good you are on your own,” he tells band members, “when you bring it together in the band, you learn to carry each other.”

Musical talent also shines in the Center’s choral group, Blind Allegiance, a group of about 25 singers led by Jane Harvey of singer Gladys Knight’s Saints Unified Voices. Blind Allegiance frequently performs at events and casinos, and also has an elite choir.

“The advanced music programs are great for helping people understand they can accomplish whatever they set their minds to,” Garcia says. “If you can take it one step at a time, which music requires, you can conquer your fears and excel at anything. Take the first step — you never know where that journey will take you.”

For those who aren’t musically inclined, the Center offers classes that allow students to create in various media, including leather, metal, and foam. Because its in-demand beginners’ ceramics class always has a waiting list, teacher and artist Sherrie Thomas added a second weekly class to accommodate the overflow. Each class has about 20 students.

Participants in smaller advanced classes learn to sculpt/build, fire, and glaze ceramics, working independently on their own projects with supervision from Thomas. Some of the resulting works have been entered in art shows or sold in students’ Etsy shops.

Event Venue Works in Tandem with Arts Programs

The agency’s arts programs got a huge boost in 2018 with the opening of the Visions of Greatness Center, a 36,000-square-foot building designed to serve the needs of people who are blind. Developed with an eye toward promoting synergy between private rentals and programs fostered by the Center, the flexible, open design offers a large social space, two bowling lanes, and a spacious game room and lounge.

Most importantly, it provides a stage, rehearsal space, and recording studio for the performing music program, classrooms for its ceramics and pottery programs, and state-of-the-art kitchen facilities that house a new Culinary Arts Academy.

Before the pandemic, the contemporary space was frequently rented for corporate and social events such as conferences and wedding receptions, Garcia says, with The Broken Spectacles and Blind Allegiance often booked as well, providing income to the performers. The events business also gives the culinary program an opportunity to showcase its catering expertise.

Culinary Basic Training

Initiated in 2018 with the arrival of Le Cordon Bleu-trained chef Gerald Ward, the culinary program’s goal is to help
people who are blind develop cooking skills while being mindful of their surroundings in the kitchen.

Professional Chef Ward takes a disciplined approach to teaching, allowing only seven students in each of four classes. The curriculum includes a 16-week syllabus with weekly tests that students must pass to advance to the next lesson. Ward emphasizes the need to master the material and understand kitchen hazards.

Sensitive to the challenges of his students, Ward often wears a blindfold or glasses that simulate vision impairment. “I try to adapt my approach to how the students experience things,” he explains. “If you’re not comfortable, you can’t be safe.”

The basic culinary class starts in a smaller kitchen equipped with individual workstations with stovetops for each student. Students learn to make hot breakfasts, lunches, and dinners featuring wraps, salads, sandwiches, and various cuts of meat, as well as cutting skills. While students initially use knife guards to prevent injury, they eventually shed the guards as they gain proficiency. Ward says no students have burned themselves and only one accidentally cut himself. “He was trying to chop things the way I do; I told him ‘I have to be me, and you have to be you. We all have different ways of doing things.’ ”

**Developing Career Skills**

For students interested only in learning to safely cook for themselves, Ward offers a follow-up crockpot class focusing on healthy slow-cooked meals. For those interested in further honing their skills, he offers an advanced “Cuisines and Cultures” class exploring foods from around the world, where students learn to make signature dishes such as Jamaican curry, Japanese stir-fry, and Mexican tamales with salsa verde.

Students completing the advanced class can take “Introduction to Catering” and learn to create the nutritionally balanced menus used for roughly 800 breakfasts and lunches served to Center members free of charge each week. Catering students also learn to serve a plated meal and set up a buffet.

In addition, catering students prepare and assemble pre-packaged meals with fresh fruits and vegetables for members who can’t come to the Center. On Fridays, Chef Ward and volunteers deliver four days’ worth of prepared meals to those members, who become extended family. Ward considers knowing each person’s name and allergies to be a part of his job.

The culinary program also provides catered lunches for groups renting the Visions of Greatness Center and for offsite events. Ward estimates approximately 60 people have graduated from the program, with some now employed in the Center’s catering operation while others have gone on to employment outside the program.

“The best part of working here is the sheer enjoyment of helping someone develop a skill they thought they couldn’t master, or regain a skill they thought they’d lost when they lost their eyesight,” Ward says. “Some members have been told they can’t do things because they’re blind, but you can do anything you put your mind to — and they do.”

Before the pandemic, the culinary program was a big part of the Center’s social life, serving holiday dinners for members and hosting several cook-off competitions each year. One of Ward’s post-pandemic ambitions is to include a new class on baking and pastry.

Such plans for the future are just one more facet of the Center’s winning approach to helping people who are blind joyfully express their creativity while also developing employment skills and credentials.

Rosemarie Lally, J.D. is a freelance writer and editor based in Washington D.C.
COMMANDER HONORS BASE SUPPLY CENTER MANAGER AND STAFF

Terri Fabrizio, store manager at the Shipyard Express Base Supply Center (BSC) in Kittery, Maine, received a special honor from Portsmouth Naval Shipyard (PSNY) Base Commander Captain Daniel Ettlich in November 2020. Capt. Ettlich presented Fabrizio with a signed picture of PSNY and one of his personal challenge coins, a pocket-sized medallion that military commanders often give to service members as a mark of camaraderie, and/or as a special thanks for service rendered. Capt. Ettlich presented the coin to Fabrizio as thanks for the tremendous support the BSC staff provided with respect to the coronavirus pandemic.

“Whatever PSNY asked you for, you worked tirelessly and supported us by going above and beyond any challenges you were faced with,” said Capt. Ettlich. “We realize this was no easy task, and we cherish you for your support, determination, and dedication.”

“I only did what needed to be done to keep everyone on the base safe,” Fabrizio said. “These products were hard to find, but I kept searching. I’m grateful for my staff because I know without their hard work and dedication, we would not have been able to achieve what we did.”

Fabrizio said she plans to display the challenge coin prominently in the BSC so staff can share its meaning with customers.

NEW VIDEO HIGHLIGHTS COVID-19 RESPONSE

NIB released a new video that highlights the way its associated nonprofit agencies have been working to respond to COVID-19. Nearly 4,000 Americans who are blind working at 40 NIB associated agencies are producing more than 1,500 different products being used in the response to the global pandemic. In many cases, the employees are helping to save lives by producing critical supplies for those working on the front lines. Check out the new video on NIB’s YouTube page, NatIndBlind1938.

ABILITYONE COMMISSION NAMES NEW LEADERSHIP

The U.S. AbilityOne Commission elected Jeffrey A. Koses and Robert T. Kelly, Jr., to two-year terms as chairperson and vice chairperson at an executive session held February 4. Koses and Kelly were elected interim chairperson and interim vice chairperson in October.

Appointed to the Commission in 2020, Koses is the senior procurement executive at the General Services Administration (GSA) and GSA representative to the Commission. He is also a voting member of the Federal Acquisition Regulatory Council.

Kelly, a private citizen representing the interests of nonprofit agency employees with significant disabilities, was appointed to the Commission in 2003 and has served as vice chairperson since 2018. His career includes service on a number of disability-related boards and councils, including the U.S. Access Board, where he served two terms and worked on drafting rules for the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Jeff Koses, the GSA representative to the AbilityOne Commission, was elected chairperson of the Commission on February 4, 2021. Vice chairperson Robert T. Kelly, Jr., represents the interests of nonprofit agency employees with significant disabilities.
READ THE 2020 NIB ANNUAL REPORT

The NIB annual report for fiscal year 2020 is now available on the NIB.org website. The 2020 annual report, Call to Service, highlights the efforts of NIB and its associated nonprofit agencies in responding to the challenges posed by the once-in-a-century coronavirus pandemic while carrying out the mission to grow employment for people who are blind.

The report also outlines significant achievements in 2020, including the creation of new jobs for people who are blind, expansion of NIB’s award-winning training and development programs to help people who are blind build successful careers in any field they choose, and advocacy work that saved the jobs of hundreds of people who are blind.

Visit NIB.org> About> Media> Annual Report to download an accessible PDF format copy of Call to Service or plain text version compatible with screen readers.

LITTLE ROCK AGENCY CELEBRATES 80 YEARS SERVING ARKANSANS

NIB associated nonprofit agency IFB Solutions Little Rock celebrated its 80th anniversary in December 2020. Started in 1940 in a two-room building, and then known as the Arkansas Lighthouse for the Blind, work at the agency originally consisted of making brooms and caning chairs. In 1945, Helen Keller dedicated a new Little Rock facility and services expanded.

The agency began working on government contracts in 1976, and with the new century began producing its first complex textile item, a U.S. Army t-shirt, significantly increasing employment opportunities for people who are blind. In 2014, the Arkansas Lighthouse joined Winston-Salem Industries for the Blind, rebranding as IFB Solutions in 2016.

In recent years, the agency has expanded its services to the community. In 2015, it established the Little Rock Community Low Vision Center to help foster greater independence through training and the use of technology. In 2019, the agency opened a wellness center that provides employees with easier access to health care professionals who assist with anything from monitoring blood sugar and blood pressure to guiding employees through the pandemic.

To mark its 80th anniversary, IFB Solutions Little Rock is constructing a white cane and guide dog friendly walking track that will include benches, sensory gardens, and a shaded picnic area for employees to enjoy during their breaks or after work.

Employees stand in front of the Arkansas Lighthouse for the Blind Little Rock facility after the building dedication by Helen Keller in 1945. Groundbreaking at the present site commenced in 1966 and in 2014, the agency joined Winston-Salem Industries for the Blind, now known as IFB Solutions. Throughout the coronavirus pandemic, IFB Solutions Little Rock has remained open as an essential business providing products to the U.S. Department of Defense.
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