Community Service
Employees at NIB associated agencies serve their communities in ways large and small
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Angela Hartley  
Executive Vice President  
and Chief Program Officer

Jennifer Click  
Editor-in-Chief

Laura Reimers  
Vice President, Communications

Mike Johnson  
Director, Communications

Paul M. Best  
Program Director, Marketing and Design

Jermaine Eubanks  
Communications Design Specialist

Editor’s note: Some photos used in this issue of Opportunity were taken prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.
Opportunity welcomes news and stories about the careers and capabilities of people who are blind. Email communications@nib.org.

To add or change a mailing address, contact communications@nib.org.

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.
One characteristic of American society that we all value is a feeling of belonging and shared purpose in our communities. From donating blood, to coaching youth sports, to helping out a friend in need, people in all walks of life pitch in to improve life for their neighbors in ways large and small.

People who are blind are no strangers to the American spirit of volunteerism. In fact, many engage in community service activities that can be surprising to people who are not fully aware of the range of capabilities that people who are blind possess.

In this issue of Opportunity, you’ll read about people who are blind working in NIB associated nonprofit agencies who
become community heroes after they leave their day jobs. From an advocate who knows his way around the halls of Congress, to a woman who helps mothers and children in need of a safe haven, people who are blind serve according to their talents and interests. The citizens featured in this issue’s cover story represent just a few of the many people working in NIB agencies who give of their time to help make their part of the world better for everyone.

Winston Churchill said, “We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.” In communities across the country, people who are blind are not only building full lives for themselves, but making life better for their neighbors and communities.

Kevin A. Lynch
President and
Chief Executive Officer
COMMUNITY SERVICE

Employees at NIB associated agencies serve their communities in ways large and small.

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Cindy Watson returns home to Texas as president and CEO of the San Antonio Lighthouse, and makes history with her appointment.

BY DOMINIC CALABRESE

Texan Cynthia Watson would take exception to the old adage “you can’t go home again.”

Watson is indeed back home as president and CEO of the San Antonio Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired, where she is making a bit of history as the first woman and first president and CEO at the agency who is blind. Watson moved to San Antonio after a successful run in Seattle as senior vice president and later president of The Lighthouse for the Blind, Inc. A native of the Houston area, she is one of a growing number of people who are blind leading major nonprofits.

Watson, who received her undergraduate degree and MBA from the University of Houston at Clear Lake, also earned a certificate in management from the University of Virginia’s Darden School of Management as part of the National Industries for the Blind (NIB) Business

San Antonio Lighthouse President and CEO Cindy Watson was selected for the post from among 200 candidates.
“I lived the agency’s mission, and now I get to move it forward.”
— Cynthia Watson, President and CEO, San Antonio Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired

Management Training program. Over the past 20 years, she has carved out a career as a tireless advocate empowering people who are blind.

After a fellowship at NIB, Watson’s career steadily progressed from director of contract services at NIB associated nonprofit agency IFB Solutions; to providing teaching, counseling, and employment assistance for the Texas Department of Assistive and Rehabilitative Services, Division for the Blind; leading the American Foundation for the Blind’s Center on Vision Loss and Web Programs in Dallas; and serving as vice president of services at Dallas Lighthouse for the Blind (now Envision Dallas).

Chosen for the San Antonio post after a national search that drew more than 200 candidates, Watson, who took office on August 9, 2021, is only the fifth CEO in the 88-year history of the agency.

Founded in 1933, the San Antonio Lighthouse is one of Texas’ largest military apparel manufacturing operations. In addition to a 140,000 square-foot manufacturing plant, the agency operates 15 AbilityOne Base Supply Centers® across the Lone Star State as well as in New Mexico and Oklahoma, and employs nearly 500 people.

As head of the San Antonio Lighthouse, Watson will encounter different challenges from those she faced in Seattle. While the two agencies
are comparable in size, they differ in scope. The West Coast operation is focused on a variety of manufacturing and service businesses, employing people who are blind, DeafBlind, and blind with other disabilities. In addition to apparel manufacturing, the San Antonio agency is one of the largest providers in the country of rehabilitation services for people who are blind.

“I lived the agency’s mission,” Watson says with a smile, “and now I get to move it forward.”

She also praises her predecessor, recently retired CEO Mike Gilliam, as a friend and mentor. “I am honored to take the solid foundation that Mike built at the Lighthouse and carry it into the future,” Watson says.

As Watson settles into her new home one thing is certain: The San Antonio Lighthouse will continue to offer services for every age and every vision condition.

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.

Learn more at NIB.org/SKILCRAFT

SKILCRAFT® is a registered trademark owned and licensed by National Industries for the Blind, the nation’s largest employment resource for people who are blind.
Employees at NIB associated nonprofit agencies take great pride in the work they do, particularly on behalf of the military and veterans. But their pride — and interests — don’t stop when the workday ends. For many, employment at NIB associated agencies empowers them to not only live more independent lives but to make meaningful contributions to their communities in some unique and surprising ways.
‘To Me, Being Blind Is a Gift’

Blind since infancy, Blake Lindsay, outreach manager at Envision Dallas, has never considered his lack of eyesight a disability. A successful radio personality for 22 years, Lindsay spent time in the banking industry and is an author, motivational speaker, and voice artist. In 2009, he joined Envision Dallas as manager of communications.

A graduate of the first class of NIB’s Advocates for Leadership and Employment program, Lindsay works with NIB’s public policy team in educating national, state, and local officials about the efforts of NIB and its associated agencies to increase employment opportunities for people who are blind. As part of this volunteer work, he frequently speaks at Rotary International, Kiwanis, and Lions clubs in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, as well as at schools, to raise awareness about Envision Dallas’ services and the capabilities of people who are blind.

“Over the past 12 years, I have spoken to a lot of Lions Clubs about White Cane Day, with a focus on making it a celebration about not just canes, but all the technical innovations that have empowered people who are blind to live independent lives,” says Lindsay. “I had been trying for years to speak at the Oak Cliff Lions Club here in Dallas, but they were a larger club and usually got celebrities to speak. I must have finally worn them down because they let me visit and talk with them about White Cane Day. Then they asked me to come back and speak again,” he recalls.

“I immediately loved the group and felt very at home there,” says Lindsay, who joined the
Oak Cliff Lions Club about eight years ago. The club wasted no time putting him to work. “They expected me to roll up my sleeves and dive in. I really appreciated that,” says Lindsay. Over the years, he has volunteered as a greeter at the club’s low vision clinic, helped run the eyeglass recycling program, and more recently, participated in the club’s pop-up COVID-19 vaccination clinics.

This year, Lindsay is serving as first vice president. “The club has about 100 members, so that makes it one of the larger clubs in the area,” says Lindsay. “We do a lot of good work, and I’m proud of the difference we are making in our community.”

**Saving Lives**

James Martino, e-commerce sales and business development associate for the Central Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired in Utica, New York, was born without irises, the part of the eye that regulates the amount of light that enters by opening and closing the pupil.

**IFB Solutions Employees Support Food Bank**

At IFB Solutions in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, employees regularly volunteer at Second Harvest Food Bank, says Anastasia Powell, corporate culture and internal communications manager.

“The idea came from an employee-driven outreach committee that includes volunteering in the community as one of its foundational pillars,” she explains. Every other month, up to five employees and a member of the committee volunteer at Second Harvest,
putting together boxes and packaging nonperishable meals for families.

IFB Solutions gives employees up to eight hours per year to perform volunteer work, so the employees go to Second Harvest during the workday. “The employees are grateful for the opportunity to assist community members in a valuable way,” says Powell. “Without their jobs at IFB solutions, many would still be on the receiving side of this effort.”

At the end of the shift, volunteers are treated to a meal. “Second Harvest Food Bank also houses the Providence Culinary Training program,” notes Powell. The 13-week program helps individuals who have experienced job loss, incarceration, or substance abuse learn culinary skills to help them rejoin society, she explains. “Needless to say, the meals are delicious.”

Youth program coordinator Kim Flanagan and line team lead Brooke Brown are just two of the IFB Solutions employees who volunteer at the Second Harvest Food Bank in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, every other month.
Having low vision is all he has ever known, but he says he’s always thought of it as a challenge, not a disability.

“My mother is totally blind, but other family members are sighted,” says Martino. “I feel like I had the best of both worlds. I learned from both my family members with vision and from my mom.”

Martino grew up on a farm, and from an early age was taught how to do things just as a fully sighted person would. He did chores, rode a bike, and dreamed of being a firefighter like his uncle. As he grew older, that dream became a life goal.

When he applied to become a volunteer firefighter, Martino recalls, he was asked many questions by the board of directors, who initially doubted his ability to do the job because of his eyesight. “They asked me how I would

James Martino, e-commerce sales and business development associate for the Central Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired in Utica, New York, served 30 years as a volunteer firefighter. When questioned about how he would handle situations where the smoke was too thick to see Martino, who was born without irises, told interviewers, “that’s where I have an advantage.”
get to the calls. I said to leave that up to me.” When one of the board members said that in an actual fire, even sighted firefighters have difficulty seeing because the smoke is so thick, Martino replied “that’s where I have an advantage, I guess, because I’m used to doing things by feel.”

He was approved to be a volunteer firefighter the following month, in February 1988. Although he has since moved out of the district and become an honorary firefighter, Martino served his community for 30 years. In addition to being a volunteer firefighter, he was also a Level 3 EMT for 30 years.

As a volunteer firefighter, Martino says, he never knew how often he would be called to respond, but says volunteers were expected to meet 20% of the calls or functions each year, and his department responded to between 360-440 calls a year.

And then there were the functions. Martino attended countless functions over the years — fundraisers like chicken barbeque dinners, and the annual Christmas party for the children in the community, where Martino often starred as Santa.

Some days were busier than others, says Martino. “My late wife and I lived near the firehouse,” recalls Martino. “One day, she was giving me a haircut. Or at least trying to. I sat down and was called to respond. We had nine calls that day, and it took four attempts to finish that haircut.”

“The job takes a lot of time and dedication,” says Martino. “I could not have done it without the support of my family.”
Emergency Response and Education

Carla Abbott is a line manager at The Lighthouse for the Blind, Inc., in Seattle, and a taekwondo grand master 8th degree black belt (9th degree is the highest level that can be achieved). In addition to being one of the few women in the country to have earned the level, Abbott, certified by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), is a member of the City of Redmond, Washington, community emergency response team (CERT).

Abbott started learning taekwondo 40 years ago, when she was working as a janitor at a Salvation Army where a class she observed piqued her interest. “Actually, I originally wanted to be a female wrestler,” says Abbott. She’s glad, though, that she went with taekwondo instead.

“It completely changed my outlook of the world. Being visually impaired, I wanted to prove to everyone that I could do everything all by myself. I’ve always been visually impaired, but it was getting worse, and I wasn’t handling it very well. Taekwondo taught me that it’s OK to ask for help,” says Abbott.

Practicing taekwondo, she says, taught her how to trust others, adapt, and navigate
the world. The philosophical underpinnings of martial arts, Abbott says, taught her self-confidence, how to regulate emotions, and how to avoid conflict.

Without her taekwondo experience, says Abbott, she would never have believed she could become a FEMA-certified CERT member. The City of Redmond CERT training consists of 24 hours of courses over a series of eight weeks that teach community members basic disaster response skills, such as fire safety, light search and rescue, team organization, and disaster medical operations.

“We learned how to put out fires, how to move people out of buildings on chairs, how to examine buildings for safety, and how to mark buildings as searched. It was a really good program,” says Abbott.

The CERT program holds an expo every summer, where team members participate in various scenarios. Abbott says she participates in the scenarios to help others understand how to address the needs of a person who is blind during a disaster. “For example, there’s an earthquake, and glass is shattered everywhere around me, my shoes are across the room, and I can’t navigate to get out. It helps team members understand what they need to do to help me get out safely.”

Abbott has also spoken in front of city officials to help them understand the essentials people who are blind who may need to take shelter in the event of an emergency. “For example, how will a person who is blind get to the shelter? How will they find their cots? Shelter volunteers will need to escort them to their cots and give them landmarks so they can find them again. Shelters
should have extra food on hand to feed guide dogs, that sort of thing,” explains Abbott.

It’s rewarding work, says Abbott. “Taekwondo taught me that it’s OK to ask for help. Now, I can teach others the questions to ask so that they can help people in need more effectively.”

Providing a Safe Haven
“I strongly believe in the sanctity of marriage,” says Nelida Torres, a survivor of domestic violence. “But when my son’s physical health was in danger, I had to make a decision.” For the sake of her safety and that of her son, Torres divorced her husband and moved with her son from New York City to Orlando, Florida.

Shortly after arriving in Orlando, she learned she had glaucoma and turned to Lighthouse Central Florida for help. “They were there for me. They taught me how to do everything,” she says. “I miss and mourn my eyesight, but it doesn’t limit me.”

Torres began volunteering at the Lighthouse, eventually being hired to work part time. Today, she works full time in customer care. “The Lighthouse gave me freedom, independence, the will to live,” she says. “I saw others like me doing things, and I knew I could do it too.”

“I received so much. I knew that it was time to give back,” says Torres. About five and a half years ago, she opened her home to women with and without children who were fleeing domestic violence.

“I ran an ‘underground railroad’ because many of them weren’t safe,” she says. The women found Torres through her church, and although she sheltered women without children, she especially liked
sheltering women with children so the kids could see how her son not only survived his experience, but thrived.

The underground railroad ended because of the COVID-19 pandemic, but then a friend introduced Torres to Aspire Health Partners, a nonprofit behavioral healthcare organization. “Many of the people who come to Aspire have experienced domestic violence, substance abuse, or have survived human trafficking,” explains Torres. Her role is to sit and listen to their stories.

“They just want safety and to know that they are loved — they’re often scared for their lives.” In addition to counseling, Aspire helps people find jobs, build their resumes, find clothing suitable for interviews, and more.

Aspire also had to close its shelter because of the pandemic, but that hasn’t stopped Torres, who, with support from Lighthouse employees, her community, and her church, has been filling up her garage with donations of food, clothes, crafts, and more. “The outpouring from everyone has been incredible. When my
If that work weren’t enough, Torres also volunteers at The Mustard Seed of Central Florida, a nonprofit whose mission is to help rebuild the lives of families and individuals who have suffered disaster or personal tragedy by providing household furnishings and clothing. Torres, who is fluent in English and Spanish, helps translate when needed. But she doesn’t want to stop there. “I want to learn French, because a lot of families coming to The Mustard Seed lately are fleeing from Haiti.”

“I want people — and especially my son — to know that they should never give up,” says Torres. “There is always a silver lining of hope, faith, and persistence.”

“We aren’t defined by our disabilities, our experiences. I choose to be the person I am. I choose to be a warrior, a comforter, someone who can share hope,” she says. “You can too. Never give up.”

Sharon Horrigan is a freelance writer based in Asheville, North Carolina.
Five years ago, Dr. Frank Werblin had a chance encounter with a father seeking help for his daughter with a visual impairment. After the two spoke, Werblin realized there was real potential for a concept he was working on called IrisVision.

A Ph.D. neuroscientist, Guggenheim Fellow, and 40+ year professor at the University of California, Berkeley, Dr. Werblin had dedicated the bulk of his career to identifying how our eyes process information, leading him to design implantable prosthetic retinal computer chips for people affected by severe vision loss.

Relying on his extensive knowledge of human vision, Werblin believed his IrisVision concept could deliver a much less expensive alternative for people with low vision. In 2016, a grant from the National Eye Institute along with collaboration from experts at Johns Hopkins University created the perfect scenario for him to bring IrisVision to the world.

Werblin’s IrisVision Live device resembles the handful of virtual reality (VR) headsets worn by many hardcore gamers around the globe. Upon further inspection though, it’s clear IrisVision goes well beyond the

**Product:** IrisVision Live  
**Cost:** $2,995.00  
For more information, visit NIB.org/TechCorner
virtual world to fully interact with the real one.

The horsepower behind the IrisVision Live headset comes from a completely customized Samsung Galaxy device that rests horizontally inside the VR frames. Using proprietary software designed by Werblin and his team, the headset hooks into the smartphone’s back-facing camera to create a live video stream of the surrounding environment to the phone screen situated in front of the user’s eyes.

It may sound simple enough, but this integration of a souped-up smartphone and a VR headset contains a remarkable array of features to support nearly every type of visual impairment. So many, in fact, that it would be difficult to cover them all in one review, so let’s focus on IrisVision Live’s primary features and capabilities.

The headset has seven separate visual modes: scene, television, reading, retinitis pigmentosa (RP), IrisReader, photo gallery, and video player; six additional modes can be activated through IrisVision’s free technical support.

Upon bootup, IrisVision Live defaults to scene mode. Once an object is located, such as a person’s face, television screen, or a street sign, the user can bring the object into clearer detail using the scroll wheel located at the center top of the frames, much like a pair of binoculars. The single finger touch panel at the right temple can then be swiped forward or backward to zoom in and out, with up to 12x zoom level.

Television mode adjusts for screen brightness and glare at the center of your TV screen, while reading mode converts reading materials to a variety of helpful text and background colors, including black on
green, black on yellow, and inverted white text on black.

RP mode compensates for peripheral vision loss by condensing the scene into a much narrower field of view, while the photo gallery and video player modes optimize picture and video viewing.

Finally, IrisReader mode provides audible text-to-speech output of reading materials. All of the above modes can be activated using IrisVision’s hands-free “OK Google” voice commands — in fact, nearly every function of IrisVision can be controlled by voice.

IrisVision Live is an FDA registered Class-1 medical device and retails for $2,995, which includes wireless and wired charging options, carrying case, and free one-on-one in-person or Zoom training with a vision coach. The recently released low-profile IrisVision Inspire, currently available only in the United States, retails for $3,995.

Doug Goist is program manager, workforce development at NIB’s talent management enterprise, NSITE. A recognized leader in the field of technology accessibility, Doug has worked with the U.S. Department of Defense, the military services, federal agencies, and private sector partners. In 2013, he served as the technical steering committee representative for the U.S. Agency for International Development on a study of mobile money transfer and handset accessibility in Africa.
NEW PRODUCTS

READY TO LAUNCH

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

WRITING INSTRUMENTS

1. SLV-Performer Retractable Ballpoint Pen

SKILCRAFT’s SLV-Performer Retractable Ballpoint Pen with low viscosity ink for smooth, smear-free, skip-free writing delivers a high-performance writing experience in a value-priced everyday pen. Medium-point single-use pens available in blue or black ink have a soft, latex-free ridged rubberized comfort grip, plastic barrel to monitor ink supply, and durable clip. Produced by IBVI in West Allis, Wisconsin.

OFFICE SUPPLIES

2. 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.
3. Folding Chair
Lightweight commercial-grade folding chairs for indoor and outdoor use are ergonomically contoured with an extra wide seat for comfort and plastic feet that won’t mar floors. Made of blow molded, high-density polyethylene with powder-coated, heavy-gauge steel frame and leg assemblies for durability and portability, these chairs resist dents, scratches, and scuffs, yet nest for easy storage. 350-lb weight capacity; 5-year limited warranty. Produced by MidWest Enterprises for the Blind in Kalamazoo, Michigan.

4. Rectangular Folding Table
Easy-to-carry commercial-grade SKILCRAFT® Blow-Molded Folding Tables for indoor and outdoor use are made of high-density polyethylene with contemporary beveled radius edged tops. Tables weigh 30% less than standard wood laminate folding tables but are far more durable with heavy-gauge, gray powder-coated steel legs, non-mar plastic feet, and cross bracing that folds into the underside cavity for safe storage and easy transport. Easy-to-clean tables resist dents, scratches, rust, stains, and warping. Made in the U.S.A. with 5-year limited warranty; TAA- and Berry Amendment-compliant; meets BIFMA standards. Produced by MidWest Enterprises for the Blind in Kalamazoo, Michigan.

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.
NIB Agency Patents Ground-breaking Splint

The Rigid Immobilization System for Extremities (RISE) splint developed by NIB associated nonprofit agency Alphapointe in conjunction with the U.S. Army was recently approved by the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. Tested by military personnel at Fort Hood, Texas, and Schofield Barracks in Oahu, Hawaii, the RISE splint changes the landscape for the use of splints in triage situations, particularly in front line military settings.

Because it is significantly lighter and more compact that other splints, the RISE Splint can be carried and used by non-medical personnel to administer critical treatments on the battlefield. Another unique feature is the ability to use the splint for limbs or for pelvic stabilization — a feature previously unavailable with the military’s standard-issue splints.
LEADING WITH KNOWLEDGE-BASED JOBS

Bold initiatives help the Chicago Lighthouse identify talents and empower people who are blind.

BY DOMINIC CALABRESE

The administrations of 20 U.S. presidents; two World Wars; a Great Depression; 9/11; and two worldwide pandemics. Since its establishment in 1906, The Chicago Lighthouse for People Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired has been an eyewitness to these and many other historic events.

Along the way, The Chicago Lighthouse, one of the nation’s most comprehensive social service organizations serving people who are blind, visually impaired, disabled, and veterans, has made history of its own, laying claim to a number of firsts.

○ The Chicago Lighthouse opened in this building on the city’s West Side in 1906.

Among them are being home to one of the most prominent and continually operating vision clinics in the country; a state-certified school for children with multiple disabilities, the first of its kind in the Midwest; and through a separate nonprofit, Lighthouse Industries, holding an exclusive contract to manufacture clocks for the U.S. government.

Clocks produced by employees who are blind adorn the walls of federal buildings, American embassies, and military installations around the world. One of those clocks, taken from the ruins of the Pentagon.
Clocks produced by people who are blind working in the Chicago Lighthouse Industries program can be found on the walls of federal buildings, American embassies, and military installations around the world.

after American Airlines Flight 77 crashed into it on September 11, 2001, is now on display at the 9/11 Memorial Museum in New York City.

More recently, The Lighthouse has been developing call centers that employ hundreds of people with disabilities and spearheaded the growth of knowledge-based jobs.

“We are a multi-disciplinary organization that identifies the talents of people who are blind, enables them to pursue their dreams, and ultimately attain their goals.” says Lighthouse CEO and President Dr. Janet Szlyk, who has been at the agency’s helm since 2008. A highly respected researcher and vision scientist, Szlyk was recruited for the post in the midst of a successful academic career at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She is only the second woman to lead The Lighthouse in the NIB associated nonprofit agency’s history.

Building Knowledge-based Opportunities
In addition to offering 40 programs in education, employment, rehabilitation, and other areas, The Lighthouse prepares people who are blind or visually impaired for jobs in such key fields as human resources, finance, and IT.

“One of our people was recently snapped up for a
position at Google,” Szlyk notes, emphasizing that The Lighthouse is training the leaders of tomorrow. She attributes the organization’s success in part to a willingness to develop bold initiatives.

One recent innovation is its Digital Accessible Experience (DAX) practice. The consultancy was formed in November 2019.

“Our DAX consulting services feature certified IT professionals, all of whom are blind, who evaluate websites and digital properties across a variety of assistive technologies and accommodations to ensure optimized accessibility for all,” explains Phil Yatvin, senior director of Lighthouse Industries.

“DAX represents the next step in The Lighthouse’s social enterprise model in that it enables our professionals who are blind to move into new and exciting positions,” he observes. “It offers real career growth.”

The agency’s call center social enterprises continue to expand as well, according to Kathy Stoeberl, executive vice president and chief business development officer.

Back in 2012, The Lighthouse contracted with the State of Illinois to manage call center operations for the sprawling Illinois Tollway system that runs throughout metropolitan Chicago.
“The call centers not only provide jobs for veterans and people with disabilities, they also supply necessary revenue to help fund our vital services,” Stoeberl explains.

Emphasizing that Lighthouse programs are designed to support one another, she points to a special project in 2021 involving call center client University of Illinois’ UI Health; Epic, a global provider of medical scheduling and records software; and DAX.

“UI Health was planning to switch its scheduling platform to Epic, but some of the platform’s features weren’t fully accessible for people who are blind,” Stoeberl recalls. UI Health brokered an introduction between Epic and the DAX team in hopes of alleviating the problem.

“The DAX team helped Epic optimize its accessibility features so that our call center agents who are totally blind can use the platform to schedule appointments.”

Stoeberl notes that many Lighthouse call center agents have now been promoted to medical scheduler positions, where previously they could provide only basic information. “This is a huge breakthrough for us, Epic, and anyone who is blind or visually impaired working in the medical field,” she says.

Expanding Beyond Chicago
Successfully adapting its call center services to remote platforms, The Lighthouse has taken on opportunities to create jobs for people who are blind in other states.

In August 2021, the agency formally launched an association with BlindSight Delaware Enterprises, Inc. (BSDE), an organization with a similar mission, to develop a social enterprise partnership in Wilmington.

“This new venture will follow the model we successfully innovated at The Lighthouse to create call centers and other
employment opportunities for Delawareans,” Stoeberl says.

The Lighthouse is currently developing relationships with other Delaware-based organizations and social service agencies to grow the business.

“Our intent is for BSDE to serve as a template for creating similar partnerships and opportunities for people who are blind or visually impaired in other parts of the country,” explains Stoeberl.

Breakning New Ground

Given Szlyk’s expertise as a scientist, it is no surprise that she would also establish a world class research program at The Lighthouse.

One of the program’s most exciting studies involves an intracortical visual prosthesis (ICVP), a wireless device implanted directly into the visual cortex, bypassing the retina and optic nerves, that aims to restore some level of light perception for people who are totally blind.

The device was developed at the Illinois Institute of Technology; the surgery will be performed by a neurosurgery team at...
The Intracortical Visual Prosthetic (ICVP) – a collaboration of Chicago Lighthouse, Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT) and Rush University Medical Center (Rush) – may help restore some light perception for people who are totally blind. ICVP team members, pictured left to right, include Chicago Lighthouse President and CEO Dr. Janet Szlyk and Vice President of Research Dr. Patricia Grant; Rush Clinical Research Coordinator Bart Jacher; ITT Psychology Department Chair Dr. Frank Lane (seated center); Lighthouse Director of Visual Diagnostic Services Fred Collison (standing center); Rush Associate Clinical Research Coordinator Rebecca McWilliams and Clinical Regulatory Research Coordinator Morgan Mulcahy; and Pritzker Institute of Biomedical Science and Engineering Executive Director Dr. Philip Troyk of ITT.
Rush University Medical Center; and the ICVP testing and rehabilitation will be conducted at The Lighthouse, where Szlyk serves as the site’s principal investigator for the clinical trial.

“It is a true partnership of innovation that has the potential to benefit the lives of people who are blind,” says Lighthouse Vice President of Research Dr. Patricia Grant.

“Screening of the first candidate is complete and the surgery will be performed in the first quarter of 2022.”

This spring, The Lighthouse expects to break ground on its first ever housing initiative, The Foglia Residences at The Chicago Lighthouse, to provide safe, affordable, and accessible housing for people who are blind.

Created in partnership with Brinshore Development, Szlyk said the residences will be the first building in the country for people who are blind that will serve as a showcase of accessibility technology for home environments.

“Our hope is to provide a model for other organizations to create their own housing solutions in their communities,” she says.

Szlyk invites organizations serving people who are blind to reach out for more information about building knowledge-based opportunities “We are always happy to consult, advise, and otherwise assist our colleagues around the country.”

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.
National Industries for the Blind President and CEO Kevin Lynch was recently recognized by Virginia Business magazine as a member of its “Virginia 500.” The Virginia 500 list acknowledges influential leaders throughout the Commonwealth of Virginia who are making meaningful impacts in their communities.

Virginia Business magazine covers news and economic activity in every sector and every region of the Commonwealth. This year is the second annual publication of the Virginia 500 list. Lynch received recognition in the nonprofits and philanthropy category.
**NIB BOARD OF DIRECTORS CREATES PANDEMIC RECOVERY FUND**

In October 2021, the NIB board of directors approved a $2.5 million pandemic recovery fund to recognize the work of associated nonprofit agencies in sustaining employment of people who are blind through the difficult 2021 fiscal year (FY). The funds were awarded to agencies based on the FY2021 employment hours of people who are blind.

The board requested agencies use the funds to assist in growing the number of employees who are blind and supporting current employees who are blind through such measures as:

- Enhancing transportation options.
- Providing additional or new training.
- Investing in new technology.
- Making health and safety upgrades.
- Improving benefits.
- Implementing recruiting and incentive programs.

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**FIRST NSITE CISCO ACADEMY CLASS GRADUATES, EARN CERTIFICATIONS**

NIB’s new talent management enterprise, NSITE, celebrated the graduation of five people who are blind or visually impaired from its inaugural Cisco Academy. The NSITE program is the United States’ first Cisco Academy adapted to the learning styles of people who are blind.

To date, four of the graduates have taken and passed the exam required to become Cisco Certified Network Associates (CNA), an industry recognized credential of IT expertise, and are ready to embark on careers in the cybersecurity industry. The fifth graduate plans to take the exam in the near future.
NIB hosted 26 new associated nonprofit agency leaders at NIB headquarters in December for New Executive Orientation. The annual program provides an introduction to NIB senior leadership and other key stakeholders, as well as an overview of how NIB supports its associated nonprofit agencies in a variety of areas.

Attendees also heard from U. S. AbilityOne Commission Acting Executive Director Kimberly M. Zeich, SourceAmerica Interim Chief Operating Officer Howard Cooke, and Reinhard Mabry, president of the National Association for the Employment of People Who Are Blind and NIB associated agency Alphapointe.

In addition to structured presentations, such as the one pictured above led by NIB President and CEO Kevin Lynch, the event provided an opportunity for new agency leaders to engage with NIB staff and colleagues from associated agencies located throughout the U.S. during breaks, meals, and at an NIB-sponsored reception.
READ THE 2021 NIB ANNUAL REPORT

The NIB annual report for fiscal year 2021 is now available on the NIB.org website. The 2021 annual report, Adapt and Advance, spotlights NIB’s significant achievements in 2021, including the creation of new jobs for people who are blind, expansion of NIB grant programs to assist agencies in recovery from the pandemic and compliance with federal government cybersecurity requirements, and recognition of outstanding agency employees who are blind.

The report also outlines the continuing response of NIB and its associated nonprofit agencies to the coronavirus pandemic while carrying out the mission to grow employment for people who are blind, and highlights NIB’s new talent management enterprise, NSITE, which provides a continuum of services that connect employers with talented, dedicated people who are blind, visually impaired, and/or veterans to meet workforce needs.

Scan the QR code at right to download an accessible PDF format copy of Adapt and Advance or a plain text version compatible with screen readers.
NIB WELCOMES HELEN KELLER SERVICES

NIB is pleased to welcome Helen Keller Services in Brooklyn, New York, to its nationwide network of associated nonprofit families.

Opened in 1893 as The Industrial Home for the Blind, the organization was formally renamed Helen Keller Services for the Blind in 1985 in memory of longtime friend and supporter Helen Keller. Peter J. Salmon, who was instrumental in the founding of NIB and in significantly expanding rehabilitation services for people who are DeafBlind, began work there in 1917. NIB’s employee of the year award is named in Salmon’s honor.

Now, Helen Keller Services will be working with NIB and the New York State Preferred Source Program for New Yorkers Who Are Blind (NYSPSP) to empower people who are blind, DeafBlind, have vision loss, or have hearing and vision loss to live, work, and thrive in careers and communities of their choice.
CUSTOMERS, COMMISSION LEADERS SPEAK AT VIRTUAL STATE OF THE PROGRAM

More than 300 attendees joined NIB’s first-ever Virtual State of the Program on Tuesday, November 16, 2021. After concerns about the COVID-19 Delta variant led to cancellation of the 2021 NIB/NAEPB Training Conference and Expo, the Virtual State of the Program provided an opportunity for stakeholders to hear from key federal and military customers.

Mr. John Tenaglia, principal director of Defense Pricing and Contracting, and Defense Logistics Agency Troop Support Commander Brigadier General Eric Shirley, as well as leaders from the U.S. AbilityOne Commission® and the AbilityOne Commission Office of Inspector General made presentations highlighting their current activities and focus for the coming year. In addition, LaRue Peters from NIB associated nonprofit agency LCI and Todd LaFlame from Lighthouse Works! shared their stories of finding fulfilling careers.
A VISION FOR TALENT

Your Talent Management Solution

Learn more at NSITE.org

NSITE is an enterprise of National Industries for the Blind (NIB)