NIB celebrates the accomplishments of outstanding associated agency employees
WORKING TOGETHER

Nearly 100 years ago, Helen Keller said, “Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.” That sentiment embodies the spirit and determination of NIB and its associated nonprofit agencies as we work to enhance the opportunities for economic and personal independence of people who are blind, primarily through creating, sustaining, and improving employment.

Working together is what employees in our associated agencies do to provide high quality products and services to our government and military customers. Each year, NIB recognizes outstanding Employees of the Year nominated by our associated agencies and selects two for national Employee of the Year awards. In this issue you’ll read about those national award winners and meet all of the nominees – each a strong team player committed not only to quality, but also to making the workplace better for their co-workers.

Teamwork is critical to success in other facets of life as well. That’s why NIB and its associated agencies have been teaming up with partner organizations to advance the interests of people who are blind both in the workplace and in our society. This issue’s feature story on one such partner, VisionServe Alliance, explains how working together with diverse organizations that address needs in the areas of education, rehabilitation, employment, and representation can more effectively communicate and even amplify the voices of people who are blind.

The wisdom of Helen Keller’s statement is as true today as it was when she made it in the 1920s. NIB is proud of the teamwork of employees in its associated nonprofit agencies and proud to work with organizations such as VisionServe Alliance to advance the interests of people who are blind.

Kevin A. Lynch
President and Chief Executive Officer

Editor’s note: Some photos used in this issue of Opportunity were taken prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.
2022 EMPLOYEES OF THE YEAR

NIB celebrates the accomplishments of outstanding associated agency employees.

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Lauren Branch wears three hats as she works to increase collaboration and find common ground among groups serving people who are blind.

BY DOMINIC CALABRESE

Longtime advocate Lauren Branch is passionate about the need for organizations serving people who are blind to come together and find common ground to advance their interests. As president and CEO of NIB associated nonprofit agency NewView Oklahoma, a member of the NIB board of directors, and chair of the VisionServe Alliance executive committee, she is in a unique position to contribute to that effort.

“It is important for all of us to be working together and to be collaborating as true partners,” Branch says. “These relationships give us a bigger voice, a better understanding of the people we serve, and the opportunity to carve out a broad-based agenda that can better meet the needs of people who are blind or visually impaired.”

A certified public accountant, Branch is a Houston native who earned a degree in accounting and business administration from Texas A&M University. She has won acclaim for her outstanding leadership of NewView Oklahoma, (formerly the Oklahoma League for the Blind), which provides a wide array of rehabilitation services and employment opportunities for Oklahomans who are blind. This year marks her 25th anniversary at the helm of the agency.

Under Branch’s tenure, NewView has experienced dynamic growth, employing more than 150 people, most of whom are blind or low vision, and serving thousands of Oklahomans with vision loss. In the process, NewView has become the largest employer of people who are blind in the state and received recognition as one of the nation’s premier organizations providing comprehensive services for people losing their vision. Its many successes earned the organization a 2022 Talent and Workforce Innovator of the Year Award from central Oklahoma’s 405 Business magazine.

Despite this progress, Branch believes there is still much more to do to ensure that people who are blind have full access to technology, training, and opportunities to build a more fulfilling life.

Recognizing the value of partnerships to help achieve her goals, Branch has engaged and won the support of key civic and business leaders in Oklahoma. In addition, she reaches out to colleagues across the nation to compare notes and learn new ways to better serve Oklahomans who are blind.

Those efforts led to her leadership role with VisionServe Alliance, a St. Louis-based organization dedicated to improving the quality of life for people across the country who are coping with vision loss.

“Our vision for the Alliance is to serve as a national resource for issues affecting people who are blind,” Branch explains. “We want to be a thought leader and to move forward policies that will ultimately empower us to provide services to people who need them.”

As a member of the NIB board of directors, Branch sees opportunities for all three organizations to work together to achieve mutual goals. She notes that NewView, NIB, and VisionServe Alliance are working together to lay a foundation for public policy changes that will enable all people who are blind to have access to services and the opportunity to meet their own goals, including building a fulfilling career, if that is their wish.

She says the key to making this happen is influencing policy to ensure services for individuals experiencing vision loss are properly funded.

“At the end of the day our focus will always be meeting the needs of the community, be it on a micro or macro level,” Branch says. “The more that we can collaborate and provide a collective voice on critical issues impacting people who are blind and visually impaired, the better off it will be.”

Dominic Calabrese, a freelance writer, professor, and consultant in Chicago, Illinois, previously served as senior vice president, public relations, at The Chicago Lighthouse for People Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired.
Supporting National Disability Employment Awareness Month

When you shop SKILCRAFT® you create U.S.-based jobs for people who are blind, including our nation’s veterans.

Learn more at NIB.org/ShopSKILCRAFT
For Warren Walker, the 2022 Peter J. Salmon Employee of the Year Award winner from Bestwork Industries for the Blind in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, being nominated by his co-workers as the agency’s employee of the year was particularly meaningful. Being selected by NIB as the national winner of the Salmon award is something he never anticipated.

The award, which honors employees who excel in their positions at NIB associated agencies, is named for the late Dr. Peter J. Salmon, who was instrumental in the passage of the Wagner O-Day Act and the formation of NIB.

Known among his coworkers as the “voice of the people,” Walker always knew that helping others was his life’s calling. After graduating from high school, he studied and earned his state certification as a nursing assistant (CNA).

For the next 20 years, Walker built a career working in local hospitals and assisted-care facilities in the Cherry Hill area. His life changed, however, in 2001, when his retinas detached and he suddenly lost his eyesight.

The evening it happened, recalls Walker, was like any other. He went to bed able to see, but when he woke up, he knew something was wrong. Walker drove into work that day, although he’s still not sure how he did it. Once there, he admitted to coworkers during a morning meeting that he could only see shapes and shadows.

Walker grieved the loss of his eyesight, but soon tapped into his inner resiliency. As a husband and father, he was determined to continue providing for his family and began working with rehabilitation specialists to learn the skills he would need to re-enter the workforce.

In 2002, Walker was hired as a sewing machine operator at Bestwork Industries. With his finger dexterity limited due to diabetes, he transitioned to a packaging role.

Throughout the years, he has worked on various packaging lines, including packing clothing for the Navy. He takes great pride in his work, especially the ability to help support the military.

Walker serves on the agency’s Employee Relations and Safety committees, and since 2018, has been chair of the Quality Work Environment (QWE) committee, an initiative of the U.S. AbilityOne Commission®.

“Warren has been a keen player on the QWE committee,” says Human Resource Manager Linda Parker. “He is so outgoing and respected, he can ask questions of even the most reserved employees, people who wouldn’t normally talk to their managers, and gain valuable insight from them.”

Because Walker is so approachable, Parker has made him a central player in her tours of the agency.

“I often give tours to candidates before they even interview for the job, so they can get a sense of our work and mission. I always stop wherever Warren is because he is so welcoming. He tells candidates about his job and what it’s like to work here,” she explains.

“After a person is hired, Warren follows up to make sure they’re settling in. He would give the shirt off his back for his fellow employees.”

“Warren is an exemplary employee who goes above and beyond for his work and his coworkers,” says Bestwork Industries President and CEO Jon Katz. “It’s an honor to work with him, and we look forward to his continuing contributions.”

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

BY SHARON HORRIGAN

2022 MILTON J. SAMUELSON CAREER ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

JENNIFER HOLLADAY

CINCINNATI ASSOCIATION FOR THE BLIND AND VISUALLY IMPAIRED
CINCINNATI, OHIO

To say Jennifer Holladay keeps busy as manager of information and volunteer services at the Cincinnati Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired (CABVI) is an understatement. Her role involves leading four staff members and hundreds of volunteers who help the agency throughout the year with special events, mailings, audio information services, and more.

“My passion is helping volunteers ‘fill their cup’ with the volunteer opportunity they most enjoy,” Holladay explains.

That passion led NIB to award Holladay the 2022 national Milton J. Samuelson Career Achievement Award. The award is named for former NIB board member and executive director of The Chicago Lighthouse for People Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired, Milton J. Samuelson, who advocated for upward mobility and placement programs benefitting people who are blind or visually impaired.

Blind since birth, Holladay grew up on a small farm in Northern Kentucky, where she participated in 4H, showing lambs and rabbits, and served as vice president of the local FFA Organization (formerly known as Future Farmers of America). She first came to CABVI in third grade and continued participating in programs to fine-tune her mobility, access technology, and communication skills through college.

Holladay, who has a bachelor’s degree in communications and a master’s degree in public administration, joined the agency in 2003 as a summer intern working in community relations. She was hired in 2006 as coordinator of volunteers for the agency’s One-on-One services and promoted to her current role in 2016.

A large part of Holladay’s role involves CABVI’s audio information services, including the Radio Reading Service, CABVI’s own radio station that broadcasts daily news from local and national newspapers and magazines 24/7 and, in conjunction with the National Library Service for the Blind and Print Disabled, the Talking Books Service that allows people who are visually impaired to listen to books and magazines recorded by professional narrators.

“One of my greatest accomplishments was leading a team of staff and volunteers to transition to reading and recording remotely at the onset of the pandemic,” she says.

Since joining the agency, Holladay has worked to increase her knowledge and participation in fundraising as a way to increase state-level support for CABVI’s information services.

Specifically, she is working to create an additional studio for the agency’s radio reading services. She also helped evolve the technology platforms for Audio Information Services by launching podcast and echo programs for easier and broader accessibility.

Named chair of CABVI’s mission commission in 2021, Holladay works on accessibility at the agency to make sure people who are blind or have low vision are being heard. “It’s exciting to work on a cross-departmental team comprised solely of people who are blind,” she says.

“Jennifer has been part of our community relations team since I joined CABVI nearly six years ago,” says Vice President of Community Relations and Chief Development Officer Aaron Bley. “She is an amazing manager and advocate for our agency, but more importantly, for our mission. Her commitment to continually learning and growing as a leader is inspiring. She positively touches everyone she is around.”

CABVI President and CEO Teri Shirk agrees. “Jennifer’s career and growth as a leader within CABVI is impressive. She continues, as she has for many years, to seek new opportunities for professional and personal growth. She is so deserving of this recognition and honor; CABVI is excited to celebrate with her.”

“My goal is to continue to grow opportunities for individuals who are blind or visually impaired to have as many ways to access print material as possible,” Holladay says. “I want to make a positive difference in other people’s lives.”
2022 EMPLOYEES OF THE YEAR

Brian Anderson
Lions Services
Clovernook Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired

Steve Anderson
Lions Volunteer Blind Industries

Khadija Bari
Goodwill Vision Enterprises

James Caldwell
Envision Dallas

Felix Castaneda
East Texas Lighthouse for the Blind

Paul Eriksen
Lions Volunteer Blind Industries

Lashawn Ford
Central Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired

Lisa Dixon
Chicago Lighthouse Industries

Rosemary Nedimyer
West Texas Lighthouse for the Blind

Haley Newell
Goodwill Vision Enterprises

Keli O’Dell
Outlook Nebraska

Tereso Prado, Jr.
Industries for the Blind

Kenneth Prunier
Northeastern Association for the Blind at Albany

Teresa Smith
Lions Volunteer Blind Industries

Sarah Tamez
Travis Association for the Blind

Charles Uno
North Central Sight Services

Nancy Valvano
Association for Vision Rehabilitation and Employment

Ryan Benjamin
Southern Tier Association for the Visually Impaired

Tammy Clardy
Lighthouse for the Blind, St. Louis

Lisa Dixon
Goodwill Vision Enterprises

Shawn Dobbs
The Lighthouse for the Blind, Inc.

Calvin Echevarria
Beyond Vision

Jose Martinez
San Antonio Lighthouse for the Blind

Shawn Morrison
Industries for the Blind

Rosemary Nedimyer
VIA: Visually Impaired Advancement

Sueellen Porter
North Central Sight Services

Lorenzo Reyna
South Texas Lighthouse for the Blind

Stacy Fuehrer
Beyond Vision

Corina Salinas
South Texas Lighthouse for the Blind
FEATURE STORY

AGENCY AWARDS

Each year, NIB recognizes outstanding performance by associated nonprofit agencies at the NIB/NAEPB Training Conference and Expo.

Base Supply Center Excellence Awards

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

Base Supply Center Excellence Award
Langley Air Force Base
Operated by Virginia Industries for the Blind

Established in February 2000, the Langley Air Force Base BSC provides essential mission support to the 633rd Air Base Wing support groups. The team has a wealth of knowledge and experience that translates into excellent customer care and outstanding service. The Langley BSC received a Best Practice score of 100% on its compliance audit, and has maintained zero essentially the same (ETS) products for many years. The store has embraced bringing in new AbilityOne items to both support manufacturing agencies and offer customers the latest AbilityOne products.

Base Supply Center Excellence Award
Beale Air Force Base
Operated by Industries for the Blind and Visually Impaired

Established in 1999, the Beale Air Force Base AbilityOne BSC prides itself on supporting Air Force customers and the AbilityOne® Program. The Beale BSC has received Best Practice scores of 99-100% on its last three compliance visits, and has been ETS-free for multiple years. The store has an outstanding record of customer service and flexibility in handling ongoing deployments, and was instrumental in supporting the base with personal protective equipment supplies during the pandemic. Customers on base have great respect and trust in store personnel and the AbilityOne mission.

Base Supply Center Excellence Award
Travis Air Force Base
Operated by South Texas Lighthouse for the Blind

The Travis Air Force Base BSC has become a one-stop-shop known for outstanding customer service. The team is operationally focused and takes great pride in providing base customers with both routine and urgently needed supplies, with base leadership giving team members high praise for their dedication in meeting essential last-minute deployment deadlines. In addition to fulfilling service members’ supply needs, Team Travis is always ready and willing to go the extra mile to make job opportunities available to people in the local community who are blind or visually impaired.
QUALITY WORK ENVIRONMENT AWARD

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

MidWest Enterprises for the Blind — Kalamazoo, Michigan

MidWest Enterprises for the Blind began its QWE initiative in 2012. Each year, the agency forms a new QWE team and implements a new QWE action plan. Leadership at MidWest Enterprises for the Blind has incorporated the QWE initiative in the agency’s culture, including its strategic plan. This year, MidWest Enterprises for the Blind showed improvement in each of the four QWE tenants: Enhancement through productivity, assistive technology, agency culture, and incentives; Creative opportunities for work of choice; Linking and outreach to the community; and Supporting health, safety and communication in the work environment.

AGENCY ACHIEVEMENT AWARDS

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

Small Agency
Columbia Lighthouse for the Blind

Medium Agency
Lighthouse Works!

Large Agency
San Antonio Lighthouse for the Blind and Vision Impaired
FEATURE STORY

BUSINESS PARTNER AND CUSTOMER RECOGNITION

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

NAEPB Supplier of the Year Awards

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

Large Business Supplier of the Year: EMP Technical Group
EMP Technical has been a trusted partner of Bosma Enterprises for more than 14 years. EMP has helped Bosma create systems that make its business more efficient, effective, and accessible for employees who are blind or visually impaired. EMP works tirelessly to design and customize hardware and software for labeling and shipping Bosma products that not only meet the accessibility needs of Bosma employees, but comply with labeling requirements of the federal government.

Small Business Supplier of the Year: Massif
A champion of the AbilityOne® Program, Massif has shown remarkable support to Envision Xpress Base Supply Centers and to all NIB agencies operating BSCs. Massif Government Sales Representative Garrett Podesta routinely recommends that customers purchase Massif products through AbilityOne BSCs. In addition, Massif created a video, The Journey Home, that showcases how National Industries for the Blind and the AbilityOne Program empower people who are blind or visually impaired to live more independent lives through meaningful employment.

ETS Champion Award

Jon Kult
Analysis and Product Development Manager
Outlook Nebraska

Knowing the impact essentially-the-same (ETS) merchandise can have on the AbilityOne mission, NIB invested in a web-based data solution to position ETS efforts for the future. Jon Kult, of Outlook Nebraska, played an essential role in the development of the new ETS app, serving as the “voice of the customer” during design of the user interface and providing invaluable input about what NIB associated nonprofit agencies engaged in manufacturing would see as the objective(s) of the app and how to make functions easier to achieve.

Throughout alpha and beta testing Jon was methodical in reviewing and providing detailed evaluations to the app the developers. As one of the most prolific operators of the app, Jon paved the way for other nonprofit agencies, strengthening ETS coverage for his portfolio and furthering our mission.

Partnership in Excellence Award

David Guillemette
Senior Supplier Performance Analyst
W.W. Grainger, Inc.

Gabrielle Horton
Senior Government Sales Manager
W.W. Grainger, Inc.

Lance Belcher
Contract Specialist
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Joe Diaz
Chief Operating Officer
Didlake

Steve Coons
President
FedCap
Federal Customer Appreciation Award

U.S. Department of Commerce

Christopher Wallis
Director of Acquisition Services
Enterprise Services

Consumer Financial Protection Bureau

Laurent Pichet
Senior Contracting Officer

Stephanie Basham
Realty Officer
Administrative Operations

U.S. General Services Administration

Carol Brown
Procurement Analyst/Contracting Officer
Federal Acquisition Service
Region 2

Theresa Cox
Contract Specialist
Southwest Supply Acquisition Center

Trista Verga
Procurement Analyst
Federal Acquisition Service

DOD Customer Appreciation Award

Defense Logistics Agency-Troop Support

Don Albanese
Contract Specialist

Michelle Falkowski
Contracting Officer

Brian Schott
Manufacturer/Distributor
Directorate of Medical Materiel
Medical/Surgical Branch

Defense Contract Management Agency

Aaron Marlin
Industrial Specialist, Pre-Award Survey Manager

Naval Air Systems Command

Captain Matt Brickhaus
Director
Naval Air Warfare Center
Fleet Readiness Command V25

Naval Supply Systems Command

Steven Forster
Procurement Analyst
NEW PRODUCTS

2022 NEW PRODUCTS ROLLOUT

In fiscal year 2022, employees who are blind working at NIB associated nonprofit agencies produced new SKILCRAFT® products ranging from office furnishings and computer accessories to food service and operating supplies, and essentials for keeping facilities sparkling clean to enhance health and safety. These products and many more are available to federal government customers through the AbilityOne® Program.

OFFICE ESSENTIALS

SKILCRAFT® introduced two new members to its extensive line of writing instruments. Draft Pro Mechanical Drafting Pencils, available in fine or medium point, feature a stainless-steel etched grip, dual-action retractor, and stationary eraser and tip. SLV-Performer Retractable Ballpoint Pens, available in blue or black ink, deliver a high-performance writing experience in a value-priced everyday pen with a soft, latex-free, ridged rubberized comfort grip and low viscosity ink for smooth, smear-free, skip-free writing.

SKILCRAFT® Synthetic Paper has the appearance, smoothness, and printability of paper, yet is made using polyester film with a deluxe matte coating to resist water, oil, grease, weather, tearing, wrinkling, and fading. Food safe, foldable, synthetic paper can be wiped down with a wet cloth or mild cleanser or used with laser, offset, and flexo printers to eliminate the need to laminate documents.

Keep track of important dates and meetings with SKILCRAFT® Calendars and Planners made of 100% post-consumer recycled paper and printed with soy inks. Available in a variety of sizes and styles including monthly, weekly, and daily wire bound appointment planners, 12-month wall calendars in three sizes, and two-sided erasable laminated calendars.

A new collection of ID holders and lanyards offers something for every employee. Patriotic Neck Lanyards feature a red, white, and blue cord with adjuster, side release buckle, and breakaway connection for safety in areas with machinery and other hazards. Lightweight 36” long Face Mask Lanyards have a ¾” wide black strap, breakaway clasp, and two sturdy metal hooks to keep masks secure and easily accessible when needed.
New card and credential holder choices launched in FY2022 include a closed-face **RFID Dual Card Holder** with side release buckle and removable braided loop; vertical and horizontal **Credential Holders** made of polyester nylon with a clear vinyl insert area and top-loading zipper closure in rear; and rigid **Dual Card ID Holders** that accommodate two standard size credit cards, IDs, or Smart Cards, with slot and chain holes for easy attachment to lanyards, strap clips, and badge reels.

SKILCRAFT expanded its range of computer accessories with **Kensington®/SKILCRAFT® Computer Locks**, designed to protect data and secure physical devices with an innovative solution that meets industry-leading standards for tamper resistance, reliability, and durability. **Full Screen Privacy Filters** made using quality 3M™ materials work with flat borderless computer monitors by darkening on-screen data viewed from any angle to prevent visual hacking.

Laptop users can double their screen space with the 14.1” full HD display **Mobile Pixel® SKILCRAFT® Portable Laptop Monitor**, which connects easily via included USB cable for viewing in portrait, presentation, or landscape mode. For economical printing, competitively priced, remanufactured HP-compatible **SKILCRAFT® Laser Toner Cartridges** use precision color cartridge technology to meet HP standards for page yield, image quality, and color precision.

Help employees keep track of time in buildings that can’t receive radio-controlled atomic signals with **SKILCRAFT® LED Self-set Digital Clocks** that automatically adjust for daylight savings time so the energy-efficient LED screen display is always correct. For less sensitive buildings, **SKILCRAFT® Battery-Operated Wall Clocks** feature quartz movements that ensure accuracy to within two minutes per year and are available with a variety of clock faces including traditional, American Flag, safety message, or high-contrast, all with a shatter-resistant, UV coated clear lens that prevents fading.

Office furnishings available to federal customers include easy-to-carry, commercial-grade **Blow-Molded Folding Tables** made of high-density polyethylene with contemporary beveled radius edged tops. Suitable for indoor or outdoor use, these tables weigh 30% less than standard wood laminate folding tables but are far more durable and carry a 5-year limited warranty. Pair them with ergonomically contoured, blow molded **Lightweight Commercial-Grade Folding Chairs** with an extra wide seat for comfort and plastic feet that won’t mar floors.
NEW PRODUCTS
Continued from page 15

FOOD SERVICE AND OPERATING SUPPLIES

The SKILCRAFT® Bio+ line of foodservice cleaners are approved by the EPA Safer Choice/Design for the Environment Program (DfE). Choose from Flatware Pre-soak, Manual Dish Soap, Dishwasher Detergent, Solid Multipurpose Cleaner, and Solid Floor Cleaner to keep dishes, flatware, utensils, food prep areas, and kitchens sparkling clean.

Keep food service lines humming with new essentials like EPA-registered PURE® Hard Surface Disinfectant which sanitizes food contact surfaces in as little as 30 seconds, meets EPA criteria for use against SARS-CoV-2, and offers 24-hour residual protection. Ambidextrous latex- and powder-free multi-purpose Food Service Gloves made of clear polyethylene provide protection for food preparation and serving, and comply with FDA regulations. Generous capacity USDA bio-preferred SKILCRAFT® Disposable Paper Bowls are a must-have for break rooms, dining facilities, and any event where food is served.

CLEANING AND JANITORIAL SUPPLIES

Monitor product levels to keep employees and customers safe from more than 99% of most common germs with the PURELL® SKILCRAFT® ES8 Dispenser System that combines the most trusted name in hand hygiene with a revolutionary dispenser system. PURELL® SKILCRAFT® Professional Surface Disinfecting Wipes, proven to kill COVID-19 in just 30 seconds, provide a convenient way to wipe down surfaces and stop the spread of colds, flu, E. coli, strep, and other common viruses and bacteria.

The Just Add Water System (JAWS®) Disinfectant Cleaner eliminates grease, dirt, and grime, and kills SARS-CoV-2 on hard, non-porous surfaces with an ultra-concentrated, no-rinse agent that cleans, disinfects, and deodorizes in one step while saving storage space and helping the environment. In settings where water is not accessible, textured pre-moistened GOJO® SKILCRAFT® Scrubbing Towels tackle tough cleaning jobs including heavy soils, tar, grease, and adhesives with a fresh citrus scent and skin conditioners to prevent dryness and irritation.

Keep restrooms clean and stocked with products including the SKILCRAFT® Extra Wide-Angle Broom with a 15” sweeping path and angled bristles made of heavy-duty fibers to reach into corners and under tight spaces. Decrease service intervals and reduce risk of run out in high traffic areas with SKILCRAFT® Coreless 2-Ply Toilet Paper designed to fit existing dispensers and save storage space. Keep public or commercial restrooms smelling fresh and clean with environmentally friendly SKILCRAFT® Lasting Power and Extended Power Urinal Screens made of a polymer compound to deodorize with a fresh scent, eliminate virtually all splash back, and filter debris to prevent clogged drains.

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.
AIRA EVERYWHERE: GREATER CHOICES IN HANDS-FREE VISUAL ASSISTANCE

BY DOUG GOIST

In the fall 2017 issue of Opportunity I reviewed the breakthrough real-time service offered by Aira Tech, a San Diego venture startup that aims to make life easier for people who are blind. The Aira service pairs users who are blind or visually impaired with vetted, trained “visual interpreters” who are on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week to assist with visual tasks, including identifying clothing colors, reading documents, navigation and wayfinding, and computer tasks such as helping translate inaccessible visual screen Captcha challenges.

Aira users, called “Explorers,” download the free Aira app to their smartphones and connect with a remote visual agent through their cameras and microphones in seconds. While the service does require a monthly no-contract subscription for extended use (which works out to around $1 minute), people without a subscription can access five minutes of use in every 24-hour period absolutely free.

When I met with Troy Otillio, Aira’s CEO, at the 2022 Disability: In Global Conference and Expo in July he was excited to tell me about Aira’s brand new product, Aira Everywhere. With Aira Everywhere, he explained, Aira Explorers can go beyond their smartphones and access Aira visual interpreters through new augmented reality (AR) glasses, a new mobile device, or right from their computers through the Aira Everywhere Desktop app.

Otillio said the new features are a product both of Aira’s desire to provide additional hardware options for more flexible access and its discovery that more than 20% of all Explorer requests involve computer-related tasks.

Still in beta at the time of this writing, Aira Everywhere will feature all new access through a new ARXVision headset (purchased separately), the Aira Classic 2 app for the tactile BlindShell mobile phone (purchased separately) and the Aira Everywhere Desktop app.

According to Aira’s press release, the company is announcing Aira Everywhere in response to demand for more devices and form factors that are optimized for the task at hand.

Since the Aira Everywhere Desktop app can be implemented by all Aira Explorers who use computers, this review is limited to the desktop feature which will likely benefit users who are blind or visually impaired the most within their workplaces.

So how does it work? Users download the Aira Desktop app to their computers and once launched, can connect with visual interpreters directly — no more frustrations using one hand to hold your smartphone camera up to the computer screen while trying to type with your other hand.

Aira says its Desktop app has “built-in, secure, and efficient screen sharing” but cautions that it cannot support remote access or screen control “due to important security limitations that prevent web apps from taking control of a desktop.”

With these new features, Aira users will be able to more efficiently manage both personal and work-related documentation, such as signing and uploading medical forms, or working with complex or inaccessible digital documents, without ever leaving the keyboard or touching their smartphones.

Since Aira Everywhere offers a new set of features, the company expects there may be an initial glitch or two while they integrate all three capabilities: the desktop app, the ARXVision headset, and the BlindShell phone app. As a result, user patience will be needed as Aira Everywhere is still brand new.

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.
STRONGER TOGETHER

VisionServe Alliance brings together representatives from a wide range of organizations to advance the interests of people who are blind.

BY SHARON HORRIGAN

Established in 1987 with the aim of providing a forum where leaders of organizations serving people who are blind or low vision could meet and collaborate, VisionServe Alliance (VSA) continues its unique mission with more than 135 members representing the rehabilitation services, employment, and consumer group sectors.

Simply put, says Erika Petach, a member of VSA’s board of directors and president of NIB associated nonprofit agency Blind and Vision Rehabilitation Services of Pittsburgh (BVRS), “VSA’s goal is to strengthen the field. And it has.”

Members often join the alliance for the networking opportunities, but stay for the executive-level educational opportunities and advocacy, says Petach. “It’s through our networking opportunities that members see that they are all part of the same ecosystem,” notes Lee Nasehi, president and CEO of VSA.

All for One and One for All

One of VSA’s goals, says Nasehi, is to determine which issues can be addressed more effectively by the group than by individual organizations.

“We want to tackle problems that affect us all,” explains Bernadette Kappen, Ph.D., VSA’s vice chair and past secretary of the board who also serves as executive director of the New York Institute for Special Education. Founded as a school for the blind, the 191-year-old organization now includes other schools for people with disabilities.

“For example, accessibility — from employment to transportation, from print to technology, they are all interrelated,” explains Kappen. “VSA asks how members can coordinate efforts, but through collaboration and discussion, we also get a sense of others’ needs. We all represent blind and low vision service providers, but we are a diverse group with different needs and interests.”

“When we defined VSA’s goals, we tried to answer the following questions,” says Nasehi. “First, how will our actions impact the people we serve? We’re here to improve the lives of people who are blind or low vision. Second, what can we do to strengthen our members so they can better help their constituents? And finally, what are the issues best addressed by working together that we can’t do individually?”

The answers to those questions, says Nasehi, formed VSA’s foundation. Networking and collaborative experiences help define the first question — how VSA’s actions will improve the lives of members’ constituents. Conferences and educational experiences focus on executive-level skills with the goal of improving services at the agency level. Determining which issues are best addressed by working together drives the agency’s public policy activities.

The National Policy Collaborative

In the area of public policy, says Nasehi, VSA’s focus is on creating community among blind and low vision service providers. To that end, the National Policy Collaborative was formed in 2019 to provide opportunities for organizations to share their immediate public policy advocacy priorities so efforts can be coordinated.

The National Policy Collaborative is an alliance of CEOs and public policy teams from NIB, the National Association for the Employment of People Who Are Blind, the American Council of the Blind, the Academy for Certification of Vision Rehabilitation and Education Professionals, the Association for Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind and Visually Impaired, the American Foundation for the Blind, the American Printing House for the Blind, the Blinded Veterans Association, the National Federation of the Blind, and Prevent Blindness.

“We were given the mandate to form the collaborative by the field,” recalls Nasehi. “Our highest value for the collaborative is open, honest communication that helps us understand others’ points of view when we don’t agree. It’s been a great experience.”

The National Policy Collaborative is not the only example of VSA’s dedication...
to bringing together organizations working in the interest of people who are blind. The recently launched Big Data project will, when complete, bring valuable information to the entire field. It’s also a great example of VSA’s responsiveness to member needs.

The Big Data Project
Launched in 2021 with The Ohio State University College of Optometry, the first phase of the Big Data Project collected state-level data on the rates of blindness and low vision among people 65 years and older in eight states: Pennsylvania, New York, California, Louisiana, Florida, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Illinois. Dedicated to completing the project for the entire country, VSA is recruiting 10 more states for the next phase. The project is also collecting data on chronic conditions, quality of life, and disability indicators among older people with or without vision impairments that advocates and policy makers can use in developing programs to improve constituents’ lives.

“We struggle with data in this field, and have for years,” explains Petach. “VSA heard our concerns, and launched the project. To have hard, usable data on who has vision loss and the services they need helps us tremendously in developing programs and services, and in our fundraising efforts,” she said. “This project is also a great example of how action oriented VSA is. Members identified the need and VSA made getting that data a priority.”

Dennis Steiner, president and CEO of NIB associated agency VisionCorps, says his agency uses information from the Big Data Project when meeting with legislators. “Before, it was primarily a networking organization. Now, it’s taking on a leadership role in bringing more organizations in the field together. Our business is really scattered. VSA brings us together.”

When he became president and CEO, Steiner focused first on learning the role. After about a year, he recalls, he attended his first VSA conference. “I had been more on the employment side of things before I became CEO,” he explains. “It was through VSA that I got to meet other people in the rehabilitation field. It really helped me learn the rehabilitation side of things.”

Kappen said she joined VSA for much the same reason — to network with peers in the field. “I didn’t know much about it initially,” she recalls. “Then I learned they represented those organizations in education as well, so I went to a meeting. I wanted to be able to talk with others in the same occupation so we could learn from each other. That first meeting was incredible. I felt so welcomed from the minute I stepped through the door.”

For Petach, VSA has been invaluable to her career development. “I came to BVRS without a background in working with people who are blind and visually impaired. The previous president had been a VSA member, so I just continued the membership. One VSA conference in and I was hooked. I have learned more from VSA members than anywhere else.”

Far from resting on such accolades, VSA continues to evolve, notes Steiner. “Before, it was primarily a networking organization. Now, it’s taking on a leadership role in bringing more organizations in the field together. Our business is really scattered. VSA brings us together.”

Steiner credits much of that evolution to Nasehi. “She has brought focus and clarity to the organization. She’s a visionary who has great passion for the field. Because of Lee’s leadership, I have great confidence in the future of VSA.”

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

VisionServe’s Value Proposition
VisionCorps offers a perfect example of VSA’s value proposition for members. Established in 1926, the agency today serves five counties in Pennsylvania, offering rehabilitation services to more than 1,200 individuals a year, and vision pre-screenings to about 8,500 preschool children annually. It’s rehabilitation arm offers case management services, orientation and mobility training, and assistive technology training. VisionCorps’ business side, which employs 150 people, provides well over $1 million per year in support to the agency’s rehabilitation services, according to Steiner.

President and CEO Lee Nasehi says VSA is working to determine which issues can be addressed more effectively by the group than by individual organizations.
LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Lighthouse for the Blind, St. Louis, expands job opportunities while investing in youth.

BY ROSEMARIE LALLY, J.D.

For nearly 90 years, NIB associated nonprofit agency Lighthouse for the Blind, St. Louis, (LHB) has provided employment opportunities as well as educational and support services for people who are blind. The agency distinguishes itself by directing most of its community outreach efforts — and proceeds from its manufacturing activities — toward serving school-age children and young adults to build their self-confidence and independence for long-term success.

Since its launch in 1933, the Lighthouse has added new product lines and expanded its manufacturing facilities to two locations: a liquid and aerosol manufacturing plant; and a packaging and kitting facility. Together the facilities manufacture, fill, and package more than 200 products for the federal government and commercial customers.

“We hold over 20 contracts with federal agencies covering more than 200 liquid and aerosol products,” says Director of Marketing and Public Relations Brittney Bettonville. “We are the only aerosol manufacturing facility in the world operated primarily by people who are blind.”

In 2014, the agency, which has approximately 100 employees, adopted a strategy of acquiring assets of commercial companies to broaden its customer base and provide additional employment opportunities, Bettonville explains. As a result, the Lighthouse now produces products under four commercial brands: Quake Kare® disaster preparedness kits and emergency supplies for the home, office, and classroom; Tear Mender® instant fabric adhesive; RapidFix® dual liquid adhesive system; and Badge Magic®/CosBond®, an instant adhesive for attaching badges to uniforms.

Acquisitions Enhance Employment Opportunities

The acquisitions have enhanced employment opportunities and upward mobility at the Lighthouse. Jonathan Clemons, who joined the agency in 2010, was promoted in 2016 to lead line operator in the agency’s aerosol manufacturing plant, where his unit produces 10,000-20,000 cans of aerosol product each day. Clemons enjoys the responsibility and relishes the variety of work.

“My satisfaction comes from getting to work with the other people here,” he says. “It’s like a family.” A busy father of three high-school students, Clemons is active in counseling through his church, guiding men on how to be present for their children. In addition to his duties at the Lighthouse, he is working toward a counseling degree, which he views as his next professional step.

“Since coming to the Lighthouse, there have been no limits — there are so many opportunities to grow,” Clemons says. “I’m doing challenging work I love. I’ve gotten promotions and been able to provide for my children and buy a home. This job has been a blessing.”

Tammy Clardy, the Lighthouse’s 2022 nominee for the Milton J. Samuelson Career Achievement award, is an example of career growth. As an accounting department employee for 23 years, she recently mastered advanced Excel so she could fill in when her manager took a leave of absence. In addition, she stepped into a new role as public policy liaison and joined NIB’s Advocates for Leadership and Employment program.

Clardy returned home from her first Advocates training session brimming with ideas for ways to spread the word about increasing employment opportunities for people who are blind. “I feel the need to share the Lighthouse’s mission with others because what we do here is so important,” she says.

Investing in the Next Generation

In addition to providing greater employment opportunities, the Lighthouse acquisition strategy funds See the Future, 23 community outreach programs assisting children and young adults who are blind or visually impaired throughout Missouri and Western Illinois.

The first See the Future program launched in 2005, says Angie Yorke, community programs manager. Since then, the
agency’s outreach programs have grown to include training in adaptive technology, independent living skills, professional career development, and vision assessment through a mobile low vision clinic.

See the Future participants are encouraged to take part in more than one program and often do. “Our goal is to teach activities of daily life, provide social interactions, and help build confidence, friendships, and independence,” Yorke explains.

“All the programs are very effective, but we feel the Summer Orientation and Mobility and Adapted Living Resource Program (SOAR) is among the best in the country for teaching independent living skills,” Yorke says, calling it “absolutely life changing.” The one-week, non-residential program begun in 2006 has grown into an intensive, three-week residential program that provides individualized instruction to youth who are blind and plan to seek competitive employment, attend vocational training, or go to college after high school.

Each summer 12 students aged 16-21 have the opportunity to attend the program at Webster University in Webster Groves, Missouri. There, they work one-on-one with instructors to master skills needed to live successfully on their own: orientation and mobility; cooking; travel using public transportation or a ride-share service; money management; self-care; and clothing management. In addition, students hone organizational skills, learn to craft a resume, and participate in mock job interviews. Guest presentations on topics ranging from guide dogs to self-defense round out the program.

In the afternoons, mentors engage students in recreational activities designed to build self-confidence and travel skills, such as attending a St. Louis Cardinals game, going to an arcade or water park, shopping, and dining out. SOAR also focuses on helping students learn to navigate interpersonal relationships, offering sessions on etiquette, dating and friendship, and sex education.

“The students form a life-long family over the course of three weeks. Many come in as shy and unsure, but at the end of the session they don’t want to go home. We often hear ‘This was the best three weeks of my life,’ ” Yorke says. “And parents are amazed. They’ll say, ‘She’s a whole new person since she came home.’ ”

Another signature education program offered by the Lighthouse is Space Camp for Interested Visually Impaired Students (SCIVIS), a one-week residential program held each September at the U.S. Space and Rocket Center in Huntsville, Alabama. The Lighthouse covers tuition for 30 U.S. and 20 international students aged 9-18 to participate in one of six programs geared toward their interests, learning through state-of-the-art simulations, experiments, and robotics exercises.

SCIVIS uses space to excite and educate students in the fields of math, science and technology, teaching teamwork, self-confidence, and communication skills. “Kids want to come back every year,” Yorke says.

In addition, the Lighthouse offers a variety of services to support young people who are blind, including braille tutoring for students and parents; a night orientation and mobility program to help students attain skills to travel safely after dark; summer jobs for legally blind students age 16 and older; recreational and developmental summer camps; and The Braille Box, a quarterly subscription-style box designed to help students practice their braille reading skills.

“If young people who are blind have unmet needs, we try to address them through outreach,” Yorke explains. “I’ve met such incredible people through these programs. Watching people go through life-changing experiences is such a privilege.”

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NYSPSP NAMES 2022 EMPLOYEE OF THE YEAR

Eric Clark, a 17-year employee of NIB associated nonprofit agency Northeastern Association for the Blind at Albany (NABA) has been named 2022 Employee of the Year by the New York State Preferred Source Program for New Yorkers Who Are Blind (NYSPSP). NYSPSP is a state-mandated program that creates and sustains employment opportunities for New Yorkers who are blind.

Clark, a sewing machine operator at NABA, works on reflective safety vests used to help keep Metropolitan Transit Authority and New York State Department of Transportation employees safe on the job. Known around the agency for his positive attitude, Clark’s exceptional work creates quality products that meet the high standards required by customers across the state.

In addition to his job responsibilities, Clark works with engineering students from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute on capstone projects to develop adaptive tools and equipment modifications for people who are blind. Recent projects Clark contributed to include creating fixtures that NABA employees use to sew zippers onto safety vests, as well as adaptations that assist the wider community of people who are blind or visually impaired, such as a gadget for putting toothpaste on a toothbrush, and a device that helps people find an outlet and plug in an electrical cord.

“Eric is an outstanding member of the NABA manufacturing team,” says agency President and CEO Laura Zeliger.

“I am so proud of our team. Having Eric receive the NYSPSP State Employee of the Year award is a great honor.”

Clark, who says he enjoys working at NABA, called the award “an unexpected honor.”

KEVIN LYNCH RECOGNIZED AS INFLUENTIAL LEADER

Virginia Business magazine named National Industries for the Blind President and CEO Kevin Lynch to its Virginia 500 Power List for 2022. The Power List recognizes the most powerful and influential leaders in the Commonwealth of Virginia who are making meaningful impacts in business, government, politics, and education.

Virginia Business magazine covers news and economic activity in every sector and every region of the Commonwealth. This is the second time Lynch has been included in the Virginia 500 list. He received recognition in the nonprofits and philanthropy category this year and in 2021.

NEWVIEW OKLAHOMA OPENS ITS FIRST BASE SUPPLY CENTER AT VANCE AIR FORCE BASE

NIB associated nonprofit agency NewView Oklahoma celebrated the grand opening of its first AbilityOne Base Supply Center® (BSC) at Vance Air Force Base (AFB) in July. Attendees at the event included Vance AFB Base Commander Col. Jay Johnson and NewView Oklahoma President and CEO Lauren Branch, in addition to employees, customers, and BSC vendors.

Attendees at the grand opening of the Vance Air Force Base BSC included (left to right) NewView Vice President of Marketing Ashley Howard; NewView Chief Innovation and Assistive Technology Officer Jack McMahan; NewView Chief Operating Office Damon Swift; Vance AFB Base Commander Col. Jay Johnson; NewView President and CEO Lauren Branch; BSC employees Leisha Arbone and Denise Hinkle, with store manager Robert Allen; Luis Lebron, Director of NIB’s Base Supply Centers Program; and NewView Service Contracts Director Patrick Palmer.
U.S. CENSUS BUREAU RECOGNIZES AUSTIN LIGHTHOUSE FOR OUTSTANDING SUPPORT

The U.S. Census Bureau recently recognized Austin Lighthouse for the Blind for providing outstanding support during the 2020 Census as the bureau’s supplier of PURELL® SKILCRAFT® sanitizer through the AbilityOne® Program. Participants in the recognition event included Census Bureau representatives and leaders from Austin Lighthouse including agency CEO Jim Meehan.

NDEAM RAISES AWARENESS OF EMPLOYEES WITH DISABILITIES

October is National Disability Employment Awareness Month (NDEAM) and NIB and its associated agencies across the country are joining together to raise awareness of disability employment issues. The 2022 theme, "Disability: Part of the Equity Equation" recognizes the vital role people with disabilities play in making the nation's workforce diverse and inclusive.

"A strong workforce is the sum of many parts, and disability has always been a key part of the equation," said Assistant Secretary for Disability Employment Policy Taryn M. Williams. “People with disabilities make up a wonderfully multifaceted group. By recognizing the full complexion of our community, we can ensure our efforts to achieve disability inclusion are, in fact, truly inclusive.”

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

GOODWILL VISION ENTERPRISES PATENTS AFFORDABLE ASSISTIVE DEVICE

The team at Goodwill Vision Enterprises in Rochester, New York, (formerly Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired) in collaboration with local volunteer mechanical and industrial engineers and the L.V. Prasad Eye Institute in Hyderabad, India, have created the ISEEIT Stand and ISEEIT app, a portable stand for mobile devices with a downloadable Android app to assist people with low vision.

The affordable ISEEIT Stand is a lightweight, versatile, hands-free mobile device stand created to encourage independence for people with low vision. The free ISEEIT app provides a full featured, easy-to-use magnifier and color remapping application compatible with Android devices.

When used together, the ISEEIT Stand and app create a more affordable, feature-rich video magnifier that can quickly and easily be set up or packed away in a briefcase, backpack, computer bag, or purse for portability.
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