

OPPORTUNITY

A PUBLICATION OF NATIONAL INDUSTRIES FOR THE BLIND



New Podcast Amplifies NIB's Mission

FEATURE
2024 NIB/NAEPB Public Policy Forum

AGENCY SPOTLIGHT
Carroll Center for the Blind

TECH CORNER
Be My AI

NIB'S NEXT CHAPTER



I am so honored to lead this phenomenal organization, with such a rich and powerful history of creating employment opportunities for people who are blind or visually impaired. And I'm proud to be part of an incredibly talented NIB team, or, as my predecessor Kevin Lynch has called them, a family, that is dedicated to our mission. It is my privilege to serve with them.

As I continue getting to know my new colleagues and our associated nonprofit agencies, I will listen, learn, and engage. I look forward to meeting employees at agencies across the country to learn how we can better serve the NIB community and create meaningful job opportunities that allow people to build careers of choice. I am eager to find new ways for NIB to evolve in service to our enduring mission.

This May, I will attend my first NIB/NAEPB Public Policy Forum and see how our advocacy work enhances lawmakers' understanding of and appreciation for the needs of people who are blind and visually impaired. This year, our Government Relations Campaign will have a single focus: urging Congress to adopt a 1% AbilityOne Program utilization goal for the Department of Defense. Our advocates — including our newest class of Advocates for Leadership and Employment — will take to Capitol Hill to speak with legislators about the importance of mandating this change. You can read more in this edition about how this goal will impact thousands of people.

For more than 85 years, NIB has remained focused on our enduring mission. As I get to know more about our community and all of those who are devoted to this important work, I look forward to planning how NIB can continue to grow and create even more opportunities for people who are blind or visually impaired to gain personal and economic independence over the next 85 years!



Scan the QR code for a special message from Soraya Correa, NIB's new president and CEO.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Soraya Correa'.

Soraya Correa
President and Chief
Executive Officer

OPPORTUNITY

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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](https://nib.org).



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ON THE COVER



NIB's Heard & Empowered podcast champions the brilliance and resilience of people who are blind. Page 6.



NIB Welcomes New President and CEO Soraya Correa

In February, National Industries for the Blind announced Soraya Correa as the organization's next president and CEO, following an extensive nationwide search. She officially took office on April 15, and Kevin Lynch, who served as NIB president and CEO for more than 15 years, retired on April 30.

"Soraya is an exceptional leader with the right expertise to guide NIB through its next chapter," said Dr. Paul Healy, chairperson of the NIB board of directors. "The board and I believe her substantial experience in government procurement, plus her record of exemplary leadership, will make a positive impact on career opportunities for people who are blind."

Correa developed extensive skills in government procurement as a contracting and program management professional, coupled with many years of experience leading and transforming organizations. A member of the Senior Executive Service, she held several leadership roles at the Department of Homeland Security, including chief procurement officer from 2015 until her retirement in 2021. Correa designed and implemented initiatives to enhance business operations and mission support

provided by more than 1,400 contracting professionals, who processed more than 70,000 procurement actions totaling over \$25 billion in goods and services each year.

Before joining NIB, she served as executive director of the National Contract Management Association Contract Management Institute, which provides research, studies, and analyses to enhance procurement and contracting business practices.

"I couldn't be more excited about the opportunity to lead an organization comprised of such outstanding individuals united by a vitally important mission," Correa said. "I believe that my government procurement background will be of great value in growing the organization and expanding employment opportunities for people who are blind."



Scan the QR code for a special message from Soraya Correa, NIB's new president and CEO.



Kevin Lynch Honored with 2024 R.B. Irwin Award

On May 14, Kevin Lynch received the 2024 R.B. Irwin Award, National Industries for the Blind's highest honor, in recognition of his career achievements. The award is named for Dr. Robert B. Irwin, executive director of the American Foundation for the Blind in the 1930s and a member of the team that pioneered NIB's formation.

"The R. B. Irwin Award is the highest honor given by NIB to a professional in the NIB community who has devoted their career to creating and improving employment for people who are blind. Speaking on behalf of the Board, we are delighted to bestow this award on Kevin Lynch," said Dr. Paul Healy, chairperson of the NIB board of directors.

Lynch dedicated 44 years to the mission of creating meaningful employment for people who are blind or

visually impaired. After serving with NIB associated nonprofit agencies Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired of Greater Rochester and Georgia Industries for the Blind, he joined NIB in December of 1994 as vice president of operations. He spearheaded the launch of the e-commerce platform known today as AbilityOne.com and established the AbilityOne Base Supply Centers — NIB opened the first store in 1996 at Fort Bragg. Today, there are more than 160 stores on military bases and federal installations across the nation.

As NIB's president and CEO from 2008 to 2024, Lynch successfully directed a network of nearly 100 associated nonprofit agencies that work in tandem with NIB and employ people who are blind. Lynch was the driving force behind the contract management support services program that has offered career opportunities for people who are blind to oversee contract administration; since 2010, these employees have identified \$25.7 billion in taxpayer funding to be deobligated and returned to the U.S. Treasury.

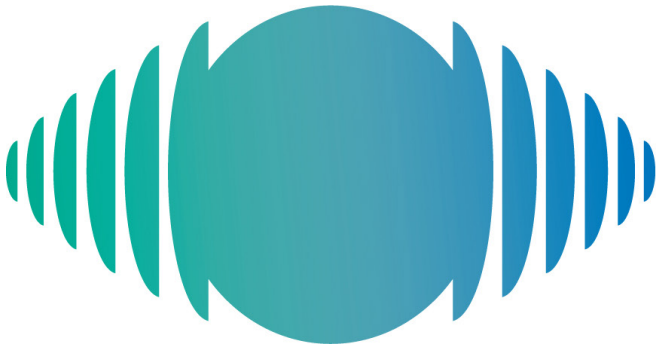
Throughout his career, Lynch spearheaded efforts to accelerate production of mission-critical products to meet surge requirements, whether for conflicts overseas or in response to natural disasters or the COVID pandemic. From combat uniforms to personal protective equipment, federal customers have been able to quickly and efficiently procure critical items from NIB, a trusted partner.

Under Lynch's guidance NIB saw tremendous growth, with product offerings increasing to more than 7,000 items, over 4,000 of them from SKILCRAFT. He oversaw the development and launch of NSITE, NIB's national talent management enterprise, in 2021. NSITE provides a continuum of employment services that connect employers with talented, dedicated people who are blind or visually impaired. This connection is critical given that people who are blind or visually impaired have two times greater unemployment rates than people who are sighted.

Lynch announced his retirement in 2023, and he officially stepped down on April 30.

"Retiring from NIB is bittersweet for me," explained Lynch. "I have thoroughly loved working with this amazing organization, and I am proud of all that we have achieved in support of our mission to create, sustain, and improve employment opportunities for people who are blind. NIB's future is very bright. I know there is no limit to what this community can achieve."

NIB Podcast Lives Up to Its Title



Heard & Empowered



Since its premier in November 2023, National Industries for the Blind's Heard & Empowered podcast has amassed more than 1,700 unique downloads and countless listens. Its inspiring content, which is specifically tailored to people who are blind and visually impaired, has been heard around the globe, from Australia to Zambia, and 19 other countries in between.

"I am so proud of what we're accomplishing with Heard & Empowered," said Hoby Wedler, the podcast's host. "Our guests opening their hearts and sharing their stories with us is what shows every listener, myself included, that anything is possible. We really do provide a platform where folks can share how they are celebrated in the workplace."

Launched as a forum to share job and career insights, insider tips, and personal stories of people who are blind and have lived experience navigating the work world, the podcast has profiled a wide swathe of individuals over its nearly 30 episodes. These guests come from every walk of life: CEOs, retired military veterans, sighted parents who advocate for their children who are blind, and more. Each week, Wedler's guests, all of whom are leading or working for or with NIB associated nonprofit agencies across the country, share personal stories about the ways they overcame adversity, successfully adapted and accommodated to the sighted world, and developed fulfilling careers. Some were born blind, while others lost

their sight as adults. Many had to push past their own fears and self-doubt to get where they are now.

Wedler himself was born completely blind. He holds a Ph.D. in organic chemistry and has spent his life turning obstacles into opportunities. He has dedicated his career to breaking down barriers and creating inclusive spaces for people who are blind or visually impaired and, in 2016, Wedler was named to *Forbes* "30 Under 30" list of bright young entrepreneurs, leaders, and stars. His own story is featured on the first episode of the podcast.

But Heard & Empowered is not only a podcast for people who are blind or visually impaired – it's also an invaluable resource for allies such as employers, educators, vocational trainers, policymakers, innovators, family members, advocates for social change, and anyone committed to building an inclusive society. Upcoming episodes will feature a conversation between former U.S. Representative Luke Messer and Jeff Mittman, chief executive officer of Bosma Enterprises, as well as Kevin Lynch, who just retired as NIB president and CEO after 30 years with the organization.

"The Heard & Empowered podcast has been such an exciting vehicle for sharing NIB's mission. Not only does it offer inspiring stories of people who are blind or visually impaired living fulfilling lives and building successful



Jonathan Lucas, executive director at NSITE, NIB's talent management enterprise, shared how NSITE provides training for blind and visually impaired individuals to develop or refine the skills they need. NSITE also matches employers with job seekers who are blind through its unique job board.

careers, but it also highlights the incredible work that NIB's associated nonprofit agencies are doing," said Aneta Zawila-Jordan, NIB vice president for marketing and communications.

Much of that work is focused on helping people who are blind or visually impaired achieve their employment goals.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the jobless rate for people with a disability is about twice as high as the rate for people without a disability. People who are blind have one of the highest unemployment rates, at 70%.

NIB is dedicated to changing these statistics. Heard & Empowered was created to help share success stories that offer encouragement to people who are blind or visually impaired and may be going through similar situations. Through the podcast, listeners can access in-depth interviews with subject matter experts.

Passionate about building a more inclusive future where the next generation of individuals who are blind can aspire without limits and be accepted without bias, Wedler said serving as Heard & Empowered's host is the highlight of his week. He even finds himself inspired by those he interviews.

Heard & Empowered: In A Nutshell

The podcast provides listeners with insights and practical advice on:

- The nuances of hiring professionals who are blind
- Ways to support job seekers who have visual disabilities
- Realities of the low cost for most accommodations
- How to encourage employees in their professional aspirations
- Leadership styles that create a more equitable professional environment

heardandempowered.org

New episodes are available each Wednesday online or via your favorite podcast platform. Amplify the movement: Subscribe, rate, and review the podcast!

The Reviews Are In!

I was so immersed in the story that I lost track of time



“It is moving, inspiring, exciting, dramatic, and motivating. Each episode shows you a lesson of life and provides great opportunities and resources for the visually impaired and blind population. For the rest of the population, it just shows you that heroes are simple humans in extraordinary circumstances, (and) I look forward to more episodes.”

jjr545rfr | United States | December 2023

Inspiring and informative!



“Very motivational and informative podcast packed with guidance for the blind and visually impaired community in reaching their career goals!”

astoicminimalist | Norway | November 2023

So much wisdom and empowerment



“This podcast must reach every person who is blind or visually impaired, there is so much potential, wisdom, and opportunity here. Amazing job NIB and everyone else involved. Dr. Hoby Wedler is a delight to listen to!”

Milspec1969 | Mexico | January 2024



Sharon Giovino, chief executive officer at the LightHouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired in San Francisco, pictured with her guide dog Shadow, talked with host Dr. Hoby Wedler about how she’s paying it forward by becoming the head of the organization that first helped her learn how to live with blindness.

“Every time I interview a guest, I prepare myself to be uplifted and rejuvenated. Hosting the podcast is not only rewarding for me; it helps my overall happiness and state of being. Our guests are incredible,” he said, adding his hosting role has encouraged him to think differently about what people who are blind or visually impaired can do in the workforce.

Wedler has also heard from Heard & Empowered listeners who are amazed at what podcast guests do every day.

“It’s not just a podcast for people interested in employment for the blind; it’s an inspirational podcast for everyone. Most listeners I know are ordinary people who had no idea NIB existed and absolutely love the work that’s being done,” he said, adding that “more than one listener has reached out to me with a sincere interest in hiring blind employees to work in their companies.”

Zawila-Jordan said Heard & Empowered is helping expand the narrative about the abilities of people

Top Five Episodes By Download

#1

EPISODE #3



From the Battleground to the Boardroom: A Career Path Like No Other with Jeff Mittman

#2

EPISODE #4



How to Find Your Path and Career Opportunities When You're Losing Your Vision with Rebekah Grieb

#3

EPISODE #1



About the Host: Discover Dr. Hoby Wedler's Story and Jumpstart Your Job Search

#4

EPISODE #10



Kyle Johnson Talks About Support, Help, and Advice to Find Meaningful Jobs for People With Vision Loss

#5

TIE – EPISODES #2 AND #11



How NIB Works and How NSITE Connects People Who Are Blind to Job Opportunities with Dr. Jonathan Lucus



Sophia McCall's Journey: From Depression and Blindness to a Thriving Career as an HR Recruiter

Know someone who would make an excellent guest on Heard & Empowered? Email communications@nib.org with your suggestion!

who are blind, many of whom have faced obstacles in achieving their career goals. She said it's also helping those still on their journey who may need just a little encouragement — especially from others who have confronted similar barriers — to take the next step in their professional lives.

“We are thrilled with how well the podcast has been received, and hope we are able to continue chronicling the experiences of people who are blind, and those who help advocate for them, for a long time,” said Zawila-Jordan.

Wedler can't wait to see where Heard & Empowered goes next.

“I hope Heard & Empowered takes center stage in the world of employment, human resources, etc. And hiring managers need to know that there's a workforce out there who is willing and able to work harder than their sighted peers and provides an angle of diversity that is unparalleled to their workplace.” ♦

Looking for Even More Inspiration?

Looking for an episode about a person who struggled after losing their sight, but persevered?

Try Episode #11 with Sophia McCall, Episode #7 featuring Lise Pace, or Episode #5 with Doug Goist.

Want to learn more about NIB, NSITE, or career opportunities, trainings, and internships, either in person or remotely?

Try Episode #2, featuring NSITE Executive Director Jonathan Lucus; Episode #6 with Richard Oliver; or Episodes #13 and #14 with Teri Shirk.

CHAMPIONING EMPLOYMENT GROWTH



Congress should adopt a 1% AbilityOne Program utilization goal for the Department of Defense to grow employment for people who are blind or have significant disabilities

How will a 1% goal make a significant impact on AbilityOne Program employees?

From 2018 to 2021, the Panel on Department of Defense (DOD) and AbilityOne Contracting Oversight, Accountability, and Integrity recommended a DOD AbilityOne utilization goal in four consecutive reports. In 2022, the DOD voluntarily pledged to double its utilization of the AbilityOne Program, increasing from 0.55% to 1% by 2027.

While this voluntary pledge was a great first step, Congress can now move to make that promise a reality.

Why is a mandatory goal important?

National Industries for the Blind (NIB) and its nearly 100 associated nonprofit agencies nationwide appreciate this commitment from the DOD, the AbilityOne Program's largest customer. We want to build momentum and formalize this pledge through Congressional adoption of a statutory goal of 1%.

Once the goal is cemented into law, Congress will regularly assess the DOD's utilization to ensure progress toward its achievement.

How will this goal benefit people who are blind or have significant disabilities?

The DOD, its branches of service, and its related

agencies hold contracts with AbilityOne nonprofit agencies nationwide that provide quality products and services. These employees take immense pride in their work to support the warfighter and help ensure our nation's security.

By formalizing this goal and nearly doubling the DOD's current utilization of the AbilityOne Program, tens of thousands more Americans who are blind or have significant disabilities could have the opportunity to build meaningful careers in both professional services and manufacturing that enhance their personal and economic independence.

Now is the time for Congress to take action.

NIB urges Congress to adopt a 1% AbilityOne statutory utilization goal for the DOD in 2024.

We need to expand career opportunities for employees with disabilities. These men and women are well poised to be able to choose the best career option to fulfill their personal version of the American Dream, with an employer that offers the accommodations and support they need to be successful.

It's the right thing to do, and now is the right time to act. ♦

To learn more about NIB's advocacy work and the 1% Department of Defense AbilityOne Program utilization goal, listen to these episodes of NIB's **Heard & Empowered** podcast.



April 24
Shannon Satterfield,
 NIB Advocate for Leadership and Employment and IFB Solutions Director of Professional Services



May 1
Vivian Fridas,
 NIB Public Policy Specialist



May 8
Former U.S. Representative Luke Messer and Jeff Mittman,
 CEO of Bosma Enterprises



May 15
Rick Webster,
 NIB Vice President, Public Policy



Scan the QR code or visit heardandempowered.org to listen online. You can also find Heard & Empowered on your favorite podcast platform.

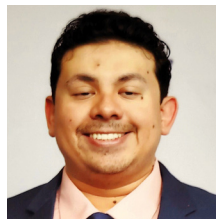
Meet the Advocates for Leadership and Employment Class of 2024



Junior Ah-Siu
 The Lighthouse for the Blind, Inc.



Norman Demolle
 Lighthouse Louisiana



Alexis Flores
 LightHouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired



Horace Grayson
 Lighthouse Louisiana



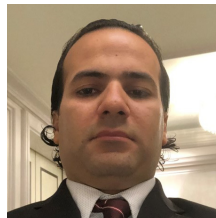
Rebekah Grieb
 Alphapointe



Greg Herron
 Bosma Enterprises



Wesley Hillman
 VisionCorps



Fayez Kotet
 Virginia Industries for the Blind



Zachary Shifflett
 Virginia Industries for the Blind



Christy Abel Taylor
 Alabama Industries for the Blind



Katy Todd
 The Lighthouse for the Blind, Inc.



Claire Walker
 Beacon Lighthouse, Inc.



Mia Weaver-Ison
 Cincinnati Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired



Jeff Young
 Industries for the Blind and Visually Impaired



Scan the QR code or visit nib.org/advocates2024 to access full bios for each Advocate.



READY TO LAUNCH

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



SKILCRAFT® Tools

Premium grade SKILCRAFT® tools made of high-grade chrome vanadium steel carry a limited lifetime warranty. Produced by BEYOND VISION in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.



SKILCRAFT® Flap Disc

Ideal for grinding, blending, finishing, and polishing surfaces, SKILCRAFT® Flap Discs are excellent for smoothing out imperfections. Produced by ASSOCIATION FOR VISION REHABILITATION AND EMPLOYMENT in Binghamton, New York.



SKILCRAFT® Universal Docking Station

Transform your portable device into a desktop replacement with the SKILCRAFT Universal Docking Station. Produced by CHICAGO LIGHTHOUSE INDUSTRIES in Chicago, Illinois.

These and thousands of products are available for purchase at AbilityOne.com, GSAAAdvantage.gov, your local AbilityOne Base Supply Center®, or an AbilityOne authorized distributor. For more information about how to purchase SKILCRAFT and other products produced by people who are blind, visit NIB.org/products.

Be My AI: What Happens When You Give ChatGPT Sight?

BY DOUG GOIST

Let's face it: When the artificial intelligence research project OpenAI announced the public release of ChatGPT in 2023, no one expected the quirky chatbot to dominate world headlines for weeks to come.

What is ChatGPT? Using large language modeling (LLM), OpenAI researchers fed a dataset of an estimated 175 billion words of text into ChatGPT, training the chatbot to understand word relationships and answer user queries through hyper-fast next word prediction.

So, what does this have to do with assistive technology? The short answer: Soon, everything.

iPhone users familiar with the Be My Eyes app don't have to wait. The free app, available on both the App Store and Google Play, connects users who are blind or visually impaired to what its Danish developers describe as "a pair of friendly eyes." Essentially, Be My Eyes accesses a smartphone's camera and microphone to connect users to sighted volunteers from around the world, much like a FaceTime call.

Now, through a new feature called Be My AI, the Be My Eyes app is leveraging artificial intelligence to interpret visual content in detail like never before.

Utilizing even more advanced algorithms from OpenAI's ChatGPT-4, Be My AI provides users with detailed visual descriptions of the world around them whenever and wherever they wish, with no need for human interaction. The results are nothing short of astonishing.

I was admittedly skeptical prior to my first test – identifying the conglomeration of buttons on a remote control – the bane of blind television owners since the day remotes first landed on coffee tables.

Not only did Be My AI accurately describe the labels, shapes, and colors of the buttons – it described their positioning, left to right, top to bottom.

A second test on an unfamiliar Keurig coffee brewer yielded similar results. Be My AI explained that the control panel had a circular interface, described the shapes and colors of the buttons, and read each cup serving setting around the "clockface."

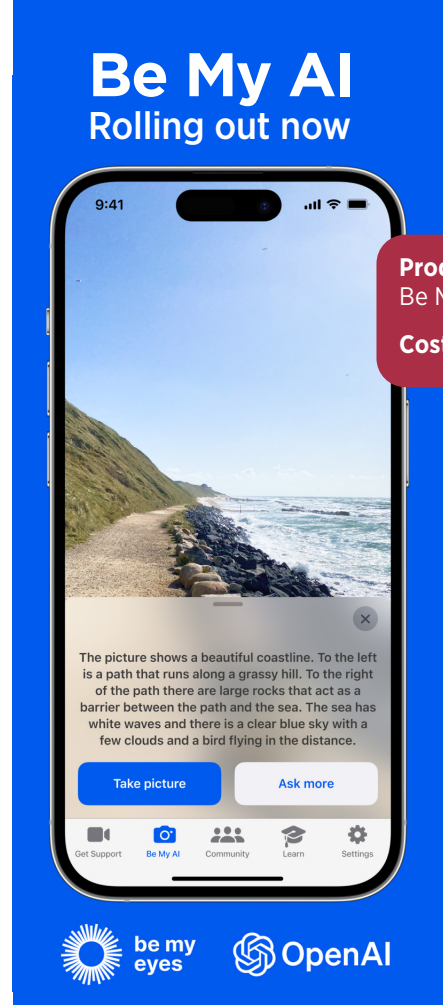
Outdoors, the app described a building exterior, read signs around the building, told me a middle-aged man was sitting on the front steps looking at his phone, and even peered through glass windows to describe arrangements of plants in the lobby.

Be My AI can tell you what's in your refrigerator, read expiration dates, and suggest meals using the items on your shelves. In the gym, it can direct you to specific equipment and let you know which machines are free and which are occupied.

Again, astonishing.

Ask Be My AI for more detail and it tirelessly provides it, even describing a room's ambience as "cozy," "modern," or "sophisticated."

When more help is needed, the app offers an easy to locate "call a



volunteer" button, allowing users to quickly connect to a sighted person.

While it's not exactly clear where all this is leading, what is clear is that sooner than later AI is going to open employment and social opportunities never thought possible for people who are blind.

Be My AI is now available on iOS and Android. ♦

Doug Goist is the 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.



Carroll Center for the Blind staff.

Carroll Center for the Blind Celebrates 87 Years

BY DOMINIC CALABRESE

From its modest beginnings in 1936 as the Catholic Guild for All the Blind, to its internationally respected rehabilitation center, The Carroll Center for the Blind in Newton, Massachusetts, is at the forefront of vision rehabilitation for people of all ages and all stages of vision loss.

Today, the NIB associated nonprofit agency is among the nation's premier blindness organizations. It offers a wide range of support, from skills training, vocational preparation, and job placement to services for school-aged children and seniors.

"Critical to our success is that we continue to embrace the principles we were founded on: respect, independence, dignity, and a determination to open opportunities and improve the lives of everyone we touch," said Greg Donnelly, the Carroll Center's CEO.

A HISTORY OF INNOVATION

The Guild was renamed in 1972 in honor of Father Thomas Carroll, a visionary leader who established many innovative programs for people who are blind. He championed equal rights, independence, and skill building for employment, college success, and community engagement.

"Father Carroll left an indelible mark by establishing the world's first community mobility program in 1952 to teach safe travel skills to people who are blind or visually impaired," Donnelly explained.

Two years later, he created Saint Paul's Rehabilitation Center, the nation's first comprehensive residential rehabilitation center for people new to vision loss.

The center was based on successful programs Father Carroll had a hand in developing with the Department of Veterans Affairs after World War II. His book, *Blindness: What It Is, What It Does, and How to Live with It*, is required reading at many universities.

PROMOTING AND PRESERVING INDEPENDENCE

One of the first agencies to offer computer training to people who are blind, the Carroll Center now offers services both in person and virtually. The Screen Reader User Tester Training (SRUTT) Program is one of its newest initiatives, which prepares participants to work in the field of digital accessibility and assist organizations in achieving compliance.

"SRUTT graduates understand digital accessibility in desktop and mobile environments," Chief Program Officer Dina Rosenbaum explained. "They can identify accessibility barriers and communicate issues to developers as well as non-technical stakeholders so the problems can be remediated."

The Carroll Center's popular youth summer programs focus on self-advocacy, social development, and independent living for young people ages 8-22. Past participants include noted blind mountain climber and motivational speaker Eric Weihenmayer.



Mobility Instructor Joe Kolb (left) instructing a client.

“Eric got his first climbing experiences through our program and learned he could pursue adventure as a person who is blind,” Rosenbaum said.

The Carroll Center’s comprehensive low vision clinic provides optometric services, assessments, and training. An onsite store sells a wide range of adaptive devices, such as white canes, magnifiers, talking and braille watches, cooking tools, clocks, labeling supplies, and much more.

Holly Polgreen, a recent Carroll Center graduate, was able to return to her job as a speech therapist thanks to the services she received.

“My life took a dramatic turn after being diagnosed with an inherited form of vision loss back in 2021,” Polgreen explained. Referred to the Carroll Center with hopes of being able to return to work and learn to safely travel with her changing vision, she attended an independent living program, intensive computer classes, and orientation and mobility training. “Just because I cannot see does not mean that I don’t have vision,” she said. “Thanks to the Carroll Center, I have renewed hope!”

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Donnelly notes one challenge facing the Carroll Center is prevalent nationwide – an ongoing shortage of vision professionals coupled with the need for nonvocational services for older adults and children under 13 growing at a record pace. Given that government funding for

“Just because I cannot see does not mean that I don’t have vision. Thanks to the Carroll Center, I have renewed hope!”

– Holly Polgreen, Carroll Center Client



such services is far less than that allocated for vocational programming, he sees fundraising as key.

“Philanthropic success is instrumental to maintain the positive outcomes for our clients while demand for our services increases dramatically each year,” Donnelly observed. “It is critical that we engage younger generations and introduce them to our transformative impact and work.”

Nonetheless, Donnelly is confident about the future, noting that the Carroll Center is embarking on its first five-year comprehensive campaign. Designed to strategically advance and strengthen all aspects of the center, it will begin with its strongest asset – its people.

“With our 87-year history, renowned vision professionals, and game-changing programs, along with our unprecedented growth and financial sustainability, the Carroll Center has never been better positioned to serve the growing needs of people who are blind or visually impaired at all ages and stages of vision loss.” ♦

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.



Procure with Purpose: National Industries for the Blind Streamlines Federal Acquisition



For 85 years, National Industries for the Blind has championed diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility through its enduring mission to create employment opportunities for people who are blind.

Seventy percent of working-age people who are blind in the United States are unemployed.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the jobless rate for people with a disability is about twice as high as the rate for people without a disability.

NIB strives to change those statistics and reduce that unemployment rate by creating opportunities for people who are blind or visually impaired to become wage earners and taxpayers, eliminating reliance on government support. **In 2023, NIB and its nearly 100 associated nonprofit agencies across the country employed more than 5,200 people who are blind and provided jobs for 476 veterans.**

NIB provides a wide variety of services for its government and commercial clients, and its SKILCRAFT® contract management support (CMS) services are one of the organization's flagship offerings.

CMS services are specifically designed to provide contract closeout support services to the federal government. **Since the CMS program launched in 2010, NIB and its associated nonprofit agencies have identified \$25.7 billion for deobligation and closed out nearly 570,000 contracts – all while retaining a quality rating of 99.6%.**

NIB's CMS services free up time for government personnel to focus on inherently governmental functions and facilitate the return of unused funds to the government.

**PROCURE
WITH PURPOSE**





Scarlet Nishimoto is a contract closeout specialist who is also blind. She is part of the contract management support division at VisionCorps, an NIB associated nonprofit agency in Pennsylvania.

“Meaningful employment increases access to resources, services, and opportunities that enable individuals with disabilities to live more independently,” Scarlet said. “I accepted the position three-and-a-half years ago. I am now the primary income for my household, and I recently bought a house. This was a very large goal of mine that I thought would be much harder to achieve a few years ago.”

“NIB can take almost everything off a contracting officer’s plate and provide contract management support in one package. We take the guesswork out of working with the AbilityOne Program and allow government customers to focus on the next acquisition.”



Robert Harris,
NIB's senior
director of
services

SKILCRAFT

Contract Management Excellence

570,000 contracts closed out	\$25+B to be deobligated	99.6% quality rating

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TRAINING CONFERENCE & EXPO



The 2023 NIB/NAEPB Training Conference and Expo welcomed nearly 800 attendees for three days of meetings and activities centered around empowering people who are blind through employment and engagement in their communities. Held October 9-13 at the Hyatt Regency Crystal City in Arlington, Virginia, the event included an all-day Expo with more than 60 exhibitors.

Elevated training sessions tackled today's most pressing issues, including the transformation of the AbilityOne Program, program erosion, support for small and emerging nonprofit agencies, and barriers to and potential solutions for the recruitment of people who are blind. The general session featured remarks from officials with the General Services Administration and the Department of Defense, as well as a lively fireside chat with U.S. AbilityOne Commission Executive Director Kim Zeich, Commission Vice Chair Chai Feldblum, and Commission Member Megan Dake, the U.S. Army representative.

Throughout the conference, NIB celebrated the 67 Employee of the Year nominees from agencies across the country. These honorees and their guests enjoyed special programming, visited the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts for an interactive performance, and attended studio art sessions with artist-in-residence John Bramblitt. Bramblitt, who is blind, is a world-renowned artist who has murals in New York and Dallas and serves as a cultural ambassador for the United States.

At the general session, five of the Employee of the Year nominees spoke about their personal journeys and shared how working at NIB associated nonprofit agencies empowered them to succeed. The three days of networking and learning culminated in an awards banquet, at which Marybeth Clare and Craig Ellis were recognized as the 2023 national Employees of the Year.



JENA SMITH
Peter J. Salmon Employee of the Year nominee
Alabama Industries for the Blind
Talladega, Alabama
Jena Smith sang the national anthem to open the General Session.



DENOVIA ANDERSON
Peter J. Salmon Employee of the Year nominee
Alphapointe
Queens, New York
"I am vision impaired, but I choose to not, and I will not, let that control my life."



SEAN PHIPPS
Milton J. Samuelson Career Achievement Award nominee
Industries for the Blind and Visually Impaired
West Allis, Wisconsin
"What does my job mean to me? Two words: dignity and sanity."



VICTOR HUITRON NUÑEZ

Peter J. Salmon Employee of the Year nominee
Central Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired
Utica, New York

“Working at CABVI has given me another chance to actually be myself and actually live my vision.”

SHANTA TAYLOR-HARRISON

Peter J. Salmon Employee of the Year nominee
Travis Association for the Blind
Austin, Texas

“My job has opened doors for me to meet a plethora of special and unique people, such as everyone in this room.”

BRIAN PETRAITS

Milton J. Samuelson Career Achievement Award nominee
Bosma Enterprises
Indianapolis, Indiana

“Bosma has given me many, many opportunities to grow personally, professionally, and in my community.”



MARYBETH CLARE

National Winner: Peter J. Salmon Employee of the Year
Envision
Wichita, Kansas

“I choose to be defined by my choices, and not my circumstances.”

CRAIG ELLIS

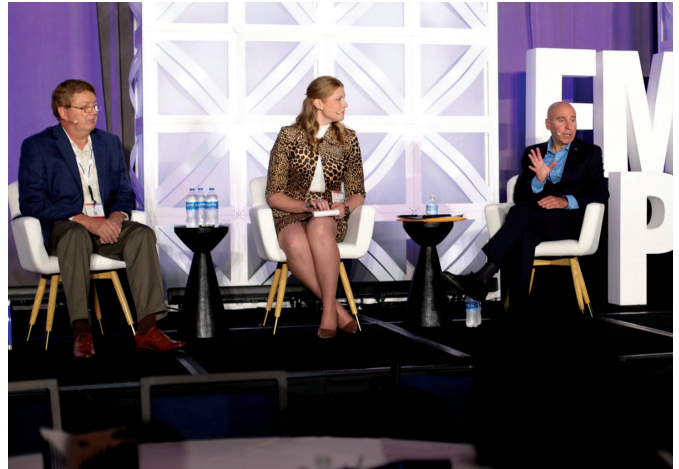
National Winner: Milton J. Samuelson Career Achievement Award
East Texas Lighthouse for the Blind
Tyler, Texas

“I challenge every one of you to go out in the sighted world and tell them about us.”

TCE SNAPSHOTS



NBC4 VIDEO SHOOT NBC4 Washington Anchor and Community Reporter Molette Green conducted a live broadcast from the TCE featuring the Employees of the Year.



KEYNOTE SPEAKERS



ERV KOEHLER
Assistant Commissioner,
Federal Acquisition Service
U.S. General Services Administration
"I'm looking forward to a long and prosperous partnership."



JOHN TENAGLIA
Principal Director,
Defense Pricing and Contracting
U.S. Department of Defense
"As AbilityOne customers, we recognize the significant ability we have through procurement to actually change lives."



KIMBERLY ZEICH
Executive Director
U.S. AbilityOne Commission
"The Commission members, they really are 'all in' in supporting the AbilityOne Program."



CHAI FELDBLUM
Vice Chairperson
U.S. AbilityOne Commission
"The goal is to provide clarity and to engage all of you as we develop policies. If we show change over time, then we will change the views of the disability community."



MEGAN DAKE
U.S. Army Representative
U.S. AbilityOne Commission
"When I became a commissioner, I realized this is an amazing program and I really became passionate about it."



STEVEN BURKE
Deputy Inspector General
U.S. AbilityOne Commission
"Our office serves as unwavering guardians of the AbilityOne Program's integrity."





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Defying Geography: Virtual Options Bring Career Training Home

BY SHARON HARRIGAN



NSITE's online programs make it easy for people who are blind to access the professional development they need to grow their careers. Here, students in the NSITE Professional Mastery of Office Technology for Employment (ProMOTE) training program hold a virtual session

NSITE partners with state vocational rehabilitation agencies and NIB associated agencies to bring a range of career services to people who are blind or visually impaired, even in areas where NIB doesn't have a physical presence.

Imagine this scenario: A case manager at a state vocational rehabilitation agency determines a client who is blind or visually impaired would benefit from specific training to improve their chances of finding a job in a particular career field. Unfortunately, the instruction they need is not offered through an authorized vendor in that state. As a result, the client does not receive the vital professional development and is unable to pursue employment in their chosen career field.

Until recently, this situation was all too common. A similar scenario played out not long ago in North Dakota, but with a much different outcome. Instead of having the client pursue a different career path, the state rehabilitation case manager reached out to NIB's talent management enterprise, NSITE. Now an authorized vocational rehabilitation training vendor in more than 40 states, NSITE was able to connect the client with virtual IT courses offered through an NIB associated nonprofit agency.

The client was so satisfied that they are planning to participate in additional, advanced IT training offered through NSITE. What could have been a story of disappointment instead became a win for the client, who has broadened their career path and opportunities, and a win for the state vocational rehabilitation case manager, who was able to locate courses through NSITE that allowed their client to pursue a career of their choosing. It was also a success for the NIB associated agency, as it established a relationship with the state agency by providing quality instruction and skill building.

Director of Learning and Leadership Marianne Haegeli said NSITE was created for just this kind of scenario. "Our vision is to bring training to people who are blind who may not otherwise be able to access it," she explained. "By working together with vocational rehabilitation professionals in state agencies and NIB associated nonprofit agencies, we can expand options for professional, upwardly mobile careers."

FINDING THE BEST FIT

NSITE is more than a conduit for connecting state vocational rehabilitation providers and NIB associated agencies. It also provides comprehensive assessments in order to create the best match between potential students who are blind and quality training organizations. In the case of the North Dakota client, NSITE identified a need for additional foundational instruction beyond the state agency's initial recommendation. "We not only identified the additional training needed, we were also able to recommend a program offered through an NIB associated agency," explained Haegeli.

Proper assessment is vital, Haegeli said, because NSITE wants clients and referring agencies to be satisfied and successful in both the professional development and, ultimately, job placement.

To that end, NSITE has been working with Indianapolis-based NIB associated agency Bosma Enterprises to adapt an assessment developed for the state of Indiana's Business Enterprise Program. It will be used to make recommendations on best-fit upskilling for candidates interested in enrolling in NSITE's nine-month Entrepreneurial Initiative Program. The new Bosma/NSITE Entrepreneurial Initiative Candidate Assessment will gauge candidate proficiency in:

- Office technologies, including computer, tablet, and smartphone use
- Microsoft Office products, including Word, Excel, PowerPoint, and Outlook
- Internet use, including web-based forms and basic searches
- Various meeting platforms, such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams
- Communication and organization skills, including taking notes, timeliness, reading and listening comprehension, and writing skills

The goal, said Haegeli, is to have similar assessments in place for all NSITE offerings to ensure participants have the fundamental skills they need to succeed in more advanced training.

BUILDING A STRONG FOUNDATION

At Blind and Vision Rehabilitation Services of Pittsburgh (BVRS), the Basic Office Skills for Success (BOSS) Program is helping expand career training for NIB associated nonprofit agency employees and vocational rehabilitation clients in Pennsylvania and beyond. The program grew out of an identified need to teach clients who are blind essential skills to succeed in more advanced courses, like NSITE's Professional Mastery of Office Technology for Employment (ProMOTE) program, said Art Rizzino, assistive technology specialist at BVRS and a ProMOTE trainer.

"We had a number of clients interested in going through the ProMOTE program, but they weren't quite ready," explained Rizzino. "The BOSS program was designed to provide the technology skills needed to qualify for, and be successful in, the ProMOTE program."

BOSS helps students master Microsoft Office applications such as Outlook, Word, and Excel, said Tracey Morsek, an assistive technology specialist at BVRS who helped design the curriculum. Students



In 2021, NIB launched a national talent management enterprise called NSITE. It provides award-winning training and professional development, empowering people who are blind to build successful careers.

Visit [NSITE.org](https://www.nsite.org) to learn more about these training programs and how you can apply.

learn how to open and close apps, format emails, add contacts and attachments, save documents, and manage files, as well as how to use the accessibility tools built into Microsoft Windows.

A good amount of time is spent helping students personalize their assistive technology configurations and practice reading commands. “We designed this instruction to be less lecture and more of a demonstration, with a lot of hands-on practice,” said Rizzino. “We want to ensure students’ success.”

Since it began in March 2023, approximately 18 students, including four recommended through NSITE, have completed the all-day, two-week virtual program, which is conducted live. Morsek said there is so much need for the program that BVRS offers it every other month. Originally designed to be offered virtually, so students can participate from anywhere, Rizzino said BOSS also has been offered as a hybrid course, with some local students traveling to BVRS for in-person instruction.

BVRS has joined with NSITE to offer the BOSS program through NSITE’s training platform. This allows state vocational rehabilitation agencies and NIB associated agencies that do not offer a similar program to work through NSITE to connect clients to the program and prepare them for more advanced courses.

A SPRINGBOARD TO CAREER DEVELOPMENT

No longer limited by geography, case managers in state rehabilitation agencies collaborating with NSITE can access an array of virtual training programs for their clients. The same is true for NIB associated agencies. Two employees who are blind working at NIB associated nonprofit agency Blind Industries and Services of Maryland (BISM), headquartered in Baltimore, recently earned promotions after completing NSITE’s Sourcing Specialist Certificate Program.

Specifically designed for people who are blind or visually impaired by NSITE and partners SocialTalent and Bristol Myers Squibb, the program prepares participants for a career in human resources (HR) as a sourcing specialist. The extensive, 18-week, full-time program includes an eight-week work experience to allow real-life involvement in HR sourcing. In addition to instruction in areas such as search basics, social sourcing, and agile methodologies in recruitment, students learn to develop and maximize their own personal brand, develop best-in-class resumes and LinkedIn profiles, and prepare for job interviews.

Heather Harris, HR manager at BISM, said Haegeli reached out to the agency about the Sourcing Specialist Certificate Program. With support from an NIB grant, BISM was able to enroll HR employees Brandi Hunter and Terri Walker. Both earned certificates in late 2022 that have served as springboards to career advancement. Hunter, who works at BISM’s Raleigh, North Carolina, location, has been promoted from HR administrator to HR staffing coordinator. Walker, who works at BISM headquarters, earned a promotion from HR specialist to HR generalist.

The curriculum focuses on sourcing for higher-level office jobs and teaches participants how to use different websites to find candidates, explained Harris. But to her, the highlight is the time spent working with Bristol Myers Squibb, which provides hands-on experience in sourcing candidates. It was that practical experience, Harris said, that really increased the confidence levels of both Hunter and Walker.

Hunter uses the skills she learned through the program to recruit for openings throughout the agency, from positions in rehabilitation services to product sales to staffing for BISM’s AbilityOne Base Supply Centers®. Harris credits the extensive sourcing network Hunter



NSITE offers both virtual and in-person professional development courses.

cultivated for increasing BISM's pool of qualified candidates by about 50%. She said Harris also regularly reaches out to the agency's rehabilitation staff to identify client training needs and get people qualified for their desired jobs.

Walker's outgoing personality made her a great fit for the program, Harris said. Since earning the certificate, Walker has applied the skills she learned to her HR generalist role, which focuses more on personnel issues, benefits, and workers' compensation. Like Hunter, Walker believes the experience has been helpful in growing her career.

"NSITE is breaking down doors," said Harris. "Training like the Sourcing Specialist Certificate Program boosts confidence and helps people who are blind or visually impaired recognize that they can do anything."

Keeping that goal a priority, NSITE will continue working with state agencies to provide more opportunities for people who are blind to participate in professional development programs that prepare them for workplace success.

"In today's connected world," said Haegeli, "there's no reason to let geography be a barrier to training that empowers people who are blind to pursue any career they choose." ♦



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