



**NIB Opportunity Magazine**  
*Tools to Embrace the Future*

*Lighthouse Central Florida helps people who are blind develop the skills they need to navigate the working world and delivers quality products and services to demanding customers.*

By Andy Brownstein | Winter 2016

Lee Nasehi, president and CEO of NIB associated agency Lighthouse Central Florida, began her three-decade journey with the organization as a mom. Her son Joe, now 34, was born premature at just 25 weeks, weighing 1 pound, 14 ounces. Blind from birth, Joe had cognitive impairments that developed into cerebral palsy. When Nasehi moved to Florida, the family began early intervention services with the organization that became Lighthouse – an act, she said, that “saved our lives, quite frankly.”

“They gave us the tools to embrace the future, not fear it,” she said. “That’s what we do to this day.”

Nasehi’s journey mirrors that of the agency itself. Begun in 1976 on the campus of Valencia Community College, the organization was originally known as CITE – the Center for Independence, Training and Education.

As it gears up to celebrate its 40th anniversary, the Orlando-based organization embraces not only early intervention services for children from birth to age six and a transitions program for students ages 14 and over, but is about to launch a program for school-age children as part of a state initiative. Lighthouse Central Florida has already identified the first 12 students who will enter its program.

The Lighthouse estimates more than 100,000 Central Floridians from Orange, Osceola and Seminole counties have passed through its doors. They come seeking education, employment or rehabilitation services.

Fostering Employment Lighthouse has long provided employment assistance, but, Nasehi admits, “We didn’t have a lot of success in getting people hired.” That changed in 2011 with the opening of Lighthouse Works!, a subsidiary devoted to employing people who are blind. Lighthouse Works! performs an estimated \$8 million in federal and state contracts annually, with net proceeds of \$530,000. The facility includes an assembly line devoted primarily to labelling and packaging medical kits for the armed forces and the state of Florida, and a state-of-the-art call center that provides customer service outsourcing for assorted businesses and government entities.

The call center at Lighthouse Works! provided a lifeline for L.C. Benson.

Benson had always dreamed of a career in the National Football League. As a semi-pro cornerback he was well on his way, scouted by the Chicago Bears and the Detroit Lions. But in 1989, those dreams were shattered. Pituitary tumors that pressed against his optic nerve – the likely result of football-related concussions – caused his sight to begin fading. By 2009, he had no vision in his left eye and limited sight in his right.

“I didn’t think my life would ever be the same again,” he said. “I became depressed, hopeless. I didn’t know where to go for services.”

His employment outlook was dire. Benson would ace job interviews, only to lose out on skills assessments due to a lack of assistive technology to accommodate his limited vision.

He came to Lighthouse in 2012 to fine-tune his reading, writing and typing skills, but got much more. That same day, Benson was offered a job at the new Lighthouse Works! call center. Within the year, he was recognized as the Top Customer Service Agent by the central Florida branch of the National Customer Service Association – a first for a visually impaired agent. He recently completed NIB’s Business Management Training program, presented at George Mason University in Virginia.

“I have no idea where I’d be without Lighthouse Central Florida, except at home or maybe not even here,” Benson said. “It gave me back my dignity and self-worth.”



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### **Innovating Efficiency**

Opened in 2011, the call center employs 17 people, 16 of whom are blind or visually impaired. The staff provided various services or 15 organizations in just the past year, including directing calls for a university hospital, quality assurance for Seminole County, and acting as mystery shoppers for Department of Defense lodgings at posts as far flung as Japan and Bahrain. The team is evenly split between people who are visually impaired – who use zoom magnification technology to magnify their computer screens – and people who are blind, who use JAWS screen reading technology. Sharon McDonald, a Jamaican immigrant who lost her sight at age 9, serves as a trainer and staff supervisor.

Fred Brown, the center’s manager, said Lighthouse’s IT team has worked “absolute magic” in developing assistive software. For example, the medical scheduling software typically employs color coding to differentiate the length of appointments and type of services to be provided (pediatric, gynecology, internist, etc.) For employees who are blind, the IT team developed software that can perform pixel comparison for each color, and a search engine that allows agents to search by color. The result: handling time has been reduced by 2 minutes per appointment.

“Agents roll their mouse across the screen, and it tells them what’s on the screen,” said Brown. “They hear the customer in their headset at the same time they hear the screen being read to them. The customer can’t hear it. It’s amazing. When we do demos, we actually have to slow it for observers so they can understand what’s going on. That’s how quick it is.”

The center also demonstrates Lighthouse’s continuum of services from birth through employment. Several center employees participated in the organization’s transitions program for youth ages 14-22, which focuses on career education.

Natasha Basheer, who includes mystery shopping for the Department of Defense lodgings among her call center duties, joined the Transitions program when she was 16. She learned a lot in Student Life Prep, a program provided in partnership with the University of Central Florida that has students live in a dorm on campus for two weeks while working at a job.

“It helped with living independently,” she said. “I learned how to cook, balance a checkbook, go grocery shopping and ride on a city bus. It was great.”

### **Supplying the Troops**

In 2013, Lighthouse Works! launched a separate business line devoted to packing, labeling and shipping. The line employs 13 people who are blind, performing primarily custom kit packaging for agencies including the Defense Logistics Agency (DLA). For DLA, employees help label and package 11 of 15 items in the Combat Life Saving Kit U.S. soldiers take onto the battlefield.

Ohad Gal, who manages the supply chain, said the line is greatly aided by what he calls “jigs” – custom tools produced by NIB for employees who are blind. Prior to adopting the jig, employees affixed labels on 50 decompression needles in an hour, with a 20 percent defect rate, he explained. Using the jig, production increased to 150 needles an hour, and the defect rate dropped to only 2-5 percent.

For its efforts, DLA named Lighthouse Works! Vendor of the Year in 2014.

“It’s nice to see,” said Gal. “The employees all understand the big picture. The job is helping them, and they’re helping the troops. The job is a lifesaver for so many people, and they get to know that they’re helping to save other’s lives in the process.”