

Orlando Sentinel

Orlando Sentinel *Lighthouse Central Florida lands new contracts for visually impaired*

By Paul Brinkmann, Contact Reporter
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Now that Lighthouse Central Florida has a new employment center for visually impaired adults in Orlando, the organization is landing new contracts.

Lighthouse has created 42 jobs over the past year for visually impaired or blind adults. It just signed a new distribution deal with LED lighting manufacturers Forest Lighting and Lighting & Energy Designs Inc.

The agency says it is positioned to become the largest distributor of commercial LED lighting in Central Florida.



"We can handle a lot more work here, and there are good reasons to use our services beyond the social benefits," said Lee Nasehi, president and CEO. "We have a very low shipping rate, for example." The not-for-profit Lighthouse Central Florida started its employment program just three years ago. The lighting contract builds on an existing \$8 million government contracts to assemble and package combat first-aid kits. Lighthouse built the 15,000-square-foot employment center just south of downtown Orlando, at 2500 Kunze Avenue, with the help of a \$900,000 Orange County grant, \$300,000 contribution from the City of Orlando, and private donations.

"After all expenses were paid last year, we made \$500,000 for the year, which is redeployable for the benefit of our members, employees and organization," said Dan Devine, chairman of the board for Lighthouse Works.

The building also houses a call center where the agency has more work. On a recent weekday, 15 employees with visual impairments were answering the phones. They use software that either magnifies their computer screens or translates visual information to verbal.



Dan Devine, chairman of Lighthouse Works, Lee Nasehi, president and CEO of Lighthouse Central Florida, and Kyle Johnson, director of sustainability and communication, at the new work center.

"Ultimately we could do manufacturing here too, like some of our sister organizations do around the U.S.," Nasehi said.

About two-thirds of visually impaired adults are unemployed or underemployed, according to Lighthouse, even though blind and visually impaired people tend to have relatively high levels of education.

Blind people perform packaging and labeling with the help of templates or molds that fit over packages.

"It's about the processes we set up and the tools we give them," said Kyle Johnson, director of sustainability and communications for Lighthouse Central Florida.

After gaining employment history and skills at the center, some of the visually impaired adults who work there find other work in the community.

"It's not out the question that we might pursue venture capital at some point," Nasehi said.

There are Lighthouse organizations in many cities. The local agency started as an open campus project housed at Valencia College in the 1970s.