

LEADING WITH KNOWLEDGE-BASED JOBS

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

BY DOMINIC CALABRESE

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

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

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

Clocks produced by employees who are blind adorn the walls of federal buildings, American embassies, and military installations around the world.



▲ Clocks produced by people who are blind working in the Chicago Lighthouse Industries program can be found on the walls of federal buildings, American embassies, and military installations around the world.

One of those clocks, taken from the ruins of the Pentagon after American Airlines Flight 77 crashed into it on September 11, 2001, is now on display at the 9/11 Memorial Museum in New York City.

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

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

Building Knowledge-based Opportunities

In addition to offering 40 programs in education, employment, rehabilitation,



▲ The DAX team, including Coordinator Ben Charget (left), Senior Director of Lighthouse Industries Phil Yatvin (right) and guide dog Sammie helps organizations make websites and digital properties more accessible.



▲ The Chicago Lighthouse opened in this building on the city's West Side in 1906.

and other areas, The Lighthouse prepares people who are blind or visually impaired for jobs in such key fields as human resources, finance, and IT.

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

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

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

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

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

Back in 2012, The Lighthouse contracted with the State of Illinois to manage call center operations for the sprawling Illinois Tollway system that runs throughout metropolitan Chicago.

“The call centers not only provide jobs for veterans and people with disabilities, they

also supply necessary revenue to help fund our vital services,” Stoeberl explains.

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

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

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

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

Expanding Beyond Chicago

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

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

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

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



▲ Chicago Lighthouse President and CEO Dr. Janet Szlyk is focused on creating more knowledge-based jobs for people who are blind.



▲ The Intracortical Visual Prosthetic (ICVP) – a collaboration of Chicago Lighthouse, Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT) and Rush University Medical Center (Rush) – may help restore some light perception for people who are totally blind. ICVP team members, pictured left to right, include Chicago Lighthouse President and CEO Dr. Janet Szlyk and Vice President of Research Dr. Patricia Grant; Rush Clinical Research Coordinator Bart Jacher; IIT Psychology Department Chair Dr. Frank Lane (seated center); Lighthouse Director of Visual Diagnostic Services Fred Collison (standing center); Rush Associate Clinical Research Coordinator Rebecca McWilliams and Clinical Regulatory Research Coordinator Morgan Mulcahy; and Pritzker Institute of Biomedical Science and Engineering Executive Director Dr. Philip Troyk of IIT.

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

Breaking New Ground

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

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

The device was developed at the Illinois Institute of Technology; the surgery will be performed by a neurosurgery team at Rush University Medical Center; and the ICVP testing and rehabilitation will be conducted at The Lighthouse, where Szlyk serves as the site’s principal investigator for the clinical trial.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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