

AGENCY SPOTLIGHT



▲ Joe Kells (left), director of sales and business development, Manufacturing Manager Angelo Ercolamento and EPA Supervisor Barry Falligan with a display of ABVI's lockout tagout and Global Harmonized System products.



▲ Patricia Solomon is one of 60 employees in ABVI's contact center, which fields more than 400,000 calls per year for federal, state and commercial clients.

BETTING ON SAFETY

New maintenance, repair and operations products are helping the Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired in Rochester, New York, grow employment opportunities.

BY JENNIFER BROZIC

More than a century after its founding in 1911 by four graduates of the New York State School for the Blind, the Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired (ABVI) in Rochester, New York, continues to fulfill its founders' dream of helping people with vision loss lead full, productive lives.

ABVI provides a wide range of vision evaluation and rehabilitation services designed to help people who are blind or visually impaired maintain their independence and navigate their communities. The agency serves adults and children in nine counties in western New York.

According to Joe Kells, ABVI's director of sales and business development, the low vision center is the soul of the organization. People learning to live with vision loss or degenerative diseases that lead to blindness are often referred to ABVI for evaluation, rehabilitation services, adaptive equipment and recommendations for improving residual vision.

In 2016, the agency reached 1,700 children through its early vision screening program, 25 percent of whom were referred for follow-up care. An additional 1,800 people received services through ABVI's low vision center.

In addition to providing vision services, ABVI is committed to creating jobs for people who are blind or visually impaired. The agency employs 136 people, 83 of whom are blind, in multiple lines of business, including manufacturing and fulfillment, sewing, contact centers and food services.

In 1994, ABVI teamed up with Goodwill of the Finger Lakes to enhance its ability to offer employment opportunities to people facing barriers to independence. The affiliated organizations operate 14 Goodwill retail stores throughout western New York. The revenue generated from the sale of donated goods is reinvested in services and programs for people served by the agency.

New Business Development

The majority of jobs at ABVI involve supplying products and services to the federal government, through the AbilityOne® Program, and the state government, through the New York State Preferred Source Program for People Who Are Blind, which NIB manages. The agency works constantly to develop new products and services to meet customer needs while creating jobs for people who are blind or visually impaired.

A good example of product development efforts is ABVI's line of right-to-know products. When the Occupational Safety and Health Administration issued a Hazard Communication Standard in 2012 that changed labeling requirements for toxic and hazardous substances in the workplace, ABVI seized the opportunity to create products to help customers comply with the new requirements.

The SKILCRAFT® Global Harmonized System Information and Safety Data Sheet products make critical safety information easy to organize and readily



Learning to navigate in the kitchen is just one facet of ABVI's vision rehabilitation therapy services. The agency provided rehabilitation services to more than 6,000 people in 2016.

Retail Associate Curt Chaltain, shown here with his guide dog Kobie, was the first employee hired for the first ABVI-Goodwill store after the organizations became affiliates in 1994.



available to anyone who needs it. The line runs the gamut from a three-ring binder to store safety data sheets (SDS), to an information center complete with a wall-mountable rack and communication station that includes Globally Harmonized System label elements and hazard and SDS information.

The product line has created several jobs for people who are blind, but ABVI isn't the only agency to benefit from development of the products. The West Texas Lighthouse for the Blind, in San Angelo, produces the yellow binders used for storing SDSs.

"We've been sourcing the binders from them for three years, and it's worked beautifully," Kells said.

Kells identified another new business opportunity when he saw a team member using lockout tagout devices while repairing equipment in one of ABVI's production spaces. Noting the way the employee organized the devices in a tool bag, Kells decided to explore the possibility of creating kits that would include all of the materials and devices needed for specific lockout tagout scenarios. With ABVI's existing kitting, fulfillment and textile capabilities, the new line seemed like a perfect fit.

After confirming demand for the product, Kells worked with a vendor to determine the right mix of components for the markets ABVI serves. The agency launched the SKILCRAFT lockout tagout line in August 2016, offering everything from individual padlocks to specialized kits for electrical and valve lockouts, to wall-mounted device stations. Production is on pace to create three full-time jobs in ABVI's kitting and sewing operations.

A Myriad of Opportunities

Barry Falligan, a supervisor for Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) fulfillment who is visually impaired, has been with ABVI for 31 years, working in nearly every department at some point. "Practically all of the jobs that have come through the agency, I've probably had a hand in it somewhere," he said.

Today, he supervises fulfillment of orders for EPA documents, and lends a hand with packaging lockout tagout devices and preparing them for shipping.

Falligan appreciates the confidence ABVI leadership has in his abilities. "They've given me responsibilities, and helped me grow, sometimes when I wasn't sure I was ready for that next step," he said. "They believe in me."

Angelo Ercolamento, a manufacturing manager who is visually impaired, supervises production of the Global Harmonized System products, managing a team of 15 employees who are blind, visually impaired or have cognitive impairments.

Since joining ABVI 30 years ago, he has worked in many different roles, including purchasing, inventory control, production and database administration. He's also witnessed many changes within the agency as ABVI has expanded services and programs to serve more people in the community.

Ercolamento says one thing that hasn't changed over the years is the commitment to get the job done. "The folks that work with me, my peers and the management team, all work toward a common goal. Everyone's on the same page."

Kells couldn't agree more. "It's definitely a team effort. Everyone here at ABVI is focused on executing great business cases that create and sustain more employment for our colleagues who are blind," he said. "That's happening here every single day." □

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