



i4 BUSINESS

A SHIFT IN FOCUS: Lighthouse Works Creates Wages for People with Vision Loss

As featured in the January 2020 edition.



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Lighthouse Central Florida provides vision-specific rehabilitation services for people of all ages, helping families deal with health care costs from eye disorders, which are projected to double by 2050. However, Lighthouse understands there is more to be done than rehabilitation. Through Lighthouse Works, the organization has been able to provide employment opportunities for people with vision loss. As it has grown over the years, a shift has taken place in its mission focus.

More than half of the revenue for Lighthouse Central Florida comes from state dollars because the organization fulfills contracts for the Florida Division of Blind Services. Groups that are heavily reliant on state funding can find their expansion plans limited.

Lighthouse Central Florida was able to identify another viable funding source. The organization knows seven out of 10 working-age adults who are blind or visually impaired are unemployed or completely out of the labor market, even though some have college degrees and some previously served as entrepreneurs and business leaders.

“They go into the market, and people just don’t know how to utilize them,” Lighthouse Central Florida president and CEO Kyle Johnson said. “It’s not malicious; the employer market doesn’t understand what someone who is blind or visually impaired is capable of.”

Creating Opportunities

Through Lighthouse Works, the organization has been able to get closer to its goal of assisting visually impaired people toward independence. At the same time, the program has helped the organization work toward its own goal of financial independence.

The organization was created on two premises, Johnson said. The first is the creation of competitive employment opportunities for people who are blind and visually impaired. Job candidates go through the normal application process, with a resume, interview and hiring based on qualifications. The second premise is for the organization to generate revenue that will go back to Lighthouse Central Florida to help fund daily operations.

Lighthouse Works operates a call center where agents who are visually impaired deliver services such as quality assurance, event communications and customer service. While call centers can have an attrition rate of between 35% and 45%, Johnson said, the one operated by Lighthouse Works loses fewer than 10% of its employees a year. Johnson credits the education and work experience of the employees, as well as their belief in the mission, behind the high performance seen at the center.

The journey toward self-sustainability is still a work in progress, but with the help of Lighthouse Works, Lighthouse Central Florida has made great strides since Johnson joined in September 2013. The revenue budget for Lighthouse Works is just over \$6 million, and the Lighthouse organization’s team has grown to 110, the majority of them now employed by Lighthouse Works.

Over the last few years, the organization’s supply chain division has grown from three blind or visually impaired employees to 17. The company also signed its first major state agency call center deal, which brings the call center to 40 agents and growing. The organization plans to announce a new contract with a major local and national theme park in the very near future.

For Johnson, the partnerships are a result of the quality of work the organization has done, in addition to its focus on helping people who are blind and visually impaired.

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Continuing to Grow

For Lighthouse Works, this is only the beginning. By September 30, 2025, the company looks to double the number of Central Floridians served per year to 1,200 through Lighthouse Central Florida, while having more than 200 employees between Lighthouse Central Florida and Lighthouse Works.

“It’s been exciting to witness our proud workforce build its impressive four-millionth Disney Magic Band box for the global company,” Johnson said. “And at the conclusion of fiscal year 2018-19, Lighthouse Works paid in excess of \$2 million in real wages into the pockets of Central Floridians who are blind and visually impaired.” The company expects it will exceed \$3 million in wages paid to this group by the end of the current fiscal year.