

WorkQuest

FOCUS

on Jobs for People with Disabilities

WorkQuest Newsletter LII

February 2021

The Lighthouse for the Blind of Fort Worth: Highlighting the strengths of the blind or visually impaired community



Kara Botschon grinds lenses to fit specific prescriptions in the optical lab at The Lighthouse for the Blind of Fort Worth.

The Lighthouse for the Blind of Fort Worth (the Lighthouse), a Community Rehabilitation Program (CRP) with the Texas State Use *WorksWonders* Program, has served the blind community in the Fort Worth metro area since it was founded in 1935. The Lighthouse offers its employees the opportunity to participate in three distinct programs: Industrial Operations and Sales, Client Services, and Community Outreach.

Kara Botschon is a valued member of the Industrial Operations team at the Lighthouse, where she keeps busy assembling drug testing kits, inputting data on a computer in the optical lab, moving boxes on a pallet jack, grinding lenses to fit specific prescriptions or working on any number of other tasks.

This cross-training is typical of employees at the Lighthouse and serves to keep everyone busy and ensure job security, says Garry Coufal, the Lighthouse's head of industrial operations.

"Ninety percent of employees here are cross-trained so that everyone has a job they can work on at any given time," Coufal said. "People like to put blind or visually impaired individuals in a box. Kara [and our other employees] breaks that mold."

The Lighthouse currently employs 58 individuals (including Botschon) who are blind or visually impaired to work on contracts with state and federal agencies and commercial customers, most of which have been facilitated by WorkQuest since 1978. Their products are shipped across the country.

Products produced or packaged at the Lighthouse include copy paper, digital watches, flashlights, paper wound tubes, energy dissipating pads, foam cushioned boxes, prescription glasses, shooting targets, urine-based and oral fluid-based drug testing kits, zip ties, weed killers, pen and pencil sets, and more.

In addition to providing state agency customers with physical products, the Lighthouse also partners with local organizations who work with the blind or visually impaired community to provide resources, training and education. As CEO of the Lighthouse, Platt Allen believes this philosophy is key to achieving the nonprofit's mission of empowering individuals who are blind or visually impaired to lead meaningful and productive lives.

"Understanding where the gaps in services are and getting others to realize that we're here and able to help is what allows us to continue to serve the blind population," Allen said. "Our resources allow us to provide vision care to folks who have historically been underserved, and raising awareness about our products and services leads to more contracts—and, therefore, more jobs."

After working at the Lighthouse for 18 months, Botschon left town for a job at Amazon. However, she quickly missed her co-workers and returned to Fort Worth and the Lighthouse. Botschon says it means a lot to be given the opportunity to learn skills that are applicable to the rest of her life, in addition to future jobs, while also making a difference in the lives of others who share similar struggles.

"At the Lighthouse, I'm able to work and keep my independence, which is so important to me," Botschon said. "When I leave for the day, I feel like I've accomplished something that's going to help people."

Allen also values the opportunity to support those who are blind or visually impaired, whether in the form of a job, a pair of glasses or a specific service.

"We aim to help people new to blindness understand that life is not over; it's just going to be different."

WorksWonders Program implements quality testing of products

In order to further increase customers' confidence when utilizing the State Use *WorksWonders* Program, WorkQuest is partnering with the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) and Texas State University to implement third-party quality testing of *WorksWonders* Program products.

As outlined in Chapter 122, Texas Human Resources Code, TWC has contracted with Texas State University to implement product quality testing in an attempt to ensure that all products approved as suitable for sale through the Program meet the formal state specifications developed by—or commercial specification approved by—the Comptroller of Public Accounts.

This quality testing initiative is scheduled to roll out in phases to ensure *WorksWonders* Program products are being tested as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Products will be tested with two goals in mind—to confirm that the products being scrutinized meet the standards outlined by the Comptroller or, if they fail to meet those standards upon being tested, that a joint partnership between TWC, WorkQuest and the community rehabilitation program (CRP) providing the product is able to bring the product up to those defined standards.

Upon completion of that initial phase, testing will move on to encompass all products that are currently for sale under the *WorksWonders* Program. Products that are submitted to TWC for price revisions will also be required to undergo retesting at the time of the revision submission to ensure that they continue to meet the quality standards outlined by the Comptroller.

The end goal of this initiative is to guarantee that every single product sold through the *WorksWonders* Program has gone through this testing process and meets the required approval criteria before being offered to customers.

The implementation of these quality testing practices will play a key role in TWC's approval of products that can be offered through the *WorksWonders* Program. Final approval will ultimately be contingent upon the following criteria:

- Whether the product meets the specified quality criteria established by the Comptroller and confirmed by Texas State University testing
- Whether the State Purchasing Department (SPD) approves the pricing competitiveness of the product
- Whether TWC determines that the value-added of each product meets state specifications

WorkQuest remains dedicated to the satisfaction of the procuring agencies that utilize the State Use *WorksWonders* Program for their product purchasing needs, and it is confident this initiative will establish *WorksWonders* Program products as the pinnacle example of industry standards across the State of Texas.

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WorkQuest in the Community

Last year, WorkQuest was happy to make a monetary donation to the Austin-area chapter of the Salvation Army.



The Austin-area Salvation Army operates as the largest provider of emergency shelter in the area. The organization provides numerous services to the communities it assists, including case management, therapy services, employment

assistance, financial assistance, and a broad range of other family and social services.

WorkQuest's donation will help support the maintenance of existing services available through the organization, which directly support and impact the transition from homelessness to self-sufficiency.

WorkQuest is proud to support the Salvation Army's mission by helping to meet the needs of people within our community.

A Message from President and CEO **Fred M. Weber, Jr.**



Happy New Year!

We are so encouraged by the conclusion of another strong year for the State Use *Works Wonders* Program, especially despite the many challenges that our community rehabilitation program (CRP) partners and their employees faced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although many things looked different this past year, some things remained constant, including the dedication, adaptability and perseverance of the individuals with disabilities who are employed through the Program.

During the reporting period reflected in the Texas Workforce Commission's (TWC) 2020 Annual Report, wages and benefits paid to individuals with disabilities increased from the previous fiscal year. Additionally, there were more than 5,400 individuals with disabilities employed through the Program for the 2020 reporting period, nearly 15 percent of whom were outplaced into competitive integrated employment.

The past 43 years of partnership with our CRPs and purchasing agencies have proven what a tremendous impact collaboration can make on creating opportunity. Our CRP partners, as well as their employees and loyal customers, have truly made everything possible. The dedication from everyone involved has ensured that we can continue to grow the Program and expand the possibilities it creates for Texans with disabilities. We are sincerely grateful for and appreciative of everyone involved.

In spite of the many obstacles 2020 threw at us all, our valued CRP partners rose to the challenge and met emerging demands to ensure consistent employment opportunities for people with disabilities. We look forward to creating additional jobs in 2021, making this year even more successful for the Program.

We hope you and your loved ones continue to stay healthy, and we thank you for your continued support.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in white ink, appearing to read 'F. Weber, Jr.', written in a cursive style.

Fred M. Weber, Jr.
President and CEO

WorkQuest

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