

WorkQuest

FOCUS

on Jobs for People with Disabilities

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East Texas Lighthouse for the Blind: Finding the balance between mission-focused and business-minded



Jared Sebren works on an assembly line at East Texas Lighthouse for the Blind.

Since its inception in 1976, the East Texas Lighthouse for the Blind in Tyler has been a resource for the blind and visually impaired in 40 counties across East Texas. As a community rehabilitation program (CRP) that is part of the *Works Wonders* Program, the Lighthouse employs nearly 80 people, 52% of whom are blind.

One of those employees is Jared Sebren, who works as a machine operator at the Lighthouse. Sebren came to the Lighthouse in 2016 as part of the Employment Services Program, which prepares individuals with disabilities for higher employment. He was a quick learner at the Lighthouse and was brought on as a permanent employee, where he rapidly learned the operation of multiple machines and was honored as the CRP's Direct Labor Employee of the Year in 2018. Sebren's job at the Lighthouse has allowed him to become more economically independent, as well as helped to improve his self esteem.

Lighthouse employees hold a variety of positions, from producing an assortment of products for state agencies through WorkQuest contracts, to roles in human resources, accounting and information technology. Lee Tillson, vice president of sales/business development at the Lighthouse, says the variety is purposeful.

"We go above and beyond to provide upward mobility opportunities to employees who are blind or visually impaired."

While providing job opportunities for individuals with visual impairment is key to the Lighthouse's mission, the organization also recognizes that it is uniquely positioned to help educate the wider community on blindness. The Lighthouse works with People Attempting to Help (PATH), a local nonprofit, to provide funding for free eye exams and resources for those in East Texas living with visual impairment. Additionally, the Lighthouse formed a blind baseball team, bowling league and various other social groups to help their

employees and others in the community cope with the emotional aspects of blindness.

Tillson attributes the Lighthouse's success to being flexible and keeping smart business practices top-of-mind.

"The hardest but most important thing is keeping a consistent balance between mission and business," Tillson said. "If you don't run a good business, you aren't able to fulfill the mission."

Horizon Industries—the manufacturing and packaging division of the Lighthouse—supplies a variety of napkins, wipes and towels, safety boots and work boots to various state agencies, including the Texas Department of Transportation, Texas Department of Public Safety and the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. These contracts keep employees gainfully employed and allow the Lighthouse to grow in other areas, such as client services. The organization operates a successful low-vision store, where products like canes, magnifiers and screen readers are sold and granted for free to the public.

"We serve 300 to 400 clients per year through our various programs," Alicia Lansford, vice president of human resources at the Lighthouse, said. "Our low-vision store is the largest one between Dallas and Shreveport."

The Lighthouse's commitment to its customers, community and especially its employees is evident throughout the organization.

"I like what they do for people who have visual impairments, like I do," Sebren said. "It can be hard to find a job when you are visually impaired, so it was cool finding out about a place like this that specifically brings people like me in to work."

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



This spring, WorkQuest faced the challenge of evolving its business operations as required by the introduction of COVID-19, as well as continuing to prioritize the safety of the dedicated employees of our community rehabilitation program (CRP) partners. While navigating this unique challenge, WorkQuest maintains its intent to safeguard the daily functions of the *WorksWonders* Program in an effort to ensure that all operational and financial workflow processes continue without interruption. WorkQuest has been able to provide product and service contracts during this uncertain time due to the commitment of our *WorksWonders* Program customers, the dedicated workforce of Program employees, and the CRPs that have supplied personal protective equipment (PPE) and additional training in order to support their continued efforts. We will continue to ensure employment opportunities are available for individuals with disabilities around the state of Texas while maintaining essential services to our customers.

WorkQuest has also been busy organizing its annual Compliance and Training Seminars. These seminars allow participants to review and outline a variety of topics, including staff development and career counseling, procurement procedures and laws, competitive integrated employment curriculum and initiatives, and career counseling training. This guidance provides CRPs with valuable information on how to operate within the *WorksWonders* Program and best utilize the resources the Program has to offer. Please monitor our website (WorkQuest.com) for more information.

WorkQuest is optimistically planning to host its 13th annual Artie Lee Hinds Award dinner and 32nd annual Products and Services Expo this September. The dinner is scheduled for Monday, Sept. 21, with the Products and Services Expo the following morning (Sept. 22). Both events function as a way to acknowledge the exceptional employees who comprise the *WorksWonders* Program and the dedicated customers whose purchase of Program products, services and temporary employment services enable the Program to continue to grow. You can find more information about both of these events on our website. We look forward to seeing you in September.

The strength of the *WorksWonders* Program's existing CRP and customer partnerships are instrumental to the Program's perseverance during these trying times, and we thank each and every one of you—and your organizations—for your continued support.

Take care and stay healthy.

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

Fred M. Weber, Jr.
President and CEO

WorkQuest in the Community

WorkQuest would like to take this time to reaffirm its commitment to safeguarding the daily functions of the *WorksWonders* Program and the Community Rehabilitation Programs (CRPs) that support it, as well as the dedicated employees behind these programs.

While our intent is to continue to perform business operations as usual, we have taken necessary steps to ensure the safety of our employees and prevent the spread of COVID-19. Essential staff members are working in the office to support the day-to-day functions of the *WorksWonders* Program, while additional staff have been set up to work from home to ensure all operational and financial workflow processes continue without interruption.

Our staff is available via phone and email to help with any issues that may arise during this time. Please don't hesitate to contact us if you need assistance.

We thank each and every one of you for your continued cooperation during this time.

WorkQuest is excited to announce Ray Zaman's promotion to director of product management.

As the State Use *WorksWonders* Program continues to expand its capabilities, increase its product offerings to customers and create additional jobs for individuals with disabilities, Zaman will work to increase WorkQuest's focus on product development, marketing and sales in an effort to accelerate future growth.



Zaman joined WorkQuest in 2004 as the regional marketing manager in the Houston office. He relocated to the home office in Austin in 2013 when he accepted the position of product research and development manager, overseeing product development for all of the *WorksWonders* product lines.

In his new role, Zaman will supervise WorkQuest's team of product sales representatives, and he will continue to use the unique experience he has cultivated in product development over the past 16 years to advance the marketing and sales efforts of the products developed through the State Use *WorksWonders* Program. By combining Zaman's extensive knowledge of products with a restructured focus on the promotion of those products, WorkQuest intends to evolve and expand the offerings available to Program customers, resulting in additional jobs for people with disabilities through the Program.

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) offerings within the State Use Program

The introduction of COVID-19 has required businesses across all sectors to adapt to tightening safety regulations, with state and federal government agencies facing the challenges of implementing new protocols to meet evolving needs.

WorkQuest has been hard at work developing strategies to ensure the community rehabilitation programs (CRPs) that make up the *WorksWonders* Program can continue to provide necessary products and services to purchasing entities while also ensuring the CRPs have the information and materials necessary to protect themselves.

As outlined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), one of the most efficient methods that can be used to help combat the spread of COVID-19 is the use of personal protective equipment (PPE), which protects the wearer from infection.

In conjunction with Program CRPs, WorkQuest is actively researching ways in which we can expand existing product lines—including protective masks, gloves, hand sanitizers and soaps, all of which are offered through the Program. By partnering with CRPs to develop their safety product lines and ensure they are meeting CDC guidelines and standards, WorkQuest hopes to be a premiere supplier of these products to governmental purchasing entities across the state. In addition to improving existing product lines, WorkQuest and its partners are seeking to expand their PPE offerings to include safety gowns and any other products that may be deemed necessary to continue the day-to-day functions of the *WorksWonders* Program.

Through its partnership with SUPRA, the State Use Programs Association, WorkQuest has been able to stay informed about any developments that occur on the national level. And, through its partnership with SourceAmerica, the federal AbilityOne Program, WorkQuest has been able to facilitate the order and delivery of PPE equipment to Program CRPs to ensure that business operations are able to continue uninterrupted. WorkQuest plans to continue these partnerships in an effort to ensure that CRPs across the state are provided for during this time.

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