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Community Impact Heroes: How this CEO is tripling his visually-impaired workforce to help the unemployed

By ADAM SODERSTROM | STAFF WRITER | ORLANDO BUSINESS JOURNAL

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[Lighthouse Central Florida](#), the Orlando nonprofit serving the visually-impaired community for 40-plus years, is tapping into those same residents to help Floridians whose jobs have been impacted by the coronavirus pandemic. The nonprofit has been contracted by the [Florida Department of Economic Opportunity](#) to use Lighthouse's job training, employment and career opportunities arm, Lighthouse Works, to assist with [rising unemployment claim calls related to the pandemic shuttering businesses](#). State financial help systems have been burdened by rapidly-increasing unemployment as employers have [furloughed workers at an alarming rate](#).

For example, Walt Disney World, the region's largest employer, [is set to furlough most of its 77,000 employees on April 19](#) due to closures. Other employers such as Comcast Corp.-owned (Nasdaq: CMCSA) [Universal Orlando](#), [SeaWorld Entertainment Inc.](#) (NYSE: SEAS), Darden Restaurants Inc. (NYSE: DRI) and Goodwill Industries of Central Florida all announced planned furloughs.

That need for increased call capacity shined a spotlight on the need for more outside assistance. As such, Lighthouse Works is tripling its size by tapping into blind and sighted workers alike to help as call center agents.

Helping showcase the work ethic and experience of the blind workforce is important, because businesses sometimes ignore that community, CEO [Kyle Johnson](#) told *Orlando Business Journal*.

"At businesses across the country and in our community, there's a lot of misconception. Our employees want to be held to the same standard as anyone else."



Here's more from Johnson on how Lighthouse is providing local career opportunities while also serving medical workers and Central Florida's unemployed:

How did Lighthouse get involved with the Florida Department of Economic Opportunity (DEO)? The DEO reached out saying, "Do you guys have any more capacity?" Well, one of our first business lines was a commercial contact center, and we've been handling unemployment calls for a little more than a year. Also, we have the infrastructure and in-house trainers, as well as the [state agency communications network] My Florida Network in our facility.

How much will Lighthouse grow due to this DEO contract? We'll move from 15 full-time equivalent employees to 50 between now and the end of June. All but one employee working on the DEO calls is blind or visually impaired. It's not a work program, it's a real business.

Are workers of all capabilities being considered or just visually-impaired?

We are hiring people who are non-disabled/sighted. For example, we're about to hire someone furloughed from Wyndham Resorts, which has a ton of call center agents now out of work. We're hoping to do the same for Disney and Universal Orlando. We're trying to get some of these furloughed, non-disabled folks back into the workforce.

Why are blind and visually-impaired workers often ignored in the workforce? I want to be clear: It's not malicious. I didn't think about blind people [before coming to Lighthouse]. If you had asked me what a blind person was capable of, I would have given you a very stupid answer. I didn't know what I didn't know. But it's nearly a billion-dollar industry.

How did you get involved with Lighthouse? It was a total accident. I had an unconventional upbringing and path for my career. In 2012, I had no idea how I could apply my life to be successful. I was running communications for a boutique wealth management firm, and we were doing a seminar on nonprofits. Lighthouse came and I learned they were looking for someone to run fundraising and communications. One thing led to another and they hired me into that role — it was like taking off a tight shoe.

How else is Lighthouse helping during the pandemic? We've been able to acquire personal protective equipment. We have our workforce packaging and distributing masks, gowns, face shields, gloves and alcohol. The biggest thing we're selling is hand sanitizer. We're supplying that to local hospitals and government agencies.



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Kyle Johnson, CEO, Lighthouse Central Florida

- Age: 42
 - Hometown: Orlando
 - Employees: 110 (combined Lighthouse Central Florida and Lighthouse Works)
 - Year founded: 1976
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