



Orlando Sentinel *They work at Florida's last unemployment call center. And they know what it's like to lose a job.*

By Caroline Glenn
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At the state's only remaining call center helping people apply for unemployment, there's a special empathy for the laid-off workers on the other end of the line. The staff at Lighthouse Works, a nonprofit that's operated in Orlando for 10 years, are mostly blind, and for many, losing their vision also meant losing their jobs.

Calvin Echevarria, who's been at Lighthouse Works for a decade, was making \$70,000 a year, the most he ever had, working as a truck driver and managing a construction equipment store when diabetic retinopathy took his sight and turned his right eye milky white. He and his wife had just bought a house. He was thinking about buying a second car. His little girl was just 2 years old.

"I was on top of my game. I thought I had it all. I thought I was Superman," said Echevarria, who's 47 and lives in Meadow Woods in south Orange County. "That's basically when life slapped me in the face and I went blind. And I couldn't keep a job."

Not unlike the thousands of Floridians who have lost jobs during the pandemic, for some of the call agents at Lighthouse Works, suddenly being unemployed was a shock to the system that threatened to upend their very lives. They would need to get on government assistance, but even then paying bills and supporting their families was hard. Some would need to downsize their homes or move in with relatives.

They were hopeful they'd find another job someday.

A leg up on other call centers

Although unemployment has vastly improved since the onset of the pandemic, there were still about 529,000 Floridians out of work as of August, with more than 46,000 claims waiting to be verified, according to the most recent data from the Department of Economic Opportunity.

To meet that demand, the state has some in-house call reps and contracts with Lighthouse Works, which employs about 75 agents, some blind and some fully sighted as part of its mission to create competitive career opportunities for the visually impaired, a community of which 70% of adults are unemployed.

The nonprofit was getting between 3,000 and 4,000 claimant calls per month before the pandemic. Afterwards, Lighthouse hired more agents so it could handle triple that.

There used to be a handful of call centers, staffed with thousands of more agents brought on by DEO, as calls grew from 27,000 per week to more than 800,000 because of the pandemic



Monica Ortiz, a team lead at Lighthouse Works
(Ricardo Ramirez Buxeda/Orlando Sentinel)



By now, the state has gotten rid of all of them except Lighthouse. Residents criticized the move as premature, as COVID cases surged and thousands of Floridians continued to struggle to access jobless benefits, unable to get through the state’s malfunctioning CONNECT website and waiting hours on hold to reach an agent.

The DEO said the call centers were axed because the state wasn’t happy with their performance.

But agency spokesman Andrew Nixon said the partnership with Lighthouse Works has “proven to be successful.”



Inside the Lighthouse Works unemployment call center (Ricardo Ramirez Buxeda/Orlando Sentinel)

That a majority of the calls reps can’t fully see doesn’t matter. Some use Braille readers; others simply enlarge the text on the computer screen.

Echevarria uses a screen-reader software, so in one ear of his headphones there’s a voice reciting the words on the computer screen and in the other ear the claimant. He’s been using the program so long, the speed he has the voice turned up to is nearly incomprehensible to anyone else.

“They can’t sacrifice quality or speed. The customer isn’t working with us to do a favor or be nice to people who are blind,” said Kyle Johnson, CEO of Lighthouse Works. “People who are calling in, they think they’re calling DEO, and they have absolutely no idea that they’re talking to someone who is blind.”

Johnson and the other higher-ups at Lighthouse Works credit the success, in part, to the fact that the nonprofit has worked with DEO since 2017 to provide call center services, through the agency’s Unique Abilities Partnership Program. In total, the contracts have brought in more than \$7 million, a portion of which goes to the organization’s sister nonprofit Lighthouse Central Florida to provide training for jobs and how to live independently.



Calvin Echevarria, a team Lead, shows tactile stickers on his keyboard during a demonstration of the screen-reader software that he uses to work at Lighthouse Works (Ricardo Ramirez Buxeda/Orlando Sentinel)

Unlike the other call centers that were propped up after the pandemic hit, the agents at Lighthouse Works had already been trained and knew the CONNECT website well.

For the agents who were brought on later when Lighthouse expanded, there was already a four-week training program in place and supervisors to teach them. There’s also an IT team that codes shortcuts for the CONNECT site so the visually impaired staff can work as efficiently as possible.

Because of that, the agents there were trusted by the DEO with more complicated claimant problems than other call reps who could only do simple tasks, like reset passwords. In fact, the agents there regularly handled calls from agents at the other call centers who needed help.

“And it’s a sighted person,” Echevarria said. “I always find it funny.”



Their ability to empathize

But more than that, Johnson said he believes it's his call agents' own hardships that enable them to empathize with claimants. Todd La Flame, a supervisor at the call center who's undergone surgery for detached retinas and cataracts and now has just partial vision in his left eye, thinks he's right.

La Flame, 56 of Ocoee, had always wanted to be a cook — because of his last name — and was working at a hospital kitchen in Galveston, Texas, in his 30s when his sight became too blurred to see the dials on appliances or the numbers on timers. He had to quit and moved to Pennsylvania to try to find another kitchen job, but he was nervous to work around knives and hot surfaces. He could hardly make out the person interviewing him.

Unsure if he'd work again, La Flame got on Social Security Disability Insurance and food stamps and moved to Florida where the cost-of-living was cheaper. But money was still tight. He had to get his things from thrift stores, food pantries or his local church, and ask friends if they could lend him money for rent and utilities.

He went years without being able to find a job until a friend told him about Lighthouse Central Florida.

The people who call into Lighthouse Works' call center are usually in the same boat. They've defaulted on bills, are living in pay-by-the-week motels, are sometimes owed thousands of dollars in benefits tied up in Florida's unemployment website. Once in a while, they get callers who are in situations so dire they're suicidal.

Those cases usually get passed on to La Flame, who stays on the line while the local sheriff's office checks on them at home.

On a day when the center gets one of those calls, La Flame said he tries to think about the people he's helped.

"It makes me proud to know I'm making a difference in their lives," La Flame said. "This has been a very tough year for me, but work has been one of the grounding things in my life. To come here and have a purpose ... I wouldn't be anywhere else."



Todd La Flame, a call center supervisor at Lighthouse Works
(Ricardo Ramirez Buxeda/Orlando Sentinel)