**acvrep | did you know?**

**Did you know…**

• In the past five years **ACVREP has made over $305,000 in capital investments** to maintain best practices standards in certification:

 • **$200,000+** to update the COMS, CLVT and CVRT exams and launch the CATIS certification; another **$60,000** on exam updates will be spent in 2020

 • **$60,000** in the website and database to create more efficiencies for applicants and improve responsiveness to certificant inquiries

 • **$45,000+** in copyright and trademark filings to protect the integrity of each certification from unauthorized use

• **In the first 8 months of 2019 ACVREP had over 1,900 phone calls** with certificants

• **In the past 8 months ACVREP read 10,000+ emails and sent 6,000+ emails** to certificants, CE providers, subject matter experts, advisory councils and national coalitions

• **Chair, Jack Chen, recorded a podcast** in June when he was in Indianapolis as the Keynote Speaker at the Indiana AER Conference [**https://soundcloud.com/user-995895574/navigating-blindness-podcast-jack-chen**](https://soundcloud.com/user-995895574/navigating-blindness-podcast-jack-chen)

• Excellent progress is being made in developing the Canadian Deaf Blind Intervenor certification, **CDBIS, expected to launch in early 2021**

• Work has begun on the **Audio Describer and Audio Description Consultant certifications**

• **ACVREP** is now a member of the **Mississippi State University OIB/TAC Advisory Council**

• **ACVREP** is a member of the **Vision Serve Alliance’s National Coalition on Aging and Vision Loss**

• I**n 2020 ACVREP will celebrate its 20th anniversary** – stay tuned for celebration details

**acvrep joins visionserve alliance’s aging & vison loss national coalition**

Coalition, to tackle critical issues related to older persons experiencing impaired sight as the result of age-related eye diseases.  The Steering Council of the coalition is currently made up of 17 national, state, local, private and public agencies representing broad constituencies who will advocate for equal access and quality of life for older Americans with vision loss.

The Coalition has begun its work through subcommittees focused on three key priorities:

**1) Awareness:** Increasing awareness among the general public, professionals and especially seniors themselves of the issues faced by older persons with vision loss and the significant impact for professional vision rehabilitation services on sustaining their independence and dignity.

**2) Funding:** Enhancing funding for vision rehabilitation services including education and training, assistive devices and technologies for older persons with vision loss.

**3) Training:** Expanding the pool of qualified professional vision impairment specialists, through support for university programs and incentives for healthcare students to consider this specialty; and providing broad training for allied health personnel.

**For more information about the AVLNC and how to get involved** please visit [**https://visionservealliance.org/avlnc/**](https://linkprotect.cudasvc.com/url?a=https%3a%2f%2fvisionservealliance.org%2favlnc%2f&c=E,1,sRW-uOCH8wjpd9eVM694V-MQ7e3YqpuWE5DaLHrMcQdxS7kOb2aXWb-f58CVUgRhzuGFWoNsmA_AvSbJ9dURREJgd1s5uOUqj__wZKAcuo1BDhxMCi6wrLa68Q,,&typo=1).

**acvrep | a cohost and sponsor of visionserve alliance executive leadership conference**

VisionServe Alliance invites all leaders in the blind and low vision field to attend their Executive Leadership Conference, November 3 through 6 at the Georgian Terrace Hotel in Atlanta, GA. This nationwide in conversations around education, rehabilitation, employment, healthcare, transportation, technology and social services for people of all ages. Event facilitators will include: David Morgan, President & CEO of Future In-Sight; Lee Nasehi, President & CEO of VisionServe Alliance; and John Mitchell, President & CEO of the Cincinnati Association for the Blind and Board Chair of VisionServe Alliance.

**This year’s conference will be different for two reasons:**

1)Attendance is open to any leader who cares passionately about the future of living well with blindness and low vision.

2)This conference will incorporate the Open Space Technology format, which will allow participants to generate the discussion topics and schedule for each day. We pledge to make this unique format 100% accessible by utilizing technological adaptions and volunteers from the Center for the Visually Impaired, Atlanta.

All stakeholders and leaders in the blind and low vision field are encouraged to attend. “We wanted this year’s conference to provide learning exchanges to engage a wider array of current and emerging leaders across sectors, disciplines, demographics, and industry segments including education, rehabilitation, employment, medical, technology and social services for people of all ages,” says President and CEO of VisionServe Alliance, Lee Nasehi. “We are also proud to have the support of other national organizations in the field behind this year’s event.” **Co-Hosts of the VisionServe Alliance Executive Leadership Conference include** ACB (American Council of the Blind), ACVREP (Academy for Certification of Vision Rehabilitation & Education Professionals), AER (Assoc. for Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind and Visually Impaired), AFB (American Foundation for the Blind), APH (American Printing House for the Blind), BVA (Blinded Veterans Association), CVI Atlanta, COSB (Council of Schools and Services for the Blind) NAEPB (National Association for the Employment of People Who Are Blind), National Research and Training Center on Blindness and Low Vision, NIB (National Industries for the Blind), NOAH (National Organization for Albinism and Hypopigmentation), and USABA (United State Association of Blind Athletes). **For more information**, [email info@visionservealliance.org](mailto:info@visionservealliance.org). **To register**, visit [https://visionservealliance.org/conferences](https://linkprotect.cudasvc.com/url?a=https%3a%2f%2fvisionservealliance.org%2fconferences&c=E,1,Zo6jYKk9upyZIrFzx3tsZdagEd4Q_lNXseyU276FKm0gVDf61lVd9Sez-i76DosoQpywfBY7Pr4iAHyD2aUdFVwh2XOolo88E2QjgZA_xEB_e_-6Xw6b5lTK3q0,&typo=1).

**ACVREP WOULD LIKE TO KNOW WHAT CRITICAL TOPICS YOU WOULD LIKE TO SEE DISCUSSED. SEND YOUR DISCUSSION TOPICS TO ACVREP BY EMAILING** [**COMMENTS@ACVREP.ORG**](mailto:COMMENTS@ACVREP.ORG)**.**

**meet new board member | john erickson**

John grew up in River Forest, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago, where he still lives with his wife, Jane. At the age of twelve, John became legally blind due to pressure on his optic nerve. While attending high school he learned to read Braille and to travel independently using a white cane. He attended the University of Notre Dame, where he earned a BA in business administration and went on to earn an MBA from the prestigious Kellogg Graduate School of Management at Northwestern University.

John started his career in the Trust Department of the First National Bank of Chicago on the Municipal Bond Desk. He then worked as the director of Fixed Income for LaSalle Bank’s Wealth Management Department and finished his career before recently retiring as a Registered Investment Advisor for the Kovitz Investment Group in Chicago.

Considering himself “**visually inconvenienced**” rather than handicapped or impaired, John continues to push limits even in retirement. He enjoys adventure sports. He has climbed the ninety-five stories of the John Hancock building twice, rappelled down the Wit Hotel three times, snow skis in the winter, sails on Lake Michigan in the summers, has bungee jumped in Australia, taken trapeze lessons and sky-dived in California. He has even driven a 60 ton tank over a working car. Yes, that was on purpose! Clearly John believes in “no limits.”

**As a twin, how difficult was it to lose your sight when your brother did not lose his? Did it impact your relationship?**

“For my whole life, my brother Pete has been my best friend first and my twin brother second. We did everything together. After losing my sight, I think Pete found it harder to continue with activities that I could no longer do. But I realized losing my sight meant we had to focus on fewer things we could do together and find new things we each could do separately. It forced us to search and find the different things that each of us could do and enjoy regardless of whether the other was doing it too. It forced us to become the individuals we were meant to be, not simply “the twins” anymore.”

**You have written an inspiring book about the journey you went through in losing your sight, What I Saw When I Went Blind [available on Amazon]. In your book you talk about resisting using a white can and some of the stories about your experiences with people who did not know what your white cane was. Would you share your thoughts on your adjustment to using a white cane and the importance of the orientation and mobility instruction that you received?**

“My slow acceptance to using a cane and becoming comfortable and confident with it was because I did not want to be pitied or felt sorry for as a “blind person”.  
 I did not want others to consider me incapable of most tasks because my eyesight was poor. I was just 12 years old and at that stage in life most kids want to blend into the crowd and not stick out. I’m sure my first mobility instructor did not mean it, but I came away feeling that I had to use a white came “because that’s what blind people do,” not because a white cane was a tool that would enable me to become independent and confident of traveling by myself.”

**It is very unusual to find someone blind in the field of finance and investment banking. What challenges did you face in entering that field and what advice would you give to others who are legally blind who wish to enter the field of finance or investment banking?**

“The primary challenge I felt to entering a specialty industry like Wealth Management and Securities Trading was the reality that   
very few people in the industry can imagine how someone with a vision problem could do their job. Today I believe that this is the primary reason an individual with visual impairment, “VIP,” has   
trouble finding a job in all areas of business. There is no good answer to this unspoken objection that a VIP can give to a potential employer. I strongly believe that any VIP should address this “elephant in the room” right away at a job interview. I would recommend that you begin the meeting with a statement like “I am visually paired and I am sure you are wondering just how I could ever do your job. That’s because you have no idea of all of the aids and appliance I have used for many years to get to where   
I am today.” In almost all cases, the interviewer is not just looking for someone who could step in and do their particular job. They are looking for someone with the character, ambition and work ethic that would fit into their work environment. Any VIP who finds themselves far enough along in education and job experience to be interviewing for a career in an industry with few other VIPs has already demonstrated these characteristics, whether they know it or not.”

**You have participated in some extreme physical activities and proven there are “no limits”. What has inspired you to do that?**

“My primary inspiration to do the kinds of extreme adventures I have done is my desire to prove to myself I am not disabled or handicapped. In my own mind, I ask myself “How can I be handicapped or disabled? I just skied down that black diamond or repelled down that 26-story building or just caught that man’s arms and moved from one trapeze to another!” My life is rich and full of experiences.”

**You recently have lost much of your hearing. How have you coped with that additional challenge?**

“Luckily for me, the loss of my hearing took place over a long period of time and occurred after I had established myself in the work environment. The long period of time when the loss occurred enabled me to find and research the technology that is needed to cope with the loss. I did come to realize that my loss of hearing would prove more challenging in the long run than had the loss of eyesight. As Helen Keller pointed out, “When you lose your eyesight, you lose the world, but when you lose your hearing, you lose people.” Since my career in Wealth Management at the time demanded lots of customer contact, I decided it was time to consider retirement. And it’s been a great decision!”

**When ACVREP approached you to serve on its Board of Directors what motivated your commitment to say yes?**

“When I was first contacted to join the Board, I researched who they were and what they did and agreed that their work was meaningful. But then I had to call and ask “Why me?” Because I felt there had to be many others perhaps more qualified in the rehab industry than me. When I was told they not only needed someone with investment skills but they also needed another VIP to meet their   
by-law requirements. I knew then I was the right man for the job!”

**The very positive way you have dealt with life challenges inspires us, what inspires you?**

“What inspires me now is not so much the big race or exciting adventure, but the time spent with someone or advice given to someone who really needs it. I’ve found this takes more thought and consideration than my earlier objectives.”

**meet an inspirational leader | jenice heck, lotr, mmc**

**What challenges did you face growing up with visual impairment?**

“This is always an interesting question for me. When I think back to my childhood, I don’t think of the challenges I faced due to vision loss. Mostly, I remember what I believe to be the same experiences other kids might have had – riding bikes, climbing trees, looking for crawfish in the ditch across the street, flirting with boys, going to dances, etc.

I have never identified myself as a blind person, though I may be a person who is blind.   
I believe the key to this has been my parents, who were always supportive and encouraged me to do everything my peers were doing.

Of course, I remember my mom arguing with the Principal of my school because the copy machine was printing assignments in extremely light purple that was hard for me to see (I’m showing my age here). I remember lugging heavy large print books around in a rolling bag and wearing ridiculously thick glasses. I remember needing someone to read the questions to me for all of the standardized tests. And, I remember more than a few mental break downs in high school when I had more work to do than time in the day to do it. Reading was always a challenge, because it took me longer than the average person to read, even with large print and/or magnification. My eyes would tire and I would develop headaches, if I pushed it too far for too long. Thankfully, I have a stubborn gene that kept me moving forward. I’ve always been an over-achiever and an “A” student, so I was successful in school, though it wasn’t always easy.

Basically, I simply learned to adapt to the world around me without relying on vision like your average person. I know this is difficult to believe for people who have always been sight-dependent. More than 50% of the human brain is dedicated to interpreting visual information. This is why it is so hard for sighted people to understand how others without sight can function at their level. For a child whose brain did not develop by relying on visual information to interpret the world, information is naturally gathered through other sensory systems such as sound, touch, taste, smell, and intuition. Children with vision impairment are simply children who learn differently, but they still have the same needs and desires as any other child – to play, to learn, to interact, to explore, to dream, to create, and to be loved. This is how I think of my childhood. My parents were strong advocates and true realists. They did not coddle me because I had a vision impairment. They encouraged me to grow, learn, and live like my peers.”

**What motivated you to become an occupational therapist?**

“My first major in college was marine biology. Like most teenage girls in this world, I wanted to be a marine biologist and study dolphins. Of course, being a city girl, it didn’t take me long to realize that this wasn’t the best career path for me, so I started exploring options that matched my skills and interests. I knew that I wanted to work with people and to help them in some way. I learned from my volunteer experiences with my church youth organization and Audubon Zoo that I enjoyed teaching, but I knew that I didn’t want to be a classroom teacher. I was drawn to the medical field, as I have always had an affinity for science, especially biology. Thus, I started exploring my options. I knew that there was something inside of me that was meant to help others, and I found it when I discovered Occupational Therapy (OT). It was a perfect fit. As defined by the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA), occupational therapy is a science-driven, evidence-based profession that enables people of all age’s live life to its fullest by helping them promote health, prevent – or live better with – injury, illness, or disability. Wow! Who wouldn’t want to do this job? I knew instantly it was for me.”

**How did you break down the visual barriers in your occupational studies?**

“I have to admit. OT school was hard, probably the hardest thing I’ve ever accomplished, including my master’s program in mass communications. Luckily, the faculty of the program found my vision impairment to be a fascinating and refreshing change to their average student. I got the impression that they were intrigued with my potential and eager to assist me in traversing the challenges of the program. I challenged them as much as they challenged me, because they had to adapt their lessons and teaching techniques to accommodate my visual limitations. It was quite the adventure.

My biggest barrier was neuro anatomy, because the instructor was extremely visual and not very accommodating. However, I met his challenges with sheer determination and stubbornness – not to mention a lot of caffeine, long nights, and tears. My favorite class (though difficult) was anatomy. We had to dissect a human body to learn about the various components from muscles and tendons to nerves and arteries. It was amazing! The beauty of the class was that it was hands-on learning, bringing 2-D pictures in a textbook to life through touch. This was perfect for me, since I learn best through touch. One of the instructors actually asked me to assist him in dissecting the heart from one of the cadavers. I’ll never forget the honor of this experience.

The biggest challenge of this class was the final exam. The instructor used pins to mark various components of the body that the students were required to identify by sight. No touching was allowed. However, as an accommodation to me, he allowed me to take the test after everyone else, so I could touch the parts that were pinned. Needless to say, I got an “A” in that class.

I like to use this story as an example to other young people of the importance of being honest about their disabilities. If I had hidden my visual deficits from my instructors, I would not have been as successful in school, because they would not have been given the opportunity to support my needs. If you choose to hide your disability from the world, you create your own barriers to success. Having a vision impairment does not make you less of a person. In contrast, I happen to believe it makes you a more interesting person to know.

The day I received my diploma from LSU Medical School was one of the proudest days of my life. It marked the start of a fabulous career path that fit me like a glove.”

**Can you describe your career path that has brought you to your important leadership role as head of rehabilitation at the Lighthouse, Louisiana?**

“I have always found my vision loss to be an asset as an OT for several reasons. First, I developed great skill and comfort working with physical disabilities or injuries, because my heightened sense of touch allowed me to manipulate muscles and joints in ways that other therapists couldn’t. I used touch to understand what was going on beneath the skin. This is more difficult for people who depend on sight for information. Second, my experiences and understanding of disability helped me to build rapport with my patients, who were struggling with their loss of function. Often, I found that my patients felt less sorry for themselves after learning that I was blind, because (for most people) being blind was worse than any other disability or injury imaginable. Thus, I was usually able to leverage my own disability to inspire others to overcome theirs. Third, my personal experiences with blindness helped me to understand the psychology of disability and feelings of loss. This allowed me to help my patients to cope and find motivation to achieve their goals.

I worked in rehab hospitals for years before landing at Lighthouse Louisiana in low vision rehabilitation. Honestly, I hadn’t even considered Low Vision Rehabilitation as a specialty in OT, until I happened to find the Lighthouse by chance. Back then, the Lighthouse was seeking an OT to develop their vision programs. This was very forward thinking at that time, since OT’s were just beginning to enter the field of vision rehabilitation. In November of 2003 I joined the Lighthouse team and never looked back. Since program development is one of my passions, the job offered me endless opportunities to help people with vision loss to cope, adapt, and live meaningful lives.   
I have had the honor of being a teacher, a mentor, a facilitator, an advocate, a strategist, a collaborator, and a leader in a field that is near and dear to my heart. How many people can say the same? My accomplishments as an OT in the field of Vision Rehabilitation have proven to me that I am living the life I was meant to live. My personal experiences with vision loss have certainly been checkered with barriers to overcome, but each challenge has made me who I am today and who I was meant to be.

I truly relish opportunities to show others what people who are blind can do. I enjoy meeting the challenge of being told that I cannot do something because I am blind. I love to empower others to embrace their vision loss and adapt to their other senses to keep living life to the fullest. And, I especially love to mentor children who are blind to motivate them to keep dreaming and achieving their life goals.”

**Would you share with us your personal interests, family life and the hopes and dreams you still have – in other words what is on the bucket list?**

“I have a wonderful husband (of 16 years) and two beautiful children. I married in my thirties, because I needed to explore the country a bit and prove to myself and my family that I could be truly independent before settling down. I accepted internships in Seattle and Salt Lake City prior to accepting my first job in Hobbs, New Mexico. During these years, I traveled and learned about other cultures. It was a precious adventure that I wouldn’t trade for anything. During this period, I had to overcome even more challenges to independence, since I had left my support systems in my home town of New Orleans. I learned how to use a white cane and became extremely proficient with assistive technology. I sowed my wild oats, then decided to move back home to obtain a master’s degree in mass communications with emphasis in public relations and advertising. This appealed to my creative side and love of public speaking. When I connected with the Lighthouse in 2003,   
I entered on the ground floor of a new era in the organization’s history. Fortunately, this allowed me to use my expertise from both areas of study, developing programs and promoting services to the community. It was a match made in heaven.

Today, I am the Vice President of vision rehabilitation Services at Lighthouse Louisiana, overseeing vision programs in both the New Orleans and Baton Rouge regions. I am truly blessed with a wonderful and supportive family. And, my kids have learned that people with disabilities are simply people. We live the average family life with family vacations, special projects, and homework. If I didn’t work so hard to cook and keep the house clean, my poor family would live in a pig sty. Basically, life is good. I look forward to watching my children grow into productive adults with families of their own. I look forward to retiring one day with my husband, though we cannot decide between the mountains or the beach. I only have a few things on my bucket list. First, I have written   
a book – a user’s manual for living with vision loss. I hope to have it published one day. Second, I hope to one day be able to help people with vision loss on a national level. There is so much work to be done. Third, I’d love to spend a week with my family at the new Galaxy’s Edge resort in Disney World. Hey, a girl can dream.

The moral of my story is this. I once heard a speaker say that she doesn’t wake up each day and thank God for making her blind. I know she was trying to make a point that you should make the most of what you’ve been given. I agree with the sentiment, but I was saddened by her statement. I don’t know what my life would have been, if I had been born with average sight. I’ll never know what it’s like to drive or to see my children’s faces. However, I do know that I am living the life that I was meant to live by using the gifts I have been given. So, I do thank God every day for making me who I am because   
I wouldn’t be this person without the experiences and challenges I have faced with vision loss. I’ve been given a unique gift that has allowed me to help others, and for that I am truly grateful. I have lived a wonderful life, full of adventure and great joy. I look forward to new challenges and new opportunities, as I continue my journey flying blind.”

**meet an employer | new view oklahoma**

The Oklahoma League of the Blind was founded in 1949 and for decades served as the state’s largest employer of people who were blind or visually impaired. By 2009, the League had been entirely re-imagined, expanding its mission to empower people through employment, vision rehabilitation and community outreach. So, on its 60th anniversary, the AbilityOne and National Industries of the Blind (NIB) agency was introduced to the public as NewView Oklahoma, Inc. At the helm, was President and CEO Lauren Branch, who by her own admission, landed in the field of vision rehabilitation quite by accident. A CPA by training, Branch thought she had been hired to head up a manufacturing company. “I was looking for a job and they were looking for a controller.” The appointment proved to be serendipitous, as Branch fell in love with the organization and emerged as the driving force behind   
its transformation.

Today, NewView helps 2,800 people a year adapt to vision loss and learn to thrive. But when Branch was first handed the reins in 1997, the agency offered no rehabilitation training and Branch knew little about the practice. But she listened and learned from peers at other NIB agencies and soon recognized that the League employed many bright, hardworking people and yet there was no avenue for them to acquire new skills.

Branch saw an opportunity. “At a certain point the light bulb came on, and I realized we were doing a huge disservice to our employees and the community as a whole by not addressing the rehabilitation needs of people who were blind and visually impaired.”

NewView now offers rehabilitation training through Oklahoma City and Tulsa Low Vision Centers while many clients are served by an itinerant staff who work with clients in their own homes. NewView operates the only private low vision clinic in the state and recently hired a doctor with expertise in the field of neurology to address the unique visual deficits of those who have experienced a traumatic brain injury. Branch likes to say that the organization serves babies, grannies and everyone in between. NewView gets referrals from the state through early intervention programs and provides direct service in public schools. The majority of clients, about 75%, are seniors with the balance split between children and working age adults.

NewView employs a range of ACVREP certified specialists, as well as TVIs, Occupational Therapists and Occupational Therapist Assistants, all of whom are an integral part of the rehabilitation staff. Branch explains that this was not by design but a product of creative problem solving.

Once NewView’s executive leadership committed to the idea of starting a top-notch rehabilitation program, the agency embarked on the traditional path of hiring Certified Vision Rehabilitation Specialists (CVRT) and Certified Low Vision Therapists (CLVT). But Oklahoma did not have a university program churning out viable candidates, so the only option was to look out of state. Recruitment efforts, however, proved to be fruitless. “We couldn’t even get one person to relocate to Oklahoma,” Branch recalls.

Undaunted, Branch and her team, which included the late Cathy Holden, looked to an available pool of allied health professionals. Oklahoma’s OTs and COTAs had some exposure to vision rehabilitation, but not to the degree that would satisfy the standards of a state-of-the art program. Branch and Holden approached Lighthouse International, now the Lighthouse Guild, which had been working on a program to train COTAs in vision rehabilitation. When the Guild was ready for beta testing, NewView partnered with the organization to refine the curriculum.

Branch understands the anxiety over occupational therapists’ perceived encroachment upon the field of vision rehabilitation, once the sole domain of those with more traditional vision degrees. Branch’s response is pragmatic. “OTs are here to stay, and so we had better be at the table to ensure they are trained appropriately.” New View is in the process of certifying their OTs as CLVTs and their assistive technology specialists as CATIS.

In accordance with their model, clients who come through NewView’s low vision clinic are given an assessment with recommendations for center or home-based training. One obvious advantage of employing allied healthcare professionals is that the hours billed to insurance companies provide a reliable revenue stream. Reimbursements contribute to the fiscal health of the agency, but Branch also sees that being able to partner with health insurance companies is good for the health of the vision rehabilitation field as a whole. Declining enrollments in university programs demonstrate how difficult it is to attract students to an education-based university program for VRT & LVT where salaries have stagnated and the price of a master’s degree continues to rise. Branch is confident that adding well-trained OTs to NewView Oklahoma’s rehabilitation team has been a win-win situation. “Our OTs serve our clients very well, and with the revenue generated from insurance billing, we are able to pay them a competitive salary.”

AbilityOne-affiliated agencies who have long-provided employment for individuals who are blind or visually impaired helped to address unemployment for visually impaired individuals (estimated at 75%). NewView employees were producing everything from fire hoses to Purell hand sanitizer until 2016 when new government regulations created some issues with the program. Branch expresses the frustration of many AbilityOne partners. “I felt like we were under attack.”

The new regulations in the Workforce and Opportunity Act that were implemented in 2016 required “Competitive Integrated Employment.” This prompted many state Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) programs to make a blanket judgment that AbilityOne nonprofit programs, which by design employ a high percentage of people with visual impairments, were not sufficiently integrated. As a result, visually impaired individuals working with VR agencies could no longer freely choose to work at an AbilityOne associated nonprofit agency.

Branch is of the opinion that well-intentioned legislation had unintended consequences. “The end game… [for individuals who are visually impaired]… ,” says Branch, “is being able to earn a living, buy a home, send your kid college or simply afford dinner at a restaurant.” She contends that by forcing the issue of an “integrated” workplace, policymakers failed to see the overarching goal of integrating people who are blind or visually impaired into broader society.

Branch reflects on what type of new legislation would truly empower people with visual impairments to realize career ambitions. She considers her talented colleagues who are blind or have low vision and stand out in their jobs in accounting or program management. “It’s unfortunate that the accommodations that we make in our company for staff who are visually impaired are frequently deemed unreasonable in the corporate world.”

And while Branch is heartened by clients who have achieved rehabilitation goals and are now thriving in their jobs, she recognizes there is more to be done. “As a society, we are not creating job opportunities on a systemic level. Until accessibility is truly native to workplace systems, including everything from training programs to computer software, there will continue to be challenges.”

Branch’s ability to successfully lead her agency to innovate and grow has caught the public’s attention. During her tenure, NewView Oklahoma has won the Blue Cross Blue Shield Champion of Senior Health Award, the American Optometric Association Apollo Award and was recognized by the Department of Human Services as their Program of the Year. Branch herself has garnered the admiration of the community who named her CEO of the Year. Branch attributes her success to ongoing discontent with the status quo.   
The restlessness compels her to continue moving the ball forward. Branch also has the humility to credit her exceptional staff. “Our agency has done cool things because we have really good people.”

Branch finds motivation in simply walking down the halls at work and witnessing the impact programs are having on a daily basis. “People come in and think their lives are over. In just a few hours, you can give them a small win and they start to consider the possibility that they can indeed get their lives back. Every person who comes in is his or her own success story.”

NewView rallies around the moto: It’s not what you can see, it’s what you can be. Lauren Branch summed it up this way “I think the idea that people can be anything they want and work anywhere they want is aspirational but attainable. If we keep fighting, we can ensure that people who are blind or visually impaired will have opportunities to live independent lives through rewarding careers.”

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