

Blind, visually impaired New Yorkers contribute to state economy

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Employment statistics suggest bleak economic realities for New Yorkers who are blind. Nearly two in three are out of work, a level in line with national unemployment figures for individuals who are blind and other populations with disabilities.

But a more promising picture emerges from the Industries for the Blind of [New York State](#) (IBNYS) and its eight affiliated agencies, which are breaking down employment barriers from Buffalo to Brooklyn through a program that creates jobs to produce goods and services needed by [government agencies](#).

A recent study by the University at Buffalo Regional Institute reports that these agencies, including Buffalo's Olmsted Center for Sight, provide jobs for 900 workers, 440 of whom are blind or visually impaired, generating over \$88 million in direct sales of 240 different goods and services. [Spinoff](#) activity in related industries across the state creates another \$80 million in [economic output](#) and supports 266 additional jobs.

To view a [full copy of the report](#), visit the UB Regional Institute online.

"The UB Regional Institute report proves what our affiliates and workers have known for years. Blind and visually impaired workers are productive members of our community. They can be efficient, conscientious and exceptional employees," said Richard Healey, president of IBNYS, which commissioned the report. "The missing

ingredient is the opportunity. We are dedicated to creating those opportunities across the state."

"On the numbers side, the impacts of IBNYS and its agencies are clear— from millions of dollars in sales to hundreds of jobs. At the scale of the individual, however, these impacts translate into economic security, independence, a career path and a sense of self-worth," said Robert G. Shibley, dean of the UB School of Architecture and Planning and interim director of the institute, a research center of the school.

One of the report's key findings is that IBNYS and its agencies have the potential to double these impacts by expanding strategic product lines and increasing its market share of state and local government contracts. By 2016, IBNYS could create over 400 new jobs for individuals who are blind, and see its overall economic impacts soar to \$355 million.

"In New York State today, approximately 106,700 individuals who are blind and between the ages 18 and 64 are not working. Clearly there is significant untapped potential in providing New Yorkers who are blind with gainful and meaningful employment opportunities and, in turn, realizing greater economic impacts for the entire state," said Sharon Ana Entress, senior policy associate with the institute and director of the impact study.

IBNYS anticipates much of its growth to stem from its role in the state's Preferred Source Program. Created in the 1960s to support populations historically facing employment barriers, the program mandates that state and local agencies purchase, where possible, commodities produced by New Yorkers who are blind or otherwise disabled. IBNYS fulfills these contracts through its affiliated agencies, which provide manufacturing and service capacities ranging from contact centers to work-clothing production to technology assembly.

However, the program is significantly underutilized due to gaps in awareness among government entities, as well as inaccurate perceptions about the cost and convenience of purchasing blind-made goods and services.

"Today we represent 1 percent of state agency spending -- obviously not a significant share," Healy said. "Yet this also represents \$11 million. If we were able to increase our market share to 2 percent, we could put hundreds more to work, at the same time adding to the state tax base and reducing the number of people on public assistance."

Ronald S. Maier, president of the Olmsted Center for Sight in Buffalo, which produces work clothing and linens, as well as switchboard services, for its government clients, says now is the time to seize the opportunity for growth.

"This study shows that an overwhelming majority of sales for state and local government are being left on the table. For whatever reasons, there are significant gaps in adherence to the law," he said. "Now we will take steps to grow our share of the market to create even greater economic and quality-of-life impacts for the state and blind New Yorkers."

Like many of the other agencies, Olmsted offers rehabilitative services and other employment programs for blind workers. For instance, its National Statler Center provides training in hospitality, customer service and contact centers.

Within the preferred service program, IBNYS anticipates additional growth through the expansion of strategic product lines. Top-selling goods are office supplies, cleaning products and work clothing. Services in highest demand include switchboard and contact center operations, mailbag sorting services and computer technology training.

The institute's report also reveals that the federal government and other out-of-state buyers account for a significant share -- or 60 percent -- of agency sales. These are a critical source of new dollars for the state economy.

Going behind the numbers, the institute's report examines how these programs improve the lives of individuals. Case studies of 14 employees across the agencies show how IBNYS jobs build career paths, foster economic independence and advance the quality of life for a [population](#) typically left out.

IBNYS employees work in a variety of positions, from machine operators and packing clerks to contact center representatives and supervisors. The jobs pay average hourly wages 40 percent higher than the state minimum wage, and come with basic benefits including health, dental, pension, vacation and sick time.

Additionally, vocational training and continuing education are a core part of the job for employees of IBNYS affiliates. Advancement within the agencies is common, and 7 percent of employees are eventually attracted to [jobs](#) outside the agency in the public and private sectors.

A major research and policy center of the University at Buffalo within the UB School of Architecture and Planning, the UB Regional Institute plays a vital role in addressing key policy issues for regions, with focused analysis of the Buffalo-Niagara region. The institute leverages the resources of the university and binational community to pursue a wide range of scholarship, projects and initiatives that frame issues, inform decisions and guide change.

Provided by University at Buffalo

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