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Miami Lighthouse's contributions in health, education cited

BY MARILYN BOWDEN

Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired—the oldest private agency in Florida serving the blind—received two major awards in 2015. A Sapphire Award from Florida Blue Foundation acknowledged it as an outstanding nonprofit community healthcare organization; the Beacon Council's Distinguished Industry Award honored it for outstanding contributions to education.

In recognition of these tributes, *Miami Today's* Gold Medal Award judges have given Miami Lighthouse the 2016 Silver Medal for an Organization.

From its beginnings in 1931, in a 900-square-foot bungalow, the nonprofit has grown to a 55,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art educational and rehabilitation center serving the blind and visually impaired at every stage of life, says Miami Lighthouse President and CEO Virginia A. Jacko.

"We have a major expansion under way," says Board Chair Ramón F. Casas, "that will include full-service daycare and pre-kindergarten for blind children in collaboration with Miami-Dade County Public Schools and the Early Learning Coalition. We're already offering intervention from birth, but now we'll be able to do so on a daily basis.

Daily instruction in Braille, math and using an iPad, Ms. Jacko says, will ensure that when the children enter the



President and CEO Virginia Jacko has strengthened Miami Lighthouse.

public school system "they will have all the skills they need for a level playing field."

Miami Lighthouse's four mobile eyecare units provide free eyecare exams and glasses for kids having trouble at school due to impaired vision but whose parents can't afford eyecare services.

"A survey of the parents of 1,400 kids assisted in that program showed that 74% had academic proof that their child's performance had improved by getting glasses from us at no cost," Ms. Jacko says. As children enter their teens, Miami Lighthouse focuses on preparing them for employment.

"We're helping them do whatever they have to do to be ready for a career—such as getting them job-shadowing opportunities as well as jobs during spring break," Ms. Jacko says.

"Our GED program for blind adults, a collaboration with Miami-Dade Public Schools' Adult and Career Technical Education programs, includes help for those who first need to take English as a second language."

Numerous challenges face those who lose their vision as adults—a group that is growing as the population ages. Ms. Jacko says studies show one in four adults over 75 will experience uncorrectable vision loss.

"They need to relearn how to use a computer, cook, put on makeup, label clothing, do laundry, cross the street safely with a guide dog, do their shopping, among other things," says Ms. Jacko, who speaks from experience. A former university executive, she originally came to Miami Lighthouse as a client determined to learn how to continue to be a successful administrator.

Her success as chief executive of the nonprofit speaks eloquently of the effectiveness of its programs.

"When I began at Miami Lighthouse 10 years ago," she says, "we were serving about 450 people annually. Now we assist over 15,000. That's because the need is great.



Miami Lighthouse Chairman Ray Casas, right, and President and CEO Virginia Jacko receive the award from Joe Jimenez, vice president for legal and regulatory affairs of the sponsoring Codina.

