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VIRGINIA A. JACKO, PRESIDENT AND CEO OF MIAMI LIGHTHOUSE FOR THE BLIND AND VISUALLY IMPAIRED

Virginia Jacko, Accessibility and Education

Interview by [Shivani Vora](#)

Virginia Jacko, 81, was a financial executive at Purdue University when she was diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa, a genetic condition that eventually caused her total blindness. She is now the president and chief executive of the Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired, a service and advocacy organization that provides blind and visually impaired people with education and training. Besides expanding services for the visually impaired in Florida, she successfully pushed some candidates to bring their websites into compliance with

the Americans with Disabilities Act during the 2020 election — a move that inspired changes to whitehouse.gov.

In 2001, you moved from West Lafayette, Ind., to Miami to take advantage of Miami Lighthouse’s services. How did you go from being a client to heading the organization?

I fell in love with the mission. On my first day, I had no idea what they could do for me. When a case manager asked me what my goal was, all I had to say was “to cook myself a meal without getting burned.” I had no idea that blind people could do anything sighted people can.

Miami Lighthouse asked me to become treasurer of the board because of my strong financial background. When the C.E.O. left, I became interim C.E.O., and then the board appointed me to be the first-ever blind president and C.E.O. of the group.

What gaps did you identify in resources available to blind people, and how did you set out to fill those holes?

I found gaps in programming, accessibility and technology and started programs to address them. We had funding for only 23 babies in our [Blind Babies Program](#), for example, and I worked to build it up. Now, we serve more than 130 babies annually.

And I expanded the [Florida Heiken Children’s Vision Program](#). Underprivileged children often have no access to eye care, and I worked on an initiative to address that. Five mobile clinics travel around the state, going to different schools, partnering with local optometrists to give children eye exams, prescription glasses and referrals to help prevent blindness related to certain eye diseases, injuries and abnormalities. This program served 18,000 children last year.

Also, Braille music was very hard for blind musicians to come by, but Miami Lighthouse now has a Braille music distance learning curriculum that is accessible to musicians all over the world.

One of your biggest moves during your tenure was to get several of the 2020 presidential candidates during the 2020 elections to change their websites to become compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act. What were these sites missing?

The easiest thing for any entity to show that it cares about digital accessibility is to put an accessibility statement on its website that includes a phone number and an email to reach out to.

Many of the candidates didn't have this statement or a widget to adjust the contrast and font size. With the widget installed, one keystroke is all it takes to make that adjustment.

The campaigns of Joe Biden, Michael Bloomberg, Cory Booker, Elizabeth Warren and Andrew Yang contacted Miami Lighthouse and sought my counsel to ensure that their websites were compliant.

The feedback myself and my I.T. team (all blind themselves) provided the Biden administration is now reflected on whitehouse.gov.

Do you see progress for persons with sight disabilities in the years since you started advocating for people with impaired sight?

One thing that is very slow is getting meaningful jobs for the blind and visually impaired. Employers need to provide them with the resources to succeed, which are as simple as having the right equipment or computers.

What are the biggest remaining impediments to addressing some of the inequities?

No. 1 is digital accessibility. Website accessibility is this generation's wheelchair ramp.

[Women and Leadership: 7 Women Discuss Their Journeys - The New York Times \(nytimes.com\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/27/us/politics/women-leadership-7-women-discuss-their-journeys.html)

