

No sight doesn't mean no job for those aided by LR charity Lions World Services trains, finds positions for the blind

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When Jeffrey Smith lost his eyesight nearly a decade ago, he also lost his job.

The 45-year-old Michigan man hasn't had his sight restored, but his employment prospects are brighter, thanks to a small program operated by Lions World Services for the Blind in Little Rock.

Smith is among two dozen people being trained for jobs with the federal Internal Revenue Service, which has had a partnership with Lions World Services since 1967. In that time, more than 1,250



Photo by **Steve Keesee**

Jeff Smith of Whitmore Lake, Mich., begins a two-month training course offered by the IRS and the Lions World Services for the Blind in Little Rock on Monday.

people have gone through the program, including two dozen this year.

Smith is thankful to be among them. He began his two months of training classes Monday at the Lions World Services campus at 2811 Fair Park Blvd. Seventeen other students also are enrolled in the program. As long as they complete the course, they are guaranteed a job. Smith will be moving with his wife, Sara, to Atlanta once he finishes the course work.

"I'm looking forward to it," Smith said. "I'm just honored for even Lions World Services to give me an opportunity, for a new door to open, a new career. I'm ready."

Under the partnership, the IRS provides the instructors and curriculum while Lions World Services provides the

classroom and places for students to stay - all at no cost to students.

Smith is participating in the automated underreporter program, a two-month course that teaches people to work as tax-examining technicians.

Their primary duties involve screening selected cases for unreported income, as well as responding to telephone and written responses, explaining IRS notices sent to taxpayers, researching and analyzing taxpayer records and resolving taxpayer account problems.

The automated underreporter program is an IRS initiative to compare what an individual income tax filer reports as income against the income report the IRS maintains on every taxpayer. That file can include copies of W2 forms and 1099s, or third-party information returns on income filed by employers, banks or brokers.

Lions World Services also offers separate courses to be a collection-tax examiner, a tax examining assistant and taxpayer-service representative.

Like other blind and visually impaired people, Smith's journey to Little Rock began with a telephone call from his Michigan counselor who saw the job posting. Smith hasn't worked in eight years and hasn't received any interest from employers through job applications and interviews. Smith was intrigued.

"It sounded like a new direction for me," he said.

Smith suffers from a degenerative condition known as Usher Syndrome II, which also affects his hearing. He has lived with the condition for years. For instance, at one point, his doctor barred him from driving at night. Smith was an engineer for companies that built or serviced conveyors used in the automotive industry. One employer accommodated Smith, allowing him to work on weekends when the winter days grew too short for him to pull an eight-hour day, Smith said.

Finally, he had to stop driving even during the day, but Smith isn't totally blind. He is able to move about during the day without assistance and even play basketball, though his teammates must

remember not to make a bounce pass to him. At night, his wife must assist him or he uses a mobility cane to get around.

His poor hearing also requires a technological assist when he's on the telephone.

Larry Dickerson, president and chief executive officer of Lions World Services, says he wants his organization to build on what he calls the "very unique relationship" it has with the IRS.

"There's probably not another program for the blind or for any other disability in which that job is guaranteed once the training program is completed," Dickerson said.

He hopes to add other partnerships, particularly with state government and perhaps large corporations. Dickerson has had discussions with both.

The jobs in which his agency's clients are placed typically experience high turnover. But the IRS has found Lions World Services clients bring stability to their jobs.

"Ninety percent of people who complete the training here and start the job stay on the job," Dickerson said.

For Smith, like other clients placed through the program, their gratitude for a chance to make a living is profound.

"It's changed my feeling, my thoughts and my future," he said.