

# Call center company Blindsight Delaware changes name, approach

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A Wilmington call center company that planned to focus on the medical industry while hiring part of its employees from special needs and disadvantaged communities has widened its focus and shifted its name.

BlindSight Delaware Enterprise, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit social business enterprise founded in 2021, received a \$608,000 grant from the Delaware Strategic Fund last year to help it grow..

Now known as BSD Enterprises, the company has found success with the city of Wilmington, running its 311 call center, and Beebe Hospital, working to schedule appointments and more for its Tunnell Cancer Center. It's talking to Beebe about adding service for another department.

"We're starting to get traction and awareness," said Karl Fischer, vice president of customer solutions for the company since April 1.

He replaced a man who lived in Chicago. Local matters, says Fischer.

"You know how Delaware works," he said. "It's not even the seven degrees of Bacon. It's three degrees." And often only one.

"I've been able to come in and start to leverage some relationships and build some relationships, not necessarily from my rolodex, but from my Delaware roots," he said.

Fischer moved to Delaware young enough to attend kindergarten here. He grew up to run operations and strategies for MBNA and Bank of America's contact center for about eight of his 18 years with the banks. His last job was in customer experience with DecisivEdge, a company formed by former MBNA people, that sold consulting services.

"He can envision the entire spectrum of a solution for a customer," said CEO John D. Baker. "So he's not a salesman, he's a solutions man."

## Name change

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The company was founded in 2021 by BlindSight Delaware, a nonprofit founded in 1909 and once known as as Delaware Association for the Blind, and The Chicago Lighthouse.

BSD changed its name partly because so many people seemed to think it was designed to prioritize its social goals over profit.

Not so.

"We're viewed as a nonprofit, a charity," Fischer said. "We're turning our positioning around, like our tagline says: Quality interactions for call centers. It's quality.

"I don't want people to think I'm out here looking for business for charity. I'm looking for business. We do a great job, as evidenced by city of Wilmington and and the Tunnell Cancer Center. We do great work. We make revenue to drive back into the business."

Stephanie L. Mergler, deputy chief of staff in Wilmington, said the city has been delighted to hire a Wilmington company to replace a Pennsylvania one.

“It’s helpful for a call taker to actually be familiar with the city that they’re answering calls about,” Mergler said.

One reason for BSD’s choice by the city is that BSD can handle credit card payments over the phone; the other company couldn’t, she said. That company had to transfer the call to a finance office, costing those workers time, she said.

The city also likes supporting a company that plans to hire about 30% of its work force from special needs and economically disadvantaged people, Mergler said.

When Wilmington residents call the city’s 311 line, they have four options: water billing; parking; public works; and then everything else, which includes finance, licenses, inspections and constituent services.

BSD handles the fourth group, getting about 2,500 calls a month, about half of all the calls to 311.

“Since they are willing to really staff the call center appropriately, our call time and wait times have been minuscule,” Mergler said. “Our goal is under 30 seconds, and they’ve been within 10 seconds every time. So our call abandonment rate is significantly down and our speed to answer is incredibly fast.”

The BSD contract was just renewed.

## **Impressed by call center talent**

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Fischer said he now hears commercial’s for the city’s 311 system on WDEL.

“I think a large part of that is a testament to the work that our people are doing here,” he said.

He said he’s been impressed by the talent in the company.

The company may have changed its name, but it won’t forget its history, he said.

“We are here because BlindSight Delaware wanted to create an opportunity for their constituents to work,” he said.

Workers come to the CSC Station on the Wilmington Riverfront for four to six weeks of training. Then they move to one of the 24 workstations, paid for with help from the Welfare Foundation. A few people work remotely.

The state grant was designed to help them hire people, and Fischer says they may not be able to hit the original marks of 155 people by the end of this year and 255 by the end of 2025.

Fischer expects to hit 155 seats by the middle of next year.

Baker said he and Fischer have negotiated with the state and its grant has been extended through 2026. They routinely meet with Bryan Mack, a state business development manager.

“I’ve got a steep hill to climb,” Fischer said.

“But what has changed is we’ve signed two major clients that have shown our proof in the two verticals,” he said. “We think we have strengthened municipalities and healthcare. We have created a network of relationships that we’re continuing to build and grow. And our prospect phase is growing.”

## **Regional call center hub**

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BSD Enterprises' goal is still to be the region's call center hub, employing Delawareans, he said.

The company plans to approach several kinds of companies, including federally qualified healthcare centers, like Henrietta Johnson in Wilmington or La Red in Sussex County, and utilities.

For the health centers, there's a range of benefits for getting their customers into the center and keeping them out of emergency rooms, Fischer said.

Ultimately, he said. "It's the skill set of our people, not necessarily the vertical, that drives us right? So if you can schedule, if you can register, if you can take pharmacy refills ... Our people are talented. They just need to be educated properly. "

Hiring from Delaware keeps the workers' money and talent in the state, Baker said.

As he seeks new business, Fischer ghost calls organizations he plans to approach, including state service centers.

He called one and waited more than 20 minutes and then hung up. On the fifth day, a Friday, the call was answered at 3 p.m., which surprised him.

"I just thanked them," he said

Delawareans are paying taxes and not getting good service, he said.

"In the world of state support, you have nowhere to go."

He wants to help improve that.

While Fischer is selling in Delaware, he's also interested in offering services in nearby states and has been surprised by how many companies rely on call centers outside the state or overseas.

At a minimum, he said, the tapes playing during a wait should stop telling people how much their call is valued and start telling them how to use online assets.

Some people don't want to or can't access those, he noted. That often means the companies are sending older people to centers in Costa Rica or the Philippines, where the callers and the center have to deal with hearing and language problems.

One of the things that's changed is the company's look on how we're going to approach this business and its look on focusing on customer experience, and it's look at trying to help companies as they move along the progression of customer service, Fischer said.

"This is an interaction, not a transaction," he said.