

AT A GLANCE

Life Line Emergency Vehicles

FOUNDED: 1985

OVERVIEW: A maker of quality custom-built ambulances and emergency vehicles.

EMPLOYEES: 176

IMPACT: Projections call for more than \$1 million in new or retained sales because of the motorized sliding side door.

FOR MORE: www.lifelineambulance.com



Capstone Project Helps Life Line Open New Door

A Sumner, Iowa, manufacturer of emergency vehicles believes it's on the cusp of a major innovation after Iowa State University engineering students helped the company develop a new design for a side-entry ambulance door.

Life Line Emergency Vehicles, a maker of custom ambulance bodies since 1985, expects to go to a national trade show this fall with a working prototype of its first ambulance with a motorized sliding side door—a new feature that's expected to make it safer and more convenient for emergency medical crews to operate in tight spaces or along the side of a highway.

"Any time an ambulance pulls over to the side of the road on a restrictive street, getting the side door open becomes an issue," said Jacob Spiegel, Life Line's head of research and development. For

example, hinged doors that swing open near traffic have a tendency to block views of the road and may create a hazard for EMS workers.

Other ambulance makers have been selling sliding side-door models for years, but Life Line's new patent-pending entry appears to be the first motorized offering.

"We have always tried to be a leader in the industry," Spiegel said. "We've always tried to be out in the forefront.... I think this is going to be a very big deal because it gives us something that the rest of the industry doesn't have."

The new product is arriving roughly two years after the privately owned Life Line was sold to Folienc Inc., an employee stock ownership plan that purchased the ambulance firm in July 2017 (see page 3), making the company 100 percent employee owned. To help Life Line grow, Folienc reached out to CIRAS and Iowa State University for assistance.

The sliding side door was "something that people had been talking about in the industry, so it was a good starting point," Spiegel said. "There are a lot of things that have to be addressed in a sliding door. It's a complex mechanism, but this

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is a good fit for a bunch of engineering students.”

“We didn’t want to be an ‘us-too,’” said Randy Smith, Life Line’s director of operations. “We wanted it to be unique and to challenge us.”

Eight mechanical engineering students visited Life Line in the fall of 2018 to begin roughing out the new door’s design as part of a senior capstone project—a requirement that Iowa State engineering

students must complete before graduation to demonstrate that they can apply what they’ve learned to real-world problems. A second group of capstone students then developed the design even further the following semester.

Life Line engineers took over the project in May and began working it through the final tweaks of becoming a production-worthy design.

“The students were magnificent, but they ran into some problems that modeling it on a computer doesn’t

predict,” Spiegel said. “They did a bang-up job; but until you build the first prototype, you don’t really know how it’s going to work.”

Life Line plans to publicly unveil the new ambulance in October at EMS World

Expo 2019, a major trade show in New Orleans. After that, the new vehicle still will require safety testing—meaning it may take another year before the company will see significant new sales.

“If we deliver something that is a benefit to the customer and it’s seen as value added, then it’ll sell itself.”

— *Jacob Spiegel*

But Spiegel said Life Line is confident that the industry’s future includes sliding side doors. It’s simply what the customers want.

“We are a custom-built manufacturer,” he said. “Everything we make is custom. We take great pride in the durability and the longevity that people get out of a Life Line ambulance. I think this will dovetail nicely with our existing product line.”

“If we deliver something that is a benefit to the customer and it’s seen as value added, then it’ll sell itself.”

➤ **For more information, contact Carey Novak at cenovak@iastate.edu or 515-408-4257.**

Iowa State University engineering students check wiring, switches, and software during construction of a prototype motorized side ambulance door.



On the Cover: Ambulances under construction at Life Line Emergency Vehicles in Sumner.

CIRAS Mission: *Every day we will enhance the performance of industry through applied research, education, and technical assistance.*

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The Folience Formula: Diversification That Boosts Family Businesses

A 133-year-old newspaper company's path to diversification is simultaneously sparking innovation among the employee owners of the businesses it's purchasing.

Folience Inc., a Cedar Rapids-based holding company, has acquired two manufacturing firms in the past three years as part of a concerted effort to broaden the company beyond its media industry roots.

"These companies, when they're on their own, are working really hard to have the success that they've had," said Folience president and CEO Daniel Goldstein. "Joining Folience gives them more resources and more capacity than they would have had on their own. . . . It's a very clear example of 1 + 1 = 3."

Folience, which serves as an umbrella organization for an employee stock ownership plan (ESOP), evolved into its current form at the beginning of 2017 because The Gazette Company, publisher of the Cedar Rapids newspaper, wanted to find new ways to invest its resources. The Gazette, which has been 100 percent employee owned since 2012, received a windfall when it sold KCRG-TV for \$100 million in 2015.

Four years after that sale, Folience has a total of 620 employee owners. That figure includes the newspaper and a commercial printer; Fusionfarm, a Cedar Rapids advertising agency; Life Line Emergency vehicles, a Sumner ambulance manufacturer that Folience purchased in 2017 (see page 1); Cimarron Trailers, an Oklahoma trailer company purchased last year; and a Shared Services division that helps all the firms run payroll, human resources, and other support functions.

Goldstein said Life Line and Cimarron both started as family-run businesses, with owners looking to depart without harming those they would leave behind. In both cases, controlling families eventually sold to an ESOP. Long-time managers thus could keep their jobs while simultaneously taking advantage of the new resources that a parent corporation could provide.

CIRAS account manager Sean Gallegger believes the ESOP structure, when run properly, can help a company make better choices. "There's no guarantee," Gallegger said. "But in most instances, I feel companies become stronger over time because the culture changes. You've got more diversity of thought in strategy and decision making."

It was Folience, through a board member's connections at Iowa State University, that helped Life Line begin a relationship with CIRAS, thus helping the company find engineering resources to develop its long-wanted sliding side-door ambulance. Life Line, recently transformed to a 100 percent ESOP, now is working with CIRAS on a strategic plan to help the company set the correct priorities for its new future.

Randy Smith, director of operations for Life Line, said Folience facilitates growth.

"Basically, their job is to just let us do our thing," Smith said. "It kind of frees up some of our time to go out and work on the projects that we want to."

➤ **For more information, contact Sean Gallegger at galleger@iastate.edu or 515-290-0181.**

AT A GLANCE

Folience Inc.

FOUNDED: 1884 (2017 in its current form)

OVERVIEW: An ESOP holding company that includes Cedar Rapids' The Gazette, Life Line Emergency Vehicles, and Oklahoma-based Cimarron Trailers.

EMPLOYEES: 620

FOR MORE: www.folience.com



PTAC Receives Awards

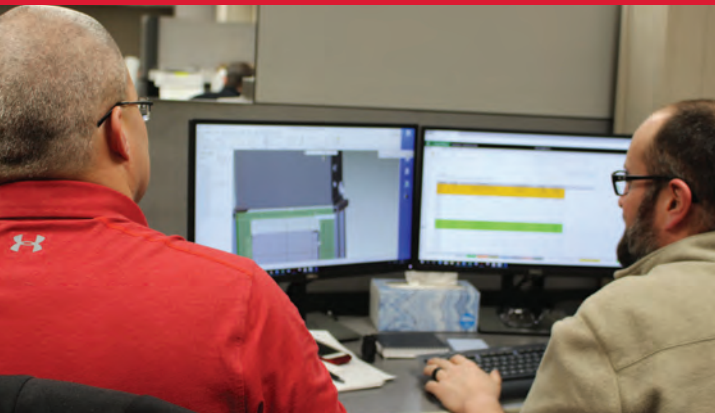
CIRAS government contracting specialists were praised by their peers earlier this year for having a tremendous impact both on the Iowa economy and on the communities where they live.

The CIRAS Procurement Technical Assistance Center (PTAC) was lauded by its national organization in March for fostering local coordination in the state's Home Base Iowa program. The Association of Procurement Technical Assistance Centers (APTAC), a group of more than 94 PTACs around the country, presented CIRAS PTAC program director Leah Barton with an Economic Impact award at its annual meeting in Reno, Nevada. APTAC praised work by government contracting specialist Andy Alexander to coordinate Home Base Iowa efforts in Pottawattamie County and "set the standard" for regional collaboration.

Alexander additionally received the Becky Peterson Human Impact award for helping the Council Bluffs Police Department strengthen ties to its community after two officers died in the line of duty in 2017. Alexander worked with Council Bluffs to boost community participation in the National Night Out and Citizens Police Academy and helped the town with construction of a new \$20 million police headquarters.

APTAC says the Human Impact award recognizes those who go beyond normal PTAC duties, "making a difference in the lives of others and the communities we call home."

Congratulations to Andy and the rest of the PTAC team.



Above left: Bazooka Farmstar engineers design various product improvements. **Above right:** A welder assembles an Eclipse Hose Reel, which is used for moving “layflat” hose as part of the liquid manure application process (below).

AT A GLANCE

Bazooka Farmstar Inc.

FOUNDED: 1991

OVERVIEW: A maker of quality agriculture and manure-handling equipment.

EMPLOYEES: 110

IMPACT: Doubled the company's production capacity and cut lead time from 16 weeks to 6.

FOR MORE: www.bazookafarmstar.com

CIRAS Helps Bazooka Farmstar Bring Order to Its Growth

A Washington, Iowa, maker of manure-injection equipment was able to double capacity and drastically reduce lead time after CIRAS arranged coaching for its key managers.

Bazooka Farmstar is a rapidly growing 110-person agricultural manufacturer that's seen sales grow 140 percent since 2016. But as the company took off, its production processes and management seemed to lag. Lead times increased, labor costs rose, and it seemed more and more difficult to maintain an adequate supply of parts.

“The manufacturing team was doing a great job of meeting their production requirements but was spending considerable excess time and effort in doing so,” said Jim Poe, a retired CIRAS project manager. “They have great people. They had the education and the knowledge. They just needed some help with organization and focus.”

Poe, on behalf of CIRAS, began meeting regularly with Bazooka Farmstar managers to identify problems and find the best solutions. At his direction, the company created a master list of all nuts, bolts, washers, and valves used in various products and arranged for a vendor to supply them via the Internet. Engineers who had been working on fifty projects began to focus on four or five,

getting one done, and then moving on to the next one.

“When you're able to make small improvements and benefit from that work, the impact on productivity just snowballs,” Poe said.

Bazooka Farmstar paid for part of Poe's work with help from a U.S. Department of Commerce program known as the Trade Assistance Act Grant for Firms. The program was created to counteract the adverse effects of foreign competition by paying one-half the costs of business improvements.

Eric Hahn, managing partner at Bazooka Farmstar, said declining oil prices and strong Chinese competition in 2014 damaged sales of fracking equipment sold to the oil industry. “We've been able to rebound largely because we made some improvements and invested in ag,” Hahn said.

Donna Porch, director of the Mid-America Trade Adjustment Assistance Center in Missouri, said her agency at the end of April was actively working with 40 companies in Missouri, Iowa,

Kansas, and Nebraska—9 of them in Iowa. “Technical assistance and cost share grant funding enable a firm to make improvements to its competitive situation faster and more aggressively than it could on its own,” she said.

Meanwhile, Bazooka Farmstar welcomes Poe's continued help.

“Jim has been really good at being a mentor to the heads of my departments and just kind of making sure that we're starting with the lowest-hanging opportunities and moving forward,” Hahn said. “I think my team is seeing more clearly now, not just for today, but for tomorrow and the next month and the next year.”



➤ For more information, contact Rudy Pruszko at rpruszko@iastate.edu or 563-599-0645.

AT A GLANCE

Cambridge Investment Group

FOUNDED: 1981

OVERVIEW: A privately controlled financial solutions firm serving more than 3,000 independent financial advisers and their clients.

EMPLOYEES: 816

IMPACT: The company saved \$1.4 million in 2018 through efficiencies found via continuous improvement processes.

FOR MORE: www.cir2.com/public

Cambridge Investment Group Saves Money via Continuous Improvements

A Fairfield financial solutions firm estimates that the company saved more than \$1 million in 2018 by using continuous improvement techniques to shave time and lost effort off its work.

Cambridge Investment Group Inc. is a privately controlled financial solutions firm that provides a broad range of choices regarding financial solutions to more than 3,000 independent financial advisers around the country, as well as their hundreds of thousands of clients.

Amanda Reineke, vice president of accounting and continuous improvement for Cambridge, said the company saved roughly \$1.4 million from efficiency improvements.

"The savings came from across the company, with nearly every department participating and contributing,"

Reineke said. "It came down to many small improvements that added up, with approximately 90 percent of the improvements valued at less than \$5,000.

"An example would be eliminating handwritten information in one process," she said. "One team found that it saved two to five minutes of work for each set of paperwork by eliminating the need to decipher handwriting and reach out for clarification."

In another example, the company managed to shrink the time needed to open a new account at Cambridge to an estimated 48 to 72 hours. The goal is to get the time down to 24 hours by the end of 2019.

Cambridge's success comes roughly five years after the company joined the Iowa Lean

Consortium (ILC) and began to introduce a culture of continuous improvement at its home office in Fairfield. That was followed over the next few years by the implementation of visual management,

"Lean has been a great tool to allow our entire organization to work toward common goals."

— Amanda Reineke

value-stream mapping, and other Lean techniques—all while Cambridge company leaders continued attending ILC training events.

Reineke said Cambridge has found value by improving all aspects of the company. This includes better process development and enhancement, increased communication, better cross-collaboration between departments, and more value-stream thinking at every level.

"Lean has been a great tool to allow our entire organization to work toward common goals," she said.

➤ For more information, contact Iowa Lean Consortium program director Teresa Hay McMahon at thmc@iastate.edu or 515-715-0293.



CIRAS Advice Makes Mobilis Home Medical Self-sufficient

Colleen Brabec believes CIRAS has made her smarter about government contracting.

Brabec owns Mobilis Home Medical Equipment, a 17-person Council Bluffs company that sells wheelchairs, scooters, and related equipment throughout western Iowa and eastern Nebraska. Mobilis used to deliver equipment for U.S. Veterans Administration hospitals in Iowa and Nebraska, but the company lost that contract three years ago because of what Brabec describes as newly complicated procurement procedures and increased competition from new players in the market.

Brabec, who joined Mobilis in 2002, has been working closely since 2016 with Andy Alexander, a government contracting specialist with the CIRAS Procurement Technical Assistance Center. As a result, she believes she's now better equipped to make a smart bid when opportunities arise for business with the federal government.

"The unfortunate part is I didn't understand everything that was in that contract before Andy, which was a real disadvantage," Brabec said. "After working with CIRAS, I now have a much clearer understanding of who I'm dealing with in the government and what will be required in terms of time and reporting. I am much more educated now in my response to a solicitation."

Mobilis last year won the contract to operate the VA's Seating and Positioning Clinic. Brabec said the clinic currently ranks as her fourth-largest revenue source by billing.

Alexander said Mobilis seems to understand that government contracting is a long-term play. "If you put in three bids and win one, then you have to keep submitting," he said.

Brabec still meets regularly with Alexander, although she said she now uses CIRAS mostly as a backstop. In February, Brabec waited until she had nearly finalized her submission for a state of Iowa wheelchair contract before she ran the paperwork past Alexander as a double check.

"So far, I've been able to work on the contract without having to bother him," Brabec said. "I find it remarkable that I was able to work on this by myself. . . . The fact that I can navigate it on my own, I think, speaks volumes for the help Andy's given me in the past."

Two months later, Mobilis was awarded the contract.

➤ **For more information, contact Andy Alexander at andyalex@iastate.edu or 402-547-0333.**

AT A GLANCE

Mobilis Inc.

FOUNDED: 2002

OVERVIEW: Provides a full line of medical equipment and services to customers in Iowa and central and eastern Nebraska.

EMPLOYEES: 17

IMPACT: Nearly \$422,000 in government contracts awarded over the past four years, not counting a new contract to provide wheelchairs to the state of Iowa.

FOR MORE: www.mobilismed.com



Colleen Brabec (right) and her partner, Trisha Gillespie.

ISU Career Fairs

Agriculture and Life Sciences Ag Career Day

Tuesday, October 8, 2019

9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.
Lied Rec Center

CONTACT: mikegaul@iastate.edu

Business, Industry, and Technology Career Fair

Wednesday, September 25, 2019

Noon to 5:00 p.m.
Hilton Coliseum

Business, Liberal Arts and Sciences, Human Sciences

CONTACT: buscs@iastate.edu

Engineering Career Fair

Wednesday, September 18, 2019

Noon to 5:00 p.m.
Scheman Building

Tuesday, September 24, 2019

Noon to 5:00 p.m.
Hilton Coliseum and Scheman Building

Both fairs are a mix of engineering and associated STEM majors

CONTACT: ecs@iastate.edu

People to People Career Fair

Wednesday, September 25, 2019

Noon to 5:00 p.m.
Scheman Building

Focuses on human/social services, education, health/wellness, government, and hospitality; Hosted by the Colleges of Human Sciences and Liberal Arts and Sciences

CONTACT: hscareers@iastate.edu



Quadyster Finds Success by Broadening Government Expertise

As far as Hari Banda is concerned, it all comes down to getting a good education and having a better reputation.

Banda is the owner of Quadyster, a Bettendorf information technology company that struggled for years to find the right approach to doing business with the government. Contracts seemed always out of reach. Then, two things happened: the company found CIRAS, and it found a new source for electronic equipment.

Government buyers noticed.

“We needed a good supplier to have a better price,” Banda said. “Once they saw that we had readjusted ourselves, from about 2017 onward, we started winning. Now, we’ve got a good rapport with some of the organizations like the Air Force, and they keep coming to us.”

From January 2017 through the first quarter of 2019, Quadyster landed a total of 55 government contracts worth more than \$2 million.

“Our niche is cloud computing,” Banda said. “We’ll help you move all your local

services to the cloud, build security, and train you how to use it.”

Melissa Burant, a government contracting specialist with the CIRAS Procurement Technical Assistance Center, believes Quadyster’s success has come at least partly because the company routinely sends multiple employees to CIRAS educational events. Government contracting can be complicated, with systems and procedures that must be followed to achieve maximum effect.

“When you have just one person and they don’t get it, that can be difficult,” Burant said. “Half the battle is finding opportunities and understanding how to respond to them. With Quadyster’s combined experience, they can learn from each other. That goes a long way.”

Banda praised CIRAS for guiding Quadyster through its education.

AT A GLANCE

Quadyster

FOUNDED: 2006

OVERVIEW: An information technology solutions provider focused on digital transformation and cloud computing.

EMPLOYEES: 26

IMPACT: With CIRAS help, the company landed contracts totaling more than \$2 million.

FOR MORE: www.quadyster.com

“CIRAS is a wonderful organization,” he said. “Without your help, we wouldn’t have gone this far. . . . All your people are wonderful—so nice.”

Government contracting specialists “mentor and motivate,” Banda said. “They call you into their offices and spend time with you to look through something.”

“Online documentation can help you get there as far as understanding it,” echoed CBL Rao, Quadyster’s vice president. “But the personal attention and the motivating is what differentiates CIRAS from other organizations. They are available at any time to help us.”

➤ For more information, contact Melissa Burant at mmburant@iastate.edu or 563-726-9958.

- **Preparing a Winning Proposal**
August 14, 2019
10:00 a.m. to Noon
Council Bluffs
- **Inventory Management 101**
August 26, 2019
8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.
West Des Moines
- **Process Intensification and Modularization**
September 10
9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.
Ames
- **ILC State of Readiness Workshop**
September 12–13, 2019
9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.
Omaha
- **2019 FSMA Update & Beyond Lunch and Learn**
September 13, 2019
11:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.
Marshalltown
- **Blended PCQI Human Food Part 2: Instructor Led**
September 30, 2019
9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.
Ames
- **ILC Lean Coffees**
Ames—August 27, September 26, October 24
Coralville—August 9, September 13, October 11
Davenport—August 21, September 18, October 16
Des Moines—August 1, September 5, October 3
Marion—August 20, September 17, October 15
Omaha—August 16, September 20, October 18
Pella—August 21, September 18, October 16
Waterloo—August 21, September 18, October 16

For details and more events, see www.ciras.iastate.edu/events-workshops.



Industrial Cleaning Firm Finding New Options in Government Contracting

A Council Bluffs industrial cleaning firm is poised to make major inroads into government contracting after CIRAS showed its leaders how to market their high-value expertise.

W-S Mechanical Group is a 45-person company launched in 1993 by people with decades of experience in cleaning coal-fired power plants. As coal has waned in popularity over the years, W-S Mechanical Group has been gradually branching out into other lines of business, said company vice president Troy Holm.

“The government contracting was something I was kind of dabbling in before meeting [CIRAS],” Holm said. “Now, if it’s not one of the biggest things we do right now, it sure will be.”

Holm has been working for roughly a year with Andy Alexander, a government contracting specialist with the CIRAS Procurement Technical Assistance Center. Alexander helped the company understand government purchasing processes, how to focus marketing, how to bid, and how to frame a formal capabilities statement.

AT A GLANCE

W-S Mechanical Group LLC

FOUNDED: 1993

OVERVIEW: A full-service industrial cleaning firm that also assists companies with preventative maintenance.

EMPLOYEES: 45

IMPACT: Awarded more than \$800,000 worth of government contracts in 2018.

FOR MORE:
www.w-sindustrial.com

“They were doing some things before, but it wasn’t very organized,” Alexander said. “They were going project to project. Now, they’re going program to program.”

W-S Mechanical Group landed roughly \$800,000 worth of government contracts in 2018 and is actively pursuing more than \$10 million more.

Holm described government contracting as “such a bureaucratic mess from the surface that, unless you get somebody like Andy who can strip it out and give it all to you in layman’s terms, you literally could spend tons of money on contracts you have no chance of getting—and not know it.”

Holm said working with CIRAS helped W-S Mechanical Group, which includes many employees from the military with explosives-handling backgrounds, get quickly qualified to handle jobs such as cleaning an old tank in Kansas City.

“Anybody can go into SAM or Fed Biz Ops and those things,” he said, naming federal government procurement computer systems. “But unless somebody shows you how to navigate it, it’s all trial and error. . . . I think if you guys hadn’t come to the table, I probably would have quit before I started generating any revenue.”

➤ For more information, contact Andy Alexander at andyalex@iastate.edu or 402-547-0333.

AT A GLANCE

Simply Soothing

FOUNDED: 2003

EMPLOYEES: 12 full time, 15 part time

IMPACT: Nearly \$3.8 million from CIRAS work over the past five years, including increased and retained sales, plus new jobs and \$120,000 invested in new plant equipment.

MORE: www.simplysoothing.net

Milkhouse Candle Company

FOUNDED: 2003

EMPLOYEES: 50

IMPACT: More than \$500,000 from CIRAS work over the past two years, including investments and increased sales tied to Internet marketing assistance.

MORE: www.milkhousecandles.com



Ryan Horgen (left) shows Freda and Jim Sojka how candle containers are held stable while they're filled with wax.

Simply Soothing, Milkhouse Candles Preparing to Light Wick on New Product

A popular Iowa-made brand of all-natural insect repellent now comes with a wick—thanks to a new union between two highly successful CIRAS clients.

Simply Soothing, the Columbus Junction maker of Bug Soother insect spray, is launching a new line of 8-oz. candles this summer with help from Milkhouse Candle Company, a soy-based candle firm with factories in Osage and New Hampton.

The candles, which will be manufactured by Milkhouse but sold under the Bug Soother name, are the culmination of years of conversations between the two companies. It all began after Ryan Horgen, head of business development for Milkhouse, read an article on Simply Soothing in *CIRAS News*.

"They just contacted us out of the blue and wanted to know whether we were interested in doing a candle," said Simply Soothing owner Freda Sojka.

"That was about the time everything exploded with Bug Soother spray, so we had to put that on the shelf."



"We love to connect with and help businesses who share the same values we share."

— Eric Sparrow

Sojka eventually worked with Milkhouse to devise a lemongrass-scented candle that began hitting Iowa shops and supermarkets for the first time in May. Simply Soothing will expand it to other markets later, to the extent demand merits going through a variety of state-by-state regulatory processes.

"We want to kind of put it out there and test it,"

Sojka said. "If there's a big push for it, then we'll register it in more states."

Simply Soothing launched Bug Soother in 2008, sparking growth that quickly sent the company to CIRAS for help in upgrading its manufacturing processes. The company also worked to explore

government contracts as a way to sell beyond the few months each year when pests are prominent in the Midwest.

Milkhouse likewise began as a family business—one that Eric and Janet Sparrow, with help from CIRAS strategy coaching and networking events, ultimately grew into a 10,000-candles-a-day operation. Eric Sparrow said the still-expanding company, which uses only soy wax and beeswax while shunning artificial dyes, is happy to produce the all-natural Bug Soother candles because "we love to connect with and help businesses who share the same values we share."

Sojka said her company plans "to promote that part of it, that it's a partnership of two Iowa companies," and she sees broad possibilities ahead. Success may simply turn on the volume of mosquitoes pestering Iowa patios this year.

"It's a great story," she said with a smile. "It's good for them. It's a win-win.... I just hope it's a buggy summer."

➤ For more information, contact Sean Gallegger at gallegger@iastate.edu or 515-290-0181.



Scenes from the 2018 FLL Championships for Iowa.

FIRST® LEGO® League Jr. Continues to Grow in Iowa

Iowa ended 2018 with a record number of young teams anxious to show off their accumulated intellect, programming skill, and design creativity.

For the fifth consecutive year, the number of FIRST LEGO League Jr. teams in Iowa expanded substantially—to 339 last year, up from 78 teams in 2013.

Camille Sloan Schroeder, director of K–12 Outreach for Iowa State’s College of Engineering, said the state’s FIRST LEGO League organizers have been eagerly promoting the groups to younger students in a bid to get young Iowans interested in science, technology, engineering, and math as early as possible.

“A lot of kids check out on science and math very early, saying that it’s hard, and they’re not going to do it,” she said. “We don’t want them doing that.”

“We’ve been focusing on talking to the younger students, because it’s kind of a progression,” Sloan Schroeder said. “If they start engaging in the early grades and build their self-efficacy and see that it truly is fun, then they’re going to want to keep going.”

FIRST LEGO League Jr., which caters to children ages 6 to 10, is an outgrowth of FIRST LEGO League, which was created in 1998 as a research and robotics-based problem-solving program for children 9

to 14. The older league had 388 teams last year, up from 30 when Iowa State University officially launched the program in Iowa in 2002.

The 2019 season officially started for both leagues on August 1, when Iowa teams formally learned of the CITY SHAPER and BOOMTOWN BUILD challenges that they will be competing under this fall and spring. After a space-themed focus in 2018, this year’s groups will have to do research and solve robotic challenges focused on building a better world through creative design and sustainable infrastructure.

The theme presents new opportunities for Iowa businesses to get involved with students, Sloan Schroeder believes—because Iowa has many prominent engineering design, construction, and infrastructure-related companies. Local connections to the subject matter “seem to make it more touchable for the students,” she said.

Iowa organizers for FIRST LEGO League recruit hundreds of volunteer business

“A lot of kids check out on science and math very early, saying that it’s hard and they’re not good at it. We don’t want them doing that.”

— Camille Sloan Schroeder

leaders each year to help with the competitions and mentor teams as work progresses.

Kathie Sommerfeld, Kreg Cares manager at Kreg Tool in Huxley, said her company supports FLL programs because of employee requests.

“We’ve seen how LEGO teams teach and challenge students in areas outside what they might get from traditional classroom study,” she said. “They learn how to work in a team, problem solve, develop skills, and hopefully discover the gifts necessary to succeed in today’s job market.”

Sloan Schroeder believes volunteering companies can help encourage that development while simultaneously building relationships with their next generation of potential workers.

“I think it’s less of a stretch today for companies to see how they connect,” she said. “It used to be, ‘LEGOs! Oh, how cute!’ But now, it’s, ‘Oh, how do I get in front of them? Because I want them to come work for me someday.’”

➤ For more information, contact Camille Sloan Schroeder at camilles@iastate.edu or 515-294-4293.

Postcards from the Preparation

CIRAS has scheduled a September grand opening for the Digital Manufacturing Lab Powered by Alliant Energy. (Tours for companies will start soon after that.) Here's how we've been getting ready:



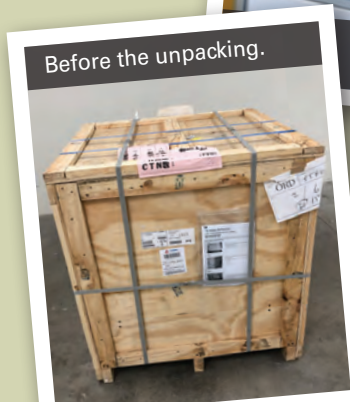
Training on a new, metrology-grade handheld 3D scanner.



Demonstrating robots at the Iowa Capitol. Special thanks to Mike Ralston, president of the Iowa Association of Business and Industry (blue tie), and state Sen. Chris Cournoyer (black dress).



After: A portable collaborative robot.



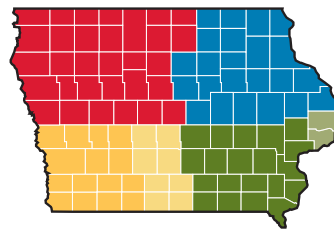
Before the unpacking.

CIRAS Engage. Educate. Embed.

Since 1963, we have delivered proven services to enhance the performance of industry. Our approach—Engage. Educate. Embed.—creates specific solutions that allow each business and its community to prosper and grow. Coupled with a satisfaction guarantee, our typical client has achieved a 200% ROI. Clients have reported an economic impact of more than \$2 billion over the past five years.

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In addition to four regional account managers, CIRAS has seven regional government contracting specialists,* a statewide account manager for the food industry, and one for economic development. More staff information can be found at www.ciras.iastate.edu/staff.asp.



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- Iowa Sustainable Business Forum
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GROWING YOUR BUSINESS

Personal Contacts Plant Seeds for Future Growth *By Jodi Essex*

Many businesses that attempt to sell to the government get frustrated and quit because they don't see immediate results.

They see opportunities on their bid match, submit a well-written and competitively priced proposal, and are puzzled when the contract is awarded to someone else. They ask the agency for a debrief or the scoring sheet to get some clues, but they still don't understand exactly what happened.

What likely happened is that the winning company had a relationship with the agency that they have been nurturing for months or even years prior to the solicitation being released.

Government contracting is a long-term game. Successful government contractors spend months or even years targeting an agency. They contact multiple people and try to glean information that might give them a competitive edge when the solicitation is released. They find out if the agency is happy or frustrated with their current contractor. What pain points does the agency have? Are there other problems that need solving? Smart contractors educate the agency about their industry or their unique capabilities in

hopes of influencing the solicitation in their favor. They do all of this BEFORE the solicitation is released, because once it's released, agencies will not be allowed to have these discussions with vendors.

So when you are seeing the solicitation on your bid match for the first time, know that your competitor may have been targeting and shaping this opportunity for months. When it comes time to submit a proposal, they may have a lot more information that they can use to their advantage.

What can you do to better position yourself for these opportunities? Invest time to build relationships with agencies. Meeting them face-to-face at an event is the best way to kick off a relationship, but then follow up with them regularly. Identify where you have a competitive advantage by researching your competitors. Learn how their strengths/weaknesses compare to yours. Research the existing contract pricing. All of these things will help you be better positioned when the next opportunity hits your bid match.

For more information, contact Jodi Essex at jodir@iastate.edu or 515-509-0769.