

Committee Chair kicks off National Disability Employment Awareness Month

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To kick off National Disability Employment Awareness Month, the Chairperson of the Committee for Purchase From People Who Are Blind or Severely Disabled, visited Wright-Patterson Air Force base September 19 and 20th to donate a commemorative brick at the Wright "Flyer" Memorial and to participate in the 12th Annual Air Force Marathon.

Andrew D. Houghton, a Presidential appointee who heads the independent federal agency, decided to enter the marathon to show his personal appreciation of the dedication and support Wright-Patterson has given to the AbilityOne Program for decades.

"Wright-Patterson's support of the AbilityOne Program is an example of dedication to Americans with disabilities," Houghton said. "The base's continuous support of the program allows people with disabilities the opportunity to show both their abilities and capabilities while providing the base with quality services."

The Committee administers the AbilityOne Program, which creates employment opportunities for over 42,000 people who are blind or have other severe disabilities through more than 600 local nonprofit organizations nationwide, Puerto Rico and Guam.

Houghton began the kick-off activities with a visit to *The Office Runway*, Wright-Patterson's base supply center Friday morning. Operated by Cincinnati Association for the Blind, the store features many items provided by AbilityOne-participating nonprofit agencies, including office and janitorial supplies and computer accessories. *The Office Runway* provides the program with an additional distribution channel for its products, and Wright-Patterson AFB customers with a convenient way to obtain AbilityOne products they have come to trust.

"I am very impressed with the store; it rivals any retail office store in layout and product availability," Houghton said. "It was great to learn that *The Office Runway's* AbilityOne product sales are approximately \$1 million per year."

After the visit to the base supply store, Houghton proceeded to the headquarters building of the Air Force Materiel Command where he presented Gen. Bruce Carlson, Commander, with an AbilityOne Program brick to be placed at the Wright "Flyer" Memorial on the base. Houghton said the commemorative brick was a way for the program to thank the Air Force base for its longstanding support.

Joining him with remarks of appreciation were James Barone, Chairman of the Board of NISH, Robert Chamberlin, CEO of NISH, and Steve Brice, Chief Financial Officer of National Industries for the Blind (NIB.) NIB and NISH are two national nonprofits designated by the Committee for Purchase to help allocate federal contracts and provide technical assistance under the AbilityOne Program.

"We do not support the AbilityOne Program out of charity, we support it for the superior services the people provide us," Carlson said. "The people who work under the program are not just employees, they are our friends. They are part of the Air Force family."

Houghton's next visit was to the AbilityOne employees who perform custodial work in the headquarters under a contract held by Goodwill/Easter Seals of Miami Valley. Through his own

experiences, he encouraged the employees to continue living the American Dream by reaching for what others may say is unobtainable.

“Twenty-two years ago, while riding a motorcycle, I hit a palm tree and lost the use of my legs,” Houghton said. “I did not let my disability prevent me from showing people how capable I am, and look where it has brought me. I am a presidential appointee for the Committee that provides employment opportunities for people like you and me.”

Employees proudly told Houghton what they do to keep the headquarters building clean and in working order. They were proud to tell him how many years they have been working for the Air Force through the AbilityOne Program.

His final visit was at TAC Industries, Inc., in Springfield, Ohio. TAC Industries, Inc., provides employment opportunities for individuals to develop marketable skills by completing contract work in partnership with the government and other industries.

Friday’s events ended with a pasta dinner for marathon runners at the National Museum of the United States Air Force at Wright-Patterson AFB. Houghton met Army Capt. Ivan Castro, a U.S. Army Special Forces soldier who was blinded during a mortar attack in Iraq in 2006.

“It was a great honor to meet with Capt. Castro,” Houghton said. “He is an amazing person and a true hero. The AbilityOne Program is working with wounded Warfighters to provide them opportunities for employment across the U.S., Puerto Rico and Guam.”

AbilityOne tries to match people with job opportunities across the entire spectrum of disability. Veterans who have disabilities such as visual impairment, traumatic brain injury (one of the hallmark injuries of the current war), mobility impairment or other severe injuries are among those who find employment through the program.

One of the 14 wheelchair racers was 14-year old Adam Rose from Michigan. Rose was diagnosed with leukemia in 1998. He had a rare neurotoxic reaction to chemotherapy that permanently paralyzed him from the waist down. This was Rose’s third time to race in a full marathon at Wright-Patterson. Houghton took tips from Rose on the marathon course.

“Adam has all of the qualities that make up an elite wheelchair athlete. At 14 his athletic skills already put him at the top of his class,” Houghton said. “We’ll probably see this kid competing in the Paralympics someday soon. I wouldn’t be surprised if he equally excels in school and other areas of his life.”

On Saturday morning, Houghton prepared for his first marathon. He was nervous but excited to participate in the Air Force Marathon. He was focused on finishing the race with no expectations of where he would place.

As he crossed the finish line, Houghton added to his list of accomplishments as an athlete – something that he had not attempted or achieved prior to having a disability. He gets great personal satisfaction through sports and exercise, he said, and hopes his competing in the marathon will encourage others with disabilities to surprise themselves.

"It was great to take part in this event. It was also great to come on base, meet with Gen. Carlson and see how our program is making a difference...by giving people with disabilities an opportunity to both learn new skills and give back to the military," Houghton said. "If I can compete in a marathon, I hope it will inspire some of the folks in our program to try something new and out of their comfort zone," he said. "Sports is one of the greatest motivators for people with disabilities."

“Put Ability to Work for You” is the official 2008 theme for the AbilityOne Program’s observance of National Disability Employment Awareness Month, which is observed in October nationwide. For

more information about the AbilityOne Program and its activities celebrating National Disability Employment Awareness Month across the country, go to www.AbilityOne.gov.

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