

Work for people with disabilities

By TINA BALLARD

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Eighty percent of the nation's working age population without disabilities is employed, but the employment rate for people with severe disabilities is only 38 percent. That low level of employment covers a wide range of individuals with disabilities, each of whom face different barriers to employment. The AbilityOne Program (formerly Javits-Wagner-O'Day) targets those facing the highest barriers to employment.

AbilityOne is the largest U.S. source of employment for people who are blind or have other severe disabilities. We promote good stewardship of appropriated contracting dollars and provide products and services to fulfill federal requirements. Our focus is also on price, quality and delivery. The program has a 70-year history, and today it is a national network of more than 600 nonprofit contractors.

As a public-private collaboration, the AbilityOne Program is facilitated by the Committee for Purchase From People Who Are Blind or Severely Disabled consisting of 15 federal executives and private citizens appointed by the president. The federal executives represent the Agriculture, Commerce, Defense, Education, Justice, Labor and Veterans Affairs departments, Air Force, Army, Navy and General Services Administration. The remaining four members are private citizens knowledgeable about the obstacles to employment faced by people who are blind or have other severe disabilities.

The Committee staff is an independent federal agency that provides strategic leadership. It oversees administration of the AbilityOne Program and employment of more than 40,000 people. National Industries for the Blind and NISH, which creates job opportunities for people with disabilities, are two central nonprofit organizations that assist in implementing this mission.

In 1938, President Roosevelt signed the Wagner-O'Day Act, initiating employment opportunities for the population we serve. Presidential attention continues today. In his February memorandum, President Bush said, "Americans with disabilities make valuable contributions to our country's work force. ... Expanding employment opportunities ... will help ensure that our economy is drawing on the talents and creativity of all its citizens."

Federal customers provide employment opportunities for people who are blind or have other severe disabilities when they purchase goods and services on the AbilityOne Procurement List. The Federal Acquisition Regulation establishes the list as a priority source. We collaborate with federal customers to meet their needs and provide high-quality products and services.

An example is work for the FBI headquarters, where AbilityOne employees route more than 15,000 pieces of mail daily. Their exemplary performance earned accolades including the FBI-GSA Mailroom of the Year honor and approval ratings of 98 percent customer satisfaction — remarkable achievements for any service provider.

Another AbilityOne-participating nonprofit agency, one of the 20 largest battery distributors in North America, has for 15 years provided batteries at competitive prices to the Defense Logistics Agency (DLA). As DLA's sole source for 10 commercial battery types, AbilityOne shipped 34 million alkaline and lithium batteries last year. To provide DLA with a superior product and service, workers developed a strong inventory control system and moisture-resistant packaging that exceeds wrapping standards — all at a lower cost, with a vendor rating of 100 percent for quality and on-time delivery.

For 10 years, the Army Soldier Systems Center at Natick, Mass., has entrusted the energy dissipation pad, or “honeycomb,” manufacturing exclusively to the AbilityOne Program. These pads are vital to the Army’s delivery of humanitarian supplies, equipment and tools to troops in-theater. Since supply planes must drop loads from high altitudes to minimize personnel risks, packing materials must withstand the impact, a feature the pads provide. AbilityOne employees produce these pads at a rate of 150,000 per year, with 100 percent on-time delivery.

AbilityOne employees provide dependability, reliability, accountability and capability to the federal government. As we advance into the 21st century, we look to increasing AbilityOne employment, continuing President Roosevelt’s initiative for generations to come. Nothing is more rewarding than increasing employment opportunities and enabling greater independence for Americans who are blind or have other severe disabilities.

Tina Ballard is executive director of the Committee for Purchase From People Who Are Blind or Severely Disabled, the independent federal agency that administers the AbilityOne Program.

