

AbilityOne provides work for disabled, support for warfighters

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By Beth Reece

Americans who are blind or have other severe disabilities are achieving their professional dreams through a partnership between the Defense Logistics Agency and the AbilityOne Program, which provides work opportunities for the disabled while ensuring warfighters get equipment and services at the best value.

“About 70 percent of the people in our blind and disabled population are unemployed, but because of the work DLA and its contracting folks do, we continue to see more opportunities opening up for them,” AbilityOne Executive Director Tina Ballard said.

AbilityOne and the more than 600 nonprofit agencies that fall under it provide DLA such products as chemical protection suits, computer parts and even coffee. They also provide services ranging from warehousing and distribution to grounds maintenance, and are often the first ones to create a full-scale model of new military uniform products before they are mass produced.

“There’s a lot of prototyping that’s done by our agency for DLA that eventually leads to the production of major uniform items for the U.S. armed forces,” said Kim Zeich, AbilityOne’s deputy executive director.

The quality, timely delivery and competitive prices offered by AbilityOne have helped make DLA AbilityOne’s largest contracting agency in the Department of Defense for the last nine years, said Timothy Stark, coordinator of DLA’s AbilityOne Advocacy Network.

“The nonprofit agencies that are part of the program have proven to be great sources of supply, and put the same emphasis on quality, timeliness and fair prices as we do,” Stark said. “And fortunately, through our purchases from AbilityOne, we’re able to help provide employment opportunities to thousands of people who would otherwise have difficulty finding work.”

AbilityOne is an independent federal agency that creates employment opportunities for more than 40,000 Americans who are blind or have other severe disabilities, including many disabled veterans. It is administered by the Committee for Purchase From People Who are Blind or Severely Disabled in partnership with the National Industries for the Blind and NISH, formerly National Industries for the Severely Handicapped.

Many federal employees know AbilityOne as the former Javits-Wagner-O’Day, or JWOD, program, which required government employees to buy items included on its official “mandatory procurement list,” such as Skilcraft-brand supplies, from nonprofit agencies that were part of the JWOD program. Today, government agencies like DLA are still required to buy items on the procurement list from what became AbilityOne in 2006, but Stark said they are relying on AbilityOne for much more than common office supplies and custodial services.

Successes in the medical and subsistence supply chains managed by Defense Supply Center Philadelphia are examples of how DLA and its military customers are benefiting from AbilityOne’s workforce. DSCP purchases medical stretchers, first-aid kits and bandages from AbilityOne. In fiscal 2009, AbilityOne agencies contributed more than \$10 million worth of items for inclusion in group rations and more than \$9 million of items for ready-to-eat meals, Stark said. Subsistence officials also worked with AbilityOne in



Stevie Bradley checks inventory at Defense Supply Center Richmond’s AbilityOne Supply Store, where he is a stock clerk and cashier. Photo by Stephen J. Baker, DSCR Public Affairs

2008 to introduce co-branding of food products like Maxwell House and Sara Lee coffee.

“This strategy opened the door for food-producing nonprofit agencies to employ the severely disabled while continuing to provide the recognized commercial brands desired by military customers,” Stark said, adding that what DSCP procures from AbilityOne isn’t always directly related to items already on the mandatory procurement list.

“The working model is for them to evaluate the processing capabilities of a particular nonprofit agency, search for products the military services are currently purchasing and see if there is a match, then determine if there is a sufficient sales volume to establish a production line,” he said.

At the Defense Supply Center Columbus, Ohio, officials are creating a potential business model with AbilityOne for a new “break bulk” warehousing operation.

“For example, you might have a manufacturer who wants to ship you 100,000 widgets, because that’s the unit of issue. But if you’re operating from a small submarine you don’t need 100,000 pens; you probably only need a dozen,” Stark said. “So if we can get this facility stood up, we would be able to break larger shipments into smaller units, which would help us better meet customers’ needs.”

Even as one of DoD’s most active supporters of the program, DLA continues efforts to increase opportunities with AbilityOne. In October, the Acquisition Management Directorate created the AbilityOne Advocacy Network. The group is composed of representatives from each of the agency’s primary-level field activities and meets monthly to develop strategies that increase the awareness of AbilityOne capabilities, increase business opportunities, and share best practices and lessons learned.

“The value of this network is that it gives the PLFAs the chance to discover more about AbilityOne’s capability to meet warfighter needs across the various supply chains,” Stark said.

Defense Supply Center Richmond, Va., has the only base supply store currently run by AbilityOne, for example, but Defense Supply Center Columbus is using Richmond’s experience to open its own store. The store is currently slated to open this spring.

Ballard said AbilityOne continues to take on new products and services, such as combat lifesaver kits and contract management services, which will hopefully draw the interest of DLA and other government agencies.

“General warehousing and storage is another opportunity area. In our current warehouse operations, our folks are meeting 98 and 99 percent accuracy for their ability to store, pull and ship things,” Ballard said, adding that AbilityOne hires people for what they “can” do.

“DLA buyers getting new requirements should know that AbilityOne has a wide array of services and supplies they can provide,” Stark said. “They’re willing to work closely with us to find the best ways of meeting warfighters’ requirements.”