

Statements and Bios of U.S. AbilityOne Commission Private Citizen Members

JOINT STATEMENT OF BRYAN BASHIN, CHRISTINA BRANDT, GABE CAZARES AND CHAI FELDBLUM

We are honored to be appointed by President Biden as private citizen members of the AbilityOne Commission. The power of government contracting is strong and we have a responsibility to ensure that those monies are used to employ as many people with significant disabilities, including those who are blind, in as many good jobs as possible. We stand at a pivotal moment in time as we consider the reviews of the AbilityOne program to date and the varied suggestions for strengthening the use of government contracting. We have a positive vision for the future and we look forward to working collaboratively with our fellow members of the AbilityOne Commission and with all the stakeholders that contribute to this important endeavor.

Following are our brief bios, together with short personal statements regarding our anticipated work on the Commission.

Bryan Bashin

Bio: Bryan Bashin is CEO of the Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually-Impaired in San Francisco, a 119-year-old nonprofit devoted to the comprehensive training and employment of blind people. For 30 years his organization has employed blind workers through the National Industries for the Blind (one of the central non-profits in the AbilityOne program), and over the last 11 years Bashin has overseen significant expansions of direct blind employment in the AbilityOne space, but most importantly in competitive, integrated workplaces. Bashin previously worked as an Assistant Regional Commissioner for the Department of Education's Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) where he supervised \$400 million in federal disability spending in Arizona, Nevada, California, Hawaii and Pacific territories. From 1998 until 2004 Bashin was Executive Director of the Sacramento Society for the Blind, where he led a strong expansion of blindness services, including competitive employment programs. Bashin has also been an expert witness in cases involving employment of people with disabilities. A former science journalist, Bashin is well acquainted with industrial and technical processes and skill needs of employers. Bashin is currently a Board member of VisionServe Alliance, a membership association of more than 100 US blindness agencies.

Statement from Bryan Bashin:

The 1.5 million blind Americans like me, as well as those with other disabilities, have much to contribute to Federal contracting as well as to general commerce. Innovative social enterprises have demonstrated that our community can achieve well-paid jobs through their labor, as well as gaining experience that will help propel them to fulfill their personal economic aspirations. I look forward to collaborating with all members of the Commission to encourage fresh thinking around Federal contracting and the equitable benefits it can confer to workers with disabilities, as well as providing high-quality American-made products and services to meet Federal needs.

Christina Brandt

Bio: Christina Brandt is the CEO of an innovative nonprofit, an AbilityOne producer with over 4 decades of quality service to the government customer. She transformed AtWork! from a sheltered workshop paying subminimum wages to a nationally recognized best-practice provider of customized and integrated community employment for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. As a subject matter expert, Christina has delivered training and technical assistance in multiple states, including significant work in Oregon implementing the settlement of *Lane vs. Brown*. Throughout her 46 year career she has advanced equity and inclusion for people with disabilities and was instrumental in securing Washington State's Employment First legislation.

Statement from Chris Brandt:

I am honored to have the opportunity to work with my fellow appointees and other members of the AbilityOne Commission to further equity and justice for people with disabilities, including those with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD). Often denied the basic employment rights most citizens take for granted, people with I/DD are employed at much lower rates when compared with the general public and even to people with other disabilities. Federal contracting provides an avenue for people with significant disabilities to succeed, have a career, and escape the poverty that entraps so many of our fellow citizens. I am eager to share my experiences supporting people with I/DD to obtain competitive integrated employment and demonstrating to other nonprofits that they can do the same. Together, with the Biden Administration's commitment to CIE and equity for people with disabilities, I believe we will effect positive change that creates more job opportunities within the government contracting sector and beyond.

Gabriel (“Gabe”) Cazares

Bio: Gabe Cazares currently serves as the Director of Mayor Sylvester Turner’s Office for People with Disabilities in the City of Houston, Texas. In this capacity, Gabe oversees the accessible and timely delivery of city services, programs, and activities for over 215,000 Houstonians with Disabilities. Prior to his appointment, he served as the Manager of Government Affairs at the National Federation of the Blind in Baltimore, Maryland. There he managed the organization's education, technology, immigrants' rights, LGBTQ, and blind entrepreneur small business policy portfolio. Gabe holds a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science with a Spanish minor from Texas State University. He and his partner, Derin Dacey, live in Houston with their 4-year-old rescue dog, Sam.

Statement from Gabe Cazares:

I am pleased to serve alongside my fellow private citizen appointees and existing members of the AbilityOne Commission to bring the promise of competitive integrated employment to fruition for all workers with disabilities, including over 3 million blind and low-vision workers. My professional career has focused on advancing the full integration of blind and other people with disabilities in every aspect of community life, including education, employment, and civic engagement. Government contracting can and must incentivize the recruitment, retention, and promotion of workers with significant disabilities in integrated environments across all industries. I look forward to contributing my expertise to build back better for workers with disabilities.

Chai Feldblum

Bio: Chai Feldblum is a national expert in disability law and employment. She led the drafting and negotiating of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and the ADA Amendments Act of 2008. As a law professor at Georgetown University Law Center, she and her students represented non-profit organizations, including disability rights organizations, in advocating for legislation and administrative regulations to support social justice goals. Chai served as a Commissioner of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission during the Obama Administration where she spearheaded the issuance of regulations under Section 501 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Those regulations established a goal of 12% representation in the federal workforce of people with all disabilities and a 2% representation of people with significant disabilities. The latter group includes people with the type of disabilities hired under the AbilityOne program. Chai is a lesbian and has a psychiatric disability of anxiety disorder.

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Statement from Chai Feldblum:

I am enthusiastic about joining my fellow private citizen members and the existing members on the AbilityOne Commission. I have devoted much of my professional career to advancing employment for people with disabilities. There is a limit to what an anti-discrimination law, like the ADA, can do to put a dent in the unacceptable unemployment and underemployment of people with significant disabilities. We must use all levers possible to incentivize hiring people with significant disabilities, including setting aspirational targets for all government contractors and federal agencies, and using government contracts to result in the hiring of people with significant disabilities. I hope to provide my expertise and strategic thinking in using the lever of government contracting in the most effective way possible.