



AbilityOne employees from The Chimes, Inc. in Baltimore, MD clean stairs in the 89th Airlift Building at Andrews AFB in Maryland.

ABILITYONE PROGRAM RESPONDS TO SOCIOECONOMIC RESPONSIBILITY

By Lynne Harris

AS A MAJOR FEDERAL PROGRAM DESIGNATED TO assist a specific group of individuals under the Javits-Wagner-O'Day Act, the AbilityOne Program seeks to procure federal contracts for goods and services, while providing jobs for people who are blind or have other severe disabilities.

The original Wagner-O'Day Act, established in 1938, was designed to promote a desirable socioeconomic goal while leveraging the federal government purchasing power. In 1971, the Act became known as the Javits-Wagner-O'Day Act when it was amended to include people who have other severe disabilities. The law empowered the Committee on Purchases of Blind-Made

Products, now known as the Committee for Purchase From People Who Are Blind or Severely Disabled, to administer the program and determine the fair market price of goods and services contained on the Procurement List. The Committee for Purchase studies and evaluates its activities under the Act to assure its effective and efficient administration. Activities are coor-

minated through two central nonprofit agencies (CNAs), National Industries for the Blind and NISH. These CNAs, in turn, work with nonprofit agencies across the country to employ individuals in various lines of business, including document destruction, secured mail center services, fleet management and custodial services.

The traditional custodial work that has been a large portion of the AbilityOne Program—which currently provides employment opportunities for more than 40,000 people—is no longer so traditional. Things are changing in more than one way. NISH—creating employment opportunities for people with severe disabilities—is anticipating continuing reductions in military contracts, for example. The goal is to offset these reductions with other contracts.

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Within the custodial industry itself, things are also changing as client organizations look to “go green” with their custodial practices. Today, more than ever, organizations offering custodial services are expected to possess and maintain individual professional and organizational certifications.

NISH Senior Project Engineer Mickey Crowe is also a certified building service executive (CBSE) and a registered building service manager (RBSM). As the owner of a Florida-based cleaning service for more than 18 years, Crowe has been involved in the Building Service Contractors Association International (BSCAI) since the mid 1980s. He earned the CBSE designation in 1992 from the BSCAI and the RBSM designation in 2004 from the same organization.

After joining NISH in 1999, Crowe noted continuous references to “certification” requirements in the statements of work from government customers. After extensive research, he determined that the RBSM designation was a good fit for AbilityOne custodial operations. Crowe was authorized by the BSCAI board of directors to conduct the RBSM training sessions in 2005. The sessions were added to the NISH training catalog in 2006. Crowe has counted more than 80 people who have attended the training, passed the exam and became certified.

John Coward, manager of custodial service for the Eastern Carolina Vocational Center (ECVC) in Greenville, NC, participated in the training sessions and was subsequently certified as a RBSM by the BSCAI. He found the certification worthwhile both personally and professionally. ECVC is a nonprofit agency that provides training and employment services to persons with disabilities in Pitt and surrounding counties in eastern North Carolina.

According to ECVC, the number of applicants looking for employment in housekeeping and custodial services began rising significantly, which prompted the agency to begin a janitorial service in 2004. Coward attended the RBSM certification preparation training in 2005, passed the written examination to earn the designation, and began growing the custodial business within ECVC. Today, their business serves many public buildings, including courthouses, detention centers, public health buildings and rehabilitation centers. About 45 people in continuous (five days/week) custodial jobs are employed at ECVC. Coward conducts much of their training in-house and plans to have his five supervisors certified with the RBSM designation.

Coward says that the NISH/RBSM certification course is extremely worthwhile. He was particularly pleased to get all of the books and references, along with the course, that he can continue to use in the future and believes his certification has made a difference in winning contracts.

“You need that competitive edge when it comes to showing you’ve got the professional qualifications to do the job,” he says. “The NISH course not only helped me to learn where and how to cut costs, but also how to do that and still provide a great service to our customer.”

In the last few years, the NISH/RBSM certification training and examination course has been scheduled, by request, from individual nonprofit agencies and other NISH employees (minimum of 20 required). The training session has been authorized by the BSCAI board of directors with the same standards that apply to commercial for-profit organizations. The first two days of review/training are a combination of lecture and exercises

based on the seven manuals in the *Building Service Management Program*, which is recognized as a world standard of certification for project managers and supervisors. The third day is an all-day written examination proctored by an educator approved by BSCAI. The cost of the set of manuals, the examination, training facility and proctor are covered by NISH. “Our government customers are encouraged to participate in these workshops as well,” says Crowe.

Crowe acknowledges that the examination isn’t easy. It consists of more than 800 items and covers a multitude of topics. He is not surprised to see some people, who have been in the industry for many years and have developed expertise, still struggle with the exam. He emphasizes that BSCAI wants registrants to pass, and provides conditions to enable this, such as retaking only those modules where the person scored less than 70 percent. Ultimately, passing the exam can provide a tremendous feeling of accomplishment and professional recognition from an industry-leading organization providing a prestigious certification.

According to Crowe, the RBSM continues to be the gold standard for those committed to demonstrating the custodial professionalism. For more information about the RBSM and CBSE, go to www.bscai.org or call (800) 368-3414. More information about the AbilityOne Program can be found at www.abilityone.org.

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