



Leading Organizations of Americans with Disabilities Call for Reform of AbilityOne® Program

Organizations Set Forth Seven Reform Principles

Washington, DC (September 15, 2015): Seven leading organizations comprised of Americans with disabilities announced today that they are calling for reform of the AbilityOne Program and set forth seven principles for overhaul of the program, which affects tens of thousands of American workers with disabilities. The announcement was made by the National Federation of the Blind (NFB), TASH, the National Council for Independent Living (NCIL), the National Disability Rights Network (NDRN), the Association of People Supporting EmploymentFirst (APSE), the Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN), and the United Spinal Association. The seven principles for reform put forward by the organizations are as follows:

1. *Commitment to the expressed integration mandate set forth by the Supreme Court of the United States in the case of *Olmstead v. L.C.*:* Segregation of people with disabilities in work sites, such as sheltered workshops and enclaves, is inconsistent with Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act. People with disabilities must be supported to lead fully integrated lives in their communities, including throughout their workday.
2. *Implementation and development of best practices for employment of people with significant disabilities:* People employed by contracts negotiated through the AbilityOne procurement process must have their employment goals supported by providers implementing recognized best practices, such as Supported Employment and Customized Employment, that result in good jobs in the community.
3. *Elimination of conflicts of interest that contribute to exploitation, fraud, and abuse:* Conflicts of interest in AbilityOne contract implementation are rampant, and must be identified and prohibited. These include determination of employee eligibility by community rehabilitation programs (CRPs) implementing contracts, as well as the use of contract funds for lobbying and other purposes.
4. *Payment of prevailing wages and the elimination of subminimum-wage payments:* Payment of subminimum wages to people with disabilities is intolerable in the United States. People with disabilities should be paid the prevailing wage for the task they are performing.
5. *Ensuring financial and operational transparency and accountability:* AbilityOne contract use of funds must be transparent and readily available (online) to the public at every level, including the purpose and amount of funds used by the Central Nonprofit Agencies, executive compensation packages of nonprofits involved in the program, worker wage ranges, and purposes of funds used.

National Federation of the Blind

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6. *Relationship with employer*: The ultimate objective of a federally-sanctioned special procurement program should be to connect employees with mainstream employers, as opposed to having people with disabilities working for nonprofit entities under specialized, set-aside contracts.
7. *Prioritizing awarding of contracts available through the procurement process to disability-owned businesses, including self-employed individuals with disabilities*: Rather than all contracts going to the non-profit organizations currently involved in the program, individuals with disabilities should be encouraged to compete for service contracts.

The AbilityOne Program must be brought up to contemporary standards of practice for supporting people with disabilities to access competitive integrated employment. When these reforms are adopted, an inspector general should be appointed to provide rigorous oversight to ensure that the days of exploitation and fraud are brought to an end.

Barb Trader, Executive Director of TASH, said: “The continued segregation of people with disabilities in employment is unjust, and the payment of subminimum wages is discriminatory and demeaning. Americans with disabilities must be freed from the overwhelming control of the entities that simultaneously determine their eligibility for services, administer those services, and function as their employers. The concentration of power in community rehabilitation programs and sheltered workshops is a fundamental flaw in the AbilityOne Program. Any federally-sanctioned program must be a positive force for workers with disabilities by providing them freedom, self-determination, and real employment and career development opportunities.”

Mark A. Riccobono, President of the National Federation of the Blind, said: “The principles we are setting forth today reflect the hopes and aspirations of all Americans with disabilities. Neither AbilityOne nor any other program that purports to serve us can do so without reference to our own determinations on how to live the lives we want. We urge all other organizations of Americans with disabilities and like-minded service providers to join us in calling for an end to discrimination and low expectations, and to work with us for a future in which we, as Americans with disabilities, have full control over our destinies.”

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About the National Federation of the Blind

The National Federation of the Blind knows that blindness is not the characteristic that defines you or your future. Every day we raise the expectations of blind people, because low expectations create obstacles between blind people and our dreams. You can live the life you want; blindness is not what holds you back.

About TASH

TASH is an international leader in disability advocacy. Founded in 1975, TASH advocates for human rights and inclusion for people with significant disabilities and support needs – those most vulnerable to segregation, abuse, neglect and institutionalization. TASH works to advance inclusive communities through research, education, and advocacy. The inclusive practices TASH validates through research have been shown to improve outcomes for all people. More information about TASH can be found at www.tash.org.

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About the National Council on Independent Living

The National Council on Independent Living (NCIL) is the longest-running national cross-disability, grassroots organization run by and for people with disabilities. Founded in 1982, NCIL represents thousands of organizations and individuals including: Centers for Independent Living (CILs), Statewide Independent Living Councils (SILCs), individuals with disabilities, and other organizations that advocate for the human and civil rights of people with disabilities throughout the United States.

About the National Disability Rights Network

NDRN is the national membership association for the Protection and Advocacy (P&A) and Client Assistance Program (CAP) System, the nationwide network of congressionally-mandated agencies that advocate on behalf of persons with disabilities in every state, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and U.S. territory. For over thirty years, the P&A/CAP System has worked to protect the human and civil rights of individuals with disabilities of any age and in any setting. Collectively, the P&A/CAP agencies are the largest provider of legally-based advocacy services for persons with disabilities in the United States.

About the Association of People Supporting EmploymentFirst

Since its founding in 1988, the Association of People Supporting EmploymentFirst (APSE) has served as a primary resource on inclusive employment for individuals with disabilities, through high quality, cutting-edge training, technical assistance, and dissemination. APSE is a 501(c)6 membership organization with 39 chapters that are the driving force for implementing Employment First policies and practices nationally. APSE is the only national membership organization focused exclusively on integrated employment.

About United Spinal Association

United Spinal Association is the largest disability-led national non-profit organization. Founded by paralyzed veterans in 1946, it has since provided service programs and advocacy to improve the quality of life of those across the life span living with spinal cord injuries and disorders (SCI/D) such as multiple sclerosis, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), post-polio syndrome and spina bifida. United Spinal represents over one million individuals with spinal cord injuries and disorders and, throughout its history, has devoted its energies, talents, and programs to improving the quality of life for these Americans and for advancing their independence.

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