Seventy percent of working age Americans who are blind are not employed. Because of the shortage of suitable employment opportunities, people who are blind are often unable to reach their full potential—many rely on public benefit programs such as supplemental security disability income (SSDI) to provide for themselves and their families. National Industries for the Blind (NIB), the nation’s largest employment resource for people who are blind, is part of a federal government initiative known as the AbilityOne® Program. The program was established in 1938 to create jobs for people who are blind through the manufacture of goods ranging from the ubiquitous SKILCRAFT® U.S. government pen to uniforms, bedding, and food products for the armed forces.

With advances in assistive technology, NIB was working to diversify career options for highly educated people who are blind in professional service positions. Meanwhile, as the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) focused on awarding contracts to support critical warfighting missions, it discovered it needed support to close out those contracts once completed. In 2008, the federal government spent more than $500 billion on contracts for various goods and services—the U.S. Department of the Army alone had in excess of 500,000 contracts that needed to be closed after work had been completed. Recognizing an opportunity to create upwardly mobile, career-oriented positions for people who are blind, NIB took the lead role in developing the AbilityOne Contract Management Support (CMS) services program to meet this growing requirement.

In 2009, a team of experts from NIB, the U.S. Army, and the AbilityOne Commission worked together to develop a statement of work, and the Army agreed to conduct a nine-month pilot program to determine feasibility. NIB partnered with DOD’s Defense Acquisition University (DAU) to provide online training for qualified candidates in the core courses required to establish a foundation for contract management. Trainees were required to be legally blind, have a four-year college degree or related experience, possess good computer skills, be highly proficient in using adaptive technology, and be able to obtain a security clearance.

The pilot program not only showed that people who are blind could carry out the work, but that they could do an
The pilot program not only showed that people who are blind could carry out the work, but that they could do an outstanding job—both productivity and quality exceeded expectations.

contracting functions. To date, CMS contract closeout specialists have processed and delivered for sign-off more than 238,000 contracts and identified nearly $840 million in de-obligated funds that could have been processed through the procurement system.

AbilityOne CMS contract closeout specialists and contract clerks provide administrative services that are not inherently governmental functions. They review open federal contracts, verify government receipt and acceptance, identify any funds that should be de-obligated, and scan and index contract documents. At the end of these processes, they deliver "ready-to-close" contracts back to federal agencies. By focusing on these post-award actions, CMS specialists provide critical support to government contracting offices and free up time for federal government employees to focus on critical, inherently governmental contracting functions.

In June 2010, the Army added CMS closeout services to the Procurement List (a list of all supplies and services required to be purchased from AbilityOne-participating nonprofit agencies under federal acquisition regulations) and signed an indefinite delivery/indefinite quantity (IDIQ) contract with NIB as the prime contractor and manager of the AbilityOne CMS Program.

Eight NIB associated nonprofit agencies across the country participate in the AbilityOne CMS Program, operating either in a secure facility at the agency’s location, or on-site at the customer’s location. The CMS program employs 126 people, including 83 people who are blind in direct labor positions, and 20 service-disabled veterans. In addition, 32 employees who are blind have been hired for career-track positions with the federal government, defense contractors and other public- and private-sector employers.

The CMS Program enables people who are blind to build meaningful careers and support themselves and their families. The positions are professional-level jobs with good pay and benefits—wages are typically $17-$21 per hour—and the potential for career growth. In addition, CMS specialists gain financial security that allows them to lessen or eliminate their dependence on public benefits such as SSDI.

Jude Lucien is one such participant. Lucien joined the program in 2011 and advanced every year, eventually becoming a contract closeout supervisor at the Defense Logistics Agency in Cumberland, PA. He recently left the program for a contract specialist position with the U.S. Army, where he is on track to become a GS-9. “I have seen participants get off disability, become homeowners and start families,” Lucien says. “The program works.”

Kevin A. Lynch is president and chief executive officer of National Industries for the Blind.

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