



COMMITTEE FOR PURCHASE FROM
PEOPLE WHO ARE BLIND OR SEVERELY DISABLED

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MEMORANDUM TO NONPROFIT AGENCY EXECUTIVES

THRU: E. Robert Chamberlin, President & CEO
NISH

Kevin Lynch, President & CEO
National Industries for the Blind

FROM: E. Ballard *E. Ballard 1/15/09*
Executive Director

At the January 8, 2009 meeting of the Committee for Purchase From People Who Are Blind or Severely Disabled, the Committee unanimously approved a special vote letter on Guiding Principles and Best Practices for a Quality Work Environment (QWE). The purpose of this communiqué and set of frequently asked questions is to provide you with background regarding this special vote letter and to inform you of the collaborative process the Committee staff and the Central Nonprofit Agencies (CNAs) are committed to following to develop a plan for the implementation of employer best practices.

At the outset, the Committee recognizes that the development of employer best practices is a complex task, given the diversity of the nonprofit agencies that participate in the AbilityOne Program and the myriad of stakeholders involved. The AbilityOne Program targets people whose severe disabilities present the most complex barriers to competitive employment. It is therefore critical that the implementation of best practices deliberately ensures that people with the most severe disabilities continue to be included in the program. Accordingly, the development of a plan to implement best practices requires leadership from the CNAs as well as broad input from the program's stakeholders.

Background

Objective 2(d) of the AbilityOne Strategic Plan for 2007-2009 is to "Promote employment quality through NPA adoption of activities that address and/or improve quality of work environment." The Strategic Plan measure for this objective states "By 2010, self-certification of all NPAs demonstrating best practices for increasing the quality of work environment, to be reviewed in compliance visits."

The development of recommendations to achieve this plan objective was assigned to the **Communications and Customer Satisfaction Subcommittee** chaired by Neil Romano, with James Omvig and Kathleen James as members. The subcommittee is supported by Committee staff and has liaisons with National Industries for the Blind (NIB), NISH and the Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP). In developing its recommendations, the subcommittee used the AbilityOne Strategic Plan's Vision Statement as a guide. The vision is as follows:

"The AbilityOne Program enables all people who are blind or have other severe disabilities to achieve their maximum potential.

The vision will be realized when:

- Every person who is blind or severely disabled and who wants to work is provided an opportunity to be employed productively
- Every AbilityOne employee earns not only the Federal minimum wage (or higher applicable state or local minimum wage) but also a living wage and benefits package appropriate to his or her geographic locality
- AbilityOne employees are provided the training and development they need to be successful in their current positions, and ultimately achieve their maximum employment potential
- Every AbilityOne employee is provided the opportunity, with or without accommodations, to advance to his or her maximum employment potential, including internal or external competitive placement or management or administrative positions
- All AbilityOne products and services provide best value to Federal customers, thus earning their continued support and loyalty"

The subcommittee also developed Three Guiding Principles to help steer further development of the best practices. The Three Guiding Principles are as follows:

"The Committee expects participation in the NPA self-certification process so that AbilityOne workers with disabilities will be provided with:

- Opportunities to do the work of their choice with appropriate supports and/or workplace flexibilities, alongside non-disabled employees where all workers receive competitive wages and benefits, either with their current employer or other community-based businesses;
- On-going training opportunities that make employment with other community-based businesses possible, by teaching job skills and social skills, as well as promoting the worker's leadership and management potential; and
- A clear path to career and advancement opportunities, which details what opportunities are available and the steps the worker must accomplish to achieve promotion in a reasonable time period."

Committee Approval

With Committee approval (received on January 8, 2009), the CNAs are now charged with working with the NPAs to develop Quality Work Environment (QWE) Business Plans that implement the guiding principles. Critical elements of these plans are research of best practices; wage rates and productivity; and employment customization and training to achieve the guiding principles and the development and

implementation of a self-certification program. The self-certification program will be based on the Three Guiding Principles, the Vision Statement, the Strategic Goal and the Objective 2(d). The plan will also address methods and tools for assisting nonprofit agencies that are at various stages in implementing best practices similar to the aforementioned principles.

Next Steps

The Committee staff and the CNAs have approved a collaborative process designed to engage stakeholders in development, vetting and communication of information related to the identification and implementation of best practices for the targeted AbilityOne workforce. The next step in this process is the appointment of a cross-functional workgroup comprised of representatives from the Committee staff, CNAs and the NPAs, as well as other subject matter experts selected by the Committee. Both CNAs will name participants to serve on this workgroup; the Committee will also name participants from both within and outside the AbilityOne Program. This workgroup will take the leadership role in several activities including but not limited to: researching, identifying and collecting potential best practices related to a QWE; vetting the potential best practices with NPAs; conducting a trial implementation of the best practices; evaluating the results of the trial and making modifications, etc. The workgroup will be required to provide updates on a quarterly basis.

NPAs and other key stakeholders will have the opportunity to provide input at various points throughout the process. The approach is designed to gather feedback using a bottom-up process. The workgroup's recommendations will be first approved by the Communications and Customer Satisfaction Subcommittee before being presented to the full Committee for approval. The expectation is that the CNAs' business plan and self-certification program plan are developed within 12 months. Timelines for the actual implementation of the plan will not be known until the plan, developed by the workgroup, receives full Committee approval.

We are confident that the process we are about to undertake will help us identify and promote state of the art best practices for all AbilityOne employees who are blind or have other severe disabilities, and it will help ensure that we continue to deliver only the highest quality products and services to Federal customers through the program.

Attachments:

Frequently Asked Questions

LACI Matrix

Committee for Purchase From People Who Are Blind or Severely Disabled

Special Vote Letter

Guiding Principles and Best Practices for a Quality Work Environment (QWE)

Frequently Asked Questions

January 15, 2009

1) What is the timeframe for developing and implementing the Best Practices for a Quality Work Environment?

As a result of the Committee's approval of the special vote letter on January 8, 2009, the CNAs are now charged with working with the NPAs to develop Quality Work Environment (QWE) Business Plans that implement the aforementioned guiding principles. The Committee expects that the CNAs' business plan and self-certification program will be developed within 12 months. The actual implementation of the plan will be over the next few years.

2) Will the CNA QWE Business Plan be the NPA QWE Business Plan?

The Committee recognizes that each NPA is different and anticipates that NPA QWE Business Plans will be developed using the CNA Business Plan as a model to accomplish their own unique QWE Business Plan. As part of this process, NIB and NISH will assist their associated nonprofit agencies in development of NPA Quality Work Environment Business Plans that reflect the principles and include a self-certification program based on them.

3) Will NPAs be expected to self-certify in 12 months?

No. The actual implementation and timing of the self-certifications will be an element of the CNA and NPA QWE Business Plans. The actual implementation of the NPA QWE Business Plans will be over the next few years.

4) Will there be NPA representation on the workgroup? What is the timeframe for appointing a workgroup to start developing the plan for developing and implementing the Best Practices for a Quality Work Environment?

The workgroup, which will be appointed shortly, will be comprised of representatives of the Committee staff, CNAs and NPAs as well as other subject matter experts selected by the Committee both from within and outside the AbilityOne Program.

5) What are the best practices for a Quality Work Environment?

The best practices for a QWE for the AbilityOne population have not yet been determined. The Committee-appointed workgroup will take the lead in developing the best practices using a collaborative process.

6) What is the collaborative process and what is its origin?

The Committee staff and the CNAs recently agreed upon a high level process to help them better communicate with NPAs, gather input and involve stakeholders, and seek agreement on issues for which there is disagreement. The approach that will be used to develop the best practices is intended to use these principles. The process is collaborative in that NPAs and other key stakeholders will have the opportunity to provide input at various points throughout the process.

The approach is designed to gather feedback using a bottom-up process. The attached matrix is a working document that describes the key steps in the process and how stakeholders will be involved in terms of a LACI diagram (Lead, Approve, Consult and Inform).

7) Will NPA Boards be involved?

The process as outlined in the attached LACI matrix calls for NPA Board and Staff participation at several key points throughout the process.

8) Who will fund training to develop the best practices? What will be the cost to NPAs?

The Committee recognizes there will be costs involved. However, costs to the Committee, CNAs and NPAs or others cannot be established until the best practices are identified. The Committee is sensitive to the current economic challenges facing NPAs and has directed the CNAs to include in their exploration of best practices some tools and resources to help ensure that implementation does not result in unfunded mandates.

9) Does the special vote letter approved by the Committee on January 8, 2009 relate to NPA Executive Compensation?

No, the vote letter approved by the Committee on January 8, 2009 does not relate to NPA Executive Compensation. One of the recommendations approved by the Committee was for the Governance Subcommittee to determine within the next six months how information on wages paid to employees who are blind or severely disabled may be considered in the Committee's suitability criteria, or NPA qualifications, or other areas of oversight and governance. At this point an approach for this undertaking has not yet been developed.

10) What will happen to those with the most severe disabilities if customized employment options are not available or if they prefer to stay in their current jobs?

It is critical that the implementation of best practices deliberately ensures that people with the most severe disabilities continue to be included in the program. Accordingly, the development of a plan to implement best practices requires leadership from the CNAs as well as broad input from the program's stakeholders.