

**U.S. AbilityOne Commission
Minutes – Quarterly Public Meeting**

**Thursday, October 24, 2024
1:00 p.m. – 4:00 p.m. ET**

I. Call to Order and Introductions

U.S. AbilityOne Commission Chairperson Jeffrey Koses called the meeting to order at 1 p.m. and greeted the approximately 300 participants attending via Zoom.

Commission Executive Officer Angela Phifer gave administrative remarks. She noted that two American Sign Language interpreters would interpret and that the meeting was being live captioned.

Commission members introduced themselves. Executive Director Kim Zeich and Inspector General Stefania Porter introduced themselves and certain staff members.

II. Consideration of Minutes

Minutes from the July 25, 2024, quarterly public meeting were approved.

III. Chairperson Opening Remarks

Impact of Hurricanes Helene and Milton

Koses recognized that AbilityOne nonprofit agencies (NPAs) in areas affected by Hurricanes Helene and Milton had worked to ensure the welfare of their employees and employees' families. He said the Commission stood ready to work with impacted NPAs during their recovery.

Transition to New Presidential Administration and New Congress

Koses said the Commission was preparing for transitions to a new Presidential administration and new Congress following the Nov. 5, 2024, election.

He said relationships with Congress are key to the Commission's success, a fact reflected in the agency's [FY 2022-2026 strategic plan](#), whose first outcome goal refers to working with Congress.

The agency's focus on building relationships and sharing information with Congress is paying off, as is clearly shown by recent Congressional interest in the agency's work. Congress regularly asks the Commission for technical assistance – a sign of a healthy relationship, Koses said.

Public Engagement

Koses said the Commission focused on public engagement throughout 2024, incorporating engagement and feedback into the policy process, and building public engagement sessions into quarterly public meetings.

He observed that during the public engagement session at the quarterly public meeting on July 25, 2024 – “[How Can the Commission Continue to Advance AbilityOne Program Modernization Within the Current Statutory and Regulatory Framework?](#)” – the Commission heard ideas about how rethinking the definitions of direct and indirect labor might create opportunities for career advancement. Hearing those ideas prompted the Commission to issue a “[Request for Information on Direct and Indirect Labor](#)” in the Federal Register.

Telling the AbilityOne Story Through Data Collection

Koses said having adequate data is essential for progress on the FY 2022-2026 strategic plan’s strategic objective “[Identify, publicize, and support the increase of good jobs and optimal jobs in the AbilityOne Program.](#)” The Commission must also have data to counter and correct disinformation.

These imperatives led to the October 24 meeting’s public engagement session, “Discussion of Data Collection and Forms.” The Commission’s work in the data collection area is governed by the Paperwork Reduction Act.

The Commission wants to know: Are we asking for the right information, or enough information, for the purposes of telling the AbilityOne story? Will the information gathered through the forms make it possible to tell great stories backed by hard numbers and facts?

Accomplishments of FY 2024

Koses said that in 2024 the Commission accomplished much that was closely tied to its strategic objectives in the areas of rulemaking and policy guidance, including:

- [Finalizing the competition rule](#)
- Modernizing compliance policies

Quality Performance

Koses emphasized that compliance is not a synonym for the direct labor hour ratio. Compliance is also about delivering on-time, on-budget, high-quality products and services.

He said that, in his capacity as GSA’s Senior Procurement Executive, he had signed a [FAR deviation](#) that would require GSA to evaluate past performance on AbilityOne contracts.

The FAR requires past performance assessments on most federal contracts. The information is entered into a federal system called the [Contractor Performance Assessment Reporting System](#) (CPARS). But there had been an exemption for AbilityOne contracts.

The deviation Koses signed removed that exemption for GSA purposes, meaning that GSA will be evaluating AbilityOne contracts like all other contracts. The information will be entered into CPARs. This step is another way of saying performance matters, Koses said.

Cooperative Agreements

The Commission has been working toward updated cooperative agreements with the two Central Nonprofit Agencies (CNAs), National Industries for the Blind (NIB) and SourceAmerica.

The updated agreements were the topic of a [public engagement session](#) at the agency's October 2022 quarterly public meeting.

Koses said the Commission has shared its ideas with the CNAs, and that the CNAs would be sharing their ideas with the Commission, paving the way for signing of updated agreements.

ABORs

Koses said the AbilityOne Representatives (ABORs) program had much success in the past year.

ABORs are champions for AbilityOne within federal agencies. They increase awareness and understanding and help create new employment opportunities. They also help resolve concerns about contract implementation.

The number of ABORs keeps growing. Koses said more than 120 ABORs had been appointed in over 20 agencies, including nearly all of the CFO Act agencies. Several Legislative Branch agencies are currently in the process of designating ABORs.

Looking Ahead

Much of the Commission's work in 2023 and 2024 focused on modernization. A significant amount of the policy advancing that modernization has now been written. So, going forward, the Commission's attention will increasingly turn toward making sure the policy is understood and durable. That means focusing on training, communication and outreach.

The Commission will also focus on IT modernization in 2025.

IV. National Disability Employment Awareness Month

In honor of National Disability Employment Month, the Commission had invited two nonprofit employees to speak.

Commission Member Jennifer Sheehy, who is Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Office of Disability Employment Policy at the U.S. Department of Labor, introduced the speakers:

Terrie Collins

Recruiter, Alphapointe

2024 NIB Milton J. Samuelson Career Achievement Employee of the Year

Kansas City, Missouri

Jeffrey Rudloff
Computerized Maintenance Management System Manager
2023 ServiceSource AbilityOne Employee of the Year
Mark Center, Alexandria, Virginia

The speakers discussed their work experiences.

V. Regulations & Policy Subcommittee Update

Commission Vice Chairperson Chai Feldblum, who chairs the subcommittee, gave an [update](#).

VI. Executive Director Report

Executive Director Kim Zeich gave a [report](#).

VIII Inspector General Presentation

Inspector General Stefania Pozzi Porter provided an [update](#) on Office of Inspector General activities.

IX. Review Data Collection Forms

Feldblum gave an overview of three [draft forms](#):

- “Disability Qualification Determination” (DQD) form
- “Participating Employee Information” (PEI) form
- “NPA Annual AbilityOne Representations and Certifications” (ARC) form

X. Public Engagement Session: Discussion of Data Collection and Forms

The Commission [had announced](#) that the public engagement session would focus on “Data Collection Through Updated Compliance Forms” and had invited comments and suggestions on the topic.

The engagement session began with a panel moderated by John Konst, the Commission’s Director of Oversight and Compliance.

Panel

Larysa Kautz, Melwood, President & CEO

Kautz said data is critical to measuring the impact of the AbilityOne Program, and she welcomed the opportunity to share news about the accommodations, training, integration, wages,

promotions, and more that NPAs provide. It is critical to dispel the myths and misperceptions about AbilityOne, she said.

That said, she added, she personally disagrees that such data should be collected as part of a compliance report on a form required regularly in the Program for compliance. Completing such forms will be time-consuming for NPAs, and the kind of data that needs to be collected may shift in the future, she said. She urged the Commission to explore how other government agencies request and receive data on a sporadic basis. And she urged that there be robust training of contractors on how to capture required data.

Glenn Adler, Service Employees International Union (SEIU), Assistant Director for Policy

After giving an overview of [SEIU](#), he said the idea of good jobs with good wages, good benefits, and equal chances for promotion, careers, and training is something SEIU and AbilityOne NPAs share.

His specific comments related to the ARC form. He expressed interest in seeing the aggregates of the data collected through that form – such aggregate data would help with telling good stories and tracking progress. It would be important to be transparent about that aggregate data and make it accessible.

He discussed ideas for training and apprenticeships. He said the gender distribution of the AbilityOne workforce would be an interesting data point, and wondered whether there is a story to tell about advancing the interests of people with disabilities who are women.

Bruce Patterson, ServiceSource, President & CEO

Patterson said he was representing the National Council of SourceAmerica Employers (NCSE) / National Association for the Employment of People Who Are Blind (NAEPB) Compliance Council, which supports the Commission's efforts to modernize the Program. The council's message has been that any changes made in service to modernization should return value to participating employees and ensure the Program remains executable for NPAs of all sizes.

Patterson summarized what the council sees as common concerns expressed in the comments submitted in response to the forms. "Most concerning" in the council's view is the proposed replacement of the current IEE form with the proposed DQD and PEI form, a change they see as potentially onerous and likely to consume the time of staff who shoulder many other responsibilities in support of employees. Patterson said the prevailing IEE and ARC forms should remain in ongoing use as they meet all pre-existing statutory requirements, and any additional data collection should be developed using less onerous methods.

Bartholomew Devon, Alliance for Expanding America's Workforce, Executive Director

He said that when the [Alliance for Expanding America's Workforce](#) (AEAW) onboards new members, it invites them to participate in data collection at the organizational level. The data is aggregated and used to educate policymakers. The data demonstrates the scope, impact and influence of AEAW members and allows AEAW to shed light on misconceptions about the AbilityOne Program.

However, Devon had questions about several aspects of the Commission's proposed data collection, including why collection would be conducted as part of a compliance mechanism and what protections are in place to protect privacy. He recommended that the Commission revisit comments about the draft forms submitted by AEAW members.

Michael Lewis, American Association of People with Disabilities, Vice President of Policy

Lewis said that, as part of its work, the American Association of People with Disabilities (AAPD) strives to ensure that people with disabilities are represented in data collection activities, such as the U.S. Census Bureau's. He thinks the Commission's proposed forms are comprehensive and will gather useful data, including data that will demonstrate that people with disabilities can successfully integrate into the workforce. He urged that the forms leave room for respondents to describe their own disabilities if they feel those disabilities don't fit neatly into categories.

He said the AAPD is encouraged by the Commission's emphasis on career development and phasing-out of subminimum wages in the Program.

Vanessa Ferguson, PCSI, Senior VP-Workforce Development

Ferguson said everyone agrees that data is important, but that how that data is obtained is just as important. She said data collection must offer added value to participating employees and must not impede the execution of the Program. She urged that the Commission continue to communicate the "whys" of data collection. Every ask should come with a problem statement explaining what problem the ask is trying to solve, she said. She also recommended doing a crosswalk between information requested through the Commission's forms and that requested through SourceAmerica's Employee Research System (ERS).

Matt Wieseler, Vice President, Strategy and Compliance, National Industries for the Blind

Wieseler spoke on behalf of NIB President and Chief Executive Officer Soraya Correa. He began by agreeing with previous speakers on the importance of data for telling the AbilityOne story. He said the Commission needs to ensure it is asking for the right data and using it to truly grow the Program. More specifics about how the Commission plans to use the data would be welcome. It is also important to minimize the impact of the data collection on the NPAs and to ensure privacy of participating employees, he said.

Richard Belden, SourceAmerica, President & CEO

Belden concurred with previous speakers on the importance of data and commended the Commission for taking seriously the comments that had been submitted in response to previous drafts of the forms. He recommended continued discussion about whether it's necessary for an NPA to submit separate forms for each individual employee, rather than submitting aggregated data. Submitting aggregate data would be less burdensome for NPAs while reducing privacy concerns, he said.

Responding to the panelists, Feldblum agreed on the importance of communicating the “whys” of data collection, and she responded to certain concerns expressed about privacy. She said the federal government is supposed to run programs well, and collecting data may be part of that effort, even if the data collection is not statutorily mandated.

Koses responded to various points the panelists had made. He reiterated that the Commission wants to be sure it is asking for the right information, and he asked attendees to flag instances when that might not be the case. If there are less expensive or better ways to get information, the Commission wants to hear those ideas too.

In response to a comment in the chat, Zeich said the Commission is still interested in hearing ideas related to its [Request for Information on Direct and Indirect Labor](#). She also noted that a question in the chat had asked about how data would be entered in response to the forms; Belden said SourceAmerica was still working out the logistics.

A question in the chat asked about the information that has been provided through the contract the Commission [awarded](#) to develop and recommend career planning support resources for NPAs participating in the Program. Commission Deputy Executive Director Amy Jensen said the Commission had received the deliverables at the end of September and was in the process of evaluating the information and determining how to implement the recommendations.

XI. Concluding Remarks

Koses thanked all participants for a healthy discussion and adjourned the meeting.

Meeting Attendees

Approximately 300 people attended, including:

Commission Members

Jeffrey Koses, Chairperson	General Services Administration
Chai Feldblum, Vice Chairperson	Private Citizen
Bryan Bashin	Private Citizen
Chris Brandt	Private Citizen
Gabe Cazares	Private Citizen
Megan Dake	Department of the Army
Tara Jamison	Department of Justice
Jennifer Sheehy	Department of Labor
Virna Winters	Department of Commerce

Scheduled Speakers

Larysa Kautz	Melwood, President & CEO Larysa Kautz,
Glenn Adler	Service Employees International Union, Ass't Director for Policy
Bruce Patterson	ServiceSource, President & CEO
Bartholomew Devon	Alliance for Expanding America's Workforce, Executive Director
Michael Lewis	American Association of People with Disabilities, VP of Policy
Vanessa Ferguson	PCSI, Senior VP-Workforce Development
Matt Wieseler	National Industries for the Blind, Vice President, Strategy and Compliance
Richard Belden	SourceAmerica, President & CEO