

Lawmakers seek to update jobs program for blind and disabled

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A pair of lawmakers has introduced legislation to modernize a program that provides jobs for the blind and disabled.

The 2010 Javits-Wagner-O'Day Act would update the nearly 40-year-old AbilityOne program by giving it additional resources and oversight, and making regulatory changes. The bill is sponsored by Reps. Edolphus Towns, D-N.Y., and Brian Bilbray, R-Calif.

"Today is truly a historic day, and I am proud to introduce this long-awaited legislation with Congressman Bilbray to help create vital new job opportunities for people who are blind or have significant disabilities," said Towns, chairman of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, in a statement on Friday, shortly after the bill was introduced.

"The blind and disabled community is a vibrant segment of our economy and this legislation will ensure their active participation in the government procurement process," Bilbray added.

Formerly known as the Javits-Wagner-O'Day Program, AbilityOne is a federal initiative that generates jobs and training opportunities for about 40,000 blind or disabled Americans. The program -- the largest source of employment in the United States for people who are blind or have severe disabilities -- encourages the government to use its buying power to procure select products and services from nonprofit agencies that employ disabled workers.

Administered by an independent federal agency known as Committee for Purchase From People Who Are Blind or Severely Disabled, the program employs more than 600 community-based nonprofits nationwide. But, Towns and Bilbray argued AbilityOne is falling short of its goals, in part because the provisions in the 1971 legislation are outdated.

The new bill would update AbilityOne's procurement provisions to make them compatible with modern regulations, statutes and procedures, the lawmakers said. The committee, for example, would be required to compile and publish a list of products and services available through the program. Agencies then would be required, in many circumstances, to use the program when procuring those items.

Fifteen presidentially appointed members oversee the committee: 11 senior officials from agencies or Defense Department services, and four nongovernmental representatives familiar with the issues the blind and disabled face. The new bill would add the Homeland Security and Interior departments to the committee structure. And, it would add oversight and compliance personnel, including an inspector general for the program.

The legislation also would provide the committee and its associated nonprofits, the National Industries for the Blind and NISH - Creating Employment Opportunities for People With Severe Disabilities, with additional tools and resources to increase employment. And it would set tight criteria for nonprofits to operate in the program.

NISH Chief Marketing Officer Barbara Van Allen said the proposal would bring AbilityOne into compliance with modern disability employment policy and provide much-needed flexibilities to the procurement process.

"Nearly 70 percent of individuals who are blind or have other significant disabilities are unemployed," Van Allen said. "These individuals represent the nation's largest untapped labor

force. It is our hope that by modernizing the Javits-Wagner-O'Day Act, we can address this unacceptable number of unemployed individuals."

Congress created the Javits-Wagner-O'Day Program in 1938 so the blind could manufacture mops and brooms to sell the federal government. In 1971, the law was extended to include people who had severe disabilities and to expand the program to provide services to the government. In 2006, the program changed its name to AbilityOne to better convey its employment mission and link participating organizations.

"This proposed legislation updates 40-year-old language and brings it into alignment with modern-day terminology," said Kevin Lynch, president and CEO of the National Industries for the Blind. "It maintains the original intent of the Javits-Wagner-O'Day Act while improving the structure of the program with the addition of the Department of Homeland Security and Department of Interior. It also strengthens compliance and oversight."

Last week, President Obama issued an executive order instructing agencies to take steps to increase employment of people with disabilities. The directive requires agencies to take steps to meet a goal of hiring an additional 100,000 disabled employees over five years that President Clinton originally laid out in a July 2000 executive order.

An Equal Employment Opportunity Commission report also released last week showed individuals with targeted disabilities -- deafness, blindness, missing extremities, partial or complete paralysis, convulsive disorders, mental retardation, mental illness, and distortion of the limbs and/or spine -- represent less than 1 percent of the federal workforce.