



## 10 YEARS AND COUNTING

**The AbilityOne Contract Management Support Program helps people who are blind launch professional careers while saving taxpayers' money.**

BY ROSEMARIE LALLY, J.D.

As its 10th anniversary approaches, the AbilityOne Contract Management Support (CMS) program continues to thrive and expand, offering professional employment to people who are blind or have significant disabilities while providing an invaluable service to the Department of Defense (DOD) and other federal agencies.

The program's roots go back to 2008, when DOD needed specialists to close out a backlog of contracts and National Industries for the Blind (NIB) was working to develop upwardly mobile career opportunities for people who are blind. Launched in late 2009 as a nine-month pilot program to train people who are blind to close out DOD contracts, the CMS trial — carried out by NIB associated nonprofit agencies VisionCorps in Philadelphia and San Antonio Lighthouse for the Blind in Texas — quickly proved a success.

In June 2010 CMS services were added to the AbilityOne Procurement List.

Soon DOD signed a five-year indefinite delivery/indefinite quantity contract with NIB as the prime contractor and manager of the AbilityOne CMS program.

Ten years and more than 750,000 contracts later, the CMS program is continuing to change lives as people employed in the program become trusted partners of DOD and other federal agencies.

Today, nine NIB associated agencies participate in the CMS program, which currently employs 156 people, says Wallace Neal, NIB senior program manager for CMS. Of these employees, 115 are blind, including 21 service-disabled veterans. Even more encouraging, many CMS professionals have been hired by government and private employers.

### CMS Basic Training

The CMS training program is open to U.S. citizens who are blind, legally blind, or have significant disabilities; have a four-year college degree or equivalent

work experience; and are proficient in using assistive technology such as screen readers and magnification applications. Through an agreement with DOD's Defense Acquisition University (DAU), participants in the CMS training program complete five online business courses totaling nearly 80 hours of instruction. Additional training and networking opportunities are available to participants through NIB's partnership with the National Contract Management Association, which provides memberships to CMS team members.

Upon completion of training, NIB works closely with participants to help them find contract closeout positions, but finding employment hasn't been a problem, Neal says, as the high-caliber work accomplished by CMS specialists is well-known. "I used to have to sell people on the program," he said, "but that's the last thing I have to do now. Federal

agencies are completely onboard; they just want to know how quickly we can close out their contracts.”

Usually working in teams composed of a clerk, three closeout specialists, and a supervisor, CMS employees review open federal contracts, verify government receipt and acceptance, identify funds that should be de-obligated and returned to the government, scan and index contract documents, and deliver completed, ready-to-close packages to federal agencies.

The program’s numbers are impressive: Since September 2010, AbilityOne CMS specialists have closed out more than 450,000 contracts with a 99.65% quality rating and identified more than \$2.7 billion in funds to be de-obligated and returned to the general fund. “This program actually pays for itself,” says Billy Parker, NIB program director for employment support services.

### Professional Career Paths

As impressive as the cost savings and efficient, timely closeout of contracts is the program’s proven ability to offer professional jobs and opportunities for career growth. “CMS is designed to provide a professional career path with real potential for people who are blind,” Parker notes. “It provides the building blocks for an individual’s trajectory to advancement.”

“The program’s most valuable achievement is giving visually impaired people a sense of independence again,” Neal says. “Everyone wants to contribute and make their own way. Many CMS employees were employed before they became blind and this puts them back on track to be independent again.”

Annamarie Parker, a pilot program alumna currently employed at VisionCorps in Philadelphia, agrees. In 2009, she had 17 years of experience in procurement but no college degree and no job because of her increasing vision problems. A friend introduced her to NIB’s Parker, who told her about the upcoming pilot. “As soon as I heard about it, I knew I could do it,” she recalls.

“I was so grateful for the opportunity,” she says. “It was the first time people didn’t judge me on my vision, but instead looked at what I could bring to the table.”

After finishing the DAU courses and training for a week in San Antonio, the pilot participants were assigned contracts at Fort Dix, New Jersey. “We proved we could do it and got follow-on contracts and more than 15 new clients,” Annamarie Parker says. Initially hired as a closeout specialist at VisionCorps, she was promoted to supervising and training other CMS employees and now supervises a five-member closeout team while working on completing her college degree.

What she enjoys most is teaching and sharing her knowledge with others, boosting their self-esteem in the process. “I tell my people we can do this job as well as anyone — there’s nothing wrong with our brains, just our eyes. No one should be intimidated by the fact they haven’t done this work before — you just have to view it as a wonderful opportunity to learn skills you can take anywhere.”

### Feds Seek out CMS Talent

As the capabilities of CMS employees have become more widely recognized by their federal counterparts, many agencies have sought them out for federal positions. “Some agencies have stated at the start of a contract that they plan to hire the whole CMS team directly after trying them out,” says Neal.

“It’s the people in the program doing the work on the ground who are responsible for the program’s success,” he explains. “Their hard work, their willingness to learn the nuances of contracting, endear them to the federal employees they work with and lead the government to hire them.”

Billy Parker says well over 100 CMS program participants have been hired by federal and local government agencies, NIB, and private sector employers like Boeing, Northrop Grumman, and BAE Systems “We’ve had some real successes here, with

## CMS PERFORMANCE METRICS\*



**Contracts Received**  
**783,712**



**Sent to Contracting Officer for Signature**  
**457,351**



**Total De-obligations Identified**  
**\$2.7 BILLION**



**Images Scanned**  
**9.6 MILLION**



**Quality Rating**  
**99.65%**



## CMS PERSONNEL METRICS\*

**166**

**Closeout Specialist Positions Filled**

**102**

**Closeout Specialists Who Are Blind**

**16**

**Closeout Specialists Who Are Service Disabled Vets**

**84**

**Closeout Specialists Hired by Government**

**10**

**Closeout Supervisors Who Are Blind**

\*as of July 31, 2020

# FEATURE STORY

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many promotions. There's so much room for upward mobility."

Scott Collins is a CMS professional hired at NIB. Collins, who has retinitis pigmentosa (RP), began looking for a career change in his early thirties. A professional swim coach and sporting goods store manager, he realized he needed an office job due to his declining vision and pursued federal jobs for nearly a year with no luck.

His perseverance paid off when he met Billy Parker at a job fair for people who are visually impaired and learned of the CMS program. He enrolled in the DAU classes and, upon completing training, was offered a position with Virginia Industries for the Blind. But a year-long delay in obtaining a security clearance forced him to renew his job search and he ultimately was hired by Columbia Lighthouse for the Blind to work on closeout services for the National Institutes of Health (NIH). After three weeks on the NIH contract Collins was promoted and moved to Ft. Meade, Maryland, for a 14-month stint. His exemplary performance soon led to a position at NIB as an associate contract administrator.

Less than two years later, Collins was promoted to contract administrator at NIB. He now develops pricing for closeout team costs and submits team metrics to the AbilityOne Commission. "Doors are always opening at NIB;

they're interested in promoting people who put in the time and effort," he says.

Collins stresses that there's no one-size-fits-all approach. "Some closeout specialists stay in that position for 10 years and are perfectly happy; others want to move up the ladder," he notes. "It's all a personal choice."

When Collins' 6-year-old daughter asked how he does his work with reduced vision, he brought her and her younger brother to his office to show them the assistive technology he uses. It was a proud moment.

"I'm a very lucky person and it all comes back to CMS. You can learn and succeed with very little previous experience if you want to work hard and have the right mind set," Collins says. "I'm not judged here. I don't have to make excuses for my vision, hide anything, or feel second-rate. Co-workers are supportive, assistive tech is provided that allows me to do my work — it just takes all those fears away. I love working here."

Although government employment was his original goal, Collins is now more interested in helping people like himself. "Working here at NIB is like coming full circle in helping others. It makes me feel good and I'm proud of what I do."

## Rapid Success Leads to Expansion

Although the CMS program has grown

quickly, creating many new jobs for college graduates who are blind or visually impaired, Parker hopes to see it expand to more federal agencies. "Once federal employers see a CMS team in action, they're excited to support the program," says Parker.

One example is Thomas D. Robinson, director of contracting for the Air Force Life Cycle Management Center, who was appointed to the U.S. AbilityOne Commission in 2013. Robinson, who now serves as chairperson of the Commission, became a proponent within the Air Force after he learned about the CMS program and its results.

"Thanks to Mr. Robinson's support, we have close out specialists working on Air Force contracts in multiple locations across the country," says NIB's Parker. "The largest team is based at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, and several have transitioned to positions with the federal government."

NIB also would like to provide greater opportunities by expanding the program's scope to include pre- and post-award contract work. Carolyn Madison, director of the CMS program for VisionCorps, shares that vision. The agency is pursuing a strategic plan to expand to serve all contract administration needs, including invoice reconciliation and pre- and post-award work, she says.

Madison's CMS staff has grown from 12 employees in 2016 to 53 in 2020. With offices in Philadelphia; Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania; Washington, D.C.; and Bedford, Massachusetts, VisionCorps has 6,424 contracts in process, the largest with the Army Intelligence and Security Command and the Defense Contract Management Agency (DCMA). VisionCorps' superior output led to follow-on contracts from DOD and the Department of Commerce, Madison says.

"I think of the CMS program as a launching pad to other opportunities," she says. "We want to provide the skills that make people who are blind or visually impaired competitive in the sighted world." To this end, she conducts

training in pre-award processes, such as putting together solicitations, requests for quote, or requests for proposal, to make sure her staff members are fully equipped to compete in the job market. “Our folks have been so successful in getting jobs because they can address the pre-award process.”

Retired Army Lt. Col. Jack Bednar, site manager of the Virginia Industries for the Blind CMS program at DCMA in Chester, Virginia, tells a similar story of growth and expansion. VIB’s program started with nine employees in September 2014 and has grown to 55 positions, he said. With closeout facilities in Chester and Philadelphia, VIB closes an average of 350 contracts each month.

Bednar credited the program’s success to employees’ dedication and teamwork. “We’re like a family and we support each other like family,” he says. “These people are contributing and involved. There’s no one I’ve met here who doesn’t want to work hard and be successful.”

Some participants have become first-time homeowners and others have met their spouses on the job, he says. “This program gives people purpose and helps them build a good life.”

Noting that “permanent employment is the goal,” Bednar says DCMA has hired 11 CMS employees into professional federal positions over the past five years.

### Recruitment a Constant Effort

“Recruitment is the hardest piece,” Bednar said, noting that VIB’s efforts include a permanent announcement on Virginia’s state employment website. Other program managers and participants agree that identifying and recruiting eligible candidates is one of the biggest challenges facing the program.

Building awareness of the program is the first hurdle, as many college graduates who are blind are unfamiliar with CMS. Collins says NIB is working “to build a pipeline to place college grads in knowledge-based work.”

“NIB has an incredible recruitment data base,” Madison notes, adding the best recruiting tool seems to be word of mouth. “People who’ve gone through the program are ‘walking billboards,’ the best advertisement we could possibly ask for.”

Collins is proof of that — he recruited his brother, Jim, who also has RP, into the CMS program after Jim lost his job as an accountant due to diminishing eyesight. After an unsuccessful seven-month job hunt, Jim contacted NIB and was connected with Cincinnati Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired (CABVI), which hired him for a contract with the Defense Logistics Agency (DLA) in Richmond, Virginia.

After completing the DAU training, Jim began work with CABVI in February 2018. Six months later he was hired by DLA for a GS-9 post-award contract specialist position. Since then, he has moved up to a GS-11 role and anticipates another promotion in the coming year.

Jim says the CMS program was crucial to his success. “It gave me the opportunity to get my foot in the door. The people are so supportive. It was just a breath of fresh air after all those months of job hunting, to suddenly feel like ‘Oh, this is going to work, I can do this.’”

As more federal contract officers become familiar with CMS employees and their outstanding work product, government hiring of program participants will become more common. Recruiting new participants to fill the positions of those hired away remains a constant effort, but it’s a sign to NIB and its associated agencies that the program is working as it should.

“I like to think we’re assisting people to reach their goals,” says Madison. “Every time one of my contract specialists comes in to tell me they’ve found a better job, you’d think I was the proud mother! That’s the most satisfying success in this program.” □

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## GENERAL DYNAMICS EMBRACES CMS

When the Contracts and Acquisition Management Organization (CAMO) team at General Dynamics Information Technology (GDIT) needed contractors to assist with contract closeouts, data cleansing, and contract novation projects, Darryl Scott, CAMO vice president, knew where to turn, having worked with CMS employees from NIB associated agencies at the Defense Contract Management Agency (DCMA).

In May, a team of CMS employees from VisionCorps began supporting the CAMO team tasked with closing 1,500+ contracts, cleansing data for more than 1,300 active contracts, and novating (contract substitution) 1,300+ active and 200+ inactive contracts as part of GDIT’s Legal Entities Merger.

VisionCorps CMS employee Dominic Zappone enjoys the work. “It’s exciting to work with new people and talk to them on a daily basis. We’re learning every day how to work within their systems too,” he says. His colleague Tane Wall is pleased that the GDIT initiative has broadened her contracting knowledge.

The CAMO team leaders are equally enthusiastic. Janetta Brewer, CAMO senior director is impressed with team members’ resilience, noting that when the coronavirus necessitated transitioning to a remote work setup, the CMS specialists “demonstrated a great deal of patience as we worked to ship IT equipment to them, grant the appropriate network/systems access, meet their assistive technology needs, and provide them with online training.” With operations now in full swing she says “They work well with our CAMO team members and have provided work of the highest quality.”