

# **RSVA PROUDLY BUILDING NEW INROADS AND RELATIONSHIPS**

*By: Ron Eller, RSVA Board Member and  
Roy Harmon, California State Committee Chair*

At the 2011 Sagebrush Conference, an invitation for a presentation to speak was extended to a recent Presidential appointee of the Committee for Purchase From People Who Are Blind or Severely Disabled. The Committee for Purchase consists of approximately 15 Presidentially appointed members. It is an independent federal agency that administers the AbilityOne Program. The AbilityOne Program's mission is to provide employment opportunities for people who are blind or have other severe disabilities in the manufacture and delivery of products and services to the federal government

The AbilityOne Program, helps thousands of people who are blind or have other severe disabilities find employment. This program coordinates its activities with nonprofit organizations across the country to employ these individuals and provide goods and services to the federal government at a fair price. NIB and NISH are examples of national organizations who work under the umbrella of the Committee For Purchase.

In recent years, Randolph-Sheppard vendors have been entering the military dining programs on numerous military bases throughout the United States. The Randolph-Sheppard Act provides priority to a Randolph-Sheppard vendor for management purposes of military dining food services, if food is prepared onsite. AbilityOne has priority on military bases for goods and services not involving food preparation. In other words, AbilityOne may provide servers, cleaners, maintenance workers, etc. at a military dining facility. Some current Randolph-Sheppard vendors at military bases may be working hand-in-hand with contracted AbilityOne workers as well at their food service facilities, in the capacities as listed above.

When the Committee for Purchase appointee spoke to the Sagebrush participants, he introduced two other Committee members who had come to the conference to learn more about the Randolph-Sheppard Program. He had advised Sagebrush attendees that the direction of the Randolph-Sheppard Program had seemed to have "stalled" in recent years, and he was recommending that consideration be made on how to expand the Randolph-Sheppard Program rather than allow it to shrink or deteriorate.

After the Sagebrush Conference, these Committee members extended an invitation to RSVA to visit them in Washington, D.C. at their headquarters to discuss possible avenues that may be open for the Randolph-Sheppard Program. RSVA President Dan Sippl (WI), and RSVA members Roy Harmon (CA), Charlie Carroll (AL), and Ron Eller (NC), along with Ken Jessup, a political consultant and former R-S vendor (VA), accepted the invitation and met with some members of the Committee on Monday, February 28, 2011.

The meeting was very positive and informative. Attendees from the Committee for Purchase represented administrative staff as well, and they all provided input about their organization. An AbilityOne representative was also present.

The RSVA representatives were able to describe the Randolph-Sheppard Program and how it is instituted throughout the U.S. under management by State Licensing Agencies and overseen by the Rehabilitation Services Administration in the Department of Education. The vendors were able to describe the program's successes and the distinction that Randolph-Sheppard vendors are entrepreneurs given a priority in government facilities for management of food service operations versus the JWOD Act that provides employment for the blind and severely disabled.

RSVA President, Dan Sippl, aptly described the various types of facilities owned and operated by R-S vendors, including Roadside Rest areas. The Committee representatives were very attentive to the fact that many R-S vendors work alongside AbilityOne workers in military dining facilities, as well as Roadside Rest areas. The RSVA representatives were able to discuss the many successes R-S entrepreneurs have at their facilities presently, and were able to inform them about the 75 year history of the Randolph-Sheppard Act.

The meeting concluded with the Committee For Purchase representatives offering a commitment to RSVA to include them in their Quarterly Agendas, so that more discussions and discoveries can be gleaned about the Randolph-Sheppard Program today. Dan Sippl and the RSVA members thanked them for their time and discussion, and are looking forward to continued dialogue.

At the conclusion of the meeting, the RSVA representatives were given a tour of the headquarter facilities, which also included a history of AbilityOne and how their successes have grown over the many years. AbilityOne proudly employs thousands of blind and severely disabled workers, with pay scales appropriate to the type of jobs performed in the various quadrants across the United States. Watch for further meeting reports in future Vendorscope issues.