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Source Force Advocates on Capitol Hill

Washington, DC – Eighteen advocates from the ServiceSource Network participated in the NISH-sponsored Grassroots Advocacy Training in Washington, DC on June 8-12, 2009. After the training, seven individuals with disabilities who are directly employed on AbilityOne contracts, as well as their family members, had the opportunity to speak with Members of Congress and their staff. In total, the Source Force advocacy teams met with ten Congressional offices to tell their story of how the AbilityOne Program has positively impacted their lives.

The Source Force advocacy teams attending the event this year were comprised of employees, parents and staff from ServiceSource Network affiliates Employment Source, OCI and ServiceSource. Dennis Dapolito, Executive Director of OCI, represented the Delaware-based affiliate. Employment Source Program Manager at the Veterans Affairs (VA) Medical Center and newly-elected NISH Board Member, Belinda Porras, attended, along with AbilityOne employee Vivian Downs (Veterans Affairs Medical Center, Fayetteville, NC) and Polly Moore, Project Manager for Fort Bragg mailroom operations. Fort Carson food service was represented by AbilityOne employees Brian and Sarah VanNess, along with Brian's dad Scott, Sarah's mom, Linda, and staff member Ashley Allen. A local ServiceSource team of AbilityOne employees was comprised of Cindy Toth (Department of Commerce Mail Room), Jack Busby, (US Marine Corps 8th and I Food Service) and Laurie Thieberger (ServiceSource Employment Center). Each of the ServiceSource Metro Region employees had one or both parents participate as well.

Belinda Porras was invited to be a keynote speaker during the event's kick-off dinner. Belinda told her inspiring story of how the AbilityOne program changed her life, and offered some advice for participants preparing to visit Members of Congress: "Just be yourself and tell your story," Belinda said. "Never be embarrassed or ashamed of your story."

During their visits with Congressional Members, the Source Force advocacy teams spoke of proposed legislation that will modernize and improve the AbilityOne Program. Brian and Sarah VanNess told staff in Congressman Lamborn's office about how their jobs at Fort Carson have helped them become more independent and move into their own place for the first time since they were married five years ago.

The ServiceSource Network employs more than 1,300 people with disabilities in nine states and the District of Columbia. The majority of those jobs are AbilityOne jobs. NISH is a national not-for-profit agency that works with Community Rehabilitation Programs (CRPs) and the Federal Government to create job opportunities for people with disabilities through the AbilityOne Program. More than 44,000 people who are blind or have other severe disabilities work on AbilityOne contracts nationwide.

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From left to right: Belinda Porras, Polly Moore and Vivian Downs take a break from visits to pose outside the Capitol Building.



From left to right: Steve Toth, Cindy Toth, Marcia Knutson (Congressman Moran's Staff person), Laurie Thieberger, Paul Thieber and Jack Busby.



Participants of the 2009 NISH Grassroots Advocacy Conference