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Remembering Evelyne Villines on International Day of Persons with Disabilities

ARLINGTON, Va.--Former U.S. AbilityOne Commission member Evelyne Villines, who helped launch an era of rights advocacy for people with disabilities, was remembered by the Commission's leadership as the 2017 International Day of Persons with Disabilities was observed on Dec. 3.

Villines was at the forefront of efforts to open doors to workplace opportunities for people with disabilities and was known worldwide for her speech "In the Name of Love". She died Sept. 30 in her native state of Iowa at age 87.

"Evelyne reminded us, through her words and her life, that we are all more than how others see us," said the Commission Chairperson James M. Kesteloot. "It's fitting that we remember her on International Day of Persons with Disabilities because her global advocacy changed the horizons of people with disabilities around the world."

Villines was just 3 years old when she contracted polio. The disease caused permanent damage, especially to her left leg. She faced difficulty and discrimination, but turned that hardship into her passion -- championing the cause of others seeking employment in a time when those with a disability were often marginalized or excluded from the workplace.

"Ms. Villines' service stretches across generations. Her groundbreaking advocacy helped set the stage for the Americans with Disabilities Act," said Commission Executive Director and CEO Tina Ballard. Villines was a guest at the White House when the act, the most comprehensive disability rights legislation in history, was signed into law by President George H.W. Bush in 1990.

Villines was appointed in 1994 and 1999 to the federal government's Committee for Purchase From People Who Are Blind or Severely Disabled, which now operates as the U.S. AbilityOne Commission, by then President Bill Clinton. The AbilityOne Program is among the largest sources of employment in the United States for people who are blind or have significant disabilities. It provides more than 46,000 jobs through approximately 550 nonprofits to manufacture products and offer services for purchase by federal departments and agencies. Also, for more than 20 years, she served on the board of SourceAmerica, (then NISH) a central nonprofit agency that helps administer the AbilityOne Program.

"My own definition of rehabilitation is to 'restore with dignity,' and there is dignity in work, in gainful employment, in feeling needed," Villines once said.

She served on numerous boards and commissions and was well known as a speaker, both nationally and internationally, relaying experiences that made her a compelling advocate. Villines told the story of seeking a secretarial job when she was a young woman. Despite the fact

she could type 80 words a minute, the supervisor said to go home where others could care for her. Instead she began a lifelong journey to advocate for the rights of persons with disabilities to enjoy the chance to compete and contribute in the workplace.

She was inducted into the National Hall of Fame for Persons with Disabilities in 1986 and in 1994 inducted into the Iowa Women's Hall of Fame.

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About AbilityOne

The AbilityOne Program is a source of employment for more than 46,000 people who are blind or have significant disabilities, including approximately 3,000 veterans, at approximately 550 nonprofit agencies nationwide across 15 time zones from Maine to Guam. AbilityOne provided more than \$3.3 billion of products and services to the federal government in fiscal year 2016. The program operates at more than 1,000 locations representing 40 government agencies, including 150 Base Supply Centers at military and government installations.

The program is administered by the U.S. AbilityOne Commission, the operating name of the Committee for Purchase From People Who Are Blind or Severely Disabled, and is an independent federal agency. The Commission is comprised of 15 Presidential appointees, with 11 representing federal agencies and four serving as private citizens who are knowledgeable about the obstacles to employment of people who are blind or have significant disabilities. The Commission administers the AbilityOne Program with the assistance of two central nonprofit agencies, National Industries for the Blind and SourceAmerica.