

Starting Your Journey

If you or somebody you know is interested in becoming a Randolph-Sheppard Business Enterprise Program entrepreneur, contact your state's Vocational Rehabilitation Agency that serves people who are blind or visually impaired. Your rehabilitation counselor can get you started on the path to becoming a licensed entrepreneur.

Eligibility Requirements

In order to become a licensed Randolph-Sheppard entrepreneur one must be a U.S. citizen, legally blind and meet any additional local state agency's eligibility requirements. Check with your local state licensing agency to determine exact eligibility requirements.



Produced by:



MISSISSIPPI STATE
UNIVERSITY™

*The National Research and Training Center
on Blindness and Low Vision*

www.blind.msstate.edu

Funded by NIDRR grant number H133B10022

Randolph-Sheppard Business Enterprise Program



An Entrepreneurial Program for People who are Legally Blind



Pictured above is one of the many military dining facilities contracted by a Randolph-Sheppard blind entrepreneur. The military dining contracts are a successful and lucrative component of the Randolph-Sheppard Program.

FAST FACTS*

- \$792,613,306—ANNUAL GROSS SALES
- \$56,168—AVERAGE ENTREPRENEUR EARNINGS
- 2,319 LICENSED ENTREPRENEURS
- 400 OTHER BLIND EMPLOYEES
- 1,322 OTHER DISABLED EMPLOYEES
- 12,094 OTHER EMPLOYEES

*Figures are based on nationwide data from the 2010 RSA Report



From humble beginnings to industry-leading entrepreneurship

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE RANDOLPH-SHEPPARD BUSINESS ENTERPRISE PROGRAM

The Randolph-Sheppard Act was signed into law on June 20, 1936 by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Leading the fight to get the bill passed, Leonard Robinson, a blind attorney, enlisted the help of Senator Morris Sheppard and Congressman Jennings Randolph. The Act granted individuals who were legally blind the authority to operate vending facilities on federal property. The first facilities came into operation in early 1938 in Washington DC, with 12 facilities operating by late 1939. Within four years, the first facility operator was earning \$14,000 annually -- a substantial increase from his previous annual income of \$1,620 from a welfare grant. Facilities were soon established in other parts of the country, using the Washington DC model, with operators mostly selling newspapers and cigars.

Over the years, the Randolph-Sheppard program has changed dramatically from single vendor-managed concessions and newsstands to large military food service contracts, kiosks, convenience stores, laundry facilities, restaurants, snack bars, automated vending machine operations including vending routes, highway rest-area vending and much more. The focus has changed from employment to creating true entrepreneurial opportunities. Today approximately 2,300 self-employed men and women who are legally blind operate businesses under the program across the country. The average annual income of these entrepreneurs is about \$56,000, and they provide employment to an additional 14,000 individuals, of whom about 1,700 are people with disabilities, including blindness.



In business for yourself not by yourself

MISSION OF THE RANDOLPH-SHEPPARD PROGRAM

To provide people who are blind with rewarding and profitable entrepreneurial ventures, broaden their economic opportunities, and invigorate all blind people to be self-supporting, while dispelling misconceptions about blind people by showcasing their abilities.

NEW HORIZONS

The Randolph-Sheppard Business Enterprise Program is consistently working to expand its horizons and the opportunities for entrepreneurs who are blind. One area of expansion is developing strategic partnerships with nationally-branded companies and other private sector entities. These partnerships not only increase opportunities for blind entrepreneurs, but they also increase blind entrepreneurs' customer base. By teaming with branded companies, blind entrepreneurs have the opportunity to capture brand-loyal customer segments and increase net profitability. This is an exciting strategic initiative for the Randolph-Sheppard Program.

PRESIDENTIAL MEMORANDUM

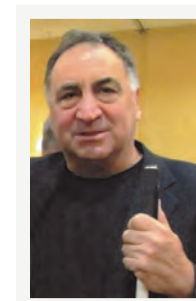
"Through the Federal Randolph-Sheppard Vending Facility Program... talented and creative individuals who are blind have acquired the management training and business skills necessary to realize the American dream -- a lifetime of economic opportunity, independence, and self-sufficiency for themselves and their families."

- Barack Obama, 1/20/2012

FROM OUR BUSINESS OWNERS

Melissa Smith began to lose her vision as the result of retinitis pigmentosa at age 30 while working as a teacher assistant. The mother of 4 was forced out of her job and onto Social Security Disability. "A friend told me about the business enterprise program," says Smith whose bubbly personality serves her well as an entrepreneur. "Owning my own business was a dream of mine and the BE Program was a perfect fit for me," she explains. "Not only am I working and showing the world that people who are blind can be successful, the business allows me to provide for my family." Melissa loves managing the cafe at the TVA Office Complex in Chattanooga, TN. "The people are so wonderful and it's a new adventure everyday...It really is the best thing that ever happened to me."

- Melissa Smith, Blind Entrepreneur



Nicky Gacos lost his vision due to a head injury while playing college football at the University of Pittsburgh. His career plans took a detour. After working in a family business for a few years, Gacos wanted to venture out on his own and put his entrepreneurial spirit to the test. "The Randolph-Sheppard Program gave me that opportunity and I have thoroughly enjoyed the experience and challenges of being a small business owner," Gacos states. "Getting my customers the food and quality service they want is my top priority," explains Gacos who owns the food service business that serves postal workers at the Jersey City Post Office. "For me that meant adding a Dunkin' Donuts franchise because my customers want name branded products."

- Nicky Gacos, Blind Entrepreneur

What is Provided for Blind Entrepreneurs

The state agency administering the R-S Program in each respective state offers everything a person who is blind needs to get started running their own food service facility. First, preliminary academic and on-the-job training on all aspects of running a successful business is offered. Once trained, new entrepreneurs are assigned a facility furnished with all equipment and initial stock needed to get started. Continuing training and support is also offered through professional business counselors. The R-S Program prides itself on allowing entrepreneurs the independence to be their own boss, while also providing them with a network of support. Blind entrepreneurs play an active role in administering their program by electing their peers to represent them. The elected representatives actively participate with the Business Enterprise Program in major decisions, which ensures that blind entrepreneurs have ownership in how their program is run.

Benefits of being a Randolph-Sheppard Entrepreneur

The Randolph-Sheppard Program is unique in that it allows participants to, in essence, create a strategic partnership with the government. This partnership is different and more beneficial, in many respects, than traditional independently-owned entrepreneurial businesses. First, every R-S entrepreneur has priority status to establish a food service facility on most federal property, and in many cases on most state property, as well. Another benefit is the support system available to R-S entrepreneurs. The entrepreneurs are responsible for running all aspects of their business from day-to-day operations to making strategic business decisions; however, if an entrepreneur needs help they have professional business counselors available for consult and support. Having these benefits provide a competitive advantage and reduces the risk for R-S entrepreneurs, while still allowing them freedom to be their own boss, create their own schedule, have limitless earning potential, and be as strategic and competitive as any other entrepreneur in the market.