

Report on Women's Participation in the Business Enterprise Program (BEP)

Abstract

Data were gathered from the directors of BEP state licensing agencies in each state, as well as the chairs of Elected Committees of Blind Vendors, regarding the gender composition of the BEP in their state and ways to improve women's participation. It was found that approximately 25% of licensed vendors and vendor trainees across the country are female, and approximately 25% of committee members are female. The most common suggestions for recruiting female vendors involve outreach through vocational rehabilitation (VR) counselors and the involvement of existing female vendors in marketing the program. Involving female vendors in marketing was also suggested as a way of promoting their active participation in the program, along with mentoring and encouraging committee service. Future studies will be useful to identify factors that may contribute to women's under-representation.

Introduction

The Randolph-Sheppard Act was enacted in 1936 to provide entrepreneurial opportunities for individuals who were blind. The program has evolved from small newspaper and candy stands in federal courthouses and Post Offices to very complex foodservice operations on properties controlled by federal, state, and local governments. Today, the program is venturing into private properties as well. These businesses that are operated by blind entrepreneurs today include automated vending machine sites, micromarkets, C-Stores, snack bars, and even full-service cafeterias. Nationally, approximately 1,900 blind entrepreneurs generate almost three quarters of a billion dollars in annual sales.

The Randolph-Sheppard Act created a system whereby programs are run on the state level by what are referred to as state licensing agencies or SLA's. Forty-nine states and the District of Columbia have programs. Wyoming is the only state that does not. The states must adhere to federal requirements but have a great deal of flexibility in how they administer the program. There are large state programs and small ones. Some have over 100 blind entrepreneurs while others have as few as two.

The National Association of Blind Merchants, a division of the National Federation of the Blind, is a membership organization that represents the interests of the nation's blind entrepreneurs. NABM President Nicky Gacos had observed at state and national conferences that women appeared to be under-represented. The Randolph-Sheppard Program is the most successful program in history that focuses on entrepreneurial opportunities for blind persons. According to data provided by the U.S. Department of Education, the average blind entrepreneur in the country earns approximately \$63,500 in 2016, the last year for which figures are available. Mr. Gacos was puzzled. Why are there so few women in such a successful program? Was it just his perception or are women truly under-represented in the Randolph-Sheppard Program? Out of concern, Gacos established the NABM Women's Initiative. He appointed Melba Taylor, a well-known blind entrepreneur from Maryland, to head up the Initiative. She enlisted fellow female blind entrepreneurs from across the country and some SLA staff to form a committee to examine the matter. The committee started with a survey instrument. This document summarizes the results of that survey.

Data Collection Method

A survey was sent to all of the state licensing agencies (SLAs) in every state with a BEP, along with the District of Columbia. The survey asked how many total vendors were licensed in the state, and how many of those vendors are female. In addition, SLA directors were asked to provide the number of current BEP trainees (female trainees and total trainees), as well as the number of blind staff employed at the SLA and how many of those staff are female. Finally, the SLA directors answered two open-ended questions: “What suggestions do you have for increasing the number of women entering into the Randolph Sheppard program?” and “What suggestions do you have to increase and support the active participation of women vendors in your state?”

In addition to the SLA director survey, a similar survey was sent to the chairs of the Elected Committees of Blind Vendors in each state (and the District of Columbia). This survey was identical to the SLA survey, except that the first two questions asked about the number of people serving on the Elected Committee and how many of these individuals are female.

Results

Gender Composition in the BEP

Data were received from state licensing agencies (SLAs) from the District of Columbia and 49 states (all states except Wyoming, which does not have a Business Enterprise Program).

Across the federal program, there are a total of 1,835 licensed vendors, 440 of whom are women. Across the federal program, 24% of licensed vendors are women. Two states (Delaware and Iowa) reported having no women vendors.

When the gender composition was compared across the ten U.S. standard federal regions, it was found that Region VIII, or the Mountain states (Colorado, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Utah) had the highest percentage of women vendors (36%) followed by Region X, the Pacific Northwest region (Alaska, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington) with 34% women vendors. The regions with the lowest percentage of women vendors were Region VII, the plains region including Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska with 11% women vendors, and Region II, the mid-Atlantic region including New Jersey and New York with 14% women vendors. The full breakdown of the ten regions is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Gender Composition by U.S. Federal Region

Region	States	Percent Women
Mountain	CO, MT, ND, SD, UT	36%
Pacific	AK, CA, ID, OR,	34%

	WA	
New England	CT, MA, ME, NH, RI, VT	28%
Southeast	AL, FL, GA, KY, MS, NC, SC, TN	27%
Southwest	AZ, CA, HI, NV	25%
South Atlantic	DC, DE, MD, PA, VA, WV	23%
Midwest	IL, IN, MI, MN, OH, WI	23%
South	AR, LA, NM, OK, TX	20%
MidAtlantic	NY, NJ	14%
Plains	IA, KS, MO, NE	11%

Committee Composition

Committee chairs were asked about the size and gender composition of their state's Elected Committee of Blind Vendors. Across the federal program, a total of 379 individuals serve on the Elected Committees of Blind Vendors. Ninety-three of these individuals (25%) are women. Eleven states reported having no women on their Elected Committee of Blind Vendors: Delaware, Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, Mississippi, New Jersey, New Mexico, Oregon, Rhode Island, Utah, and West Virginia. The Mountain region had the highest percentage of women in their Elected Committees (45%), while Region V, the Midwest region (Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, Wisconsin) had the lowest percentage at 16%.

Composition of Trainees

The BEP trainee program currently has 100 trainees in 33 states, 25 of whom are women (25% women).

Composition of Blind Staff

Nineteen states reported employing at least one blind staff member in the administration of their state's BEP. A total of 25 blind staff are employed in administering their state's BEP. Of the blind staff, 10 (40%) are women.

Suggestions for Recruiting More Women Vendors

Suggestions from SLA Directors

Thirty of the SLA directors provided suggestions for increasing the recruitment of women into BEP training programs. The most common types of suggestions were: outreach to VR counselors (8 responses); involving current women vendors in the recruitment process (8 responses); outreach to transition-age youth or culinary students (4 responses); outreach to women's groups or events (4 responses); improving outreach generally, without regard to gender (3 responses); increasing the number or diversity of facility locations (3 responses); building a more inclusive culture in the program (2 responses); and networking (2 responses). Two additional responses (at the bottom of the list below) suggested stereotypes about women's lack of interest in vending. Example comments include:

- **Work closer with VRC's to promote additional program visibility.**
- **I feel if currently-licensed blind vendors who are women discussed their success with the Randolph Sheppard Program to their state's VR program, especially to transition ages (14 – 21) and college students along with the VR counselors.**
- **Expand our reach (BEP) at the high school level. I would like to reach out to CCSD facilitators to provide informational sessions on the Randolph Sheppard Program Start earlier in education, exploring vending and food service as a career.**
 - **Attend and have booths at women's events.**
- **The program should work with the vendor's committee to create a contact list of women vendors and provide either a roundtable event, guest speakers, and/or recommend resources specifically for women vendors. One option is the Women's Business Center they may be able to provide information, speakers, etc.**
- **General promotion of the BEP would help with increasing participants of all genders. Operating a business in today's market is difficult and in many cases it seems that employment opportunities in technology fields are more stable and not bad for income. For women and men alike, finding a way to make BEP attractive to highly qualified applicants is the key.**
 - **We are always in search of qualified candidates that are a good fit for the BEP; we have not placed a specific request that they should be female.**
- **Our program has a culture of all-inclusion. We work with counseling section to provide orientation to any interested client. We also regularly present an overview of the BEP program to our New Vision Adjustment to Blindness students.**
- **Growth in the BEP is a challenge for all blind persons. Increasing financially plausible employment opportunities is the key both publicly and privately is the key to reserving the current national trends.**
 - **More locations.**

- **We need to think outside the box when locating additional facilities for women because lots of women do not want to do foodservice.**
- **Our state is 90% vending. I have been told that our state needs to have other opportunities other than vending to attract more women. Several women trainees have said they would prefer to be manager of a gift shop.**

Suggestions from committee chairs

Nine committee chairs provided suggestions about ways to recruit more women vendors. Most of the committee chair comments recommended involving current women vendors as mentors for prospective vendors or vendor trainees. The committee chair comments included:

- **VR refers few women to our training program and roughly 1 in 4 graduates are awarded a facility. To build our diversity profile, I have pushed volunteer mentoring of high school age blind children in an internship program with our operators and we strongly and actively encourage female and minority recruitment.**
- **Go to regional VR offices and make presentations to VR counselors promoting our program in order for them to understand the program as a viable solution for their clients' needs. Right now, we are sending one woman and one man from the committee to do the presentation in order to give both perspectives.**
- **Increasing our marketing efforts to women who are legally blind. Having female mentors that are working with other organizations to promote Business Enterprise Program to women and to speak to current students at the blind schools and in our training programs. To have a networking call on a quarterly basis to exchange ideas and encouragement.**
- **Continue to provide the same equal opportunity to all who inquire about our program. Our licensed blind vendors are not involve with the initial assessment process for selecting candidates for training, but perhaps vendor involvement in that area should be considered. Some female candidates might feel more comfortable in pursuing entrance into our program if there was a possibility of having another female as mentor to help them during training and in the initial phase of placement. Our SLA has a high turnover rate and so the specialist that provides training for our new vendors likely won't be there very long after a trainee is placed in a facility, and so having an established working relationship with another vendor who will likely still be in the program for many years would probably make a big difference.**

- **Asking for feedback from women who are already involved in the program.**
- **Working with potential candidates and statewide vendors to connect female candidates with successful BEP women vendors.**

Suggestions for Encouraging the Active Participation of Women Vendors

Suggestions from SLA Directors

Twenty-one SLA directors provided suggestions about ways to encourage women's active participation in the BEP program. The most common types of suggestions included involving women in committees or in leadership roles (8 responses), involving women vendors in marketing the program to other women (6 responses), gathering feedback from women to improve the program (2 responses), and other responses (5 responses). Example responses included:

- **Presentations at local chapter meetings. Other female mentors. Going to counselor meeting and trying to recruit women.**
- **The way to increase participation is to annually invite managers to put their name in nomination from the Committee. People need encouragement to step forward.**
- **Work with the OVRC to recruit more women to serve on OVRC.**
 - **Work with female members to become more involved with recruiting to both the program and the SCBV. Have female managers meet with VR staff to help promote female participation and recruitment. Have female managers get more involved with blind organizations throughout the state and speak at their meetings.**
 - **Always asking for feedback is critical to validate a business and to always make sure they are minimizing negative outcomes.**
 - **All our LBV's actively participate in the development of the Program. I make sure they understand the importance of their input to every aspect of the BEP.**
 - **Our program's promotion and transfer policy affords points to blind vendors who attend and contribute to the state committee, either through attendance or volunteering on subcommittees. All blind vendors, including women, are made aware of the importance of active participation not only to guide the program, but also to earn active participation points for promotion and transfer.**

Suggestions from committee chairs

Eight committee chairs provided suggestions about ways to promote women's active participation. Like the SLA directors, the committee chairs suggested committee leadership as a means of active participation, along with marketing and providing program feedback. The eight responses from the committee chairs are as follows:

- **Sending qualified women that have been successful in their endeavors out to Regional VR offices to make presentations extolling the virtues of our program as a**

means of earning a living that benefits the women and their families is a very good starting point. Be honest, candid and persuasive in your recruiting efforts. I feel that will benefit you in the long run.

- Perhaps include them by asking for their suggestions if they seem not to be engaged.
- Might want to have women break-out groups at state meetings.
- Work to get female vendors more involved in sub-committees, even if they are not on the Elected Committee. Always strive to get more women involved.
- We have and try to get as many women operators to join the committee. As chairman, I strongly ask for and urge the women operators to be part of the program and not just in the program. I reiterate that it is their program, as much as possible and advocate for them when they have any problems, and work with them to find solutions. Women have many great opinions and points of view which men may not and which are very valuable to the success of our program.
- This is a good start; this survey brings awareness of gender equality to the table and opens the discussion. I suggest surveying the women directly to get their ideas and input, perhaps with the option of remaining anonymous if they prefer.

Discussion

This initial survey found that only one in four licensed vendors, members of Elected Blind Vendor Committees, and trainees are women. This number suggests that women are significantly under-represented, not only in the cohort of current vendors, but among future vendors as well. These results are consistent with prior findings reported by the National Association of Blind Merchants, showing that women make up only 14% (about one in seven) of troop dining contract awardees. When military dining is excluded, the ten largest, most lucrative retail facilities are exclusively operated by men, suggesting that women may be especially under-represented in the most lucrative facilities. It is interesting to note, however, that women make up a higher proportion of SLA directors (38%) compared with vendors and trainees at 25%.

The findings regarding trainees suggest that women's under-representation may begin in the training pipeline. Women may not be interested in vending careers, or they may feel unwelcome in BEP training programs. This pattern is likely self-perpetuating, as the low number of women vendors may reinforce the idea among future vendors that women do not belong in the profession. Consistent with this, both SLA directors and

committee chairs recommend that current female vendors can serve a pivotal role in recruiting and mentoring future female vendors.

This survey targeted SLA directors and committee chairs to obtain top-level data on the representation of women. However, to fully understand the factors underlying women's under-representation, surveying female vendors and trainees will be critical. A future survey will be useful to evaluate the positive and negative experiences that women have in the BEP as well as women's beliefs about pursuing vending careers. It will also be important to survey male vendors in order to identify stereotypes that might contribute to women's under-representation.