

## CUSTODIANS

# Honoring the 'Backbone' Of Federal Government

*38 in Program for Blind, Disabled Are Recognized*

By DELPHINE SCHRANK  
Washington Post Staff Writer

They stitch Army combat uniforms and package first-aid kits. They maintain the grounds of the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island. And some of them take out the trash for White House employees.

Yesterday, 38 custodians employed by a federal program for blind and disabled workers received certificates of appreciation in the Indian Treaty Room of the Eisenhower Executive Office Building, whose bathrooms and hallways, along with those at the New Executive Office Building, they have mopped and polished for nearly a decade.

Almost 48,000 disabled people, including injured Army veterans, are employed nationwide under the auspices of AbilityOne, a federal program that tries to find them jobs providing services to the government.

"We are the backbone of the federal government," said Andrew D. Houghton, chairman of the Committee for Purchase From People Who Are Blind or Severely Disabled, the federal agency that oversees AbilityOne.

The unemployment rate of physically or mentally disabled is about 70 percent nationwide, Houghton said, but the workers in the AbilityOne program help counter the myth

that they are incapable of performing well.

"The employees do a great job. They act as a beacon for many others," said Paul Dennett, an administrator with the Office of Management and Budget.

Among those employees is Brenda Sheaffer, 36, of Oxon Hill.

Before she found work through Melwood, a nonprofit group that is part of AbilityOne, she worked as a cafeteria server and laundered sheets in a nursing home. But her employers found her too slow, she said, and she was let go.

Faced with living with her parents or on government benefits, she joined Melwood's training program. She started as a custodian in the National Zoo before applying for a security clearance to work in federal offices. Now she rises at 5:30 a.m. to vacuum and dust the 10th floor of the New Executive Office Building.

"I have a place to go in the morning," she said in remarks at the ceremony. "I have people who need me. I no longer take benefits. I am a taxpayer instead of a tax user."

Her father helps her handle her wages, she said, because she never understood money or mathematics. But her newfound independence means she can live on her own, pay her bills and care for her cat, Ashley.



BY KATHERINE FREY — THE WASHINGTON POST

**Matthew Ficaretta of Bowie is among the custodians who were honored at the Eisenhower Executive Office Building, which they clean.**

"One day," she said, "I hope to work with cats."

Best of all, she said, she has been able to buy gifts for her family, including nine tickets to "A Christmas Carol" at Ford's Theatre.

At 1 p.m., after a slice of cake and a photo in the ornate fourth floor room, James Hewitt, 61, of Alexandria headed straight for the service elevator and down a narrow,

pipe-lined corridor to his locker deep in the bowels of the building. He tucked his certificate on a shelf, pulled on a pair of orange rubber gloves and disappeared through a side door to retrieve a massive trash bin.

Up to the second floor and then down to the first, he wheeled the cart along his daily route past rooms labeled "Office of Management and Budget," "Presidential Speechwriting" and "White House Counsel," pick-

ing up piles of newspapers, empty boxes and trash bags stuffed with papers outside each office.

Was he pleased to receive a certificate?

"Oh, yeah," said Hewitt, who stutters and has trouble speaking. Cracking a smile as he pushed the cart past the National Security Council office, he said: "This my first time I had one. Oh, yeah. I'll show it to my friends. The ones who helped me get a job."