



# Connecting industries, supporting warfighters

Matthew Sablan | Staff Writer

*Elaine S. Howell, Defense Contract Management Agency Small Business Operations Center Mentor-Protégé Division director, speaks during the signing of the Mentor-Protégé agreement between Northrop Grumman and MVLE. This is the first agreement between a nonprofit AbilityOne program and a mentor corporation. DCMA provides oversight and support to this agreement, which ultimately benefits wounded warriors, people with disabilities, the industrial base and the Department of Defense. (Photo courtesy of Northrop Grumman)*

**T**he Department of Defense looks to reduce time and cost, improve performance from its suppliers, better its collective processes and build a stronger industrial base. One significant way DoD does this is through a 20-year old, lesser-known program, the DoD Pilot Mentor-Protégé Program, designed to help small businesses make inroads in getting to the DoD contracting table with fresh ideas and methods.

The program, established in the 1991 National Defense Authorization Act, provides the framework and gives incentives for large business contractors to mentor small businesses protégés through tailored developmental assistance plans in the form of a Mentor-Protégé Agreement. These agreements enhance the protégés skills and ability to compete in the larger arena as subcontractors, suppliers and, ultimately, DoD prime contractors.

## Checks and Balances

DoD relies on the Defense Contract Management Agency Small Business

Center's Mentor-Protégé Division as a check and balance for the agreements' overarching interests. DCMA's small, dedicated team is an independent voice to verify data, identify issues, analyze context, offer insight, and make correlations and recommendations. DCMA's Annual Reviews fulfill its regulatory mandate; they are delivered to the Office of the Secretary of Defense Office of Small Business Programs and other stakeholders via the Cumulative Annual Report to Congress.

DCMA verifies and analyzes the data to put the resulting dynamics into context. DCMA uses its business insight to qualify data. These reports cover a wide range of statistics, such as prime and subcontract awards as well as the agreement's impact on the protégé's revenue and employment. DCMA provides a critical, independent analysis for all stakeholders.

## Mentors and Protégés

Mentors are generally major DoD contractors with at least one active subcontracting plan. The mentor conducts a thorough needs assessment, identifying

realistic pacing for and assessing what developmental assistance it can provide to enhance the protégé's capabilities.

Protégés are primarily "small disadvantaged businesses," as defined in Federal and Defense Acquisition Regulation Supplement and in concert with The Small Business Act. The program includes qualifying groups recognized and stipulated by statutes into its framework, including organizations employing the severely disabled; woman-owned; historically underutilized business zones; and veteran-owned and service-disabled veteran-owned businesses.

"The program allows large businesses to 'guide' small businesses and help them understand how to do business with DoD," said Mark Olson, DCMA Small Business director. "We have been able to document how mentor-protégé agreements have created jobs in small businesses. These agreements are a great thing, helping small businesses flourish."

An agreement outlines what services the mentor will provide, the protégé's obligations, and DoD's collective oversight



*From left: Mary Seabolt, Defense Contract Management Agency Small Business Office deputy director; Cynthia Abarca, DCMA Mentor-Protégé program manager; Elaine S. Howell, DCMA Small Business Operations Center Mentor-Protégé Division director; Rosalyn Wiggins, DCMA Mentor-Protégé program manager; Enid Allen, a retired DCMA Mentor-Protégé program manager; and David Jorza, a retired DCMA Mentor-Protégé program manager. The Mentor-Protégé division serves as a key enabler of business partnerships between large and small corporations. The division is also crucial to providing Congress and the Department of Defense with vital data on the health of the program. (Photo courtesy of the DCMA Small Business Office)*

roles. The mentor’s benefits are either direct reimbursement of costs incurred or credit-based, meaning costs-incurred translate into credits with the benefit of regulatory multipliers allowed for each cost-category that can be applied to each protégé’s qualifying category, crediting a significant amount to the mentor’s total small business category, helping it meet its subcontracting plan goals from credit-based Mentor-Protégé Agreements instead of “directly subcontracted” dollars.

**The DCMA Mentor-Protégé Team**

“Our team fills a unique, niche skill. We provide reviews, comments and recommendations in a cohesive pattern, with cumulative recommendations and opinions becoming key in assessing the viability of a proposed agreement,” Elaine S. Howell, DCMA Small Business Operations Center Mentor-Protégé Division director, said.

Howell instituted strategies and stronger record-keeping techniques and templates to economize operations and strengthen annual reviews and Congressional reporting. This increased consistency in documentation methods and housing and retrieving data. “The team provided input, improving the original documents. We developed stronger methods to produce insights that serve the team well

and help the larger mandate to provide the independent voice, check, balance and accountability we bring to these agreements,” Howell said.

“We built a pathway one brick at a time. Conveying the fundamental reporting requirements to the Mentor-Protégé participants remains part of a learning process. Core documentation is key to producing meaningful and stronger Annual Reviews that are an integrated analysis of data, observed facts and documented events,” Howell said.

**Mentor-Protégé Agreements Provide Knowledge Transfer to Small Businesses**

The accurate and detailed reports show a stronger industrial base and new companies’ growing role in the DoD marketplace, “Each agreement can be win-win for both firms and the government,” Olson said.

DoD agreements focus both on high-tech areas with large potential for innovation and should be of value to DoD. Successful agreements build the industrial base and allow large businesses to find and develop multiple sources. “It is good to have competition, and it is good to have more than one source to meet high demands or provide continuity in case the first source fails,” Olson said.

“Historically, we have worked to develop suppliers to help manufacture key components for our systems,” said Robin Tate, FLIR Systems Director of Materials and Small Business Liaison Officer. Mentor corporations, like FLIR, find suitable protégés, such as Custom Interface, a custom cable and wiring developer who produces interfaces and electromechanical builds.

Jane Beatty, Custom Interface president, explained the impact of FLIR Systems’ training and support. “We’ve made significant improvements in processes,” Beatty said. “We have become (International Traffic in Arms Regulations) compliant and taken a deep dive into Lean Six Sigma to streamline our processes.”

Through the agreement, Custom Interface achieved IPC-610 and IPC-620 training for Electronic Assemblies, electrostatic discharge certifications; Custom Interface is also AS9100 quality compliant and pursuing certification in that field. Custom Interface is now capable of training others in IPC-610 certification, further promoting expertise through the industrial base.

Lockheed Martin Corporation is a long-time mentor. “Success depends on open and honest communication and using DCMA as an adviser,” said Sharon Dougherty, then Lockheed

Martin Small Business Mentor-Protégé Program manager.

Lockheed Martin's protégé — Fort Walton Machining Inc. — received risk management and proposal writing training. "The biggest benefit for us was in the development of our metal-finishing division," Greg Britton, CEO Fort Walton Machining Inc., said. "This increased our ability to deliver products in a narrow, critical capability. We can now reduce lead time by weeks and reduce costs to the government."

Mentoring helps small businesses grow in the industrial base. DoD doesn't take the business-build from a ground-up build, as an SBA program may. Instead, it enhances a viable company's skills, providing even stronger sources to better qualify and compete for mission-critical supplies. "The end result is more than just a return-on-investment," Beatty said. "Long-term, I firmly believe that after this agreement ends, we will have built a strong foundation."

"No one truly understands the personal attention the mentors give protégés and how happy they are to help. They do not get enough credit for what they do," Britton said.

"To be successful, we need strong, flexible suppliers," Tate said. "Mentoring suppliers allows us to develop suppliers

that can grow their business."

**Agreements Make a Difference**

One agreement — between MVLE Inc., an AbilityOne organization, and Northrop Grumman — created opportunities for people with significant disabilities and wounded warriors. The program is helping MVLE transition to supporting the government, with Northrop Grumman providing institutional knowledge of proposal writing and other tasks, such as LSS training, business development and International Organization for Standardization certification training.

"Over the years, I have been able to share in and experience MVLE's wonderful success story and the professional growth of my son and the hundreds of others like him who work within the MVLE community," said Larry Peters, Northrop Grumman program manager. "Without MVLE — more importantly, the corporate partnerships that make this possible — (my son) would not be living the quality of life he now enjoys. The partnership provides him a sense of contribution to the family, his community and a reason to get out of bed every day."

In 2010, this agreement became the first non-profit AbilityOne program with a recognized mentor-protégé agreement. "Having worked with MVLE for six years,

Northrop Grumman saw the value and importance in creating opportunities for people with significant disabilities," Susan Coté, Vice President Corporate Contracts, Pricing and Supply Chain, Northrop Grumman, said. "This is a long-term journey for the employees."

"The inclusion of small business partners is aligned with Northrop Grumman Corp.'s business objectives and the importance of diversity and the advantages it provides in our supply chain," said Wes Bush, chairman, CEO and president of Northrop Grumman.

"Unemployment for persons with severe disabilities is around 75 percent. Providing these employment opportunities for AbilityOne is a great benefit for all involved," said Tizoc Loza, Northrop Grumman Corporate Mentor-Protégé program manager.

"DCMA has truly been a partner. They have provided advice every step of the way," Coté said. "DCMA went the extra mile. Without their leadership, this program wouldn't be where it is today."

"This program raises the bar of skills we need to newer, yet-to-be-discovered levels for DoD," Howell said. "The DCMA Mentor-Protégé Division looks forward to serving both OSD OSBP and DoD's overarching interests as entrusted to us." 



From left: Elaine S. Howell, Defense Contract Management Agency Small Business Operations Center Mentor-Protégé Division director; Joe Apa, MVLE Board of Directors chairman; Susan Cote, Northrop Grumman, Corporate Contracts, Pricing and Supply Chain vice president; Rep. Gerry Connolly, Virginia Congressman; April Pinch-Keeler, MVLE president; and Tizoc Loza, Northrop Grumman Corporate Mentor-Protégé program manager. The Mentor-Protégé agreement with MVLE is an example of how the partnerships support the goals of the Department of Defense, DCMA, and the mentor and protégé corporations. (Photo courtesy of the DCMA Small Business Office)