



Blind Industries and Services of Maryland

**Governor's Annual Report
FY 2024
(7/1/23-6/30/24)**

Report Required by:
Human Services Article § 7-703(h)(6)
MSAR # 6071

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Joint Message from Chair of the Board, Tyrone D. Bullock, Sr., and President, Dr. Michael Gosse

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Blind Industries and Services of Maryland ("BISM") is honored to present its Annual Report for the Fiscal Year beginning on July 1, 2023 and ending on June 30, 2024. This Report includes information related to BISM's manufacturing operations, facilities, employment, human resources, development and independence training and rehabilitation programs. This report is submitted pursuant to Human Services Article 7-703 (h)(6) (MSAR #6071) and is prepared in accordance with Section 2-1246 of the State Government Article.

BISM's Fiscal Year 2024 Annual Report is presented to The Honorable Governor Wes Moore, the General Assembly, and Senator Clarence K. Lam and Delegate Jared Solomon, Co-Chairs of the Joint Audit Committee.

Over the course of FY24, the Board of Trustees and BISM's senior leadership continued to focus on and address the business of BISM, the vocational and training needs of our Associates, the provision of training services and programming and the analysis of BISM's opportunities and needs.

BISM's FY24 financial results reflect the second consecutive year of progress and stability for the organization. During FY24, BISM's leadership continued to identify and address certain areas of its businesses, manufacturing and industry which were either financially unsuccessful, operationally inefficient or which did not properly align with BISM's Mission and Vision. FY24 reflected changes which were implemented and the overall benefits derived as a result. BISM's sale of its Raleigh facility in FY24 (and the leaseback of a smaller footprint and modified space) will result in decreased overhead and increased efficiencies for that manufacturing plant.

BISM also recently completed a three (3) year Strategic Plan which, among other things, addresses BISM's plans to: (1) expand the geographic presence of its Independence Training and Rehabilitation (ITR) programming and outreach to unserved blind communities; (2) search for new, diverse and/or collateral business opportunities; and (3) develop and implement a system to measure and report partner, customer, and Associate satisfaction. BISM has also focused on installing a new, blind accessible, accounting and manufacturing software solution throughout the organization which will allow for the creation of additional product sales and customer service opportunities. In FY25, BISM also intends to focus on expanding and making more efficient its e-commerce opportunities throughout the United States Federal procurement system and identifying new manufacturing and product lines which will be both Mission worthy and financially sound.

Of course, BISM continues to deal with general economic issues such as inflation, shortages of necessary materials, challenges in hiring and retaining its employment force, a continuing trend of lower customer demand in certain areas, funding issues within the Federal government and Budget shortfalls within the State government.

BISM's FY25 budgeted sales are \$88 million with a resulting projected business income of \$5.5 million.

BISM is projecting Income before Other Revenue and Expenses of \$249,000 and EBITDA of \$1.6 million.

BISM has also worked to expand its participation in the Maryland Preferred Provider program and has continued to work with the Maryland Department of General Services, the Preferred Provider Pricing and Selection Committee, and various procurement officers. BISM, in conjunction with its Preferred Provider partner Maryland Works, has conducted outreach programs to inform and educate the procurement officers of State and State related entities of the applicable laws and requirements of the preferred provider program. Special appreciation to Secretary of the Department of General Services, Atif Chaudhry, and his staff for their time and energy in working with BISM on these issues. While there is still work to do, BISM is optimistic and looking forward to making more progress.

Separate and apart from BISM's vocational mission of providing vocational opportunities and training, BISM's ITR Department continues to provide excellent training and programming for blind and low vision individuals in the State. BISM is fully aware that there are unmet needs within the blind community in Maryland and is working to find ways to expand outreach and provide services and programming to a greater number of these individuals. These programs, as noted in this Report, BISM is in need of State assistance to better serve Maryland's blind residents and ensure that no one in our constituency is left behind.

On behalf of BISM's Board of Trustees, Leadership Staff, and our Associates, we extend our genuine appreciation to Governor Moore and the Maryland General Assembly for your continued support.

Sincerely,



Tyrone D. Bullock, Sr.
Chairman, Board of Trustees



Michael Gosse, Ph.D.
President

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Introduction: Blind Industries and Services of Maryland

Blind Industries and Services of Maryland (BISM) was established in 1908 by the Maryland General Assembly and has evolved into a multifaceted company that offers diverse employment opportunities, vocational training and comprehensive rehabilitation programs and services for blind and low vision Marylanders of all ages.

BISM is the largest employer of blind individuals in the State of Maryland and, as of June 30, 2024, employs 484 Associates. BISM maintains and operates manufacturing facilities in Baltimore, Salisbury (2) and Raleigh, North Carolina. BISM also operates eight (8) AbilityOne Base Supply Centers on federal and/or military installations.

BISM manufactures various products at competitive prices for sale to its State of Maryland customers including office paper pads; copy paper; paper towels; toilet tissue; janitorial/sanitation supplies, such as soaps and disinfecting chemicals; and repackaging and assembly services (“kitting”). A significant portion of BISM’s business operation is BISM’s production of cut and sewn textile products for the federal government, including uniforms and other garments for many branches of the United States military.

BISM offers its workforce competitive wages, health and life insurance benefits, and retirement benefits. We are constantly striving to improve our training and accessibility to allow for the professional, vocational, and personal growth of all of our Associates – blind and sighted. Our organization is built on the belief that all of our Associates play an integral part in our overall success. BISM has an uncompromising belief in the capabilities of people who are blind.

BISM’s Independence Training and Rehabilitation (“ITR”) Department provides comprehensive independence and skills training for adults, seniors, and youth. Our staff, most of whom are blind, teach Braille, Computer Technology, Independent Living, Orientation and Mobility, Job Readiness, and Woodshop in a classroom setting, and offers adjustment to blindness seminars, confidence-building group activities, home teaching, and workshops. Successful students leave BISM with the skills to enter the workforce and pursue a career, attend college, manage an active family, and contribute to the community. BISM offers these high-quality training programs and services free of charge to blind and low vision Maryland residents. BISM works closely with Maryland state agencies, specifically the Department of Rehabilitative Services, and elected representatives to ensure that our ITR Department continues to effectively provide crucial services to the blind and low vision community.

The ITR Department is funded by a combination of: (a) a State Grant (through the Department of Education); (b) fee for service work conducted by our Associates; and (c) funds generated by BISM’s manufacturing and sales operations. Unfortunately, as the needs of our blind and low vision continue to increase and BISM’s margins from manufacturing continue to shrink, the State has not approved any significant additional funding for this crucial programming. While BISM desires to expand the reach of these services and programming, it will need additional State assistance to properly serve the needs of the blind and low vision community.

Detailed Status of BISM – Fiscal Year 2024

(July 1, 2023 – June 30, 2024)

Independence Training and Rehabilitation

The mission of BISM's Independence Training and Rehabilitation Department is to provide blind and low vision people of all ages with life skills training that will lead to self-reliance and independence. BISM's training facilities are among the best in the nation and the only provider of such services in the State. The programs are successful because our dedicated team of instructors – most of whom are blind - serve as teachers, mentors, role models, and friends to the students.

In FY24, BISM's Independence Training and Rehabilitation (“ITR”) department was active in the blind community providing services across the State of Maryland. In addition to BISM's exceptional Adult and Senior programs, this past fiscal year saw BISM expand our Youth programming and start a new Internship program focused on Job training and Career exploration.

As a byproduct of the COVID-19 pandemic, where appropriate, BISM continued to utilize virtual instruction. This tool allows BISM to effectively reach Marylanders who may have health concerns, transportation issues, or other responsibilities.

BISM staff is fully prepared to offer resources and instruction to members of Maryland's blind community and those who provide services in the blindness field. This past year BISM found success at our training areas, in consumer homes, workplaces, community events, and virtually.

BISM also continued our revolutionary training program, WRAP (Work Readiness Assessment Program). This program worked one-on-one with eight (8) blind Maryland consumers who have been in the job market for an extended period. We work with these consumers for 80 hours, assessing their skillsets, conducting interviews, working on applications, resumes, and job search methods. At the conclusion of the 80 hours, BISM prepares a report with recommendations for areas of improvement to DORS. We also continue to follow up with consumers on a weekly then monthly basis to monitor their progress. This program directly led to two (2) blind Marylanders finding employment.

Of the thirty-two (32) Marylanders who were part of the BISM ITR department during FY24, twenty-five (25) are blind (including five (5) Supervisor positions). The capabilities of BISM staff, coupled with investment from both the State of Maryland and BISM led directly to increased instruction hours and students completing BISM training programs during FY24.

The total time of instruction provided in FY24 was 61,065 hours and was focused on 1,320 individuals.

Instruction and training hours were broken down and provided to adults (34,294 hours), seniors (14,055 hours), youth (6,960 hours), and customized programming (5,756 hours).

The above instruction hours also include support groups, home visits, job development, job coaching, instruction to blind Marylanders incarcerated in Maryland State Prisons, and community workshops.

Throughout FY24, there were 205 referrals to all BISM blindness skills training programs and 96 people fully completed BISM training programs.

The youth division served 250 Elementary, Middle, and High school students and staff through a variety of summer programs, school year programming, and multiple on-site workshops.

BISM's ITR Department also designed and implemented a new residential internship program. Under the mentorship of Blind professionals, BISM will custom design a three-month program to assist blind professionals gain experience in a field(s) of their interest. This experience will come through a 40-hour work week and job responsibilities. Each year BISM will take on 4 -8 interns and assign them a primary department and secondary department to gain valuable workplace experience. FY24 saw the first two interns under this program employed in Human Resources and in BISM's Senior ITR program as their primary position with experience also gained in working with BISM Youth programs.

All the above efforts resulted in seventeen (17) blind Marylanders finding employment.

BISM's rehabilitation training programs and services are offered at no cost to adults and seniors who are Maryland residents. A percentage of the adult CORE and senior services programs are funded by a State Grant authorized by the Governor and overseen by Department of Rehabilitative Services (DORS). BISM funds the balance of ITR's programming costs from BISM's operating funds.

A. Comprehensive Orientation, Rehabilitation, and Empowerment (CORE) Adult Program.

The CORE program teaches blind and low vision adults the skills of blindness so they can become employed, pursue post-secondary education, and regain control of their lives. Confidence building is an essential element of the program and is reinforced with each accomplishment. CORE students are taught by blind instructors and learn non-visual methods, both inside and outside of a classroom setting. The curriculum includes braille, long white cane travel, independent living, assistive computer technology, job readiness, woodshop, physical fitness, adjustment to blindness seminars, and off-site training. The CORE program generally requires eight to eleven months to complete.

CORE is a residential program, and we consider residential living an essential component, designed to integrate skills developed throughout training. Students live in an apartment building in downtown Baltimore City. They have easy access to every mode of public transportation offered in Baltimore and are housed two blocks from the Camden Yards/Inner Harbor area. This enhances the student's ability to master public transportation, build their confidence, and further develop their travel skills during practical applications. With two certified Orientation and Mobility instructors, the BISM CORE program is now a premier destination for those seeking cane travel instruction. Another benefit to apartment living is that the students are responsible for shopping,

meal preparation, cleaning, and money management. All are essential skills of independence and career/personal development.

Students also organize and participate in community outreach, BISM fundraisers, and group activities. This past year, CORE students participated in trips to numerous restaurants, events, and outings in downtown Baltimore and its surrounding area to apply skills acquired at BISM in real world settings.

In FY24, seven (7) students successfully graduated or completed the CORE program. Additionally, the CORE assisted seventeen (17) program alumni find new employment.

B. Senior Services.

BISM Senior Services programs are devoted to helping Maryland seniors who are coping with vision loss. BISM provides training, services, and resources at BISM training centers in Baltimore, Hagerstown, Salisbury, and throughout the State of Maryland in students' homes. Programs for low vision and blind senior citizens are provided at no charge, which is a critically important factor for those seniors living on low or fixed incomes. The goal of all BISM Senior Services programs is to empower blind and low vision senior citizens with the skills and confidence necessary to live independently. Senior program participants become better equipped to manage their daily needs, remain in their own homes, return to work or volunteering, resume social activities, and enjoy life.

BISM Senior Programs include:

1. Seniors Achieving Independent Living (SAIL) - weekly training classes occurring in Cumberland, Hagerstown, Baltimore, and Salisbury. The SAIL curriculum includes classes in braille, cane travel, independent home living (with heavy emphasis on safe, nutritious cooking), computer and assistive technology, adjustment to vision loss, gardening, and leisure activities, plus peer support, confidence-building outings and community integration. Students work towards personal goals for independence with training tailored to each person's real-life situation.

2. Senior Support Groups – occurring monthly across the State of Maryland in Hagerstown, Baltimore, Easton, and Salisbury. Our support groups were active in FY24 organizing social events and bringing together blind seniors for activities, mentorship, and camaraderie. Throughout the year, seniors experienced all that Maryland has to offer by visiting local shopping venues, historical sites, and performing arts programs. Seniors made crafts and shared talents while engaging in thought-provoking discussions. The goal of helping seniors adjust to vision loss and develop a positive outlook while maintaining independence is always in the forefront.

3. Home Instruction - Statewide: Life skills instruction for blind seniors in the comfort of their own home. Staff members share resources, mark appliances, provide materials, and help families. Our home instruction services helped BISM provide blindness skills training to every county in the State of Maryland.

In FY24, BISM provided 14,055 hours of training to seniors throughout the State of Maryland, and 268 blind and low vision senior citizens received blindness skills training. We provided 112

facility tours for those interested in attending BISM training plus many additional tours for families, supporters, counselors, professionals, and large groups. These tours are the cornerstone of our training as they show in real-time the skills and work required to become an independent blind senior citizen in Maryland.

Outreach, events, and presentations by BISM staff continue to accent the services BISM can provide. In FY24, senior staff reached out with information to over 800 providers and community associations. This includes senior centers, assistive living and retirement communities, civic organizations, schools, helping agencies, community business groups, neighborhoods, and low vision support groups. This network of providers serves countless Marylanders, increasing the knowledge BISM services and capabilities statewide.

C. Youth Services.

This past summer, BISM offered the newly created GOLDSTAR program. This 4-week, fully residential program aids eighteen (18) blind and low vision students and staff with a 4-week Work-Based Learning Experience. BISM will develop a customized employment and training plan that builds on students' success in the BISM STAR (Students Training in Advocacy and Responsibility) program, student mentoring program(s), and individual educational experiences. At the completion of this program, students will walk away with 30 – 90 hours of employment experience, a comprehensive and current professional resume, two recorded job interviews, three professional references, and customized blindness skills training.

BISM also partnered with the Maryland Chapter of the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) to run the Bell Academy Eastern Shore. A custom designed one (1) week braille academy for elementary and middle school aged students on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. This program coupled with our newly created BISM Overnight Challenge Week provided services to seventeen (17) youth on the Eastern shore of Maryland. In addition to utilizing BISM's Salisbury Training center, BISM partnered with Camp Pecometh and Talisman Therapeutic Riding of the Eastern Shore.

BISM continues to offer a full academic year of workshops under the Gaining Leadership, Independence, Direction and Experience (GLIDE) program, geared to assist blind and low vision high school students with life and job skills as they grow into young adults. The monthly program had 28 participants and took place at BISM Baltimore from September 2023 to May 2024. The GLIDE program featured workshops on independent living skills, work readiness, advocacy, career exploration, communication, and more.

State Sales - Preferred Provider Program

BISM's Sales and Marketing team dedicates itself to offering high quality products at competitive prices and top-notch customer service to State of Maryland agencies, State-supported and/or controlled entities, and commercial entities. When State of Maryland customers purchase from BISM, they are helping to provide employment opportunities for blind and low vision Marylanders. BISM's product offerings include paper pads, 30% and 50% recycled content copy paper, hand soaps, sanitizers, a full line of janitorial chemicals, floor

care products, trash can liners, toilet paper and tissue, paper towels, warewashing chemicals, and personal care products.

FY24 marked a year where BISM's sales to our State of Maryland customers improved significantly over FY23. BISM's focus for FY24 was to expand and educate more of our customers on the purpose of our mission, improve quality and service to our customers, and ensure lateral and upward mobility for our associates. This, in turn, helped BISM improve sales year-on-year while providing more meaningful vocational training and employment opportunities for blind/low vision individuals.

BISM is a participant in the Preferred Provider program which, under State law, requires the State and State aided or controlled entities to purchase products which are provided by BISM. Specifically, State Finance and Procurement Article, Section 14-101, et seq. provides that, with regard to a State Agency, a "State Aided" or a "State Controlled" entity, BISM is a "Preferred Provider" for all products and services it provides.

In FY24, BISM, in partnership with Maryland preferred provider, Maryland Works, placed an emphasis on meeting with State officials to further educate on our partnership with the State of Maryland. In particular, BISM participated in several meetings with the Secretary's office within the Maryland Department of General Services as well as many important Maryland State Agency stakeholders. BISM once again participated in the 2024 State Procurement Advisory Group (SPAG) meeting where we used the opportunity to introduce our new and improved 50% copy paper. Additionally, BISM attended several events throughout the year that provided opportunities to connect with State officials. Our continued presence and involvement with State Officials and Government have been an important component in connecting BISM and the State Preferred Provider program to the State of Maryland Procurement process.

With the continued support from State Government and the State Procurement team, BISM aims to strengthen our ability to fund our core mission of empowering blind/visually impaired individuals. Our goal in working very closely with State Government, The Department of General Services and the preferred provider partners is to: (1) educate on the purpose of State procurement preference and the overall social bargain made between the State and BISM; and (2) educate new procurement officers through training to ensure compliance of the statute.

Federal Contracts – AbilityOne Program

BISM's manufacturing Associates consistently exhibit the dedication and craftsmanship that helps us meet the needs of an ever-changing marketplace, without sacrificing the quality of our cut and sewn products. We cut and sew uniforms for all branches of the U.S. military.

FY24 sales remained on par with FY23 as current sewn uniform programs have continued with slight growth in demand and the Air Force/Space Force program transitioned from start-up to production levels. All four manufacturing facilities were able to meet DLA Troop Support uniform demands as well as Federal Prison Industries orders for cut products.

All sites continued to develop innovative strategies to recruit, train and retain a consistent labor

workforce in our factories. The challenges remain in the labor market, but we have certainly improved over FY23, finding limited success at all levels of the organization.

In general, the supply chain challenges post-Covid have markedly improved. BISM has had success increasing the breadth of our supplier base and there is more competition in the marketplace for fabric and components. Product lead times, quality and responsiveness show a positive trend as our partners shake off the challenges of the recent years.

Demand for the Army Physical Fitness Uniform Jacket (APFU), Extended Cold Weather Clothing System Jacket (ECWCS) for the federal government increased in FY24. Demand for Army Combat Coat (ACU) held steady in FY24, projected to increase mid-FY25. The Airforce/Space Force Physical Training Gear (PTG) began its pre-production ramp up in FY2024, becoming the second largest production volume program in the BISM portfolio.

Beginning in January, 2024, BISM consolidated its cut/sew operation into roughly 50% of its original space through a lease. The move was made to increase floor space utilization, improve productivity and overhead absorption.

AbilityOne Base Supply Centers

BISM owns and operates eight (8) AbilityOne Base Supply Centers (BSC) on federal military installations in Maryland, Delaware, District of Columbia, and Kentucky. The AbilityOne program is a Federal program intended to support and empower blind and low vision individuals by creating vocational opportunities. The BSC retail model is a true one-stop shopping solution for military bases and other government facilities by offering on site and ecommerce office supplies and furniture, cleaning products, tools, and military uniforms.

More than one-third (1/3) of all BSC retail Associates are blind or low vision. These Associates play a pivotal role in all aspects of the operations. The BSC program is innovative in providing blind accessible technology tools for our blind and low vision Associates and, thus, allowing them to operate to their full capacity. These tools include a computer magnification program known as ZoomText, CCTVs, wireless handheld talking scanners, and “talking” Point of Sale registers.

Overall, sales for our BSC’s in FY24 exceeded our Budget expectations. During FY24, we combined the BSC shopping experience with our eCommerce portal, ShopBISM.com. We continue to note the trend among our federal customers who prefer working virtually rather than on base and in office. Our emphasis and growing support of online options is necessary for BISM to stay current with the needs/wants of our customers. In FY25, we plan to convert our current eCommerce and Point of Sale systems into a single, blind accessible, platform to better enhance the shopping experience for our customers and the opportunities for Associates.

Human Resources

BISM's Human Resources Department is committed to the continued employment and growth of blind and visually impaired Associates in our administrative, manufacturing and retail facilities.

In FY 2024, BISM continued to meet employment hiring and retention challenges associated with market-wide changes in employee availability - both for blind and sighted Associates. BISM has found it increasingly difficult to find and retain employees at all job and pay levels and these difficulties have adversely impacted BISM's ability to efficiently meet its mission goals.

BISM continues to increase its focus on internal identification of quality employees and dedicating training and skills development to them to ensure the improvement of our workforce and to encourage upward vocational opportunities. As a result, BISM saw a significant increase in the number of internal promotions of blind/low vision employees across the spectrum - from entry-level manufacturing positions to multiple roles including, but not limited to, production, leadership, and administrative support roles.

BISM remains dedicated to upward mobility, mentoring, and recruitment of blind individuals into leadership roles. We are actively looking within our organization as well as nationwide to identify blind people who hold the potential skillsets to lead BISM into the future. Our focus is to remain safe, provide a safe workspace, and provide ongoing support to our Associates who are braving the world to come into work and produce products for our customers.

Development

With the understanding that BISM's Independence Training and Rehabilitation ("ITR") Department is underfunded and the its businesses would not be able to sustain the costs of ITR on a long range basis, BISM's Development Department is responsible for pursuing alternative funding solutions to maintain the critical programming and services offered to our blind and visually impaired clientele. self-reliance and independence.

Beginning in 2022, BISM recommitted its efforts to establish and grow a successful development and fundraising department to offset the expenses associated with BISM's Independence Training and Rehabilitation ("ITR") Department.

While the ITR Department receives a grant from the Maryland State Department of Education each year, this grant is focused on partially supporting ITR's CORE programming and has remained relatively flat despite the rising costs of providing this programming. As previously outlined in the ITR section of this Annual Report, BISM firmly believes it should be the responsibility of the State to fully fund the various free independence training programs and services BISM provides to Maryland residents. In the absence of such funding, however, BISM has determined to maintain the ITR budget and subsidize it through income from other BISM business activities. We recognize that this approach is not sustainable in the long term.

In the absence of State funding, BISM continues to pursue responsible funding solutions to maintain the critical programming and services offered to our blind and visually impaired clientele. In fact, BISM is determined to grow the ITR Department and geographically expand its ability to provide services. Under the leadership of the BISM's Director of Development, BISM has expanded its fundraising efforts through annual donor campaigns, grant applications, partnerships with community organizations, and third-party support. Additionally, BISM hosted several events, including a successful golf tournament fundraiser, and introduced a new Spring event this year to increase public exposure and engagement with the general community.

The increased outreach efforts are yielding positive results, with more donations and grants coming in. Each year, our goal is to raise more funds to ensure the long-term sustainability and full funding of the ITR department. We recognize the challenges of fundraising for an organization that blends business-based vocational training with nonprofit programming. However, the uniqueness of BISM's ITR services—which are not offered anywhere else in Maryland—continues to inspire support from donors, community partners, and Grantmakers.

We remain committed to building upon these successes, growing our development program, and meeting our long-term goals to fully fund the ITR department through diverse, sustainable fundraising strategies.

Summary

Blind Industries and Services of Maryland continues to be the largest employer of blind and low vision adults in the State of Maryland. Our internationally recognized Independence Training and Rehabilitation programs and services develop the life skills that help blind people of all ages be more independent and successful in all elements of their lives.

We appreciate the support from the Governor's Office, the Maryland Legislature, and State agencies, and we look forward to creating more opportunities for blind Marylanders in the future.