

Background

On February 1, 2001, within two weeks of taking office, President Bush announced his New Freedom Initiative and laid out a bold plan to tear down the stubborn barriers to equality that confront many of the 54 million Americans with disabilities. He did so with the knowledge that:

- Students with disabilities graduate at far lower rates than other students. Early access to support services and an accessible and appropriate education can give America's more than 6 million students with disabilities an equal chance to succeed and a path to greater independence.
- Employment remains one of the greatest barriers for people with disabilities. Of the 7.5 million people with disabilities on the Social Security rolls, fewer than 1 percent ever leave those rolls to return to work. People with disabilities deserve the chance to engage in meaningful work and to contribute to America's economy.
- Inaccessible transportation continues to inhibit the ability of people with disabilities to take advantage of job training, employment, and recreational opportunities. The Community Transportation Association of America (CTAA) reports that more than 100 million low-income, older Americans and people with disabilities are at risk of being unable to provide or afford their own transportation. They are also more likely to be dependent upon others for their mobility. CTAA also notes that almost 40 percent of rural counties throughout the U.S. have no public transportation.
- Safe, stable, and accessible housing is necessary before people with disabilities can enjoy neighborhood activities or explore job options. However, according to a 2001 report issued by the Technical Assistance Collaborative and the Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities Task Force, over 3 million non-elderly people with disabilities who receive Supplemental Security Income cannot afford decent housing in the U.S. without government housing assistance.
- Under *Olmstead v. L.C.*, 527 U.S. 581 (1999), the Supreme Court required states to place qualified individuals with mental disabilities in community settings, rather than in institutions, whenever treatment professionals determine that such placement is appropriate, the affected persons do not oppose such placement, and the state can reasonably accommodate the placement, taking into account the resources available to the state and the needs of others with disabilities. However, far too many people with disabilities who would exercise the choice to live in the community are forced to remain in institutions because of a lack of community-based services available in their states and hometowns.

The New Freedom Initiative is a commitment to address these barriers and others through programs and proposals that increase development of and access to assistive and universally designed technologies, expand educational opportunities, further integrate Americans with disabilities into the workforce, and help remove barriers to full participation in community life.

In the past 15 months, the Administration has taken many steps toward fulfillment of New Freedom Initiative goals. The President secured funding for many of the New Freedom Initiative's important programs in the FY 2002 budget process.

Among the highlights is the President's Executive Order 13217, *Community-based Alternatives for Individuals with Disabilities*, directing his agencies to swiftly implement the Supreme Court's *Olmstead* decision. The Executive Order charged six agencies - the Departments of Justice, Health and Human Services, Education, Labor, and Housing and Urban Development, and the Social Security Administration - with evaluating their agency policies and programs to determine whether any should be revised to improve the availability of community-based services for qualified individuals with disabilities.

In December 2001, these agencies, joined by the Departments of Transportation and Veterans Affairs and the Office of Personnel Management, presented a preliminary report, "Delivering on the Promise." The agencies released the complete reports in March 2002, outlining over 400 solutions in areas such as housing, education, personal attendant services, employment, health care structure and financing, caregiver support, and technology to make community living possible.

Following the February 2001 New Freedom Initiative announcement, numerous Cabinet members and agency heads embraced the New Freedom Initiative mission, introducing additional activities that helped to advance the objectives of the Initiative. For example, Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson announced a series of grants to promote community living. Department of Labor Secretary Elaine Chao established a Youth Advisory Committee to improve employment for youth with disabilities. Department of Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta and Project Action hosted a dialogue with transit industry executives and disability leaders to increase accessible transportation. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission Chair Cari Dominguez created a series of workshops to assist small businesses in recruiting and hiring people with disabilities. When the President voiced his strong support of Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which requires that electronic and information technology purchased by the government be usable by people with disabilities, many agencies quickly formalized plans to institute the standards and expedite implementation.

More work remains to be done. Breaking down persistent barriers in employment, transportation, housing, and community access requires sustained, aggressive, coordinated measures – nothing short of, in the President's words, a "revolution of independence." With the commitment and resources of the Cabinet, and through new agency and private sector partnerships, the President will continue the campaign to advance the full and equal participation of people with disabilities.

The President proposed increases in the FY 2002 budget totaling \$1.38 billion to fund New Freedom Initiative programs. Congress often supported the President's priorities by funding his initiatives. For FY 2003, the President has proposed increases of \$1.39 billion for New Freedom Initiative funding. The Administration will continue to work with Congress to see that the New Freedom Initiative commitments are implemented and that its proposals are realized.