

*“It is not only important to give people with disabilities training and access to assistive technology, but also the ability to become more active citizens in their communities.”*

– U.S. SECRETARY OF LABOR ELAINE L. CHAO

Source: U.S. Department of Labor

# New Freedom and No Limits for Americans with Disabilities

Far too many Americans with disabilities who are willing and ready to work are unemployed. To address this problem, President Bush launched the New Freedom Initiative to help Americans with disabilities buy homes and computers, receive special needs education, choose their own support services, and maintain health benefits when they return to work.

The bottom line is to help disabled Americans enter the workforce and enjoy better access to the institutions of daily life that the rest of us take for granted.

A good idea needs a good organization to make it happen. In late 2000, Congress approved creation of the Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) at the Department of Labor. This new agency is bringing a heightened and long-term focus to the need for greater employment of people with disabilities through the development of policy, technical assistance and best practices, as well as outreach, education, constituent services and promoting the ODEP mission among employers. President Bush's 2002 request substantially increases funds for the office, and the congressionally-approved resources will enable ODEP to make the goals of the New Freedom Initiative a reality.

The track record so far is impressive. In the past year, ODEP inaugurated grants for One-Stop Career Centers and Workforce Investment Act youth programs. The programs will now be more accessible to people with disabilities, use assistive technology, provide appropriate staff training, and implement best practices which give people with disabilities more of the services they need to join the economic mainstream.



Source: White House photo by Eric Draper

ODEP also supports a number of major long-standing projects that serve the disability and employer communities:

- **The Business Leadership Network** — In partnership with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, this national program is led by employers in concert with state governor's committees and/or other community agencies. It is designed to encourage companies to hire qualified job candidates with disabilities. It offers employers access to an often overlooked domestic pool of applicants with disabilities. It provides information on pertinent disability employment issues, networks

of companies, an opportunity to provide training and work experience for job seekers, and recognition for best disability employment practices.

- **The Job Accommodation Network (JAN)** — This is a toll-free information and referral service for job accommodations for people with disabilities. It also offers resources for technical assistance, funding, and education for employment of people with disabilities. JAN also analyzes trends and statistical data related to the technical assistance it provides. JAN can be reached by phone at 1-800-526-7234 or 1-800-ADA-WORK (1-800-232-9675) or online at [www.jan.wvu.edu/english/homeus.htm](http://www.jan.wvu.edu/english/homeus.htm);

- **The Employer Assistance Referral Network (EARN)** — EARN is a national toll-free telephone and electronic information referral service. It became available to the public in March, 2001 and helps employers recruit qualified workers with disabilities. EARN also provides technical assistance on general disability employment-related issues and can be reached at 1-866-EARN NOW (327-6669) or online at [www.earnworks.com](http://www.earnworks.com).



Source: U.S. Department of Labor

ODEP is also working hard to bring youth with disabilities into the 21st century workforce. The High School/High Tech Program gives students with disabilities opportunity to explore exciting careers in science, mathematics, and technology. As coordinated by ODEP and the U.S. Department of Defense, the Workforce Recruitment Program offers summer work experience for college students with disabilities. In some cases, the students move to full-time careers afterwards. Youth Leadership Forums are also held to help states develop youth leadership training for high school students with disabilities. This program has had great success in California and ODEP hopes to replicate it in all 50 states.

Looking ahead, 2002 will bring greater program outreach to the employment of people with disabilities. "DisAbilityDirect," the Department of Labor's premier information web site highlighting services and information for people with disabilities from across the Federal government, is available at [www.disabilitydirect.gov](http://www.disabilitydirect.gov). Also on deck this year is expansion of ODEP's adult and youth

grants programs, as well as a new initiative to promote telecommuting from home. Finally, ODEP will convene two new advisory groups: the Youth Advisory Council and the President's Disability Employment Partnership Board.

The Office of Disability Employment Policy is taking the reins of leadership for the New Freedom Initiative. As President Bush has challenged us, "One of the great advances in our time is that persons with disabilities have been more welcomed in the workplace. But there is still more to do. We must speed up the day when the last barrier has been removed to full and independent lives for every American, with or without disability." ■



## Did you know?

MANY DISABLED PEOPLE WORK. AMONG THOSE WHOSE DISABILITIES WERE CLASSIFIED AS NOT SEVERE, 82 PERCENT OF THOSE AGE 21-64 WERE WORKING IN 1997, ALMOST EQUAL TO THOSE WITHOUT DISABILITIES. AMONG THE SEVERELY DISABLED, 31 PERCENT WERE EMPLOYED.