

## Background

On February 1, 2001, fewer than two weeks after his administration began, President George W. Bush announced the New Freedom Initiative. The New Freedom Initiative is a comprehensive strategy for the full integration of people with disabilities into all aspects of American life.

In 2001, more than a decade after passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the unemployment rate for people with severe disabilities remained unacceptably high – as high as seventy percent according to some estimates. Too many people with disabilities who could be living in the community with family and friends were still in institutions. People with disabilities had less access to transportation and education than the population at large. And technology, which holds such tremendous promise for people with disabilities, was still inaccessible to many of them.

While recognizing the critical role that the ADA has played in removing barriers – both architectural and attitudinal – faced by this Nation's 54 million people with disabilities, the New Freedom Initiative recognizes that more work needs to be done. For example, while the ADA makes it unlawful for employers to discriminate against qualified applicants and employees because of disability, reliable transportation, a quality education, and access to technology are equally important to reducing the unemployment rate of people with disabilities. The Supreme Court's landmark decision in *Olmstead v. L.C.*, 527 U.S. 581 (1999), stated that people with disabilities should be provided services in the community rather than in institutions, whenever appropriate. *Olmstead* was an important step toward achieving the promise of full integration of people with disabilities into the community. But this promise can only be realized if biases in our Medicaid system that favor institutional treatment change and only if safe and affordable housing options are available.

Much progress toward breaking down the barriers that still confront individuals with disabilities has been made since the announcement of the New Freedom Initiative. This Report summarizes significant activities that have occurred since publication of the first New Freedom Initiative Progress Report in May 2002.

Some of this progress builds on efforts undertaken during the first year of the New Freedom Initiative. For example, on March 21, 2002, nine agencies released a report entitled *Delivering on the Promise* in response to Executive Order 13217, which called for swift implementation of the *Olmstead* decision. Progress is being made on implementing many of the report's more than 400 solutions to remove barriers to full integration that exist in Federal programs affecting people with disabilities. Presidential commissions established by Executive Orders – the Commission on Excellence in Special Education and the New Freedom Commission on Mental Health – have now completed their work and have issued reports and recommendations that will inform future policy development.

The President has secured \$120 million since the beginning of his administration to promote research and development of assistive and universally designed technology and to put technology into the hands of more people with disabilities. Promoting full implementation of Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act, which requires the accessibility of electronic and information technology

purchased, maintained, and used by the Federal government, also remains a priority for the President.

President Bush has continued to follow through on his promise to provide more funding for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Since Fiscal Year (FY) 2001, the President has secured more than \$3.7 billion in additional annual funding for the IDEA Part B State Grants program. He has proposed a further increase of \$1 billion in FY 2005.

Since 2001, the Social Security Administration has been answering the President's call for implementation of the Ticket to Work program. The program allows Social Security and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) disability beneficiaries to receive a "ticket" that they can take to a provider of their choice in order to obtain employment-related training and services. Thus far, approximately 4.9 million people in 33 states and the District of Columbia now have tickets, and an additional 3.5 million people will be issued tickets in the remaining 17 states and the U.S. territories this year.

The President continues to push for increases for the Department of Transportation to promote innovative solutions to transportation barriers that people with disabilities still confront. The Department of Justice (DOJ) and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) are advancing the President's commitment to full enforcement of the ADA. For example, the Solicitor General intervened in the Supreme Court case of *Tennessee v. Lane* to defend the constitutionality of ADA provisions that require state and local governments to make their programs and activities accessible to people with disabilities. DOJ, EEOC, and other agencies have also engaged in creative outreach efforts – to educate businesses about the advantages of seeing people with disabilities as potential employees and customers, and to inform people with disabilities about their rights and responsibilities under the ADA. The Department of Housing and Urban Development has promoted homeownership for people with disabilities through its voucher homeownership program and has provided technical assistance nationwide to architects, engineers, and developers on how to build accessible housing.

Several new initiatives have also been undertaken since May 2002. An August 2002 Executive Memorandum called for the development of a web portal containing links to government-wide resources on disability. Fewer than sixty days after issuance of the Memorandum, DisabilityInfo.gov was launched, and the site had more than 1.5 million visitors (with 30 million "hits") during 2003. A second Executive Memorandum, issued in February 2003, required agencies to better coordinate the availability of assistive technology mobility devices for people with disabilities. The working group that was created has detailed 34 agency actions that will be taken to make these devices more available.

In order to further implementation of *Olmstead*, the President has proposed \$2.2 billion in the budget over the next five years for the Department of Health and Human Services to conduct demonstration projects that promote community-based services for people with disabilities. The President is also supporting a number of demonstrations aimed at removing disincentives to work that exist in the Social Security and SSI disability benefit programs.

Agencies have also undertaken new activities on their own to further the New Freedom Initiative's goals of full integration of people with disabilities. Last July, Secretary of Commerce Donald Evans announced an eight-point plan for getting assistive and universally designed technology to the marketplace more quickly. Secretary of Labor Elaine Chao established the New Freedom Initiative Awards, which annually recognize employers and individuals who promote the employment of people with disabilities. Secretary of Health and Human Services Tommy Thompson established the Office on Disability to coordinate HHS activities that support the New Freedom Initiative. And the Department of Education has undertaken a number of new funding projects that support the recommendations in the report of the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education. More than ever before, agencies are working together on initiatives that affect people with disabilities. They are also forging new partnerships with state and local governments, the business community, and organizations of and for individuals with disabilities.

Under the leadership of President Bush, and with the New Freedom Initiative serving as a set of guiding principles for change, the Administration will continue its efforts to break down the remaining barriers to the full integration of people with disabilities into everyday American life.