

Department Of Homeland Security to Lead Interagency Coordinating Council on Emergency Preparedness and Individuals with Disabilities

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Today President Bush marked the anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act and expanded on his New Freedom Initiative by signing an Executive Order that seeks to fully integrate people with disabilities into the national emergency preparedness effort. The Executive Order built on the President's New Freedom Initiative to fully integrate people with disabilities into all aspects of society and creates an Interagency Coordinating Council on Emergency Preparedness and Individuals with Disabilities (Interagency Council). Secretary Tom Ridge will chair the council, which will be comprised of representatives from the many Cabinet agencies that are committed to strengthening their preparedness efforts as a result of the President's directive.

The Executive Order directs the federal government to address the safety and security needs of people with disabilities. Those needs arise in emergency situations including natural and man-made disasters, such as earthquakes, tornadoes, fires, floods, hurricanes, and acts of terrorism. The Interagency Council will oversee the implementation of this policy.

"The Department of Homeland Security is committed to including the disability community in planning for all types of emergencies, both operationally and through citizen preparedness. People with disabilities have much to offer all Americans because they and their families overcome obstacles and vulnerabilities daily and in times of crisis. They bring innovation and determination to solving readiness problems," said Secretary Ridge.

Daniel W. Sutherland, the Department's Officer for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties and previously a disability rights lawyer at the Department of Justice, called the President's action "one of the most significant developments in the area of disability policy in several years." Mr. Sutherland noted that, "Since 9/11, the disability community, like many in America, has been very focused on preparing for emergencies. This Council will ensure the coordination of preparedness work being done across the country, maximize the value of past efforts and stimulate new work to address the difficult challenges that face this community."

As a result of President Bush's Executive Order, the Department of Homeland Security will take several significant steps in the upcoming months, including:

- The Office of National Capital Region Coordination, in partnership with the state and local jurisdictions within the National Capital Region and the National Organization on Disability, will host a major conference on emergency preparedness for people with disabilities. The conference will take place from September 22-24, 2004 and Secretary Ridge will be a keynote speaker.
- The Office for State and Local Government Coordination and Preparedness, as part of its Fiscal Year 2004 Competitive Training Grants Program, sought applications addressing training gaps related to prevention and preparedness. One of the issue areas specified included assistance for special needs populations. Applications for this \$30 million competitive program are currently in the peer review process being evaluated for available discretionary funding.
- FEMA has prepared a number of technical assistance materials on emergency preparedness for people with disabilities, and is committed to publishing new guidance and assistance materials in the upcoming months.
- FEMA is also providing technical assistance to the U.S. Access Board, which will hold a conference in mid-October discussing new research on building evacuation for people with disabilities.
- Ready.Gov, the Department of Homeland Security's citizen preparedness web site, will include new and updated information to help people with disabilities prepare for and respond to emergencies of all kinds. The

Council's work will lead to the inclusion of more comprehensive guidance for people with disabilities.

- Citizen Corps will establish a National Citizen Corps Council subcommittee on emergency preparedness for people with disabilities. This subcommittee will be a key component of the federal government's efforts to reach out to communities across the country on these issues.