

GUEST EDITORIAL

The New Freedom Initiative and its impact on disability and rehabilitation research

INTRODUCTION

President George W. Bush unveiled his New Freedom Initiative (NFI) on February 1, 2001 [1]. The NFI was designed to break down remaining barriers to equality that continue to face Americans with disabilities and to further the progress made since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) [2]. This editorial will focus on the research aspects of the NFI. Research is specifically mentioned in the first component of the NFI, but I will show that the other three NFI components also have implications for the Nation's research and development programs in disability and rehabilitation research.

DESCRIPTION OF NEW FREEDOM INITIATIVE

Briefly, the four components of the NFI are—

1. Increasing access to assistive and universally designed technologies: The NFI calls for an increased research budget, creation of a fund to help bring assistive technology (AT) to the marketplace, improved coordination of the Federal research and development effort, and funding for low-interest loan programs to help individuals purchase AT.
 2. Expanding educational opportunities: The NFI supports increased funding to states to implement the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 (IDEA) and to establish a grant program to support early comprehensive reading programs in schools [3].
 3. Increasing integration into the workforce: The NFI calls for low-interest loan guarantees for individuals and tax benefits for employers who purchase computer and Internet access for telecommuting, promotion and enforcement of the ADA, and funding for the development of innovative transportation solutions.
 4. Promoting full access to community life: The NFI recommends swift implementation of the "American Homeownership and Economic Opportunity Act of 2000" [4], which permits recipients with disabilities to use Section 8 vouchers from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to finance the down payment on a home, and also provides Federal matching funds to increase the accessibility of organizations currently exempt from Title III of the ADA.
- The Administration's progress toward the fulfillment of the initial NFI goals was summarized in May 2002 [1].



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The President secured new funding for many NFI programs in the FY 2002 budget process. Highlights specifically related to research include—

- \$20 million for the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR) Rehabilitation Engineering Research Centers (RERCs), which conduct advanced research in assistive technology.
- \$3 million for the Interagency Committee on Disability Research (ICDR) to coordinate Federal disability research programs.
- \$37 million for the NIDRR-administered AT Act to award matching grants to states to help people purchase AT through low-interest loans.
- \$20 million to the U.S. Department of Education's Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) for matching Telework grants to states to help people with disabilities purchase equipment to work from home.

IMPACT OF NEW FREEDOM INITIATIVE ON RESEARCH

The NFI's first component has explicit implications for research, directing the ICDR to improve coordination of the Federal Assistive Technology Research and Development Program. The NFI noted that the Federal Government has had no effective coordinating body for AT research and development. The NFI further noted "while the ICDR was designed to coordinate the Federal effort, it has had no real authority and no budget." In FY 2002, the ICDR began to prioritize the immediate assistive and universally designed technology needs in the disability community, as well as to foster collaborative projects between the Federal laboratories and the private sector.

The first two highlights from the FY 2002 budget just presented are clearly research related. The NIDRR RERC program now has 22 centers, 5 of which were funded in 2002. These centers are funded at approximately \$900,000 a year and represent the largest concentration of rehabilitation engineering research and development in the Nation. New

RERCs in Spinal Cord Injury: Technologies to Enhance Mobility and Function, Workplace Accommodations, Rehabilitation Robotics and Telemanipulation, Machines Assisting Recovery from Stroke, Recreational Technologies and Exercise Physiology Benefiting Persons with Disabilities, and Accessible Medical Instrumentation joined existing RERCs in Technologies for Children with Orthopedic Disabilities, Low Vision and Blindness, Hearing Enhancement, Telerehabilitation, Technology for Successful Aging, Mobile Wireless Technologies for Persons with Disabilities, Improved Technology Access for Land Mine Survivors, Prosthetics and Orthotics, Ergonomic Solutions for Employment, Technology Transfer, Universal Design and the Built Environment at Buffalo, Communication Enhancement, Universal Design and the Built Environment at North Carolina State University, Wheeled Mobility, Wheelchair Transportation Safety, Information Technology Access, and Telecommunication Access.

The ICDR, authorized by the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended [5], promotes coordination and cooperation among Federal departments and agencies conducting disability and rehabilitation research programs. Representatives of over 30 agencies regularly participate on the ICDR. In addition to the full committee, under the NFI, two new Subcommittees were added: Technology Transfer Subcommittee and the New Freedom Initiative Subcommittee. They join the existing Subcommittees on Disability Statistics, Medical Rehabilitation, and Technology. The goals of the ICDR and its Subcommittees are to (1) increase consumer input to the ICDR to ensure that research efforts lead to solutions for identified needs, (2) coordinate Government-wide research activities in support of the NFI, (3) improve the visibility of the ICDR and Federal disability research in general, and (4) identify and solve problems that are broad or cross-cutting to encourage partnerships among various agencies and departments, using a multidisciplinary approach.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE NATION'S FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDA

The Administration has issued Executive Orders and Memoranda to support the NFI. Key among them are—

- Executive Order 13217, Community-based Alternatives for Individuals with Disabilities [6], directed swift implementation of the Supreme Court's Olmstead decision [7]. In March 2002, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) released a report outlining over 400 solutions in areas such as housing, education, personal assistant services, employment, healthcare structure and financing, caregiver support, and technology to make community living possible [8].
- Executive Order 13227 created the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education [9]. The Commission's report found that "overall, Federal, state, and local education reform efforts must extend to special education classrooms" [10].
- A Presidential Memorandum of August 28, 2002, instructed Federal agencies to develop a comprehensive Federal web site that serves people with disabilities [11]. The U.S. Department of Labor unveiled the new web site on October 16, 2002 [12].
- An Executive Memorandum of February 12, 2003, directed Federal agencies to develop steps to improve coordination among programs to help individuals with disabilities obtain mobility devices, improve training of vocational rehabilitation counselors with respect to mobility devices, and better inform individuals with disabilities regarding their mobility options [13].

As the outcomes of these executive orders and memoranda evolve with the continued implementation of the NFI, most likely, gaps in knowledge and practice will be found. These gaps will lead to identifying new areas for research. Increased dissemination of research outcomes under the NFI, as well as being more proactive in seeking out the needs and opinions of individuals with disabilities, will also

help inform the Nations' future research agenda in this area.

A variety of other activities have been completed in support of the NFI, such as the establishment of advisory groups, new grant programs, and inter-agency working groups; implementation of informational and technical assistance programs; and policy development [2]. The ICDR recently established a new web site specifically to gather input from the public on disability and rehabilitation research needs [14].

CONCLUSION

The impact of the NFI has already been felt during its first year of implementation. New research centers have been funded, interagency coordination has been dramatically improved, and the stage has been set for identifying new problems that research must solve. New efforts by the ICDR to obtain input from persons with disabilities will generate information that can be used by Federal agencies in helping to set future research priorities.

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