

## Press Release

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### **U.S. EQUAL EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY COMMISSION HIGHLIGHTS FLORIDA'S LEADERSHIP IN EMPLOYING INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES**

**TALLAHASSEE** - Governor Jeb Bush today acknowledged the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's comprehensive report on the efforts of nine states to employ more people with disabilities in government jobs. The study, *Final Report on Best Practices for the Employment of People with Disabilities in State Government*, highlights Florida's efforts to employ individuals with disabilities.

"Florida is leading the way in assisting persons with disabilities to achieve their full potential. These Floridians, like all of us, strive for the American Dream," said Governor Bush. "I am proud of the work by our state agencies. Florida will continue to pave the way so individuals with disabilities have the same freedoms we all do."

Highlights of the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's report include:

- In 2004, Governor Bush and the Florida Legislature created the Agency for Persons with Disabilities to support individuals with developmental disabilities in all aspects of community life.
- In 2004, Governor Bush created the Blue Ribbon Task Force on Inclusive Community Living, Transition and Employment of Persons with Developmental Disabilities. Charged with coordinating statewide services for students with developmental disabilities to transition from school to gainful employment, the task force also aims to expand and improve competitive, integrated employment opportunities for individuals with developmental disabilities.
- Florida established the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Working Group within the Department of Management Services to provide information and technical assistance to state agencies on complying with the ADA's employment provisions. Applicants for state jobs and state employees can use the Working Group's services to clarify their rights and responsibilities under the ADA. A subsequent executive order added the Clearinghouse on Disability Information to the Working Group's mandate, which makes information on disability resources and services more accessible and provides information on employment, including jobs with state agencies.
- Florida is one of three states to take significant steps to ensure state websites meet or exceed the level of accessibility required by the federal government under Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act. The law requires all electronic and information technology purchased, maintained or used by the federal government to be "readily accessible to and usable by individuals with disabilities" unless this would cause "undue hardship." Governor Bush declared Section 508 the standard for requiring access of all shared electronic information.
- Florida established the Able Trust, also known as the Florida Governor's Alliance for the Employment of Citizens with Disabilities, a public-private partnership foundation. Since its establishment, the Able Trust has awarded more than \$16 million to individuals with disabilities and nonprofit agencies and helps close to 2,000 individuals with disabilities annually to enter the workforce. The Able Trust awards grants to agencies for on-the-job coaching, job skills-training, job development and employer outreach.
- Florida's Able Trust sponsors twenty High School/High Tech programs throughout the state with plans to implement ten new sites by the end of 2005. The program encourages students to set their sites on college and a career in the fields of science, technology, engineering or math. Students with disabilities enrolled in High School/High Tech sites take field trips to science and technology-related businesses and attractions and receive on-the-job experiences through job shadowing and internships. More than 90 percent of Florida High School/High Tech graduates have enrolled in post-secondary education or training.
- In a public/private partnership, Florida's Business Leadership Networks are dedicated to assisting businesses and organizations in recruiting, hiring, training and retaining people with disabilities and in diversifying their customer base to include people with disabilities. The

networks provide businesses with a means of communicating with one another about best practices and successes in hiring qualified individuals with disabilities.

- The Florida Freedom Initiative is a demonstration project that aims to reduce disincentives to work by allowing recipients of Medicaid and Supplemental Security Income to work and save money while continuing to receive vital benefits. Florida received a waiver from the Social Security Administration allowing program participants to earn significantly more than the law generally permits before their benefits will be reduced. Additionally, participants may save up to \$10,000 annually to purchase, lease or modify a home; to purchase, lease or maintain a car; for education or to purchase or expand a small business without losing benefits.
- Florida adopted a five-year initiative in 2003 to expand the state's emphasis on employment for persons with developmental disabilities. The program will divert 25 percent of people receiving Adult Day Training Services into competitive employment. The initiative seeks to move away from "prevocational training," which in practice delays or defers employment, toward on-the-job training and workplace experience.
- Florida served as the national kickoff site for Disability Mentoring Day 2005 on October 19. Governor Bush served as the Florida Honorary Chair. Across the state, more than 100 educators, service providers and state agency representatives volunteered as Community Liaisons to match students and job seekers with disabilities with business mentors for on-site job shadowing activities. Nearly 1,000 Florida students with disabilities were mentored by business professionals, elected officials and corporate executives in nearly 30 cities across the state.

State agency recruitment and hiring practices highlighted by the report include:

- As part of ADA training at several state agencies, managers and supervisors are directed to designate those job functions considered "essential" in job descriptions and to prepare job descriptions before announcing, and recruiting for, a position.
- Florida's Agency for Health Care Administration requires all managers and supervisors to receive ADA training that includes specific information about how to prepare job descriptions and interview applicants with disabilities. The agency requires all personnel to be sensitized and trained to be aware of communication and physical access issues that might arise during the application process.
- Florida's Department of Transportation requires managers, supervisors and interview panel members to receive ADA training on interviewing and developing position qualifications.

"All employers can learn from the best practices of Florida and our other state partners cited in this report," said EEOC Chair M. Dominguez. "Individuals with disabilities deserve the freedom to compete in the workplace on a level playing field - without discriminatory barriers based on myths, fears and stereotypes."

The report U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's report contains findings from the "States' Best Practices Project" launched in December 2003 as part of President George W. Bush's New Freedom Initiative to integrate people with disabilities into all aspects of the nation's social and economic life. The final report covers Florida, Kansas, Maryland, Missouri, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Utah, Vermont and Washington. The report highlights practices related to recruiting and hiring people with disabilities for state jobs, providing reasonable accommodations for applicants and employees with disabilities, the retention and advancement of individuals with disabilities within state government, and the employment of people with disabilities in both public and private sector jobs.

To read the final report, visit

[http://www.eeoc.gov/initiatives/nfi/final\\_states\\_best\\_practices\\_report.html](http://www.eeoc.gov/initiatives/nfi/final_states_best_practices_report.html). For information about Florida's Agency for Persons with Disabilities, visit <http://apd.myflorida.com>. For information about the Florida's ADA Working Group and the Clearinghouse on Disability Information, visit [www.abilityforum.com](http://www.abilityforum.com)