

The Obama Administration: Supporting Hope & Change for the Future

Statistics report that *fifty-four million* Americans have some form of a disability. President Barack has indicated that his administration will put into place a four-part plan to provide Americans with disabilities the greatest possible access to the same opportunities as those individuals without disabilities.

Obama's four-part plan for individuals with disabilities consists of; 1) providing educational opportunities, 2) ending discrimination and promoting equal opportunity, 3) increasing the employment rate and 4) supporting independent, community-based living.

In order to implement the first part of his plan, President Obama plans to fully-fund the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The IDEA will enable school districts to provide additional services for the disabled without cutting into their general education budgets. The plan calls for \$10 billion to be invested per year in early intervention educational and developmental programs for children between the ages of zero and five.

The Obama administration intends to lend more support to vocational rehabilitation programs and will work to ensure that there is sufficient funding to empower Americans with disabilities to succeed in college and beyond. As such, he will work to make college universally more affordable, with the creation of a new American Opportunity Tax Credit. The credit would ensure that the first \$4,000 of a college education is completely free for most Americans and would cover two-thirds of the cost of tuition at the average public college or university. He will also authorize a comprehensive study of the transition to work and higher education of students with disabilities. The focus of the study will be on barriers that keep those students from seeking and completing higher education, the extent to which they are able to access loans and grants, reasons why their drop-out rate is so high and the barriers that prevent them from making a direct transition to work.

The second part of President Obama's plan is to work towards the end of discrimination and the promotion of equality of opportunity for people with disabilities. The President's plan of implementation includes the restoration of the Americans with Disabilities Act. President Obama will also look to increase funding for enforcement of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and the Department of Labor's Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs (OFCCP); the agencies tasked with enforcing anti-discrimination laws that protect workers with disabilities. In addition, a guarantee of health care coverage will be made. In the past, many people with disabilities did not seek work or left the workforce because they needed the guaranteed health insurance coverage that the federal government's benefits programs provide.

President Obama has vowed to sign legislation which would assure that Americans with disabilities have quality, affordable, *portable* coverage that would allow them to take a job without fear of losing coverage.

The third facet of President Obama's plan is to increase the employment rate of workers with disabilities. To help in this effort, private sector employers will be provided with the resources they need to better accommodate employees with disabilities. A National Commission on People with Disabilities, Employment and Social Security will also be established. The commission will include presidential and congressional appointees, the Commissioner of the Social Security Administration and the Secretaries of Labor and Health and Human Services. The President's charge to the commission will include; 1) examining and proposing solutions to work disincentives in the SSDI, SSI, Medicare and Medicaid programs, 2) revisiting the Ticket to Work Act to assess how it can better provide SSDI and SSI beneficiaries with the supports they need to transition into work, and 3) studying programs that would help young people join the labor force.

In addition, the Obama administration would also look to assure workers with disabilities and family caregivers that they receive the flexibility at work that they need, that the Family and Medical Leave Act be expanded, that states be encouraged to adopt paid leave programs and that companies mandate a reasonable amount of paid sick leave. Programs to support small businesses owned by individuals with disabilities would also be encouraged.

The fourth facet of President Obama's plan to assist individuals with disabilities involves the support of independent, community-based living. In support of the Community Choice Act of 2007, he believes that we should provide incentives to states to enable Americans with disabilities the ability to choose the most appropriate care for *their* individual needs. In keeping with this, legislation would be put in place to expand community direct care services, with the goal of ensuring high-quality, accessible care.

Government investments will also be made in the area of in assistive technology, with the support of the Fostering Independence Through Technology Act, which will offer 21st century solutions, such as home monitoring and communications technologies, to overcoming barriers.

The new administration has inspired hope with its pledges to bring about change.....it will be exciting to watch the weeks, months and years ahead.

Source: Barack Obama and Joe Biden's Plan to Empower Americans with Disabilities. www.barackobama.com