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**Subseries:**

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**OA/ID Number:** 12029

**FolderID:**

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**Folder Title:**

[Disability-Related Issues Currently Addressed by the Department of Energy] [loose]

**Stack:**

**S**

**Row:**

**97**

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**DISABILITY-RELATED ISSUES CURRENTLY ADDRESSED**  
**BY THE DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY**

Following are the employment and accommodations issues which the Department of Energy is currently addressing:

**EMPLOYMENT ISSUES:**

In order to promote and increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities, the Department of Energy successfully obtained an authority from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) in January 1993 for an exemption from full-time equivalent (FTE) ceiling controls for hiring people with disabilities including disabled veterans, sign language interpreters, readers, and personal assistants for the Department's employees with disabilities under the excepted appointing authorities. The success of the Department's ceiling exemption program for hiring people with disabilities has been hampered by the hiring and ceiling restrictions imposed by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Bulletin No. 93-08.

Furthermore, a large number of military bases across the country are in the process of closing down, and many Department of Defense (DOD) employees are being laid off. The National Defense Authorization Act for FY 1993, enforced by the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), requires all Federal agencies to give full consideration to the job applications of displaced Defense employees before selecting any candidate from outside the agency. Consequently, this law considerably slows down Federal agencies' efforts to increase the employment rate of disabled veterans and people with disabilities.

Due to the current downsizing efforts and scarcity of full-time equivalent (FTE) slots at the Department of Energy, managers and supervisors tend to overlook qualified applicants with disabilities and select those who seem to be "the Best and the Fittest" to fill those scarce FTE slots in their organizations. Because of the persistent myths and misconceptions, managers and supervisors tend to think that qualified applicants with disabilities cannot be the best qualified ones because of their severe disabilities. Consequently, it has become extremely difficult for highly qualified applicants with disabilities to compete for scarce FTE slots with women, minorities and other people who do not have disabilities. This unusually intensive competition perpetuates the Darwinian theory of "the Survival of the Fittest," and slows down Federal agencies' efforts to increase the employment rate of disabled veterans and people with disabilities.

I suggest that a central pool of FTE slots be established as a great incentive to encourage Federal managers and supervisors to hire people with disabilities and personal assistants (including interpreters and readers) under excepted appointing authorities at all Federal agencies. I suggest that the National Defense Authorization Act be amended to allow Federal agencies to select qualified candidates with disabilities from outside the agency without being required to give full consideration to the job applications of displaced Defense employees who do not have disabilities.

Currently, it is optional for managers and supervisors to take disability awareness training seminars. In fact, not many of them are highly motivated to take this necessary training seminar. Consequently, the myths, misconceptions and stereotypes about disabilities continue to perpetuate themselves at all Federal agencies, and discourage Federal managers and supervisors from increasing the representation of qualified people with disabilities.

I suggest that, like the AIDS awareness training, disability awareness training seminars be made mandatory for all Federal managers and supervisors in order to effectively eliminate those persistent myths, misconceptions and stereotypes and to open the Federal government's once-closed door to highly qualified people with disabilities.

#### **ACCOMMODATIONS ISSUES:**

The Department of Defense (DOD) established the central Computer/Electronic Accommodation Program (CAP) in 1990 to assist DOD field offices in procuring and providing adaptive devices for DOD employees with disabilities. The CAP program assisted DOD to significantly increase the employment and career advancement opportunities for people with disabilities by having successfully eliminated a wide variety of artificial barriers. The CAP office services as the primary DOD program office responsible for providing computer and electronic accommodations to individuals with disabilities, and assists DOD field offices by providing financial resources for services to make long-term training programs easily accessible. The CAP office also assists DOD field offices to fully integrate the electronic accommodations of persons with disabilities with the information resources management planning, programming, budgeting and acquisition processes.

Efforts to support the computer/electronic accommodation needs of employees with disabilities at the Department of Energy (DOE)

have been decentralized with each field office having their own program in addition to the Department of Energy Headquarters' program. While this arrangement meets existing requirements, the Department of Energy needs to expand and coordinate the program, especially in light of new DOE initiatives to increase employment and career advancement opportunities for people with disabilities. Occasionally, funding to procure adaptive devices has been difficult to obtain. There is no network among the Department of Energy field offices to expedite the acquisition and provision of accommodation services for people with disabilities. Furthermore, the Department of Energy does not provide additional financial assistance to small DOE field offices for reader/interpreting services for employees with visual or hearing impairments, for training opportunities for DOE employees with disabilities. Since some accommodations are expensive, many managers and supervisors have a hard time budgeting for these expenses, and therefore, are discouraged from hiring more people with disabilities.

The Department of Energy is currently considering the suggestion that the Department establish a central fund from which organizations can draw for procuring adaptive devices and support services, and the suggestion that the Department of Energy develop and implement a centralized DOE-wide accommodations system similar to the Department of Defense's CAP program. If the Department of Energy finds it feasible to adopt the above suggestions, the new program will eventually provide a wide variety of computer/electronic accommodations services for all DOE field offices, and will provide financial assistance to small DOE field offices for reader/interpreting services and for disabled employees' training opportunities. Such a centralized department-wide program will review the results of DOE field offices' efforts and provide constructive program feedback.

The Federal government needs to implement a new regulation which requires all Federal agencies to establish a separate line item in the annual Federal budget plan to provide resources and financial assistance to meet accommodation needs of Federal employees with disabilities.