

# News Release

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## **U.S. Department of Labor salutes ‘New Freedom Initiative’ awardees for enhancing participation of Americans with disabilities in 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce**

*Theme: America’s People . . . America’s Talent . . . America’s Strength!*

The U.S. Department of Labor today recognized eight winners of the 7<sup>th</sup> annual *New Freedom Initiative* Award for their outstanding efforts to improve employment opportunities for people with disabilities. The awards ceremony took place at the Grand Hyatt Washington Hotel in Washington, D.C.

“The examples and best practices that we highlight today will hopefully provide insight and ideas for different strategies to help Americans with disabilities become fulfilled, contributing members of our workforce,” said U.S. Secretary of Labor Elaine L. Chao.

Linking Employment, Abilities and Potential (LEAP), Cleveland, Ohio was one of two non-profits to receive this prestigious award focused on **Empowerment Through Opportunity**.

LEAP, with offices in Cuyahoga and Lorain Counties, provides information, education, training, employment and independent living services to people with disabilities in eight counties in Northeast Ohio. It was established in 1981, and since this time has itself followed a philosophy of employing qualified people with disabilities as a majority of its staff.

In Ohio, LEAP is one of ten Centers for Independent Living, one of four Ohio Developmental Disabilities Council Public Policy Centers, and one of four High School/High Tech locations. Its programs and services are accredited by the Commission on Rehabilitation Accreditation, and its youth program is a Promising and Effective Practices Network (PEPNet) awardee. In 2006 LEAP received the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission’s *Freedom to Compete* award for exemplary employment practices and the Ohio Association of Non-profit Organization’s *Standards of Excellence* award.

To help persons with disabilities achieve greater independence, LEAP increases access to low vision services and assistive technologies through the Assistive Technology Center, and implements innovative employment and training programs. LEAP operates a unique program that trains people with disabilities to work as personal assistants, home health aides and attendants to other people with disabilities. Furthermore, its Center for Personal Assistance prepares people to become state-tested nurse’s assistants.

LEAP works with youth with disabilities through its award-winning Job Link program. Implemented collaboratively with the Cleveland Metropolitan School District, this program helps youth with disabilities prepare for work and adult life annually. LEAP also established the Doris Brennan Center for Disability Education and Advocacy, which assists people with both professional and personal development by offering disability benefits assistance, access to health care, housing and transportation assistance, independent living skills training and social and recreation activities.

The *New Freedom Initiative* is a government-wide effort to accelerate the full inclusion of people with disabilities into mainstream American life. “Our efforts are focused on maximizing the independence of individuals whose conditions are limiting them from being as self-sufficient as they want to be,” said Melanie Hogan, Executive Director of LEAP. “We are tapping an underutilized labor pool and working with individuals to eliminate barriers and open the door to opportunities.”

Note: A list of all award winners and their profiles are available at [www.dol.gov/odep](http://www.dol.gov/odep).

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