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Bush's disability proposal is called detail-challenged

Local organizations say the president's plan has potential but needs implementation

By Lisa Toth
Oregon Daily Emerald

President George W. Bush's multi-million dollar plan intended to aid disabled Americans has potential, but the recent proposal isn't detailed enough to indicate how it will impact people with disabilities, according to members of various local organizations that offer disability services.

The "New Freedom Initiative" that Bush sent Congress on Feb. 1 is a set of proposals to ensure that all Americans with disabilities can lead active lives in their communities and country, aiming to speed up progress and opportunities for disabled people.

Bush is expected to make an announcement today concerning the details of his proposal, according to Jan Campbell, a disability project coordinator with the Office of Neighborhood Involvement in Portland.

"It's a wonderful concept, but we need to have the backing, the implementation and the monitoring to enforce it," Campbell said.

The series of proposals that could potentially help disabled Americans offers an increase in spending for research and development and provides low-interest loans to help disabled people buy computers and other equipment needed to work from home.

"Wherever a door is closed to anyone because of a disability, we must work to open it. Wherever any job or home, or means of transportation is unfairly denied because of a disability, we must work to change it," Bush said in a White House press release. "Wherever

any barrier stands between you and the full rights and dignity of citizenship, we must work to remove it, in the name of simple decency and simple justice."

The plan would also increase state spending for educating disabled students and support 10 pilot projects to develop transportation plans for the disabled. The proposal would also create a national commission on mental health to study the nation's delivery system of health services.

University Disability Services Counselor Molly Sirois said the proposal was too general to predict whether the plan would increase the program's spending abilities.

Bush did not provide spending figures Thursday, but during a campaign stop in June, he proposed creating a \$5 million annual fund to provide technical assistance for small businesses that face financial burdens in complying with laws affecting people with disabilities.

Hilary Gerdes, with Disability Services, said she still needs more information regarding Bush's general statements.

"Until we really know what the plan is, we won't know exactly how it will impact University students," Gerdes said.

Bush's father signed the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, which was the genesis of President Bush's current proposal.

"Because of that law, millions of Americans can now compete for jobs once denied to them, enter buildings once closed to them [and] travel on buses and trains once unequipped for them," Bush said.

Ruth McEwen, a private rehabilitation and general counselor, said while she isn't familiar with

Bush's new plan, she has seen progress over the years in terms of employment initiatives for disabled people because of the act.

"People are starting to look more at ability than disabilities," McEwen said. "We can go a lot more places than we used to 10 years ago. It takes almost a generation for changes to really come through."

Wally Earl, the program director of Lane Shelter Care and an advocate for seniors and people with disabilities, said he hopes Bush will do more nationally for people with disabilities regarding transportation and access to buildings. Earl, who was once 100 percent disabled, said Eugene is one of the best cities he is aware of in offering disabled people easy access to buildings.

Earl added that he hopes Bush's plan will improve transportation at universities, but he said Oregon already offers senior citizen and disabled transportation.

He also said the Americans with Disabilities Act still has room for improvement. He said many Americans think too much money is currently being spent by the government on disability services, and businesses and restaurants feel providing services for disabled people is already costly.

Anne Brown, the executive director for the Coalition in Oregon for Parent Education, works with parents of children with disabilities. She said Bush's plan to expand focus on technology and special education needs for disabled people is significant, and more funding needs to be available.

"In theory, he is looking at the right issues," Brown said. "We are opening the door to conversation about the right things, and that is a very important step."

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Man fires gun, is shot in knee by agents outside White House

WASHINGTON — A middle-aged accountant with a history of mental illness fired several shots outside the White House on Wednesday and then was shot by the Secret Service as he waved his handgun menacingly, authorities said. The tense, noontime standoff sent tourists running for cover.

The midday drama unfolded just outside the fence at the edge of the South Lawn, 200 yards from the building where President Bush was inside exercising.

The man, wounded in the knee and hospitalized under guard, was identified by law enforcement sources as Robert W. Pickett, 47, from Evansville, Ind. He was fired by the Internal Revenue Service in the mid 1980s, and neighbors said he kept to himself, resented the IRS and was obsessed with West Point, where he dropped out after a semester in 1972. Pickett has acknowledged in court records that he suffers from mental illness and has tried to commit suicide.

Bush, working out in the White House residence, was alerted by Secret Service agents "but understood that he was not in any danger," spokesman Ari Fleischer said. First lady Laura Bush was in Texas. Vice President Dick Cheney was working in his White House office.

The shooting was the latest in a string of security scares that have brought tighter protection for U.S. presidents. In 1995, then-President Clinton ordered Pennsylvania Avenue closed in front of the White House following the Oklahoma City bombing. Earlier that year, a man was shot on the White House

lawn after scaling a fence with an unloaded gun.

The latest incident, shortly before noon on a sunny, spring-like day, triggered a tight security clampdown. Tourists were evacuated from White House rooms, and police in riot gear took up positions around the executive mansion and beyond its gates.


Dan Halpert, a tourist from Queens, N.Y., was on the National Mall nearby when officers told him to get down and clear out.

"We were all running away. It was scary," said Halpert, 24.

The confrontation occurred on "E" Street, where tourists gather along the White House fence to snap photos of the executive mansion and hope for a glimpse of Bush jogging on the track encircling the South Lawn. There is an unobstructed view from the fence to the mansion.

Secret Service officers on routine patrol in a car "heard shots fired and proceeded to surround a subject who was wielding a weapon, a gun," White House press secretary Ari Fleischer said. A 10-minute standoff ensued in which witnesses said they heard officers try to persuade the man to put the gun down.

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