



Homeland Security

January 3, 2005

The Honorable Robert Riley
Governor of Alabama
State Capitol
600 Dexter Avenue
Montgomery, Alabama 36130

Dear Governor Riley:

As you know, throughout the past two years the U.S. Department of Homeland Security has been working hard on many levels to better prepare our Nation for terrorist attacks, natural disasters and other emergencies. I know that you share my commitment to ensuring a more prepared America, and I have appreciated the opportunity to work closely with you on this critical issue.

I am writing to encourage you to consider an aspect of this issue that is a priority for President Bush and the Department of Homeland Security: incorporating the needs of Americans with disabilities in preparedness, response, and recovery efforts. While all Americans face difficulties during emergencies and disasters, these difficulties are often compounded for people with disabilities and their families. Legally and ethically, we are responsible to ensure that our fellow citizens with disabilities are as safe and secure in their communities as individuals without disabilities.

President Bush and I are deeply committed to integrating the disability community in all aspects of emergency preparedness, response, and recovery. In fact, President Bush marked the 14th anniversary of the landmark Americans with Disabilities Act in July 2004, by signing Executive Order 13347, "Individuals with Disabilities in Emergency Preparedness." We have already seen a great deal of momentum and activity at the Federal level in response to the President's direction.

To further our Nation's progress on this critical aspect of the preparedness, response, and recovery effort, I ask that you work with us in the following ways. First, I ask that you take steps to ensure that your State's existing emergency preparedness plans are as comprehensive as possible with regard to the issues facing individuals with disabilities. Encouraging individuals with disabilities to actively take part in the planning process, including in exercises, can be a significant asset to planners. We must work to ensure that emergency management personnel are properly trained with regard to preparing for, responding to, and recovering from emergencies as these situations relate to people with disabilities and to ensure that people with disabilities and their families take the initiative to prepare themselves.

Second, I ask that you take steps to ensure that emergency information and resources are available by accessible means and in accessible formats. Please consider, among other things,

captioning and voice description of all broadcasts regarding emergencies and providing materials in accessible alternative formats when printed materials are made available to the public.

Third, I ask that you consider expending Federal homeland security dollars on initiatives that address and/or respond to the needs of individuals with disabilities for emergency preparedness, response, and recovery. Many of the challenges that we face in this arena will only be effectively resolved when substantial resources are applied to developing innovative solutions. I ask that you consider the use of funds in this area to be a priority.

Finally, many of you have already done extraordinary work in this area. I ask that you share your ideas and lessons learned with us, and we will endeavor to share your experiences with the widest possible audience. Please communicate directly with the chair of the Interagency Council on Emergency Preparedness and Individuals with Disabilities, Daniel W. Sutherland, the Department of Homeland Security's Officer for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties (civil.liberties@dhs.gov or 202-401-1474).

Throughout all of our work on these issues, we must keep in mind that people with disabilities are not passive consumers of help. Rather, people with disabilities have a great deal to offer all Americans because they bring a unique blend of energy, ideas, and determination to these issues. By addressing this specific population's needs, all Americans will benefit.

Thank for your commitment to this issue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tom Ridge". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Tom Ridge