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Eddie Guerrero studied communications and Spanish at George Mason University, where he earned a bachelor's degree in 1999. The 27-year-old Great Falls resident wants to work in customer service and build his resume to attain a government job.

Guerrero, like thousands of other Northern Virginians, can't find work in the tough economic climate. But an economic upswing won't solve his employment struggle.

For 20 years, Guerrero has battled muscular dystrophy, an incurable neuromuscular disorder that can cause loss of muscle use. Confined to a wheelchair and unable to extend his arm to shake hands, he needs extra equipment to use the computer and phone. And employers often aren't interested in meeting these needs.

"Part of it is the perception of many companies that people with disabilities might be too much of a burden," Guerrero said Wednesday at the Crystal Gateway Marriott in Arlington. "It's a challenge to find an employer that is willing to make accommodations."

Berry Cuffee of Herndon and Springfield resident Joann McSorley joined Guerrero Wednesday as the first three Virginians to receive Tickets to Work, a Social Security Administration program to help disabled people land jobs.

"The important thing here is choice," said Social Security Commissioner Jo Anne Barnhart. "We are giving people a choice where to find help if they want to work."

The work tickets, which will be mailed to about 196,000 Virginians over the next several months, can be used by Social Security and Supplemental Security Income disability beneficiaries to obtain employment services. The voluntary program was created through a 1999 federal law and provides job support services through public or private employment networks.

Networks and ticket holders devise a plan to help the beneficiary find work. Eight networks offer vocational rehabilitation, job training and other support services to Virginia candidates.

"Most importantly, increases in work opportunities to people with disabilities increases their independence," Barnhart said. "In our country, [jobs] define who we are and what we do with our lives."

Nearly 70 percent of working-age disabled Americans are unemployed, and the threat of losing Social Security disability coverage, Medicare or Medicaid is a deterrent to finding work.

The ticket program aims to remove this barrier by ensuring immediate reinstatement of benefits if a person's medical condition forces them to stop working. This request must be made within five years after benefits, including Medicare and Medicaid, end.

Virginia, 19 other states and Washington, D.C., are part of the program's second phase that covers about 2.6 million people. The first tickets were distributed to 13 states in February. Tickets will be dispersed in Maryland and 16 other states in 2003.

Employment providers receive incremental payments from the Social Security Administration for

successful job placement. Due to the program's infancy, only \$10,000 to \$15,000 has been distributed nationwide to networks.

Annual funding will vary on the the extent of placement, but the administration will not limit rewards to productive organizations, said Ken McGill, the administration's assistant commissioner for employment support programs.

The program improves the hiring potential for Virginia's disabled community, but it will take one or two years to evaluate its success, said Joseph Bowman, commissioner for the state's Department for the Blind and Vision Impaired.

For Virginia's first ticket holders, it opens new doors to the job market.

"It's not a matter of receiving a pay check," Guerrero said. "It's a matter of personal achievement - to create a sense of self."