**MEMORANDUM**

To: The Members of the Colorado General Assembly

From: The Members of the National Federation of the Blind of Colorado

Date: January 20, 2015

Re: Legislative Concerns of Blind Citizens

**GENERAL BACKGROUND**

The National Federation of the Blind (NFB) is the oldest and largest organization of the blind in the United States and in Colorado. The primary mission of the Federation is to allow the blind to live the lives they want in all areas of life from insuring basic civil rights to securing employment and education for the blind. Founded officially in 1955, the NFB of Colorado engages in a number of programs specifically designed to create greater opportunities for the blind. For example, the Federation is the chief sponsor of the Colorado Center for the Blind. The Colorado Center provides training in the alternative skills blind people need to become fully participating members of society. Additionally, NFB offers national and statewide scholarships. We provide a free talking newspaper called NFB-NEWSLINE® which allows the blind of our state to read the daily newspaper just as easily as their sighted peers. We advocate for the rights of the blind in all areas ranging from education to employment. Where positive changes are happening in the blindness field, there is a good chance that the Federation is involved.

**2015 LEGISLATIVE AGENDA**

First, the NFB of Colorado thanks the Colorado General Assembly for past support of and requests continued funding for NFB-NEWSLINE®, one of the NFB’s critical programs serving the blind of our state and allowing them to get access to nearly 400 publications at the same time as their sighted colleagues. Second, we believe that blind Coloradans are not adequately or effectively served by the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation and thus the Assembly should first form an interim study committee and then develop needed reforms. Third, we call upon the Assembly to adopt a Joint Resolution urging Congress to eliminate the practice of paying subminimum wages for workers with disabilities. Fourth and finally, we bring to the Assembly’s attention two key programs we run, the Colorado Center for the Blind and NFB scholarships, programs that may assist your constituents.

For further information contact:

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**CONTINUE FUNDING FOR NFB-NEWSLINE® SERVICE**

For more than a decade, the Colorado General Assembly has funded Colorado’s NFB-NEWSLINE®, providing blind Coloradans the same daily access to newspapers and magazines as their sighted neighbors and family members enjoy. This year, we request that the General Assembly maintain its support of $60,000.00 to this project. Continuing funding to NFB-NEWSLINE® will not impact general funds because NFB-NEWSLINE® is funded through the Disabled Telephone Users Fund (DTUF), which comes from a very small fee on phone lines in Colorado and which has always registered a surplus.

Access to information from the newspapers and magazines of our nation and state play a critical role for each of us as informed and participating citizens. Recognizing this, the National Federation of the Blind created NFB-NEWSLINE® for the blind in the mid-1990s. With this revolutionary system, the blind are able to pick up their touch tone phone, call a toll free number, and select from nearly 400 different newspapers and magazines including the Denver Post, Colorado Springs Gazette, Wall Street Journal and many other national newspapers. Today the phone-in option is still in place, but additional options include online on-demand reading, e-mail delivery and, most impressively, mobile phone and tablet apps that deliver the two Colorado newspapers offered on the system, national papers as well as nearly 40 magazines – everything from AARP publications to Time and Wired. There are even accessible and locally-relevant television listings – something impossible to find in an accessible form for the blind otherwise. Additionally, the system provides current weather conditions as well as watches and warnings. Currently, over 1300 blind Coloradans have access to the 400 newspapers, magazines, and other publications on the system. About every three minutes, a blind Coloradan is tapping into the vast wealth of information provided by NFB-NEWSLINE®.

With the funding, the NFB of Colorado will maintain the system and expand its reach. We will create even greater opportunities to share NFB-NEWSLINE® on additional web based and other technological platforms; expand the number of publications available; train more blind individuals to use the system; and work with the Audio Information Network of Colorado (AIN) to provide more information to the blind of Colorado. AIN is another service funded by the DTUF providing other timely publications and information to our state’s blind and the NFB of Colorado supports continuing funding for AIN as well.

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**CONVENE AN INTERIM STUDY ON EFFECTIVE VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION SERVICES FOR BLIND COLORADANS**

The National Federation of the Blind of Colorado urges the Colorado General Assembly to convene an Interim Study of the effectiveness of the Colorado Division of Vocational Rehabilitation’s (DVR’s) delivery of its services to blind Coloradans and to give strong consideration to the establishment of a separate, dedicated unit within state government to provide the targeted expertise necessary to enhance quality of life and improve employment outcomes for Colorado’s blind citizens.

Through the recent legislative audit conducted, members of the General Assembly are all too aware of the trials that Coloradans with disabilities have endured over the past two years as Colorado’s DVR program, under the Department of Human Services, seemed to collapse upon itself, leaving no doubt in anyone’s mind that Colorado’s federal-state program to assist people with disabilities to gain skills, training and education that could lead to integrated, competitive employment was possibly the worst in the nation as evidenced by the fact that several thousand disabled Coloradans were forced on a waiting list for months, even years for basic services. Obscured by this catastrophe is a steady dilution of services for blind Coloradans that predates DVR’s current predicament. Even as DVR has done much heavy lifting in terms of responding to the Legislative Audit Committee’s findings and to whittle the waiting list down, the National Federation of the Blind remains very concerned that Colorado DVR is not uniformly and adequately addressing the rehabilitation needs of blind applicants and clients.

People who are blind must have effective training in a discreet and specialized skill set in order to be successfully employed and integrated into the economic fabric of the state and nation, including training in independent travel, use of assistive technology and a host of other alternate strategies. States which have separate identifiable services for the blind have measurably better outcomes for their blind applicants. However, Colorado’s DVR is currently incapable of delivering these specialized services effectively, thus the need to study the issue intensively.

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**PASS A JOINT RESOLUTION CALLING ON CONGRESS TO END SUBMINIMUM WAGES FOR WORKERS WITH DISABILITIES**

The National Federation of the Blind of Colorado Urges the Colorado General Assembly to pass a joint Resolution Urging Congress to Support Legislation to phase out Section 14(c) of the Fair Labor Standards Act.

The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (FLSA) established a federal minimum wage to be paid to all American workers. However, only workers with disabilities, as a class, are excluded from this federal wage protection.

Over the years, workers without disabilities have received periodic increases to the federal minimum wage, which currently stands at $7.25 per hour, while workers with disabilities have seen the statutory floor for their subminimum wages fall and then disappear completely, with the result that some are now paid pennies per hour. This means that many of Colorado citizens with disabilities can legally be paid far less than the Colorado minimum wage of $8.23 per hour.

The practice of paying workers with disabilities subminimum wages stems from the public misconception that people with disabilities cannot be productive employees. The National Federation of the Blind has been joined by more than sixty (60) organizations of, or for, people with disabilities to condemn and deplore the archaic, misguided, unjust, unfair, and immoral practice of subjugating people with disabilities in non-integrated sheltered work settings with no hope of reaching their full vocational potential.

There are currently twenty-nine (29) entities across the state of Colorado which are certified by the United States Department of Labor to take advantage of the 14(c) Minimum Wage Payment Exemption allowing them to pay thousands of Colorado citizens, who happen to have disabilities, wages well below the federal minimum wage.

The National Federation of the Blind of Colorado calls upon the Colorado General Assembly to pass a joint resolution urging the United States Congress to pass H.R. 188, the Transition to Integrated and Meaningful Employment Act, which will responsibly phase out the use of special wage certificates under Section 14(c) of the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act.

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**SUPPORT THE COLORADO CENTER FOR THE BLIND AND OTHER NFB PROGRAMS**

In your packets, you will find brochures on the Colorado Center for the Blind and fliers for National Federation of the Blind national and local scholarships. These and other programs are of great importance and therefore deserve a specific mention.

Founded in 1988 by the NFB of Colorado, the Colorado Center for the Blind (CCB) offers world class rehabilitation and adjustment to blindness training to blind/visually impaired individuals in our state and from all over the world. The CCB believes that with the right kind of training and a positive attitude, blindness need not be a tragedy and should not artificially limit a person’s hopes and dreams. The program serves all ages from kids as young as elementary age to seniors. CCB teaches cane travel/orientation and mobility, Braille, technology, independent daily living, employment skills, and much, much more. The vast majority of the teaching staff is made up of blind instructors who serve as excellent role models. Please read the CCB brochure in your packet for more information or go to www.cocenter.org. Our Center is located in Littleton and you are always welcome and encouraged to visit.

**SCHOLARSHIPS**

The National Federation of the Blind, on a national basis, offers thirty scholarships to talented blind men and women attending a post-secondary institution. Over a hundred thousand dollars are awarded each year and provide real opportunity for deserving students. On a state level, the NFB of Colorado offers up to five scholarships to blind men and women attending a post-secondary institution and scholarships range from $1,500.00 to $5,000.00. More information on how to apply is contained in your legislative packet. Please inform your local high schools, colleges and universities as well as any blind/visually impaired post-secondary student you know about these valuable scholarship opportunities.

For further information on any of these issues contact:

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