**MEMORANDUM**

To: The Members of the Colorado General Assembly

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

Date: February 12, 2024

Re: Legislative Concerns of Blind Coloradans

**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 we want in all areas of life from ensuring basic civil rights to securing employment and education for the blind. Founded officially in 1955, the NFB of Colorado (NFBCO) engages in several programs specifically designed to create greater opportunities for the blind. For example, NFBCO is the founder and chief sponsor of the Colorado Center for the Blind, an agency which provides training in the alternative skills blind people need to become fully participating members of society. Additionally, NFB offers national and statewide scholarships. We also provide a free talking newspaper called NFB-NEWSLINE®, a service which enables the blind of our state to read daily newspapers and many other on-demand publications 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.

**2024 LEGISLATIVE AGENDA**

1. Pass HB24-1115, Prescription Drug Label Accessibility, legislation that would require pharmacies in Colorado to provide accessible prescription labels for blind and/or print-disabled users, thereby enabling them to accurately and independently identify the medications they use themselves or dispense to those in their immediate care.

2. Pass SB24-153, adding $130,000 from the General Fund to expand access to NFB-NEWSLINE® for more blind, deafblind, and print-disabled Coloradans while maintaining the $120,000 for NFB-NEWSLINE® From the Telephone Users with Disabilities Fund (TUDF).

3. Initiate a thorough financial audit—with specific focus on the funds allocated to Colorado's Support Services Provider (SSP) program—to adequately meet the needs of current eligible recipients, to eliminate the waiting list for SSP services, and to do outreach for other deafblind citizens who may qualify and benefit from SSP services.

4. Hold public hearings, possibly through an interim study committee, to discover and highlight the systemic and rampant discrimination against blind guide dog users by rideshare drivers, and to develop a legislative solution.

For further information on any of these issues contact:

Jessica Beecham, President, National Federation of the Blind of Colorado

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**SUPPORT PRESCRIPTION DRUG LABEL ACCESSIBILITY – HB24-1115**

The National Federation of the Blind of Colorado has a vast array of technical know-how, our lived experience, the legislative experience, and our commitment to give attention to problems facing the blind of our state. For all Coloradans, knowing what our medications are, as well as the frequency and dosages of each, are critical matters of health maintenance, potentially with life and death consequences.

While technology exists to produce prescription labels in Braille, large print, and electronic formats that can be rendered audibly and/or in electronic braille, and while pharmacies can be found which can produce prescription labels in one or more of these formats, consumers who cannot use traditionally-printed prescription labels are finding that drug labels in accessible formats are neither consistently nor readily available to them. They cannot be confident that all of the pharmacies from whom they may acquire their medications will use any of these technologies and approaches, let alone inform them about ways in which pharmacies can provide accessible prescription labels. Pharmacies in Colorado are not required to provide prescription label information in ways that work for people who are blind or print-disabled, and there is no consistent way in which they are required to provide this critical information.

HB24-1115 requires pharmacies to notify an individual that identifies as blind or otherwise print-disabled about accessible methods of accessing critical medication information in formats to include braille, large print, electronic, or any other method recommended by the United States Access Board. The state pharmacy board may exempt from the requirements of the bill a pharmacy that is a sole proprietorship with no more than 2 pharmacists for which, upon request of the pharmacy, the Board determines compliance would create an undue burden. Overall, this bill will provide critical information such as usage, warnings, and any other critical information available to sighted persons taking the same medication.

Please support safe, accessible prescription information for the blind and print disabled by voting for HB24-1115.

For further information on this issue contact:

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**INCREASE ACCESS TO CRITICAL NEWS SOURCES FOR BLIND COLORADANS**

**THROUGH INCREASED FUNDING FOR NFB-NEWSLINE®
SUPPORT SB24-153**

NFB-NEWSLINE® is a free audio news service for anyone who is blind, low-vision, deafblind, or otherwise print-disabled, providing access to more than 500 publications, emergency weather alerts, job listings, and more. Currently, over 1500 blind Coloradans have access to 500-plus newspapers, 75 magazines, and other publications on NFB-NEWSLINE®, including the Denver Post, Grand Junction Sentinel, Colorado Springs Gazette, Fort Collins Coloradoan, and Colorado Springs Independent. About once every two minutes, a blind Coloradan taps into the vast wealth of information available through NFB-NEWSLINE® - all available in formats accessible to the assistive technology the blind use to read printed information.

There are well over 100,000 blind people in the state of Colorado, many of whom are isolated and completely unaware of the tremendous set of services provided by NFB-NEWSLINE® under the National Federation of the Blind of Colorado’s Project Literacy. On-time access to information by blind school-age children, working-age adults, blind veterans, and blind seniors is critical for the full integration of the blind into society on terms of equality. Information about the latest and most innovative access technologies is still not easily available to many blind, low-vision, or otherwise print-disabled people in Colorado, regardless of whether they live in urban or rural settings.

For well over a decade, the Colorado General Assembly has funded NFB-NEWSLINE® from the Telephone Users with Disabilities Fund (TUDF), currently at $120,000 a year. The funding is allocated to the Colorado Department of Education’s Colorado Talking Book Library and issued through a grant to the National Federation of the Blind of Colorado to manage the NFB-NEWSLINE® program.

In addition to the $120,000 from TUDF, we request an additional $130,000 from the General Fund to expand our current Project Literacy Program. Given the current pressures for funds from other programs, TUDF doesn’t appear to be a reasonable option for additional funding for NFB-NEWSLINE®.

With the additional funding in SB24-153, News Access for Consumers Who Are Print Disabled, we will provide a wider array of information and literacy support services throughout the entire state of Colorado through which blind and print-disabled people can be introduced to a number of literacy and communication-related assistive technologies and blindness-related services, provided with introductory training, and helped to find and use additional resources in or near their communities. Resources would be developed such as marketing and facilitating monthly information-sharing sessions, focus groups, and meet-ups. In addition, this funding would allow NFBCO’s Project Literacy to establish a technical assistance network to respond to questions from blind/deafblind/print-disabled users about the ever-changing array of access technologies and to provide timely follow-up training and support. These outreach and training efforts will more than likely center around use of the accessible technologies embedded in today’s smartphones to get access to NFB-NEWSLINE®. Thus training and support in this area will undoubtedly have benefits far beyond gaining access to NFB-NEWSLINE® offerings.

Please pass SB24-153, News Access for Consumers Who Are Print Disabled, which would add $130,000 of the General Fund to expand access to NFB-NEWSLINE® to more blind, deafblind, and print-disabled Coloradans while maintaining the $120,000 for NFB-NEWSLINE® From the TUDF.

For further information on this issue contact:

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**RESTORE AND EXPAND SSP SERVICES FOR THE DEAFBLIND**

The Colorado Commission for the Deaf, Hard of Hearing and Deafblind (CCDHHDB) is a program in the Office of Adult, Aging and Disability Services within the Colorado Department of Human Services. The services that CCDHHDB provides—including equipment for people who are hard of hearing, rural interpreting services (ASL and CART), legal interpreting, and the Support Services Provider (SSP) Program for people who are Deafblind—are funded through the Colorado Telephone Users with Disabilities Fund (TUDF). This is a small tax on phone bills. These funds have not been tracked well enough so as to prevent CCDHHDB from running out of funds months before the end of the state fiscal year.

The Support Services Provider (SSP) Program for deafblind individuals is a vital lifeline that helps to maximize independence for this marginalized population. An SSP is a trained professional who empowers a deafblind person by enabling them to perform their essential daily activities, FOR EXAMPLE, opening mail, processing bank transactions, shopping for groceries, etc. Up until late November 2023, deafblind participants in the SSP program had been receiving up to 24 hours of SSP service each month.

Within the deafblind community, there is a pervasive belief that CCDHHDB has always run short of SSP funds well before the end of each state fiscal year. Indeed, deafblind recipients report that their SSPs went unpaid for some of their hours at the end of FY 2023. Yet, the agency failed to address demand for the program or to request an increase in funding for the upcoming year. This pessimistic view was reinforced when, in mid-December, CCDHHDB sent out an email declaring that SSP services were still active while CCDHHDB staff worked to prioritize SSP services and budgetary issues. The email indicated that SSP hours for December would be reduced from 24 to 10.

The final word came down in an email from CCDHHDB sent out on January 9, 2024. In this email, stakeholders were informed about temporary guidelines under which SSP services were to be provided, effective January 14, 2024. After spending weeks reviewing the needs of the program and consumers against budgetary limits, stakeholders were informed that qualifying deafblind consumers would receive 18 hours of SSP services each month.

The National Federation of the Blind of Colorado is very concerned about the apparent lack of financial planning and prioritization for the Support Services Provider program administered by CCDHHDB. We have heard that the program has a waiting list of 20 individuals who have been waiting for years to qualify to receive SSP services. We believe that the deafblind community is justified in its belief that SSP program funds are not being managed well. Why, for example, would CCDHHDB spend weeks planning and prioritizing budgetary limits in the middle of a state fiscal year instead of at the end of the previous state fiscal year? It should be noted also that the JBC made an emergency allocation of $500,000 last month to cover CDHHDB’s budget shortfall in this Fiscal Year.

We call upon the Colorado General Assembly to initiate a thorough financial audit, with specific focus on the funds allocated to Colorado’s Support Services Provider (SSP) program, to adequately meet the needs of current eligible recipients, to eliminate the waiting list for SSP services, and do outreach for other deafblind citizens who may qualify and benefit from SSP services.

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**NEED FOR URGENT ACTION TO PREVENT ONGOING DISCRIMINATION AGAINST**

**THE BLIND BY TRANSPORTATION NETWORK COMPANIES**

Access to transportation means access to employment, education, family, worship, medical care, and civic life. For more than a decade, transportation network companies (also known as rideshare providers) such as Uber and Lyft have changed the transportation landscape for tens of thousands of Colorado residents. Transportation network companies have become an indispensable option in the Colorado transit system, especially as public transit options have failed to fully rebound since the COVID pandemic. This is certainly true for many Coloradans who are blind, low vision, or deafblind, for whom driving is not an option.

Far too often, however, blind riders with guide dogs are denied transportation when drivers find out that they will be transporting a passenger with a guide dog. These service denials are discriminatory and create unwarranted obstacles to the ability of the blind to live the lives we want on terms of equality with our peers who can see. Despite our concerted advocacy, we who are blind are finding denial of transportation services by transportation network companies to be increasing in frequency—to the extent that some guide dog handlers are being forced to consider abandoning the use of guide dogs as a primary and equalizing travel tool. What should be a great equalizer for people with disabilities has become a source of exclusion and profound anxiety.

For many years, the National Federation of the Blind of Colorado has worked diligently with community partners to end the horrendous practice of discrimination by transportation network company drivers, which is a clear violation of state and federal laws. Although there seems to be some progress on the national level through increased dialog with Uber, constant denials of service continue to blight the everyday lives of riders with service animals, creating unwarranted barriers to jobs, education, and community life. Attempts by the National Federation of the Blind of Colorado to engage in productive dialog with the Colorado Department of Regulatory Agencies have met with little response, making the need for higher-level intervention abundantly clear.

We call upon the Colorado General Assembly to hold public hearings, possibly through an interim study committee, to discover and highlight the systemic and rampant discrimination against blind guide dog users by rideshare drivers, and to develop a legislative solution for the same.

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**SUPPORT THE COLORADO CENTER FOR THE BLIND AND**

**NFB SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAMS**

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/low vision individuals in our state and from all over the world. We believe blind people can do anything. Every day, we encourage and challenge each student—and they come to understand their potential as they build the skills and confidence to live the life they want. Because when you believe in yourself and experience a thriving community of positive blind people, nothing can hold you back from pursuing your dreams.

CCB programs serve all ages from kids as young as elementary age to seniors. CCB teaches cane travel/orientation and mobility, Braille, technology, independent daily living skills, employment skills, and much, much more. Nearly all 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 two hundred thousand dollars are awarded each year and provide real opportunity for deserving students. Interested applicants can find more information at <https://nfb.org/scholarships>.

On a state level, the NFB of Colorado offers up to five scholarships to blind men and women attending a post-secondary institution. 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/low vision post-secondary student you know about these valuable scholarship opportunities.

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