**MEMORANDUM**

To: The Members of the Colorado General Assembly

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

Date: February 18, 2025

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 work toward full access for the blind to participation in all aspects of society, including insuring basic civil rights, securing meaningful employment and education for the blind, thus allowing us, the blind, to live the lives we want.

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 to blind students. 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, including recent legislation strengthening the rights of parents with disabilities and accessible prescription labeling. Where positive changes are happening in the blindness field, there is a good chance that the Federation is involved.

**2025 LEGISLATIVE AGENDA**

1. Maintain access to critical news sources for blind Coloradans through funding for NFB-Newsline®
2. Empanel an interim study committee to hold public hearings to discover and highlight the systemic and rampant discrimination against blind guide dog users by rideshare drivers, and to develop a legislative solution.
3. We include a fact sheet on federal laws and funded programs which are critical to blind Coloradans.

For further information on any of these issues contact:

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**MAINTAIN ACCESS TO CRITICAL NEWS SOURCES FOR BLIND**

**COLORADANS THROUGH FUNDING FOR NFB-NEWSLINE**®

Access to information from the newspapers and magazines of our nation and state plays a critical role for each of us as informed and participating citizens. 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.

For nearly two decades, 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, Colorado State Library’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. Because TUDF funding comes from a small (currently 3 cents per phone line) tax on land and VOIP mobile phones, there is not a direct impact on the General Fund.

This year, HB25-1154 seeks to create an enterprise that would house other programs that rely on TUDF funds, principally those in the Commission for the Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and Deaf-blind. Initial drafts included NFB-NEWSLINE® and AfterSight, the two reading services for the blind housed in the Colorado State Library’s Talking Book Library. At the time of this writing, possible amendments to HB25-1154 may result in keeping the reading services for the blind, including NFB-NEWSLINE®, in the Library. We are comfortable with either option, so long as the NFB-NEWSLINE® funding of $120,000 doesn’t get lost somewhere along the way.

Thus, we ask your support for maintaining the current funding of $120,000 for NFB-NEWSLINE® regardless of where it is finally located for FY 2026.

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**CALL FOR INTERIM STUDY TO DETERMINE 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, leaving the erstwhile rider stranded, causing them to be late for work, medical appointments, or picking up children from childcare or activities. 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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# **LAWS THE BLIND DEPEND ON**

Fifteen members of the National Federation of the Blind of Colorado attended our annual Washington Seminar from Feb. 3 to Feb. 6 in our nation’s capital. Along with our other legislative priorities in Congress, we shared this fact sheet with the members of the Colorado delegation. The following are federal laws that impact the lives of Blind Coloradans, and are offered for information purposes:

## **THE REHABILITATION ACT OF 1973**

Section 501 prohibits the federal government from discriminating against people with disabilities in employment and requires reasonable accommodations for federal employees.

Section 503 prohibits federal contractors from discriminating against individuals with disabilities in employment, including requiring reasonable accommodations.

Section 504 prohibits the federal government and federal grantees from discriminating on the basis of disability in providing programs and services.

Section 508 requires federal technology, including websites, software, and technology provided by vendors, to be accessible to the blind.

## **THE AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT**

Title I of the ADA prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities by private and public employers.

Title II of the ADA prohibits state and local governments from discriminating on the basis of disability in their programs and services, including requiring reasonable modifications and requiring their websites and applications to be accessible to the blind. Title II ensures that voting, transportation, justice systems and government services are accessible to the blind.

Title III of the ADA prohibits disability discrimination by private public accommodations in their goods, services, and information, including reasonable modifications and accessible websites and applications.

## **INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES EDUCATION ACT**

The IDEA requires public schools to accommodate students with disabilities and to provide specialized education services when students need them. Braille literacy is essential to blind students and, therefore, they need specialized Braille instruction and Braille equipment. They also need access technology, such as screen reading software, audio materials, large print materials, and tactile graphics, all of which are considered special education. The IDEA provides for important due process protections that allow parents of students with disabilities to resolve disputes with their schools without resorting to the courts.

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# **FEDERAL FUNDING THE BLIND DEPEND ON**

## **SPECIAL EDUCATION**

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act provides federal funding to states to provide required “special education” services for public school students with disabilities. While states provide most of the special education funding, the federal government provides about $15 billion. This serves some 7.5 million students. Special education services for the blind include Braille instruction, access technologies, and specialized teachers of the blind.

## **VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION**

The federal government provides grants to states to provide “vocational rehabilitation” (VR) programs to help people with disabilities become employed. The federal government provides about 79 percent of the funding, with states providing the rest. VR programs serve over 800,000 individuals each year. Without VR services, many blind people would be unable to gain employment, leaving them reliant on public benefits to survive.

## **FREE MATTER FOR THE BLIND**

The US Postal Service provides free postage for special material used by blind individuals, such as Braille or audio material. Organizations who serve the blind rely on this service to keep costs down, which, due to the size of the materials, would be cost-prohibitive. *(Note: The Colorado Talking Book Library relies on the Free Matter program to move its specialized formats and equipment to and from its patrons.)*

## **NATIONAL LIBRARY SERVICE FOR THE BLIND AND INSTITUTE OF**

## **MUSEUM AND LIBRARY SERVICES**

NLS provides free Braille and recorded materials to the blind. IMLS is a federal agency that helps libraries and museums. An important part of IMLS funding supports libraries to be accessible to the blind. Without access to library services, blind people would lose access to information, education, and entertainment others take for granted.

## **OLDER BLIND PROGRAMS**

Federally-funded state-run older blind programs serve blind individuals over age 54 to help them live independently. The programs teach independent living skills so blind people can remain in their homes and communities and avoid placement in expensive nursing homes.

## **PROTECTION & ADVOCACY**

Each state has a federally-funded “protection and advocacy” program that represents people with disabilities facing abuse, civil rights violations, denials of benefits, and lack of access to health care, education, employment, housing, transportation, and voting.

## **MEDICAID**

Medicaid is a federal grant program to states to cover health care for low-income and disabled individuals. The federal government provides about 70 percent of the funding and states making up the rest. Without Medicaid funding, many blind people would lose access to health care, including treatment for their vision disabilities.

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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 are 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 students 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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