

FALL/WINTER,
2016

THE FEDERATIONIST

Executive Editor | Kathryn Webster

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From the Editor

By Kathryn Webster

Executive Editor, The Federationist

In this edition of the Federationist, we will dive into an array of interests, discussion topics, and updates from both our Affiliate and our National levels. After celebrating 75 years of success, progress, and commitment, join us in reading an excerpt from the 2015 Banquet speech presented by President Mark Riccobono during our Diamond Anniversary. As the newsletter progresses, we will learn about a legislative issue our Affiliate is facing in regard to guide dogs. This past November, the National Federation of the Blind of Connecticut collaborated with the National Association of Blind Students to host a student legislative workshop. Joining us during our State Convention, 25 students from neighboring states, as well as our own Connecticutians, gathered to learn and reflect on national policy issues we are fighting for throughout the year. With such a remarkable turnout, two students have shared their thoughts on the success of the seminar. Later, we will dive into a reflective piece written by a parent of a blind child. With love, hope, and determination, Carol Castellano shares some insight into parenting a blind child, while encouraging equal treatment. After a successful launch of our Connecticut BELL Program last summer, our Affiliate chose to continue this week of enrichment by hosting yet another program in Central Connecticut. Kathryn Webster has passed the torch as State Coordinator to Beth Rival; and we are eager for an even better turnout this August! Finally, dive into our last two articles regarding STEM accessibility in the Nutmeg state, as well as a fruitful article written by our Legislative Director, Justin Salisbury, concerning local and national advocacy.

Thank you for reading!

Please direct any suggestions, comments, or concerns to Kathryn Webster, executive Editor, at kathrynwebster.nfb@gmail.com.

The Federation at Seventy-Five: An Excerpt from the 2015 Banquet Speech

By Mark Riccobono

President, National Federation of the Blind

As we come to the diamond anniversary banquet of the National Federation of the Blind, I find myself wondering about value, our value, and how it has evolved over time. Sometimes the story is similar to that of the diamond, but sometimes it is distinctly different. As we join together tonight to consider our past and to contemplate our future, we know with certainty how our value is determined and where our hope and energy is restored. For just as the diamond exhibits value, so does the National Federation of the Blind shine with love, hope, and determination as a collective reflection of the value each blind person brings to our movement. Like the individual carbon atoms, under pressure we have bonded together in love and faith to demonstrate to ourselves and to others that we have value—we are the blind, we have come to celebrate, and we will let our value shine. We are the National Federation of the Blind.

Diamonds are created out of individual carbon atoms being placed under intense pressure for a long period of time. Similarly, for nearly all of history prior to the founding of our organization in 1940, blind people faced tremendous suppression of our true value to society. The earliest humans learned that the night—the absence of the ability to see clearly—was something to be feared. Blind people at best were left to be beggars in developing communities. At worst, blind people were left to die or were exterminated outright in order to relieve society of the cost associated with the tragedy of blindness.

In the late middle ages, a greater enlightenment prevailed and provisions were made to care for the unfortunate blind through almshouses and other segregated institutions. These provisions were not meant to maximize our potential, provide meaningful training, or bring us into the mainstream of society. Thus, the pressure continued to build, society perpetuated the notion that the blind had little value, and we as blind people came to internalize that misunderstanding.

There was no hope of changing the determination of the value of the blind until we, the blind of this nation, chose to build a new model. A diamond is an extremely tough substance that requires special tools to be cut. The job of cutting is much easier and exponentially more effective when another diamond is used to do the work. As blind people in the United States of America began to explore the value we could offer, we found fault in the limits that had been placed upon us. Blind people found opportunities to come together with other blind people and they established state-based organizations where the blind first began to understand the power of collective action. In the state of California, Dr. Newell Perry was the chief diamond cutter who gave shape to the first leaders of the organized blind movement. Dr. Perry, a teacher by instinct and

mathematician by training, knew from his own difficult experience the tremendous struggle a blind person must endure in order to demonstrate true value. He dedicated his life to helping the blind of the next generation learn that value was not measured by the degree of vision in their eyes, but rather by the degree of determination, education, and heart they possessed. Among the rough diamonds that Dr. Perry cut was Jacobus tenBroek, who called on the blind of this nation to establish a vehicle for collective action—the National Federation of the Blind.

We faced struggles in the late fifties that challenged our toughness and commitment. At the beginning, we were a small corps of blind people seeking to build value for each other. Two short decades later, we were a powerful movement that a small group, emboldened by the agencies, desired to control for their own self-interests. This period of instability—sometimes referred to as the civil war—helped solidify our organizational values and deepen our commitment to securing an authentic organization of the blind. From the perspective of seventy-five years, the period of internal struggle within the Federation is relatively small. Yet the core values that we strengthened at that time—democracy, collective action, respect, full participation, love for one another, and a commitment to sharing our resources—have contributed significantly to the fifty-plus years of our movement since that time. We have established stability, which has fed growth, which has created a base of power from which we can demonstrate our value to society. We are the blind and we intend to let our value shine.

It is this last element—testing the limits of our value—that has characterized the next and current phase of our movement. We have come together to determine our value and to reflect our hope; we have pushed against the institutional and social pressures that suppressed our value; we have cultivated value and put it to work; and we have implemented an aggressive program to eliminate the barriers that prevent us from giving our full value. While this is a great start, our work is not done. We have not reached the limits of our value. Are we inherently limited by blindness, or can we continue to expand the horizons?

Have we discovered all of the barriers that stand in our way, or are there still real and perceived obstacles preventing us from showing our full potential?

Are we as blind people doing our part to maximize that value, or do we continue to fall into the limits of low expectations? Or to say it another way, are we truly living the lives we want and letting our value shine?

Unlike diamonds, which are a commodity under the control of a consortium, we own the rights to our future, and we intend to let our value shine. We, the members of this organization, are the single most powerful force in determining the value of our participation in the marketplace. That is a tremendous risk and a tremendous opportunity. If we stop where we are—settling for the progress we have made—we will most certainly lose the value we have gained and fail to realize our potential. But we will not stop, we will not settle, the future will be ours.

My brothers and my sisters, we are the blind and we have bonded together. We have built a legacy of hope and determination. We work today with love and commitment. And we welcome tomorrow with faith and imagination. We have learned our value and we will not give it back; we have taught each other to explore the limits and we have not found the boundaries; we have cultivated the power of our collective action and we will not release the bond of hope. Let us go shine our value. Let us go live the lives we want. And let us go build the Federation.

The Necessary Separation of Guide Dogs and Health Insurance

By Justin Salisbury

Legislative Director, National Federation of the Blind of Connecticut

In 2016, in the Connecticut General Assembly, Raised Bill 35 requires health insurance companies to purchase service and assistance dogs for people with disabilities or related medical conditions, such as sudden seizures, autism, or post-traumatic stress disorder. Some people with disabilities other than blindness want these service animals in order to fulfill their medical needs, and some of them have requested that this bill be introduced. Without consulting the organized blind community, guide dogs have been added into this bill. Some of the legislative staff in our state government decided that they did not want to leave out any type of service animals when writing this legislation so that they could extend this benefit to all users of service animals. Their hearts were in the right place, but they are missing some critical information about the nature of blindness, the function of a guide dog, and how guide dog schools are currently funded. Regardless of the positive intent, this bill language will threaten the guide dog industry as we know it.

The real problem of blindness is not the lack of eyesight; it is the low expectations and misinformation which exist in our society. Given the proper rehabilitation services and opportunity to achieve, blind people can lead normal and productive lives. There is a common misperception that the problem of blindness is contained within the eye conditions that cause the lack of eyesight. If this were true, there would be no point in providing blind people with rehabilitation services and very little point in having an organized blind movement. Blindness would lead to unavoidable and permanent peril, and the only relief for that peril would be the restoration of eyesight. In the National Federation of the Blind, we know from our own life experiences that blind people can raise families, succeed in our careers, and live the lives we want. The connection between blindness and healthcare is tangential at the most. If rehabilitation services become entangled in health insurance and other medical systems, it will change who controls rehabilitation services and how they are administered. It will institutionalize and perpetuate the misperceptions in society which oppress us and contribute to our 70 percent unemployment rate.

In the United States of America, funding for rehabilitation services is rightfully kept separate from funding for medical treatment. The Rehabilitation Services Administration, for example, is housed within the United States Department of Education. This is done for a reason. While an eye condition is still being treated and the restoration of eyesight is still being actively and realistically pursued, that eye condition is an illness and falls within the domain of healthcare. Once the restoration of that person's eyesight is no longer a realistic and active pursuit by medical treatment, a blind person can begin to move on with his or her life, and he or she transitions from medical treatment to blindness rehabilitation. An individual may properly be

said to be “blind” or a “blind person” when he or she must employ enough alternative techniques in order to function efficiently that his or her pattern of daily living is substantially altered. When vision is not functioning, it does not affect other body systems; it is a sensory issue, which is not an illness.

Rehabilitation services include the provision of training in the alternative techniques used by blind people and the equipment to make independence and gainful employment possible. Some blind people choose to use guide dogs to navigate their environment, enabling them to pursue gainful employment. Guide dogs and guide dog schools do not contribute to the restoration of eyesight or the management of any health condition. In fact, potential guide dog puppies who demonstrate any tendency to do anything other than guide their users, such as those which display protective instincts, are dismissed from the guide dog schools. A contrasting example could be a service dog which is trained to smell a hormone that a person secretes before having a seizure and alert that person so that he or she can take a medication to prevent the seizure. That service dog is providing a medical service; however, a guide dog is specifically and exclusively a mobility tool like a long white cane.

Currently, the acquisition of guide dogs from guide dog schools is governed by the guide dog schools themselves. Nobody but the guide dog school gets to decide if a blind person can obtain a guide dog. Raised Bill 35 will shift the acquisition of guide dogs to being governed by a medical model so that medical service providers will be making decisions about what types of rehabilitation services blind people need, which they are absolutely not trained to do. The professionals at the guide dog schools can handle their own intake, and many other rehabilitation professionals exist to offer consultation. Involving healthcare providers in these decisions is unnecessary and inappropriate.

Guide dog schools currently benefit from a great deal of autonomy because they are currently funded philanthropically. Guide dog schools have fundraising or “donor relations” departments instead of billing departments. Guide dog schools have been able to fund themselves since the 1920s, and they answer predominantly to their consumers, fundraising alumni, and generous donors. If a blind person wants a guide dog, he or she typically pays an optional fee of about 60 dollars and receives multiple weeks of free room and board at the guide dog school while training with their new dog. The cost of the dog is already covered by philanthropic contributions and any received grants. We all know that philanthropists want their contributions to make a difference. If Raised Bill 35 is passed as written, a prospective donor will then look at guide dog schools as entities whose expenses are already covered by health insurance companies under the legal mandate. Rational philanthropists can be expected to shift their contributions to other causes that are not already guaranteed funding from other sources by legal mandate so that their donations will actually make a difference. Guide dog schools will become dependent upon the funding from health insurance companies, and their success will be based upon the number of guide dogs produced instead of the proper provision of rehabilitation services. Sometimes, guide dog schools reject students who would be best-served by rehabilitation services other than guide dogs, thus encouraging them to seek those types of services that will suit them best. If Raised Bill 35 strips guide dog schools of the financial autonomy that currently allows them to do that,

blind people who should be receiving other blindness training are going to end up receiving guide dogs.

Raised Bill 35 requires that guide dogs come from an accredited, non-profit organization, but no accreditation standards have been developed with sufficient consumer participation. The guide dog schools themselves have formed alliances to issue accreditations. The accreditations that do exist are currently inconsequential to guide dog schools and blind consumers. It is no surprise that guide dog school accreditations have thus not been a focal point of the organized blind movement.

We, the blind consumers, are the only ones that can speak for ourselves when it comes to guide dogs. The National Federation of the Blind of Connecticut, an affiliate of the oldest and largest organization of blind people in the United States, has been the voice of Connecticut's blind since 1971. We work to achieve equality, opportunity, and security for the blind at the state and federal levels in active consultation with 50,000 colleagues nationwide. It is our right and responsibility to urge the Connecticut General Assembly to remove any and all inclusion of blind persons or guide dogs from Raised Bill 35. We can and will use every media outlet possible to educate the public about the danger posed by Raised Bill 35. We must clarify and emphasize that guide dogs used by blind persons are a tool of independent travel given and trained for in a model of education and rehabilitation and not in a model of medical services nor by medical professionals. The distinction between guide dogs on the one hand and assistance dogs given by medical professionals, for medical necessity, and paid for by health insurance on the other hand should not be considered illegal or harmful discrimination. The National Federation of the Blind fully respects the right of organizations of persons with disabilities other than blindness to succeed in legislating for services to which they believe they should be entitled so long as they do not infringe upon the rights of the blind. All mention of guide dogs and blind people must be removed from Raised Bill 35.

Leading Lives through Laws: Reflections from Our Students

On November 7th, 2015, the National Association of Blind Students (NABS,) in conjunction with the National Federation of the Blind of Connecticut (NFB of CT,) held our first-ever regional legislative seminar. During this afternoon of moderated discussion and interactive dialogue, students of all ages were able to learn effective advocacy skills alongside national student leaders. This Legislative Leadership Workshop taught students about the current issues we are working on, conducted mock meetings with Congressmen, learned how to communicate with different representatives, and so much more! Join us in reading reflections of the seminar from two of our active attendees, Alex Anderson and Nefertiti Matos.

Alex Anderson is a dedicated Board Member of the Massachusetts Association of Blind Students (MASSABS) and a 2014 national scholarship winner. Currently, he is in his sophomore year at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts. Upon graduation, he hopes to attend law school. In this article, Alex hones in on one of his interests: advocacy.

At the 2015 state convention of the National Federation of the Blind of Connecticut, The National Association of Blind Students and the Connecticut Affiliate brought a fascinating new idea to the foreground of educating blind students about the legislative goals of the Federation. NABS President Sean Whalen, with the help of Kathryn Webster, Justin Salisbury, Bre Brown, and Hindley Williams, ran an influential interactive seminar in which students were encouraged to participate in discussions and engage in active feedback about the issues of 2015 in the Federation.

At the start of the workshop, students gathered together in a room and were given a short lecture on current legislation, as well as strategies for speaking to congressional representatives. After a brief and informative back and forth between Whalen and the students in attendance, we were broken up into four groups, each led by an older and/or more informed student who had been chosen ahead of time by Sean to serve on the leadership committee. For the remainder of the event the room was periodically broken up into these same teams and tasked with a wide range of activities and games.

Among these activities was a Federation adaptation of the game show "Family Feud" wherein two teams would be pitted head-to-head to ascertain which group of students had a stronger conceptual grasp of the legislative information we had been given. This was really a fantastic way to get all the students involved and invested in the information. There were jokes and

laughter and wacky hijinks all around as we compared our thoughts and ideas to the results of the survey President Whalen conducted amongst professional lobbyists, advocates, and former Capitol Hill staff prior to the event.

Perhaps the highlight of the whole event was the role-playing. We were broken up into our four teams once again and given Braille and large print information packets pertaining to current Federation legislative goals such as AIMHEA as well as the Marrakesh Treaty, and were given time to read and absorb information from both, in addition to what President Whalen had already told us about both topics. After absorbing the information and spending several minutes strategizing, each group of students played the part of a group of legislative activists while the Leadership Committee, including President Whalen, played the parts of imaginary Congressmen to whom it was our job to pitch both pieces of legislation. It was an excellent way to build teamwork and a great simulation of real life experience for each student involved.

After the wild success of this first student legislative workshop, I very much hope we see other workshops funneling the same model crop at other NFB conventions around the country. They are a great way to get blind students enthusiastically involved in one of the Federation's most important aspects. It was informative, entertaining, well put together, and generally a lot of fun for everyone involved. With this new-gained knowledge, I am ready to join our Federation family on Capitol Hill this January at our annual Washington Seminar!

Nefertiti Matos is the newly elected secretary/treasurer of the New York Association of Blind students (NYABS) and a 2015 national scholarship winner. She attends SUNY: State Empire College in New York City where she is pursuing a degree in community and human services. Although Nefertiti has only been to one Washington Seminar, she was quick to realize her passion for changing the legislative agenda for blind people.

How excited we fellow New York students were when we learned that we had the opportunity to attend the 2015 Student Legislative Seminar launch. We packed our bags and boarded a train to Connecticut, our minds ready to learn and our spirits ready to join our NABS leaders in the fight for equal access to education. This seminar promised to teach us the ins and outs of legislative advocacy so that, come January, we too could march on Capitol Hill with confidence and knowhow. It did not disappoint.

The organizers must have had those of us who's hearts palpitate at the mere thought of attending a collegiate-style four-hour long lecture in mind, as the seminar was put together in such a way

that sitting and idly listening wasn't an option. Sean Whalen (President), Bre Brown (Second Vice-President), Katherine Webster (Secretary/Treasurer), Hindley Williams (Board 1), Justin Salisbury (former Connecticut Association of Blind Students division president), with the full support of NFBCT president Edward Shaham had us up on our feet from start to finish. We eagerly asked and answered questions, competed good naturedly during a Family Feud-like game, and studied for and carried out mock meetings with members on both sides of the political spectrum. We learned useful techniques for how to best speak to democrats and republicans on the same issue, and came away with vital dos and don'ts to ensure our success in Washington.

We were at once entertained and fully engaged, and I for one thoroughly lost myself in the experience. I think it safe to say that everyone, from those who had gone to Washington Seminar previously to those whose first time is on the horizon, went away from this event that much more enthused and well-versed on the issues we currently face. The hands-on group work we participated in allowed us to get to know one another better, and we were able to compare war stories as they relate to our higher education struggles. We all agree that the injustices we as blind students encounter on a daily basis are appalling and unnecessary. Thanks to the Student Legislative Seminar, we are all now better equipped to speak up for our rights as blind students. We shall arrive on mass at Capitol Hill, armed with the dedication and knowledge to push forward our noble causes and worthy legislation. Washington, DC, here we come!

Possibilities

By Carol Castellano

It took my daughter Serena a long time to decide just what she wanted to be when she grew up, whereas, my son was only four when he decided that he would be a dinosaur scientist. It wasn't until she was seven that Serena realized that her destiny in life was to be a folksinger. Happily she played the chords to her favorite song, "Michael Row the Boat Ashore," on my guitar.

Then came the Presidential campaign of 1992. Serena was eight. She sat rapt before the television listening intently to the speeches of both parties. After the summer's two national conventions, she realized that it wasn't a folksinger that she wanted to be after all ... it was a folksinging Senator. By late fall, having heard all three Presidential debates, Serena was going to be President.

Her barrage of questions about how she could learn to be President and conversations about what politicians do kept up for so long that my husband and I were convinced she really might go into politics when she was older.

In the late spring of this year, Serena went out with her father to pick early snow peas from the garden. Coming inside with her basket of peas, she told me she was very interested in gardening. "That's wonderful," I replied. "You'll be a big help to Daddy."

Overnight Serena's interest must really have taken root, because the next day she asked me if I thought the gardens at the White House were too big for the President to tend, since the President is such a busy person. "Yes," I replied. "I'm sure there's a staff of people who take care of the White House gardens." "Well then, I won't be a gardening President," she told me. "I'll just be a gardener."

The desire to be a gardener was still but a tender shoot when Serena took a piano lesson—just a few weeks after picking those peas—and realized it was a pianist she wanted to be!

Serena is at such a wonderful stage of life! Interested in everything, trying everything out, she sees the world as her plum, ripe for the picking. She believes in herself, as we believe in her. And since what people believe largely determines what they do, it is critically important for parents of blind children (and other adults in the child's life) to have positive beliefs about blindness and what blind people can do.

If we are told (in a journal article or by a teacher of the blind, say) that blind children usually do not or cannot learn how to do a certain task, and if we come to believe this, chances are we will not give our child the experience or opportunity anyone would need in order to do this task. And chances are the child won't learn to do it. Imagine, though, if we—and our blind children—were never told that blind people couldn't accomplish a certain thing. Imagine what the results might be if everyone believed that blind people could do anything they wanted to! Well, I believe

this—and attending National Federation of the Blind National Conventions has solidified this belief for Me.* It is this belief which guides the way I bring up my daughter.

Sometimes in the literature I read the phrase “accepting the child’s blindness.” That word acceptance always causes me concern; what different people mean by acceptance can be entirely opposite things. To some, “accepting the child’s blindness” means accepting—or coming to believe—that because the child is blind, there will be limits to what the child can do, limits to what he or she can understand, limits to what he or she can learn. (They often refer to these beliefs as “being realistic.”) It is easy to see what the effects of that kind of thinking will be.

When I consider the term “accepting the child’s blindness,” I think about accepting that the child is blind, learning and coming to believe that blindness need not stop the child from achieving what he or she wishes, and allowing, indeed insisting, that the child learn the alternative techniques of blindness that will enable him or her to achieve the desired results!

Find a way, parents. Keep all the doors open. Glory in the exhilarating feeling of watching a child look toward the future and see only possibilities.

We Are Ringing the BELL Again in 2016

By Beth Rival

BELL State Coordinator, National Federation of the Blind of Connecticut

The National Federation of the Blind of CT will once again host a week-long Braille Enrichment for Literacy and Learning (BELL) Program in 2016! Our BELL Program will be held in the central Connecticut area from August 8th through the 12th for children ages 4 to 12 years old. In addition to Braille crafts and other fun hands-on projects, games and a field trip to the Dinosaur State Park, children will learn vital independent living skills. Our BELL Program helps build self-confidence and positive attitudes because successful, blind people will facilitate the majority of the lessons.

Please help spread the word about our BELL Program this summer! We need to raise awareness about Braille! We need to bring blind children together for a fun week! For more information, any questions, or to help with the 2016 BELL Program in Connecticut, contact Beth Rival, State Coordinator or Ellen Shumann, or BELL instructor, by calling our outreach office at 860-289-1971 or by emailing info@nfbct.org.

Accessible Astronomy Workshops Offered for Students who are Blind or Visually Impaired

Two tactile astronomy workshops will be offered on Saturday, May 21, 2016 at the McCarthy Observatory in New Milford, Connecticut.

Noreen Grice, an accessible astronomy educator, author and founder of You Can Do Astronomy LLC, will present both workshops.

The Constellation Workshop takes place from 11 a.m. – 12:30 p.m. and includes activities on how to identify star patterns by touch using a tactile star chart. In the Moon Workshop, offered from 1 p.m. – 2:30 p.m., students will learn to identify the moon's phases and explore the lunar surface. Both workshops include hands-on activities and materials to take home.

These workshops are presented at no charge to students and are designed for blind or visually impaired students in grades 7 – 12. Students can sign up for one or both workshops. Participation is limited to 16 students for each workshop, and pre-registration is required.

Please contact Elaine Green (ebgreen2fly@aol.com) to register for one or both workshops, or call 203-526-7071 with any questions. When registering, please state whether the participating student reads Braille or large print, and provide a contact email for the student.

The McCarthy Observatory is located on the campus of New Milford High School, Route 7, and New Milford, Connecticut. You Can Do Astronomy LLC makes astronomy and space science accessible.

Legislation Affecting the Blind of Connecticut in 2016

By Justin Salisbury

Legislative Director, National Federation of the Blind of Connecticut

Members and leaders in the National Federation of the Blind of Connecticut have been hard at work in recent months to strive for success in our policy agenda. We always need more help, and each additional member who joins in the work will enhance our success and raise the expectations of blind people.

In the summer of 2015, a blind woman from East Hartford gave birth to her second child. She was already successfully caring for her first child, but this was her first time giving birth as a blind woman. She noticed that the way that the hospital personnel were treating her was quite different than it had been during her first experience, but that was before she became blind. After she gave birth, the hospital personnel and social workers took her baby away from her. It did not matter that she was already caring for her first child successfully. In their opinions, blindness rendered her incapable of caring for her newborn son. Our state statutes do not explicitly specify that blindness cannot be used as a justification to terminate parental rights. We can change that if we can find a champion for the Blind Persons Right to Parent Act in Connecticut, which will simply ensure that blindness cannot be used as a justification to terminate parental rights.

In 2015, State Senator Dante Bartolomeo introduced a bill that would require health insurance companies to pay for the purchase of guide dogs. This bill was well-intended but would cause many problems in the guide dog system. We came out against this bill, requesting that anything related to blindness be removed from the bill or that the bill not be passed. The bill never came to a vote. This year, Raised Bill 35, if passed, will require health insurance companies to purchase assistance dogs and guide dogs for people whose healthcare providers declare them a medical necessity. The guide dogs will have to come from accredited, non-profit organizations. It appears to be the same exact bill. For many reasons, outlined in another article in this issue of *The Federationist in Connecticut*, we are requesting that guide dogs be removed from this bill.

Last year, a bill was proposed to remove the opportunities for blind vendors under the Randolph-Sheppard vending program at all facilities run by the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection. We fought, and we were able to get them to reduce the bill's language to involve an investigation last year so that they could gather evidence to cut the blind vendors' jobs this year. A bill to take away these jobs has not come across our radar yet this year. Regardless, it is absolutely vital that we rally the blind vendors in Connecticut this year. At the 2015 state convention of the National Federation of the Blind of Connecticut, we created a Connecticut Association of Blind Merchants, a division of NFBCT, like many other affiliates have done. It

enables us to focus on vendors' affairs as a cause affecting our members and to have voices from the vendors' community coming from within our affiliate. With a strong and new merchants' division, we can be in a great position to advocate for the careers of blind vendors.

At the federal level, we are working on our wish list, the Legislative Agenda of Blind Americans. We are fighting for the passage of H.R. 188, the Transition to Integrated and Meaningful Employment (TIME) Act, which will phase out the provision within the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) that currently allows employers to pay workers with disabilities wages less than the minimum wage. We have actually found a worker being paid \$0.00 per hour, where the employer has been writing it up as employment. With the help of our sponsor, Congressman Gregg Harper of Mississippi, we are working to end the exploitation. Congressman Joe Courtney is the only Connecticut congressman who has cosponsored the bill. We are also attempting to pass a state-level version of this bill just as New Hampshire did in 2015.

The Accessible Instructional Materials in Higher Education (AIM HE) Act is on our agenda again, but the bill has yet to be dropped in the legislature. Since the higher education lobby, the American Council on Education, came out against us near the end of the last session, our national legislative leaders have been meeting with them to negotiate new language that we will both support. If they will not agree to support legislation that blind students need, we will try to pass it without them.

The third bill is the Equal Access to Air Travel for Service-Disabled Veterans (HR 2264). This bill will include 100 percent service-disabled veterans with service-connected disabilities to participate in the space-available flight program in our armed forces. Currently, if there is a military flight with open seats, people are allowed to get into those free seats until they are full. Active duty military members have the first priority, followed by anyone needing emergency medical treatment. After that, retired veterans can get in line. This bill would enable disabled veterans who did not reach retirement to get in line at the priority level of a retired veteran. This bill was amended into the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) in the House of Representatives in each of the past two sessions. The NDAA has been rushed through the Senate without considering any amendments, so then this language has been eliminated by the conference committee from the version written into law. We just have to keep trying!

Earlier this month, President Barack Obama presented to the United States Senate the ratification package for the Marrakesh Treaty, which will enable blind Americans to obtain accessible materials that have already been produced in other countries. This will expand the scope and quality of the accessible books available to blind Americans. We continue to urge our Senators, Dick Blumenthal and Chris Murphy, to vote to ratify the treaty.