

**BLIND ENTREPRENEURS INITIATIVE**

**THE BLITZ**

**January - February 2015**

The winter cold has gripped most of the nation. The Northeast is seeing snow in amounts never seen before. The Federal Government has been shut down more than once and the closings had nothing to do with Congress, budgets, and spending cuts. It was that little white stuff. The South has gotten a taste of what real winters are like with frigid temperatures and plenty of ice and snow that paralyzes our cities. But regardless of the cold, Randolph-Sheppard issues remain hot. And although some of us may be trapped at home as the white stuff piles up outside, we remain hard at work on Randolph-Sheppard. Here are some of the highlights as to what is going on. Spoiler Alert! You will hear healthy vending more than once.

***NABM/NFBEI Take Healthy Approach to Healthy Vending –***There are two major developments with respect to NABM’s involvement with the healthy vending issues. NABM continues to be a leader in the Randolph-Sheppard community in addressing the healthy vending issue and equipping blind entrepreneurs with the tools they need to be successful.

1. ***NABM Endorses Fit Pick*** – The NABM Board of Directors voted to endorse NAMA’s Fit Pick Program as the preferred standard for blind entrepreneurs to use when trying to meet the needs of their customers. NABM has encouraged all blind entrepreneurs to familiarize themselves with the Fit Pick guidelines and ensure that they offer a sufficient number of product selections that meet the standards. The move was hailed by NAMA, which highlighted the endorsement in a February news release. “We salute NABM – they are working to meet the challenge of healthy vending head on,” said Eric Dell, Senior Vice President of Government Affairs. He went on to add, “NABM is taking the right steps to provide their customers with an informed choice for their snack purchases.” NABM is proud to work with NAMA to promote the Fit Pick standard.
2. ***NABM / NCSAB to Sponsor National Workshop –*** As further evidence of NABM’s commitment to assist blind entrepreneurs in meeting the needs of customers who want healthier choices, the organization will be teaming with the National Council of State Agencies for the Blind (NCSAB) to sponsor a one-day workshop in Washington, D.C. The decision to conduct this training is consistent with both NABM’s and NCSAB’s position that education and voluntary participation by blind entrepreneurs is the answer rather than unreasonable mandates. The workshop will be aimed at SLA staff, blind entrepreneurs, and other Randolph-Sheppard stakeholders. It will feature presentations by experts in the field as well as exhibits that feature healthy choices. The contract with the hotel has not been signed so an exact date has not been finalized but early June is the target date. An official announcement will be out in the coming days.

***Fly In and Let Your Voice Be Heard –***NABM and the NFBEI will be partnering with NCSAB on a blind entrepreneur fly-in designed at educating members of Congress on issues of interest to the Randolph-Sheppard community. The fly-in is tentatively scheduled for early June. The exact date and additional details will be available in the coming days. The fly-in will piggyback onto the healthy vending workshop so participants can attend both with one trip. All Randolph-Sheppard stakeholders including SLA’s are encouraged to attend. We will be setting up Congressional meetings for those who plan to attend and we will be focusing on members of certain committees. The primary focus will be on Department of Defense issues, the Veteran’s Administration, and the transportation bill. We need you there so your voice can be heard. Every single blind entrepreneur who operates a troop-dining contract owes it to himself to be there because it is your job we are defending. If your member of Congress is on either the Veterans Affairs committee or Veterans Affairs Appropriations Subcommittee, we need you there so we fight to bring the VA into compliance with the law and create opportunities for blind entrepreneurs. If you are a rest area vendor, we need for members of Congress to hear your story. Regardless of the type property or facility you operate, you can help us as we educate Congress. You owe it to yourself and to future generations of blind people to help us protect this great program.

***Hadley Enrolls First Students -*** You’ve been hearing about it for a year. It is finally a reality. In January, the NABM / Hadley On-Line Entry Level Training Program enrolled its first 3 students. Several more are in the works. These students will be the first to graduate from the on-line training program for potential blind licensees. “From the first day Terry Smith joined us, he has talked about the need for an on-line national curriculum for blind entrepreneurs,” said NABM President Nicky Gacos. “We are so happy that through this partnership with Hadley we have helped bring the first-ever national curriculum into being.” This training has the potential to be a major game changer in our field. It can replace the classroom training states now offer. In those states that have very little formal training, it will enhance the training experience. In those states that do have training, it can be more cost effective and offer an alternative to a blind client having to spend months away from home while in class. Check out the program at [www.hadley.edu](http://www.hadley.edu).

***Still on the Defense –*** In the last issue of The Blitz, we reported about two important developments regarding troop dining.

1. ***Defense Authorization Act*** - One was language that appeared without notice in the report language for the Defense Authorization Act directing DoD to promulgate rules implementing the famed Joint Policy Statement. As you will recall, the Department of Education, Department of Defense, and the AbilityOne Commission developed this Joint Policy Statement in 2007 with no input from the Randolph-Sheppard community. The resulting policy statement was found to be in violation of the Randolph-Sheppard Act in several areas, which explains why it was never implemented. You can only imagine our surprise when we saw the language directing DoD to implement something that is illegal. It is no exaggeration to say that if this becomes a reality then blind entrepreneurs will essentially be shut out of the troop-dining business and 40+ blind entrepreneurs will be looking for new work eventually. Without going into too much detail, we have had productive meetings with key Congressional staff and Administration officials and are confident that we have gotten our message across. But there is much still to do and this will be a key issue addressed with members of Congress during our June Fly-In.
2. ***Army Consolidation Effort –*** The Army issued a Sources Sought Notice seeking companies that could manage troop-dining contracts at 11 bases in 10 states. This issue is more difficult than the first and it is picking up less traction with politicians thus far. However, we continue to make our case against the consolidation effort that would displace 11 Randolph-Sheppard entrepreneurs and this too will be a topic at our June Fly-In. Our work is made even harder by the fact the Rehabilitation Services Administration says such multi-state contracts are permissible under the Randolph-Sheppard Act. We are not so sure since consolidation essentially would negate the priority by virtue of the fact it would be virtually impossible for 10 states to collaborate on one bid. Ultimately our strategy will not be to tell Congress the actions of DoD are illegal. Our strategy will be to make the case it is simply the wrong thing to do and totally unnecessary. The NFBEI did coordinate responses from most of the 10 states to the Sources Sought Notice and NABM and the NFBEI submitted comments as well. We are not sure as to the Army’s next step. They could issue an RFP or they could just drop the idea entirely. One thing is clear. The affected bases know even less than we do about this possible initiative and there will be great resistance by some base commanders to giving up control of food service. That can work to our advantage.

Now, do you wonder why we are having a fly-in? These two issues alone are enough to justify our collective action.

***It’s Vegas Baby – Mark Your Calendars –*** Are you planning on being at the NAMA One Show in Las Vegas in April? Well, now there is one more reason to attend. The RSA Buying Group is sponsoring a Randolph-Sheppard training to be held in conjunction with the NAMA show on Tuesday, April 21st. The RSA Buying Group has negotiated discounted registration rates for its members and the discounts have been extended to SLA’s. The RSA Buying Group is not affiliated with either consumer organization but NABM and the NFBEI are totally supportive of the training and encourage all blind entrepreneurs to attend if possible. Mark your calendars to be in Vegas to take in all that NAMA has to offer and plan to attend the Randolph-Sheppard training. For information about how to obtain the discounted registration, you can contact either Terry Smith or John Murn with the RSA Buying Group. In the meantime, look for a formal announcement in the next few days.

***More on Calorie Disclosure Coming Soon –***As was also reported in the last issue of The Blitz, the FDA issued final rules in December on calorie disclosure requirements in vending machines. These requirements go into effect in December of 2016. The FDA plans to issue a small entity compliance guide. We expect the guide to be out later this month. For purposes of this requirement, blind entrepreneurs are small entities. They are exempt from the requirement entirely if they operate fewer than 20 vending machines. As soon as this guidance is issued, we will try to get it out to everyone.

***NAMA to Invade Congress –*** NABM and NCSAB are not the only ones planning to invade Capitol Hill to educate members of Congress on vending issues. NAMA is sponsoring the first of what it hopes will be an annual event. *NAMA Takes the Hill 2015* will take place July 21-22 in Washington, D.C. NABM and NFBEI leadership have committed to participate in this industry-wide advocacy effort because we believe that what is good for the vending industry is good for blind entrepreneurs. If you wish to attend, you can register at [www.namavoice.org/2015flyin](http://www.namavoice.org/2015flyin). We understand that asking blind entrepreneurs to make two trips to D.C. in one summer to meet with your members of Congress is too much to ask. However, if you can afford both and want to be involved, your participation is welcome.

***WE Fit Wellness Keeping It Healthy –*** Former NABM Executive Director Kevan Worley has announced a bold new venture that capitalizes on the trend toward healthier lifestyles and fills a void in the disability community. Kevan resigned as the NABM Executive Director effective February 1st to concentrate on some new Worley Enterprises initiatives. One of those is the WE Fit Wellness Program. According to a January 15th press release, “WE Fit Wellness has three distinct but related components,” said Kevan Worley, company CEO. “Developing and operating corporate wellness initiatives, reaching organizations that serve people with disabilities with innovative, energizing exercise and nutrition strategies as well as bringing training to concession operators are all things we know how to do very well. The WE Fit Wellness initiative really is a model of social entrepreneurship that we not only endorse; it is a meaningful commitment we are proud to make.” Kevan has brought Jessica Beecham on board to direct this initiative. Although the NFBEI has no affiliation with the program, we are proud that Kevan has chosen to take on this important venture. For more information, visit their website at [www.wefitwellness.com](http://www.wefitwellness.com).

***Land of Lincoln; Land of Innovation*** - Kudos to the Illinois BEP for securing what may be one of the most intriguing business enterprises facilities in the country. As of April 1st, a blind entrepreneur will be managing the key retail activities at a state park. The Illinois BEP has secured a contract to manage a camping convenience store, large fee-for-admission outdoor swimming pool, and 20 waterfront cottages.  The BEP initially tried to exercise its State priority but was told that the priority does not apply to lodging facilities. Not to be deterred, the BEP submitted a bid and won the contract.  The cottages are like furnished apartments with a stove and small refrigerator with cookware/tableware. Seven are two-bed room and the others are single bedroom with 3 units wheelchair accessible. Every cottage has a million dollar view of Lake Carlyle, the largest man-made lake in Illinois. The pool has a capacity of 200 with showers and lockers. The camp store has a Laundromat, bait shop, commercial cooking area with hood, and a retail store. Congratulations Illinois. We are very proud of you.

***Merchants Meet at NFB’s Washington Seminar –***NABM merchants met on January 26 in Washington, D.C. in conjunction with the NFB Washington Seminar. Over 50 people attended the 3-hour session, which included several speakers. It was one of the largest January merchants meetings ever.

***BLAST ’15: Really?*** - Don’t look now but there may be BLAST 2015 after all. The next BLAST was tentatively planned for the Spring of 2016 but both internal and external pressures are causing us to rethink that plan. A decision will be made by the end of March as to whether or not to do BLAST in November. We can’t disclose the location but it will be an exciting new destination for BLAST if it happens. Stay tuned for more on this one.

***Attorney Training: We Really Started Something –***I’m talking about the attorney network training we did in 2012 and 2014. As you will recall, in 2012, we provided the first-ever training for state attorneys on Randolph-Sheppard. In 2014, we provided training again and this time half of it was on Randolph-Sheppard and the other half was on Vocational Rehabilitation. Now, the attorneys themselves have taken the bull by the horn and another training is being offered in April in conjunction with the Council of State Administrators for Vocational Rehabilitation (CSAVR) spring meeting. This training will include at least two presentations on Randolph-Sheppard. Yes, indeed, it looks like we started something and we are proud to have provided the forum for such training. We all benefit when our state attorneys are well trained on Randolph-Sheppard issues.

***Nothing Sweet About Sugar Taxes*** – We continue to see efforts in various state legislatures to tax sugar in candy and beverages. The most recent effort is in Connecticut and would place a 1-cent tax per ounce on candy and beverages that are high in sugar and calories. There is a similar bill in Illinois that would tax sugary drinks and the blind vendors there are following that bill closely and working on it. Illinois blind vendors are also facing legislation that would require a certain percentage of healthier items and products made in Illinois be placed in vending machines at the interstate rest areas. We are only going to see more and more such legislative attempts as states try to modify people’s eating habits while also generating dollars for tax coffers.

***On the Road Again*** – It was a quiet two months as far as travel is concerned as few states held their annual vendor meetings. Terry Smith was in Columbia, South Carolina for their annual meeting. Prior to the training, he spent a full afternoon with the SLA and Committee discussing how to make changes in the promotion rule. As part of their training program, he did two breakout sessions and one general session presentation. The travel schedule picks up in April. If your state would like to have Terry or someone else from the NFBEI present at your annual conference, provide upward mobility training, or staff training, let Terry know as soon as possible before everyone’s calendars fill up.

***Welcome Aboard: New States Join NFBEI –*** We would like to welcome 4 new states who have joined the NFBEI membership / subscription service. Our new states are Utah, New Mexico, North Dakota, and Massachusetts. If all of our current subscribers renew as we expect, we will be at 30 states. That means if your state does not subscribe, you are in the minority. We are very proud of this level of participation. You can help ensure our future funding by encouraging your state to join in. A recommendation from the Elected Committee of Blind Vendors would carry a lot of weight in a state’s decision. Remember, a state can use set aside dollars, state or highway unassigned funds, and/or federal dollars to pay for the membership / subscription service.

**You Can Still Help** –Do you like what the NFBEI is doing to advocate for the program on a national level and to assist individual state programs? If so, we can use your financial support. Over half of our support comes from the NFBEI subscriptions but we count on donations to make up the rest. If you would like to contribute to the cause, we would welcome your donation. If you want to make a donation, contact Terry Smith and he will walk you through the logistics.

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As I said, the temps may be cold but Randolph-Sheppard issues are hotter than ever. We remain vigilant and will continue to be a loud voice for all blind entrepreneurs. In the meantime, help us keep everyone informed about what is happening around the country. Let us hear from you. Tell us what is going on in your state. What is happening in one state affects what is going on in another, and the NFBEI is the vehicle to keep everyone updated on what is going on out there.

***GET THE BLITZ-READ THE BLITZ-SHARE THE BLITZ***

**PLEASE FEEL FREE TO SHARE THE BLITZ WITH OTHERS AND DISTRIBUTE ON YOUR LISTSERVS. WE WANT ALL BLIND ENTREPRENEURS, BEP ADMINISTRATORS, and OTHER STAKEHOLDERS TO KNOW WHAT THE NFBEI IS DOING**