

**BLIND ENTREPRENEURS INITIATIVE**

**THE BLITZ**

**Fall, 2015**

 I’ve had a lot of people ask about The Blitz. I apologize for the lateness of the fall edition. It was my intent to get it out before the holidays but the Merry-Go-Round that is Randolph-Sheppard just hasn’t slowed down enough for us to sit down and gather our thoughts. But here we go. Sit back in that recliner. Grab something to drink and maybe a snack. This may take a while.

***Heading Down the Homestretch to the Windy City BLAST*** – It’s time to make plans to attend the 2016 Windy City BLAST which will be held May 17-20 at the Loews Chicago O’Hare Airport Hotel. Registration is open. You can go to [www.blindmerchants.org](http://www.blindmerchants.org) to register and we’d encourage you to register early. Check out these highlights:

**Not Mickey Moussing Around: Disney to Offer Training at BLAST** – We are so excited to announce that we have contracted with the Disney Institute to do a full day workshop entitled “The Disney Approach to Business Excellence.” This world-renowned training will be offered as a pre-conference workshop on May 17th from 8:00 to 4:00. The training is outstanding as evidenced by the fact the normal charge for the one-day program is $450 - $500. However, as part of our continued commitment to bringing quality training to the Randolph-Sheppard community, participants who register for BLAST can take the Disney training for only $100. There are limited slots available at this discounted rate. The training is available to the public at a cost of $375 and we are already getting a lot of interest with several having already registered. The maximum number of participants for the Disney training is 275 so again register early to ensure you get a slot.

N**avy Seal to Deliver Keynote Address** – Navy Seal, Leif Babin, founder and co-owner of Echelon Front, LLC and author of the recent best selling book on leadership entitled “Extreme Ownership”, will be the keynote speaker. Leif takes the leadership skills he learned as a Navy Seal and applies them to the world of business. Did you see the movie “American Sniper” about Chris Kyle? Leif was his superior officer. We are so excited to have such a high profile and dynamic speaker present at our conference. Leif’s best friend and fellow Navy Seal was blinded in combat so he is especially enthusiastic about speaking to a room full of blind entrepreneurs.

**Host Hotel Recognized as One of the Best** – The Loews O’Hare Airport Hotel, which is hosting the Windy City BLAST, recently received 2 distinguished honors. First, it was named one of the world’s top 11 airport hotels. It was one of only a few U.S. hotels to make the prestigious list. Then in December, it was named one of Chicago’s top luxury hotels and the only hotel not in the downtown area to be so recognized. We continue to try to do things bigger and better and the Loews may be the best hotel to ever host BLAST.

***Future Randolph-Sheppard Leaders Emerge in the Big Easy* –** Concerned about where we will find future Randolph-Sheppard leaders, NABM President Nicky Gacos envisioned creating the first-ever Emerging Leaders Training Program. That vision was realized December 7-9 in New Orleans. Potential candidates went through an application and screening process and 13 were selected for the inaugural class. The keynote speaker was General Russell Honore who rose to fame in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Other speakers included former RSA Commissioners Fred Schroeder and Joanne Wilson and current RSA Commissioner Janet LaBreck. RSA Randolph-Sheppard Program Manager Deanna Jones addressed the group as well. Pam Allen, the Director of the Louisiana Center for the Blind, did a terrific job with a couple of presentations and Michael Talley and Gary Grassman discussed leadership from the perspective of two Committee Chairs. There was a presenter from Toastmasters International as well as a speaker on social media. The quality of the speakers was outstanding. The graduates of the first Emerging Leaders Training Program are:

Melba Taylor - Maryland

Angela Rachal – South Carolina

Gerald Fisher – North Carolina

Julius Locklear – North Carolina

Bob Matuszak – Georgia

Bradley Basta – Colorado

Adam Bevel – Arizona

Lawanda Miranda – Oregon

Marco Giannotti– Illinois

Giovanni Francese – Illinois

Dan Facchini– New Jersey

Gary Grassman – New York

Manny Sfuentes – Texas

President Gacos had appointed a planning committee that was chaired by Ed Birmingham (Illinois) and included Michael Talley (Alabama), Zach Snow (Georgia), Gary Grassman (New York), Harold Wilson (Virginia) and Melissa Smith (Tennessee). NABM Board members Pam Schnurr and Joe Higdon (both from Indiana) dropped in and participated as well. In all, there were 21 participants. If President Gacos has his way, this will not be the last training of this type. In fact, a second class is planned for September, 2016, in Nashville. Keep an eye on the website at [www.blindmerchants.org](http://www.blindmerchants.org) for the announcement that applications for the next class are being accepted.

***NABM Contracts to Do Annual Training in Tennessee*** – The bureaucracy made it an easy decision. Tennessee had to cancel its 2015 Annual Blind Vendors meeting simply because it couldn’t get a contract for the hotel through the state red tape. It couldn’t process contracts for speakers in a timely manner. Vendors were angry and staff was frustrated. NABM brought a solution to the table. It agreed to contract with the state to conduct the annual training conference for the next 2 years. Getting one contract with NABM approved was much easier than getting multiple contracts approved. The state also recognized that NABM has greater access to national speakers and resources for a potential tradeshow. As a result, NABM will conduct the 2016 annual training in September. NABM is open to similar contracts in other states. If you are tired of your state’s bureaucracy and want access to higher quality training, get in touch with Nicky Gacos or Terry Smith and have a conversation as to what NABM can do for you.

***Crime Does Pay: NABM Announces Initiative to Create Opportunities in Inmate Commissarie***s – In November, NABM announced a partnership with Vend Engine, a commissary software and hardware company, to create opportunities for blind entrepreneurs in inmate commissaries. The goal is to replicate the model that has been so successful in Tennessee and give other SLA’s a toolkit to market and secure contracts/permits for inmate commissaries to be operated by blind entrepreneurs. Vend Engine will sell the necessary hardware and software to the SLA at a discounted price and set up a system to accept deposits into inmate accounts on-line or at lobby kiosks. Inmates can place orders on kiosks in the cellblocks and the blind vendor will fill the orders in his/her warehouse and delver the products to the inmates. The SLA will be in position to offer jails and prisons state-of-the-art technology even better than what most other companies can offer them. NABM has facilitated discussions between Vend Engine and several states who have expressed interest in the program. To read the announcement and to get more information, visit our website at [www.blindmerchants.org](http://www.blindmerchants.org)

***NABM Submits Comments on GSA Healthy Food Guidelines*** – The U.S. General Services Administration and the Center for Disease Control are in the process of revising the healthy food guidelines. They solicited input from the public and interested stakeholders. NABM was the only blindness consumer organization to submit comments. The National Council of State Agencies for the Blind also submitted comments on behalf of the SLA’s and NAMA offered input on behalf of the vending industry as a whole. NABM urged a balanced and common sense approach and emphasized that there are factors at play that make it a challenge for Randolph-Sheppard entrepreneurs to offer healthier options in some cases to the extent desired and still maintain reasonable profits. However, NABM recognized that Randolph-Sheppard vendors have an obligation to ensure that customers who want healthier options are able to make such purchases. To view the text of NABM’s comments, visit [www.blindmerchants.org](http://www.blindmerchants.org)

***GSA Hears But Are They Listening?*** – In November, President Gacos and Terry Smith met with GSA officials to discuss a number of concerns. NCSAB and RSA were invited to participate in the discussion. At the center of the conversation was the new GSA permit template. GSA field representatives are telling SLA’s that the template is non-negotiable. The problem is the new permits contain language that clearly violate the law and is discriminatory against blind people. For example, the permit requires the blind entrepreneur to hire a manager to be on-site to handle day-to-day operations. First, we believe that blind people are perfectly capable of being on-site managers without hiring someone. Second, many sites are too small to justify an on-site manager. There are also concerns about language that effectively turns the healthy food guidelines into mandates and require calorie disclosure even if the site is too small to meet the requirement of the law. NABM has advised states to not sign permits that contain such language under any circumstances. There are many other issues with GSA such as their liberal interpretation of the term “cafeteria” that allows them to call almost any food service a cafeteria thus allowing for the solicitation of bids. We are also concerned that GSA refuses to allow running water in many Randolph-Sheppard facilities thus limiting the income potential for blind vendors. The law requires GSA to provide adequate utilities GSA is in violation of the law. There is also concern that GSA is moving toward a system of circumventing the law by requiring the SLA to sign what it calls a revocable lease rather than a permit. Permits are for an indefinite period of time and cannot be terminated unilaterally without cause. And finally, we are concerned that a GSA official gave sworn testimony that micromarkets technically meet the definition of a cafeteria and GSA can therefore bid them out. We continue to work with GSA to try to resolve these issues but it remains to be seen if GSA is listening.

***The NABM/Hadley Partnership Soars to New Heights***: This fall saw some major steps forward in terms of the training being made available to Randolph-Sheppard entrepreneurs through the NABM/Hadley partnership.

* Hadley was granted permission by the National Restaurant Association to develop Serve Safe training as part of its on-line entry-level training. In December, two Serve Safe modules were launched. These modules are included as part of the entry-level training program or can be taken as independent modules by any Randolph-Sheppard entrepreneur. Hadley cannot offer the Serve Sage test because the NRA requires tests to be proctored so students still have to be tested locally. However, the prep work for the test is available on-line.
* We offered another Randolph-Sheppard on the Web webinar. John Murn of RSA Management Group led the presentation entitled “Next Level Healthier Vending for Today’s Workforce.” It was well attended and the feedback has been positive.
* Congratulations to NABM Treasurer Pam Schnurr who was named the Hadley School for the Blind Student of the Year. Pam loves to learn and is a great ambassador for Hadley and for Randolph-Sheppard. More than that, she’s a great person loved by everyone who knows her.

***President Gacos Tackling Accessibility Issues*** – Technology continues to open doors for blind people. Accessibility has leaped forward with advancements that allow individuals who are blind to function independently. However, the vending industry has paid little attention to the issue and blind customers today are as unable to independently use most vending machines as they were 20 yeas ago. NABM President Gacos is concerned about this and is appointing a committee to address the problem on behalf of NABM. We are at a disadvantage since ADA guidelines do not require machines to be accessible to blind users. The guidelines only apply to wheelchair users. Therefore, President Gacos will be urging the Access Board to re-examine these guidelines. He also recently facilitated a meeting between one of the major micromarket companies and the technology unit at the NFB National Center. It is an issue that merits our attention.

***Is Silence Golden When It Comes to DoD Issues?*** – The silence is deadly. We expected DoD to release its proposed rules in regards to how the Randolph-Sheppard priority is to be applied to troop dining contracts this past summer. We expected a real fight as we anticipated the rules would not be favorable to Randolph-Sheppard. But for some mysterious reason, DoD has not released the proposed rules. Why not? No one knows. Has there been a change of heart? Have the DoD attorneys put the brakes on the process? Has DoD’s appetite for a fight with the Randolph-Sheppard community waned? Are AbilityOne’s legal woes and bad press causing DoD some heartburn knowing their rules would give AbilityOne more business? The fact is we have no idea. DoD folks aren’t talking. In the meantime, we are in a waiting mode. Since the regulations have the potential to cause harm to our side, we are fine with sitting and waiting. But stay tuned. How long the silence remains is anyone’s guess.

Likewise, there is no news on the Army’s possible plans to consolidate 11 Randolph-Sheppard contracts into a single national contract. It’s been a year since the Army issued a Sources Sought to identify potential bidders. We know that the Army is serious about this project and have some reason to believe that an RFP could be issued in 2016. The NFBEI and NABM are working with the states to formulate a response.

***There’s More to It Than Troop Dining*** – The NFBEI reached out to DoD to begin dialogue on how to increase opportunities for blind entrepreneurs to manage and operate traditional Randolph-Sheppard opportunities. Again, NCSAB and RSA were invited to join the discussion. The discussions were very preliminary but there are 2 fundamental truths. First, there is supposed to be a Randolph-Sheppard vending facility in every building built or renovated after January 2, 1975 including military bases. Second, few military bases have traditional Randolph-Sheppard vending facilities. The NFBEI has encouraged states to pursue such sites with the same vigor as they do troop dining contracts.

***Fit Pick Gaining Momentum*** – Last year, NABM endorsed NAMA’s Fit Pick standard as the one recommended for blind entrepreneurs and SLA’s to use when trying to offer healthier choices to customers. It is paying dividends. In Chicago, the Illinois blind vendors have been working with the different federal agencies to ensure that blind vendors are meeting the needs of their customers. The group agreed to adopt Fit Pick as the standard and the federal agencies cited NABM’s endorsement of Fit Pick as the reason for accepting Fit Pick as the standard. In November, the Illinois blind vendors set up an exhibit at the Federal Employees Health and Benefits Fair and promoted Fit Pick items. It is the perfect example of how federal agencies can work collaboratively with the blind vendors rather than creating an adversarial environment. Also, it’s worth noting that the Mississippi Department of Health is working with the SLA to provide healthier options. They too have adopted Fit Pick as the standard.

***Arbitration Update –*** Several important arbitration decisions have been rendered and several others are in progress. In yet another ruling dealing a blow to the longstanding argument by some that the priority only applies to troop dining contracts with full-food, a panel in Georgia recently ruled that the Randolph-Sheppard priority applies to all contracts pertaining to the operation of cafeterias including dining facility attendant contracts. There was a similar decision at Fort Campbell. The same issue is being arbitrated at Fort Bliss in Texas and Fort Riley in Kansas. Maryland recently got good news when an arbitration panel ruled that GSA violated the law when it failed to establish a competitive range on a cafeteria solicitation. GSA tried to argue the Randolph-Sheppard priority only applies if the SLA bid is within the competitive range. However, by not establishing a competitive range, there is no priority. It was a ludicrous argument and the panel agreed. In November, Oregon’s case against GSA was heard. In that case, the Oregon SLA is challenging GSA’s position that a grab-and-go operation meets the definition of a cafeteria. GSA argues that it is a cafeteria although it serves no entrees or vegetables with little variety. It is a sandwich shop but GSA refused to grant a permit to the SLA saying it is a cafeteria subject to bid. The number of arbitration is growing. According to RSA, there are 28 arbitration cases in various stages. Of that total, 10 are SLA’s versus federal entities while 18 are blind vendors versus SLA’s. RSA is literally spending hundreds of thousands of dollars per year on these cases. Give RSA credit for working hard to get through the backlog of cases that existed. However, there has to be a better way. RSA is trying to mediate disputes in some cases before they reach the level of arbitration and that has potential. If we can convince RSA to issue stronger guidance, perhaps we can reduce the number of arbitrations filed by SLA’s against federal agencies.

***More Than a Name Change* -** RSA Buying Group is now RSA Management Group but that’s not the big news. You’ve asked for it. Now you got it. RSA Management has launched a new website at [RSAmanagementgroup.com](http://rsamanagementgroup.com/). The site is 100% accessible. Each member will have a specific login and password. This will allow them to access their sales and rebate information. The site will become a major resource for members when they are looking for information. The site will have links to Federal and State agencies and organizations as well as each of the suppliers who support the programs and it will have special RSA discounts and programs each month. The site will include a monthly newsletter as well as a community billboard you can post some of the exciting things that are going on in your state.

***Mississippi State University Announces On-Line Staff Training –*** The National Research and Training Center on Blindness & Low Vision at Mississippi State University recently announced the availability of a national on-line training curriculum for Randolph-Sheppard staff. The curriculum is designed to help orient new Business Enterprises staff members to the Randolph-Sheppard Program, although anyone, including blind entrepreneurs and vocational rehabilitation staff, is welcome to use the curriculum. Written by NRTC researchers and BEP experts, including Terry Smith who heads up the NFBEI, the content covers major aspects of the R-S program, and is broken down into the following content areas:

1. Introduction to Blindness and Low Vision
2. The Vocational Rehabilitation Program and How It Intersects with the Randolph-Sheppard Program
3. The Randolph-Sheppard Act: What the Business Consultant Needs to Know
4. Active Participation - What It Is and What It Isn't
5. Assistive Technology and Its Potential for Blind Entrepreneurs
6. The Role of the Business Consultant
7. Basic Business Principles and the Randolph-Sheppard Enterprise
8. Human Resources and the Blind Entrepreneur
9. Marketing and Customer Service
10. Marketing the Randolph-Sheppard Program to Outside Parties
11. Partnering with the Private Sector: Expanding Opportunities for Blind Entrepreneurs
12. Social Security Disability and the Randolph-Sheppard Entrepreneur
13. Healthier Food Options
14. Working with Blind Entrepreneurs with Hearing Loss

These 14 free modules are available at <http://www.ntac.blind.msstate.edu/courses/courses.php?course=randolph>.

***The Hadley School for the Blind Wants to Back Your Business* –** Have you seen the popular television show “Shark Tank”? Well, Hadley is bringing its version of “Shark Tank” to BLAST. Hadley recently announced its inaugural [2016 New Venture Business Competition](http://hadleyweb/hadleyedu/FCE-NVC.asp). In the spirit of ABC’s hit show, Hadley is inviting new, current or recent Forsythe Center students to submit their plans for a start up for a chance to win one of three cash awards for up to $10,000. Entrants must have enrolled in at least one FCE module for consideration of their business plan. However, it’s not too late to *become* an FCE student and participate in the competition. New FCE students must provide proof of legal blindness from a physician before enrolling in an FCE course. Participation and submission rules can be found at [hadley.edu/nvc.](http://www.Hadley.edu/nvc) [To enroll in the FCE, please visit hadley.edu](http://www.hadley.edu)/FCE or call Student Services at 800-526-9909.Contestants will need to move quickly, though, as the entry period ends when the clock strikes 11:59 pm CST on Feb. 15, 2016. Winners will be recognized and receive their awards at the 2016 Business Leadership and Superior Training (BLAST) Conference in Chicago, May 17-20, 2016.

***NABM Website Update*** – Check out the new and improved NABM website. Visit us at [www.blindmerchants.org](http://www.blindmerchants.org). We’ve made it more functional and with more resources. Check it out.

***Well Known Blind Vendor Now Leads Illinois Agency*** – John Gordon, who is well-known nationally as a Randolph-Sheppard entrepreneur and strong advocate for the program recently was named as the Chief of the Illinois Bureau of Services for the Blind. John has been a licensed blind vendor for more than two decades and was the Chair of the Committee of Blind Vendors. He is best known for walking from Chicago to Springfield as he lobbied to pass legislation to improve the vending facility program. But now he has taken on a new challenge as a state administrator. Congratulations and good luck, John.

***Welcome Wagon Calling*** – Jim McManus said goodbye to Maine and hello to Washington DC. Jim, the longtime director of the Maine BEP was recently named the new BEP Director in the District of Columbia. He will do a terrific job helping that program fulfill its potential. Across the continent in the State of Washington, Bobby McCalden was named as the BEP Director replacing longtime Director Jeanne Gallo. Bobby comes to Randolph-Sheppard from the private sector. We wish both Bobby and Jim the best of luck!

***Saying Goodbye*** – Although some said hello, at least one said goodbye and another will soon do the same. Gina Washburn resigned as the Idaho BEP Director in December leaving state government for a job in the private sector. And Roger Erpelding in Iowa has decided to retire as the BEP Director after more than 40 years of service to blind Iowans. We will have more about Roger in the next issue of The Blitz. Both Gina and Roger will be missed and we wish them well.

***The Sun Shines Bright in Sunshine State*** – We’ve used this space in the past to brag on the good things happening in Florida. There’s more good news. The Florida SLA and Alton Palmore and Blackstone Consulting have been awarded the full food service contract at the Naval Air Station in Panama City. At a time when we are having to fight our way into some locations, this is a major victory. Congratulations to all.

***Innovation in the Land of Lincol***n – It is not always easy to find innovation in state government but the Illinois Business Enterprises Program is proving to be an exception. How about running a state park? A blind vendor is now providing cabin rentals and operating the campground, camp store, swimming pool, etc. at a state park. How’s that for different? They also bought an 18 foot trailer and a blind vendor set up at the state fair. What’s next? It’s not all good in Illinois though. The state has no budget and as a result rest areas are being closed since there is no money to pay utility bills.

***The NFBEI on the Road*** – Terry Smith and Nicky Gacos continued to rack up frequent flyer miles and hotel points. Between the two of them, they visited Nebraska, North Dakota, Mississippi, Utah, Texas, Tennessee, New Mexico, Massachusetts, Oregon, and Illinois. They offered training at annual vendor meetings, conducted program evaluations, and did some staff training. They also attended a number of conferences and conventions on behalf of NABM. The break from the road during the holidays was welcomed by both. Many states are already scheduling their 2016 meetings. If you’d like to have an NABM trainer, let us know. Don’t forget that if you are a state that subscribes to our services, our participation is totally free.

***Merchants to Gather at NFB Washington Seminar*** – The National Federation of the Blind will be holding its annual Washington Seminar January 25-28. The blind merchants will be meeting on Monday afternoon, January 25th. President Gacos has lined up several great speakers. All blind merchants are encouraged to attend the Washington Seminar and to participate in the NABM meeting.

***Tidbits*** – Did you know that?

* Hadley School for the Blind will soon be Hadley Institute for the Blind & Visually Impaired?
* Soft drinks have been banned from vending machines in South Korea?
* There is a new restaurant in San Francisco where the customer places his order, pays for the food, and gets their food without ever interacting with a person?
* President Obama issued an Executive Order that will require contractors on federal property to provide up to 7 days of paid sick leave starting in 2017.
* Pepsi is placing thousands of Hello Goodness healthy vending machines into service across the country?
* The KNFB Reader is now available for Android devices?
* President Obama signed into law a 6-year Transportation Bill that has no mention of rest area commercialization.

***You Can Still Hel*p** –Do you like what the NFBEI is doing to advocate for the program on a national level and to assist individual state programs? Do you enjoy reading The Blitz and being kept informed about what is going on in the Randolph-Sheppard community? 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. You can donate by sending a check to:

National Association of Blind Merchants

7450 Chapman Highway, #319

Knoxville, TN 37920

Make the check payable to NABM and write “NFBEI” in the memo portion of the check. Your support is greatly appreciated.

You can also donate by going to our website at [www.blindmerchants.org](http://www.blindmerchants.org) and we have a new way you can contribute. We can do bank drafts if you want to sign up for monthly giving. Contact Terry Smith if you are interested in setting up bank draft donations

***Share Your News with Everyone***- 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**