First Timer's Guide

Welcome to your first convention of the National Federation of the Blind. We hope that you find the convention fast-paced, fascinating, and fun, and that it won't be your last.

Throughout the week, you will have amazing opportunities to network with thousands of competent, blind role models employed in exciting careers, attend presentations on a wide variety of empowering topics, view the latest in technology, and network with dynamic leaders in the field of blindness.

A lot happens at each convention, so this guide is intended to give you an overview of what you will experience at your first convention. It is available in Braille, in large print, and on our website at www.nfb.org.

For many, attendance at that very first convention has become a life-changing experience. Many hear for the very first time that it is respectable to be blind, that carrying a cane is useful and is nothing to be ashamed of, that Braille is a valuable tool after all, and that much progress is being made in adaptive technology. Attendees also learn that they are not alone, that there are others who are facing the same problems they are, and that an active and normal life is possible and within their reach.

For more specific details about this year's convention, consult the convention agenda, the [Braille Monitor](https://www.nfb.org/resources/publications-and-media/braille-monitor), and the NFB's convention webpage.

For a more personal introduction to your first convention, plan to attend the Rookie Roundup, usually held in the evening of the very first day of the gathering. There you will meet your fellow rookies, be welcomed by Federation leaders (including the President), and get some advice on what to do and when to do it from convention veterans. The convention is full of opportunities to learn, work, play, and network (both formally and informally). The only thing you won't get much of at a National Federation of the Blind convention is sleep!

From the President

I am delighted to welcome you to your very first national convention of the National Federation of the Blind. These pages are a brief overview of our conventions and the unique role that they play in the life of our movement. Your presence at convention is important! Being here means that you are a part of the largest gathering of blind people held anywhere in the world. I believe that you can and will benefit from the strength and knowledge that you will gain from the many blind people you will meet at the convention, and the National Federation of the Blind certainly needs your ideas and your voice. I hope you come to feel the love, the power, and the unity of purpose this convention brings to blind people and their families who choose to attend. — NFB President Mark A. Riccobono

Community and Conduct at Convention

To allow all attendees the chance to benefit from all aspects of the convention, the National Federation of the Blind is committed to providing a harassment-free environment for everyone. We appreciate your assistance in cultivating an atmosphere in which participants from diverse backgrounds may learn, network, and share with each other in an environment of mutual respect. Our organization is deeply committed to diversity as well as [integrity and respect](https://www.nfb.org/about-us/history-and-governance/code-conduct). Please contact the Information Desk or notify your state affiliate president if you need assistance or have questions/concerns. Thank you for doing your part to contribute to our community and the high expectations we strive to maintain.

Some Notes about the National Federation of the Blind

A Brief Organizational History

The National Federation of the Blind was established in 1940. Representatives from seven states gathered in Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania, for the founding convention. Those seven states were: California, Illinois, Minnesota, Missouri, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin.

The founder and first President of the NFB was Dr. Jacobus tenBroek, a blind lawyer born in Canada but raised primarily in California. While attending the California School for the Blind, Dr. tenBroek was taught and mentored by Dr. Newel Perry. Dr. Perry believed that the only way that the blind would improve their situation, which back then was usually one of poverty and misery, was to come together in organizations and engage in collective action. In the early part of the twentieth century, Dr. Perry himself had organized the alumni of the California School for the Blind in order to—as he put it—"escape defeatism and to achieve normal membership in society."

Dr. tenBroek spent most of his working life in Berkeley teaching at the University of California. However, in his early career, during a short teaching stint at the University of Chicago School of Law, he founded the National Federation of the Blind.

Today, the National Federation of the Blind has fifty-two affiliates: one in each of the fifty states, plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico.

Federation Philosophy

You will probably hear conventioneers discussing what they call "Federation Philosophy." What they are talking about is the Federation's positive belief system about blindness. Members of the Federation realized the simple truth many years ago that blind people are just people who cannot see—we are not broken sighted people. Blind people are as different as sighted people are; that is, we are a cross-section of the broader society and, therefore, are not all alike as some assume. Blindness is a physical characteristic, but it is not the characteristic that defines us or our future. It is low expectations and misconceptions, not blindness itself, that stand between blind people and our dreams.

Given proper training and opportunity, blind people can and do live the lives we want. It is respectable to be blind, and, with the right tools and techniques, blindness may be reduced to the level of a nuisance or inconvenience. To combat the low expectations, misconceptions, and stereotypes that are the true barriers to achieving our dreams, the blind have organized for the same reasons other minorities have—to make positive social change through collective action. The Federation philosophy provides an overall framework for thinking about blindness, what it means, and what it doesn't mean. However, it is not intended to be rigid or dogmatic. As we just said, blind people are individuals, and we may disagree on any number of things, including how to handle a given situation as blind people. What our philosophy does do is give us a positive way of thinking about our blindness, rather than the negative ways in which we have often been conditioned to think about it by society. Rather than saying that we as blind people can't do something, we try to find ways that we can, and to challenge each other, in a loving way, to always push the envelope and expand the limits of our independence. As you read further, you'll discover that, to the extent we need to formulate specific positions about blindness and the policies related to it, we use a democratic process to arrive at these positions.

The National Federation of the Blind also provides encouragement and support to families with blind children and to people who are losing vision or have become blind later in life, by bringing them into a network of tens of thousands of blind people who are living full lives and who can serve as mentors and role models. Together, with love, hope, and determination, the members of the National Federation of the Blind transform dreams into reality.

What is the Function of the National Convention?

The national convention is held once each year in a location chosen by the President based upon successful negotiations for the needed space. We are able to negotiate outstanding room and meeting space rates at hotels with many dining options, comprehensive room amenities, and first-rate facilities. While a lot happens at the convention, it's important to remember that its primary function is to serve as the governing body for the National Federation of the Blind. So, while some of the details in the following pages may seem very technical, it's important for you to understand how the convention works as a governing body so that you can fully participate in selecting the leadership and setting the policy of the organization. At the convention, national officers and board members are elected by the general membership, decisions concerning the organization are made, and policies are set for the following year or years.

To quote briefly from the NFB Constitution (last revised in 2014):

"The Convention is the supreme authority of the Federation. It is the legislature of the Federation. As such, it has final authority with respect to all issues of policy. Its decisions shall be made after opportunity has been afforded for full and fair discussion. Delegates and members in attendance may participate in all convention discussions as a matter of right. Any member of the Federation may make or second motions, propose nominations, and serve on committees; and is eligible for election to office except that only blind members may be elected to the National Board."

The national convention also has some very practical benefits for attendees. Those who are new to blindness and parents and teachers of blind children can meet and learn from successful role models and have their expectations raised. Friendships are made and renewed, the latest adaptive technology for the blind is on display, tours of interesting places can be taken in your spare time (if you have any), and hope for the future is kindled. The convention is, in a sense, a large family gathering, and has been described by one observer as being analogous to an annual meeting of the Scottish clans. This means, of course, in addition to the serious business of the convention, there are lots of opportunities to just have fun.

How Big is the Convention?

NFB national conventions have experienced enormous growth through the years. There were sixteen representatives from the seven founding states at the 1940 meeting. Just two years later—at a 1942 Des Moines, Iowa, meeting—one hundred fifty representatives from fifteen state affiliates were on hand. The convention first recorded more than one thousand attendees in 1971 in Houston, Texas. Attendance went over the two thousand mark for the first time in 1988 in Chicago. By the convention held in New Orleans in 1997, registration topped more than three thousand for the first time. Currently, between two thousand eight hundred and three thousand three hundred attendees will be present.

The Facilities

As mentioned earlier, the National Federation of the Blind is usually able to negotiate space and outstanding room rates at top-notch convention hotels and facilities. This means that you'll have access to a comfortable room (which you won't spend much time in), plenty of dining options, and amenities like fitness centers, swimming pools, and the like. Because we have a big convention, we need a lot of space, and sometimes navigating it can be intimidating at first. That's why your agenda will include a comprehensive description of the convention facilities and where they're located. In addition, both blind and sighted volunteers will be present throughout the convention to provide direction and help you get where you're going, if needed. So grab your cane or harness up your guide dog, and go out there and enjoy all the convention has to offer.

The Schedule

The NFB national convention packs an unbelievable number of activities into six days. Day one includes the parents' seminar, a national orientation and mobility conference, several technology seminars, and other special meetings and events as well as the Rookie Roundup. On day two, registration begins in the morning and the Resolutions Committee convenes in the afternoon. The agenda also lists other special meetings. On day three, the national board of directors meeting, which is open to all, occurs in the morning and various committees, groups, and divisions gather in the afternoon and evening. Day four brings the opening of the formal convention, with the roll call of states in the morning and the Presidential Report and other program items in the afternoon. There are more committee and divisional meetings on the evening of day four. On day five, general convention sessions are held in both the morning and the afternoon. Elections are scheduled on this day, as well. Day six is the last day of convention; the morning and afternoon general sessions are followed by the annual evening banquet, a convention highlight.

Convention Agenda

The convention agenda is available at registration and can also be obtained at a number of other locations at the convention site. Moreover, it can be found on the NFB website at www.nfb.org as soon as it is final, which is usually about a month before the convention begins. The agenda gives general information about the convention, hotel rates, and other hotel information, and it shows the times and locations of the various meetings and general sessions.

The Presidential Report

One of the major presentations each year is a report delivered by the national President to the entire convention on the Federation's activities and progress during the previous year. All attendees are urged to be present for this major event, which is usually the first item on the afternoon agenda on day four. The President will tell you and your fellow conventioneers about the legal victories we have won when blind people faced discrimination, the new programs and initiatives we've started to help blind people achieve success in all aspects of life, the ways in which we're making technology more accessible to the blind, and more. You'll also hear the stories of individual members who are living the lives they want.

The Banquet

The annual banquet is the highlight of each convention. It is held on the final night of the convention.

The banquet features several national award presentations, the scholarship winners, and a major address by the national President, focusing on our philosophy of blindness and designed to inspire us to continue to build the Federation.

Committees, Groups, and Divisions

In addition to the three days of general convention sessions, many smaller groups affiliated with the NFB hold their annual meetings during the national convention. These are groups such as blind students, blind lawyers, parents and teachers of blind children, blind secretaries, blind businessmen and women, blind teachers, blind guide-dog users, blind computer users, blind rehabilitation professionals, blind seniors, and blind diabetics. These meetings are open to all, and you will want to look at the agenda to select those which might be of interest to you. Attendees are encouraged to attend more than one division meeting if they have interest in more than one area. Some of these committees or divisions collect dues, and some do not.

Registration and Banquet Ticket Purchase

For those who have not pre-registered online, registration starts on day two. All attendees are requested to register and the outstanding hotel group rates are not available to those who do not. In addition, to be eligible for door prizes you must be registered. An official badge is issued to each registrant and should be worn throughout convention week. Banquet tickets for the banquet held on the final night of convention week are available for purchase when you register. Banquet tickets should be purchased as early in the convention as possible and are not available for purchase after the lunch break on day four.

The Banquet Ticket Exchange

All convention attendees are encouraged to attend the banquet. When the convention and banquets were smaller, attendees simply went to the banquet hall, waited in line to enter, and found a seat once inside. Now, because more than two thousand people will be present, a system for reserved seating has been developed. Purchase your banquet ticket at the time of registration. Then you can turn in that ticket to whoever is assigned to get reserved seats for your affiliate or you can pool your ticket with a group of friends so that you can all sit together. Your group designee will hand in the tickets at banquet exchange, and in return will get the same number of tickets, but now with an assigned table number. You should get your new ticket from the banquet exchange designee and present it at the banquet. If needed, volunteers will help you find your table, and you can then enjoy the banquet with your Federation family.

State Delegations in the General Sessions

During the three days of general convention sessions, the meeting hall will be set up with flags indicating the location of each of the state affiliates. The number of seats per delegation is based upon the registration figures. It's a good idea to sit with your affiliate's delegation. In this way, people can be located easily if they are needed. Moreover, official voting delegates have the membership at hand if they wish to poll the delegation on voting issues or if they wish to determine the consensus of their affiliate's representatives.

How is the Convention Run?

As mentioned earlier, the national convention is the supreme governing authority of the National Federation of the Blind. Consequently, important business must be done at the convention in an orderly and democratic manner. The following information describes how the convention is run, including how votes are taken, how resolutions are considered, and more.

General Sessions

The general sessions consist of program items, reports, panel discussions, elections, and official votes on policy issues. General convention sessions customarily are chaired by the Federation President. Floor microphones are available for comments and questions from the audience when time permits.

Official Voting

Usually, on votes for elections, motions, or for the adoption of resolutions (see below), the President will call for voice votes. In such cases, it is usually clear that a vast majority has voted one way or another. However, if the outcome of a particular vote is not absolutely clear, then the President will ask for a roll call vote. In the event of a roll call vote, only official delegates of the affiliates may vote.
In order to be as democratic as it can be in its decision making, the Federation has decided that each state affiliate will have one vote during a roll call vote. At the opening general session, each affiliate names its official voting delegate and an alternate or alternates in the event that the official delegate is absent at the time of a given vote. Then, when a roll call vote is taken, only the official voting delegates may cast votes. Therefore, a maximum of fifty-two official votes may be cast. The secretary keeps the official tally and announces votes once decisions have been made. The official delegate may poll his or her delegation on the question or motion being considered, which is one reason why it's a good idea to sit with your affiliate's delegation.
Some have asked why the Federation has not adopted a "one person, one vote" policy. The concern with this method is that a very few large state affiliates could control the outcome on every issue. Therefore, the Federation has opted to give each state equal representation, as the United States Constitution does with respect to the US Senate.

Elections

The Federation has a national board consisting of President, First Vice-President, Second Vice-President, Secretary, Treasurer, and twelve additional board members, each of whom serve for terms of two years. The five constitutional officers and six of the twelve board members are elected during national conventions in even-numbered years, and the remaining six board members are elected at conventions during odd-numbered years.

At the roll call of states held on the morning of the first general session, each affiliate announces its appointee to the Nominating Committee. The President then designates one of these nominees to be Chairperson of the Nominating Committee. This committee then develops its slate of candidates during a private meeting, which is closed to the general membership so that free and frank discussions may be held. Note: This is the only closed Federation meeting at the national convention.

The actual elections are then held during a designated general session, usually on the morning of day five. The candidate offered for each position by the Nominating Committee is first placed in nomination. The chairperson then calls for other nominations from the floor. In order to be completely open and democratic, the Federation has a long-standing policy of calling for other nominations three times before a motion to close nominations will be accepted by the chairperson. In this way, it can never be alleged that a quick vote has been pushed through without time for other nominations. If no other nominations are made, then typically a motion to close nominations and elect the nominating committee's candidate by acclamation is offered. If other nominations are made, then an election is held among the candidates nominated. The chairperson will usually try to conduct the election by voice vote of the entire convention, but in the event that no candidate has a clear majority, then the chairperson will conduct a roll call vote, in which only the official delegate for each affiliate will participate.

It is also long-standing policy that an individual will not stand for election unless he or she has agreed to run. This policy avoids the problem of electing unwilling candidates.

Resolutions

Resolutions are the official policy statements of the organization. Anyone may offer a resolution. The customary method is to submit a proposed resolution to the Chairman of the Resolutions Committee at least two weeks before the convention. The Resolutions Committee—appointed by the President—holds a public meeting on the afternoon of day two of the convention. The resolutions that have been submitted to the committee chairperson are then considered one at a time. Typically the committee will allow the proponent of a resolution to speak in support of it; otherwise, although the meeting is public in order to maintain full transparency, only members of the committee speak during deliberations.

After full discussion of each resolution in turn, the committee votes either to pass or not pass. If the committee passes a particular resolution, then it comes before the full convention in general session for final action. This means that there will be several days in which to debate contentious issues and to try to politic for favorable votes before final convention action is taken.

If a resolution is not passed by the committee, it can still be considered by the convention if its proponent can gather support according to the following procedure: if he or she is able to enlist five state affiliates to request that the resolution be heard, then it will be considered by the entire convention on the final meeting day.

Although it is somewhat rare, a resolution may also be brought to the full convention through the national board of directors. A majority of the directors must support the resolution in order to bring it to the floor in this manner.

Other Things to Know

National Scholarships

The Federation has an outstanding college scholarship program; it awards thirty national scholarships at each national convention, ranging in value from $3,000 to $12,000. Applications close on March 31 of each year.

As many as five hundred to seven hundred individuals apply for these scholarships annually. Each spring, the Scholarship Committee meets in Baltimore, evaluates the applicants, and offers scholarships to the top thirty candidates. These thirty scholars attend the national convention, with assistance from the NFB. They spend each day with designated mentors.

When the students arrive, they know that they are one of the select thirty. It is not decided until a meeting of the Scholarship Committee the night before the banquet who will receive which of the scholarships.

Generally the students will all receive a scholarship; the only question is who will receive which scholarship. The winner of the top scholarship is offered the opportunity to speak briefly at the banquet.

All blind students residing and attending school in the fifty states, the District of Columbia, or Puerto Rico are invited to apply for National Federation of the Blind scholarships, even if they have previously won. Those who win a second or subsequent scholarship are called tenBroek Fellows, in honor of NFB founder Jacobus tenBroek.

Exhibits

There is a major exhibit area at each national convention. This gives convention goers the opportunity to look over all of the latest adaptive technology, to talk with officials from such agencies as the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped or the American Printing House for the Blind, and to buy items from exhibitors. Convention attendees are also invited to browse the NFB’s extensive free literature collection on display as well as to examine and purchase items from the NFB store, known as the Independence Market. Because the NFB convention is the largest gathering of blind people anywhere in the world, many technology companies and others who provide products and services to the blind launch new products at our convention, so you will probably want to visit the exhibit space and find out what's new and noteworthy. Near the entrance of the exhibit area, you'll find an information table where you can get a print or Braille map of the exhibit hall and a list of all the exhibitors and their locations.

Exhibits are open during various times throughout much of the convention, but they are closed for the general convention sessions because all conventioneers are encouraged to attend these meetings.

As with other areas of the convention, the growth in the number of exhibitors through the years has been gratifying. In Atlanta in 2004, the number of exhibitors topped one hundred for the first time.

Door Prizes

Significant door prizes are drawn throughout general convention sessions and at the banquet. To be eligible to win, you must be registered and present at the meeting where the prize is drawn. Each morning session begins on time with a drawing for a $100 bill. Similar drawings occur periodically throughout general sessions and at the banquet. The grand prize drawn at the banquet is much larger than the others.

Convention Fundraising

Six different types of fundraising will be discussed during the convention. These are:

* The White Cane Fund: A time will be set aside during the Convention when buckets will be passed through the audience to receive cash donations for the White Cane Fund. Affiliates will also make gifts or pledges to this fund. These dollars go directly to the general treasury of the Federation.
* The Jacobus tenBroek Fund: Donations will also be made to this fund for the maintenance and upkeep of the NFB Jernigan Institute property. This property houses the operations of the NFB and other entities.
* The Kenneth Jernigan Fund: The proceeds from this fund are used to bring a number of attendees to their first national convention. It is named for Dr. Jernigan who planned our conventions for more than forty years and who did so much to make them what they are today.
* The Pre-Authorized Contribution (PAC) Plan: This giving opportunity enables individuals to make regular financial contributions to support the programs and activities of the Federation. The PAC Plan has insured a consistent flow of monthly income to fund some of the Federation's work. By signing up for the PAC Plan, a donor agrees to make an automatic monthly contribution to the Federation; the donation is withdrawn directly from a checking account or charged to a credit card. The individual designates how much he or she wants to contribute each month and specifies a day of the month on which the money should be withdrawn from the account. To participate in the PAC Plan, the donor must have a checking account or credit card, complete a PAC Plan card, sign and turn over a voided check (if the contribution is to be withdrawn from a checking account), and begin with a monthly donation of at least $5.00. Supporters of the Federation contribute between $350,000 and $400,000 each year through this giving opportunity.
* SUN (Shares Unlimited in NFB) Shares: Supporters of the Federation are also able to make either monthly or annual donations for SUN Shares. These funds are being set aside in the event that they are needed to support the Federation during difficult times.
* The Imagination Fund: In January of 2004, the Federation held the grand opening for the first and only research and training center run by the blind, for the blind. Our National Federation of the Blind Jernigan Institute, named after our long-time president, Dr. Kenneth Jernigan, develops and implements innovative programs and services that help to transform the dreams of blind people into reality. The Imagination Fund has been established to support the work of the Jernigan Institute. Members and friends of the organization are asked to participate in this annual campaign by requesting contributions from friends and colleagues and by providing names and addresses of individuals who may be receptive to Imagination Fund solicitations. All funds raised will be used to support the research and training programs of the Jernigan Institute and our state affiliates.

Guide Dog Relief Area

In order to accommodate blind guide-dog users at the national convention, arrangements are made each year to construct a special facility where the dogs may be taken to relieve themselves. This special area is refreshed several times each day.

Representatives of the Guide Dog Committee are available to show first-time convention goers where to take their animals and to assist in learning individual clean-up practices. Dog users are expected to use these special facilities rather than to permit their animals to relieve themselves in the streets or on other hotel property.

Services for Spanish Speaking Individuals

All the general sessions and the banquet proceedings are translated by volunteers for attendees who speak Spanish. Small receivers may be borrowed to listen to the audio transmission. A Hispanic Seminar and a Spanish Translation Committee meeting also take place during convention.

Requests for Accommodations Based on Disability

The convention of the National Federation of the Blind is designed and implemented to be accessible especially to blind people in that materials are offered in accessible formats and other nonvisual aids are provided (therefore special requests for these items are not required). If you require specific accommodations based on your disability other than the blindness-related accommodations mentioned above in order to participate fully and equally in the Convention, we urge you to let us know as soon as possible. Specific accommodations for which requests are required include requests for deaf or deaf-blind interpreters. Due to the size and complexity of this convention, as well as the need to appropriately plan for additional human and other resources, requests for specific accommodations must be submitted to jerniganinstitute@nfb.org no later than May 31, of the convention year.

Small receivers are available for the hearing impaired to receive direct transmissions from the public address system. For those who may be totally deaf and use a deaf-blind communication device for interpreting, volunteers are present to translate the general session and the banquet proceedings. The Deaf-Blind Division also holds a seminar and a business meeting during convention.

Who Attends the Convention?

Attendees may be long-time convention goers, the newly blinded, parents and teachers of blind children, blindness professionals who are interested in becoming more knowledgeable about blindness, adaptive-technology providers, and family members of people who are blind. Most attendees are from the United States, although each year there are foreign visitors from as many as twenty other countries.

A Life-Changing Experience

For many, attendance at that very first convention has become a life-changing experience. Many hear for the very first time that it is respectable to be blind, that carrying a cane is useful and is nothing to be ashamed of, that Braille is a valuable tool after all, and that much progress is being made in adaptive technology. Attendees also learn that they are not alone, that there are others who are facing the same problems they are, and that an active and normal life is possible and within their reach. Some learn for the first time that there are orientation and adjustment centers where blind people can be sent by their rehabilitation counselors to learn the skills of blindness and the positive attitudes which lead to personal empowerment.

We hope that by attending our convention your expectations of yourself are raised, so that blindness is no longer the characteristic that defines you or your future, and that low expectations no longer stand between you and your dreams. We want you to become empowered to live the life you want.

The President's Wrap-Up

I hope this information has been helpful to you and that it has given you a sense of the significant role the national convention plays in the life of the NFB. I also hope your interest has been piqued and that you will continue to be an active member of our movement via your local chapter and state affiliate. Let this convention experience mark the first of many others in your life. We need your voice and your talents. Working together, with love, hope, and determination, we will continue to make a difference in the lives of blind people everywhere and transform our dreams into reality. — NFB President Mark A. Riccobono