# BRAILLE MONITOR

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 You can transfer the recording of each issue from the thumb drive to your computer or preserve it on the thumb drive. However, because thumb drives can be used hundreds of times, we would appreciate their return in order to stretch our funding. Please use the return envelope enclosed with the drive when you return the device.

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## Convention Bulletin 2025

The 2025 convention of the National Federation of the Blind will take place in New Orleans, Louisiana, this summer. Start planning your trip now.

Tuesday, July 8 through Sunday, July 13
The Marriott New Orleans and the Sheraton New Orleans

As our headquarters hotel, the Marriott will host convention breakouts, general sessions, and the banquet. Right across Canal Street, the Sheraton serves as our overflow hotel and will be home to the exhibit hall and Independence Market.

If this will be your first convention or if you need a refresher, check out our First Timer’s Guide at <https://nfb.org/get-involved/national-convention/first-timers-guide>.

### Book Your Hotel

There is still plenty of space at the Sheraton New Orleans. Our members have had good success when booking rooms by calling 504-525-2500. Ask for the “National Federation of the Blind 2025 Convention” block. You can also contact the Marriott with questions about your existing reservation by calling 888-236-2427. Here are important things to know about the rates and booking the room:

#### Rates and Taxes

The nightly rate for both the Sheraton and the Marriott is $119 for singles and doubles, while triples and quads can be booked for $129 per night. You should also anticipate the combined sales tax and tourism support rate of 16.2 percent and note there is a hotel occupancy fee of $3.00 per night.

#### Deposit and Cancellation

At the time you make a reservation, a deposit of the first night’s stay is required for each room reserved. If you use a credit card, the deposit will be charged against your card immediately, just as would be the case with a check. If a reservation is cancelled before Sunday, June 1, 2025, half of the deposit will be returned. Otherwise, refunds will not be made.

### Registration

Registration for in-person convention attendees closes May 31. Onsite registration will be $30 per person plus $85 per banquet ticket. Registration includes the biggest event of the year, access to the event app, and communications on the latest news and events. A virtual convention experience is available for a registration fee of $10. Register and get more information here: <https://nfb.org/convention>.

### Request for Door Prizes

Remember that as usual we need door prizes from state affiliates, local chapters, and individuals. Prizes should be small in size but large in value. Cash, of course, is always appropriate and welcome. We ask that prizes of all kinds have a value of at least $25 and not include alcohol. Drawings will occur throughout the convention sessions, and you can anticipate a grand prize of truly impressive proportions to be drawn at the banquet.

### Volunteer

Thank you to the hundreds of volunteers who help make national convention a big success. Please consider signing up to be a Convention Ambassador to assist in making the national convention a welcoming and empowering experience for all our attendees or for the Independence Market to serve as a demonstrator, storekeeper, pay-station representative, or line marshal during the days the market is open in the Exhibit Hall.

More details on shifts, schedules, and signups will be available soon. Those who are registered will receive email updates, and the latest information is always available at <https://nfb.org/convention>.

### Countdown to New Orleans

The best collection of exhibits featuring new technology; meetings of our special interest groups, committees, and divisions; the most stimulating and provocative program items of any meeting of the blind in the world; the chance to renew friendships in our Federation family; and the unparalleled opportunity to be where the real action is and where decisions are being made—all of these mean you will not want to miss being a part of the 2025 National Convention. We plan to see you in New Orleans in July.

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## Welcome to New Orleans

**From the Editor: The following is reprinted from the June 2022 issue of the *Braille Monitor.* We have tried to update and verify the information that we can, but you may want to double check the transportation facts in the piece. Still, we hope it gives you a flavor of what to expect in New Orleans. Here is what our Louisiana affiliate shared in 2022, the last time our convention was in town:**

We are delighted to welcome you to New Orleans for the eighty-fifth National Convention of the National Federation of the Blind. No matter your interests, our city has something to entertain and inspire you. We are the home of delicious food, rich and diverse culture, famous attractions, unparalleled music, and so much more. We hope you will take a little time to enjoy all there is to offer.

There are several ways to travel from the Louis Armstrong International Airport (MSY) to the Marriott or Sheraton. The approximately fourteen-mile trip takes twenty-five to forty minutes depending on traffic. Taxis are readily available and have a thirty-six-dollar minimum fee for two people. For three or more passengers, the cost is fifteen dollars per person. Rideshare options are a convenient choice. The airport shuttle service that was available in 2022 is no longer providing service for individual passengers, but groups of ten or more may make reservations in advance. To learn more, visit <https://www.airportshuttleneworleans.com>.

Once you have arrived and unpacked, it is time to experience our amazing city! New Orleans was founded in 1718, so we have more than 304 years of rich history and culture to share with you. New Orleans goes by many nicknames. We are The Big Easy, because of our laid back and easy-going attitude. We are the Crescent City because New Orleans was originally built on a bend in the Mississippi River that looks like a crescent. We go by NOLA, short for New Orleans, Louisiana. We are the City of Yes because of our positive attitudes. We have been dubbed Hollywood South because of the vast entertainment opportunities and the movie boom in recent years. Our nicknames give you a flavor of who we are and what you will experience when you visit.

You may be familiar with some of our famous festivals. We celebrate Mardi Gras to kick off Lent, and we definitely know how to have fun! The colorful and vibrant floats, the Mardi Gras beads, the energetic music, and the costumes are unparalleled. We also host the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, often called Jazz Fest, which celebrates the unique culture and heritage of New Orleans. Jazz originated in NOLA in the 1800s. Each year, Southern Decadence happens over Labor Day weekend and is filled with a host of parties, parades, brunches, and events in celebration of the city’s LGBTQ+ community. For more than forty years, this French Quarter-wide fest has been the perfect way to close out summer in the Big Easy. We are also home to the ESSENCE Culture Festival®. This is the largest African-American culture and music event in America. It will take place July 3-6, so if you get to town early, please check it out. These are just a few of our festivals. There’s always something fun and interesting happening in New Orleans.

We have many cultural venues in our beautiful city. These include the National WWII Museum, which honors those who courageously served and showcases America’s contribution to World War II. We are also home of the Audubon Zoo, which houses alligators, bears, and other rare animals and plant life right in the heart of New Orleans. The Audubon Aquarium of the Americas is the home to 15,000 sea life creatures including a shark you can pet and Zion the Penguin.

New Orleans boasts a number of tours, including walking tours to celebrate the city’s Black history, haunted history, music history, and all of the histories that form its culture. Visitors may want to tour one of our cemeteries, which solved the problem of how to bury the dead in a place that is below sea level by creating elaborate marble chambers above ground.

Those interested in transportation may want to ride one of our historic streetcars. In fact, the Canal line runs right in front of the convention hotels. For information about the public transportation and paratransit services, please visit [https://www.norta.com/ride-with-us/know-before-you-go/transit-accessibility/paratransit-service or call 504-248-3900](https://www.norta.com/ride-with-us/know-before-you-go/transit-accessibility/paratransit-service%20or%20call%20504-248-3900) for general info or 504-827-7433 for paratransit reservations. We also have ferry boats and riverboats for those who want to cruise the mighty Mississippi.

The Marriott sits on the edge of the French Quarter or Vieux Carré, the heart and soul of New Orleans history and culture. Frequently called the “crown jewel,” you will love the charm and welcoming vibe of one of New Orleans’ oldest neighborhoods and most iconic areas. We have something for everyone and much to explore! It is the heart of the city, and it is renowned for its French and Spanish Creole architecture, delicious food from traditional Creole cuisine to contemporary American, and vibrant nightlife along Bourbon Street. Tour the iconic St. Louis Cathedral, spend some time people-watching or communing with the artists in Jackson Square, visit the many galleries and antique shops on Royal Street, or enjoy some shopping at the French Market. Be sure to grab some beignets (pronounced ben yays) and café au lait at the world-famous Café Du Monde just blocks from the Marriott. For music lovers, you will frequently hear live music and street performers wherever you are.

Speaking of food, New Orleans is the home of outstanding Creole and other cuisines. Try a po’ boy, muffuletta, gumbo, turtle soup, red beans, crawfish étouffée, oysters—fried, raw, or char-grilled—and so much more. And don’t forget to enjoy a cocktail, like a Hurricane, if you are inclined. In case you are wondering, a po’ boy is a sandwich on flaky French bread stuffed with shrimp, oysters, catfish, roast beef, or whatever you choose, “dressed” with lettuce, tomato, pickles, and mayo. A peacemaker po’ boy is half fried shrimp and half fried oysters. There are many twists on the classic, but you will enjoy whichever combo you choose. And beignets are square pieces of deep-fried dough topped with tons of powdered sugar or a little piece of paradise as we like to say!

New Orleans is the home of many important individuals. These include the ornithologist John James Audubon, writer Truman Capote, artist Edgar Degas, authors William Faulkner and Anne Rice, and returning to the theme of food, the founder of Popeye’s Chicken, Al Copeland. New Orleans is the home of Benjamin Button and Benjamin Sisko from *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*. Famous entertainers from New Orleans include Sandra Bullock, Donna Douglas (played Ellie Mae on *Beverly Hillbillies*), Tyler Perry, Richard Simmons, Mahalia Jackson, Reese Witherspoon, Louis Armstrong, Harry Connick, Jr., DJ Khalid, Aaron Neville, Lil Wayne, Branford Marsalis, Wynton Marsalis, Randy Newman, Frank Ocean, Irma Thomas, and Fats Domino to name a few. Prominent journalists include Hoda Kotb and Cokie Roberts. Prominent political figures from New Orleans include Supreme Court Justice Amy Coney Barrett and former Speaker of the House of Representatives Newt Gingrich. Famous sports figures include NFL quarterbacks Eli and Peyton Manning, and Audrey Patterson, the first African American woman to win an Olympic medal. Both from New Orleans, Ruth Benerito invented wrinkle-free cotton, and Levi Spear Parmley invented dental floss. Ruby Bridges, at six years old, was the first African American child to racially integrate the New Orleans public school system, which gained national attention. Betty DeGeneres was a prominent LGBTQ+ civil rights activist. Chef Leah Chase, the “Queen of Creole Cuisine,” served as the inspiration for Disney’s Princess Tiana. These are just some of the people who hail from New Orleans, but they give you a flavor of our diverse and rich history and culture.

Regardless of your interests, we are sure you will find something to enjoy and make many happy memories! Your Louisiana family can’t wait to welcome you! *Laissez les bon temps rouler;* let the good times roll!

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[PHOTO CAPTION: James Brown]

## A Handful of Blind Little Boys and Girls from Tennessee Just Beat the Speaker of the House

**by James Brown**

**From the Editor: James Brown is president of the National Federation of the Blind of Tennessee. He is also known to Federationists for his composition and recording of some of our newer movement songs, including “Live the Life You Want.” His day job is as a Transportation Program Supervisor with the Tennessee Department of Transportation. As you will read in this article, advocacy gives him great joy, even or perhaps especially when the stakes are high, and he writes about it with wit and verve. All too often, members of the public, including legislators, view blind people as powerless children to be patronized or, worse, ignored. But we are not children and we are not powerless, as James and his Tennessee Federation family recently demonstrated. Here is how James tells the story:**

### The Spark

I still remember the first time I felt the spark—that electric sense that maybe, just maybe, we really could change things. It was 2009, and I had just landed in Washington, DC, to attend my very first Washington Seminar with the National Federation of the Blind. There were only three of us from Tennessee that year. We were small in number and passionate. In fact, I was so green, I didn’t know the difference between a House resolution and a Krispy Kreme doughnut.

Thankfully, I was paired with Joe Shaw, a seasoned legislative advocate and a blind vendor with a sharp wit and a deep knowledge of the Hill. Within the first hour of our legislative meetings, a legislative aide leaned across the table and asked, “Are you two professional lobbyists?” I couldn’t believe it. I was a total rookie, and here someone thought we were pros. Joe just laughed and said, “Well, we do know our way around the issues.” Not bad for day one.

That year, we were promoting the Pedestrian Safety Enhancement Act—a piece of legislation to make sure hybrid and electric vehicles made enough sound so blind pedestrians like me didn’t end up playing real-life Frogger just trying to cross the street. The bill passed less than two years later, and I was hooked.

Since then, the National Federation of the Blind of Tennessee has worked on state legislation to protect the rights of blind parents, ensuring our kids don’t get taken away just because we have a disability. We’ve helped pass a law requiring Tennessee’s higher education system to follow accessibility standards for digital content. We abolished subminimum wages for workers with disabilities. We even got legislation passed to make prescription labels accessible to blind and low-vision people. Most of our work has been about building something—creating opportunity, removing barriers, opening doors.

But every now and then, a bill comes along that doesn’t just block the door—it threatens to bulldoze the whole building. And when that happens, you don’t push forward. You dig in.

That moment came in April of 2025, when a poison-pill amendment to eliminate Tennessee’s little-Randolph-Sheppard Act was proposed sixteen hours before the bill and amendment were about to be heard on the floor of the Tennessee House of Representatives. Like the federal Randolph-Sheppard Act, little-Randolph-Sheppard Acts in states across our nation provide opportunities for blind people to operate small businesses in state buildings. The amendment would have erased around 300 jobs, many of them held by our blind brothers and sisters.

### Blind but Not Backing Down

Once we, in a frenzy, got the bill rolled for a one-week delay, we hit the ground running—and we didn’t stop. Within hours, Terry Smith from the National Association of Blind Merchants, a division of the National Federation of the Blind, was drafting fact sheets and press releases. I was fielding calls from vendors, lawmakers, and Federation members across the state. The Tennessee Committee of Blind Vendors also jumped in with both feet, and a statewide strategy started to take shape.

We heard from the political grapevine that the bill originally came from the Tennessee Speaker of the House. The clock was ticking, and legislators would be leaving town for the weekend before Easter, and by the time Monday morning rolled around, we’d only have three real working days left to shift votes, secure media coverage, and apply pressure. There was no time to waste.

Funny how life circles back sometimes. Joe Shaw—from back in 2009—was now right back in the trenches with me. Only this time, it was our own backyard. Joe and his wife Karen started early Monday morning, visiting all ninety-nine members of the Tennessee House of Representatives. They handed out fact sheets, scheduled meetings, and personally told our story—one lawmaker and staffer at a time.

While they canvassed the Capitol, we launched our media blitz. By Sunday night, we’d let the proverbial cat out of the bag. Press releases went out to every major outlet in Tennessee. And by Monday afternoon, our first TV story hit the airwaves in Nashville, spotlighting the work of blind vendors across the state and the devastating impact this bill would have.

Then came Memphis. Then Chattanooga. Then Knoxville. Like dominos, one media market after another picked up the story. Within just a few days, we were in every major market in Tennessee.

Inside the Capitol, we stuck to a simple but powerful message. We told lawmakers we loved the Senate version of the bill, which improved customer service and expanded opportunities for all people with disabilities. But the House amendment? That was a poison pill. It didn’t expand opportunity—it wiped it out. Of the roughly ninety blind vendors in Tennessee, eighty would lose their jobs. That’s not policy. That’s carnage.

And it wasn’t just jobs. These vendors had invested their savings, taken out loans, bought equipment, and built small businesses from the ground up. One vendor in West Tennessee told me he had three box trucks tied to his business. If this bill passed, he’d likely lose it all—his trucks, his business, maybe even his house. He said he might have to go on Social Security and move in with family. That’s not theoretical. That’s real life.

By Tuesday night, we had already secured half of the twenty-six Republican votes we needed to kill the amendment. And the pressure was starting to mount.

### The Media Turns Up the Heat

By Wednesday, April 16, the media machine was in full swing—and it was doing exactly what we needed it to do. The pressure was no longer just coming from inside the Capitol; it was coming from living rooms, smartphones, and kitchen tables across Tennessee.

Fox 13 Memphis had been digging into the story and, in their hunt for a quote, they reached out to the sponsor of the House bill—the very one who’d introduced the toxic amendment. But instead of reaching him, they accidentally got his wife. And let’s just say, she wasn’t thrilled about how her husband’s legislative season was going.

The reporter told us later that the representative might be sleeping on the couch for a while. Now, I don’t know what kind of sofa he’s got at home, but I hope it’s comfy, because the media wasn’t done yet.

His wife ended up giving the reporter his cell phone number, and to his credit, the representative agreed to an interview. He tried to frame the amendment as a way to “expand opportunities” for people with disabilities—but while he was talking, the news station flashed the actual amendment text across the screen, highlighting the part where blind vendors would be forced to compete with giant corporations.

Not exactly the best look.

This aired Tuesday night, just two days before the bill was scheduled for a vote. At the same time, our team of advocates was still pounding the pavement inside the Capitol. Joe, Karen, members of the blind vendor committee, and Randolph-Sheppard walking encyclopedia Terry Smith were running from office to office, meeting with legislators, dropping off packets, answering questions, and clarifying what this amendment would really do.

By Wednesday afternoon, we started hearing from legislative aides that their representatives were texting them from the House floor: “I’ve decided. I’m voting no if that amendment stays in.” Others said, “I’m hearing it’s going to be pulled.”

It was like watching a wave build—not a tidal wave of destruction, but one of momentum, of clarity, of people standing up and doing the right thing.

Still, we couldn’t relax. Politics can be a game of misdirection. Until it was official, we had to assume the amendment was still alive and kicking.

### Victory in the Eleventh Hour

Thursday morning, April 17, arrived like the final lap of the New York City Marathon: hearts racing, shoes worn down, and adrenaline doing all the work. We’d done everything we could. We had flooded inboxes, knocked on doors, given interviews, and practically worn tracks in the carpet of the Capitol. But there was still that flicker of doubt. Was it enough?

The bill was scheduled to be heard that morning. We gathered in person on the floor of the House and around our cell phones, our ears tuned to every word coming over the live feed. And then, just like that, it happened.

The representative stood up and pulled the amendment.

No debate. No vote. Just… gone.

And if that wasn’t enough, he followed it up with what may go down in history as the most awkward half-apology in Tennessee legislative history. He said something along the lines of, “This amendment probably wasn’t my best idea.”

Now, look—I don’t know what prompted his change of heart. Maybe it was the outcry from blind vendors across the state. Maybe it was the press coverage. Maybe it was the overwhelming number of representatives who said they wouldn’t support the amendment. Or maybe… just maybe… it was the fact that his wife gave his number to a reporter and told him he’d better fix it before Easter weekend.

Whatever the reason, we had done it.

We stopped a bill that would’ve devastated an entire community of blind entrepreneurs in Tennessee. We stared down one of the most powerful figures in state government and came out on top. And we did it with facts, with unity, with persistence—and yeah, with a little humor too.

By Thursday afternoon, we were breathing for the first time all week. Not celebrating exactly—because there’s always another fight around the corner—but smiling. Laughing. Maybe even letting ourselves feel proud.

It wasn’t just a policy win. It was proof that advocacy works, that blind people have power, and that a handful of blind little boys and girls from Tennessee can still beat the Speaker of the House.

### What This Win Really Means

This wasn’t just about vending. It wasn’t just about a single amendment, or one bad bill, or one week of frantic advocacy. This was about reminding ourselves—and reminding the people in power—that blind people are not invisible, we are not silent, and we are not weak.

We are business owners, advocates, parents, professionals, problem-solvers, and, when necessary, political warriors. We know how to organize. We know how to mobilize. And when someone threatens our livelihoods, our dignity, or our future, we show up.

We show up with facts.
We show up with courage.
We show up with unity.
And yes—we show up with press releases, TV spots, and the occasional well-timed joke about sleeping on the couch.

If you’re a Federation member reading this, wondering if your voice matters—let me assure you, it does. If you’ve ever questioned whether one letter, one phone call, or one office visit can make a difference, let this be your proof. If you’ve ever been discouraged by the political climate or worn down by how long change takes, take heart. Because in one week, against long odds, a small team of determined blind advocates in Tennessee protected the rights of eighty blind entrepreneurs and pushed back against the Speaker of the House himself.

I hope this story makes you laugh. I hope it makes you think. But most of all, I hope it reminds you that we still have power. The world doesn’t hand us victories—we go out and win them with a smile on our face and a white cane in our hand, or in my case, a solid Black German Shepherd named Zero by my side.

Because that’s who we are.
We are the National Federation of the Blind.
And we will never stop fighting for each other.

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[PHOTO CAPTION: Bruce Sexton]

## My Kids Knew Their Dad Was Enough

**by Bruce Sexton**

**From the Editor: Bruce Sexton is a blind father, disability rights advocate, and policy strategist. He holds a Juris Doctor degree and has worked across education, technology, corporate, and government sectors to advance equity and inclusion. Bruce has held multiple leadership roles within the National Federation of the Blind, including service on the board of the National Association of Blind Students and various state-level positions. He has also led large-scale public engagement initiatives, supported the launch of a school for blind students in India, and advised executive teams on systemic change. Bruce has written about his role as a blind dad in our pages before. Here is his latest lovely contribution:**

I never had to tell my kids that I was enough. They just knew.

They knew it in the rhythm of my steps, pacing the same loop through the house—kitchen to hallway, through the living room, and back again. They knew it in the steady hum of my voice as I sang lullabies, my arms burning from their weight, holding on until sleep finally won. And when I sat down, finally ready for relief, only to hear them stir and start again, they knew it in the way I stood back up without hesitation.

They knew it in the evenings as they got older, when I ran my fingers over Braille pages, working to decode the dots and give them voice fast enough to keep the story flowing. It took work—pulling meaning from the raised dots, turning it into speech in real time, making sure the words held the same magic they would on any other page. Some nights, my brain was taxed, my focus slipping, but I kept going because that’s what you do when you want your kids to grow up with stories. Because that’s what parenting is. Besides, *Library Lion* was one of their favorites, and mine as well!

They knew it when I read to their preschool classes, letting tiny hands explore the Braille so they would understand it before they ever thought to question it. They knew it when I sat in their grade schools, giving them and their classmates the experience of having a blind parent in their world, just a dad doing what dads do.

They knew it when we walked through an airport or down a busy street, moving together, my hand on their shoulder or theirs brushing against mine. I was always the parent, leading in ways that had nothing to do with sight.

They knew it at restaurants when I handed them the menu and asked them to decide not just what sounded good, but what they actually wanted. Not just pointing to a picture but speaking up and ordering for themselves. Little things that weren’t so little—the quiet practice of knowing their own minds, of using their voices, of understanding that their choices mattered.

And that’s the thing—parenting is struggle. Sometimes it’s exhaustion, sometimes it’s patience wearing thin, sometimes it’s carrying more weight than you think you can hold. Some of that, for me, is because I’m blind. But none of it has ever meant that my kids carry me.

People assume blind parents depend on their children, that our kids must fill in the gaps, take on responsibilities they shouldn’t have to. But my kids don’t exist to make my life easier. They aren’t my guides or my caretakers. They are my children. And like any children, they are learning, growing, building their own place in the world.

I parent the way any father does—through love, through effort, through showing up even when it’s hard. My blindness doesn’t change that. It changes the way I do some things, sure. It forces me to problem-solve in ways most parents don’t have to. But it does not shift the weight of responsibility from me onto them.

My children do not carry me. They walk beside me. And if the world wants to keep telling stories about us, let them. But let it be this one.

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[PHOTO CAPTION: Jesse Shirek]

## Blind Americans and the End of Paper Benefit Checks: What You Need to Know

**by Jesse Shirek**

**From the Editor: Jesse Shirek is one of the very smart and capable people on the Federation’s Advocacy and Policy team. His specific portfolio includes answering questions and facilitating solutions to problems related to Social Security benefits. Jesse is kind, friendly, and approachable, so members who have concerns should never hesitate to reach out to him. In this short article, he explains an important change that will affect how blind people receive benefits like SSI and SSDI, as well as other payments from the federal government. Here, in Jesse’s words, is the critical information:**

On March 25, 2025, President Donald Trump signed an executive order titled Modernizing Payments To and From America’s Bank Account. The goal is to phase out paper checks for all federal payments including Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), Social Security Retirement, and federal income tax refunds by September 30, 2025. For many blind Americans, this is more than a shift in payment methods—it’s a change that may impact our financial independence, privacy, and equal access.

The federal government processes millions of payments every year. According to the executive order, paper checks are “16 times more likely to be reported lost or stolen, returned undeliverable, or altered than an electronic funds transfer (EFT).” There’s no question that updating the system is long overdue—but the nation’s blind must not be left behind.

If you receive SSI, SSDI, or Social Security Retirement, and still get a paper benefits check, this change directly affects you. You will be expected to switch to an electronic payment method, such as direct deposit, prepaid debit card, digital wallet, or real-time payments. Agencies are required to stop issuing paper checks unless you qualify for a specific exemption. This includes all federal disbursements: benefits, tax refunds, and even payments to government contractors and vendors.

The government has outlined important exemptions for individuals who cannot access electronic payments. Section 4 of the Executive Order requires the Treasury Department to revise procedures for those who qualify. Exemptions include individuals who do not have access to banking services or electronic payment systems, certain emergency payments where electronic disbursement would cause undue hardship, and other circumstances as determined by the Secretary of the Treasury. The order also guarantees that individuals or entities qualifying for an exception shall be provided alternative payment options. If you’re without a bank account, experience hardship, or have a disability-related barrier to digital access, you may still receive paper checks, or another form of payment that works better for you.

Technology offers tremendous opportunity, but also risk. Some banking apps, digital wallets, and payment portals are not screen-reader accessible. Blind people may face inaccessible verification methods, complex interfaces, or be forced to rely on others to manage their money, which is something no one should be required to do. That’s why Section 5 of the order is so critical. It mandates a public awareness campaign to inform recipients about the transition, including “guidance on accessing and setting up digital payment options.” It also requires agencies to facilitate a smooth transition to digital payments, ensuring that affected individuals and entities receive adequate support. Importantly, agencies must work with financial institutions, consumer groups, and other stakeholders to address financial access for unbanked and underbanked populations. That means the government must engage with groups like the National Federation of the Blind to ensure full accessibility for blind Americans.

The National Federation of the Blind is committed to ensuring equal access to financial systems and services. We will be watching closely to make sure exemptions are accessible, fair, and easy to request; all digital payment platforms meet accessibility standards; public education materials are provided in Braille, audio, large print, and screen-reader–friendly formats; and blind people receive direct support to transition, if needed.

If you already use direct deposit or a prepaid card like Direct Express, no action may be needed. However, if you use paper checks, now might be a good time to explore alternatives that are accessible and fit your needs. If you believe you will need an exemption, keep a record of why digital options don’t work for you. As previously mentioned, the National Federation of the Blind will continue to monitor this situation and provide updates and help as this transition moves forward.

The federal government’s move toward digital payments is a step into the future. But for blind Americans, that future must be built on inclusion and accessibility. No one should be denied their benefits or forced into dependency because of inaccessible technology. As the Executive Order reminds us, “Nothing in this order shall be construed to impair any right or benefit enforceable at law or in equity by any party.” We are monitoring. We are advocating. And we are ready to ensure blind people have full access to our benefits.

If you need help with a Social Security related concern, contact Jesse Shirek at the NFB Jernigan Institute at 410-659-9314, extension 2348.

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[PHOTO CAPTION: Karl Belanger]

## A Comparison of the Brailliant BI 40X and Braille eMotion Smart Displays

**by Karl Belanger**

**From the Editor: Karl Belanger is a nonvisual accessibility analyst with the National Federation of the Blind Center for Excellence in Nonvisual Accessibility (CENA). In addition to technology, he is a fan of sports and video games (yes, some blind people play those, and Karl can tell you all about how they do it). Many readers will have met Karl virtually through CENA’s accessibility boutiques and seminars, if not in person at convention or while visiting the NFB Jernigan Institute. In this article, he provides an overview of two Braille displays that are packed with useful features and produced by two reputable access technology companies. Pricing information is not included; prices often change, and it’s even possible that one or both of these vendors will have promotions available at the National Convention. Karl assures me that the prices of these two units are comparable, which is to say that there is not a dramatic price difference as the prices of Braille devices go. Here is what he says about them:**

Braille displays continue to play an important role in the lives of many blind people. Recently, both HumanWare and Selvas, formerly HIMS, have released their latest displays. These displays not only provide output from a connected computer or smartphone but also have a fairly robust suite of onboard applications. They are often referred to as smart displays, since they are an intermediate point between traditional displays with no internal features and full notetakers such as the BrailleNote. Both the Brailliant BI 40X and the Braille eMotion are 40-cell displays with a Perkins-style keyboard and a variety of navigation and function keys. Both displays have USB type C ports for charging and connecting to devices via USB, plus USB type A ports for connecting flash drives. The Braille eMotion also has a Micro SD card slot. They each also have internal applications such as a text editor, file manager, calculator, and the ability to download books from various sources. HumanWare offers two other versions of the Brailliant: the Brailliant BI 20X, which has a 20-cell display, and the Mantis Q40, which has the same 40-cell display with a regular computer keyboard in place of the Perkins-style one. Both these displays have the same software as the Brailliant discussed in this article. Selvas only has the one 40-cell version of the eMotion.

### Physical Descriptions

#### Brailliant BI 40X

The Brailliant has the standard thumb key layout on the front edge that has been on HumanWare devices for a while now. In the middle of the front panel is a Home button, which is used to go back to the main menu or exit terminal mode. The right side contains the Volume buttons and a headphone jack behind them, while the left side has a USB A port, the Power button, and the USB C port from front to back. The back edge of the device is empty. On the top of the Brailliant, the 40-cell display is along the front edge. There are cursor routing keys above each cell, and three navigation buttons arranged vertically at each end of the display. Behind the display is the standard Perkins-style Braille keyboard, with two spacebars in front of the display. Lastly, two small speakers are positioned behind and at each end of the keyboard.

#### Braille eMotion

The front edge of the Braille eMotion has two panning keys at either end, with the F1 through F4 keys commonly found on Selvas devices from left to right in between them. In the middle is a Home button with two microphones on either side of it. All of the controls except the Home button and microphones are slightly angled toward the rest of the display. The right side includes the Volume buttons, plus a Mode button to change their function. Behind those are the headphone jack and USB C port. The left edge has the USB A port near the front and a Record button behind that. The top has the Braille display along the front edge, with the Spacebar, Control, and Alt keys in front of it. The display has cursor routing keys, and two capsule-shaped panning buttons at either end of the display. This is actually the first Selvas display to allow you to pan the display either with the panning buttons at the ends of the display or with the keys on the front similar to the Brailliant. Behind the display is the Perkins-style keyboard, with a center key between dots 1 and 4. There are also two speakers at the back corners of the top, with the Power button just to the left of the right speaker. Just to the right of the left speaker are three small keys, labeled W, B, and C in Braille from left to right. These are the Wi-Fi, Bluetooth, and connectivity keys. Press either the Wi-Fi or Bluetooth keys to toggle the feature on or off or hold each key down for a second to open the relevant settings. Pressing the connectivity key will open the Connectivity application allowing you to use the eMotion as a display with other devices, as discussed later in this article. Holding it down will open a menu where you can choose the type of connection you want.

### The Interface

When turning either display on, they will go through a startup sequence and display progress as they go. Both will then come up to the main menu by default. Both take around twenty seconds to start, though the Brailliant finished loading three or four seconds faster. The main menu for both devices contains the main applications that each device has. These include the editor, called Notepad on the eMotion; the app for connecting to other devices, called Terminal on the Brailliant and Connectivity on the eMotion; and apps for accessing online books and changing settings. If you have used a BrailleNote before, the Brailliant uses many of the same interface conventions and status keys. This also holds true for BrailleSense users with the Braille eMotion. In addition to the main apps, both devices have other basic utilities, such as a clock and calculator, and the ability to directly install software updates. Unique to the Brailliant are exam mode and the ability to customize the main menu. In the Brailliant’s options menu, you can enable or disable any of the apps from showing in the main menu. This could be useful for newer users who find themselves getting lost or just to hide applications you aren’t interested in. Exam mode locks down the display for up to six hours. Only the terminal application functions, and you can only connect to a computer via USB. This will prevent students from accessing notes or other information to which they should not have access during tests.

### The Editors

Both devices have basic text editors, allowing you to write documents, take notes, or do anything else with text. However, neither of them offer any advanced formatting or other features of a full word processor. The Brailliant can open PDF, Word, text, and Braille files, but will only save a document as a text file. The Braille eMotion will open all the same formats as the Brailliant, but can also open ePub books. The Braille eMotion can save files in Word or RTF formats, but they will be unformatted. If you open a Word file with formatting such as heading structure, you will lose the formatting if you save the file. The eMotion will also save files as BRF from the notepad, while this function is reserved for the separate Braille Editor application on the Brailliant. They both have standard cut, copy, and paste commands, search and replace, and the ability to insert the time and date. The eMotion also has a read menu for reading different portions of a document and a layout menu for setting the paragraph and page layout for embossing documents. Unique to the Brailliant is the ability to search Wikipedia, Wictionary, or WordNet. Select a word in the document and then use the menu option or shortcut key to perform a search with your desired service.

#### The Brailliant’s Braille Editor

The Brailliant has a specialized Braille editor designed for the opening, editing, and saving of BRFs. It has all the same functions of the standard editor and adds the Format BRF option. This will allow you to specify the desired number of characters per line and lines per page for the embossed file. Once these values are set, it is possible to enter a mode in which the Braille is displayed using these settings so you can get an accurate representation of what the embossed file will look like.

### Searching, Downloading and Reading Books

Another major feature of both these displays is finding, downloading, and reading books from multiple online services. You can access these services from the Online Services menu on the Brailliant or the Library menu on the eMotion. Both displays provide access to Online Daisy, Bookshare, NFB-NEWSLINE®, and NLS Braille books. The eMotion also has a downloadable version of the BARD Mobile Android app for listening to NLS audiobooks, as well as a Bible app. For most of the services, you can log in, browse, or search for books, and download them. Books will be in the Books folder on the Brailliant or the Downloads folder on the eMotion. Once you have a book downloaded, you can read it in the appropriate app: Victor Reader or the editor on the Brailliant or the DAISY player or document reader on the eMotion. While both devices can read Braille books downloaded from NLS, only the eMotion can play audiobooks, and only through the optional BARD Mobile app, which is discussed next.

#### BARD Mobile: eMotion

The Braille eMotion has a version of the BARD Mobile app that can be downloaded through the Optional Services option from the Library menu. Once installed, opening it launches the standard BARD Mobile app for Android. After logging in, you can browse and download audiobooks the same as you would on your phone. These books are not stored in your normal books folder and cannot be played outside the BARD Mobile app.

### Connecting to Other Devices

Through the Terminal app on the Brailliant, or the Connectivity app on the eMotion, you can connect to other devices via Bluetooth or USB. Both displays support connecting to, and switching between, multiple Bluetooth connections plus one USB connection. Both displays can connect to Windows, Mac, iOS, or Android, though the Brailliant can only connect to Android devices running Android version 15 or higher via Bluetooth. Android 15 was the first release supporting Braille devices using the HID standard over Bluetooth. You can connect an older Android device to the Brailliant via USB as long as it is running a recent version of TalkBack. For both displays, you can be connected to up to five Bluetooth devices and one USB device simultaneously.

#### Brailliant: Terminal

Choosing the Terminal option from the main menu opens a submenu where you can see the list of connected devices or add a Bluetooth device. The connected device menu will always have the USB connection first, followed by the list of Bluetooth devices you have paired. Pressing Enter on a Bluetooth device will attempt to connect to it if it isn’t already, or switch to the connection if it is already active. The last options in this menu allow you to reconnect all devices and go back. The add device option displays a prompt to select the Brailliant from the Bluetooth list on the device you want to connect to and go through the pairing process. No matter how you initially connect, once you’ve established the connection, you will see the output from the connected device on the Braille display and can control the device from the keyboard. Pressing the Home button will take you back to the Terminal menu, where you can switch devices or go back to the internal applications. In the Options menu, you can also enable “Start in Terminal” to have the device always go into terminal mode when it starts. This could be useful if you primarily use it as a display with other devices.

#### Connectivity: eMotion

Choosing the Connectivity option from the main menu, or pressing the Connectivity key, will open the Connectivity application. By default, it will either reconnect to the last connection or put you in pairing mode if that connection is unavailable. If you have no Bluetooth devices saved, choosing Connectivity from the menu will also bring you here. Once in Bluetooth pairing mode, you can pair to the eMotion from your other device. Interestingly, the eMotion shows up as a BrailleEdge when pairing to other devices. Once a device is connected, you will see the output on the display and can control the device from the eMotion. The eMotion also has a terminal clipboard that can be used to edit blocks of text before sending them to the connected device all at once. This can be used to copy text from an internal file on the eMotion or if you prefer editing on the eMotion rather than the device you’re connected to.

### Other Features of the Braille eMotion

The Braille eMotion has a few extra features that are not present on the Brailliant that may be worth considering when deciding which display to get.

#### Media Player

The eMotion contains a basic media player. You can load a file or folder of files from either internal storage or a USB drive and play them back. The player supports saving the current files as an M3U playlist. You can navigate within files and set bookmarks to return to a point in an audio track. The player does have a fairly robust set of settings. You can adjust the equalizer, set repeat and shuffle settings, change the minimum length of a file for the player to remember your position, and more. The media player supports most common audio file formats, plus it can play the audio from video files.

#### Recorder

Pressing the Record button on the left side of the eMotion opens the voice recorder. This app allows the user to record MP3 or WAV files at a variety of sample rates, choose how files are named, and choose whether recordings are done through the internal microphones or through a headset. This should be sufficient for recording voice notes or possibly lectures or meetings, though external microphones or headsets should be used for longer recordings since sounds from handling or using the device will be picked up on its internal microphones.

#### Send Device Audio, (Bluetooth Speakerphone)

When connecting to another device such as your phone, you can play the device’s audio through the eMotion’s speakers. To do this, enable Send Device Audio in the Options menu. Once you’ve connected the devices, press the center key+enter+A to toggle whether the device audio is played through the eMotion’s speakers. The speakers sound decent and should be fine for playing music or listening to podcasts. The eMotion can also handle calls, with your voice being picked up through the eMotion’s internal microphones. Unfortunately, there does not appear to be any noise canceling applied. Any key presses, sounds from moving your hands on the device, or anything else in the environment will be picked up clearly, so this is likely to be unusable for calls unless the eMotion is sitting untouched on a desk in a quiet room.

#### Text to Speech Support

Both displays support Text to Speech (TTS) while navigating menus and for reading content. The Brailliant uses Acapela voices, while the eMotion uses Vocalizer voices. Both displays have options to set the Volume, Pitch, and Speed of each voice, as well as to download other voices to use on the display. Both displays also support having two voices installed simultaneously and using them for different purposes, such as one for menus and the other for reading. Having speech capability is useful for when you’d rather listen to a book and give your fingers a break, and it can also be helpful for new users who may still be learning Braille.

### Final Thoughts

Both the Brailliant BI 40X and the Braille eMotion are solid displays with a very similar feature set. Both allow for basic notetaking and can download and read a variety of books from several sources. The eMotion can handle audio playback and may be a better option if you want to use a display with older devices or Android versions prior to 15 because of its support for legacy Braille display drivers. The Brailliant contains a number of options for customizing the interface and may be a better option for education or corporate environments with limited internet access or where there is a need to restrict access to certain applications, such as during educational testing. In general, both of these displays are solid options, whether you want to download and read books on the go or work in Braille with your smartphone or computer. The right device for you will come down to the extra features you want and the online libraries you access.

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[PHOTO CAPTION: Shannon Cook]

## What Is Your “Of”?

**by Shannon Cook**

**From the Editor: Shannon Cook has been a member of the National Federation of the Blind of South Carolina for over thirty years; in fact, she and I came into the movement at about the same time and have been friends for slightly longer. She is currently the affiliate secretary, NFB of SC Scholarship Committee chair, Palmetto Convention Grant chair, and serves as secretary for the boards of the Federation Center of the Blind, Rocky Bottom Retreat and Conference Center for the Blind, South Carolina Association of Black Leaders, SC Computer Science and Technology Division, and the SC Association of Guide Dog Users, among other duties. I must remember to ask her if and when she sleeps. She obtained her Master of Social Work from the University of South Carolina. Shannon met her husband Steve through the Federation, where he is a leader in his own right. They have been married for twenty-one years and have three dogs. We often say that the word “of” is the most important word in the name of our organization. When we talk about why, we usually say it is because we are blind people speaking and acting on our own behalf, not others speaking or doing good works for our benefit. But in this beautifully written article, Shannon invites us to consider other aspects of the meaning of “of,” particularly as it relates to fostering inclusion, which is one of the Federation’s core values. Here are her thoughts:**

The word “of” is often seen as a small, almost unremarkable part of our everyday language. Yet its role is far from insignificant, especially when we examine it as it relates to our place in the National Federation of the Blind. It is a term that links, connects, and defines relationships among people, things, and ideas, and when placed within inclusive frameworks, it can carry powerful connotations of unity, shared experiences, and collective belonging. In the framework of the National Federation of the Blind, “of” is everything we stand for. It connects each member to our collective experience of blindness. It connects each member to the greater organization as an integral part of the whole, no more or less important than the other members, but part of the entire structure. The “of,” fittingly positioned smack-dab in the middle of the name National Federation of the Blind, reflects that we, the blind, comprise the voice of the organization through our expertise and firsthand knowledge of blindness. We are the ultimate authority on blindness because of “of.” We are not “for” in the sense that others decide for us; we are our own leaders within our movement for equality, change, integrity, inclusiveness, accessibility, growth, and success. “Of” means that we belong.

### The Linguistic Role of “Of”

For those of you who know the grammar nerd that I am, I could not skip this bit of background. In its most basic sense, “of” is a preposition. It serves as a connector between a noun and another part of the sentence. While its primary function is to denote possession, origin, or association, it can also show parts of a whole or define relationships. This seemingly small word, therefore, acts as a bridge, linking individuals and groups to larger structures, whether in the context of society, culture, or beliefs.

For example, in the phrase “members of the community,” the word “of” not only connects the members to the community but suggests a shared identity or affiliation. It is this use of “of” that holds relevance when discussing inclusion—it implies belonging, being part of a collective, and establishing connections among individuals and larger social systems.

### “Of” and the Concept of Inclusion

At its heart, inclusion is about recognizing, welcoming, and valuing the diversity of people, ideas, and perspectives. It is about fostering environments where everyone feels that they belong, regardless of their background, identity, or abilities. When we use the word “of” in this context, it can represent a powerful tool in shaping inclusive narratives and fostering understanding.

Consider the expression “a society of equals.” Here, “of” does more than just indicate that equality is a feature of society—it expresses that society is made up of equal individuals. The use of “of” frames the concept of inclusion in a way that everyone, regardless of their differences, is seen as an integral part of the whole. In this way, the word becomes a building block for inclusive language, which seeks to empower and unite rather than divide. In the National Federation of the Blind, we often hear that we are an organization “of” the blind, not only “for” the blind. A one-word change on the surface would seem barely relevant to the meaning, but by using “of” we are all equal parts of the whole as community members. We all have a seat at the table. No one’s lived experience is more or less valuable than another’s.

To put it in a different frame, imagine that the National Federation of the Blind is a giant puzzle. Each member is a piece. Without everyone, the puzzle is not complete. No one piece is the same as the next. Some are shaped differently, have a combination of colors, or have sharp edges rather than rounded. The intersectionality of features is individual to each piece. In our movement, we are each a piece; no one is more important than the next. Each piece is individual. Some are similar. Maybe we have common family histories, home states, gender identities, etc., but the unique combination of characteristics is what makes us an irreplaceable part of the entire beautiful picture. The puzzle is not complete without all its pieces in place.

### How Do You Envision Your “Of”?

I have been a Federationist for most of my life, thirty-four years to be exact. I identified with the Federation from day one because the Federation philosophy gave me the language to articulate my belief that blindness did not make me less than my sighted peers. When I first became a member, I learned the structure, boards, and interplay among local, state, and national levels of the organization. Shortly thereafter, I was asked to help organize and lead one of the smaller chapters of our state. I joined and participated in the Student Division. (We still refer to our student group this way rather than adopting the “South Carolina Association of Blind Students” formulation, because the acronym SCABS sounds gross!) The more involved I got, the more I wanted to get involved. I was accepted in a way I never felt before in my life. Blindness was the characteristic that gave us all a connection, but it became secondary in our interpersonal relationships because we all shared it. No one was known as “that blind person,” as we often are in other contexts. We had deep discussions about music, books, politics, religion, myths of blindness, and our own misconceptions. Because of our particular perspectives, we were stronger together. Each member found their purpose and sought to fulfill it.

The question I pose to readers is, “What is your of?” What do you bring to the Federation that excites you and keeps you invested in our future? You may have a busy, overwhelming personal life, and attending monthly chapter meetings is the maximum you can manage right now. If that is your Of, that is fantastic. If you can plan speakers, chair committees, organize fundraisers, donate to the cause, recruit new members, live by example, teach alternative techniques to newly blind members, make reminder calls, solicit convention sponsors, or anything else, that is wonderful. We can all do something. Your capacity to be involved can and will likely change over time. The key is to realize what you can do. Often it is more than you may imagine. If you do not see a niche for your talents, make one; accept the challenge to develop a project or program where your skills will be best used.

Every one of us, by virtue of our membership, bears a responsibility to further the aim of the National Federation of the Blind: to plan for the present, appreciate and acknowledge the contributions of the past, and make provisions for the future of the NFB. Membership and belonging also come with a collective responsibility to carry us forward through trials, triumphs, stumbles, and successes.

Find your place; don’t be the missing piece.

Take your place in our big, beautiful “of.”

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## Progress and Peril: Developments in *Texas v. Kennedy*

**by Chris Danielsen**

As readers of the April 2025 *Braille Monitor* may recall, a lawsuit known as *Texas v. Kennedy* (formerly *Texas v. Becerra*) was filed by seventeen states against Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., in his official capacity as Secretary of Health and Human Services, and the United States Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). This lawsuit challenges HHS’s 2024 updates to the regulations implementing Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, which prohibits disability discrimination by recipients of federal funds. The updated regulations, issued in May 2024, modernized rules that were fifty years old. They prohibit discrimination in medical treatment and child welfare, require accessible websites and medical equipment, and reinforce the right of disabled people to receive services in the community, among other provisions. The states’ complaint specifically challenged language in the preamble of the updated regulations regarding gender dysphoria and the regulation on integration.

In addition to challenging specific aspects of the updated regulations, the states’ original complaint asked the court to declare Section 504 itself unconstitutional. As our article explained, such a ruling would have jeopardized all of the civil rights gains that blind and disabled Americans have accrued stemming from this bedrock of disability law. For this reason, we and others have advocated for the dismissal of the lawsuit, which still has not occurred. However, recent developments indicate a change in the states’ position on this claim.

In a Joint Status Report to the federal district court in Texas that is hearing the case, filed on April 11, 2025, the states explicitly clarified that they have never moved—and do not plan to move—the court to declare or enjoin Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act as unconstitutional on its face. Furthermore, they stated that nothing in their complaint seeks to restrain the disbursement of federal funds or prevent the government from applying Section 504’s provisions to recipients based on the statute’s unconstitutionality. This clarification means that the court in this case will not rule on the fundamental constitutionality of Section 504. Taken together with the strident denials of intent to kill Section 504 issued by some of the attorneys general involved in the case, it is clear that advocacy and public pressure from the National Federation of the Blind and others has affected the legal stance the states are taking.

Despite this development, the lawsuit remains a significant threat to the rights of the blind and other people with disabilities. The seventeen states have not dropped the case. They continue to challenge other important aspects of the 2024 Section 504 regulations. These challenged provisions include:

* The requirement for states to provide services in the most integrated setting, meaning the right to live in the community rather than institutions.
* The ban on disability discrimination in medical treatment decisions, covering essential care like life-saving healthcare, organ transplants, and the allocation of scarce resources such as ventilators.
* Requirements for accessible medical equipment, websites, and kiosks.
* Provisions related to reasonable accommodations and effective communication.

Not only are the states still challenging the regulation, but so far, HHS and Secretary Kennedy have not made clear whether or not they will defend it. HHS issued a clarification on April 11 describing the preamble language about gender dysphoria as “unenforceable,” which possibly makes part of the lawsuit moot. Beyond that, HHS has not signaled one way or the other whether it will tell the court that it stands behind the regulation aside from that preamble language.

The case currently remains stayed, or paused, at the request of both parties, who also proposed filing subsequent Joint Status Reports every other month on the twenty-first day, with the next report to come on June 21, 2025.

Advocacy remains critical. The Disability Rights and Education Defense Fund (DREDF) highlights that the ability of disabled people to live in the community, a key right affirmed by Section 504 and challenged in this case, is heavily reliant on Medicaid funding for services and supports. They urge those in the seventeen plaintiff states to continue advocating for their attorneys general to withdraw from the lawsuit.

The provisions in the regulation regarding accessible medical equipment, kiosks, and websites, as well as its effective communication and reasonable accommodation requirements, bear directly on the ability of blind people to access our healthcare information, check in for appointments, and receive accessible documents and other communications from healthcare facilities. All Americans with disabilities face the danger of medical professionals deciding that our quality of life is so diminished that we are not a high priority for lifesaving medical care, as many so-called medical ethicists have argued. Backtracking and clarifications are all very well, but this lawsuit still represents a danger, and our continued monitoring and advocacy is warranted.

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[PHOTO CAPTION: Erin Daley throws her arms up in celebration on Deception Island.]

[PHOTO CAPTION: Erin Daley smiles on the Seventh Continent. Snow mountains and the ocean can be seen behind her.]

## My Antarctic Journey

**by Erin Daley**

**From the Editor: Erin Daley is an active member of the National Federation of the Blind of Colorado and secretary of the Denver chapter. She was raised by a single blind father in Massachusetts, where she was introduced to the Federation at the age of five. She currently works full-time in the insurance industry but is also pursuing her masters in assistive technology. Her passion is traveling the world to learn about new cultures, taste new food, and share the unique obstacles and joys of traveling while blind. Here is her fascinating and thrilling account of one of her travel adventures:**

It wasn’t until I was standing in my bathing suit ready to jump off the edge of a ship navigating through rocks and icebergs that it really hit me that traveling to Antarctica was much different than any trip I had ever taken. One of the crew reached around to secure a belt to my waist to ensure that they could pull me back in should there be any issues, and I was ushered to the edge. Another crew member showed me where the ladder was and of course told me which way to turn for the best photo op. I had this grand plan for an epic pose, but it went out of my head as I leaped into the Southern Ocean.

I have always felt that there is nothing like the feeling you get before a trip you have been dreaming about, saving for, and are finally ready to make a reality. As a blind traveler, there is also an added layer of apprehension: will this trip be accessible? Will I encounter any additional costs, be denied entry to a tourist site, or perhaps even be denied on a trip or tour at all? I, like everyone else, go on vacation to get away from the real world. Sometimes I go to relax, and sometimes I go to explore, but I always go as a blind woman, and even at the bottom of the world, traveling while blind was not without its unique challenges.

My friend, a travel blogger and YouTuber, started broaching the idea of a trip about three years before I found myself on the seventh continent. The season to visit is only a few months long for a variety of reasons. First, it must be summer in the southern hemisphere, and then you want to go during peak wildlife months. Even though the season keeps getting longer and longer, January and February are arguably the best months, especially if you, like me, were dying to make friends with a penguin. My friend researched different options, and we eventually put our deposit down about nineteen months before the trip. It didn’t seem real, and I was just so excited to be doing this with a few friends, as this always lowers my stress levels while traveling. We designed a shirt for our group; talked endlessly about all the whales, seals, and penguins we would see; and checked in on each other as different milestones came and went.

When we were a few months out, reality started to hit me: would they have a problem with a blind person on the ship? Would they let me off the ship onto the continent? I knew I wasn’t the first blind person by far to make that journey to the bottom of the world, but this wouldn’t be the first time I experienced some form of discrimination. When I landed for a tour in China, I was informed I would need to pay for a sighted guide to accompany me in every city or I would have to leave the tour and the country. When I traveled to Turkey, one of my city guides told the group that we would not be visiting an attraction, but when I left the van for my room, the rest of the group was then taken to that site without me. When I asked about it, one of the people who went said, “It was very hard to navigate; you wouldn’t have liked it.” I have tried to avoid these and other similar experiences by informing tour companies beforehand that I am blind. The majority outright said that they would not be willing to accommodate me. The excuses ranged from locations not being wheelchair accessible to they don’t have time to dedicate a tour to me personally to, my favorite to date, they absolutely will not carry my bags. Suffice it to say, when I filled out my medical forms for the company’s review, I was not surprised when they came back and told me that blind people are not allowed because “the ship was not designed for blind people.” I asked what a ship designed for blind people would look like, exactly. I never got an answer, but I think that would be a fun project! I reached out to my friend who arranged and booked the trip, and she forwarded emails where she had inquired about this in order to prevent this very problem. The company held to their current stance, and I made a decision: I amended the form to say that I was not really blind, just had vision issues. People asked me what I would do if they turned me away when I flew down there, they saw my white cane, and realized that I was blind. While I didn’t have a plan, I just told myself that once I got on the ship, they couldn’t drag me off if they tried. A number of people have expressed shock that I have experienced this kind of discrimination, but this is pretty common, as most countries do not have ADA-like protections. Just as in China when I was threatened unless I paid extra money, there is often no recourse.

The time came to fly to Punta Arenas, Chile, and I was riddled with anxiety about being denied. The first step was to go through orientation, which included fitting our boots, cleaning our outerwear of any biological matter, and learning about everything we would experience in Antarctica. A member of staff asked me to show him that I could get in and out of the Zodiac® safely, as we would be using this inflatable boat with an outboard motor for our landings. It was fairly easy, and that was the only pushback I got. I was elated that they did not appear concerned with my blindness. I was officially going to Antarctica!

Now, I wish I could say that I was always a perfect traveler and kept my cool the whole time, but the truth is if I don’t get my sleep, a six-foot radius around me should probably be enforced. Our tour was different in that we would not be sailing the notorious Drake Passage to Antarctica; we would be flying to King George Island and board the ship there. Flying into Antarctica is entirely dependent upon weather and visibility, so there are no scheduled flights. We were informed at around 9 PM that we needed to get up at 3 AM because they just got clearance from the airline. We rushed back to the hotel to pack and prepare. I tried to catch some sleep at the airport and on the quick flight, but it was not helping. By the time I was boarding my first Zodiac to the ship, I was panicking and overwhelmed. It didn’t help that we learned the biocontainment procedures—which included a boot-cleaning machine, standing in a box filled with this foamy decontamination liquid, and then changing out of our outer items and into our ship clothes and shoes—would be completed four times a day as we stayed on the ship, once every time we left the ship and once when we returned.

Then, it was time to learn the layout. Everyone was excited and running around checking out the lounge and the other rooms, but I had never felt so alone. For the first time, I felt like all the people who thought me coming was crazy were right. I had no business being here. I participated in the lifeboat drill and had an anxiety attack. No one gave directions; hands would just come out of nowhere and push me down a hallway or turn me in a different direction. It was all too much, and I fought to control my tears. There are some times as Federationists that we do not react how we think we would or want to in these situations, and this is a hard moment for me to look back on. I wish I had spoken up for myself, but I went back to my room and opened my BARD app. I checked how many books I had and determined that I had enough for a few days. I intended to leave the room for meals and just hide the rest of the time. My friend who arranged the trip noticed that I was not my usual self, and announced that she was giving me a tour of the ship. I thought some pretty unkind things, but anyone who knows me knows that I have more stubbornness than sense. She showed me to the dining room, the espresso machine, the bar, and the mudroom where we went through the decontamination process. She helped me find tactile ways to tell which room was mine, and she had me lead a route through the ship to ensure I knew my way. I am so blessed with friends who are blind at heart, and I am filled with gratitude that when I gave up on myself, she didn’t give up on me.

I went to bed with glaciers outside my window and my mind racing with everything that could go wrong tomorrow. When I woke, I was a new woman. It was like all the anxiety had vanished, and I was filled with pure anticipation for the first outing of the day—a Zodiac tour through a bay full of whales, seals, and glaciers. The second expedition was a landing on an island with a hike up a mountain—well, maybe a steep foothill—with a penguin colony at the top. This was my first up-close experience with the topography of Antarctica. There are no docks, no soft sand beaches, and plenty of sharp slick rocks that you have to climb over to get to the shore. The boots you wear are knee-high and waterproof for a reason. We jumped off the side of a Zodiac into the frigid waters and picked our way to shore. Once there, we were given hiking poles to help stabilize us on the feet of snow that blanketed the slope we were to climb. This process was repeated at all of our landings. I liked some more than others, but each was special in their own way. I did get to meet penguins (and smell them) as well as humpback whales and leopard seals. We passed through picturesque channels and took a Zodiac tour of an iceberg graveyard. I learned about the history of the continent and all about the different species of wildlife (the Adélie penguins were my favorite). I also can’t forget to mention the crew and food, the first of which were so kind and always helpful to everyone they met, and the second of which I wished I could bring home! This was not your average cruise food!

Without a doubt, the highlight for me was our landing at Deception Island. I remember being about six years old holding the globe in my hands and spinning it around and around to look at the different parts of the world. At the very bottom was a tiny island with a big name: Deception Island. I wish I could say that my secret dream to visit there was because it is only one of two active volcanos in Antarctica, or that in order to reach the island you sail into Port Foster, the harbor that is actually the flooded caldera of the volcano. In all honesty, I was just a little girl who loved the name, which was given because, as I just mentioned, the island is a volcano with a flooded caldera, not a normal island.

Because there are so many factors that go into landing on Antarctica, there is never a set itinerary. Each landing has to have paperwork completed, weather taken into account, and also ensure that the limit on how many people can be on land at one time is met, among other requirements. Because of this, you could go to Antarctica twice in the same month and not have the same landings. We would find out the evening before what the landings would be for the next day. We were sitting in the lounge waiting for the announcement of the final day’s landings, and when I heard Deception Island, I began to cry. I had obviously hoped we would land there, but I didn’t want to get my hopes up. I was absolutely ecstatic when I boarded the Zodiac the next day, and I did a little dance on the ash-covered island. While the island definitely had snow, much of the land was barren rock reminiscent of Mordor, the fictional wasteland in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*. We were told to stay away from the various equipment around the island that monitored the volcano, but also told not to worry because while the volcano is due to erupt in 2025 based on its prior eruptions, the seismologists had checked before our arrival and there were no indications it would blow that day. It’s always an adventure in Antarctica.

The polar plunge that I mentioned at the beginning of this story was not only a photo-op, it was also the capstone of a truly one-of-a-kind experience, and proof that I am not afraid to push myself out of my comfort zone. When I hit the water of the Southern Ocean, my first thought was “Wow, this is not that cold at all!” I barely had enough time to wonder if a whale was swimming beneath me before I burst out of the water and realized that, while the water was not as bad as I thought, the air was freezing, and I almost seized in shivers. Climbing up the ladder felt impossible, but the shot of vodka I was given at the top helped warm me up.

My friend and I got to talking, and maybe it was the vodka, but she told me that while we were back in Chile getting our orientation, one of the cruise directors had approached her and told her that I would not be able to do any of the landings or expeditions because there was no way I could navigate the rocks on shore. I was surprised, as nothing had been mentioned to me, but, then again, I have been ignored countless times by servers and employees who attempt to locate any sighted person in the vicinity who could be responsible for the blind person instead of speaking to me. My friend told the director that I would be trying every single landing, as they did not know what I was capable of. My friend apologized for not telling me, but didn’t want to ruin my trip and regretted telling me now. I thanked her, as I do like to know these things, but I also thanked her for what she said. Knowing how sleep-deprived and emotionally unregulated I had been on that first day, I do not know how that knowledge would have affected me. I would like to say that I would have been my regular stubborn self and proven them wrong, just like I had already been doing, but then again, I would have liked to educate the person who had been pushing me to the lifeboat. Regardless, I was so grateful to have a friend that understood the assignment and stood up for me. Without knowing it, I had proven the director wrong: I had completed every landing, which is not something that everyone on that ship could say.

I think we all have dreams that we wish we could accomplish but have given them up for one reason or another, and maybe that reason is the little voice inside our head that says it is impossible or that we are crazy. We often get treated as brave and inspirational for just buying milk and bread at the grocery store, but we should never lose sight of the fact that other people’s low expectations do not define what we are capable of. Traveling the world was always my dream, and before I attended the Colorado Center for the Blind and truly embraced the philosophy of the National Federation of the Blind, my grief was not just over losing my vision, it was over losing my dreams. Not everyone’s dream is to hike up Deception Island, but whatever it is, you can accomplish anything with determination and a good night’s sleep.

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## Lead and Drive: Give $25 in ‘25

Each year, thousands of Federation members and friends contribute before and during the National Convention to various funds that support blind people. In 2025, generosity is still needed to fund our great programs. When you give $25 or more between May 15 and July 11, 5:00 p.m. Central, you will be entered into the *Lead and Drive: Give $25 Drawing*. Each $25 increment is a chance to win. Thanks to a generous gift from an anonymous supporter, each contribution will be matched up to $25,000.

Why “Lead and Drive?” The National Federation of the Blind continues to lead courageously and drive lasting change in the lives of blind people across the country. Our 2024 Give $25 drawing winner, Ali Colak, shared:

“This was my second time entering, and I didn’t think I would win anything. Just participating in helping the NFB in its cause was wonderful, but winning was a pleasant surprise.”

Your support helps fund life-changing programs that bring blind people to National Convention, fuel innovation and education, and power possibilities for the next generation.

When you contribute to the Lead and Drive: Give $25 Drawing, you’ll be entered to win the following:

* Roundtrip transportation for two for the 2026 NFB National Convention
* Hotel at the convention
* Registration and banquet tickets for two
* $1,000 in walking-around cash

Or

* $2,025 cash!

### Give. Honor. Win

Maybe you want to announce our winner at the banquet and help the Federation but are not in a position to give financial support. You can ask friends and family to contribute in your honor and indicate that you prompted their gift! If they place your name and phone number or email into the field on our Give $25 Drive form, you will be credited as a Federation Challenger for that gift. There will be a special drawing at convention for our Federation Challengers and, if you are credited with prompting the most gifts, you can announce our Give $25 winner at the banquet! Remember, this year all contributions will be matched up to $25,000 thanks to an anonymous donor.

But that’s not all. Be one of the first 100 people to give $100 or more and you will receive a pair of AfterShokz wireless headphones.

The campaign supports several important funds:

* Kenneth Jernigan Fund: Used to bring attendees to their first national convention and more. Named for Dr. Jernigan, who led convention planning for more than forty years.
* SUN Fund: A “rainy day” reserve for unforeseen needs.
* White Cane Fund: Supports the general treasury of the Federation where funds are most needed.
* tenBroek Fund: Supports the tenBroek Memorial Fund, which owns our national headquarters property in Baltimore.

### How to contribute and qualify

You must specify a fund to enter the drawing. You can do this multiple ways:

* Online: Use our Give $25 Drive online form: [nfb.org/give25donate](https://nfb.org/give25donate)
* Phone: Call 410-659-9314, extension 2430
* Mail: Send a check to National Federation of the Blind, 200 East Wells Street, Baltimore, MD 21230 and include #Give25 and your fund of choice in the memo
* Visit the Give $25 Drive table outside of General Sessions at convention

Your donation will be counted for the drawing regardless of which fund you choose. If you’re unsure, please select the White Cane Fund for maximum flexibility.

Please remember, the drawing is meant for individuals and is not intended for contributions by divisions, affiliates, or chapters. The winner will be announced July 13, 2025, at the banquet. Thank you for leading and driving with us!

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## Plan for the Future

“What if I was never blind? In April 2013 I received a diagnosis of Stargardt Disease. I often felt adrift, uncertain of how to chart a course towards a fulfilling life. At that time, I was employed at McDonald’s and had temporarily paused my undergraduate studies. If I hadn’t received that diagnosis, my life might have followed a completely different trajectory. I would have continued working at McDonald’s, feeling stuck and uncertain about my future, but without the guidance and support that I found through the National Federation of the Blind, I might have struggled to navigate the challenges of vision loss. Instead, that diagnosis became a turning point for me by forcing me to confront my circumstances and seek out resources and communities that could help me thrive despite my blindness. The NFB helped me realize that my vision loss didn’t have to define me or limit my aspirations. By believing in my abilities, by entrusting me with leadership positions, and through intensive mentorship, the Federation changed my life. My community helped me excel beyond where I would be if I were sighted.

Mentorship is what has brought me to this point in life thus far. Without my mentors I am not sure where I would be right now. I just hope I can pay it forward someday.” - Dustin

Blind children and adults are making powerful strides to live the lives we want every day across the United States, but we need to continue helping blind people like Dustin. For more than eighty years, the National Federation of the Blind has worked to transform the dreams of hundreds of thousands of blind people into reality. With support from individuals like you, we can continue to provide powerful programs and critical resources now and for decades to come. We hope you will plan to be a part of our enduring movement by including the National Federation of the Blind in your charitable giving and in your estate planning. It is easier than you think.

With your help, the NFB will continue to:

* Give blind children the gift of literacy through Braille.
* Mentor young people like Dustin.
* Promote independent travel by providing free long white canes to blind people in need.
* Develop dynamic educational projects and programs to show blind youth that science and math careers are within their reach.
* Deliver hundreds of accessible newspapers and magazines to provide blind people the essential information necessary to be actively involved in their communities.
* Offer aids and appliances that help seniors who are losing vision maintain their independence.

Below are just a few of the many tax-deductible ways you can show your support of the National Federation of the Blind.

### LYFT Round Up

By visiting the menu, choosing Donate, and selecting the National Federation of the Blind, you commit to giving to the National Federation of the Blind with each ride.

### Vehicle Donation Program

We accept donated vehicles, including cars, trucks, boats, motorcycles, or recreational vehicles. Just call 855-659-9314 toll-free, and a representative can make arrangements to pick up your donation. We can also answer any questions you have.

### General Donation

General donations help support the ongoing programs of the NFB and the work to help blind people live the lives they want. You can call 410-659-9314, extension 2430, to give by phone. Give online with a credit card or through the mail with check or money order. Visit our online contribution page at: <https://nfb.org/donate>.

### Pre-Authorized Contribution

Through the Pre-Authorized Contribution (PAC) program, supporters sustain the efforts of the National Federation of the Blind by making recurring monthly donations by direct withdrawal of funds from a checking account or a charge to a credit card. To enroll, call 877-NFB-2PAC, or fill out our PAC Donation Form <https://www.nfb.org/pac>.

### Plan to Leave a Legacy

The National Federation of the Blind legacy society, our Dream Makers Circle, honors and recognizes the generosity and imagination of members and special friends who have chosen to leave a legacy through a will or other planned giving option. You can join the Dream Makers Circle in a myriad of ways.

#### Percentage or Fixed Sum of Assets

You can specify that a percentage or a fixed sum of your assets or property goes to the National Federation of the Blind in your will, trust, pension, IRA, life insurance policy, brokerage account, or other accounts.

#### Payable on Death (POD) Account

You can name the National Federation of the Blind as the beneficiary on a Payable on Death (POD) account through your bank. You can turn any checking or savings account into a POD account. This is one of the simplest ways to leave a legacy. The account is totally in your control during your lifetime and you can change the beneficiary or percentage at any time with ease.

#### Will or Trust

If you do decide to create or revise your will, consider the National Federation of the Blind as a partial beneficiary.

Visit our Planned Giving webpage (<https://www.nfb.org/get-involved/ways-give/planned-giving>) or call 410-659-9314, extension 2422, for more information.

#### In 2024 our supporters helped the NFB:

* Host three career fairs connecting blind job seekers with potential employers.
* Send 261 Braille Santa and Winter Celebration letters to blind children, encouraging excitement for Braille literacy.
* Distribute over six thousand canes to blind people across the United States, empowering them to travel safely and independently throughout their communities.
* Deliver more than five hundred newspapers and magazines to more than 130,000 subscribers with print disabilities free of charge.
* Give over seven hundred fifty Braille-writing slates and styluses free of charge to blind users.
* Mentor 222 blind youth during our NFB Braille Enrichment for Literacy and Learning® Academy.
* Award thirty scholarships each in the amount of $8,000 to blind students.

Just imagine what we will do this year and, with your help, what can be accomplished for years to come. Together with love, hope, determination, and your support, we will continue to transform dreams into reality.

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[PHOTO CAPTION: Gary Wunder]

## Staying True to Our Mission While Respecting Our Differences

**by Gary Wunder**

The National Federation of the Blind is a diverse organization. We are bound by our shared belief in the capacity of blind people to live the lives we want, not by a shared political ideology. Among our members are Republicans, Democrats, Libertarians, Independents, and those who would rather not affiliate with any party at all. This ideological variety is not only expected—it is healthy. But it also means we must walk a fine line between being respectful of one another’s beliefs and being bold enough to speak when policies threaten the programs we rely on.

Some confusion arises when advocacy organizations like ours criticize policies promoted by political parties or public figures. It is not unusual for members to ask, “Are we attacking my party? Are we going after someone I support? Is this a place where I still belong?”

These are fair questions, and they deserve thoughtful answers. But in many cases, what may feel like an attack is actually a principled disagreement based on the organization’s priorities—particularly those grounded in the needs and rights of blind people.

We must learn to differentiate between criticism of a person or ideology and disagreement with a policy direction. If a proposed budget slashes funding for rehabilitation training, we are duty-bound to speak up. If Social Security is under administrative strain, making it harder for blind people to get answers to our questions or appeal incorrect decisions, we must say so. If key civil rights provisions of the Rehabilitation Act—protections hard-won in the 1970s—are threatened, then silence is not an option.

None of this should be mistaken for personal condemnation of any politician or supporter. Our role is to advocate. That means we have a responsibility to evaluate proposed changes and their likely effects, regardless of where they come from. If our advocacy seems pointed at times, it is because the stakes are high. The lives of blind children in public schools, blind workers seeking job training, and blind people navigating public systems hang in the balance.

This does not mean we throw respect and sensitivity out the window. On the contrary, we must be especially mindful of how we speak and write. We should not demonize those who disagree with us, nor should we reduce complex beliefs to slogans or caricatures. Mutual respect strengthens our organization and enables deeper discussion. But respect does not mean muting ourselves in the name of harmony.

We cannot allow fear of causing offense to paralyze our advocacy. If we believe a particular program or law is essential to our well-being, we must say so. If we think a proposed action—or inaction—will harm blind people, we must say that, too. Silence born of excessive caution is not neutrality; it is complicity in the erosion of hard-won rights and opportunities.

Our movement was not built on silence. It was built on a relentless push for recognition, fairness, and opportunity. That work continues today, and it often requires us to speak against the tide. We are seeing real and threatened cuts to library services that provide accessible books and materials to blind readers. We have seen threatened funding reductions in rehabilitation services on the grounds they lean toward emphasizing diversity and equity over skill and competence. It is not partisan to argue that these assumptions are not what our lives have shown us and that we stand for programs and services which are critical for training blind adults to live independently and enter the workforce. We have seen threats to the very civil rights language in the Rehabilitation Act that once opened doors that had long been locked.

We cannot sit quietly while these gains are chipped away—not for fear of offending a friend or fellow member, not because we happen to support other policies advanced by the same people proposing the cuts. Supporting a party or politician in a general sense does not require us to support every action they take. And standing against a particular policy does not mean we reject everyone who supports its authors. It means we are doing what we were formed to do: speak up when blind people’s rights, opportunities, and access are at risk.

Advocacy requires courage. It also requires trust: trust that we can disagree with one another in good faith, trust that we can examine policy proposals on their merits, trust that our membership can tell the difference between a policy critique and a personal attack, and trust that our common bond—the pursuit of equality for blind people—will remain stronger than our differences.

We must continue to press for policies that support quality education, meaningful rehabilitation, robust access to Social Security and other supports, and the enforcement of civil rights. These are not partisan goals. They are the foundation of a society in which blind people can thrive. Let us pursue them with all the clarity and vigor they deserve—respectfully, thoughtfully, and without apology.

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[PHOTO CAPTION: Melissa Riccobono]

[PHOTO CAPTION: Chris Danielsen]

[PHOTO CAPTION: President Riccobono]

## Always Partisan for Blind People: A Podcast Discussion with President Riccobono

**From the Editor: The following is a lightly edited transcript of excerpts from a recent episode of the *Nation’s Blind Podcast,* which is one of two podcasts produced by the Federation at the national level. (The other is *Access On*, which is hosted by Jonathan Mosen and is dedicated to access technology and our work in that area.) Melissa Riccobono and Anil Lewis are the usual co-hosts, but Anil was unavailable to record this episode, so I stepped in for him. I am including this content here, however, not because I participated in its creation but because President Riccobono did. He provided critical insights into recent actions that we have taken that some have perceived as politically partisan. I felt that these insights were important to share with *Monitor* readers and that the content paired well with Gary Wunder’s piece also appearing in this issue. I do urge those who can, to listen to the entire podcast. The full transcript is also available on the podcast’s page on our website. If you’ve never listened to the show before and like the episode, please do subscribe to this podcast and to *Access On* as well. You can find them both on the National Federation of the Blind website or by using the search function of your podcast client of choice. Here is the excerpted conversation:**

**Melissa Riccobono:** Hello and welcome to the Nation’s Blind Podcast. I’m Melissa Riccobono, and I am joined today by a gentleman that we haven’t heard from in a little while, but he is not a stranger to the podcast. Here is Chris Danielsen. How are you, Chris?

**Chris Danielsen:** I’m doing great. It’s great to be back on the podcast. I’ve shifted roles and I’m primarily working on the *Braille Monitor* now, of course, but it’s fun to have a chance to come back on the podcast, so it’s great to be here and great to talk with you, Melissa. How are you?

**Melissa Riccobono:** I’m doing well. I’m actually traveling in Wisconsin, so I have been enjoying time with my family and I got a chance this morning to be with my great niece for a little while, so that was very fun. She just turned a year old, so family time is wonderful, but we’re not here to talk about family time, although incidentally we do have a family member of mine on the podcast, so that actually worked out really well. Not only are we joined by Chris Danielsen, but we are also joined by the President of the National Federation of the Blind, Mark Riccobono. I am going to just let him have the floor so that he can begin the discussion and sort of frame what we’d like to share with you today.

**President Riccobono:** Well, I appreciate that. In a time like this where there is, I would say, a lot of political discourse happening, we have a challenge as the National Federation of the Blind because we are America’s civil rights membership organization of blind people, and people expect us to speak out on issues related to programs and services that impact blind people. Our membership is a very diverse cross section of blind people who come from all perspectives on almost any issue you can think of, and it’s difficult in any environment to advocate for something because generally someone else wants to make it about something that it’s not. So a lot of times when we speak out as the blind of America on an issue, there’s someone else who wants to make it about something else. And for us it’s always about blind people. I like to say we’re always partisan for blind people. We’re not particularly interested in whether an issue is a conservative issue or liberal issue. For us, it’s does the policy being considered, does the issue being considered have a direct impact on blind people? And if so, what should it be? So that’s the framing for why we’re here today to talk about that because especially in today’s general political environment, I would say a lot of people tend to make any kind of public statement a political statement, either for or against somebody, and we wanted the opportunity to talk about the work that we do as a diverse organization and how it is always driven by and intended to benefit blind people.

**Chris Danielsen:** Yeah, I think that’s a really good framing. And it is difficult, right? Because people want to read into any action that any organization takes, it seems like they want to read into it, “Oh, well, you’re here or there on the political spectrum,” and it’s not really about that for us. Now, obviously it may seem like that because we may be responding to a particular thing that a particular political entity has done or failed to do, but the reality is we’re just concerned about the policy implications for blind people. So, let’s just dive right into it and let’s just talk, for example, about how we have responded and why we have responded to the, I guess what I’ll call it is the debate about the future of the United States Department of Education.

**President Riccobono:** Yeah, that’s a great place to start, Chris. And what I would say is, just to put a fine point on what you said, it’s not as simple as saying we’re not a partisan organization; we don’t get into party politics in America. It has to be a conscious choice on our part, and it has to mean that as elected leaders in the organized blind movement, we have to listen to what the members of the Federation are saying, talking about, dealing with, and then also make very conscious decisions about not just the policy, but the actions to be taken. And we can talk a lot about historical examples of that. So I don’t want to make it sound like it’s easy to not get dragged into some things. As everyday Americans who happen to be blind, we have opinions about many things. But as elected leaders of the organized blind movement, we have a very specific responsibility to the organization and to its members to make sure that our actions are always partisan for blind people and don’t get dragged into what sometimes becomes political argument for the sake of that. So elimination of the Department of Education is an interesting one because the fact of the matter is there are a lot of important programs that impact blind people that are currently housed at the Department of Education. So for historical context, of course, there was a time when very important programs for blind people were not housed at the Department of Education because it didn’t exist. And our concern is those programs, and in fact, we came to our Washington Seminar in February—our annual time of bringing our members together to do advocacy work in DC—and we already knew that elimination of the Department of Education was going to be a topic in Washington, DC. And so we at a leadership level talked about, well, what is the Federation’s position on the Department of Education? Well, organizationally, we don’t have a policy. We don’t really care how government decides to organize itself. At least so far, the convention’s never taken an opinion on that. But we do care about the programs. And so we identified the key programs within the Department of Education and have said to Congress and to the administration that those programs need to be protected. And furthermore, we’d like to have a voice, a say in what the plan is, where those programs land, what they look like, how they could be better, because we always want to have the blind at the table in having a say like that. So I know that one of the areas that we have been vocal about is that one of the first steps was to dramatically reduce the Office of Civil Rights at the Department of Education. We don’t have a particular opinion about how many offices there should be and how many people there should be employed. But we do know that with respect to violations of federal law as it relates to blind people that are enforced by the Office of Civil Rights at the Department of Education, that enforcement is already dramatically slowed, dramatically underfunded, and to eliminate those offices will further erode our ability to help blind students in higher education settings to get their concerns heard when their universities implement an inaccessible learning management system. And so we’ve spoken out quite vigorously that we’re very concerned about it. Now, maybe there’s a better plan out there, and we will praise that plan if it gets implemented. But since we don’t have any idea what the plan is or where it’s going, all we can say as blind people is that we are very concerned about what happens to the enforcement of our rights.

**Melissa Riccobono:** Absolutely. And very similar for Social Security, right? Do you want to talk a little bit about the lawsuit that was just filed?

**President Riccobono:** To begin, let me remind us that one of the principal motivating factors for the development of the National Federation of the Blind, bringing together blind people from various states, was having a voice in the national Social Security program, which was of course developed in the 1930s. And we came together in 1940, and Social Security—making sure that blind people and our interests were represented and that those programs really created opportunity for us—was a very important part of our organizing. So we’ve been giving opinions on what Social Security and the agency should do since 1940. We also know that a lot of blind people have difficulty with the Social Security rules. The Social Security Administration often gets the rules wrong. There are very specific rules related to blind people, for example, receiving Social Security Disability Income, and a lot of times the wrong rules are provided. So the customer service element is really important. Also, we’ve worked closely on making sure to eliminate barriers in Social Security, whether it is making sure blind people can get accessible documents, whether it’s your statement of your benefits or that sort of thing. And then more recently we’ve worked to eliminate barriers, especially during the pandemic where the only option for applying for benefits was actually giving a physical—what they call a wet ink—signature, and then taking your document and dropping it in the mail. And during the pandemic, that was a disparity for blind people and other people with disabilities. We worked to get really good changes at Social Security for verification of identity and electronic signatures. And all of these things lead up to now, where the current effort is to reduce the customer service function at the Social Security Administration. And we already know this is going to have an impact on blind people because blind people were having trouble before the reductions in staff. And we know that the closure of offices is a problem for blind people because we face transportation difficulties and disparities already. And so we looked hard at what to do about that, and we decided to join in this case with other organizations who have an interest in this issue, other disability organizations and also organizations that deal primarily with senior citizens, because these really are the populations of people who are going to be harmed by these reductions. And so we joined together and we thought carefully about the right approach, but the changes were so dramatic and so fast, and we were already hearing from blind people who, I mean, we have people who have been waiting for a year or more to hear about their application for Social Security Disability Income. So these are blind people who have been in the workforce, they’ve paid into the workforce, they’re now in a situation for whatever reason, they’re clearly eligible for Social Security Disability Income, and they’ve been waiting a year. And that is the exact kind of barrier that we’re concerned about. In this case, we felt it was necessary to bring a case because swift action is needed. We don’t have time for the standard advocacy work. In fact, we don’t even have a disability point of contact at the White House at the moment, which we’ve had in almost every administration going back many decades now. So we felt that a lawsuit was needed, and fortunately, we’re already seeing—and it’s not just because of our work, there’s a lot of activity around Social Security around the country, but I think our lawsuit helps—we’re seeing now the Social Security Administration saying they’re walking back some of those cuts, and we’re going to hold their feet to the fire and make sure that really happens.

**Chris Danielsen:** Yeah, I think that’s really important. And again, it’s because of the impact that Social Security has on blind people, and Social Security has always been frustrating, at least in my experience. But we don’t need it to become even more frustrating and even less responsive. And another issue where we’ve weighed in—and we talked about it at Washington Seminar and we are engaging about it—is library services. And again, to me, that issue is not about the structure of the government, because we talked at Washington Seminar about the Institute for Museum and Library Services [IMLS], but that as an agency as such hasn’t always existed—it was created in 1996—but there is federal involvement in the provision of library services to blind people and to others as a matter of fact. And we’re seeing, in the wake of the effort to close the Institute for Museum and Library Services, we’re seeing reports of libraries that are having to cut back staff and are having to shut down particular programs. And they’re not all libraries for the blind, but some of them are. So again, this is an issue where we needed to weigh in because whatever the structure is behind it, we have to have the library services. And I believe in that case, what we did was we reached out to the appropriators and basically said, how are you planning to make sure that the funds are appropriated so that library services continue?

**President Riccobono:** So one of the things, and I think this came up in some of the Facebook comments with listeners, and I think we’re going to get to some of those, is a concern that, well, maybe the Federation’s not telling the whole story. So let’s make sure that everybody who’s listening really understands that the National Library Service for the Blind—which is actually part of the Library of Congress, so it’s under the jurisdiction of Congress—is the library entity that helps to produce Braille and audio books in an accessible format. It’s not a library, in that it doesn’t lend books to anybody. The National Library Service provides those materials at no charge to state libraries, or they’re often called regional libraries. And so in Maryland, we have the Maryland Library for the Blind and Physically Disabled. Those entities exist in states to the extent that the state has, through its government processes, developed a library for the blind. There are states, take Wyoming for example, which does not have a library for the blind and has contracted out its library services to the Utah Library for the Blind. So Utah, thankfully, provides library services to blind people in Wyoming. In many of these states, blind people have advocated for state funding for the library, which is wonderful. In a lot of states, there’s a lot of competing interests for library services. And so in some places, Minnesota I believe is one, a hundred percent of the funding for the Minnesota Library for the Blind comes from the federal dollars that flow from IMLS. And so in some states, the impact might only be partial, maybe not at all, because the state’s really fully funding the library for the blind. But in a state like Minnesota, it’s a hundred percent. And the issue becomes, it’s not like a blind person has the option to just go down to the local library and get their Braille books and get accessible formats, because most public libraries don’t offer that. We’d love it if every library did. So we’re in a difficult position.

We may or may not have an opinion about IMLS, how it operates, but those dollars and the elimination of those dollars without a plan are going to have real impact on blind people’s ability to get information, books, resources. Think about if you’re a blind student in one of these states and you need books from the library for the blind for your schooling, an immediate shutdown is going to have really dramatic impacts. So you’re right, Chris, in that case, we wrote directly to the appropriations committees. Of course, they’re responsible for that anyway. The Federation, we don’t care in one sense, if those dollars go directly to the states as some sort of block grant program or whether they flow through an agency. But right now, those states and those libraries are left not knowing what’s going to happen. And that means blind people don’t know where they’re going to get their books.

**Chris Danielsen:** Exactly. And it’s important to remember that really is the case, because some listeners might be thinking, “Well, yeah, but the NLS has BARD and you can download the Braille and audiobooks,” and that is true. And in that case, you are getting them directly from NLS. But the fact is that depending on the technology that you have available to you and the ability that you have with it, or just the other factors, BARD may not be a resource. And not everything is on BARD. I mean, some libraries—some state agencies that deal with blindness and sometimes they are libraries—are also doing things like helping to provide school materials, as you said, that aren’t necessarily going to be up on the BARD site, as I understand it. So there’s lots of pieces to this, and because we’re an organization that advances the lives of all blind people, we can’t have blind people left behind. So we can’t just say, “Well, the NLS is chugging along and it’s run by the Library of Congress and BARD is still up, so we’re not going to worry about it.” We’re not in a position where we can say that.

**President Riccobono:** But as an organization, of course, we should think about, well, what kind of access do we want blind people to have, and what do we want to advocate for? Is the system we have through NLS the best one we could have? Do we want something different? And what are the trade-offs for that? And I think the beauty of the National Library Service System—and of course as blind people, as the organized blind movement—we have significantly shaped it over the last fifty-plus years, including the fact that when there are hearings about appropriations for the National Library Service, we testify. And sometimes we bring many people to those hearings, and often the committee staff say, “Oh, we never see citizens come in interested in this particular appropriation.” But the point being, we don’t have to settle for what we have today. We should always be thinking about is there a better system that benefits blind people? And for that matter, we’re for saving America money too. We don’t want to be a burden, but we also believe that we contribute to America in a better way when we have equal access. And knowing that we don’t have equal access, something like the National Library Service is an amazing way to bring that to scale, and it’s actually more efficient for the country overall. So really just wanted to make the point, we can always change our mind about what the system should be, and that’s what we should do as an organization.

**Melissa Riccobono:** That’s a really good point. I was just going to say really quickly that BARD, you don’t usually get your BARD account unless your state library can verify that you are a member, and they often have to be the ones to reset your password if you forget it, and all sorts of things. So even if NLS is chugging along, people that want a new account or people that need help with their account might have a lot of problems even with BARD chugging along. So that’s definitely a problem. And I guess the other thing is you were talking about people thinking that maybe we’re not telling the whole story. I just want to point out that NFB-NEWSLINE® is a way to get lots of different sources for news, different perspectives, different editorials. We have access to over 500 publications on NFB NEWSLINE. So that’s a really, really great resource at any time to read local, national, international news and then figure out the whole story, as much as you can piece it together, and do that research and not just rely on one source or social media to get news stories. So I think that’s really important.

**Chris Danielsen:** It is really important. And I think another thing that is important, and this goes back to President Riccobono’s point, is that we do listen to our members. And so as we inform ourselves, all of us, about what is going on, we do and should exchange ideas about, well, is this the best system, and what do we want ultimately in this environment of change? It can seem like there are not, but maybe there are opportunities to increase efficiency and to make sure that services are delivered in a better way to us. But we’re the ones who need to be engaged and talking about that because as we always say, we are the nation’s blind. We are the people that have the lived experience and the expertise to design these things. So really being engaged is not optional. And we can express concern that things are not being done or that we don’t know how they’re being done and what the plan for them is. But we can also say, here’s an opportunity to build an even better system and a system that uses our nation’s resources wisely, but also benefits blind people and gets more of us into the mainstream of society.

**Melissa Riccobono:** It reminds me a lot of the Help America Vote Act that happened because the 2000 election had difficulties, and we knew that election reform and ballot reform were going to be on the table. And so we as the nation’s blind jumped in and said, when you’re talking about this, don’t forget about the blind. We need a secret ballot just like everybody else. We deserve that right as citizens. And so I think that just over and over, this has really been what has helped us to make things better for blind people over all the years that we’ve been here, really taking advantages of those opportunities.

**Chris Danielsen:** You’re right about that, of course, Melissa, but we don’t even have to just look to the past because we know right now that there is going to be a discussion of taxes and tax reform on the table. And so we are trying, once again, to get the Accessible Technology Affordability Act folded into that discussion and say, hey, while we’re talking about how the tax system can work better for everyone, let’s talk about making it easier for blind people to afford our own technology so that we have more opportunity. So we’re always looking for those synergies, and we’re hoping to see that legislation folded into a tax package because we know that’s on the table.

**President Riccobono:** So I want to bring us back to this idea of our organization being steered by blind people. And I think what happens in today’s environment is some people, they dip into Facebook and they figure if they comment on a post that the Federation has put there, that they’re giving their feedback. And of course, that’s not really engaging with the organized blind movement. And this is why a lot of things that we do as an organization come up through our local chapters and our affiliate conventions or happen through discussions at our national convention. And a lot of these ideas are shaped over time. So I know there was a comment about our statement of concern about the Office of Civil Rights at the Department of Education, which said, “Well, what’s wrong with education being managed by the states?” Our statement doesn’t say anything about that. In fact, organizationally we don’t have an opinion. If it’s going to be managed by the states, we’re still going to require the same level of oversight and protection for blind students in those schools.

In the same way, we’re also very critical of the Department of Education and have been for a long time on certain issues. The Department of Education has responsibility for overseeing the Randolph-Sheppard Act, which protects and creates business opportunities for blind people. Our organization, our Association of Blind Merchants as part of the National Federation of the Blind, has been exceedingly frustrated with the Department of Education for, I don’t know, maybe decades now, and I would say rather weak enforcement of certain aspects of the protections that we believe exist in the Randolph-Sheppard Act. And there’s some great staff at the Department of Ed, but the department structure as a whole has not viewed the Randolph-Sheppard priority as one of its primary concerns, even though there’s great competent staff at Department of Ed working on that program. So maybe it’d be better at Department of Labor, maybe it’d be better in another agency where it’s not a sideshow, but they really view it as an opportunity to create business opportunities for blind people to contribute their time, talent, and taxes to the efforts of America. …

**Melissa Riccobono:** … Well, I think this has been an incredible podcast, lots of wonderful information shared. And I guess before we go, President Riccobono or Chris, do either of you have anything else that you’d like to share with our listeners?

**President Riccobono:** What I would say is that we live in a time where our country is pretty much equally divided. And because that’s the environment, it’s very difficult for the Federation not to get sucked into the current political discourse of the time. We should remember, history will show that we’ve always been partisan for blind people. We’ve criticized almost every administration, I can’t think of one actually that we haven’t. We’ve taken action and pushback against political leaders, commentary, folks that make commentary, social media stars, all of the above from all walks of life for using blind people as their tropes, as they’re examples of what not to do. And we criticize all of those, whether you’re from one party or the next, because it’s not helpful to blind people. And at the end of the day, we shouldn’t get lost in the day-to-day political arguments. We should stay focused on what are the policy implications for blind people and how do we shape them?

That feels increasingly difficult. But what gives me a lot of hope is that we have an organization where we have real everyday blind people living in local communities who all come together and we find a way, despite all the noise, we find a way to sit down and have the conversation about what’s good for blind people and trying to bring the focus to what can we do to advance blind people. I think that gives us an opportunity to get out of the standard echo chambers we might be in as individuals. I think the Federation offers us a really amazing environment to speak to people from backgrounds that we might not otherwise come across. You go to our national convention and there are people with backgrounds that you may not have ever experienced but for the Federation, and I think if we can lean into that, not get caught up in what’s happening in the day-to-day news environment, and remember that we are all coming together to advance blind people in society despite our own personal views, I think we’ll be able to have some really amazing, sometimes difficult, conversations. But at the end of the day, if we can still link arms and walk in the same direction, blind people are going to be better off for it.

**Chris Danielsen:** Well, I got nothing after that [Chris and Melissa laugh]. I mean, I can’t really think of a more inspiring, motivational way to end the podcast. That, and I feel like the president should have the last word anyway, but I definitely think that that’s where we need to be. That’s what we need to focus on. And so there you go.

**Melissa Riccobono:** Absolutely. Well, thank you all so much for listening to the Nation’s Blind Podcast. As always, if you have things that you’d like to share with us, please be in touch via social media or email or our phone number. We always love to hear from you. And remember, you can live the life you want.

**Chris Danielsen:** Blindness is not what holds you back.

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[PHOTO CAPTION: Jeff Altman]

## Striking the Technology Balance

**by Jeff Altman**

**From the Editor: Jeff Altman has been teaching cane travel for thirty-six years. He graduated from the Orientation and Mobility program at Louisiana Tech in 2001 and has long served on the National Blindness Professional Certification Board (NBPCB) and the NOMC Trainers Committee. He has also served as vice president of the National Federation of the Blind of Nebraska. In this article, Jeff applies his experience and intellect to the question of how we as blind people might incorporate new technology into our daily lives while still valuing our fundamental blindness skills. Although much of what he has to say is directed to blindness skills instructors, it has application to all of us. Readers who enjoy this article might also want to listen to the Nation’s Blind Podcast episode on this topic, which was published in May to coincide with Global Accessibility Awareness Day. Here is Jeff’s article:**

During the past thirty-five years, the rate of technological change has been astounding. When I began working in the blindness rehabilitation field, desktop computers were still very much in their infancy, cell phones were rare and very expensive, and the idea of a “smart phone” was pure science fiction. I point this out not because I’m just one of those “boomers,” but to make clear that before the digital revolution, blind people were independent, competent, and competitive members of their communities. Before there was “keyboarding,” there was typing. Before there was the electronic notetaker, there were the slate and stylus and the Braillewriter. Before there was GPS, there were blind people getting around independently by using the GPS between their ears. And that is my point: no matter how advanced technology becomes, we still have to be skilled problem-solvers who are fully engaged with our environment and prepared to adapt.

As Curtis Chong said: “As amazing and beneficial as technology can be in our lives, it is worth pointing out that the blind, like everybody else, are being pushed by societal forces that are often not in their control to work with digital technology simply to survive. Needing to use an iPhone simply to unlock your apartment door or to pay for operating your laundry-room washer and dryer are examples where technology can, for some, create frustrations and challenges if not properly introduced. Our centers are beginning to start their technology training with the iPhone—not because it is better than the computer but because students might need to use the iPhone simply to accomplish even the most basic of daily living tasks.

“As I have often said to people who would listen, the iPhone and similar devices are computers in your pocket. And like computers, they provide all of the benefits and the frustrations that pertain to using computer technology. Recognizing when it is better to use a low-tech solution and having the judgment to know when this is appropriate is a key ingredient of the training our centers provide.”

Without question, the digital revolution has provided us with greater access than we have ever known before, even though we have had to fight hard to make certain that we were included. These technologies have made our daily lives easier and our working lives more efficient. And now, with the growing role of artificial intelligence, the possibilities seem nearly overwhelming. Yet these digital marvels are not perfect and simply do not hold all the answers.

As individuals, each of us must develop a range of skills, beginning with the low-tech alternatives, along with developing the skills demanded of the evolving high-tech environment to the best of our ability. As instructors assisting blind students to develop these skills, we must not only keep up but must also devise appropriate approaches to instruction to ensure that our students are truly comprehending the proper role of digital technologies in their lives.

How we go about developing our own skills or those of our students must be based upon individual experiences, abilities, and needs; it cannot be a “one size fits all” approach. Nonetheless, there can be many benefits and shortcomings to these evolving technologies, and we as instructors have to be prepared to deliver the proper learning experience when the teaching moments that these shortcomings create arise. Perhaps some examples will help to clarify this point.

A travel student some years ago was on a drop route. Students were told not to use the GPS on their smart phones, but this particular student did not follow this rule and experienced just how inaccurate GPS can be. She had a pretty good idea where she was, but she decided that she needed to use the GPS on her phone to help her locate the bus shelter she wanted to find as a landmark. She was observed several times, and for more than half an hour she walked back and forth checking her phone and looking for the bus shelter. She was unaware that she had several times come within twenty feet of the shelter, only to turn around and walk in the opposite direction. Finally, it was necessary to become involved. She was asked what was happening and why she was using her GPS. She said that she was using the GPS because she had become frustrated, but even though she now knew she was on F Street, she couldn’t seem to find the bus shelter. She said that the GPS kept telling her she needed to go west, but then it would tell her she had gone too far, and she would then turn around. Based on the GPS, she just couldn’t find the shelter. She was asked, “Since the GPS doesn’t seem to be helping, what else could you try?” She thought about it for a while, and then said, “I guess I could try walking further west.” In a few minutes she discovered the bus shelter and was able to return to the training center from there. Later, we debriefed, and she was better able to understand the reasons for not using the GPS during travel classes and some of the technology’s flaws.

Another student was preparing his graduation meal and decided to use the Seeing AI app to determine when his chocolate chip cookies were done. Well, they were edible, but a bit crispy. He was frustrated enough by this experience that he attempted to make the cookies again the next day, but this time using a non-visual non-tech alternative, and the cookies came out just right.

Each of these examples led to a teachable moment that helped the student involved to gain a better understanding of the limitations of the technology they had relied upon and the benefits of having a set of alternatives that are not dependent on digital technology. This also points to the need for instructors to push themselves to understand these new technologies and to test the abilities of Be My AI and similar applications. I tried out some of these apps because I wanted to see just what they can do to assist with independent travel. Be My AI provided a remarkable range of interesting but noncritical information, including that there were cars parked in the parking lot, the sky was blue, and there were shadows of tree branches on the ground. But it struggled to recognize driveways, bus shelters, and intersections, all of which would be valuable pieces of information in a real travel situation.

Outside of the training environment, there are similar situations that arise, and there is a need to consider how students will handle real-world situations once they have completed their training and new technologies have come into their lives. As an example, a friend was presenting at a conference and had prepared the presentation on her notetaker equipped with refreshable Braille. She did not have a hard copy, and of course, midway into the speech, the problems began. First she lost her place, then the notetaker started skipping lines. Finally, it quit altogether. She was able to finish her presentation without her notes, but it was challenging. Naturally, shortly after the end of her presentation, the notetaker started working again. Presenting from hardcopy Braille may have its challenges as well, but it is not likely to glitch.

Clearly there is a need for us to provide our students with a skill set that can transition from the training environment to the everyday world and transfer from one situation or technology to another. Countless times I have had a travel student sit in my office, tasked with planning a route to an unfamiliar location, smart phone in hand, and express frustration that the needed information doesn’t seem to be available using the internet. Yet, when asked if there might be another way to obtain the necessary information, the idea of making a simple phone call to the business in question to request directions doesn’t enter the student’s mind.

This points to the need for a much deeper type of skill, and it is not something that we normally think of as a skill. Students must develop a positive, deeply rooted philosophy of blindness. This philosophy isn’t just about how we feel about being blind. It isn’t just about internalizing the true meaning of blindness, and it isn’t just about how we should interact with other people or stand up for ourselves when confronting barriers, although it is certainly all of these things. Our philosophy must be an internal set of principles and expectations that drives us to explore the environment, gather information, draw on our resources, problem-solve, and find solutions. It is through this philosophical paradigm that our teaching philosophy has developed. As instructors, our most important job is to model these core philosophical principles and to assist our students to develop their own deeply rooted philosophy so that they become lifelong learners.

Our teaching philosophy is grounded in the well-founded belief that nonvisual alternative techniques, when well developed and properly employed, allow blind people to manage the environment on a level equal to their sighted counterparts. We also recognize that proper skill development and gaining the knowledge of how to effectively employ these skills takes time and requires students to be fully immersed in a nonvisual learning environment. We have long held that proper training—that which assists students to develop effective foundational skills—cannot be blended with visually grounded techniques because of the natural tendency to rely unnecessarily on one’s own diminishing eyesight or the eyesight of others.

Given this important foundation of the Structured Discovery model of rehabilitation, we encourage our students to wait until after their training is completed to acquire low-vision devices or to consider obtaining a guide dog. We insist that such devices, or the use of a guide dog, not be incorporated in the training. Low-vision devices are intended to enhance the individual’s remaining eyesight, which can obviously be useful and desirable, but it can also reinforce the belief that visually grounded techniques are always superior to nonvisual ones, and we know that this is simply not correct. When low-vision devices are introduced prior to nonvisual immersion training, there is a relatively high probability that students will come to the conclusion that the device will meet their needs and not be as open to the possibility of receiving nonvisual training. As a result, the student may not explore the various other alternatives, some of which might be more effective.

The same rationale applies to guide dogs. For some students, the use of a guide dog can prove to be a very effective travel tool, but it too can reinforce the false notion that visually-based techniques are always superior; after all, the blind person is relying on the vision of another living being. Furthermore, guide dogs are trained to perform many of the independent travel tasks that are a part of the foundational skills students need to develop to reach a higher level of independence and therefore can interfere with the student developing the information-gathering, problem-solving, and orientation skills necessary for effective travel in more demanding situations. Most good guide dog handlers have received good cane travel instruction and have extensive cane travel experience. Indeed, most guide dog schools require at least a basic level of cane travel skill before accepting an applicant into their training programs.

In the same way, the new high-tech devices, especially those based on artificial intelligence, either enhance the user’s existing vision or, like a guide dog or a human assistant, convert visual information into either a tactile or verbal output. It is therefore tempting to treat these emerging technologies as we would low-vision aids or the use of guide dogs in the training setting. But we must also consider what is happening in the world around us, which has gone digital. The majority of educational settings, employment opportunities, and other aspects of daily life now require high-tech skills. It is simply not a question of whether these technologies should be introduced to rehabilitation students, but rather a question of when and how.

I believe that we can all agree that providing the basic instruction, introducing an app or some other new technology, and then allowing the student to work with this technology can be beneficial. That having been said, we arrive at the question of when. One of the most important aspects of effective rehabilitation is “informed choice,” based in the principle that when provided with all the necessary information, consumers will make the best choice for themselves. At the same time, it is recognized that without a complete understanding of the possible alternatives, a consumer may be tempted to select the quickest solution to the challenges of blindness, especially if those solutions are visually based ones.

Students tend to see familiar or easier-to-learn skills as superior, especially when this view is reinforced by societal attitudes. As a result, if nonvisual skills are not fully developed, students may prefer digital tools simply because they are easier to use, without fully understanding their limitations. To support informed decision-making, digital technologies should be introduced only after students have gained sufficient proficiency in the equivalent non-digital skills. For example, a student might first become skilled in using Braille before being introduced to the use of a digital recorder for note-taking or develop effective route-planning abilities before using navigation apps like Google Maps, which often produce less efficient routes than those based on personal experience. Another example is developing address location skills and knowledge of the local address system before introducing a navigation app. Most certainly, it is important to have students develop solid street-crossing skills before introducing an app such as Oko that can tell the user that the walk sign is on, since there are many other aspects to making a safe street crossing than knowing the status of the walk signal.

None of this is to say that these technologies are useless, not if their capacities and purposes are properly understood. Considering them as a means of enhancing existing skills or as a possible additional tool when conditions are frustrating other nonvisual alternatives is a reasonable point of view. Presenting these technologies within this frame of reference—as a potential enhancement to existing skills and an additional tool in the toolbox—can prepare students to make informed choices in the digital future.

Determining when and how to introduce these new digital aids will remain a matter of the instructor’s professional judgment in working with a particular student. Such judgments should be guided by the underlying philosophy of training centers, instructor preparation programs, and the recommendations of the National Blindness Professional Certification Board. Being open to these new technologies is important, but having a solid, positive philosophy when evaluating their proper place in the training environment will remain the most critical lens through which we can provide instruction.

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[PHOTO CAPTION: Patricia Grebloski]

[PHOTO CAPTION: Lisa Bryant]

## A Tribute to Patricia Grebloski: Founding Member of the Keystone Chapter, Philadelphia

**by Lisa Bryant**

**From the Editor: Lisa Bryant currently serves as secretary of the Keystone Chapter of the National Federation of the Blind of Pennsylvania. She is a freelance journalist and also creator and cohost of *White Canes Connect*, the official podcast of the affiliate. You can read more of her work at** [**bylisabryant.com**](https://bylisabryant.com/)**. Here is her loving tribute, written on behalf of the affiliate, to a longtime leader who recently passed away:**

Our Federation has more than its share of heroes and sheroes that paved the way and make our organization what it is today. Add Patricia (Pat) Grebloski, founding member of the Keystone Chapter of Philadelphia, to the hall of fame. Pat passed away at age eighty-two on February 18, 2025, but not before leaving her mark in Federation history as well as loving memories and inspiration.

Originally from the small town of Girardville, Pennsylvania, Pat and her family relocated to Philadelphia, where she attended Saint Lucy School for Children with Visual Impairments. Pat went on to graduate from a mainstream high school and later worked as a Dictaphone typist before completely losing her eyesight.

But for Pat, losing her sight only ignited the fighting spirit within. Her sister Anne said Pat then fully devoted her life to fighting for equality for blind people. Around 1990, she was one of a handful of founding members of the Keystone Chapter. Pat held a few offices but served mainly as the chapter’s treasurer for over twenty years.

Jim Antonacci, past president of both the Pennsylvania affiliate and the Keystone Chapter, who knew Pat for more than thirty years, has tender memories of Pat, like how faithful she was to bring coffee and donuts to every meeting, refusing to take a dime of reimbursement. But he also recalls how she never hesitated to get on the front lines.

With assistance from the National Federation of the Blind, Pat and three other Federationists sued the Free Library of Philadelphia for not providing accessible e-readers. In 2012, they reached a settlement in which the library agreed to a short-term solution to provide accessible readers. Further, the lawsuit completely altered its future procurement of devices. The library committed to considering accessibility features and compliance in its purchasing process.

Antonacci also recalled Pat protesting against negative stereotypes of the blind in entertainment, and for guide dogs to be allowed on Amtrak. “Whatever the Federation needed, Pat was there,” he said. “And she was a great Braille reader, loved the *Monitor,* and was one of the most honest people I knew,” he added.

Lynn Heitz, president of the Pennsylvania affiliate, credits Pat for bringing her into the Federation. “She would call me every month for about a year to invite me to a chapter meeting. She never missed a month,” Heitz said. In 1996, the affiliate granted Pat a lifetime membership, citing her decades of dedication and service. “You could count on her to help with everything from answering phones to outreach efforts and fundraising,” Heitz added.

In addition to supporting Federation efforts, Pat volunteered and helped fundraise for her local Catholic Youth Organization. She also eagerly shared her Braille skills at the chapter’s annual Louis Braille Day at her alma mater, Saint Lucy.

Her family recalls Pat’s ingenuity and being a terrific problem solver. “We were avid pinochle players and so as not to be left out, Pat Brailled not just one deck of cards but two. She brought those ‘cards with the bumps’ to every family event,” said her sister Anne. Anne added that Pat will be best remembered for “her courage and stick-to-itiveness. Blindness was just another challenge that she would learn to live with.”

The Pennsylvania affiliate is grateful to Pat for her pioneering efforts and unwavering service and has committed to honoring her legacy going forward.

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## NFB Pledge

I pledge to participate actively in the efforts of the National Federation of the Blind to achieve equality, opportunity, and security for the blind; to support the policies and programs of the Federation; and to abide by its constitution.