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*Chris Danielsen, Editor*

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NATIONAL FEDERATION OF THE BLIND

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Each issue is recorded on a thumb drive (also called a memory stick or USB flash drive). You can read this audio edition using a computer or a National Library Service digital player. The NLS machine has two slots—the familiar book-cartridge slot just above the retractable carrying handle and a second slot located on the right side near the headphone jack. This smaller slot is used to play thumb drives. Remove the protective rubber pad covering this slot and insert the thumb drive. It will insert only in one position. If you encounter resistance, flip the drive over and try again. (Note: If the cartridge slot is not empty when you insert the thumb drive, the digital player will ignore the thumb drive.) Once the thumb drive is inserted, the player buttons will function as usual for reading digital materials. If you remove the thumb drive to use the player for cartridges, when you insert it again, reading should resume at the point you stopped.

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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[PHOTO CAPTION: An aerial view of the New Orleans Marriott.]

## 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

Reserve your room by calling 888-236-2427 for the Marriott or 855-516-1090 for the Sheraton New Orleans. Ask for the “National Federation of the Blind 2025 Convention” block. Here are important things to know about the rates and booking the room:

### Rates and Taxes

The nightly rate for both the Marriott and the Sheraton 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 convention will open in March. Registration will be $25 per person plus $80 per banquet ticket. Register early because prices go up if you register onsite in New Orleans. Registration includes the biggest event of the year, access to the event app, and communications on the latest news and events.

### Convention Schedule

The 2025 Convention of the National Federation of the Blind will be a truly exciting and memorable event, with an unparalleled program and rededication to the goals and work of our movement.

* A wide range of seminars for parents of blind children, technology enthusiasts, job seekers, and other groups will kick the week off on Tuesday, July 8. Convention registration and registration packet pick-up will also open on Tuesday.
* Breakout sessions continue on Wednesday, July 9, along with committee meetings.
* Thursday, July 10, will kick off with the annual meeting, open to all, of the Board of Directors of the National Federation of the Blind. National division meetings will follow the board meeting that afternoon and evening.
* General convention sessions will begin on Friday, July 11, and continue through the afternoon of Sunday, July 13.
* Convention ends on a high note with the banquet Sunday evening, so be sure to pack your fancy clothes. The fall of the gavel at the close of banquet will signal convention’s adjournment. Make plans now to be a part of it.

### 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. If you have a prize that must be shipped in advance of the convention, please email Greater New Orleans Chapter President Tammy Green at [tammygreen4401@gmail.com](mailto:tammygreen4401@gmail.com) to make arrangements.

### Division, Committee, Group Meetings

Over 200 sessions and meetings happen during convention. If you are a leader in a division, committee, or group that will meet at convention, please don’t wait to organize. Start planning your agenda, goals, and connections now. Stay tuned for details from the Convention Chair, John Berggren.

### Volunteer

Thank you to the hundreds of volunteers who help make the national convention a big success. There are plenty of opportunities to pitch in throughout the week of convention. Visit <https://nfb.org/convention> to learn more about the following opportunities.

* Convention Ambassador: assist in making the national convention a welcoming and empowering experience for all of our attendees.
* Independence Market: serve as demonstrators, storekeepers, cashiers, and line marshals during the days the market is open in the Exhibit Hall.

Ambassadors and the Independence Market are not the only areas where we need volunteers. Stay tuned for more details on shifts, schedules, and signups for the following areas.

* Convention Ally Network: facilitate participation in the convention and support those who feel unsafe because of laws in the host state.
* Support Service Provider: assist with optimizing participation in the convention for deafblind attendees.
* Spanish Interpretation: help make the convention available to our Spanish-speaking attendees.
* Action Fund Book Fair: assist with box sorting, helping customers with book decisions and selections, and packing selected books for delivery.

If you are interested in learning more about how to get involved, please connect with your state affiliate president.

### 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. To assure yourself a room in the headquarters hotel at convention rates, make your reservations early. We plan to see you in New Orleans in July.

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[PHOTO CAPTION: Chris Danielsen]

## A New Editor’s Introduction

**by Chris Danielsen**

When I was a child, I became a voracious reader, after some initial hesitancy about “books with bumps” that weren’t like the glossy, smooth pages my older sister got to read. My mom kept after me to use Braille, and eventually there was a tipping point where I started reading at every waking moment that I wasn’t doing something else. This led to a desire to emulate the writers I was enjoying, and before long I was composing short stories and then light verse. (The latter was inspired by reading Shel Silverstein’s classic children’s poetry book *Where the Sidewalk Ends* in Braille.) By high school, I thought I wanted to be a writer. My parents were understandably concerned about whether I could make a living that way, and my dad urged me to focus on acquiring a marketable skill. I considered majoring in journalism but settled on political science and pursued a law degree; lawyers, after all, do a lot of writing. Six years of private practice, however, convinced me that lawyering was neither my particular talent nor my joy. Fortunately, as it had already done at some other pivotal moments in my life (more on that shortly), the National Federation of the Blind gave me an opportunity to apply my skills to our communication needs. For that, I am eternally grateful to two mentors: the late Donald C. Capps, then president of the National Federation of the Blind of South Carolina, who let Dr. Marc Maurer, then President of the national organization, know that I was looking for opportunities to leave my Myrtle Beach practice, and Dr. Maurer himself, who hired me. Twenty-one years later, I am embarking on an exciting new opportunity in our organization: editing its flagship publication. Over thirty years after considering a career in writing and journalism, here I am with a job that involves both. My late father used to joke about how my career in the Federation had proved him wrong about whether I could make a living as a writer, since my role before this one involved cranking out press releases, statements, and the like. I hope he knows that I’ve come full circle and is proud; I know my mom is. I thank them both for the love and encouragement that led me here, even though none of us knew the destination at the time. I also thank President Riccobono for selecting me for this important new role: the level of trust and confidence in me that he is showing is both humbling and gratifying.

Now for my history in our movement: I joined the National Federation of the Blind in 1989, just before my freshman year in college, because some other mentors at the South Carolina Commission for the Blind encouraged me to attend a state convention. I was part of a summer program at the Commission that was intended to provide blind teens with pre-employment transition services. There were classes during the week, and we stayed in the dormitories at the Commission’s Ellen Beach Mack Rehabilitation Center, usually heading home on the weekends. But I stayed in Columbia for the weekend and attended the convention. I had a wonderful time, and decided that getting involved with the organization would be cool. But although I was immediately recruited to be part of the Student Division, I didn’t live near a Federation chapter, so my involvement was limited, and the Federation wouldn’t become a bigger part of my life until a couple of years later.

In 1991, I was honored to become a finalist for a National Federation of the Blind Scholarship and, consequently, was invited to the national convention in New Orleans. That convention changed my life. I know that sounds like a cliché, but like most clichés, it has become one only because there is truth in it. National conventions have changed the lives of many blind people, and the 1991 convention certainly changed mine. Not only did I make new friends who are still friends today, and have a great time exploring the city of New Orleans and its various party spots, but I learned for the first time that I wasn’t the “amazing” blind person many folks had always told me I was. I met blind people who had achieved things I had never thought blind people could achieve. More importantly, however, I got my first inkling that my blindness skills were perhaps not commensurate with my beliefs and ambitions. Growing up, my parents had always encouraged me, and I had better access than many to the services blind children and youth need to succeed, including cane travel instruction. But at the convention, I found that with my short folding aluminum cane and less competence and confidence than other travelers, I could barely keep up, literally, with the blind mentors with whom I was assigned to spend each day; in fact, I usually became separated from them and had to find them again. After chasing one such mentor through the mall attached to our hotel, and finally arriving at the spot in the food court where we had agreed to have lunch, I sat down with the mentor, Melody Lindsey (now Melody Roane, director of the rehabilitation training program in Virginia and still a dear friend), and some colleagues of hers. Those included Joanne Wilson, Director of the Louisiana Center for the Blind, and the late Jerry Whittle, the center’s Braille instructor. It was Joanne who finally told me what I had needed to hear for many years: “Chris, you’re very smart and you’ve got plenty of guts, but you’re just not a very good cane traveler, and you have some other blindness skill deficits. I think you should consider coming to Louisiana.”

I told Joanne that I would indeed consider the comprehensive training available at the Louisiana Center for the Blind, and I may have even meant it at the time. But when I returned to school in the fall, it soon became the farthest thing from my mind. But then, something else happened that gave me a gut-check. In the spring of 1992, I was encouraged by my faculty advisor at Furman University to pursue an internship as part of my major in political science. There were several positions for which I could apply in Washington, DC, through a collaboration among Furman, American University, and several employers based in the nation’s capital. As I reviewed the application materials, however, I became alarmed. While the partner school would provide housing in one of its dormitories, I would be on my own for the summer, expected to do my own shopping, prepare or acquire my own meals, and arrange transportation to and from my internship location. I wasn’t at all sure I could do these things, despite reassurance from my advisor and from friends also considering the internship. “We’ll be there to help you,” some of these friends said. But I realized that if I had to depend on the help of others, the whole enterprise might not be very successful, and frankly the idea of trying to navigate the experience without help left me terrified.

Could I have managed the internship? I’ll never know; I didn’t apply. The very fact that I didn’t have enough confidence in myself to try told me something important. There was a gap between what I wanted to do and what I believed I could do, and I needed to bridge that gap for myself. So I gave up on pursuing an internship, and instead I called Joanne and told her that I wanted to start training at the Louisiana Center for the Blind as soon as possible.

I spent that summer, and the following fall, at LCB. The experience did improve my existing blindness skills and provided me with skills that I had not yet mastered, such as maintaining my own apartment, doing my own grocery shopping, and cooking my own meals. I became an accurate user of the slate and stylus, although still not an extremely fast one. But the most important thing I gained at LCB was confidence, specifically the belief that I could overcome any problem that blindness might present or appear to present. I’ll give just one example. Part of our training included certain activities that were unlikely to play any part in our daily lives as blind people, but which were intended to help us build confidence and learn how to solve problems. One such adventure involved traveling to New Mexico to join students of its own rehabilitation center for a rock-climbing expedition. On the first day of this adventure, we hiked up a long mountain trail to a plateau, from which arose several steep rock faces. Each of us were expected to attempt to climb at least one of these rock walls. On our first attempt, we would receive advice from the experienced rock-climbers who were leading the course, but as we tried more climbs, we would receive less and less of this “beta” (that’s mountain climber-ese for help.) Rock-climbing is, at least initially, daunting for most people, blind or not. On the other hand, it’s a great activity for many blind people. That’s because your success at rock-climbing depends on your ability to feel for crevices in the rock wall where your hands and feet can be positioned and leveraged to lift you higher. Sight is not required for success; only your sense of touch and your agility are needed. I was not, and am not now, the most physically fit person in the world, nor do I have the best balance. But I was able to make two successful, although short, climbs on our first day out, and I began to realize that if I could meet this challenge, I could meet others.

That afternoon was even more of a revelation. When we traveled down the long trail that we had climbed that morning to reach our plateau, I found myself between the group of climbers that had started down before mine and the one behind me. For a while, I was alone on the trail, parts of which were treacherous and most of which was bordered by sharp drops on either side. A wrong step could mean serious injury, or worse. But as in other situations during my training, I found that my white cane told me everything that I needed to know. Slowly, I navigated my way down to ground level, a little dirty but without even a scratch or a cut. I was exhilarated. I had just used my blindness skills to manage something much more challenging than crossing the average city street or locating an unfamiliar address. Pushing my blindness skills to the limit had given me more confidence in their everyday use.

Training is one of the many ways that we raise expectations in the National Federation of the Blind. Another is through the stories we tell each other and share with our allies in the blindness field and beyond. We share those stories in speeches, in conversations, and of course through this, our flagship magazine. I am excited to receive your stories and help you share them with our readership. Like my friend, mentor, and predecessor, Gary Wunder, I encourage you not to be intimidated by the prospect of writing an article for the *Braille Monitor*. Give writing your story a try, even if it’s just as a paragraph or two; we can always work together to make it something more. You can also reach out to me to set up a conversation from which we can help craft an article. And of course we want more than stories: tips on dealing with blindness, reviews of technology, observations about our collective work, and discussion and debate around our philosophy and how we apply it are most welcome as well. And if you’ve never seen an article quite like the one you’re thinking of writing in these pages before, you may just have a new idea that we’ll want to run with.

I want to close this brief introduction of myself as the tenth editor of this publication with two final thoughts. First, by coincidence, I am taking the helm at the start of a new presidential administration in our country. The incoming president, Donald J. Trump, who is entering his second nonconsecutive term, has promised nothing less than revolutionary change in government structure and policy. Many people, including in our community, are enthusiastic about the prospect of such change; many others are apprehensive. As a nonpartisan organization, we will seek opportunities to work with the new administration. As the nation’s transformative advocacy organization of blind people, we will simultaneously remain vigilant and call out the administration when we believe it is steering the wrong course for blind Americans. This magazine will, as it always has, speak the truth about what is happening to the best of our ability. Our President, Board of Directors, and National Convention determine how we will respond to new policies announced by our nation’s leaders, and we will share news of those decisions. We will also share civil but frank discussion when our community disagrees on the proper response, as indeed we will on other topics. Our commitment is to be fair but fearless, to amplify the Federation’s views while being open to candid discussion about them, and to use this forum to find a path forward when it is unclear.

My final thoughts come from one of my great loves besides books and the Federation—the movies. One of my favorite films is *The Shawshank Redemption*. If you are not familiar with it, be advised that mild spoilers follow. The movie tells the fictional story of a wrongly convicted prisoner, Andy Dufresne (played by Tim Robbins) and his ultimate triumph over this injustice. More importantly, however, the film focuses on Andy’s effect on the prison environment and other inmates, especially the story’s narrator, Ellis Boyd Redding, known as Red (played by Morgan Freeman). Andy resists being beaten down by the cruelty, corruption, and hopelessness that surround him. He maintains both a willingness to make positive change and hope for the future, attitudes which many of his fellow inmates eschew or even discourage and which the prison administration tries to crush. He fights his battle against soul-destroying despair with quiet determination and even cheerfulness, and he improves his surroundings in both material and spiritual ways. He thereby imparts hope to Red and to others.

This movie has always struck me, among other things, as a metaphor for our work in the National Federation of the Blind. I may take some personal privilege and expand on why in a future article. For now, I will just say that one of our critical functions is to give hope to others, particularly those who are new to vision loss and who struggle to see how their lives can move forward, as well as to blind people who have been beaten down by the vision industrial complex, the failures of our education system, or any number of other manifestations of society’s low expectations. Individually, many of us do what Andy does for Red in the movie; collectively, our movement brings the blind as a whole forward into a brighter future. Our flagship publication, as a purveyor of our message and a chronicle of our work up until now and going forward, is a critical piece of that work. I am committed to being a good steward of its longstanding role in our movement, even as I think about how it might evolve to better serve it. And I look forward to collaborating with you, the readers and contributors, in that effort.

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[PHOTO CAPTION: Nathanael T. Wales]

## Our Federation of the Blind and Physician-Assisted Suicide: When Shall We Speak, and What Strategy Shall We Use?

**by Nathanael T. Wales**

**This article addresses suicide. Suicidal thoughts or actions (even in very young children, older adults, and people with life-threatening illness/disability) are a manifestation of extreme distress and should not be ignored. If you or someone you know needs immediate help, call or text the National Suicide & Crisis Lifeline at 988.**

**From the Editor: Nathanael T. Wales has been a member of the National Federation of the Blind since he was in high school, is a past scholarship winner, and currently serves as first vice president of the National Federation of the Blind of Connecticut. The article he has contributed expands upon the discussion of how the Federation should respond to the growing movement for the legalization of physician-assisted suicide, and specifically its potential expansion beyond cases where the person desiring such aid in dying does not have a terminal condition or illness. As both the author of the prior article he references and the editor of this publication, I welcome his contribution to this important conversation. Here is what Nathanael has to say:**

I appreciated and enjoyed Chris Danielsen’s article “The Federation and Physician-Assisted Suicide” in the June 2024 *Braille Monitor*. I believe that his expression of what the National Federation of the Blind’s philosophical starting point on physician-assisted suicide as it affects the blind and deafblind is right, authentic, and true to who we have always been. My purpose in this article is to consider additional information that Chris’s article did not consider and then to ask when and how we advocate on this issue while continuing to keep rightly, authentically, and truly to our philosophy of blindness.

Chris’s article considers only laws in effect in the ten of our United States and the District of Columbia where physician-assisted suicide is legal. And as he reports, at present these laws only apply to patients rigorously determined to be terminally ill. He merely imagines that there may be potential evidence of broader eligibility for physician-assisted suicide, not just for terminal illness, in other countries. And he does not consider at least one attempt in one of the ten states where the practice is already legal to broaden its existing law to include others not yet terminally ill, although in fairness this attempt was made at around the time that his article was published and possibly after he had written it.

Multiple countries allow physician-assisted suicide not just for those who have a terminal condition but also for those having “a permanent, debilitating condition” (Austria) or a “grievous and irremediable condition” (Canada). This information can be found also on Wikipedia in the article at: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assisted_suicide> and in articles linked to it (the one for Canada and the one for the United States that Chris cites, for example). Additional countries with these broader laws include The Netherlands and Switzerland.

Furthermore, early in 2024 the California legislature considered broadening eligibility for physician-assisted suicide to those with a “grievous and irremediable medical condition,” echoing the language used in Canada. Again, the timing of the bill may have overlapped Chris’s article submission, so it is possible the bill wasn’t introduced until after Chris wrote his article. The bill, SB 1196, was later withdrawn by its author, likely before our NFB of California affiliate could consider its position (if it would have wanted to). Consider the following reporting from *Politico*: “Sen. Susan Talamantes Eggman, who authored the original End of Life Options Act in 2016 [the current law that Chris’s article lists], came out against the most recent expansion, posting on X that, ‘While I have compassion for those desiring further change, pushing for too much too soon puts CA & the country at risk of losing the gains we have made for personal autonomy.’” (<https://www.politico.com/news/2024/04/17/lawmaker-withdraws-california-bill-assisted-dying-00152840>). Note that the senator does not oppose the idea of broadening physician-assisted suicide to others who are not terminally ill but rather has concerns about asking for too much too quickly.

We as the National Federation of the Blind must be just as strategic in this evolving aspect of our advocacy for the rights for the blind and deafblind. And we must be clear. And finally, if possible while keeping truly and authentically to our philosophy of blindness, we must speak in a way that brings members from various backgrounds, especially various faith traditions, together behind a unifying consensus. My own faith tradition opposes suicide without exception, including physician-assisted suicide, even to shorten or alleviate suffering. I recognize that many members of my Federation family may support physician-assisted suicide as a choice to alleviate suffering, but we can all agree that blindness and deafblindness are not inherently a reason for physician-assisted suicide. If we stick to the thing we all know best—blindness—our diverse movement can be unified and clear in our assertion that blindness and deafblindness are not a justification for physician-assisted suicide.

Assuming we agree on this philosophical position, the next question is: When shall we speak? Shall we wait to react to legislation when it is at risk of passing, such as some sort of a smaller step toward broadening eligibility in California? We should consider how important a priority opposing physician-assisted suicide with blindness and deafblindness as its justification should be among many other priorities, such as access to medical devices and pedestrian safety related to quiet large vehicles (we already have made great strides with the much more ubiquitous quiet cars and SUVs). I would personally favor clear advocacy opposing physician-assisted suicide on the grounds that blindness or deafblindness is “grievous” as pre-imminent among our priorities; the dignity of our very lives is the foundation upon which all of our other civil rights and calls for accessibility and equality are built.

Additionally, there are those who oppose physician-assisted suicide more broadly who argue that it is harmful to people with disabilities. They themselves are not disabled. Shall we let them speak for us? I do not think so, even as I agree with the argument they make. Would it not be better for us to have a clearly articulated policy or statement?

As for strategy, should we consider an improved Federation resolution? I trust Chris Danielsen, Anil Lewis, and our other leaders to speak clearly and focus on the thing we all know best: blindness and deafblindness (not, indeed, my church’s theology on physician-assisted suicide). Even before a resolution, I know they will advocate for us and represent us rightly and truly. Chris’s article laid out a position that I’d be happy for him to share with any media outlet that approaches him.

I offer my fellow readers one final piece of information, and perhaps an approach, to consider. Our Federation family members in Canada, through the Canadian Federation of the Blind, which proudly advertises “US National” events such as our national conventions and some of whose members you will likely find seated in the international section on our convention floor, have articulated a position in response to broader access to physician-assisted suicide in their country. (Note again that the language of Canadian law was echoed in the bill proposed in California.) Their position is prominent on their web homepage

<https://www.cfb.ca>. As a technical matter, the term for physician-assisted suicide Canadians use is “medical aid in dying.” Here is their position statement:

**CFB’s Position Statement on Medical Assistance in Dying (MAID), Regarding the Blind:**

The Canadian Federation of the Blind deplores any attempts by those responsible for decision-making in the Medical Assistance in Dying (MAID) program to consider impending blindness as a potential reason to end a life. In the case of blind individuals, employing MAID is a stark example of the common, and tragic, misunderstanding of blindness and its consequences. Adjustment to blindness is difficult, and blind people face their own particular challenges, but it is well known that these challenges can be met, and the technology and services available today have vastly improved prospects for the blind. That someone facing blindness might want to die is tragic; that the state might sanction and aid the suicide of blind people is a total betrayal of trust and decency. The Canadian Federation of the Blind invites any blind person or their supporters to connect through our email group or our contact form and we will be here to support. We also stand willing to actively oppose this program and its devastating ramifications for the blind.

This position seems right, authentic, and true to our philosophy here in the US. And it is consistent with all of the thoughts of our leaders including Chris and Anil.

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[PHOTO CAPTION: Marilyn Green]

## Breaking Barriers: My Journey as a Blind Juror

**by Marilyn Green**

**From the Editor: Being selected to serve as a juror has been difficult for blind people because of the assumption that critical evidence will be visual and that we have no alternative ways to get needed information on which to make judgments. In this case we had a willing judge, as well as a prosecutor and defense team that did not use their challenge to remove Marilyn. This is yet another step in our ongoing attempt to be fully integrated with sighted society, to show that judgment comes not from the eyes but the brain, and the desire to serve burns in all of us unless it is smothered by denials and low expectations we as blind people adopt as our own.**

**Marilyn is a member of the National Federation of the Blind Board of Directors and the state president of the National Federation of the Blind of Illinois. In this article, she recounts her excitement in the challenge of serving on a jury, her concern that she might be denied, and the appreciation that comes when one encounters people really willing to make accommodations that can make the most of citizens wishing to serve. Here is what she says:**

I recently had the honor of serving as a juror in a narcotics and firearms case, marking a significant milestone for blind people in Illinois. Though I have received a jury summons or two in the past, I had declined to participate, knowing how many people are turned down for service. I checked the box saying it would be an undue hardship, and never was I challenged. But when I received a summons just prior to our state convention, I had second thoughts. As the state president of the Illinois affiliate and a member of our national board, I felt it might be a profound moment for our community—a step forward in our journey toward full inclusion in civic life. So after a full weekend of convention, I got up Monday morning prepared for the challenge of service but knowing how often the goodwill of people like myself had been rewarded with “No thank you.”

### Ready to be of Service

My journey began with the jury selection process, which was, unsurprisingly, the first hurdle. You will not be surprised to learn that there was the issue of an inaccessible kiosk, and I needed human intervention. It’s when they called my name and I got in line with no one saying anything that I saw this as an encouraging sign but knew there would still be several hurdles to come.

As perspective jurors, we were told to start by reading page 2 of the form we were handed, and, with my cane visible, I wondered how they thought all of this was going to work. No accommodations were offered, and soon we were told that if we were finished with page 2, we should go on and finish filling out the form. The person I had talked with as I navigated the kiosk and the line said that he would talk with the judge about helping me complete the form. It was a long fifteen minutes before the deputy came back and said one of the law clerks would assist me by being my reader and scribe. Together, we completed the form, addressing questions about my background and eligibility. Though this accommodation was met with patience and goodwill, it was clear the process wasn’t initially prepared for a blind juror.

### Moving to the Jury Room

Once in the courtroom, the potential pool was asked whether there are hardships that would keep them from serving. Among the hardships described were blindness and the inability to hear. I did not signal that I wished to be dismissed because of hardship. The judge asked me directly whether my blindness would present an obstacle. I explained that, with accessible information, I could perform my role as well as any sighted person. When asked if I would be able to follow video evidence, I suggested that the court would need to provide verbal descriptions to ensure I had equal access to the content. “The burden will be upon the court to make sure I can understand what’s happening, just as any sighted person would,” I explained. I wanted the court to see that judgment comes from intellect and understanding, not eyesight.

### Questions from the Prosecution and the Defense

Like other potential jurors, I was asked about my education and career. I noted that I had worked for the city of Chicago and that I had a friend who worked in the public defender’s office but that we never really had an in-depth discussion about any of the cases. As the selection process continued, I sensed that I might actually be chosen. Sure enough, I was called back into the courtroom and sworn in—a milestone moment for me, and perhaps for some of the others who would make up this fourteen-person jury.

### Necessary Accommodations

The initial relief and joy I felt soon gave way to the realization that my service would involve further negotiation for essential accommodations. Recognizing that standard juror notes were taken on paper, I requested permission to use my laptop, equipped with screen-reading technology, for my notetaking. After consulting with counsel, the judge approved my request on the condition that my laptop, like all other jurors’ notebooks, would remain in the court for security. A concern was raised about the fact that I would be using earbuds and that they might interfere with my ability to hear evidence. I noted that I only used one earbud and would have no difficulty in listening to the proceedings. The use of the laptop and the earbud were accepted as reasonable accommodations. This arrangement, reached through mutual respect, allowed me to participate fully and independently.

### Listening to and Weighing Evidence: The Trial Begins

Once the trial began, I found myself navigating both familiar and new challenges. Evidence was often presented visually, and while the judge was open and willing to make it accessible, some witnesses were less prepared to provide verbal descriptions. In one instance, a witness described a photograph of bullets simply by saying, “It’s bullets. I took pictures of them.” At the judge’s prompting, the witness described the arrangement and quantity in more detail, offering a clearer picture for all jurors. These moments showed me that while the courtroom’s willingness to adapt was encouraging, there’s a need for better training on how to communicate effectively with blind jurors. With all due respect to the defense and the prosecution, the judge was the best person in the courtroom to make sure that I received a good explanation of videos and other visual evidence. When one juror was describing the evidence that had been bagged, they kept saying “right here” and the judge would say “top right corner.”

### The Time for Deliberation Arrives

In the jury room, the experience deepened my understanding of how our legal system, while willing to be flexible, is still navigating how best to accommodate us. My laptop allowed me to take notes, but at times I felt that more preparation could have made the experience seamless. Document preparation in advance would have helped immensely, eliminating the obligation for other jurors to read to me and sometimes to repeat the process if I had questions about what had been read.

### Work to do after the Trial

The judge made himself available to members of the jury after the trial, and I took that opportunity to thank him for not summarily dismissing me. He credited the prosecution and the defense for not using their peremptory challenges, and I respectfully countered that his attitude was significant in setting the tone for their consideration. Not surprisingly, some of our discussion focused on accommodations. I suggested to the judge that having accessible digital versions of documents such as jury instructions would allow blind jurors to review the material on their own without depending on others. I expressed how important it is to fully understand everything we’re deliberating, especially when it could mean years of a person’s life. The judge readily concurred. I further suggested that having a protocol ready when a juror with a disability is selected would help ensure that everyone knows what to do, saving time and enhancing the experience.

I was so taken with the judge that I invited him to next year’s state convention. I explained that his presence might do a lot for the morale of blind people who have too often been dismissed, and he agreed that, if his schedule allowed, he would be delighted to come. In a previous article about me, I opined that I had all the joy that comes with advising young children but none of the responsibilities. But I have to tell you that I was so impressed with the openness, intelligence, and compassion of this judge, that I would be glad to marry him and have little judge babies who might inherit from him the commitment to fairness, openness, and seeing that all could participate in the justice system.

### Marching Toward Equality One Step at a Time

Serving on this jury taught me how critical it is for blind people to be seen as full participants in society. We are capable of understanding evidence, deliberating carefully, and making informed judgments. My experience was empowering, but it also reinforced the need for systems to evolve and better accommodate people with disabilities. Blindness is not the characteristic that defines us or limits our abilities; it is simply a trait that requires some adjustments.

Ultimately, this experience wasn’t just about me but about all blind people. It was about the larger message that judgment and civic duty come from our brains, our minds, and our hearts, not our eyes. My hope is that sharing this story will encourage future courts to make necessary accommodations and consider blind people as fully capable jurors. It is also that more of us will accept the challenge and not take the easy out of saying that we are blind and should not be asked to serve. With openness, collaboration, and a commitment to accessibility, our society can continue moving toward true inclusion, and you can bet that the National Federation of the Blind will be the motivating force that sees that it does.

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[PHOTO CAPTION: Casey Robertson]

## Leading Courageously with Higher Expectations: Braille, Teacher Preparation, and the Continued Influence of the Organized Blind Movement

**by Casey Robertson**

**From the Editor: This presentation discusses one of our most important responsibilities, that being to educate blind students so they are in a position to be confident, contributing adults. That is the goal, but what is the path we must travel to achieve it? What follows are the remarks of someone who has some clear ideas to answer that question.**

**I am always moved when people who work in the blindness field also consider themselves as a part of us, and we have no finer example than Casey. She shares what she has learned from the education system with us and what she has learned from us with her fellow educators and students. Here is what she said to the 2024 National Convention on July 6:**

Thank you, President Riccobono, and I’m glad you chose a different song besides “My Tractor’s Sexy.” I’m glad the song was different.

I am Casey Robertson, and I’m the lead instructor at the Professional Development and Research Institute on Blindness at Louisiana Tech. Now, that’s a mouthful, so we just call ourselves PDRIB [pronounced pid rib]. We have existed since 1999.

The Institute on Blindness provides outstanding professional preparation for individuals entering the field and working with blind children and adults, and our graduates have been eagerly sought after by employers from across the United States in both the public and private sector. We have some graduate students here, and they were swarmed the first night because people want to hire them.

We train individuals in four pathways to reach certification to work in the field of blindness, and we do that training based on the Structured Discovery method of teaching. [Applause] I am also an advocate for blind students and their families across the nation. Those families who are seeking services are seeking better services to provide independence for their blind children. Some of those families are here in the room with us today.

I also love volunteering my services to the National Federation of the Blind in any capacity that is needed. But if you really know me, if you really, really, know me, besides tractor riding, I am an educator at heart. I love people, and I love literacy for all people.

I want to take a moment and share a story with you. This story is adapted from a children’s book by Amanda Gorman, a best-selling author. The title is *Something Someday*.

You are told that there is not a problem. But you’re sure in your heart and in your gut that there is a problem. You are told that you cannot fix that problem, but you know that you can help. You are told that this is too big for you. It is a very, very big problem. But you have seen the tiniest of things make a huge difference before. You’re told that this won’t work, so don’t even try. But how will you know if you never try?

You’re told to sit and wait, but you know people have waited for far too long. You’re told that what is going on is very, very sad, but you’re not just sad; you’re scared, you’re confused, and maybe you are downright angry. And maybe, just maybe, underneath all of that, you’re also hopeful. You are told not to hope too much, because there’s no use to hope. But you keep hoping anyway.

Sometimes you may feel that you’re all alone, but someday, somewhere, you find a friend—someone who will help you and who believes in your dream, someone who will fight with you. You make a promise to each other, and you say, “This is a problem, but it’s our problem together, so we can fix it together. The problem is big, but together we are bigger.”

So together, working, and together, beginning, over and over again you keep at it, until you are no longer beginning. You are now winning. Suddenly there is something you’re sure is right. Something you know has helped—something small that has changed things in a big way, something that is no longer a dream, but the day that that dream becomes a reality that you live in.

I share this book with you because it describes the direction of the education of blind students in our country as we speak. It also describes how I feel so often in the field of blindness.

Just as the little boy in the story identified, we have several issues that just do not seem right. Currently, students are not receiving enough Braille. We have a shortage of teachers in the field and a great number of teachers who are in the field lack the self-efficacy to teach Braille literacy to their students. Schools are not equipped to provide services, or they just feel that they don’t have to provide services. Sometimes they even feel that just good enough is good enough; we don’t need to do any more.

Parents do not have the advocacy that they need to advocate for students. Society, along with the educational system, has set very low standards for our students based on their lack of knowledge. Research has proven that literacy is more than just reading and writing. At its simplest form, literacy is the way that we interact with the world around us, how we shape it, and how it shapes us. It is how we communicate with others via reading and writing, but also speaking and listening and creating. It is how we articulate our experiences in this world.

Literacy has a direct impact on employment: better access to the economy, better opportunities, and even better nutrition and environmental stability. However, just as the little boy in the story was told “there is no problem,” parents are often told there is no literacy problem with their child. Educational staff, along with professionals in the field, will state that the student is receiving the best education the school can offer. And, after all, parents, you should just expect your blind kids to be slower and perform with less ability than their sighted peers. [Audience responds with boo] That’s right! Boo! When parents are told there is no problem, deep in the heart of the parents, they are sure that they know something is wrong. It’s not okay for a third grader to be illiterate, not being able to read or write or express themselves in a creative way just because they are blind. [Applause] So, you may ask, why would professionals in the field of blindness tell families this type of misinformation? I believe it flows back to our teacher preparation programs.

Just as the little boy in the story was told, in the teacher preparation sphere, we recognize that there are problems. We can even state those problems. Others in the sphere would tell us the problems are too large for us to solve. It is often stated that the problems are just way too large, because there’s not enough teachers, not enough funding, not enough time and, after all, Braille is too hard to learn, too hard to teach, and has so many rules. And, does anybody use Braille any longer?

So as I stand here before you today and say these problems go back to the teacher preparation program, let me share my evidence of how I came to this conclusion. Let’s look at literacy requirements of the teacher preparation program. Currently, there are thirty-eight universities across the country that have teacher preparation programs for teaching blind students. Most of them, outside of Louisiana Tech, call it “Teaching Visually Impaired.” The programs make up both graduate and undergraduate studies.

Research as recent as 2022 showed that the Braille code competency is not consistent among universities, thus resulting in inconsistent expectations of those teachers that they are turning out into the field. Most of the thirty-eight universities do not ask their teachers to show any Braille proficiency at the end of the program. Those that do show proficiency set a very low reading rate of approximately twenty words per minute to pass their course.

In a 2019 study of undergraduate programs, teachers of the blind showed that 31 percent of the universities that offered Braille only offered one course in Braille. Teachers and personnel preparation programs are taught that Braille readers will read one-third to one-fifth the rate of their sighted peers. Some of the universities are even teaching their teachers to accept that students will read one-half to two times slower than their sighted peers.

When we look at Nemeth, the math code for Braille, Amato examined colleges and universities that prepared teachers of the blind. She found that almost all teachers that she interviewed had had a course in Nemeth. However, they still felt their skills to teach Nemeth were inadequate. We know by research that if a teacher does not have the self-efficacy to teach a subject such as Braille or Nemeth, they are not going to recommend a student learn it. After all, if a teacher doesn’t know Spanish, do you think she is going to take a job teaching Spanish?

Currently we do not—I repeat do not—have any national standards for what teachers of the blind are taught. Each university can apply their bias and expectations and determine what they will or will not teach. How can we expect our students to have a consistent education if we are not training our teachers in a consistent format with the same high expectations?

In the teacher preparation arena, I am often told that the problems are too large for me to solve. It’s too large for any university to solve. We are often told the problems are so large because, once again, there are not enough teachers, not enough funding, and not enough time. Just as the little boy in the story was discouraged from solving the problem he knew existed, he was told to sit and wait. Well, I stand here today and tell you: blind people are met with daily access challenges that society has, and they say are minor problems. Blind people are asked to sit and wait, and we have waited far too long. [Cheers and applause]

When I came into the field of blindness education many years ago, I was told that the problem in the blindness field was so large and had been going on so long that I could expect them to be here long after I was pushing up daisies. I was encouraged to not rock the boat, and let it float with the status quo. I was also encouraged to not educate the populous. While on the one hand that might have been advice to pace my work, at the same time it was an expectation that things would not change in the education of blind children. It was a negative expectation of a cycle that has gone on far too long for our blind children. [Applause]

Just like the little boy in the story, I was simply not going to sit and wait for a change. [Applause] So I found partners who believed in my dream. I found the National Federation of the Blind. [Cheers and applause]

So you might ask, what does it take to create that change in the teacher preparation program? It takes listening to blind people and valuing their words. It takes partnering with the organized blind movement, the NFB, to find out what teachers need to know to be able to teach children. In a majority of the programs across the United States that have teacher preparation programs, teachers never meet a blind person before they graduate.

We should be at the forefront of the education for blindness, because we are the organized blind movement. We are the ones who know what it takes to create a successful blind person. We don’t need people to tell us what we have to have to create a successful blind person. We know that. It also takes courage to step out of your comfort zone and be a leader in the field, even when the other entities, including universities, are telling you it will not work.

In December [2023], I traveled to a convention with a colleague of mine who is blind. We were met with less than a warm welcome, and every time the professionals in the blindness field saw us coming, they would quickly dart the other way. So the field is not as warm to blindness as it should be.

At Louisiana Tech, through the Office of Professional Development and Research Institute on Blindness, we know, just as the little boy in this book knew, that taking action, one small step at a time, telling others and partnering with them would be the best start to a solution. In our teachers of blind students’ program, we partner with the Louisiana Center for the Blind, [Cheering] and we expose our graduate students to some of the highest-quality Structured Discovery training that exists.

At the university, we set the highest requirements for Braille in the nation. Now, you remember the other universities had a mere twenty words per minute if they had any proficiency at all to graduate. My students leave our program reading a minimum of one hundred words per minute in Braille. [Cheers and applause]

At a conference I recently attended, I sat at the table to share dinner with teacher preparation personnel across the nation, and they all told me these standards were not needed, that no one needed to read Braille at one hundred words per minute to be able to teach kids. Because if they had any sight, we didn’t need to teach them Braille. They went on to tell me that teachers in the field had full-time jobs, so why would I make them do ten pages of Braille homework a week? I told them that that is what I had found necessary to show proficiency and for them to retain the code. My message was not well received among the professionals.

Not only do our students leave the program reading one hundred words per minute; almost all of them hold the National Certification in Unified English Braille before graduating. [Applause] At that table that night, I mentioned that all of my students take the NCUEB, and it was met with the question of, “Why should they have to show proficiency to teach Braille?” So needless to say, they didn’t buy my dinner that night.

We employ the Structured Discovery method of teaching throughout our programs. We teach teachers how to teach literacy and orientation and mobility to blind students. We give them the self-efficacy needed to go out and to not be afraid to teach blind students. Recently, in one of the Monarch trainings, several of my students were in that training, and I was getting text messages. “Hey, we can read the Braille without the screen on, and all the other teachers need the screen.” [Audience chuckling] I enjoyed those text messages.

When our students complete our program, they know Braille is not too hard. It’s not too hard to learn, it’s not too hard to teach, you can learn the rules, and it is still used by blind people. [Applause]

We could not solve the problem alone, though. We have to have partners. So we recently partnered with the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland and the Maryland Department of Education to train a cohort of fifteen teachers from Maryland to go back into the state and teach Braille literacy to students. [Cheers and applause] All of those teachers hold the NCUEB.

Because of this dramatic increase of teachers of blind students in Maryland, this past school year was the first year that the Maryland School for the Blind was able to meet required service minutes for their school districts. [Applause] These teachers filled a huge void in the education of students with blindness in Maryland.

If we want students to receive a quality education and the excuse is the shortage of teachers, then we need your help—everyone in this room. I need your help in recruiting more teachers and more people to go into the teaching of blind students just as Maryland did. [Applause] We would love to train more blind people to go in the field of education. Find a cohort in your state, get with me, and let’s educate them. [Applause]

While training teachers is important, we also need to train the paraprofessionals, because, you know, most of our students sit with a paraprofessional more during the day than they do a teacher of blind students. Parents also need to know Braille to be able to assist their students with homework and to know that, when a teacher says it will take a year to learn letters A through J in the Braille alphabet, something is wrong.

Three years ago we decided to train parents and paraprofessionals at our office at PDRIB. This class is a fourteen-week class offered over the summer, and it’s particularly targeting paraprofessionals and parents. The first year we had three members. Two of those members received their National Certification in Unified English Braille. The third entered the teaching program. This class has now grown from three members that first summer to twenty participants this summer.

I was once again met with educators across the field wanting to know why I was doing more. “Why are you doing this for parents and paraprofessionals?” “Where is the funding coming from?” “There’s no way you’ll be able to do this without funding.” So I let them know we were volunteering our services and that the parents get it free.

We also recently partnered with the NFB and the Lavelle Fund to train sixteen IEP advocates to go out and train others to represent students in IEP meetings. There will be an additional IEP cohort coming next year. This will have a trickledown effect as we train the advocate, the advocate goes and trains more advocates, and the education spreads.

Our office at the university offers student assessments across the nation to make sure that they have quality services. Recently, with some informal research on social media, I asked parents of blind students and blind students alike to tell me what they wish their teacher of blind students knew. Some of the responses I received were: “I wish that my teacher had not been my friend but been my teacher.” “I wish they had pushed me harder.” And I think the most heartbreaking statement was from a three-and-a-half-year-old who said, “Please come see me more. I know I can learn to read.” We know these small steps have been taken at the university with our partners, and we know that they are the right steps to create change in a big way.

So as I close my speech and time with you today, I want to leave you with the thoughts of the little boy from our read-aloud. We need our dream of every blind student being a successful adult to come true. We need people like you to dream and dream big. We need you to recruit others to believe in our dream so that someday something will happen, and our dream will become reality.

Thank you!

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[PHOTO CAPTION: Mark Riccobono]

[PHOTO CAPTION: Bradley Tusk]

## Is Mobile Voting our Final Shot at Saving Democracy? Interview with Bradley Tusk and Mark Riccobono

**by Gina Healy and Jennifer Woodall**

**From the Editor: Another election cycle has come and gone, but the fight for private, independent, and accessible voting continues so that hopefully the voting experience improves for the blind in subsequent cycles. This article, reprinted with permission from *ABILITY Magazine*, addresses what the future of voting might look like and how it could fundamentally change the voting experience not just for blind voters, but for all voters, in a positive way.**

**The article features Mark Riccobono, President of the National Federation of the Blind, who expresses his views as the elected representative of blind Americans. The other participant in the interview is Bradley Tusk, who is funding an effort to advance mobile voting and has written a book about why he believes it is important, not just for accessibility but for saving our democracy. His opinions about the state of our political system are his own. *ABILITY Magazine* would like our readers to know about its other web resources:** [**https://abilityjobs.com**](https://url.us.m.mimecastprotect.com/s/uEVoCwpRPosGjq3zTqhzHJWlHh?domain=abilityjobs.com)**, a job board for job seekers with disabilities;** [**https://abilityjobfair.org**](https://url.us.m.mimecastprotect.com/s/fnjBCxk7QpI1l7o4sYioHyGob8?domain=abilityjobfair.org)**, an online career fair for job seekers with disabilities; and** [**https://abilityE.com**](https://url.us.m.mimecastprotect.com/s/MkJUCyPJRqhr185zURsgHxlGcW?domain=abilitye.com)**, which connects actors with disabilities to the entertainment industry.** **Here is the interview:**

When people think about disenfranchised voters through the course of history, one overarching theme presents itself: accessibility. Fair access to voting has been fought for tooth-and-nail by marginalized groups across various backgrounds, and a certain group of people are lobbying for what they feel is the next step towards a truly equitable voting system—mobile voting. In Bradley Tusk’s most recent book *Vote With Your Phone: Why Mobile Voting Is Our Final Shot at Saving Democracy*, he speaks to the positive impact mobile voting could have on our current system. Working in tandem with Mark Riccobono, President of the National Federation of the Blind, Tusk is driving the initiative towards more inclusive voting.

*ABILITY* *Magazine*’s Gina Healy and Jennifer Woodall joined Riccobono and Tusk in a virtual interview to discuss mobile voting security measures, voter fraud, enacting the mobile voting platform on the federal level, and how to change the system.

Jennifer Woodall: Hey Bradley, how are you doing?

Bradley Tusk: Hey, I’m good.

Woodall: Hello, Mark. How are you today?

Mark Riccobono: I’m doing well. Thank you.

Woodall: My co-interviewer Gina is here as well.

Gina Healy: Hi, everyone.

Tusk: Nice to meet you.

Riccobono: Hey, Gina.

Woodall: Bradley, can you give us some background on how you got to where you are now?

Tusk: Sure. I’m a venture capitalist. I’m in politics. Actually, I’ll just walk through it this way. Started my career in politics, was Mike Bloomberg’s campaign manager when he ran for mayor of New York, worked for him at City Hall. I was the Deputy Governor of Illinois for four years, ran the state’s legislation budget policy operations and communications. Spent a couple of years on the Hill in DC as Chuck Schumer’s communications director in the senate. Started my first company, Tusk Strategies, a political consulting firm, in 2010. We run all kinds of big campaigns for companies, candidates, nonprofits all over the country. Started working in tech in 2011 with Uber, ran most of the campaigns around the US to legalize ridesharing. That worked. Did it again with CLEAR to get them to airports. That worked. Then launched my first venture capital fund in 2016. We invest in early-stage technology companies that face different regulatory issues. We’re investing out of our third fund right now and raising our fourth. Separate from that, I got really lucky in that when I did Uber, I took my fee in equity because they couldn’t afford me because they were such an early startup at the time, and it became Uber.

I was able to start a family foundation out of that. We do two things, mobile voting, which we’ll discuss today. The other is hunger. We fund and run campaigns around the country to pass legislation requiring universal school meals. So far, we’ve passed twenty-five bills in twenty states. About thirteen million more people have access to food on a regular basis, and about seven [sic] of our money has helped to lock about $2 billion in new government funding for school meals. Separate from that, I teach at Columbia Business School. I own a bookstore on the lower side of Manhattan called P&T Knitwear. I host a podcast called *Firewall*. Write a column for the *New York Daily News*, write a Substack, and tomorrow is my third book coming out, *Vote With Your Phone: Why Mobile Voting Is Our Final Shot at Saving Democracy*. The first book, *The Fixer*, was a memoir, and the second, *Obvious in Hindsight*, was a novel about how to legalize flying cars. So that’s me.

Woodall: That’s a lot. Busy man.

Tusk: [laughs] Yeah, I have a very short attention span.

Woodall: I understand that for sure. And how about you, Mark?

Riccobono: I serve as President of the National Federation of the Blind. My business degree was from the University of Wisconsin, and I was going to go into marketing and economics. Because of my advocacy work at the grassroots level in the state of Wisconsin, I got noticed by the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, and started directing a state agency for blind children just short of my twenty-fourth birthday. I had no background in the education of blind children, except I knew everything not to do because that was my educational experience in the public schools as someone who was blind, but mostly wasn’t passed over by the educational system. I got very deeply into educational reform issues for blind children and did that for three-and-a-half years before I came to work for the National Federation of the Blind to build research and training programs, which had me doing everything from education programs to technology development to putting together research programs that were centered on blind people. As part of that, I oversaw our work on the Help America Vote Act. We got into the Help America Vote Act—in 2001—a requirement that nonvisual access had to be included in voting machines in federal elections.

This is the first time that there was an affirmative requirement that polling places—at least in federal elections—had to provide equal access in a real meaningful way to blind people. We have had a project ever since then. One of the things that I established and have been overseeing is we survey the experience of blind voters every year since 2008 in every major election. We have the longest-standing longitudinal data on the experience of blind voters. On the technology side, what I’m most noted for, is I got handed a project to help build a car that a blind person could drive. There’s a long story there, but one of the intersections of that story is I ended up being the person asked to represent the Federation to do the public demonstration of that technology, which was at the Daytona International Speedway. A lot of people know me as “the blind driver.” I’ve had quite an interesting set of things I’ve worked on. In 2014, I was first elected President of the National Federation of the Blind. In order to be elected, you have to be a blind person. You have to be a member of our organization, and you have to be able to get elected at our national convention. I’ve been re-elected every two years since. It’s important that I keep doing a good job for blind people. In this capacity, obviously, I work on all variety of things, but most importantly, staying centered on what blind Americans need, want, and hope for, and then go out and make it happen.

Woodall: Thank you both for those introductions. Bradley, you recently wrote a book called *Vote With Your Phone: Why Mobile Voting Is Our Final Shot at Saving Democracy*. Can you give our readers a brief synopsis of what this book’s about?

Tusk: Yeah. I mean, the book makes the case that we have a government and a democracy in crisis, and that if we want to fix it, we’ve got to really change the way that we allow people to vote. I think people with disabilities—especially Mark who has been one of our best partners and a true visionary—it really has been incredible in understanding what needs to be done here and being at the forefront of it. I think that in many ways, the people who are going to read this interview know what everyone really should know, which is voting is just too difficult. It’s too difficult if you are a person with disabilities, but it’s too difficult for everybody, simply by the fact that most people just don’t do it because of gerrymandering, which is the process by which most legislative districts are already set as Democrat or Republican, so only really the primary matters. Primary turnout, depending on the year in the elections, is about ten to twenty percent. So who are they? They’re the furthest left, or they’re the furthest right, or they are special interests who know how to move money in votes in low-turnout elections.

As a result, small groups of people pick who our officials are and then dictate what they’re going to do in office, and it gives us one of two types of government: either the total chaos and dysfunction that defines Washington, DC, or totally one-sided government, whether it’s the state of Texas on the right or the city of San Francisco on the left. In my view, none of that is democracy, and none of that is effective. When I ran the campaigns to legalize Uber and ridesharing, what I saw was millions of people were advocating on our behalf and through the app telling their elected officials, “Hey, I like this ridesharing thing. Please leave it alone.” And it worked. We wanted every single market in the country and started wondering, “Would they vote that way, too?” Maybe. They certainly aren’t voting now in those state and local primaries. But maybe if you make it really easy. So we started the Mobile Voting Project in 2017 and started off by funding elections in seven different states where either people with disabilities or deployed military voted in actual elections—Mark, again, was one of our most important partners on that—and it worked.

Turnout increased materially. National Cyber Security Center audited all of them. They came back clean. Jocelyn did a poll when she was running Denver’s elections and found now, no shock me, that 100 percent of people said, “Yeah, I’d rather press a button than go somewhere.” That would be weird if it wasn’t 100 percent, but a lot of the cryptography community felt like the tech that was already out there just wasn’t secure enough. Our view was, we didn’t want that to be an excuse to not move forward, so we decided to build our own mobile voting technology and began what we’re now in year four of a process. We are building technology that is end-to-end encrypted, end-to-end verifiable, air-gapped, has multifactor authentication, has biometric identification, and is open-sourced—that’s in accordance with the recommendations from the U.S. Vote Foundation—and when we finish building the tech next year and we go through all the certifications, the next step to make it free and open-source so anyone can use it, anyone can improve on it. Then the really hard work begins. That’s why I wrote this book and why Mark contributed an essay to it, which is changing the laws so that everyone has the option to vote on their phone.

We’re not trying to take away any current form of voting, we’re just trying to give people an additional option, but we’re going to get a lot of opposition because people who have power currently don’t like the idea of making it easier to risk losing power. So whether you’re a Republican, Democrat, lobbyist, union, trade group, if you like things the way they are, you’re going to have concerns about what we’re doing. I wrote this book to try to start building a movement of people all over the country, people with disabilities, civil rights leaders, military families, Gen Z, all these different groups who can hopefully demand that we be given this right. What we’ve seen throughout history is that really pivotal movements and moments in American democracy, like the Americans with Disabilities Act or same-sex marriage or civil rights, all happened because people stood up and said, “I refuse to accept the status quo.” So that’s the beginning of the next phase. The book is basically the story of, “Where are we now? Why are we here? How did we get here? How can we fix it? What did we build? And what comes next?” Is that your question?

Woodall: Yes, very thoroughly, thank you. It touched on a couple of the things that I want to ask about as well, but we can go into them a little bit deeper. When we talk about mobile voting, how do you approach the concerns about voter fraud?

Tusk: So there’s voter fraud and there’s security more broadly. I have to say, voter fraud is one of these things that gets attention, but doesn’t exist all that much in reality. As I mentioned, I worked in Chicago politics, so that’s as ugly as it could possibly get, and even there, you don’t really see it. The Heritage Foundation, which is a conservative think tank, did a report and found that 0.000006 percent of votes are impacted by voter fraud. So basically zero. Then the question is security because this is a new type of voting and it’s on the internet. Therefore, people have every right to be concerned. Maybe I could just walk you through how it works, which is if you are a voter, you download the app from your local election jurisdiction. The first thing they do is make sure that you’re voting in the right precinct in place, and then they identify that you are you. Every jurisdiction has different ways that they do that. Some use biometric screening, like an iris or a fingerprint or facial recognition scan, some use digital signature matching. In every case, we use multifactor authentication. So just like with Google or Amazon or whatever, you get a code sent to you that only you can access to verify that you’re you. Once it’s established that you’re you, the app looks like any voting thing you’d see on the internet because the goal is to make it as easy to use as possible, where it’s a little different is compared to other forms of voting, there’s no risk of hanging chads or stray pencil marks or undervoting or overvoting or anything like that. Once you’ve completed your ballot and you decide it’s what you want, you review everything, you hit send, it’s immediately encrypted. You get a tracking number that then says, “Okay, here’s how you can follow the progress of your ballot throughout the process.” They then go to the election official’s office and they then decrypt, they take it offline, it’s called air gapping, to remove it from the internet because the only way to hack something is to be able to access it through the internet, so if something’s not on the internet, you can’t do that. And they only decrypt it once it’s taken offline. A paper copy of the ballot is then printed out. The ballots are anonymized and randomized. Then for the voter, you have the tracking numbers. You can see when your ballot was submitted, when it was received, when it was decrypted, when it was printed, when it was tabulated. Because all the code is open-source, anyone who knows how to do this stuff can check for bugs in the code or anything that could potentially go wrong in an election. So, there’s multiple layers of both security and accountability and auditing. So does that explain it?

Woodall: It does. Yeah. Thank you. We actually recently interviewed Ken Block, who was actually hired by the Trump administration when they were alleging voter fraud to do the research on it as a neutral party. He had some interesting information about how voting is conducted so differently state to state. I’m interested to see how something like this technology would work in states that are so different from each other with how they’re conducting voting, and how they’re collecting voting.

Tusk: Yeah. I mean, for better and for worse, because voting is run at the local level, everyone’s going to have their own processes, rules, requirements, everything else. We have built this app so they can adapt to whatever it is. If you’re a jurisdiction that says, “I want biometric screening,” great, we can do that. If you’re a jurisdiction that says, “We have ranked choice voting here,” great, we can do that. We can adapt to whatever rules are because we’re not in a position to set all the different rules. When we polled mobile voting before 2020, we found that about 75 percent of Democrats and independents and Republicans all said, “Yeah, if it’s secure, we should have this.” Then, after 2020, we polled again. It stayed in the mid-70s with Democrats and independents and fell into the 40s with Republicans. That’s clearly the influence of what we saw coming out of the 2020 election. Look, we have built this to be totally non-partisan. In the seven states where we’ve done this, three of the seven were very Republican states: West Virginia, Utah, and South Carolina. But it’s also possible that blue cities and states warm up to this faster than red, and they adopt it first. Our goal is to work with anybody who wants to do this.

Healy: To follow up on that a little bit more, it does seem like the states with the most restrictive voting measures would be the ones who would be least likely to adopt this versus the liberal ones. How would you ensure that this would be enacted on a national level?

Tusk: Yeah, absolutely. So, I have two answers: one is, sometimes we think that—even take Georgia, which is one of the states that really has had the most restrictive voting laws—we actually think Atlanta as a city is one of our best targets, in part because like the disability community, another community that feels very strongly that the current system is unfair is the civil rights community. So, for example, I’m going to Atlanta next week, and I’m doing an event at the Carter Presidential Library with Martin Luther King III, making the case for mobile voting because he believes that the best way to fight voter suppression is to let people vote on their phones. When you’re pressing a button in your living room, no one could turn you away because of the color of your skin. So, the first thing is, I think finding blue cities in red states is one path there. The second is more broadly like what I’ve seen in my career in technology, which is once you take the genie out of the bottle, you can’t put it back in. Everybody everywhere runs their lives on their phones these days. We do our banking, our health care; people do their love lives, so many different things. They’re not really willing to say, “Oh, my cousin in this state can have access to this app and tech, and I can’t.” Yes, I don’t think it’s going to happen in all fifty states at the same time, but everything that I’ve ever seen as a venture capitalist and a technology investor is once the genie is out of the bottle, once the product is out there in the market, it’s very, very hard to roll it back. That’s also why we’re going to need to be able to organize and mobilize millions of people. Yeah, those political fights in the red states will probably be tougher than the blue states, but you know what? Having worked in a lot of blue-state politics—New York, Illinois, Pennsylvania—in my career, those aren’t going to be easy either.

Woodall: It’s still in development, the mobile voting platform?

Tusk: Yeah, we’re like 85, 90 percent done. We have a team of experts who are just running test after test, and then we’re going to go to organizations and ask them to review it. Then also the important thing is keeping it open-source. It’s not the end-all deal we put up online. Other people could then from there build on it and make it even better. But yeah, it doesn’t do any of us any good to put something up that is not as bulletproof as possible.

Healy: So you would give the technology to the states?

Tusk: Yeah, it’s free.

Woodall: Oftentimes when companies are developing tech, specifically for accessibility, they fail to have disabled contributors in their research and development teams. Is that something that you’ve been able to do while you’re developing this platform?

Tusk: Yes. Very much so.

Healy: Mark, it seems from what I saw that Provision 2 of the ADA either builds on HAVA (Help America Vote Act) or supplements it. I was wondering how mobile voting would add to that, to make it that even better.

Riccobono: Well, in the National Federation of the Blind, we pushed very hard on the idea that the entire voting program has to be accessible. The Help America Vote Act did a lot—really opened up making sure that polling places in federal elections were fully accessible—but it didn’t really address absentee voting. What we saw also is that after less than a decade, a lot of states wanting to go away from electronic voting machines back to paper. I think this synergizes pretty well with what Bradley said. Once the genie is out of the bottle, at least for blind people, we said, “Well, wait a minute. We’ve had private independent voting for the first time where no one interferes with our ballot. We don’t have to rely on someone else marking the ballot. We’re not going back.” At the same time, we recognized that there were other forms of voting that were not available. So, nondisabled people had actually more options. You could vote absentee. We sued the state of Maryland, and Maryland said, “Well, we make voting available to you at the polling places. Sorry, if you got to be out of town on Election Day, too bad for you.”

If you were a person without a disability, no problem, you’d have access. We were able to establish that actually the Americans with Disabilities Act guarantees us access to the entire voting program, not just a particular aspect of voting. The problem is that the states don’t do too well at really planning for and thinking about accessibility. Case in point is the 2020 election. Now, I sent a letter to every state in the nation in September 2019 saying, “We have a big election coming up in 2020. You should be ready to make sure that your entire voting program, including absentee voting, is accessible to voters with disabilities.” Now, I’m not particularly good at predicting the future. I wrote that letter from an advocacy point of view, but what happened six months—a year later, every single state was rushing like mad for mail-in ballots, not because of accessibility, but because of a worldwide pandemic. Virtually no state paid attention to my letter in September 2019. We ended up pursuing almost two dozen states in terms of lawsuits or other actions because their absentee voting processes had no accessibility in them. One of the reasons that mobile voting is important, and it’s important that the initiative of this movement is being built with accessibility from the beginning, is it will give states a tool that they know has accessibility built into it, and it has the flexibility to be accessible in all of the ways that might be needed.

That’s one of the key aspects of voting that is really continuing to be missed. We have states, even today—North Dakota is a great example—they’re permitted to do delivery of ballots to people with disabilities. It’s in their law, but they’re just not doing it. A lot of states aren’t even thinking about accessibility still in absentee. Really, people with disabilities, not unlike other classes of people, really have a limited set of choices when it comes to truly voting privately and independently in an election. Mobile voting presents the option to make level that playing field, provide all the options to voters with disabilities that other people have.

Healy: I read in your essay that the NFB (National Federation of the Blind) has a mobile voting working group. Is that what you referenced earlier?

Riccobono: Yeah. So we have worked really from the beginning—even going back earlier than the Mobile Voting Project—pulling together thought leaders and others who have been thinking about this idea of mobile voting. It’s something that we’ve helped curate some of the conversation, knowing that if anybody is going to be talking about new forms of voting, we want to do exactly what this project that we’re here talking about today has done, which is making sure that accessibility is baked in from the beginning. That it’s not an afterthought. Our mobile voting working group has really been to get people thinking and talking about what the future of voting is and how it can be built to be accessible from the beginning.

Healy: Is it also an advocacy group?

Riccobono: Well, really, the advocacy comes in our grassroots network and what we do. It informs our advocacy efforts, I would say, because in our advocacy efforts, we’re not advocating, in many cases, for a specific approach to voting. We’re advocating for making sure that the voting methodology is accessible and also trying to, again, expand the franchise of voting. Absentee voting is already available to overseas military voters in ways that it’s not available to people with disabilities. We spend a lot of time advocating that those methods be open to us. If you’re on the International Space Station, you can vote from space. But apparently, we’re not smart enough to figure out how to make that happen for people right here in the country. It doesn’t make sense to me. What it says to me is, if you’re an astronaut, you’re important. If you’re a person with a disability, you’re not. So that’s where the advocacy comes in.

Healy: You said you’ve been elected every two years. How did that voting go? Did you guys use mobile voting?

Tusk: That’s a really good question.

Riccobono: Well, it could be, but our voting does happen in person at our national convention. It’s a little bit different in that our national organization is a little bit more representative democracy in that the delegates at the convention are voting, but they’re all elected by people at the local level. It’s a little different. We certainly are interested in if there are applications for the mobile voting technology for other things that we do.

Healy: Yeah, I would imagine. It sounds [like] it would be an incredibly powerful tool for so many people, more than the disabled, more than the civil rights movement. It’s service workers, moms who have to work with small children—

Tusk: A few others, too, just throw them in there. Obviously, college students. For example, we dropped off our daughter at college a few weeks ago for the first time, and when we moved her in, she got her room key, she got a bike room key. It didn’t occur to me [till] later that mail—mail, room, mailbox—never came up once. I literally don’t think she would know what to do with a piece of mail, but if you let her vote on her phone, I guarantee she’s already checked her phone twelve times since we all started this conversation. People in climate emergencies, especially because of hurricane season now. It’s just like it’s getting worse and worse and people are getting displaced. People in Native American tribal areas. There’s lots and lots of different groups that could really benefit. But to your point, Gina, the reality is, why wouldn’t we want to make voting easy for everybody if we can?

Woodall: Since the platform is still in development, do you have a projected date when you imagine this being completed?

Tusk: Yeah. So I would say probably Q3 of 2025 for the rollout, but that includes a series of different testing events and activities over the course of 2025, DEFCON being probably the most high-profile one in that cyber world. But at the same time, we’re also going to start running legislation in different cities around the country that would permit people to vote on their phones once the tech is ready and certified and everything else. We’re going to get the movement-building process going now. We’re going to get the legislative process going now. We’re going to finish the tech completely and make it open-source in 2025. My hope would be that by 2026, ’27, ’28, municipal elections, maybe some state elections. Then if it’s all working, we can start to expand things like congressional primaries from there.

Woodall: Am I remembering correctly that you said you’ve been testing the mobile voting in seven states so far?

Tusk: We did mobile voting pilots in seven states, not with the tech that we built. We were using the existing tech on the market, which actually, in fairness to them, works really well, but because it’s not open-source, because these are private companies with proprietary information, it couldn’t meet the security requirements that the experts put out there. That’s why we decided to build our own tech.

Healy: Do you think mobile voting is the only radical change needed to strengthen or to increase access to voting?

Tusk: No. In fact, it’s funny. There’s a whole chapter in the book, specifically, about a lot of the other reforms out there. I believe that we should have as much early voting as possible. I think states should have opt-out instead of opt-in for mail-in voting. I think that there’s something to say here about the idea of making Election Day a holiday. On top of all that, I think we just need more types of political reform: open primaries, final five, ranked choice voting, national popular vote. There’s a lot of good stuff out there, and I think we should do all of it.

This was great. It was a really thoughtful interview.

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[PHOTO CAPTION: Jesse Shirek]

## Social Security Disability Insurance and Supplemental Security Income Updates for 2025

**by Jesse Shirek**

On October 10, 2024, the Social Security Administration (SSA) announced a 2.5 percent cost-of-living increase for 2025, and as you may expect, we have our traditional end-of-year updates for your review. But before we dig into those details, I would like to share some exciting news that illustrates the power of relationship-building in our movement. On December 18, 2023, Martin O’Malley was confirmed as the Commissioner of the Social Security Administration. Commissioner O’Malley is very familiar with the National Federation of the Blind. Before he became Commissioner O’Malley, he was governor of the great state of Maryland from 2007 until 2015. Prior to being elected governor he was mayor of Charm City, otherwise known as the City of Baltimore, from 1999 until 2007. As you are probably imagining, he has been to our national headquarters on multiple occasions.

On August 14, 2024, we were invited to the White House to celebrate the eighty-ninth anniversary of the signing of the Social Security Act. I attended the celebration on behalf of the National Federation of the Blind. Social Security is one of my core portfolio priority areas working in our governmental affairs group. We are constantly trying to improve Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) benefits for blind Americans. I personally understand the struggles that blind beneficiaries face, as I received SSI as a young adult, and SSDI provided me the stability I needed when starting my professional career.

It should come as no surprise to you that the individual with the most decision-making authority within the Social Security Administration happens to be Commissioner O’Malley. It is very difficult to get a meeting with the Commissioner, so I feel privileged to share that I had a few minutes to speak with Commissioner O’Malley, painting for him a picture of the stories our members report to us regularly. He was very engaged in hearing about the problems that we are facing when we need to access SSA services. I talked about the letters our members receive every day from the Administration about insurmountable overpayments, which occur when SSA has paid beneficiaries more money in benefits than the beneficiary is qualified to receive. Typically, this is caused when a beneficiary begins working and earning income, especially when they receive SSI or SSDI. This can occur when crossing the substantial gainful activity threshold. It is not uncommon for an individual to learn that they owe $50,000, $60,000, or in some circumstances over $100,000 to the Social Security Administration as a result of an overpayment. The reasons are complex, but you should know that the SSA is underfunded and understaffed, which does not help the situation.

We do not believe that this approach is fair, especially when beneficiaries are attempting to earn a living and trying to get off of benefits. I mentioned to Commissioner O’Malley that we would like to see the Administration place a limit on the number of months or years it can look back into a beneficiary’s earnings to calculate overpayments. We should not suffer because the agency is understaffed and underfunded. The Commissioner is supportive and communicated that a change like this would require Congressional approval, which highlights the importance of our continued advocacy work. I ask you to please continue sharing the struggles that you face with the Social Security Administration, and please know that we are dedicated to continuing our work to bring resolution to the challenges faced by our members. Additionally, please keep in the back of your mind that building relationships with government officials is very important. You never know if the person you are speaking with is the next Commissioner of the Social Security Administration or perhaps the next Commissioner of the Rehabilitation Services Administration.

### Annual Adjustments to the Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) and Supplemental Security Income (SSI) Programs

In 2025, approximately seventy million Americans will see a 2.5 percent cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) increase in their benefit amounts. Thus, come January, monthly checks will be higher. The 2025 amounts are below, along with some general concepts pertaining to the Social Security and Medicare programs, in case you want to better understand or refresh yourself about your rights. The COLA is based on the consumer price index (CPI), which measures the rate of inflation against the wages earned by the approximately 173 million workers across the nation over the previous four quarters starting with the third quarter of the previous year.

### Tax Rates

FICA and Self-Employment Tax Rates: If you are employed, you know that you do not bring home everything you earn. For example, 7.65 percent of your pay is deducted to cover your contribution to the Old Age, Survivors, and Disability Insurance (OASDI) Trust Funds and the Medicare Hospital Insurance (HI) Trust Funds: 6.2 percent covers OASDI, and 1.45 percent is contributed to the HI Trust Fund. Additionally, your employer is required to match this 7.65 percent for a grand total of 15.3 percent.

For those who are self-employed, there is no “employer” to match the 7.65 percent, which means a self-employed individual pays the entire 15.3 percent of their income. These numbers will not change in 2025 regardless of whether an individual is employed or self-employed. In 2025, individuals with earned income of more than $200,000 ($250,000 for married couples filing jointly) pay an additional 0.9 percent in Medicare taxes; this does not include the above amounts.

### Maximum Taxable Earnings

There is a ceiling on taxable earnings for the OASDI Trust Fund, which was $168,600 in 2024 and will increase to $176,100 in 2025. Thus, for earnings above $176,100, there is no 6.2 percent deducted for OASDI. As for Medicare, there is no limit on taxable earnings for the HI Trust Fund.

### Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) Quarters of Coverage

The OASDI Trust Fund is kind of like an insurance policy. You have to pay a premium to participate. Therefore, to qualify for Retirement, Survivors, or Disability Insurance benefits, an individual must pay a minimum amount of FICA taxes into the OASDI Trust Fund by earning a sufficient number of calendar quarters to become fully insured for Social Security benefits.

In 2024, credit for one quarter of coverage was awarded for any individual who earned at least $1,730 during the year, which means that an individual would need to earn at least $6,920 to be credited with four quarters of coverage. In 2025, the amount increases to $1,810 for one calendar quarter or $7,240 to earn four quarters of coverage for the year.

A maximum of four quarters can be awarded for any calendar year, and it makes no difference when the income is earned during that year. Basically, the taxes you pay into the OASDI and HI Trust Funds are your premiums to take part in the Social Security and Medicare programs. The total number of quarters required to be eligible for benefits depends on the individual’s age. The older the individual, the more quarters are required. Furthermore, a higher average income during an individual’s lifetime means a higher Social Security or SSDI check when benefits start. Remember that the above quoted numbers for quarters of coverage to become fully insured are only minimum amounts.

### Trial Work Period (TWP)

This concept is often misunderstood. The amount of earnings required to use a trial work month is not based on the earnings limit for blind beneficiaries but instead on the national average wage index. In 2024, the amount required to use a TWP month was only $1,110, and this amount will increase to $1,160 in 2025.

If you are self-employed, you can also use a trial work month if you work more than eighty hours in your business, and this limitation will not change unless expressly adjusted.

### Substantial Gainful Activity (SGA)

The earnings limit for a blind beneficiary in 2024 was $2,590 per month and will increase to $2,700 in 2025. Again, it is important to remember this is not the amount of money an individual makes to use a trial month. This is to say that the TWP can be exhausted even if your income is well below $2,700 per month. See the above information about the TWP.

In 2025 a blind SSDI beneficiary who earns $2,700 or more in a month (before taxes but after subtracting un-incurred business expenses for the self-employed, subsidized income for the employed, and impairment-related work expenses) will be deemed to have exceeded SGA and will likely no longer be eligible for SSDI benefits.

### Supplemental Security Income (SSI)

The standard federal monthly payment amount for individuals receiving SSI was $943 in 2024 and will increase to $967 in 2025. For married couples, the standard federal monthly payment amount of SSI will increase from $1,415 to $1,450.

### Student Earned Income Exclusion

In 2024, the monthly amount was $2,290 and will increase to $2,350 in 2025. The annual amount was $9,230 in 2024 and will be $9,460 in 2025. The asset limits under the SSI program will remain unchanged at $2,000 per individual and $3,000 per married couple. If you find yourself approaching the SSI asset limit, I urge you to continue reading the next section regarding ABLE Accounts.

If you have questions related to your SSI and SSDI benefits or if you are seeking help, contact Jesse Shirek by phone at 410-659-9314, extension 2348 or by email at [jshirek@nfb.org](mailto:jshirek@nfb.org).

### ABLE Act

We are coming up on the ten-year anniversary of the signing of the Achieving a Better Life Experience (ABLE) Act, which became law on December 19, 2014. The ABLE Act has a significant impact on resource limits associated with the SSI and Medicaid programs for people who became blind or disabled by the age of twenty-six. Traditionally, SSI beneficiaries have been required to adhere to strict resource limits, such as a maximum of $2,000 in the bank for an individual receiving SSI benefits. However, under the ABLE Act the amount held in an ABLE Account can be much higher than the two-thousand-dollar resource limit. ABLE Account contributions must be designated specifically for purposes such as education, housing, employment training and support, assistive technology, health, prevention and wellness, financial management, legal fees, and funeral and burial expenses. Check with your financial institution of choice for the status of ABLE Act regulations in a specific state and to see if an ABLE Account is right for you.

It is important to note that SSI beneficiaries should consider the many other purposes not subject to the traditional resource limits when making ABLE Account contributions, since there are also tax advantages associated with ABLE Accounts. If you are seeking out more information about the topic of ABLE Accounts you can reach out to Government Affairs Specialist Jesse Shirek at 410-659-9314, extension 2348. Alternatively, visit <https://www.ablenrc.org/>.

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[PHOTO CAPTION: Gary Wunder]

## National Federation of the Blind Applauds United States Department of Labor for Proposed Rule Phasing Out Subminimum Wages: Organization Urges Congress to Codify Proposal in Statute

**by Gary Wunder**

Since its very beginning in 1940, the National Federation of the Blind has opposed the payment of subminimum wages to blind people. Our first formal statement of this opposition was a resolution in 1942 which said:

NATIONAL FEDERATION OF THE BLIND

RESOLUTION No. 104

WHEREAS, the purpose of the Fair Labor Standards Act was to establish a floor under the wages of the poorest paid groups of American workers and thereby to raise the standard of living and to remove the national weaknesses resulting from the maintenance of a class of workers below a decent American standard of living, and

WHEREAS, the Wages and Hours Division in charge of the enforcement of said Act hasissued certain certificates and contemplates issuing further certificates removing blind workers in sheltered shops and elsewhere from the benefits of such Act and

WHEREAS, the exemption of such blind workers from such benefits defeats the very purpose of such Act and tends to establish a class of pauper workers and to create sweat-shop conditions among the least fortunate workers in this country, and

WHEREAS, such action by the said Wages and Hours Division has been taken and is being further considered without consulting the blind themselves, and

WHEREAS, organization of the blind workers in the various states and the officers of this Federation are perhaps the only agencies from which the said Wages & Hours Division can actually learn the wishes of the Blind, the capacities of blind workers and the conditions under which the blind actually live, now therefore

BE IT RESOLVED, by the National Federation of the Blind that we protest against the issuance of certificates exempting blind workers from the benefits of the said Fair Labor Standards Act, and that we respectfully request that all Federal agencies entrusted with the adoption of regulations under and the enforcement of said Act hold public hearings throughout the country and secure the testimony and views of the blind themselves at such hearings, and consider the needs and desires of the working blind in all steps in relation to said Act to blind workers.

Adopted by the Third Annual Convention of the National Federation of the Blind assembled in the City of Des Moines, State of Iowa, this 26th day of June, 1942.

J. tenBroek

President

J. DeBeer

Secretary

Of late, we have been pursuing a two-prong approach to doing away with Section 14(c) of the Fair Labor Standards Act by pressing both Congress and the Biden Administration to do what is in their power to abolish the practice. The Biden Administration has acted by submitting a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM) and is giving the public until January 17 to make comments. Affirmatively acknowledging and commending this activity is the following press release issued on December 5, 2024:

The National Federation of the Blind (NFB), the transformative advocacy organization of blind Americans, today expressed its commendation of the United States Department of Labor for its proposed rule aimed at phasing out the payment of subminimum wages to disabled workers under Section 14(c) of the Fair Labor Standards Act.

“The National Federation of the Blind has fought the payment of subminimum wages since 1942, so we wholeheartedly applaud the Department of Labor for bringing forth this proposed rule,” said Mark Riccobono, President of the National Federation of the Blind. “The antiquated and discriminatory practice of paying subminimum wages is based on false and stereotypical assumptions about the capacity of the blind and other disabled workers. It is and always has been an assault on our dignity that devalues not only our labor, but our very humanity. While we commend this regulatory proposal, we continue to urge the United States Congress to codify this change into our nation’s statutory law with no further delay, ending this shameful practice once and for all and relegating it, like other forms of discrimination, to everlasting infamy.”

As we study the NPRM, we will be drafting comments on behalf of the Federation and asking that members submit their own comments. Time is short, so when you see a request, please react promptly.

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## We Need Your Help

*Attending my first National Convention in Orlando, Florida, I was overwhelmed by not only the resources, mentorship, and national community of students, but the love that filled every corner of the organization. The National Federation of the Blind gave me the world.* — Trisha

Blind children, students, and adults are making powerful strides in education and leadership every day across the United States, but we need to continue helping students like Trisha. 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 Trisha.
* 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 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 Contributions

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 2023 our supporters helped the NFB:

* Send 401 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 Braille-writing slates and styluses free of charge to blind users.
* Mentor 321 blind youth during our 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 in 2025, 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: Jessica Beecham]

## Jessica Beecham: Enthusiastic Servant Leader

**From the Editor: The next four articles are brief biographies of recently elected members of the National Federation of the Blind Board of Directors. In the past we have sometimes devoted an entire issue to these biographies, under the banner “Who are the Blind Who Lead the Blind?” More recently, we have simply featured the sketches of our most recently elected board members. However, you can access the biographies of all currently serving board members at** [**https://nfb.org/about-us/leadership/board-directors**](https://nfb.org/about-us/leadership/board-directors)**. Here is Jessica Beecham’s story:**

In the heart of the National Federation of the Blind (NFB), Jessica Beecham shines as a beacon of dedication and service. Elected to a term on the National Board of Directors in July of 2023, her election represents the recognition of Jessica’s work ethic, creativity, and her absolute intention to share what she has with her fellow blind people.

### Early Life and Education

Jessica was born in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, the first of two children born to Doug and Marsha Beecham. Jessica’s great-grandmother noticed that at about six months of age, Jessica was not looking at things in the way one would expect. Testing revealed that indeed she had a vision problem, the diagnosis being optic nerve hypoplasia, meaning her optic nerve was not developed.

Although she retained some vision, it was sufficiently low that she clearly qualified for admission to the Tennessee School for the Blind, where she attended elementary and secondary school. Though she learned Braille, the thinking at the time was that Braille was on its way out—a skill it might be nice to have but whose value would soon disappear due to the prevalence of audio recordings and computer-generated speech. She was never encouraged to use it for assignments, nor did anyone suggest that it might be helpful for her in terms of lists and other personal communication.

Because of the school’s belief in technology, Jessica learned a lot about the use of the Job Access with Speech (JAWS) screen reader. One of her sighted teachers was so committed to teaching the skill that he did so without using a screen. His expectation was that his blind students would learn how to use a screen reader with a keyboard and would figure out how to get the most out of the software not by looking at the screen but by listening to what the speech program said.

Because she had some vision, cane travel was not encouraged. Throughout Jessica’s school career, she was blessed to have good friends both at the school for the blind, where she attended as a day student, and in her home neighborhood, where she spent every night. She lived about forty-five minutes from the school, so each day her parents would provide transportation until eventually the school district decided it had a responsibility to provide bus transportation. The street she lived on had very little traffic and made a wonderful play area with well-defined boundaries.

Academics came easy for Jessica, but when she discussed the possibility of leaving the school for the blind for the public school, her mother had reservations. She was not sure that they could get the services that Jessica needed so that she could perform in a way that would demonstrate her real potential. Both envisioned a college career for Jessica, and her mother felt that being rated number one in her class at the school for the blind would mean more than being rated number five or number ten in what might be a more competitive environment lacking in necessary services.

Late in her high school career, Jessica did have the opportunity to attend several classes at a private school with sighted students, and her skills proved for the most part to be quite adequate. The one exception was when she was told she was not a good writer while trying to gain admission into advanced English classes. The process for admission was competitive, with only thirteen students being admitted. The English teacher in charge of advanced classes said that Jessica’s spelling and punctuation were atrocious, but she would admit her because Jessica was among the most well-read high school students the teacher had ever seen. Getting admitted was one thing; earning a grade would be quite another. For every comma splice, spelling mistake, and punctuation error, ten points would be deducted from Jessica’s grade. Lesser reductions were made for errors in paragraphing and other formatting Jessica had never really had the chance to observe as an audio reader. “It is rather deflating to take a paper that you believe would have been an A+ and find your letter grade was a D. I knew what things should sound like; what I couldn’t get straight was how they were supposed to be written.” As those of us who now read things that Jessica writes can affirm, she did quite a lot of learning in her honors and advanced-placement English classes.

### Higher Education and Early Career

Jessica’s passion for helping others led her to Middle Tennessee State University, where she pursued a degree in recreation and leisure studies, followed by a master’s in exercise science. Her career path took her through various roles that underscored her commitment to service, including positions at a technology center for blind people, a nursing facility for medically fragile children, and a drug rehabilitation facility. Each role fortified her resolve to advocate for and support both herself and others. She then went on to direct WE Fit Wellness, a company designed to provide accessible, affordable, and achievable exercise and nutrition solutions for individuals with disabilities. In 2018, Jessica started her own business and became part of the Colorado Business Enterprise Program. She currently operates a large cafeteria, convenience store, and vending business on Buckley Space Force Base. She also works as a contractor to provide Pre-Employment Transition Services to blind youth.

### Involvement with the National Federation of the Blind

Jessica’s first involvement did not inspire enthusiasm or a desire to get involved. “The people were kind, but they just didn’t seem to be involved in anything. They were so anxious to have me that they even paid my dues for a year, but I only attended one meeting, and after my initial rejection for a scholarship, I thought no more about the Federation.” Her reconnection with the organization came through the repeated encouragement of friends and a Thanksgiving potluck event. “I figured that if nothing else, I would get a dinner out of the thing. I was pleased to meet old friends I hadn’t seen in a long time and encouraged by the new people I met who might soon become my friends. I was surprised to find that this time I saw people doing things that I wanted to do. This was during the time when we were fighting the battle over quiet cars and when Mark Riccobono was driving on the Daytona Speedway. These things caught my interest.” So she joined the Stones River Chapter, soon leading to her election as chapter secretary. This is not surprising given her willingness to work and the recognition that the chapter had found someone good at writing.

When an opening in Colorado for an affiliate development position became available, Jessica applied and was hired. Primarily her job was to build new chapters and to strengthen those that needed some help. She loved the work, enjoyed the interaction with people, and is glad that she can claim at least six chapters that were created during her tenure.

### Leadership Philosophy and Contributions

Jessica’s leadership style is characterized by a profound commitment to inclusivity and community. She believes in leading with love, seeking out new challenges, and continually pushing the boundaries of personal and professional development. As a guide dog user, she also advocates for mobility independence, which has greatly influenced her approach to leadership and her ability to inspire others.

In addition to her job and her volunteer work with the Federation, Jessica enjoys yoga, high adventure activities, and ultra running. She has completed several marathons and ultra-marathon events including the Boston Marathon, Pikes Peak Marathon, Behind the Rocks 50K, and Pikes Peak fifty-mile race. She also enjoys exploring the city with her guide dog Prada.

### Conclusion

From a hesitant participant to a pivotal leader, Jessica Beecham’s journey with the National Federation of the Blind highlights her remarkable transformation and dedication. Her story is not just one of overcoming personal obstacles, but also of her unwavering commitment to serve and uplift her community. As she looks to the future, Jessica continues to focus on new projects and aspirations within the NFB, ensuring that her impact will resonate for years to come.

Jessica Beecham embodies the spirit of servant leadership, inspiring others through her enthusiasm, intelligence, and compassionate dedication to the blind community. Her story is a vivid testament to the power of resilience and the profound impact one person can have on the lives of many.

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[PHOTO CAPTION: Ben Dallin]

## Ben Dallin: Outdoorsman, Advocate, Mentor, and Welcoming Builder

Ben Dallin’s story is one of resilience, adventure, determination, and a deep commitment to community and advocacy. Born in Anchorage, Alaska, on September 9, 1988, Ben’s early life unfolded in McGrath, a small, remote town two hundred and fifty miles northwest of Anchorage. His parents, Phyllis and Norvil, both schoolteachers, instilled in Ben a sense of curiosity and tenacity, qualities that would serve him well in navigating life as a blind person.

### Early Life and Education

Diagnosed with Leber’s congenital amaurosis (LCA) at just three months old, Ben’s blindness was identified by a family member who noticed he wasn’t responding to visual cues. Despite the challenges of growing up in a town not connected to Alaska’s road system, Ben’s parents sought out resources and support. However, such resources were limited, and much of Ben’s early education in blindness techniques, such as learning Braille, fell to aides who were often learning just ahead of him. Despite these obstacles, Ben recalls the dedication of his community, which included family friends who were deeply invested in his success.

Ben’s early schooling was filled with adaptations. He learned Braille at a young age, though his education in the skill wasn’t comprehensive. He regrets not being encouraged to read with his left hand, a gap he worked to fill later in life. Despite this, Ben’s enthusiasm for reading flourished, aided by his parents’ belief that he should do as much as possible alongside his peers.

Ben’s middle school years were spent immersed in the rugged outdoor activities Alaska is known for—dog sledding, fishing, and hunting—opportunities that fostered a sense of independence and adventure. However, his family’s move to Spring Creek, Nevada, before his high school years marked the beginning of significant transitions.

In Nevada, Ben attended a school much larger than what he was accustomed to. He anticipated greater resources but quickly realized he would need to advocate for himself. The absence of timely Braille materials and knowledgeable support highlighted systemic challenges, yet his parents’ teaching backgrounds helped bridge many gaps. Ben excelled in extracurricular activities, especially Quiz Bowl, where his team captured the state championship three times, and he served as captain in his senior year. His pursuits weren’t limited to academics. He participated in band, all-state and honor choirs, and drama. While challenging, he found his high school years quite delightful.

### Higher Education and Discovery of the Federation

Ben’s first year at Brigham Young University (BYU) was a dramatic change. He expected that this large university would understand blindness but was told it had been a long time since it had had a totally blind student. Ben lacked any substantial contact with other blind people, had limited travel skills, and found far less success in his first year than he had hoped. Unaware of many resources available to blind students, Ben struggled but began to find direction when he attended his first National Federation of the Blind event.

The turning point came when Ron Gardner, then president of the Utah affiliate, invited Ben to the Washington Seminar. Witnessing blind people confidently traveling, advocating, and contributing to legislative efforts inspired Ben profoundly and helped him gain confidence in his own abilities. This experience solidified his connection to the Federation and led him to attend the Louisiana Center for the Blind (LCB) for further training. At LCB, Ben honed his travel and daily living skills, gaining the confidence to take on the world as a blind person. The thing he gained the most from his travel experience was understanding that, whether it looks glamorous or not, he can get where he wants to go when he wants to go there, and he is not limited to route travel that requires special training any time he goes into a new environment.

### Professional and Personal Growth

Following his training, Ben worked in various capacities, from teaching Braille and technology at training centers to roles in government and private organizations. He embraced challenges, such as moving to El Paso, Texas, for a job with the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, where he quickly rose through the ranks. Later, he transitioned to a remote position with the Department of Education, conducting quality assurance and mentoring staff. These experiences broadened his skill set and prepared him for leadership roles.

Although the message the Federation sends is predominantly positive, Ben’s life experience means he is well-equipped to deal with the more difficult sides of being blind. It is difficult to be on a Federation high while surrounded by people who believe in blindness, only to go back out into the world and find that your church isn’t ready for you to be a missionary, and when those plans fall through and you make a decision to return to school, you find that it is the same old slog in dealing with the lack of accessible hardware, software, and digital information. Experiencing the depression that many of us have familiarity with is not something we would invite, but it does mean that empathy is more than a word in knowing and caring about blind people.

Ben’s involvement with the Federation deepened over the years. After moving to Wisconsin and marrying Chelsea, an equally dedicated Federationist, Ben quickly became the legislative director for the affiliate. He was elected as the affiliate’s treasurer, and after proving successful at that, it was clear to leadership and membership alike that he had plenty of energy and talent. By 2022, he was elected president of the Wisconsin affiliate, and in 2024, he joined the National Board of Directors. His passion for Braille, technology, and legislative advocacy remain cornerstones of his contributions, and he takes pride in mentoring new members and promoting a welcoming Federation culture.

### Vision for the Future

Ben Dallin’s leadership is characterized by humility, empathy, and a drive to uplift others. He strives to bring his adventurous spirit to leadership and encourage and help others to pursue challenges and new opportunities. He focuses on helping people recognize their potential, breaking down barriers, and fostering connections. Whether through legislative efforts, mentoring, or simply welcoming new members, Ben’s impact is felt across the Federation.

His story is a testament to the power of community and the importance of self-advocacy. His journey reflects the Federation’s mission to transform dreams into reality, and his leadership exemplifies the spirit of giving back and paving the way forward for others. As Ben continues to lead and inspire, he remains grounded in his core belief: “The work we do is essential—not just for the blind of today but for future generations who deserve a world without barriers.”

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[PHOTO CAPTION: Jim Marks]

## Jim Marks: Rehabilitation Professional, Disability Advocate, Outdoorsman, Father, Grandfather, Husband

Jim Marks, a leader in the National Federation of the Blind for over thirty years before his election to the National Board of Directors in 2024, likened blind people to grizzly bears when accepting that honor from his Federation family: neither can see too well, he noted, but it does not matter, as both go where they wish to at will. Those who know Jim understand that he is also as fierce as the grizzlies are reputed to be when it comes to advocating for the rights of blind and disabled people in his home state of Montana and beyond, even as he also presents a warm and gentle demeanor. Raised with the expectation of and commitment to being someone who can be counted on, the “guy who you want at your back,” as he puts it, Jim has repeatedly demonstrated this quality, while also establishing himself as a deep thinker about the rehabilitation field and the organized blind movement.

### Early Life and Education

Jim Marks was born in Long Beach, California, in a naval hospital, as his father was stationed aboard a heavy cruiser, the USS *Roanoke*. After his father was discharged, the family returned to their ancestral home and ranch in Montana, not far from Helena. Jim was the first of nine children of Donald and Joanne Marks, and consequently grew up with a strong sense of responsibility and leadership that served him well in his family and beyond. He has six brothers and two sisters, making his family “a full basketball team with cheerleaders and substitutes,” he laughs. As the oldest, one of his roles was to “make sure everyone had a fair chance at things.”

At the age of eighteen, he became aware of problems with his eyesight. He remembers a nighttime drive during which one of his sisters commented that he had come precariously close to colliding with some horses crossing the highway, which he had not seen at all. His official diagnosis would not come, however, until the age of twenty-five, when he learned that a recessive form of retinitis pigmentosa was the cause. A brother and sister also have it. In the meantime, Jim worked for a year after graduation as a cowboy for a cattle and sheep rancher. Although he loves the outdoors, along with its wildlife and activities (he has since volunteered as a hunting safety instructor, among other things), he decided that herding cattle and sheep up and down mountainsides in all weather was not what he wanted for a full-time career.

Jim began his studies at the University of Montana intending to pursue a career in journalism, but his eyesight continued to deteriorate, and he eventually concluded, wrongly he now realizes, that journalism was not a realistic career path. (He has since written for *The Missoulian*, as well as for the *Braille Monitor* and other Federation publications.) Instead, he pursued degrees in history, philosophy, and ultimately elementary education. While he was volunteering as a teacher’s aide in order to demonstrate that his blindness did not affect his classroom skills, he learned that the school superintendent had commented to his supervising teacher, “I would like to hire Jim, but he is too expensive.” Jim understood this to mean that the official thought he would cost the school money to accommodate his blindness, and he responded to this discrimination by filing a grievance with the Montana Human Rights Commission that took five years to resolve. Years later, Jim would help to battle the same official on behalf of a blind student, Cody Greiser, and to chronicle Cody’s story in the *Braille Monitor* (<https://nfb.org/sites/default/files/images/nfb/publications/fr/fr16/issue4/f160407.htm>).

### A Career in Advocacy and Rehabilitation

With his teaching career derailed, as he saw it, Jim took a job with a center for independent living. He still respects the independent living movement, while contrasting it with our own by noting its tendency to focus on adapting the environment to people with disabilities rather than helping them to acquire skills to make their own adjustments. Individual success, he believes, usually involves blending both approaches.

In 1988, Jim became the director of the Disabled Student Services office at the University of Montana. He reflects that at the time he took the university job, there were perhaps 125 students with disabilities at the institution. He further observes that many offices like the one he ran are primarily intended to protect the school from discrimination lawsuits. Jim was instead determined to make systemic change, and he did so strategically throughout the twenty-one years he held the position. His secret weapon, he says, was the organization of disabled students that he helped to start. By encouraging the collective action of this group and actively collaborating with it, Jim was able to advance the rights of students with disabilities to the point where the University of Montana is now considered one of the most disability-friendly campuses in the country. Jim had learned the power of collective action and the focus on self-determination and independence from the Federation, and he used it to the advantage of his University of Montana students.

Jim’s outstanding work on behalf of students with disabilities led to his hiring as director of the state’s vocational rehabilitation agency in 2010. He had a mandate from his supervisor under the administration of then-Governor Brian Schweitzer to shake things up at the agency, and he proceeded to do so to the best of his considerable ability. His goal was getting rehabilitation counselors to focus less on how much money they should and shouldn’t spend and more on meeting the needs of their clients. He wrote about his work, and his perspectives on vocational rehabilitation and the power of collaborating with the Federation, in the May 2019 issue of the *Braille Monitor* (<https://nfb.org/sites/default/files/images/nfb/publications/bm/bm19/bm1905/bm190512.htm>).

Jim was able to make significant changes in the Montana VR program, but in 2017 a new, more budget-focused administration came into power, and he was a casualty of this political shift. Although he considered continuing his rehabilitation work in other states, he ultimately decided to stay rooted in Montana to be in the place and near the family he loved and took a job as program director with the Area IV Agency on Aging of the Rocky Mountain Development Council. Although this work is not specifically focused on blindness, Jim finds that Federation philosophy serves him well here, too. “There is a real need for older people to assert their self-determination and humanity,” he observes, and so he works to help his clients do just that.

### Leadership in the Federation

By the mid to late 1980s, Jim had encountered the National Federation of the Blind and gotten involved in the state affiliate, then known as the Montana Association for the Blind. He did not attend a national convention, however, until 1993. At that time, Recordings for the Blind (now Learning Ally) was testing a new electronic book reader, and Jim was hired to exhibit it. Then as now, the general sessions of the convention did not conflict with exhibit hall hours, so Jim’s natural curiosity and desire to grow in the movement found him in the Montana delegation. He particularly remembers Dr. Kenneth Jernigan giving his now-classic address “The Nature of Independence.” For Jim, this confirmed that the National Federation of the Blind was where he belonged as a blind man and an advocate. He held various roles in the Montana Association for the Blind over the years, including on its board of directors, and also served on the National Scholarship Committee, as he still does today. In 2012, the affiliate reorganized to become the National Federation of the Blind of Montana, and Jim was elected as its president a few years later.

### Looking Ahead

Jim, who now lives and works in Helena with his wife Kathy, is thrilled with both his old and new roles in the Federation. “There have been a lot of changes over the years,” he observes, “but I am liking the direction a lot. I appreciate the movement’s increasing diversity of people and perspectives. My own goal is to be a reliable partner as we continue to move forward.” Jim also plans to continue working for the foreseeable future, even as he enjoys time with his family, including four adult children and eight grandchildren. “I am not ready to rest yet,” he says. “I enjoy being able to say that I have made some difference in the world at the end of each day, and so I plan to continue doing it until I can’t.” Jim recognizes that he is perceived as a quiet man, joking that this comes from a cowboy ethos emphasizing that one should “never miss an opportunity to shut up.” More seriously, he strives to be a person of substance who does not speak unless he has a real contribution to make. The National Federation of the Blind is fortunate that we will continue to benefit from Jim’s quiet strength, thoughtful writing and speech, and tireless determination to improve the lives of blind people.

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[PHOTO CAPTION: Jamie Richey]

## Jamie Richey: Mother, Grandmother, Daughter, Sister, Aunt, and Child of God

Jamie Richey’s life as a blind person, educator, and leader exemplifies caring, community involvement, and a passion for paving the way for future generations, a beautiful template for a leader in the National Federation of the Blind. Born on August 10, 1982, in Oshkosh, Nebraska, Jamie grew up in a close-knit community that supported her through life’s transitions, including her adjustment to blindness.

### Childhood and Education

Jamie lost her vision at age twelve due to an allergic reaction to medication for pink eye. With the support of her family, particularly her mother, Geralyn, Jamie learned Braille alongside a local homeschool instructor who was equally new to it. From the onset of Jamie’s blindness, her mother has been what we so fondly call blind at heart, even now serving as a member of the National Federation of the Blind of Nebraska’s Board of Directors. Despite suggestions to send Jamie to a school for blind children seven hours away, her mother insisted she remain in her community, a decision Jamie deeply appreciates.

Her resource teacher’s dedication, learning Braille through a prison-based correspondence course, ensured Jamie’s seamless reintegration into public school. Jamie credits this early support and her mother’s philosophy of independence for preparing her for the challenges ahead.

### Professional Journey and Family Life

After graduating high school in 2000, Jamie pursued training at the Nebraska Center for the Blind and enrolled at the University of Nebraska, initially aspiring to teach fourth grade. However, after having her son Isaac, Jamie shifted to massage therapy, practicing for seventeen years until rheumatoid arthritis led her to focus on other endeavors.

Jamie’s career has included roles as an orientation counselor for the Nebraska Commission for the Blind, a position where she taught older adults blindness skills. She has also contributed significantly to the National Federation of the Blind (NFB), holding leadership roles at the chapter and state levels for over two decades. Jamie currently serves as president of the Nebraska affiliate and was recently elected to the NFB national board.

Jamie is married to Jeremy, who participates in the Business Enterprise Program (BEP), and together they manage a blended family of four adult children and two grandchildren.

### Leadership and Advocacy

Jamie’s commitment to the NFB began in 2000 when she attended her first state convention. Over the years, she has built a legacy of service, mentoring youth and organizing and participating in initiatives like the national Youth Slam and the NFB BELL® Academy in Nebraska.

In 2022, Jamie stepped in as interim executive director of BLIND, Inc., now the Minnesota Center for the Blind, during a transitional period. Though she received offers to relocate, Jamie remained steadfast in her commitment to Nebraska, where she feels deeply rooted.

### A Philosophy of Giving Back

Jamie’s dedication to the Federation stems from her desire to give back to an organization that provided her with independence and lifelong friendships. Her passion for mentoring young people drives her efforts to instill confidence, skills, and the Federation’s philosophy of blindness in the next generation.

### Personal Life and Interests

Jamie and her husband enjoy reading mysteries and Westerns, often sharing books as a couple. When not engaged in NFB activities, Jamie values time with family and friends, playing card games, fishing, and exploring new ideas through her diverse reading interests.

### Looking Ahead

As Jamie continues her work in the NFB, her focus remains on fostering opportunities for others and strengthening the community. Whether organizing events, mentoring youth, or guiding blind adults toward independence, Jamie embodies the Federation’s mission of equality and empowerment for blind people. Though she does not consider herself a natural writer, it is clear that she has the insight, depth, and the ability to relate to others that is so key to the kind of communication required in our dynamic movement. As fortunate as she may be to have found us, we are a significant beneficiary of the brain, heart, and soul that is represented in the name Jamie Richey.

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[PHOTO CAPTION: Tracy Soforenko]

## Kenneth Jernigan Convention Scholarship

**by Tracy Soforenko**

**From the Editor: Tracy is a member of our National Board of Directors and is the president of the National Federation of the Blind of Virginia. He is also the chairperson of the Kenneth Jernigan Fund Committee, and it is in this capacity that he writes:**

Have you always wanted to attend an annual National Federation of the Blind convention but have not done so because of the lack of funds? The Kenneth Jernigan Convention Scholarship Fund invites you to make an application for a scholarship grant. Perhaps this July you, too, can be in the Marriot New Orleans enjoying the many pleasures and learning opportunities at the largest and most important yearly convention of blind people in the world.

The three biggest ticket items you need to cover when attending an NFB national convention are the round-trip transportation, the hotel room for a week, and the food (which tends to be more expensive than at home). We attempt to award additional funds to families, but whether a family or an individual is granted a scholarship, this fund can only help; it won’t pay all the costs. In recent years, the grants have been $750 for individuals and $1,200 for families.

We recommend that you find an NFB member as your personal convention mentor, someone who has been to many national conventions and is able to share money-saving tips with you as well as tips on navigating the extensive agenda in the big hotel. Your mentor will help you get the most out of the amazing experience that is convention week.

### Who is Eligible?

Active members of the National Federation of the Blind, blind or sighted, who have not yet attended an in-person national convention because of lack of funding are eligible to apply. If you have attended a convention virtually but have never attended an in-person convention, you are still eligible to apply.

### How Do I Apply for Funding Assistance?

This year we will be accepting applications online. Since applications must be completed in a single session online, we strongly recommend that you prepare your responses in a document, and then cut and paste your responses into the application form. The application form does not support complex formatting, so we recommend avoiding features such as bullet points and different fonts or styles.

Effective January 1, 2025, the application form can be found at the following link: <https://nfb.org/form/convention-scholarship>.

The application will ask for the following information:

* Are you applying as an individual or a family?
* Contact information: Include your full name and both your primary phone where you can be contacted by your state president and your mobile phone you might use at convention, if available.
* Please include your mailing address and, if you have one, your email address. If you don’t have an email address, please consider whether there is a friend or chapter member who might be able to assist with email correspondence.
* State affiliate/chapter information: Include your state affiliate, your state president, chapter, and chapter president, if you attend a chapter.
* Mentor information: Include your personal convention mentor and provide that person’s phone number.
* Funding request: Include your specific request and explain how much money you need from this fund to make this trip possible for you. We suggest you consult with other members to make a rough budget for yourself.
* Essay questions to explain why this is a good investment for the NFB:
  + How do you currently participate in the Federation?
  + Why do you want to attend a national convention?
  + What would you receive?
  + What can you share or give?
  + Any special circumstances you hope the committee will take into consideration.

Please note that applicants must be eighteen years of age by the time of the convention or must be accompanied by a parent or guardian.

If you cannot apply online, you can still apply by writing a letter to your state affiliate president answering the above questions. This letter should be emailed to your state affiliate president. Once you have decided you will apply, please contact your state president in person or by phone to request their help in obtaining funding. Be sure to tell the state affiliate president when to expect that your application will be submitted and mention the deadline.

Once your application has been submitted, your application will be provided to your state president via email. It is still your responsibility to contact your affiliate president. They must email a president’s recommendation directly to the Kenneth Jernigan Convention Scholarship Fund Committee at [kjscholarships@nfb.org](mailto:kjscholarships@nfb.org). Your president must email the recommendation no later than the deadline of April 15, 2025. If you have applied outside of the online form, the state affiliate president must email both the recommendation and the application letter.

### Notification of Award

If you are chosen to receive this scholarship, you will receive a letter with convention details that should answer most of your questions. The committee makes every effort to notify winners by May 15, but you must do several things before that to be prepared to attend if you are chosen:

* Make your own hotel reservation. If something prevents you from attending, you can cancel the reservation. (Yes, you may arrange for roommates of your own to reduce the cost.)
* Register online for the entire convention, including the banquet, by May 31.
* Find someone in your chapter or affiliate who has been to many conventions and can answer your questions as a friend and mentor.
* If you do not hear from the committee by May 15, then you did not win a scholarship this year.

### Receiving the Award

At the convention, you will be given a debit card or credit card loaded with the amount of your award. The times and locations to pick up your card will be listed in the letter we send you. The committee is not able to provide funds before the convention, so work with your chapter and state affiliate to assist you by obtaining an agreement to advance funds if you win a scholarship, and to pay your treasury back after you receive your debit or credit card.

### More Information

For additional information, please contact the chairperson of the Kenneth Jernigan Fund Committee, Tracy Soforenko, at [kjscholarships@nfb.org](mailto:kjscholarships@nfb.org) or 410-659-9314, extension 2020.

Above all, please use this opportunity to attend your first convention on the national level and join several thousand active Federationists in the most important meeting of the blind in the world. We hope to see you in New Orleans.

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[PHOTO CAPTION: Everette Bacon]

## The 2025 Dr. Jacob Bolotin Awards

**by Everette Bacon**

**From the Editor: Everette Bacon is the second vice-president of the National Federation of the Blind and the affiliate president in Utah. He also chairs the Dr. Jacob Bolotin Award Committee. Here is his announcement about the 2025 Bolotin Awards program:**

The National Federation of the Blind is pleased to announce that applications are now being accepted for the Dr. Jacob Bolotin Awards. These prestigious awards, granted each year as funds permit, seek to honor initiatives, innovations, and individuals that are an exemplary positive force in the lives of blind people and advance the ultimate goal of helping them to live the lives they want. Award winners will be publicly recognized during the 2025 National Convention of the National Federation of the Blind in New Orleans. Each recipient will receive a cash award determined by the Dr. Jacob Bolotin Award Committee and will also be honored with an engraved medallion and plaque.

Dr. Jacob W. Bolotin (1888-1924) was a pioneering blind physician, the first in history to be born blind, who achieved that goal despite the tremendous challenges faced by blind people in his time. Not only did he realize his own dream; he went on to support and inspire many others in making their own dreams a reality. The awards which bear his name are supported in part by the Alfred and Rosalind Perlman Trust, left as a bequest by Dr. Bolotin’s late nephew and niece-in-law to the Santa Barbara Foundation and the National Federation of the Blind to present the annual cash awards.

As chronicled in his biography, *The Blind Doctor* by Rosalind Perlman, Dr. Bolotin fought ignorance and prejudice to gain entrance to medical school and the medical profession. He became one of the most respected physicians in Chicago during his career, which spanned the period from 1912 until his death in 1924. He was particularly known for his expertise in diseases of the heart and lungs. During his successful career, Dr. Bolotin used his many public speaking engagements to advocate for employment of the blind and the full integration of the blind into society. Interested in young people in general and blind youth in particular, Dr. Bolotin established the first Boy Scout troop consisting entirely of blind boys and served as its leader. Jacob Bolotin’s wife Helen had a sister whose husband died suddenly, leaving her to raise a son, Alfred Perlman. The Perlmans moved in with the Bolotins when Alfred was eleven, and for four years (until Jacob Bolotin’s untimely death at age thirty-six), “Uncle Jake” became Alfred’s surrogate father. Alfred later married Rosalind, and the couple worked on a book about Dr. Bolotin’s life. After Alfred’s death in 2001, Rosalind dedicated the rest of her life to completing and publishing the book, *The Blind Doctor: The Jacob Bolotin Story,* published by Blue Point Books, <http://www.west.net/~bpbooks/mhp.html>, with standard inkprint and large type editions available, and also available in digital audio format from the National Library Service for the Blind and Print Disabled (NLS) program.

Past award winners have:

1. Broken down barriers facing blind people in innovative ways.
2. Changed negative perceptions of blindness and blind people.
3. Pushed past existing boundaries to inspire blind people to achieve new heights.

### Award Description

In 2025 the National Federation of the Blind will again recognize individuals and organizations that have distinguished themselves in accordance with the criteria established to receive a Dr. Jacob Bolotin Award. The committee will determine both the number of awards and the value of each cash award presented. The Federation determines the total amount to be distributed each year based on income received from the trust supporting the award program. The award categories for each year are blind individuals; sighted individuals; and organizations, corporations, or other entities. Individuals may apply on their own behalf or may submit a third-party nomination, or the committee may also consider other individual or organizational candidates.

### Who Should Apply?

**Individuals:** Only individuals over eighteen years of age may be considered for a Dr. Jacob Bolotin Award. Applicants must demonstrate that they have shown substantial initiative and leadership in improving the lives of the blind. Examples of such initiative include but are not limited to developing products, technologies, or techniques that increase the independence of the blind; directing quality programs or agencies for the blind; or mentoring other blind people. All individual applicants or third-party applicants nominating other individuals must demonstrate that the work to be recognized has been conducted within the twelve months preceding the application and/or that the work is continuing. Applications by or on behalf of individuals must include at least one letter of recommendation from a person familiar with or directly affected by the work to be recognized.

**Organizations:** Organizations may apply for a Dr. Jacob Bolotin Award in order to further programs, services, technology, or techniques of unique and outstanding merit that have assisted and will continue to assist the blind. Applications from third parties nominating an organization will also be considered. The organization category includes for-profit or nonprofit corporations or organizations or other entities, such as a specific division within an organization. Organizations or third-party applicants must demonstrate that the programs or services to be recognized include substantial participation by blind people as developers, mentors, administrators, or executives and not merely as clients, consumers, or beneficiaries. For example, an organization operating a program for blind youth might demonstrate that a substantial number of the counselors, teachers, or mentors involved in the program are blind. The organization or third-party applicant must demonstrate that it has substantially aided blind people within the twelve months prior to application and that an award would support efforts to build on previous successes. The application must also include at least one testimonial from a blind person who has benefited substantially from the programs or services.

To qualify for an award, both individuals and organizations must provide programs, services, or benefits to blind people in the United States of America.

### Procedures

More information, including an online application, can be found on the National Federation of the Blind website at <https://nfb.org/bolotin>.

Online submission of nominations, letters of support, and other relevant materials is strongly encouraged, but applications sent by mail and postmarked by the deadline will also be accepted. The 2025 deadline for application submission is April 15, and recipients chosen by the committee will be individually notified of their selection no later than May 15. Receipt of all complete applications will be acknowledged, but only those applicants chosen to receive an award will be notified of their selection. All decisions of the Dr. Jacob Bolotin Award Committee are final.

The awards will be presented in July during the annual convention of the National Federation of the Blind. Individuals selected to receive an award must appear in person, not send a representative. Organizations may send an individual representative, preferably their chief executive officer. Recipient candidates must confirm that they will appear in person to accept the award at the National Federation of the Blind annual convention. Failure to confirm attendance for the award presentation by June 1 will result in forfeiture of the award.

### Ineligible Persons

Those employed full-time by the National Federation of the Blind may not apply for a Dr. Jacob Bolotin Award for work performed within the scope of their employment. Students may not apply for both a Dr. Jacob Bolotin Award and a National Federation of the Blind Scholarship in the same year.

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## *Monitor* Miniatures

### News from the Federation Family

#### Brown, Goldstein & Levy Proudly Announces a New Era of Leadership

**From the Editor: Many readers know that the Baltimore law firm Brown, Goldstein & Levy LLP has long represented the National Federation of the Blind in legal cases, with an outstanding record of success. Its founding partner Daniel F. Goldstein took the lead on our cases from the mid-1980s until his retirement. Currently one of its attorneys, Eve Hill, serves as the organization’s general counsel. Recently the firm put out the press announcement below about a change in its leadership. We reprint it here because both of the attorneys mentioned have also been heavily involved in representing the Federation and blind people, so we thought our readers would like to know the news. Here is what the firm had to say:**

Brown, Goldstein & Levy has announced that Managing Partner Sharon Krevor-Weisbaum will retire at the end of 2024, and BGL Partner Jessie Weber will become the firm’s next managing partner.

Sharon started working at Brown, Goldstein & Levy as a law clerk in her second year of law school when BGL had two partners, two associates, and a few staff members. In 2000, Sharon returned to BGL after eleven years at the Office of the Attorney General of Maryland. In January 2016, she became the firm’s first Managing Partner. Today, BGL has twenty-two attorneys practicing in a variety of areas from commercial litigation to civil rights to criminal defense, all supported by a very strong professional staff.

Jessie Weber joined BGL thirteen years ago, following a clerkship with the Honorable Catherine C. Blake and a year as the Francis D. Murnaghan Jr. Appellate Advocacy Fellow at the Public Justice Center. Jessie’s law practice primarily focuses on civil rights and workers’ rights, exemplifying the firm’s commitment to bringing about a more just world, sometimes one dispute at a time, and sometimes through systemic change.

Sharon spent her early career as an attorney at the Office of the Attorney General of Maryland. Her experience there gave her knowledge, perspective, and relationships that fueled her return to BGL. She has worked with a wide range of clients but is best known for her work on behalf of individuals with disabilities and her passionate and forceful representation of non-profit and for-profit entities that provide support and services to individuals with disabilities.

Sharon has guided BGL to continued growth and success, while balancing her own active practice, family life, and significant volunteer work with several Maryland non-profits and the Maryland State Bar Association.

“I love what I do and what my colleagues and I have accomplished on behalf of our clients. I am very proud of the culture and quality of legal services that Brown, Goldstein & Levy provides. I have complete confidence in Jessie, who is one of the most special people I know and has all the qualities needed to move BGL forward.”

Jessie Weber is a tenacious litigator who enjoys both advocating for her clients in court and working to build consensus at the negotiating table. She is known nationally for her groundbreaking work obtaining equal access for individuals with disabilities to voting, education, websites, and government information and services.

Jessie has obtained significant judgments and settlements for clients in cases involving civil rights (including disability and LGBTQ rights) and employment law (including wage and hour cases). Jessie is also an experienced appellate litigator and has argued before the Fourth, Sixth, Ninth, and D.C. Circuit Courts of Appeals.

Jessie has served on the boards of the ACLU of Maryland and FreeState Justice, Maryland’s statewide LGBTQ equality group. She is currently Disability Rights Maryland’s board president and is a permanent member of the Fourth Circuit Judicial Conference. She attended Princeton University and received her J.D. from Yale Law School.

“Sharon’s leadership has set a high bar, but I am surrounded by an extraordinarily talented and passionate team of attorneys and professional staff who are well positioned to ensure our success. I look forward to leading Brown, Goldstein & Levy into its next chapter.”

### *Monitor* Mart

**The notices in this section have been edited for clarity, but we can pass along only the information we were given. We are not responsible for the accuracy of the statements made or the quality of the products for sale.**

For sale: I have a Freedom Scientific Focus 40 fifth generation I’d like to sell. It has never left my desk, so it is in fantastic shape. It comes with manuals in Braille and print, and I’m asking $1,800. If interested, call Colleen Roth at 419-661-9171.

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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.