Issue 5 Volume 2

February 2019

**In This Issue**:

NFB Pledge

Meeting Announcements

Membership Dues

Making Transit and Travel Accessible

Washington Seminar

State Convention

National Convention

**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.

**Meeting Announcements**

Our next meeting will be Saturday, February 9, from 9:30 a.m.-12:00 p.m. We meet at The Fountains of Melbourne, 4451 Stack Blvd., Melbourne, FL, 32901.

Anyone needing transportation, please call Maria Rigogliosi, (321) 795-7376, no later than Tuesday, February 5. This is to ensure you are placed on the list for transportation.

As a reminder, Space Coast Area Transit charges a fare of $1.50 each way, for a total of $3.00. Drivers are unable to make change. Fare cards may be purchased by contacting SCAT at (321) 635-7815. The phone menu options have changed, so please follow the prompts. Fare cards cost $15.00, which provide 10 one-way trips.

We will have a 50/50 raffle at our next meeting. Each ticket costs $1. Please come with your energy, bright minds and compassion for the blind.

**Membership Dues**

If you have not paid your dues for 2019, please bring it to our chapter meeting. Annual dues are $10. Members will receive a special gift from the National Federation of the Blind. Membership in the Melbourne Space Coast Chapter entitles you to membership in the National Federation of the Blind. Your dues help defray the cost of printing our monthly newsletter, our meeting space and other benefits. Make checks payable to: Melbourne Space Coast Chapter or pay via cash. You may also send your dues to:

Melbourne Space Coast Chapter

P. O. Box 120311

Melbourne, FL 32912

**Making Transportation and Travel Accessible**

The Melbourne Space Coast Chapter has worked ceasesly on the transportation needs of its members and the wider world of the blind and disabled in Brevard County. We have written emails, made phone calls and attended various meetings regarding transportation. This is an endeavor that will continue. However, transportation is and should not be our only concern. The ability to navigate our community and safely access bus stops is just as important.

As a blind traveler in Brevard, I, your president, have noticed many areas that need improvement. The ability of the blind to use the bus stops in many parts of the county is limited due to the location and condition of these stops.

The National Federation of the Blind does not work only for those who are its members, but the wider community of the blind and low vision, who may not even know we exist. Advocating for future members who may join us or who have not yet been born is also a driving facet of our organization. Whether or not you as an individual make use of the fixed route system and therefore, the bus stops, does not mean you cannot be part of the work put into those projects.

There is a troubling statistic regarding our county’s bus stops. SCAT makes every effort to find and fix crumbling, worn down bus stops. The truth is the sheer volume is hard to keep up with. There are over 940 stops throughout Brevard County and only approximately 4% are deemed to be accessible by the standards of the Americans with Disabilities Act. It is difficult to inspect, document and fund projects to correct the problems. Some of these issues may involve placement of signage, broken seats and shelters or lack of access for wheelchairs. Other issues, that may not technically involve the bus stop itself, include too narrow sidewalks, crumbling or uneven pavers on sidewalks or stops located in front of ditches or on grass.

Many of these issues and more preclude the blind and other disabled passengers from safely accessing bus stops or even walking down the street. Many stops and sidewalks were built pre-ADA and must be updated to reflect guidelines set forth in that Act.

The members of the Melbourne Space Coast Chapter will be evaluating a report released by an outside consultant who conducted an ADA Accessibility and Compliance Report for SCAT. Our goal will be to determine what, if anything, we can do to help correct the situation.

Please stay tuned for further information regarding this report and any actions we may take to assist SCAT in making our use of the bus stops safe for all of us. In addition, we will begin to assess the problems of bus stop locations, unsafe sidewalks and unsafe crosswalks. Although this involves another agency, the Transportation Planning Organization, we will contact and meet with anyone who will resolve these issues.

**Washington Seminar**

The National Federation of the Blind will descend on Capitol Hill January 29-30, to work on our 2019 Legislative priorities. Our push for legislation to further the economic opportunities and civil rights of blind Americans begins with a trek through the halls of Congress. This year, the National Federation of the Blind of Florida is sending eight members of our affiliate to represent Florida. The 2019 Florida delegation includes: Denise Valkema, Marry Schoch, Camille Tate, Jorge Hernandez, Doug Ingram, Tamika Butts, Yvonne Rosanelli and Debbi Malone. Our delegates represent North, Central and South Florida. We are pleased to announce that four of our delegates are first time attendees of Washington Seminar. Each have pledged to work with the Legislative Committee for a period of one year, following their appointment to the delegation.

We have three priorities this year designed to bring greater access to blind individuals and improve opportunities for employment. Access and employment are driving factors in the advocacy work of the National Federation of the Blind. Please see a brief synopsis of this year’s priorities.

* Access Technology Affordability Act (ATAA): This is a familiar bill to many. ATAA was part of our 2018 Legislative priorities. We garnered much support in the House of Representatives. Our national office made some changes to the bill that we hope will gain more support. To recap, ATAA is a bill that will provide a refundable tax credit of up to $2000, to be used over a three-year period. This is lower than the original amount of $2500. Additionally, the bill will sunset after five years. Sunsetting means that the bill will expire at the end of its term, i.e., five years. The importance of ATAA cannot be overstressed. 71% of blind Americans are either unemployed or underemployed. Lack of access to adequate assistive technology often stands in the way of our ability to gain or maintain employment. This bill allows us to purchase assistive technology, like screen readers or braille devices, so we do not have to wait on public or private agencies to provide them. Such a delay in obtaining equipment necessary for us to be viable candidates for jobs can mean the difference between employability and relying on Social Security.
* Greater Accessibility and Independence Through Non-Visual Access Technology (GAIN): Although the full title of this bill is quite long, its impact can last a lifetime. Advances in digital interfaces are creating barriers between blind people and our ability to safely and independently operate devices that are essential to a healthy life. Home use medical devices, home appliances and exercise equipment are increasingly inaccessible due to flat panel and digital touch interfaces. Think of it like this: a diabetic uses a glucose monitor that has text to speech technology, but the newer ones on the market are all digital. How are we supposed to use a device that no longer speaks? How do we use a device that requires a finger swipe to operate when we cannot hear where to swipe? Home appliances, such as microwaves, stoves, washers and the like may only be usable with a flat screen, with no indication of where to press to start. These are some of the examples of the widening gap between independence for blind people and the ability to safely use these devices. This bill will allow the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and Federal Trade Commission (FTC) to enforce accessibility laws granted under the Americans with Disabilities Act to make sure these products and devices are accessible to the blind.
* Disability Employment Act (DEA): As previously stated, 71% of blind Americans are either unemployed or underemployed. This bill will level the playing field for disabled employees to work in an environment that has the necessary equipment to allow those individuals to be competitive in an ever-growing technological society. It also, over time, stops the practice of paying disabled employees sub-minimum wages. When the Federally Sheltered workspace began with the passage of the Randolph-Shepard Act in 1938, the expectation was these jobs would prepare and integrate the disabled into a prevailing wage work environment. Unfortunately, these programs have lost sight of this mandate and disabled employees often stagnate and become trapped in sub-minimum wage jobs. This bill phases out that practice.

As evidenced above, the National Federation of the Blind works diligently to bring blind individuals into equal, first-class citizenship. Each and every one of us deserves to live our lives as our founding fathers intended…to have life, liberty and pursue happiness (although the original wording meant property and not happiness-we want that too). Stay tuned for our requests for you all to make a phone call, send an email, write a letter or visit your Congressional Representative.

**State Convention**

The National Federation of the Blind of Florida’s annual convention is over Memorial Day weekend, May 24-27, 2019. The convention is being held at the Embassy Suites, 661 N. W. 53rd Avenue, Boca Raton, Florida. The hotel is well constructed and easy to navigate. Room rates are $99 per night, plus tax. There is a Manager’s Reception each night from 5:30-7:30 and breakfast is included.

Our annual state conventions are vitally important to maintaining our affiliate in Florida. It is at convention that you elect leaders (President, 1st and 2nd Vice President, Secretary, Treasurer and the four Board members). Each year, elections are staggered so only a portion of the board is elected at the same time. As a current paid member of the National Federation of the Blind of Florida, you also vote on any resolutions (policy statements of the National Federation of the Blind of Florida). This is the one time each year that divisions may meet face-to-face. You can mix and mingle with other members of the National Federation of the Blind of Florida or the National Federation of the Blind that you otherwise may not see regularly. Renew old acquaintances or make new friends. Taking a walk through the exhibit hall may show you new products available for purchase. Last and certainly not least, come and learn what your affiliate has been doing since the last convention to further the work of the Federation.

If you are planning to attend our state convention, please make your plans as early as possible. To help with the room expenses, find those you are comfortable sharing a room with. Each hotel room, whether king-sized or double, comes with a pull-out couch. If two couples want to share, the double rooms can sleep four, plus an additional person on the pull-out sofa.

Registration and banquet fees have not yet been set by the state board. Once they have, we will inform all of you. The MSCC board has decided we will cover registration fees only at this time. If you are interested in attending state convention in 2019, please let Camille Tate know and you will be placed on the list. Per board decision, fees will not be paid in advance. They will be reimbursed following the convention.

**National Convention**

The National Federation of the Blind will hold its annual convention at the Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino in Las Vegas, Nevada. The dates are Sunday, July 7, through Friday, July 12.

As with state conventions, our national convention is extremely important. Members have the opportunity to hear what our National Office has been doing since the last convention. You will meet new friends in blindness and renew old acquaintances. The exhibit hall is full of vendors, state affiliates and national divisions, all showcasing exciting products, news from their divisions and goodies from each state.

The room rate is $99 per night, plus taxes; the hotel tax is 13.38% and sales tax is 8.25%. You will be required to leave a deposit in the amount of one night’s reservation, with 50% refundable if you cancel by June 1. Call the Mandalay Bay Resort and Casino to reserve your room at (877) 632-9001. The resort fee has been waived for the NFB National Convention. Reservations can be made after January 1, 2019. Please make sure to advise the reservationist that you are booking a room for the NFB Convention to ensure you receive the special room rate. It does not matter if you reserve a single, double, triple or quad; the price remains the same.

Registration and banquet fees have not yet been released for the 2019 National Convention. Everyone will be advised once those rates are available.

The MSCC board has decided we will reimburse members for registration fees only at this time. Attendees will be reimbursed following the convention. If you are interested in attending, please let Camille Tate know and you will be placed on the list. Deadlines for registration will be released at a later date.

**The National Federation of the Blind knows that blindness is not the characteristic that defines you or your future. Everyday we raise the expectations of blind people, because low expectations create obstacles between blind people and our dreams. You can live the life you want; blindness is not what holds you back.**