Subject: **Appropriation for the Center of Excellence** **in Nonvisual Access (CENA) to Education, Public Information, and Commerce**

From: Members of the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland

To: Members of the Maryland General Assembly

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**PROPOSED ACTION:**

The Maryland General Assembly should maintain the $250,000 appropriation for the Nonvisual Accessibility Initiative (NVAI) in the Governor’s Budget to support the Center of Excellence in Nonvisual Accessibility (CENA) to Education, Public Information, and Commerce.

**BACKGROUND:**

In 2014, the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) founded the NFB Center of Excellence in Nonvisual Accessibility (CENA) as a center of expertise, best practices, and resources that enable business, government, and educational institutions to provide accessible information and services effectively to blind citizens. The State of Maryland, through the Maryland Department of Disabilities (MDOD), partners with the CENA to support a series of projects under the NVAI, maintaining the state of Maryland as an ongoing leader in nonvisual accessibility.

The public-private partnership between the NFB CENA and MDOD continues to improve the standard of accessibility throughout the state, and our collaboration will continue to build a more accessible Maryland through the development and implementation of a variety of projects within the following five focus areas.

## Enhancing Access to Education Technology and Strategies

Inaccessible instructional materials prevent blind and low-vision students from accessing the fundamental tools of education. Maryland's Education Code Section 7-910 requires that local school systems and the state's Department of Education (DOE) provide students with disabilities equivalent access to digital tools, emphasizing nonvisual access and aligns with Section 508 IT standards. CENA staff worked with MDOD staff and the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) to develop an easy to digest document that outlines strategies that school administrators can use for accessible software procurement. Along with this document, the CENA staff developed training modules for MSDE staff members that explains the basics of accessibility, procurement, and the laws that outlines and demonstrates the correct way to incorporate accessibility into their teaching methods and classroom software. With continued funding, CENA staff will support MSDE by providing edited recordings, answering questions from MSDE staff via email and phone, and continue to develop future training for MSDE staff. Moreover, CENA staff will conduct an environmental scan of technology and strategies used to provide access to instructional materials.

## Enhance Access to Employment-Related Tools and Services

The unemployment/underemployment rate for blind people in this country continues to exceed 70 percent, and the need to utilize more online, digital, and virtual means of providing employment services and supports has created both problems and opportunities. Under the NVAI, CENA staff has worked in coordination with the Maryland State Department of Labor and Department of Rehabilitation Services to develop and implement a training module for American Job Center (AJC) staff to be better able to enhance MD job seekers with disabilities to access the public employment programs and services, and create greater employment opportunities. CENA staff will conduct outreach to MD employers in an effort to provide training and support to eliminate employment barriers faced by blind and low-vision Maryland citizens.

## Offering Accessibility Boutiques and Other Training Seminars

Accessibility Boutiques are one to two-hour basic overviews/trainings designed to create public awareness about accessible software, products, services, and strategies. Quarterly Trainings are half-day trainings that offer a more substantive training experience to the participants and address major issues related to nonvisual accessibility. The CENA/MDOD will continue to offer Accessibility Boutiques and Quarterly Trainings, at no cost to Maryland citizens, on topics that assist both laymen and professionals to remain knowledgeable of the evolving tools, strategies, and best practices to build a more accessible Maryland.

## Assisting with the Integration of Smart Technologies for Accessible Cities

The development and implementation of accessible, safe, affordable, and efficient transportation allows blind and low-vision Maryland citizens to independently travel throughout their communities. In addition, emerging nonvisual access navigation or wayfinding technologies facilitate independent access to a variety of public and commercial venues, including college campuses, public and commercial buildings, and other environments. CENA staff has evaluated and collaborated with a number of indoor wayfinding technology vendors that use a variety of methods for providing information about the indoor environment including Bluetooth beacons, existing Wi-Fi infrastructure, and camera-based navigation to name a few. CENA will develop and deliver a report outlining the current wayfinding technologies, their strengths and weaknesses, infrastructure impact, and other relevant data, which will then be disseminated to interested institutions.

## Coordinating the Accessibility Inclusion Fellowship Program

The “Final Report of the Study on Accessibility Concepts in Computer Science, Information Systems and Information Technology Programs in Higher Education” recommended that three annual fellowships be awarded to help instructors begin to include accessibility concepts contained within the minimum areas of instruction in at least one course offering in their institution. The CENA/MDOD has offered these fellowships and will continue to recruit and support an additional cohort in the coming year.

**CONCLUSION**

Access to information remains one of the greatest barriers faced by blind people. The public-private partnership between the NFB CENA and MDOD continues to be an effective method of removing these barriers by providing information about best practices and developing innovative techniques for achieving nonvisual access. The Maryland General Assembly should allow this exemplary partnership to continue by approving the $250,000 appropriation in the Governor’s Budget under the Maryland Department of Disabilities.