**Additional Information to Keep In Mind**

**The following information is provided to offer a window into the things we find important. No specific legislation is connected to these pieces of information, but we would ask that you keep these priorities in mind as the legislative session progresses.**

**Accessible Voting In All Elections**

The Help America Vote Act (HAVA) recognizes the right of the blind to vote privately and independently by requiring nonvisual access for the blind through the use of accessible voting systems in all federal elections. Electronic voting technologies, designed and properly configured with nonvisual access, provide blind voters with the ability to cast their votes privately and independently and to verify, without sighted assistance, that their ballots accurately reflect their voting choices. Electronic voting systems were certified and purchased, and Missouri received federal funds for each polling place to provide at least one accessible voting machine. All certified machines in Missouri provide a paper trail.

The Missouri Secretary of State’s Office is evaluating newer machines that mark directly onto the paper ballot. The options are there if legislation to make the paper ballot the official ballot of Missouri is passed. The work of the Secretary of State will also be invaluable when the existing machines need to be replaced.

Accessible machines are already required for the state to comply with HAVA. Some election boards may set these machines up more frequently than others. We ask that they be used consistently in all elections. The cost of setting them up should be minimal since “text to speech” options are available. Concerted efforts are made to get voters to the polls; Missouri should assure that when they arrive, they have the means to cast their ballots privately and independently.

Beyond the example and financial assistance HAVA has provided to emphasize accessible voting, there are two federal laws that require all elections to be accessible to bring Missouri into compliance. Voters with disabilities have the same right to vote privately and independently as do voters without disabilities. When accessible voting machines are not present in state, county, and municipal elections, blind, visually impaired, and other print disabled voters are denied an equal opportunity to cast their ballot privately and independently. This is a violation of Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. As a recipient of federal funds, Missouri and our Election Boards are required to comply with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act.

Additionally, the Americans with Disabilities Act guarantees equal access for individuals with disabilities to the benefits of the services, programs, or activities of a public entity. Public entities must provide individuals with disabilities an aid, benefit, or service that is as effective in affording equal opportunity to gain the same result or benefit as provided to others. Public entities shall furnish appropriate auxiliary aids and services where necessary to afford individuals with disabilities an equal opportunity to participate in and enjoy the benefits of a service, program, or activity of a public entity. To be effective, the auxiliary aids and services must be provided in such a way as to protect the privacy and independence of the individual with a disability.

Whether the financial responsibility falls on the State of Missouri or the County Election Boards is a technicality that must not continue to preclude the full participation of blind, visually impaired, or other Missourians with disabilities who could benefit from the use of accessible voting equipment. Please assert due diligence in regard to bridging the gap that has prevented this legislation from passing in the past, and grant people with disabilities the opportunity and the right afforded us to have the same privilege in every election that you value and take for granted as your right as a citizen of Missouri and of the United States of America.

**Salary Range for Rehabilitation Services for the Blind Counselors**

The National Federation of the Blind is a strong proponent of education and training as the doorway to fulfilling the dream of living the lives we want. The Vocational Rehabilitation counselors working for Rehabilitation Services for the Blind are a valuable asset contributing to the success of blind Missourians. Unfortunately, the salary paid these valuable men and women is markedly less than the Vocational Rehabilitation counselors for those with other disabilities who work for the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation.

For years, Rehabilitation Services for the Blind has had a problem attracting and keeping highly qualified counselors with a Master’s Degree and a level of experience that translates into quality, competent, dedicated, and effective counselors. The National Federation of the Blind of Missouri has encouraged raising the pay of RSB counselors to the same salary range as their VR counterparts. This will result in the recruitment and retention of highly motivated and empathetic professionals. Regrettably our suggestions have gone unheeded, and as a result, the recruitment and retention of qualified rehabilitation professionals continues to be a problem.

Missouri already has a template of salary ranges for equivalent positions as identified through the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education’s Division of Vocational Rehabilitation. It is just common sense that those doing the same kind of job should reap the same reward. We urge you to explore this issue and collaborate with your colleagues to find an equitable solution to this injustice that results in the lack of acquisition and retention of individuals who will help blind Missourians to navigate from their dreams to living the life we want. It is important to note that Missouri’s Vocational Rehabilitation counselors through Rehabilitation Services for the blind are performing at a quantitively successful level. The employment retention rate of Missouri clients of Rehabilitation Services for the Blind is higher than anywhere else in the country. If we want to continue this success and demonstrate appreciation for the dedication and hard work that these counselors competently demonstrate, we must consider the value of paying these individuals a rate equivalent to their counterparts in Vocational Rehabilitation.

**Safe Travel**

Missouri has recognized October 15th as White Cane Safety Day. The resolutions attached to this day acknowledge the importance of the blind to use a white cane or dog guide as necessary tools to safe and competent navigation. The National Federation of the Blind of Missouri has been increasingly receiving reports of issues related to distracted drivers who are not yielding for pedestrians using white canes or dog guides. Something needs to be done to consistently reinforce the laws that are already in place to protect the health and well being of blind pedestrians. Between the lack of consistent enforcement and the inadequate severity of punishment, many drivers are ignoring what should be common sense, and too many blind people are experiencing near misses or being struck by cars. We believe that the legislature has the responsibility and the ability to implement changes to address the increasing issues faced due to distracted drivers and the failure of drivers to learn the necessity of yielding to those using a white cane or dog guide.