LEGISLATIVE AGENDA OF BLIND MISSOURIANS

PRESENTED TO

THE FIRST SESSION OF THE ONE HUNDRED AND SECOND

GENERAL ASSEMBLY

From: The National Federation of the Blind of Missouri

Date: February 6 and 7, 2023

The National Federation of the Blind knows that blindness is not the characteristic that defines us or our future. Every day we raise the expectations of blind people because low expectations create obstacles between blind people and our dreams. Blindness is not what holds us back.

This is the message we bring to blind Missourians and the communities we live in. We pledge to be a resource to you and your constituents when they turn to you for help.

The National Federation of the Blind is a membership organization of and for the blind. As a volunteer, grassroots organization, we are blind people working on behalf of blind people. We come together on the local, state, and national level to address issues of importance to our fellow blind citizens. We promote programs that encourage self-determination, independence, and equality of opportunity.

**Blind Pension Legislation**

HB 510, sponsored by Representative Griffith has one simple but essential function, to remove the word certified from the law regarding correspondence with blind pension recipients. The well-intentioned insertion of the word certified has caused significant expense to the state as well as to blind recipients who are often forced to go to the post office to pick up mail that would otherwise be found in their box. Not only is this an unnecessary expense; it reduces the time blind pension recipients have to fill out the yearly recertification required and has caused a number of blind people to be terminated and subsequently reinstated, again at significant cost to the state of Missouri and its blind residents who receive the pension. Therefore, HB 510 seeks to remove the word certified from the laws governing Blind Pension. Many blind Missourians have experienced significant issues due to the certified mail requirement, and that is why the National Federation of the Blind of Missouri strongly supports this legislation as presented.

**Accessible Medication Labeling**

Taking medication as prescribed is an essential aspect of remaining healthy. This chore is one that can become extremely challenging at best and can result in medication errors that result in critical illness and even death if the wrong medication is taken. Many people that are blind rely on the shape and size of medication bottles, the type of lid on the bottle, the size and shape of the medication itself and the feeling of the inscription or split lines on the medication. The problem with this method is that bottles can remain the same size with similar lids for months or years, and suddenly, either the manufacturer or the pharmacy changes it up for whatever reason. A pill that is small and squared may have a brand that is more economical for the pharmacy that produces this pill in a larger oblong format. Some brands of medications are solid caplets while others are capsules. With all of this in mind, it is not a far stretch to see how this could become problematic if you could not read the label. There is technology available to create labels that provide an audible output as well as Braille and large print. This technology requires pharmacy staff to run the medication bottles through a label maker based on the end user’s mode of accessibility. Many pharmacies may not want to offer the accessibility if there is another pharmacy within 25 miles. This becomes problematic for those without access to transportation that will take the person to the pharmacy that offers this level of accessibility. Other states have legislatively addressed this issue based on the desire for businesses within their state to become compliant with the ADA and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. We believe this issue is of great importance and would welcome the opportunity to work with you on HB812.

We ask you to support this legislation and help us enhance the health and safety of all Missourians or to support any legislation that moves forward with these important provisions. We believe that this is a non-partisan issue that fundamentally improves the lives of many Missourians.

**Accessible Voting In All Elections**

The National Federation of the Blind believes that the ability to cast a private ballot securely and independently is a sacred promise allowed to every American through our constitution. We understand that discussions must be had related to voting. It is in the spirit of this understanding that we are not promoting or opposing any specific piece of legislation. We are, however, re-stating our position on the imperativeness of accessible voting for all of us. Below, we discuss the reasons behind our assertions and ask that, as you debate voting legislation throughout the session, you keep in mind how sacred your vote counting is to you. You will better understand our positions and the value we place on casting a ballot independently and privately.

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. Legislation was passed in last year’s general session to make the paper ballot the official ballot of Missouri, and. Thus, it is imperative that accessibility is in the forefront of all discussions relating to implementation of this piece of legislation. 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 regarding 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.