**Additional Information of Importance**

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.

**CONTINUED SUPPORT OF THE RIVER RUNNER AMTRAK LINE**

Many Missourians depend on this mode of transportation to commute to and from Jefferson City. When the funding was cut and access to this imperative point of transportation caused hardship for many people, it became even more apparent as to how imperative this service is to our lives. It is our wish that you keep this in mind as the session progresses. For people who are blind, the loss of this service resulted in much more than the simple inconvenience of having to drive themselves. Depending on the time of the meeting, what could have been accomplished in one day or with one night in a hotel quickly escalated to the requirement of a two-night stay. As you could imagine, this created a significant hardship. So, we ask you to keep this in mind as budget discussions progress. There has been discussion of adding additional trains and expanding the route to include Springfield. We believe this would be great for many Missourians and would encourage you to explore this option with the needs of all Missourians in mind.

**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 Awareness Day. The resolutions attached to this day acknowledge the importance of the blind to use a white cane or guide dog 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 guide dogs. 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 guide dog.

Last year, distracted driving legislation was implemented that addresses fines for people that are using devices while driving. We believe this will improve some aspects of safety. However, we feel that more should be done to increase the expectation of drivers to be mindful of the need to watch out for those that are traveling with a white cane or guide dog.

The Right of Equal Pay for Equal Work

HB1436 sponsored by Representative Gallick seeks to modify the use of funds by county Developmental Disability boards funded through county tax levies. If enacted, this bill would make it mandatory for these essential entities to primarily use their funds for sheltered workshops. This would eliminate the good work that many of these boards do for those served in their counties. The National Federation of the Blind believes in equal pay for equal work. We are opposed to subminimum wage and believe that this bill is just one more encouragement of Missouri businesses that have the legal loophole to pay employees less than a dollar per hour. We ask you to oppose any legislation that encourages subminimum wage.