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The National Federation of the Blind of Oklahoma Response to HB1895 2023

The National Federation of the Blind of Oklahoma is the transformative membership and advocacy organization of blind people in Oklahoma. Through our network of blind members, we coordinate many programs, services, and resources to defend the rights of blind Oklahomans, provide information and support to blind children and adults, and build a community that creates a future full of opportunities. We believe in blind people because we *are* blind people—from the majority of our members to our democratically elected leaders.

Oklahoma House Bill 1895 (2023) profoundly threatens the livelihoods of blind and otherwise disabled business owners whose businesses operate in connection with the Randolph Sheppard Act and its state mirror, 7 O.S. 4 § 71 et seq. (2022). This threat exists because the proposed legislation exempts county facilities from honoring the statutory requirement that they prioritize contracts with such business owners as has been done for decades.

- Oklahoma has a minimum of eleven blind vendors who operate at county facilities and would be immediately harmed by this legislation, with many more to be harmed in the near future. These are not lives to ruin lightly.
- 70.5% of blind people are unemployed nation-wide. In Oklahoma, estimates put that number closer to 90%.
- An additional 18% of blind Americans are under-employed, meaning they work, but make so little that they still need to collect government benefits to get by.
- In contrast, the prioritization provisions and current exemptions within 7 O.S. 4 § 73 have created literally hundreds of jobs for blind Oklahomans in the past ten years alone.
- The Randolph Sheppard Act has created one of the greatest employment programs of blind Oklahomans, and weakening it now would force even more blind people into the more than 88.5% who struggle to make ends meet.

We urge you to vote no on House Bill 1895. Now is not the time to push the blind back into the shadows. Neither this great state of Oklahoma nor its veterans will be made stronger by weakening its people with disabilities. On the contrary, Oklahoma's strength comes from its long tradition of overcoming adversity to dedicate oneself to hard work. We urge you not to have a hand in taking that opportunity away from us. Vote no on HB1895.

Respectfully,
Sanho Steele-Louchart, President
National Federation of the Blind of Oklahoma