**MEMORANDUM**

To: The Members of the Colorado General Assembly

From: The Members of the National Federation of the Blind of Colorado

Date: January 14, 2016

Re: Legislative Concerns of Blind Citizens

**GENERAL BACKGROUND**

The National Federation of the Blind (NFB) is the oldest and largest organization of the blind in the United States and in Colorado. The primary mission of the Federation is to allow the blind to live the lives they want in all areas of life from ensuring basic civil rights to securing employment and education for the blind. Founded officially in 1955, the NFB of Colorado engages in a number of programs specifically designed to create greater opportunities for the blind. For example, the Federation is the chief sponsor of the Colorado Center for the Blind. The Colorado Center provides training in the alternative skills blind people need to become fully participating members of society. Additionally, NFB offers national and statewide scholarships. We also provide a free talking newspaper called NFB-NEWSLINE® which allows the blind of our state to read the daily newspaper just as easily as their sighted peers. We advocate for the rights of the blind in all areas ranging from education to employment. Where positive changes are happening in the blindness field, there is a good chance that the Federation is involved.

**2016 LEGISLATIVE AGENDA**

First, we wish to express publicly our sincerest gratitude for the work performed by the 2015 Interim Study Committee on Vocational Rehabilitation Services for the Blind under the leadership of Representative Jessie Danielson (Chair), Senator David Balmer (Vice-Chair), Senator Aguilar, Senator Lundberg, Representative Primavera, and Representative Windholz. Second, we urge this Assembly to adopt H.B. 1048, recommended by the Interim Committee and which would expand the scope of Colorado’s Randolph-Sheppard Program for blind entrepreneurs. Third, likewise we urge passage of H.B. 1037, also forwarded by the Interim Committee, which would create tax credits for the hiring of blind employees and additional tax credits for employer- purchased assistive technology for blind employees. Fourth, we strongly support continued state funding for NFB-NEWSLINE® which brings daily newspapers and other periodicals to the blind of Colorado in accessible formats.

For further information contact:

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National Federation of the Blind of Colorado

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Last year at this time, the NFB of Colorado called for an interim study committee to examine the most efficacious delivery of vocational rehabilitation services for the blind in our state. Representative Pete Lee and Senator Michael Merrifield officially sponsored a request for such a committee.

Ultimately the Vocational Rehabilitation Services for the Blind Interim Study Committee (the Committee) was created pursuant to Interim Committee Letter 2015-3. The purpose of the committee was to determine the most effective structure and delivery model for vocational rehabilitation services for the blind when Colorado's Vocational Rehabilitation Program is transferred to the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment (CDLE) on July 1 of this year, following the passage of Senate Bill 15-239. Specifically, the interim study committee was mandated to make recommendations based on the following: the findings and recommendations of the November 2013 legislative audit concerning oversight and accountability of the Vocational Rehabilitation Program; an evaluation of delays in the delivery of vocational rehabilitation services for the blind; an assessment of the efficacy of the application, receipt, and use of the federal Rehabilitation Act "110" funding for the blind; the consideration of any and all issues identified in the National Federation of the Blind Colorado (NFBCO) Resolution 2014-7 and Resolution 2014-4; and consideration of any other issues related to the effective delivery of vocational rehabilitation services to the blind to assist them in obtaining job skills and long-term high-paying jobs.

Comprised of Representative Jessie Danielson (Chair), Senator David Balmer (Vice-Chair), Senators Lundberg and Aguilar, and Representatives Primavera and Windholz, the Committee conducted six meetings during the interim and heard from dozens of witnesses and collected substantial aural and written testimony. The Committee first recommended a bill to create a statutorily separate vocational rehabilitation unit for the blind but later withdrew that bill when CDLE announced that it would administratively create a separate unit for the blind effective January 1st of 2016, long before any legislation could do so. It should be noted that the NFB of Colorado has been extremely pleased with the leadership of Executive Director Ellen Golombek and her staff from CDLE who are working vigorously to create better opportunities for the blind of Colorado.

Second, the Committee officially voted to forward a bill, H.B. 1048 that would expand the scope of Colorado’s Randolph-Sheppard Program by extending said program to state higher education and the State Fair Authority. As described fully elsewhere in this memo, the NFBCO strongly supports this legislation and urges its passage.

Third, the Committee also forward to this Assembly a bill, H.B. 1037 that would create tax credits to employers who hire blind individuals and employers who purchase assistive technology for those employees. As fully described elsewhere in this Memo, the Federation wholly endorses this legislation and recommends its passage. We salute the Interim Committee and express our gratitude for its important work!

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**NFBCO URGES PASSAGE OF H.B. 1048, A BILL TO EXPAND BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES FOR BLIND BUSINESS OWNERS**

In 1936, Congress adopted the Randolph-Sheppard Act which has led to the most successful employment program for the blind in our nation’s history. The Act creates a priority for duly licensed blind business owners to operate vending facilities and other businesses on federal property. Here in Colorado, the Program is managed by the Business Enterprise Program of the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation soon to be housed in the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment (CDLE). In addition to a priority on federal property, Colorado grants such a priority to licensed blind operators on state properties. However, Colorado higher education and the State Fair Authority have previously been exempted from this priority.

As recommended by the Vocational Rehabilitation Services for the Blind Interim Committee and in recognition of the urgent need to create greater employment for the blind, House Bill 16-1048 removes an existing statutory exemption for property owned, leased, or occupied by higher education institutions or the State Fair Authority, thereby granting priority to persons who are blind and licensed vendors to operate vending facilities on these properties. The bill also expands the scope of the program so that persons who are blind may also operate businesses other than vending facilities on state property. The bill requires the program changes to be implemented within existing appropriations to the CDLE.

The NFB of Colorado strongly supports H.B. 1048 and urges its adoption. We stand ready to work with all stake holders to implement this legislation in an effective and responsible manner. We are confident that this will greatly improve employment opportunities for the blind of our state.

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**NFBCO URGES PASSAGE OF H.B. 1037, A BILL CREATING GREATER EMPLOYMENT**

**OF THE BLIND**

Despite important societal advancements in the employment of those who are blind or otherwise disabled, the working age blind still face an unemployment rate exceeding seventy percent. In response to this critical lack of opportunity, the 2015 Vocational Rehabilitation Services for the Blind Interim Committee has forwarded and placed before this General Assembly House Bill 16-1037 which would create certain tax credits for employers hiring and retaining blind employees. The NFB of Colorado strongly supports this bill and urges its adoption.

The period of the tax credit created by H.B. 1037 would apply from January 1, 2016 through January 1, 2019 and would permit taxpaying employers to receive tax credit in two different categories. First, an employer who hires a qualified blind or visually impaired person or a worker with a Developmental Disability may receive a tax credit of: a. 50 percent of the gross wages paid to that individual for the first 3 continuous months, and b. 30 percent for the next 9 months of employment. Second, an employer may receive a tax credit for the maintenance, repair or upgrade of assistive technology that is necessary for the qualified worker with a disability to complete their assigned job for such costs incurred between January 1, 2016 and January 1, 2019: a. 75 percent of the costs of the first year; b. 50 percent of the costs for the second year; and c. 25 percent of the cost for the third year of employment. Because this tax credit would only be available regarding employees referred by the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation, there will be minimal fiscal impact on the General Fund.

The Federation strongly supports this bill because of the great barriers the blind face in securing competitive employment. Offering incentives to employers to hire the blind is an effective means to integrating the blind into the workforce. Additionally, assistive technology allows the blind to participate fully in the workforce, but many employers fear that said technology will cost too much forcing employers to shy away from hiring the blind. Offering tax credits for the purchase of such technology further incentivizes employers to give blind persons meaningful employment.

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**CONTINUE FUNDING FOR NFB-NEWSLINE® SERVICE**

For more than a decade, the Colorado General Assembly has funded Colorado’s NFB-NEWSLINE®, providing blind Coloradans the same daily access to newspapers and magazines as their sighted neighbors and family members enjoy. This year, we request that the General Assembly maintain its support of $60,000.00 to this project. Continued funding to NFB-NEWSLINE® will not impact general funds because NFB-NEWSLINE® is funded through the Disabled Telephone Users Fund (DTUF), which comes from a very small fee on phone lines in Colorado and which always registers a surplus.

Access to information from the newspapers and magazines of our nation and state play a critical role for each of us as informed and participating citizens. Recognizing this, the National Federation of the Blind created NFB-NEWSLINE® for the blind in the mid-1990s. With this revolutionary system, the blind are able to pick up their touch tone phone, call a toll free number, and select from nearly 400 different newspapers and magazines including the Denver Post, Colorado Springs Gazette, Wall Street Journal and many other national newspapers. Today the phone-in option is still in place, but additional options include online on-demand reading, email delivery and, most impressively, mobile phone and tablet apps that deliver the two Colorado newspapers offered, national papers as well as nearly 40 magazines – everything from AARP publications to Time and Wired. There are even accessible and locally-relevant television listings – something impossible to find in an accessible form for the blind otherwise. Additionally, the system provides current weather conditions as well as watches and warnings. Currently, over 1300 blind Coloradans have access to the 400 newspapers, magazines, and other publications on the system. About every two minutes, a blind Coloradan is tapping into the vast wealth of information provided by NFB-NEWSLINE®.

With the funding, the NFB of Colorado will maintain the system and expand its reach. We will create even greater opportunities to share NFB-NEWSLINE® on additional web based and other technological platforms; expand the number of publications available; train more blind individuals to use the system; and work with the Audio Information Network of Colorado (AIN) to provide more information to the blind of Colorado. AIN is another service funded by the DTUF providing other timely publications and information to our state’s blind and the NFB of Colorado supports continued funding for AIN as well.

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**SUPPORT THE COLORADO CENTER FOR THE BLIND AND OTHER NFB PROGRAMS**

In your packets, you will find brochures on the Colorado Center for the Blind and fliers for National Federation of the Blind national and local scholarships. These and other programs are of great importance and therefore deserve a specific mention.

Founded in 1988 by the NFB of Colorado, the Colorado Center for the Blind (CCB) offers world class rehabilitation and adjustment to blindness training to blind/visually impaired individuals in our state and from all over the world. The CCB believes that with the right kind of training and a positive attitude, blindness need not be a tragedy and should not artificially limit a person’s hopes and dreams. The program serves all ages from kids as young as elementary age to seniors. CCB teaches cane travel/orientation and mobility, Braille, technology, independent daily living skills, employment skills, and much, much more. The vast majority of the teaching staff is made up of blind instructors who serve as excellent role models. Please read the CCB brochure in your packet for more information or go to www.cocenter.org. Our Center is located in Littleton and you are always welcome and encouraged to visit.

**SCHOLARSHIPS**

The National Federation of the Blind, on a national basis, offers thirty scholarships to talented blind men and women attending a post-secondary institution. Over a hundred thousand dollars are awarded each year and provide real opportunity for deserving students. On a state level, the NFB of Colorado offers up to five scholarships to blind men and women attending a post-secondary institution and scholarships range from $1,500.00 to $5,000.00. More information on how to apply is contained in your legislative packet. Please inform your local high schools, colleges and universities as well as any blind/visually impaired post-secondary student you know about these valuable scholarship opportunities.

For further information on any of these issues contact:

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