**Maryland General Assembly**

**Legislative Priorities for the 2025 Session**

From: Members of the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland

To: Members of the Maryland General Assembly

Contact: Ronza Othman, President
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**Date: January 16, 2025**

The National Federation of the Blind of Maryland (NFBMD) is the State’s oldest and largest organization of and for blind and low vision Marylanders. More than 116,000 blind and low vision individuals live in Maryland. These individuals access a variety of state services and resources, including those related to employment, social services, and education. Many are home-owners, business-owners, and tax-payers. Most are voters.

NFBMD has a number of legislative priorities for the 2025 Maryland legislative session. We seek to educate the members of the General Assembly on issues of importance to the blind. Each year, we visit the Maryland General Assembly early in the legislative session to educate our elected officials on our priorities. This year, though we are primarily focusing on three priorities during our NFBMD Day in Annapolis, we are also strongly advocating for three additional priorities throughout this session. Our primary priorities this session, which are detailed in this packet include:

* Increasing the property tax exemption for blind home-owners (Sen. King and Del. Attar)
* Prohibiting discrimination related to the operation of autonomous vehicles (Sen. Love)
* Funding for the Center for Excellence in Nonvisual Access

Three additional priorities, though not included with the same degree of specificity in this packet, are nonetheless very important to us. They include:

* Accessible paperless ballot return for Vote by Mail for voters with disabilities (House Ways and Means and Senate Education, Energy, and the Environment Committees)
* Tactile and Braille flags for veteran cemeteries (Sen. Simonaire and Del. Kaiser)
* Establishment of a grant program for service animal training (Sen. Simonaire and Del. Lehman)

We are seeking your support for our legislative priorities. Thank you for your support of Maryland’s blind and low vision community.

Please don’t hesitate to contact NFBMD President Ronza Othman at President@nfbmd.org or at 443-426-4110 with questions or for more information.

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Subject: **Leaving No Blind Person Behind: Raising the Blind Home Owners Property Tax Exemption**

From: Members of the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland

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**THE PROBLEM**

Blind people who own their own homes were granted a property tax exemption in the 1950s. The last time the tax was raised was 25 years ago in 2000. Today’s economy and property values are very different from the economy in 2000, but the unemployment rate for the blind has not significantly improved.

**PROPOSED ACTION**

The Maryland General Assembly should pass legislation to raise the property tax exemption for the blind to $40,000.

**BACKGROUND**

The current property tax exemption for the blind reduces the appraised value of the property by $15,000. For instance, if your home was appraised at $100,000, the state would deduct $15,000 and you would pay taxes on the remaining $85,000. This exemption has only been raised periodically: once in the 1980s, and once in 2000. According to the US Census Bureau, the median home price in 2000 was $119,600; the median home price in September 2024 was reported at $426,300, a significant increase. This exemption has not changed to meet the new values.

The blind have had an exemption since the 1950s because of employment discrimination and other economic barriers. Although we have made progress, these economic barriers remain today. Among the working age blind, there is a 75% rate of unemployment and underemployment. If this exemption is to be meaningful, it needs to be raised to reflect the current value of homes today.

**SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Blindness is a low incidence disability. The National Federation of the Blind estimates that, in 2016 (the latest date of available statistics), there were 116,500 blind people in Maryland. Blind children and blind adults who rent property would not be eligible for such an exemption. According to the Maryland State Department of Assessments and Taxation, there are approximately 1,429 blind people that take advantage of the property tax exemption. Therefore, it will not be much of a burden to the state to raise the exemption.

The property tax exemption for blind persons is well written and very explicit. For instance, the definition of legal blindness is used to determine eligibility. This definition is the same as the federal government uses to determine social security benefits and is a well-recognized standard for legal blindness that is not subject to interpretation.

Blind people frequently are in danger of losing their home because of changes in their income. Such income changes include loss of work or a change in government benefits such as Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Social Security Disability Income (SSDI) through no fault of the individual. The Social Security Administration often demands that a blind person has an overpayment in benefits and they want their money immediately. It is true that a blind person may appeal this overpayment, but it takes years to obtain the final result. In the meantime, a blind person may lose their home. Raising the property tax exemption would lessen this danger.

**CONCLUSION**

Owning your own home is part of the American Dream of Success. Blind persons are prevented from achieving this dream because of lack of opportunity. Blind persons also face discrimination because of the attitudes of the rest of the public. Raising the property tax exemption for the blind will help in leaving no blind person behind. The Maryland General Assembly should raise the property tax exemption for blind persons so that it is a meaningful exemption.

Subject: **Improving Transportation: Use of Autonomous Vehicles for Persons with Disabilities**

From: Members of the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland

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**THE PROBLEM**

Blind people who wish to move about their communities experience lack of sufficient, effective, affordable, or discrimination-free transportation options. Bus services are overtaxed, under-funded, and often inefficient. Paratransit services are even worse. Rideshare drivers regularly discriminate against blind and low vision passengers, with nearly 100% of guide dog users reporting rideshare denials and more than 50% of blind cane users reporting rideshare denials due to blindness. Many of those report multiple rideshare service denials in a given week.

Autonomous vehicle technology exists that does not require a human driver, with 25 states having passed legislation allowing for the field testing or commercial operation of autonomous vehicles. Maryland is not yet one of them.

**PROPOSED ACTION**

The Maryland General Assembly should pass legislation to permit field testing and/or commercial operation of autonomous vehicles in Maryland. This legislation should ensure that blind and low vision individuals as well as those with disabilities generally, are able to independently access these vehicles given that the technology exists that does not require a human operator to control the vehicle by prohibiting the need for a valid driver’s license to operate these vehicles.

**BACKGROUND**

Twenty-five states have passed legislation allowing for the field testing or commercial operation of autonomous vehicles.

A fully autonomous vehicle is a self-guided vehicle that operates without any human interaction, using specially designed software, artificial intelligence and sensors including cameras, radar, and infrared lasers (lidar) to understand and perceive surroundings. This is similar to how a human driver uses eyesight and hearing to perceive the environment and cognition to make decisions and operate a motor vehicle.

The Society of Automotive Engineers (SAE) separates autonomous vehicle technology into levels of autonomous operations ranging from human assisted driving to full automation. SAE level 4 and SAE level 5 are fully autonomous technology, meaning that a human driver is not necessary in any capacity for these vehicles to operate on roadways. Companies in the US currently operate commercial rideshare services in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Phoenix using SAE level 4, fully autonomous vehicles, with Austin and other cities beginning shortly. This means that an individual can summon a fully autonomous vehicle in one of these cities as easily as ordering an Uber or Lyft. They need to simply download the requisite app, enter payment information, and summon a fully autonomous vehicle. This is not science fiction. It is reality in these 3 cities and several more are on the horizon.

Currently there is not a nationwide federal law regulating fully autonomous vehicles. California and Arizona, along with twenty-three states, have passed state legislation permitting the testing and operation of SAE level 4 autonomous vehicles within their borders. The blind community is poised to benefit from autonomous vehicle technology more than any other community; therefore the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland wants to see Maryland become the 26th state to implement a similar statewide framework.

Fully autonomous vehicles are not controlled by human drivers, which eliminates discrimination from the conversation when requesting an autonomous rideshare. Passengers do not have to fear suffering refusal of a ride for being a blind person using a service animal, or white cane. The broader community does not need to live in fear of experiencing discrimination based upon religion, skin color or LGBTQ+ identity. Vulnerable men and women can feel safe knowing they are not entering a car with a stranger. Anyone can ride comfortably with the knowledge that the autonomous driver will not be intoxicated or distracted by a text message. Any passenger in an autonomous vehicle will have the same freedom to make a phone call or have a private conversation as they would experience while driving their own personal vehicle.

The National Federation of the blind headquarters in Baltimore Maryland is dedicated to sharing expertise to make sure that fully autonomous vehicles operating in Maryland would be implementing best practices for nonvisual accessibility through the Center of Excellence in Non-Visual access, putting Maryland once again front and center in the conversation of cutting-edge developments while ensuring accessibility.

**CONCLUSION**

We encourage the adoption of Maryland Autonomous Vehicle regulations that conform with the best practices in other states. Eliminating the requirement of a licensed human driver in the vehicle and maintaining comparable language to the District of Columbia will ensure people working in the DC Metro Area would be able to reliably commute between home and work creating more choice in transportation for everyone. Use of autonomous vehicles in Maryland will also reduce instances of discriminatory rideshare denials for the blind.

Subject: **Appropriation for the Center of Excellence in Nonvisual Access (CENA) to Education,
Public Information, and Commerce**

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**PROPOSED ACTION:**
The Maryland General Assembly should maintain the $250,000 appropriation for the Nonvisual Accessibility Initiative (NVAI) in the Governor’s Budget to support the Center of Excellence in Nonvisual Accessibility (CENA) to Education, Public Information, and Commerce.

**BACKGROUND:**

In 2014, the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) founded the NFB Center of Excellence in Nonvisual Accessibility (CENA) as a center of expertise, best practices, and resources that enable business, government, and educational institutions to provide accessible information and services effectively to blind citizens. The State of Maryland, through the Maryland Department of Disabilities (MDOD), partners with the CENA to support a series of projects under the NVAI, maintaining the state of Maryland as an ongoing leader in nonvisual accessibility.

The public-private partnership between the NFB CENA and MDOD continues to improve the standard of accessibility throughout the state, and our collaboration will continue to build a more accessible Maryland through the development and implementation of a variety of projects within the following five focus areas.

1. **Enhancing Access to Education Technology and Strategies**

Inaccessible instructional materials prevent blind and low-vision students from accessing the fundamental tools of education. Maryland's Education Code Section 7-910 requires that local school systems and the state's Department of Education (DOE) provide students with disabilities equivalent access to digital tools, emphasizing nonvisual access and aligns with Section 508 IT standards. CENA staff worked with MDOD staff and the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) to develop an easy to digest document that outlines strategies that school administrators can use for accessible software procurement. Along with this document, the CENA staff developed training modules for MSDE staff members that explains the basics of accessibility, procurement, and the laws that outlines and demonstrates the correct way to incorporate accessibility into their teaching methods and classroom software. With continued funding, CENA staff will support MSDE by providing edited recordings, answering questions from MSDE staff via email and phone, and continue to develop future training for MSDE staff. Moreover, CENA staff will conduct an environmental scan of technology and strategies used to provide access to instructional materials.

1. **Enhance Access to Employment-Related Tools and Services**

The unemployment/underemployment rate for blind people in this country continues to exceed 70 percent, and the need to utilize more online, digital, and virtual means of providing employment services and supports has created both problems and opportunities. Under the NVAI, CENA staff has worked in coordination with the Maryland State Department of Labor and Department of Rehabilitation Services to develop and implement a training module for American Job Center (AJC) staff to be better able to enhance MD job seekers with disabilities to access the public employment programs and services, and create greater employment opportunities. CENA staff will conduct outreach to MD employers in an effort to provide training and support to eliminate employment barriers faced by blind and low-vision Maryland citizens.

1. **Offering Accessibility Boutiques and Other Training Seminars**

Accessibility Boutiques are one to two-hour basic overviews/trainings designed to create public awareness about accessible software, products, services, and strategies. Quarterly Trainings are half-day trainings that offer a more substantive training experience to the participants and address major issues related to nonvisual accessibility. The CENA/MDOD will continue to offer Accessibility Boutiques and Quarterly Trainings, at no cost to Maryland citizens, on topics that assist both laymen and professionals to remain knowledgeable of the evolving tools, strategies, and best practices to build a more accessible Maryland.

1. **Assisting with the Integration of Smart Technologies for Accessible Cities**

The development and implementation of accessible, safe, affordable, and efficient transportation allows blind and low-vision Maryland citizens to independently travel throughout their communities. In addition, emerging nonvisual access navigation or wayfinding technologies facilitate independent access to a variety of public and commercial venues, including college campuses, public and commercial buildings, and other environments. CENA staff has evaluated and collaborated with a number of indoor wayfinding technology vendors that use a variety of methods for providing information about the indoor environment including Bluetooth beacons, existing Wi-Fi infrastructure, and camera-based navigation to name a few. CENA will develop and deliver a report outlining the current wayfinding technologies, their strengths and weaknesses, infrastructure impact, and other relevant data, which will then be disseminated to interested institutions.

1. **Coordinating the Accessibility Inclusion Fellowship Program**

The “Final Report of the Study on Accessibility Concepts in Computer Science, Information Systems and Information Technology Programs in Higher Education” recommended that three annual fellowships be awarded to help instructors begin to include accessibility concepts contained within the minimum areas of instruction in at least one course offering in their institution. The CENA/MDOD has offered these fellowships and will continue to recruit and support an additional cohort in the coming year.

**CONCLUSION**

Access to information remains one of the greatest barriers faced by blind people. The public-private partnership between the NFB CENA and MDOD continues to be an effective method of removing these barriers by providing information about best practices and developing innovative techniques for achieving nonvisual access. The Maryland General Assembly should allow this exemplary partnership to continue by approving the $250,000 appropriation in the Governor’s Budget under the Maryland Department of Disabilities.