



April 3, 2017

The Honorable Jim Banks
United States House of Representatives
509 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congressman Banks:

The National Federation of the Blind is the oldest and largest organization of blind people in the United States. Every day we raise the expectations of blind people, because low expectations create obstacles between blind people and our dreams.

An integral part of building and raising those expectations is the ability to obtain employment and remain self-sufficient. One of our divisions, the National Association of Blind Merchants, is the largest organization of blind entrepreneurs anywhere in the world. We have recently learned that you intend to introduce a bill that would privatize highway rest areas. While such legislation may seem harmless, we are certain that it will have a devastating effect on blind vending machine operators who service those rest facilities under the Randolph Sheppard Vending Facility program, which gives priority to blind vendors.

If your proposed bill is passed, it will undeniably cause a significant number of blind vending machine operators to lose their job. Recent statistics show that 72 percent of all blind adults are unemployed¹, and we firmly believe that number will only increase if this bill becomes law. At the National Federation of the Blind, we work to build greater opportunities for the employment of people with disabilities, so that all people can live the lives they want. This past July, when the Republican Party platform called for “competitive employment of persons with disabilities”² and efforts to “replace dependency with jobs in the mainstream of the American workforce,”³ we applauded those declarations.

It is with those words in mind, along with concern about the countless jobs that will be lost due to this legislation, that we strongly urge you to withhold this bill from being introduced. If you would like to discuss this matter further, or to talk about anything as it pertains to matters of blindness, I would be pleased to meet with you.

Sincerely,

Mark A. Riccobono, President
National Federation of the Blind

¹ American Community Survey. The percentage of non-institutionalized persons aged 21-64 years with a visual disability in the United States who were employed full-time/full-year in 2015.

² Republican Platform 2016. Page 38-39.

³ Republican Platform 2016. Page 39.