# National Convention 2023 General Session VI

MARK RICCOBONO: The afternoon session is in order. We are going to move quickly. So I know that we have a door prize, I'm sure.

BENNETT: So the following winners are winning $25. Dawn Mitchell from Washington. Renae Valdez from Virginia. And Susan McHardy from Maryland. The code word is "accessibility." Please email NFBprize.org.

MARK RICCOBONO: The code word was "accessibility," okay.

BENNETT: If I leave on the switch, the $100 goes to ‑‑ Claudia Del Rio of Indiana.

MARK RICCOBONO: Indiana.

BENNETT: Doesn't sound promising, does it? How about Lynette Wright of Louisiana? Stand up.

MARK RICCOBONO: Louisiana is on a streak over here. Did you get her?

BENNETT: Look around, don't find her. Next one is Hakim Cummings of Jamaica. I guess you missed it. So stand up or wave your ‑‑ okay, guess not here. Lenora Robertson from South Carolina. She is definitely here and better stay there.

(Laughter)

MARK RICCOBONO: I have an announcement that says, hello Astros fans! If you are attending the game tomorrow night, please watch your inbox for tickets. Who is heading to the games? I have to get my arm ready; you know?

## The Sixteenth Annual Dr. Jacob Bolotin Awards

MARK RICCOBONO: We are starting with the 16th annual Dr. Jacob Bolotin Awards. And here to lead our presentation. We have the Chairman of the Jacob Bolotin Award Committee, the President of the National Federation of the Blind of Utah and the Secretary of the National Federation of the Blind, here's Everett Bacon.

EVERETTE BACON: Man, I get Tina Turner. Is that not the coolest? Hello, my Federation family. How are you all? We have an outstanding presentation for you that I'm really excited to give. This is the Dr. Jacob Bolotin Awards. This is the 16th year. And we have now given away 75 Jacob Bolotin Awards. Can you believe that? After today, we will be up to 81. So we are inching closer to giving away a 100 Dr. Jacob Bolotin Award, which is pretty fabulous. Awesome, right?

Okay. Well, we ‑‑ I don't know if ‑‑ how many people have read the book about Dr. ‑‑ the blind doctor? Good, excellent. If you haven't read it yet, two download it. ‑‑ go download it after you download the Amish Romance. You can download The Blind Doctor and read an outstanding story of a man who persevered through so many trials and tribulations to get to where he wanted to go. He said that before there was a federation. Dr. Bolotin, you can read how he grew up as a blind person and the different trials he went through as a young man all the way up to ‑‑ there's a little romance in there, you get to read about his wife and family. But everything that he went through. One of the things that I always like to point out is when he was in college, back in the early 1900s, he faced the same types of adversities that we faced going to college. He had teachers doubting him. And it is an inspiration to college students of today to understand that we have been ‑‑ we have been traveling this pathway, all of us have, and people like Dr. Bolotin started it. And we have been doing it for years and years. We are going to continue to travel this pathway and break the barriers and beat down the doors. So I want to ‑‑ I want to also thank the Committee Members, the previous Chairpersons, Gary Wonder and Jim Dashel who came before me. Dr. Natalie Sheehan couldn't be here with us today, but Ms. Mary Ellen Jernigan, Donald Porterfield, Steve Jacobsen And Board‑Elect member, Jessica Beecham.

Okay, let's get to the presentation. We have an 8.5‑minute video we are going to play for you now, so let's go ahead and queue that up.

SPEAKER: Federation guests, the National Federation of the Blind is proud to introduce the 2023 recipients of the Dr. Jacob Bolotin Awards. Made possible in part by the generous support of the Alfred and Roseland Perlman trust and the Santa Barbara Foundation. These individuals and organizations have broken down barriers faced by blind people in innovative ways, changed negative perceptions of blindness and blind people and pushed past existing boundaries to inspire blind people to achieve new heights. The three individual winners are Peggy Chong, The Blind History Lady, receiving her second Bolotin Award to fund an ambitious project.

PEGGY: I think it is really important for professionals and social workers to know the history of the disabled, not just our eye disease, not just when laws were passed, but the successful people who made it in the world. That there have been blind people who have been U.S. Senators, bankers, crooks, you know? Murderers. That we are a cross‑section of society. And that we aren't the first to try something. So that we don't always feel like we need to re‑invent the wheel every time we turn around.

SPEAKER: Sharon Maneki with over 30 years of advancing technology for the National Federation of the Blind.

SHARON: Dr. Bolotin services the blind living. That's the very purpose of life. I think that's what he represents.

SPEAKER: Neil Soiffer, MathCat, Assistive Technology. A free open‑source tool that allows software development to make digital math content accessible to screen readers.

NEIL: The whole goal of MathCat is for vendors to be easily able to incorporate math accessibility into their products. It is open source, it is free, and it has a nice simple interface. So I am hoping that when I ‑‑ I am hoping that the excuse that I heard a lot of when I did math player about math accessibility is hard and we will eventually get to it, that it is no longer an excuse at all. It is not hard. Because the software does it. It's free. So it doesn't cost much. And it is simple to integrate into products. ‑‑ simple to integrate into products.

SPEAKER: Accessible Pharmacy Services for solutions that allow blind people independent control of hair healthcare. ‑‑ their healthcare.

SPEAKER: This is a full service healthcare company specializing in medication management and diabetes management for the blind, low‑vision and DeafBlind community. We find solutions to alleviate and remove any challenges or barriers related to loss of sight or hearing impairments. And identify each one of our particular patients as an individual and unique patient. And we need that patient's ‑‑ (Indiscernible).

SPEAKER: This is our primary service. Accessibility services, working with various abilities is not an after‑thought, it is our primary sources. This year our Award winners for the Jacob Bolotin Awards is validation that we are headed in the right direction. But we also understand that we are not done. This is not done. Accessibility and inclusion is a moving target and a continual effort. So this award, we could not be more honored to receive this at Accessible Pharmacy Services. It shows that we are on ‑‑ that we are on the right track.

SPEAKER: AstroAccess. Here's Dr. Sheri Wells.

SHERI: We know what is happening. Blind people will not be left behind. This is all about doing the research that we need to do. We are all about figuring out where ‑‑ what we need to change, both in the space program, the governmental space program, and the increasing number of private space programs. What do we need to do to get blind people in line to go like everybody else.

SPEAKER: The National Federation of the Blind Texas receiving the second Bolotin Award for Project BOLD. Here's affiliate President, Norma Crosby.

NORMA: Project BOLD is an opportunity for blind children and their families, including the sighted siblings. It is a project that we took on from the Texas Wildlife Department. We asked children and families to apply to be part of the program. As I said earlier, we not only invited the blind children, but their families. And we wanted to teach their sighted siblings how to be better allies for their blind siblings. So as the name says, blindness out door learning and development is just as the name BOLD says. We take children outside to do fire building, tent building and philosophy about blindness and we teach our children and their siblings in a pod, as a pod. And all of the instructors in the program are blind adults.

SPEAKER: These winners will receive a trophy and monetary prize to advance their work to help blind people live the lives we want. Now, the National Federation of the Blind proudly presents them with their 2023 Dr. Jacob Bolotin Awards.

(Cheers and Applause).

MARK RICCOBONO: That is exciting.

EVERETTE BACON: When I call your name and talk about your particular program, I want you to come up. And we will hand you an award. So our first one, I thought I would do this one first, because I kind of wanted the loud applause right away. So let's just go with the NFB of Texas, $5,000! This program is called BOLD, Blindness Outdoor Learning and Development. It is basically to help blind families, blind adults, blind children get an opportunity to experience the great states and wildlife services and the great state parks in the great State of Texas. Norma Crosby is here to accept the award. Thank you, Norma.

NORMA: Thank you.

EVERETTE BACON: Okay. Our next award winner, Accessible Pharmacy Services. This is ‑‑ this program provides a fully accessible home delivery pharmaceutical services. Lynn Heights from Pennsylvania nominated them. And Lynn Heights said simply that before this service, blind people were left out by pharmaceutical services. They didn't understand the needs that blind people had. And this service has now broken down those barriers for us to get our accessible pharmacy services. Thank you, Andy Bern Bernstein. Thank you.

Then the next award, I'm excited about this one. This is really fun to learn about. AstroAccess. Their motto, I just want to read the motto to you. If we can make space accessible, we can make any space accessible. Don't you love that? I was reading about this program and some of the great things they do. And we have two blind astronauts up on stage right now. Danielle Monture and Lindsey Mosalino. They are blind astronauts and have experienced zero gravity. I have not experienced zero gravity. They have done things like; Danielle was telling me she had an opportunity to go into the rocket and be able to create an accessible tactile map for the sighted people when the lights go out. So they can find their way. I thought that was really awesome. So I'm really proud of AstroAccess. Danielle and Lindsey are here to accept the awards. $5,000 to them as well. Here you go. Thank you $5,000 for them as well. $5,000 for Accessible Pharmacy Services. And $5,000 for the NFB of Texas.

Now to the individual awards. The first individual award winner, $5,000, goes to I like to refer to her as our history, blind history lady, Peggy Chong. Peggy Chong has previously won the Dr. Jacob Bolotin Award for her work in the Blind History Lady Program she directs. But this is a special project that she is doing. She will be going to Washington, D.C. to go into the Library of Congress to review documents related to the Harmon Foundation. The Harmon Foundation gave awards in the 1920s and 1930s to the Black workers who were in the shops making all sorts of things and then the program stopped. So she is looking into why they stopped, and she will figure out who won the awards. And I got a sneaking suspicion that after she does her research and finds out what she finds out, that this will have a space in the museum Of the Blind Peoples Movement. So thank you, Peggy Chong. All right.

Our next winner is not here today to give her her trophy, but I know she's listening on Zoom. Sharon Maneki.

(Cheers and Applause).

(Chanting for Sharon).

Sharon Maneki, I love it. Sharon Maneki was the long‑time President of the NFB for Maryland for years. Ronsa Hoffman nominated her for this award. I like to think of Sharon as a policy wonk before there was such a thing as a policy wonk. Sharon, Ronsa said that no other leader in any state has done more to advance the rights of legislation in a particular state like Sharon Maneki has. I will name 3, but I up counted 15 listed on Ronsa's application. Three stand out to me.

One of the very first states to get a parental Bill of Rights for the blind. One of the first states to require Braille certification for teachers of blind students. And one of the very first states to require accessible textbooks, not only K‑12, but K‑Ph.D. She did it for both. We will make sure Sharon gets the award. She's also a $5,000 winner.
And our last and final award winner, Dr. Neil Soiffer, is going to win $25,000. Dr. Neil created an open source tool to allow individuals to access math using software and tools for their screen reader. There's nothing else like it. And guess what? It is free. It is free to you. You can use it right now. This is an awesome service. We feel like this is just what Dr. Jacob Bolotin speaks to. I'm going to let him speak.

NEIL: Please bear with me, I will make this as brief as I can. Before hearing about this award, I didn't know about Dr. Bolotin. I read his book and will never match his accomplishments, but we do share one thing. We have the same birthday. So I'll have that. Thankfully, not the same birth year, so I am not that old. But I want to thank Dr. John Gardner who 20 years ago asked me to help him make some software accessible that he couldn't ‑‑ so he could continue research after becoming blind. And that ask has given me purpose in my life. It might surprise some people, but there are people who think that math is fun. I'm one of them. And for those who don't like math, it's likely because you weren't taught about what math really is. And I could go on and on about that for many hours, but I don't think that's what you want to hear about today.

I just want to say that I want to make the joy of math accessible to everyone, which is why I have been working on making math accessible. And I will continue to do so as long as I can. Thank you so much for the recognition. And perhaps this gives hope to other math nerds that they too someday will be appreciated.

EVERETTE BACON: Thank you again. Don't forget your award. All right, that's it. That's our six winners. They are pretty awesome, aren't they?

(Cheers and Applause).

Thank you, again, to the Pearl Trust. Mr. President, that's my report.

MARK RICCOBONO: Let's have another round of applause for our 2023 Bolotin Award winners.

(Applause)

I can confirm Sharon is on Zoom. So she has your love.

SPEAKER: How about a door prize or two, here?

MARK RICCOBONO: Go for a door prize. Get them out of the way. Let's get going.

SPEAKER: She wants me to do mine first. First in the room, we've got a folding blanket with a one‑year subscription for the book share. And another positive safety, welfare safety certificate. Easy for me to say. Not at all, but it is a great prize. The name is ‑‑ Karen Smith, Ohio. That's good. Karen Smith, Ohio. You here? Sounds pretty quiet. Okay, we got her.

MARK RICCOBONO: She's back there.

SPEAKER: Now for the virtual.

SPEAKER: So our first winner who will be winning $30 is Mary Taylor from Nevada. And the second is Deepta Verjaran from Texas. And the code word is "Bolotin."

MARK RICCOBONO: Okay, great. I would like to go to ‑‑ a final update before the tables close for the PAC Plan.

SPEAKER: What up, my PAC? I will give you a couple updates and names and then ask you to please, please come back to the table. We close down the table around 3:00. So this is your last opportunity to get your name in the drawing to support your state, to support your division, to make a difference at this Convention on the PAC Plan. We have a lot of work that we want to do, and we need to spread our wings to feed the hungry caterpillar. In the race for the PAC Rat with the creepy alien tail, in third place, we have Alabama with nine. In second place, we have a tie between Minnesota and Maryland with 11. And in first place with 17, we have Colorado. And Colorado told me they are bringing home the pack rat to Scott. I think that's wonderful. But make him work for it, guys.

In the mule category, parents right now are running 11. You have some people on. You are up to 12 now. Seniors, you are taking it away with 22. There's still time, though.

And finally, the pachyderm, we have Nevada at 29%. Delaware at 54%. And Maine still rocking that 143. Let me give you the names of the five people who started PAC or increased PAC who can come to get the $25 gift card. Desha Powell from Utah. Tanja Taylor from Alabama. Elizabeth Campbell from Texas. Ryan McKinney, Nevada. Great first name, by the way. And finally, Logan Neitfeld from Colorado.

So remember, we close down the PAC table in a half hour. You have a chance to get your names in and rep your states and divisions. So let's keep building the Pac Plan. Thank you, folks.

MARK RICCOBONO: Desha said she only brought six pairs of shoes. So maybe that's how she made more room for Pac. Great to have Desha here and congratulations to all the other winners. The last update before the banquet from the Give 20 program. Here's Tracy Soferinko.

TRACY: Federation family, all of you in Zoom land and all in the room, we have such an exciting time in the Give 20 Campaign. Somewhere after 3:00, Patty Chang and I will go down to the basement of the property in our special bunker where we go to pull the winners of this. I hear Texas has really big bugs, but I'm armed with my new butterfly wings or ears and will fight off the bugs in the bunker. But wait, your name is not there! You're not there to have us call your name. We would like you to give to our white Cane General Fund, the Rainy Day Fund, the Sun Fund, I don't believe there are any bugs the size of Texas in our building in Baltimore. And as well the Jernigan Fund where we offered 94 people the opportunity to come to our Convention this year. Give us the opportunity to call your name. But one of the key things when we do outreach to organizations, we should be able to share in our campaign. They need to know a lot of people are giving. We are so close to 500 people. I am excited to be able to share the enthusiasm of having 500 people having given to the Give 20 Campaign. Let's add your name to the list.

Let's talk about how you can give. Go to NFB.org/Give20 to sign up. You can go to the back of the room here and give at the Give 20 table. You can call 410‑659‑9314, extension 2430. If you do one of those three things before 3:00, for every $20 you give, your name gets put in a drawing. What would the drawing be for? It would be for going to Convention in 2024 in Orlando, Florida! Transportation for two, hotel room, registration, banquet and a $1,000 walking around cash. Maybe in Orlando, maybe you will be buying me a drink. I think that's a great idea! But the only way to make that happen is for you to give. Please contribute to the Give 20 Campaign because each of us one‑by‑one contributing small amounts at this time helps us to meet our overall goals of equality for all blind people... Thank you very much, President Riccobono. I look forward to talking to you at the banquet.

MARK RICCOBONO: Let's make that 500 and get the last Give 20 contributions in.

## Transformation of Jobs in the AbilityOne Program: Disability Advocacy, Leadership, and the Power of Concentrated Action

MARK RICCOBONO: The next presentation is transformation of jobs in the AbilityOne Program: Disability Advocacy, Leadership and the Power of Concentrated Action. I'm excited about the work that the presentation represents.

Our speaker this afternoon is a long‑time civil rights advocate and scholar. She played a leader role in the drafting and negotiation for the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. And later the ADA Amendments Act in 2008. And in Washington, D.C. for the past 18 years, I think she started when she was 12, she crafted a federal legislative clinic where she and her students helped nonprofit organizations advance their legislative social justice goals.

From 2010 to 2019, she served as a Commissioner for the Equal Opportunities Commission where she helped advance employment, civil rights, including for LGBTQ individuals, establishing their protections under sex discrimination laws, people with disabilities and women. She also led a proactive effort to prevent harassment in the workplace. For two years, she was a partner at the law firm of Morgan Lewis where she helped employers work proactively to create safe, respectful, diverse and inclusive workplaces.

Now, allot of people took on different work during the pandemic. She became a freelance scholar. It sounds like a great job, right? Just doing the good work. She assists with many aspects of advancing civil rights in this nation, but today we have invited her to speak regarding the leadership that is happening with the public members who are part of the Ability One coalition. They are helping to guide them through the reform enthusiastically supported by this movement. And we welcome to the stage today a woman working in the spirit of the National Federation of the Blind, please welcome Chai Feldblum.

CHAI FELDBLUM: Hello, everyone. Actually, I would like to call myself a freelance troublemaker. Making good trouble. And I know I am in great company right now in terms of making good trouble. Thank you, President Riccobono, for extending the invitation for me to speak at this convention. It is really an honor and also very exciting to be talking to a group that I am hoping will work in great partnership with what I and my fellow three citizen members are trying to do right now at the AbilityOne Commission. I believe that we are at a potentially transformative moment for increasing employment of people who are blind. Now, that's due to a lot of work that NFB has been doing since 1940 when it was first established. And a lot of that success is due to the fact that NFB is an organization of the blind and not for the blind.

(Applause).

I love your tag line, "Live the Life You Want." Well, a life like that would include having a good job. And by a good job, I mean a job that provides real economic security by providing solid wages and benefits, a job that uses a person's full potential and offers the opportunity for career growth and a job that provides a sense of self‑worth and meaning.

So what I would like to talk about today is how the AbilityOne Program can be a player in helping to achieve that outcome for people who are blind. And I will tell you that this is not really the role that the AbilityOne Commission has played over time. And indeed, NFB has legitimately criticized the AbilityOne Program for the philosophical underpinnings, for it is used by many nonprofit agencies to pay wages and the practical manner in the way the program runs. The mindset of any number of nonprofit agencies, that they are successful if they find a blind person a job and a person with a significant disability a job. And that person is in the job for 30 years. And that's success. That is the mindset that has been in play for a long time. And that is the mindset that we are now trying to change.

(Applause).

Now, I want to say something about technology in terms of this being a potentially transformative moment. There are amazing advantages in technology happening now creating a whole new range of access for people who are blind that will help them be very successful in jobs. Help to demonstrate potential. And there are companies aware of the financial benefits in developing and disseminating this technology.
We need to up leverage that. I love to say, let's capitalize on capitalism. Let's make it worth it for people to do things that will help us get employed.

I want to call out Gina Klein and Margaret Knolls. They have been at this convention. And they are in the forefront of leveraging this front. Gina is developing an ecosystem of companies developing new access technologies. And the second is Enable Ventures that invests in the companies to help them scale up. We at the AbilityOne Commission are putting different expectations on the nonprofit agencies. We are telling them that we expect them to work with their employees to understand what jobs they can have outside of their AbilityOne contract and to get them that job. How different would that be? And we are working with Gina and her group because there is technology out there to help make that move into the competitive economy. And we want to make sure the NPAs know how to use those.

Okay. Now, any type of change requires stars to align. I will tell you that something a lot of you know, there have been a lot of efforts to transform the AbilityOne Program over time. In fact, a lot of the efforts were done by NFB. Anil Lewis was appointed during the Obama Administration. He serves from 2012 to 2017. I'm guessing, just a guess, Anil, that he can share many stories with you of trying to make change at the AbilityOne Commission and not getting anywhere. Would you feel like a lonely voice crying in the wilderness, Anil? Hello! Let me tell you, you need the stars to align and the stars are aligning now. The stars are aligning now. And that is why it is so important for NFB to be involved to keep pushing what ‑‑ what the members are calling the grand experiment to transform the AbilityOne Commission. The stars are aligning.

Number one, four new citizen members of the Commission were appointed at the same time two years ago in August 2021. I was on the transition team for the Biden Administration. I was given the job of analyzing the AbilityOne Commission. And one of the things I said is there's room for four citizen members. There are two there. They have been there for a really long time. How about having four new citizen members all appointed at the same time? That's what happened.

Two years ago, August 2021, we came on as a critical mass. We didn't have to be the lonely voice in the wilderness. Let's just say, we are a critical voice to be reckoned with. Brian Bashan and Gabe are long‑time members of the NFB. Let's just say they are not exactly shrinking violets.

A fourth citizen member, Chris Brandt, has been a critical member in workshops and advancing employment with intellectual and Developmental disabilities. Go, Chris! The second star to align has been the career staff at the AbilityOne Commission. Now, as a former political appointee at the EOC for nine years, I can tell you that a political appointee might have the best idea about new initiatives. And if the career staff doesn't like it, it's not going to happen. And no one says anything negative. Just somehow it doesn't happen. Well, we are lucky now in how the career staff has responded to the changes that the citizen members have been pushing. Kim who was the deputy director during many years ‑‑ Kim totally got and supported what we did two years ago as citizen members. That was hugely important in terms of success. And we got a new General Council who knew a lot about procurement and has learned a lot in the last two years about disability rights and ideology and has been very open to helping with change. And there is a new approach again by people changing who have been there for a while and new people coming on.

So you have three people from AbilityOne Convention attending right now. Amy Jenson, Bradley Crane, our specialist in getting people out to the competitive employment, not the skillset that the AbilityOne campaign had, and Chris Stewart, the first blind leader working at the Commission. This makes a difference. And let me tell you, they all rock!

And again, simple things like budget. We all know what is in the budget is what matters. After I got invited to speak here, I checked to see whether the agency would pay. Yes, not only that, Kim is like, she was really sorry, she couldn't come because she had another engagement, she said, let's make sure Amy Jensen, Chris Stewart and Bradley Crane can go. What you spend money on tells you a bit about what you care about. So very glad to have Amy, Bradley and Chris here. Yes.

(Applause)

Let me tell you, I think we are coming every year. Whatever. Okay. The third star to align was the report issued by the National Council on Disability in October 2020. You got to hear from Mr. Gallegos this morning. They issued a report calling for the complete dismantling of the AbilityOne Program because it is so flawed at its core according to the report. And they said, instead of, yes, we want to use federal contracting dollars, which is what the AbilityOne Commission does. Having the dollars to give contracts to people who are blind and people with significant disabilities, but the way we do it is to get rid of the program with the special set‑aside jobs and we have congress pass ‑‑ we have congress pass a law to hire a certain percentage or quota of people who are blind and have significant disabilities. That report was my first exposure to the AbilityOne Commission. I read it and thought, that's an agency that needs reform.

As someone who likes challenges, I decided to say the White House and I would be interested in going inside to try to help. So long as I have some other good troublemakers. But I have worked in Congress my whole life. The ADA, the other laws, there's no way I saw the chance of Congress passing a law requiring every federal contractor to hire a particular percentage of people who are blind or with significant disabilities. It wasn't going to happen. Even if it did, what sort of enforcement would there be if people didn't meet the quota? But the report was a catalyst for change. It was a catalyst for change because it was a dramatic statement that the AbilityOne program was so flawed at its core that it had to be done away with. So the question is, can one actually transform the program, even giving some of its inherent flaws? And that's what I and the other three citizen members took on as a challenge and what I believe we are now starting to do.

Now, just in terms the of reminding ourselves of the flaw in the program, it was begun in 1938. It was premised on the assumption that blind people couldn't do anything in the general economy. In fact, they were working in sheltered workshops doing simple manual production and not getting paid very much. But that was the reality in 1938. The NFB was still two years away from being established, so the Organized Blind Movement at the time focused on getting a law that required the Federal Government to buy products from the workshops employing blind people.

One advocate said this "the best way for the Federal Government to help blind people is to buy the brooms and mops that blind people are making." That was the idea. That's not what we want. Having jobs to make brooms and mops. But they set it up to basically not have integration, because since the whole idea was to create jobs for people who are blind, they made a requirement that 75% of what they call "direct label products" had to be done by blind people and didn't include supervisors, because hey, how could the blind people be supervisors, right? It was not a premise any of us would accept today in terms of the capacity for blind people to work. But that was the initial basis. And this program has been updated and changed only once.

In 1971, 52 years ago, and it was changed to expand it so it was also contracts for services, not just for products, into include people who were called "severely disabled," which was actually defined as people who were "unable to work in the normal competitive economy." Those are the flaws. The premise on which it is based, the fact that it is contrary to integration at its core and to the 14 certificates. How did we change it? We issued against the AbilityOne contracts. And let's be clear, none of the other agencies have contracts where they are still using 14‑C certificates. And one of the requests from the disability community is to consider another regulation that says if you are using 14‑C anywhere in your contracts, you can't play in our game of AbilityOne. So we said in the preamble we were certainly looking at that. But that's just the minimum threshold, right? Minimum threshold. Here's what we are doing to really make this change happen.

First, we are going to Congress with a legislative proposal to say to give us private project authority to award a contract, especially in skilled professional work, where the ratio will be less than 75% and where to count supervisors. Let me show this program that leverages government contracting money can create integrated work settings and a chance for upward and outward movement.

We have that pending before Congress. I talked with John and the legislative team. It is like, yes, help us get this! Okay. That's changing the statute a little bit by giving us private project authority. But the second way we are moving is not dependent on Congress. We are changing the mindset. We are trying to change the mindset of nonprofit agencies that think all they have to do is get someone a job, let them stay for 30 years and everything is great. And the way we are doing this is by saying we have the following expectations of you.

Number one, this is not draft guidance that I hope to finalize in a few moments, but every employee that comes in, you have to do a job individualization. You have to make sure you're giving the person the right fit of the job and giving them all the accommodations they need. Job individualization right from the get‑go.

(Applause)

Two, you need a qualified professional working with each of the employees to have a personalized employment plan. In fact, we call it a person‑centered employment plan to reinforce the autonomy of the employee and figuring out a plan to move that person forward in their career. Personal Centered Employment Plans.

And finally, we need a plan to help those contracts move upward or outward. Let me tell you, employers do not want attrition. If you have a work site with a lot of attrition, you probably don't want to go work there. We are saying attrition is good in this respect of what you are done is countered the discrimination that happens out there every day against blind people trying to get a job. And they are never told that the reason they are not getting it is because they are blind. Hello. But they don't get it. We have a program now where being blind is the plus to get that job.

(Applause)

Being blind is the plus to get the job. That's expensive real estate, that job, right? Let's have this program be a launching pad for people who are blind with other significant disabilities to get started in a job where they are getting a plus, get job training, get good experience on their resumé so they have a chance to get that next job. That's what we are trying to achieve.

I'm going to close out with two things that I think NFB could be incredibly helpful with in helping to make this change. One, you passed a great resolution in 2020 for nonprofit agencies for the blind to pledge to have 50% of the managers and Board comprised of people who are blind. Because the way to change the mindset is to change the mind of those running the program. So we are going to do everything we can to create different expectations and to award the agencies doing this. Let's give them extra credit in starting the contracts. But the best way to change the mindset is to change the people running it.

And two, you have something concrete to offer to nonprofit agencies. Because now we expect them to give their employees a sense of what jobs outside the AbilityOne program look like to make an informed choice of where to work. And if the affiliates could be excellent ambassadors for educating blind employees about that, how about being value added in this way?

I am truly going to finish with a reference to one of the founders of NFB. He wrote a novel called "Hope Deferred" that gives a history of the sheltered workshops that is just, you know, so magnificent in understanding what was going on. But it is also filled with heart‑wrenching descriptions of where we have been as a nation with regard to respect for blind people and where we need to go.

Well, TenBroek's book was called "Hope Deferred" because of how much needed to be changed in 1959 when the book was published. I hope we are now on the threshold of hope achieved. And I look forward to working with all of you as we transform the AbilityOne Program to be one small piece of the puzzle in getting to hope achieved. Thank you so much.

(Cheers and Applause)

MARK RICCOBONO: Talk about progress. How about that? (Applause)
This is where we need to continue to support the tremendous reform happening in this program. So thank you for being here. Thank you to all the public members and to the staff of the AbilityOne Program working to really do something truly transformative for people with disabilities.

## By Us for Us: A Report on the Federation’s Research, Training, and Partnership Programs

Okay, we have a number of other great presentations coming up. His name came up. He was on the AbilityOne Commission. I mentioned yesterday that our feelings about AbilityOne's contract for what they offer to the blind. And that's why I asked Anil Lewis to lead the Coalition. We are really glad he's working on our behalf to bring programs to life that are by us, for us. He's here to talk about our progress and training and research and partnership. And he lives the Federation philosophy every day. He works with our affiliates across the nation combining that effort with our staff team to develop programs that will advance our cause and build our movement. And we appreciate his work, because his spirit and determination comes from the Organized Blind Movement. Here's our brother, Anil Lewis.

(Applause)
ANIL LEWIS: Keep it going. I love that. I like the walk‑up music. Let's turn it into a dance party. Good afternoon, my Federation family. I missed you guys last year. I was a member of the COVID club and didn't get a chance to talk to you. I will try to make up for it today.

Oh, my goodness. Did you guys listen to the President's Report? I mean, I do this work every day, and I'm listening and hearing new stuff. I was exhausted by the end. I had to take a nap. Speaking of taking a nap, I have been planning this Convention as a young guy and I forget that I'm an old guy. I am exhausted. President Riccobono said he didn't have enough time to talk about the projects, so I will hopefully nil a little bit.
But I want to reiterate, I feel love in this space. And this is the most intimidating audience that I ever speak to, but I know that you love me and I love you right back.

(Cheers and Applause)

Yep. The only thing is, I may not like all of you ‑‑ (Laughter). I'm an Orioles fan, unless they are playing the Braves. I'm a Ravens fan unless they play the Falcons. I love the Atlanta Hawks, the Atlanta Dream, and the Atlanta United. And I can tell that some of you don't like those teams like I do. And I'm sure if I talk a little bit about my politics and views on race or sex or gender or sexual orientation or religion, some of you may not like that either. But I'm glad, so glad we can agree on one thing, chocolate is life‑affirming.

(Cheers and Applause). The real truth is, I'm glad that we can agree that blind people have capacity and value and that we deserve to be respected. And we have the right to live in this world.

(Applause)

We all fight so blind people have the ability to live, learn, work and play in our communities as fully contributing members of society. But you know what? I think it's better than in some instances we disagree. I think it is important because we are a subset of society. And our differences really serve to make us stronger. As long as we don't try to find ways that we don't like each other to make us not love each other. Diversity builds the NFB. And all the intersecting characteristics, they expand our ability to influence society. And in order for that to happen, we need all blind people to participate in the NFB. With a variety of interests, expertise, to make sure we can get things done.

So as always, I want to have a conversation with you about the blind initiatives that we have. Because these are not the projects that the dynamic team in Baltimore helps to advocate for every day, these are our blind initiatives. These programs build the National Federation of the Blind. I was going to start mentioning names, but I figured that it would diminish the fact that no one in the one position in the National Office does it alone. It's the over 70 people staffed that work in our affiliates across the country to change what it means to be blind. But the in the area of membership, we are doing a dynamic job. If we don't have members, we don't have the Federation of providing chapter trainings and orientation to new members and hopefully giving other people who are getting to know the foundation to ask the questions to prohibit them from being a part of what we provide.

I also like the fact that we are focusing on our leadership building. Many of you in this room may have participated in the presidential leadership seminars. Am I on the mic wrong? Is that better? Do you remember the name of the leadership seminar? Three Strike Seminar is the best seminar that we have ever had. Come on, Three Strike Seminar ‑‑ no? On three, let's see. What is the name of your seminar? One, two, three. Three Strike Seminar. That's great. Good job!

You guys know that's a really intensive week of training. It's a lot to do. I said on three, you missed your time. It's done. We are moving on now. So the beautiful part about our leadership training is we create a Cohort of individuals. And many of them are meeting on a regular basis. And enjoying each other and supporting one another. So I love what President Riccobono touched on. He talked about the Kenneth Jernigan leadership and service program. It is more than a week. It will be a whole year. And we need you to build this program.

So I am thinking, let's have four in‑person sessions where we bring this Cohort together, right? And then we can have monthly virtual sessions where we can talk and work. But we need your help to know what the virtual programs cover. What do our leaders really need to know in order to continue to build and grow this organization? But how do we decide who participates in this program? That's the key, right? How many of you would love to participate in this experience? You have to demonstrate the relationship built with existing leaders, so maybe we require you to get two affiliate Presidents to sponsor you. You have to go out to find two affiliate Presidents to be willing to say, I will mentor this individual through the program. Ah, but let's not overload the amount of people to participate. So you affiliate Presidents, you are only allowed to sponsor two individuals. So you have to be very selective of the two individuals that you decide.

And of course, with anything that we do, maybe we'll have you write an essay. So that we can get to know you and your philosophy on blindness and what you plan on getting from or contributing to this program. But again, this is in development. We need your feedback. We would like to launch it in the Fall. So hopefully you will be hearing or watching to get more information on this program as we move forward.

I would like to talk to you about the education programs. You know that we have been talking for the past five years about our spatial abilities and blindness engineering research. Our Saber program that provides STEM education in a non‑visual way to blind students but it enhances teaching STEM to sighted students.

Coming out of this program, we have developed an open educational resource around non‑visual engineering curriculum. And that's going to help open up avenues for other entities to provide non‑visual access to STEM in existing programs as well. We don't want to just continue to carve out spaces that blind people can drive. We want blind people to thrive in any program that exists anywhere.

(Applause)

We launched our STEM To You Program. They are going to push this out to the school systems. And we said, it would be great if the lunch boxes were accessible so the blind students who are normally put in the corner when STEM is discussed can participate right alongside their peers. So many of our affiliates have helped to launch the program. And we are having STEM To You programs throughout the country. So thank you.
We are also working with a group doing an Eclipse Citizens Science ‑‑ Citizens Science Eclipse Project. I'm get it right tomorrow. I told you I was exhausted. Eclipse Citizens Science Project. Oh! Can blind people appreciate an eclipse? It is visual, isn't it? There's a lot of audio and non‑visual aspects of eclipses that we can appreciate. And even sighted people can appreciate. We are going to teach sighted people how to appreciate an eclipse. More on that as we move forward.

You hear me talking about STEM. I love the work we are doing there, but I think that so many others have taken our lead and really strayed away from the fundamentals. And we can't afford to let that happen. Here, let me offer the statistics. There are 70% to 75% unemployment. Of those 30% blind individuals that are employed, 90% know Braille. Y'all scientists will decide if it is a causal relationship, but I know there's correlation. What percentage of students are taught Braille? Come on. 10%. And we wonder why we can't move the unemployment bar. We have to give our students the tools and will champion Braille as an essential tool to be successful.

(Applause)

We have partnered with Pearson in a real way, and the tools they have used to provide accessibility to the high‑stakes testing, we have developed a curriculum now posted on the website. And I apologize, I really wanted more specific information about this, but you will see this pushed out. I don't have the information with me. But it is a ‑‑ we get to brand it because Pearson gave it to us. But it is an online curriculum to make sure Braille and math go hand‑in hand. That's how we get to STEM.

And our Braille in‑home continues to provide individuals to those who can't access the in‑person Braille session. And I'm loving the fact although we have tremendous affiliates doing work, getting 20‑plus students and partnering with schools for the Blind, we have a lot of those with resources to help the two students that may be participating in the Braille program. It's not always the quantity, but it is definitely about the quality.

I love the fact that our Maryland affiliate saw that model, thought it worked, so they thought, we can do this specifically for Maryland. So we narrowed the gap Cohort is graduating and they are anticipating the internship. There are 13 that know the NFB philosophy and will impact blind students and develop their potential.

We are not trying to devalue other teachers not exposed to the Federation, but we want to create opportunities to compliment the academic training with our lived experience and expertise. Because we have success stories that prove that our philosophy around blindness, the tools that we stress are important, really do work. I will talk later about how to recreate research to continue to validate that.

We teach our kids so they can get the self‑confidence and the problem‑solving skills to go out to achieve actual integrated employment. And I'm so pleased, who would thought that this would get applause at our convention.

(Laughter).

Outstanding. I appreciate Chai. And hats off to my young ‑‑ I would like to think I have something to do with it. I will claim it with Gabe on the AbilityOne Commission. They are really creating opportunities that otherwise wouldn't be existing.

Let's talk about unemployment. What is the percentage? 70% to 75%. People are like, it is more like 67% now. Let's not do that. Because when people say 67%, they say, something is working. No.

(Laughter).

It's not. Not until we get the Federation philosophy in our lived experience inserted and infused in everything out there. We will really be able to move this number. And I have to admit that we have been trying. We have been making a little bit of headway ourselves. We are going to create a real program that is have an impact, right?

So we started a lot with the mentoring program. We learned a lot working with the agencies. And what I personally learned is it is a failed strategy for us to try to take our philosophy and training and then put it into the framework that the agencies dictate. Can't do it. Tried. We had several projects try. And we want programs created for us and the agencies determine if they want to buy them as we want to provide them. And there are those that say no. They will be last in the list of success. We have five fabulous young people here this week participating in our Career Quest Program. And essentially, what that does is takes the whole Convention experience, offers it to the transition‑age youth, builds the framework to enhance other activities and they are better as a result. We will create the program that everybody wants to participate on. And Mississippi was just the brightest state to recognize they should do it first.

Let's give those five students an applause.

(Applause)

And we want to enhance our career fairs because they have served hundreds of job‑seekers to many as we have hosted it. But the employment career fair will help people understand the benefit of the blind people. And I will say what Chai was saying, we have to get our blind job‑seekers to understand that believe it or not, there's a positive to being blind when you are job‑seeking. Every day we leave our homes in the world that is not made for blind people. We have to problem‑solve and strategize in the moment every day to come up with solutions to problems. Who doesn't want that on their team? Who doesn't want somebody in the moment come up with something wonderful and beautiful to deal with a situation?

(Applause)

In addition to working with employers, we will do training with the VR counselors and rehabilitation. Once again from Mississippi, and other states, we are looking at reaching out to Washington and others to start really working to train the VR Council. Again, not trying to go against what they learned through the academic pursuits. Because we need someone to teach them to fill out paperwork and the forms, because RSA is going to require them to do that.

But we want to teach them how to work with blind people and how to inspire, motivate, hold accountable and make responsibility. We will have a real change in the numbers.

It is simply asking BAR agencies to step up to the bar of success by creating a Board more representative through the participation of blind individuals and making sure that blind people are working in the manager and executive levels. To make sure individuals that work for you have a way for their voices to be heard. So establishing a Committee of blind employees to give you direct feedback.

These are all common sense to us. But many of the mainstream agencies don't recognize that it is the game‑changer. But we are going to encourage more and more entities to sign our blindness parody pledge. The American Action Fund no doubt will sign straightaway. They have been meeting the standard for years. The Centers for the Blind, Blind Incorporated in Colorado and the Louisiana Center of the Blind already meet this expectation. And we are well on our way to make sure we hold agencies accountable. And the other area is research. We have to make sure as I said earlier our influences understand the impact of blindness.

In our research, we do things with museum accessibility, voting accessibility, and we host our JTB Law Symposium, the largest symposium of advocates that exists. And I would like to talk to you about the journal Of Innovation Blindness and Research. That's how to make the change many the research field.

Now that we are out there and people can research and get access to articles, more publications recognize our philosophy around blindness and integrating that into our research, analysis and conclusions. We have to build the space. And in the coming months, we will revamp this to concentrate on the resources and the energy to make sure that it happens. We have to make sure our lived experience and expertise leads the name.

We will move to closing by saying in the space, there's so much more. But I can't cover it all. But I want to mention one thing. We need to be the first individuals out there talking about inaccessibility. And we have been doing work empowering youth to make sure that you can have the voices. We are coming out with the inaccessibility form, which will allow you to talk about the inaccessibility products in home, et cetera, and it will give us the information to aggregate to our partners to make them good participants. And you can tell us if you found a workaround. We have the brightest people in this room that can fix problems in a way that no one else can think about. And we need to share that with everyone else.

Before I close, I would be remiss if I didn't say that we need leadership in order to get this done. We are more than we were in the past. We have been led by the hopes and dreams of our leaders in the past. But now as the organization grows, our strategies need to grow. And President Riccobono is the man for the job. He mentioned about the strategic planning. We are now getting ready to execute a new five‑year plan and need your active participation in the planning.

So yeah, we have our priorities, commitments, goals and tactics and will be getting data together and do surveys and develop key performance indicators, all that stuff, right? But we need you to actively participate. We will be collecting data. And I would love for you ‑‑ I forgot to say this early on, but we will be working with our communications team to push the information out, but we need you to do that because your participation makes it a big deal. You need to decide what the next 20 years will look like. Which programs will we keep? And which will we sun set? Which new ones will we develop?

We will do that by executing collaboratively the strategic plan. We will be led by the data. I mean, we will be better informed by the data but led by our hearts. We will continue the evolution of our dreams through our bond of faith and the value of capacity of blind people. All of the blind, not just the ones we like, all of the blind. And through love, let's go build the National Federation of the Blind.

(Applause)

MARK RICCOBONO: Thank you very much. Anil Lewis. And thank you to all who participate in our programs. They only happen because of hundreds of people across the country.

SPEAKER: How about a door prize?

MARK RICCOBONO: Oh, sure. Why not. But hurry up.

(Laughter)

SPEAKER: Okay. Virtual, Kenya had to step away, but I'm going to read that we have three individuals who can earn $40 a piece. Dylan Timmon from Louisiana. Alicia Green from Illinois. And Patrice Lewis from Georgia. You will receive $40 if you send an email to prize@NFB.org within the next 30 minutes. And you need to use the code word "sun fun." Good luck with that.

Now, in‑person, we have a lot of door prizes. But I will tell you what, we are giving away at this moment ‑‑ a certificate from Safe Deposit Foundation. A certificate for the fundamentals training. We have done a great job of giving these ‑‑ thank you very much. I'm sorry if I misspoke the name before, but it is Safety Positive Foundation. And we are getting the fundamentals training section there. Plus, we will include with that, because we have so many, we have a fold‑up blanket from Arizona. And a $25 gift card. And the winner is ‑‑ Andrea Smith, Maryland. Andrea Smith. She is not here. So the next one seems to be ‑‑ George Ovikers. Georgia is on my mind. But not in person. Okay. Next is Jeanette Golson, Virginia. Arietta Woods, California. We have seen her. She's here. Stand up.

MARK RICCOBONO: Okay. Now for some very important announcements about the rest of the Convention. I would like to invite to the microphone, and in doing so, congratulate him on a fabulously run logistical Convention, he's our Chairman, John

JOHN: As the President said, it is important information. It is not all exciting, but it is very important. As you know, we are planning a little get‑together this evening. I hope most of you can make it. Actually, I hope all of you can make it. It is not a trivial thing to move 2600 chairs, move in another 145 rounds of ten, set them up with silverware and salads and iced tea. But the hotel can do it. They need as much time as they can get. They are always a little skeptical that we can clear the room 5 minutes after we adjourn at 5:00. I assure them it is possible. And every year we demonstrate that it is. So here's what I need you to do. At 5:00, when that gavel falls, your first thought should be ‑‑ I'm heading for the back door. As you know, the mantra is, stand up, turn around and head for the door. So some of you have been here before.

(Laughter)

It is important that you are ready to go when the gavel falls. Don't wait until 5:00 to pack up your Braille agenda, find the travel mug that rolled under your chair, pack up your coin collection that has been spread out in the chair next to you. Be ready to go. Plan to meet your friends outside the ballroom. Not the row behind you or in another section. Finish those conversations outside the ball room.

All right. So at 5:00, we are getting out of here. Then some of you, many of you, might like to go up to your rooms. We've got a lot of folks to get upstairs and elevators, as they often are in hotels when we are here, have been a little bit of a challenge. But we think we have some ideas and plans to help manage that more effectively. I'm going to turn the mic over to hear information just on how to do this.

SPEAKER: Thank you, John. And thank you to Dan Burke, as my very capable co‑Chair and mentor in this effort. If you have been an ambassador this week, will you say "aye." Give these folks a round of applause and thanks.

(Applause)

Fine job. For the elevators this evening, every year we get a little tweak. And they are a little different and not quite what we hope for. But here is the plan for the evening. We're going to ask that those of you who are on all of the floors, because this year we are in a rectangular hotel, to head for the elevators on the fourth floor. That's this floor. If you are looking for a clearer path, if you maybe have some anxiety or use a mobility device, stay toward the windows and you will find things clearer heading to the east and west banks. In the elevators, we have people that will be in the elevators to press the buttons. And we have folks in the elevators. We can't run them like we want to, but we won't need you to swipe your room key. You can keep that safely tucked away. So instead, we have a very capable group of folks who have agreed to be button pushers for about an hour. They will take care of helping you find what car is open and getting your floors pressed. That's the announcement that I have.

MARK RICCOBONO: I'm pretty sure when Corbb says mobility device, he does not mean long white cane or guide dog. So just keep that in mind.

(Laughter)

SPEAKER: At some point after you have gotten upstairs to make yourself look gorgeous and head back this way, you will want to know where to go. Obviously, the fourth floor should be your stop. We're going to have folks line up outside the ballroom doors based on the table number that you are sitting at. And as we discussed in the board meeting, banquet tickets, exchange banquet tickets have your number embossed on them. So you know when you approach the door where you are heading.

So here's the things to keep in mind. Think about your table number and you're going to associate it with a letter of the ballroom. For tables 1‑35, you're going to come in the doors for ballroom A. That's the back left of the room if you are sitting in your chair and facing me right now. Ballroom D. Those are for tables 36‑72. And tables A‑H. So if you have a lettered table or numbers 36‑72, ballroom D.

The tension builds for ballroom G. That will cover tables 73‑108. 73‑108. And we are a little bit big this year for the banquet. So we are opening an extra air wall for those of you with table numbers between 109 and 135. You are going to come in the doors for ballroom J.

If you are sitting at the head table, come in whatever door you would like. We will be forming a little bit of a cone of space in front of the doors. If you are a user of said mobility device, a wheelchair or a scooter, I would encourage you to come to the front of the arc close to the door.

We will open the doors hopefully at 6:45. Maybe a little bit earlier. And we will give our wheelchair users priority seating and get them set up. And then we will open for everyone to get to their tables. I ask that when you enter the ballroom, you please have your banquet table tickets ready in your hand.

It is useful that you already know your table number, but we want to make sure that everyone is coming in and definitely has a place to go and a seat to sit in. So please have the tickets ready.

7:00 is our target time for getting everybody in. It will probably spill beyond 7:00, but there's an important time to keep in mind. And that's 7:15. If you have banquet tickets, you want to be at your seat by 7:15. After that, it becomes open seating. And if you are later than 7:15, you may find someone has taken your seat. It is open seating. There will still be a place for you to sit, but it may not be at the table you thought you were going to be sitting at.

I think those are the important details. I will review three things before I turn it back over to President Riccobono. 7:15 is when you lose your assigned seat. Remember that time. The doors, again, ballroom A, tables 1 to 35. Ballroom D, tables 36 to 72 and A through H. Ballroom G, 73 to 108. And Ballroom J, 109 to 135. And my last reminder is at 5:00, stand up, turn around and head for the door. Thank you, everyone. Looking forward to joining you for dinner.

MARK RICCOBONO: Thank you so much, John. I urge everybody to use patient and kindness with each other. We do this every time and do it well. And we are all going to get to where we need to get to in the end. So let's make it a group effort.

I need to share the unfortunate news that in the attendance raise, Minnesota fell out of the top ten. Florida found another person somewhere, so Florida and North Carolina ended up with 67. All the placements though otherwise remain the same. Just to give you the top five real quick.

California, 118 in fifth place. Fourth place, Arizona, 127. Third place, Louisiana, 135. Maryland ended up in second place with 175. Texas found another couple people but didn't make it to 400, but they did get to 390. 390. John Bergen said we would get to 3510. I told him we would get to that; we did get 3489. So I think I owe John a Scheinerbach. It is better than last year at 2,490. And we had 1177 people register for the virtual Convention experience.

## We Have Work to Do: Reflections on Changing the Blind Employment Paradigm

Okay. We got three more great presentations coming up. And this one is continuing with the theme of work that we have had threaded throughout the afternoon here. And that is "We Have Work to Do." We value the lived experience of blind people and the wisdom we bring from our members in this organization. And as we have created new programs, especially our youth programs, that has infused a new level of understanding into our organization. Because we now have multiple generations of those who have grown up in Federation programs. And this afternoon, we have one of those individuals. She has been participating in Federation programs since 2006.

When she attended our "Rock It On" Science Academy and has never looked back. She also has been a major factor in providing leadership in various parts of the Federation. And she's affecting change in Corporate America where she brings experiences and understanding with blindness to corporate America. Because she works in Corporate America, we benefit from that as well because she brings her observations back to this movement to make it better and to make our community stronger and more effective in the work that we do in outreach to entities in Corporate America. So here to provide her perspective from both her experience in the organized blind movement but with corporate America is the lead consultant for Cisco Systems and a long‑time leader in the National Federation of the Blind, here is Mary Fernandez!

[Music]

(Cheers and Applause).

MARY FERNANDEZ: Thank you. Work, work, work, work, work! I'm so happy I got my song, y'all!

(Laughter).

I want to say thank you. I grew up in this organization, and this is legit the most high‑pressure speech I have ever delivered.

(Laughter).

At Cisco, I have been working for the last year in developing an accessibility strategy. As we work to lean in to an inclusive future for all, and that includes disabled people. So I am very excited today that the strategy work is mostly complete. And I'm really looking forward to perhaps seeing some of our executives join us in the NFB next year to tell us how to continue to enable collaboration for all including the blind.

All right. I have a lot ‑‑ I have a long speech. When I was a little girl, my mom used to tell me to "eat your books." This was her way of telling me that literacy and education would be the key to my future. Yesterday's agenda featured brilliant women like Susan and Karla Gilbride, and each one of them said, I want to say, "hey, it's me, I'm the stubborn one, it's me." As a stubborn child, I would like to say "no! I will not read!"

Thankfully, my mother is a literal force of nature. So one day after throwing a tantrum, my mother threw me in my bedroom with a Braille book and said, child, you will read! And I threw a tantrum. I screamed, I cried, I threw myself on the floor, but there was nothing but silence from the outside. Finally in utter desperation, I slowly and tentatively ran my fingers over the title. "Freckle Juice" by Judy Blume. And then I did the unthinkable. I painstakingly and ever‑so‑slowly opened the first page. And then I realized there was a bunch of copyright stuff on the first page and realized, when the heck are they getting to it? Intellectual property is not a thing for a 7‑year‑old. And then it began.

"Line up, Miss Kelly said. Time to line up." I was hooked. And most of all, I was hooked on Braille. And this stubborn child learned and up continues to learn that my Mommy is always right. So thank you, Mommy.

(Laughter).

And in that moment, she couldn't have been more right. Literacy was my key to education. And my educational career taught me that stories move me. That curiosity drives me. But the human connection feeds me. She knew the importance of Braille literacy for her blind child. And she would always say that if you can read, you can do anything. Hence reading Braille made it possible to gain the well‑rounded education. And for me, education was always the puzzle piece, but the first puzzle piece for that thing that is so hard for disabled folks, which is finding and keeping a job.

I acknowledge that to say that education leads directly to a job and most importantly a fulfilling career is an over simplification. And I actually would argue that the skills necessary for being successful in the job market really starts at home. And those skills are supposed to be reinforced in the school system. And then they are supposed to be cultivated and nurtured as we become adults and are able to make more substantive decisions around our careers.

But when you introduce blindness to the equation, the oppressive force of ableism tends to break the natural links. Today I want to answer three questions around unemployment. One, why is the unemployment gap so significant? What can I do as an individual to be more successful in the job market? And what can employees do to more meaningfully move the needle?

So let's look at the statistics. According to the U.S. Bureau of Statistics in 2022, the unemployment rate of disabled people was over 9% versus 3.4% and dropping for non‑disabled people. This means that disabled people are three times unemployed versus non‑disabled people. And the statistics go on and on. And you can break them any way you want, but the bottom line is that disabled people are disproportionately unemployed and under employed.

And this is particularly true when you have other marginalized identity. It is one thing to hear the numbers. They almost don't connect with us, but it is another thing to live it. When I graduated as a senior from Emery University, I had a 3.8 GPA. I had done ‑‑ thank you. That was a long time ago. And I remember the first semester of my senior year. I applied to an average of five jobs a day. And that sinking feeling when every single letter came back saying, thanks but no thanks.

I will also never forget after five years of work experience as a Paralegal and helping stand up the Edge Program in New Jersey, shout‑out to New Jersey. I was back on the job market. And as I sought something more permanent, I was happy to do something part‑time. So applied to be a sixth grade English tutor, which was a remote position. And y'all, I am happy to say I was as smart as a sixth grader, because I passed the test. I aced the application. And I got a call saying, hey, you got the job.
I was like, great, awesome, thank you!

Two things, one, I would love to test out the accessibility of the collaborative software you use. And two, I would love to get the materials in electronic format so I can be successful. And there was a long silence. And ten minutes later I got a call back saying the position was mysteriously no longer available. For a sixth grade part‑time English tutor. Most of us in this room what struggled with ourselves whether or not to disclose our disability while getting a job offer knowing the choice offers no enjoyment of a job after disclosing.

We have laws that are supposed to protect us. And we have commitments from companies around diversity, equity and inclusion and statements that say we really do want you here. And yet, digital tools we need to do our jobs every single day remain inaccessible.

Discrimination cases take years to resolve. And companies with bold DEI commitment statements published on the career pages seem to miss and forget that accommodations and accessibility are part of inclusion and equity.

At the heart of all of this, there's only one answer. And that is oppression. Sorry, my Braille display is interesting. There are different parts to oppression. There are ideological and internalized. These work together to shape a narrative that truly impact every aspect of our life. I don't have the time to go into that today, but President Riccobono, a whole presentation on oppression would be a great addition to next year's agenda. If interested, give me a call. I have a suggestion.

One important aspect of oppression is internalized oppression or ableism. This is the most uncomfortable form of oppression to acknowledge, because it really makes us listen to that voice that says, "you are not enough." And if you ask for accommodation, you are not as good an employee. If you ask for help as a blind person, you are not a good enough person. And all the voices really feed on each other and on the other forms of oppression. Because they make us in some form doubt our worth. And we know as an organization we reject this. And one of the most effective ways of countering internalized oppression is through community and collective action. And it is the counter narrative we provide for each other of strength, a narrative of resilience and that control of our future.

It is training, advocacy and the refusal to settle for second‑class in our organization. What can one individual do to break down barriers? How can we carry on when these companies are supposed to carry us ‑‑ the good news is that the NFB is made up of former stubborn children and have been dismantling barriers for years. And every one of us in this room has benefited from that. When there were no useful orientation trainings, we invented it and refined it. And then we taught it to each other. And if they will not teach our children Braille, we will teach them ourselves. And at the same time, at the same time, we will fight until they get that equal access in school.

As an individual, I found the most value in community. The community I have found here has been one of the most integral parts of my success. You see, when I arrived to the United States from Columbia, I was almost 8 years old. I was ‑‑ when my mom left Columbia at the age of 26, she didn't know English, didn't know where she was going, but she took a plane to JFK and landed in New York.

After working here for a year, she got a call that I was diagnosed with glaucoma, and it would be a matter of time before I was fully ‑‑ matter of time before I would be fully blind. My mother used this as fuel to remain laser‑focused on bringing me and my brother to the U.S. She knew that would be the only chance at fulfilling life. So I came here an awkward and stubborn child. I had no social skills, never attended school, and I don't think I ever understood what blindness was. All I knew is when my instructor put a short and stubby stick in my hand and told me to carry it, I promptly dropped it on the floor ‑‑ ‑‑ floor. But the uphill battle to read was a quick one. The battle to use a cane proved a lot harder. You see, I deeply internalized beliefs about blindness and disability. And a cane was a visible sign of my difference. Even when I didn't know ‑‑ sorry, by the time I was in high school, I used it every day and still felt like an outcast. No matter what I did, I was either invisible to others or felt like the most conspicuous person in the room.

It wasn't until I was 14 that my feelings about myself began to shift because I became a part in New Jersey for low‑vision students and I met Shirley Washington. And one of the mentors who made a big impact on my life, Joe Ruffalo. Joe gave me my first real lesson in advocacy at the National Center, and I really wanted to do this Rock It On Program. And he was like, there's Mr. Riccobono, there's the ban in charge. Go talk to him. So I did. And the rest is history. Here I am.

(Applause)

Finding community equates to finding belonging. We know that blind people are not a monolith. But at the same time we have a shared lived experience that we all understand. And we understand the false narrative around blindness. With the NFB, I found my little tribe. And that tribe has carried me through the hardest parts of my life. So all of us in this employment journey, listen, it is hard. It is brutal. It is awful. It is demoralizing, but it is a lot harder when you do it alone.

It is harder when we have no one to turn to tell them how uncomfortable it was when the interview turned from our qualifications to a disability training. I would encourage you to all find and stay in this community. And not everybody in this room is your cup of tea and that's okay. And some of us are, so find us and stay with us.

Participating in the Federation sparked a passion and my gift for advocacy. As a little girl, y'all, I was always looking for the injustice to right. And when I came to the NFB, I understood why I felt like an outcast and that Braille was denied to children like me. And that babies were taken away from their parents because their parents were blind. I said, this is it. This is what I have to fight for every day.

The NFB has also sharpened my leadership skills. I delivered my first speech at the NFB NJ Convention when I was 14.

(Applause)

I led affiliate student divisions. And the leadership skills quickly transferred outside the NFB. And I became involved in after school programs and clubs and really Dove head‑long into understanding what leadership meant. And I learned that leadership does not spring from positional power. But rather from the actions we take to influence change.

(Applause)

And that is something each and every one of us can do no matter where we are and where we sit.

As I have gotten older, I identified the values that carry me everywhere. Values that were instilled by my mother, nurtured by the Federation and implemented by me. I value integrity, honesty, hard work, collaboration and authenticity. I conduct myself with courage, including the courage to speak truth to power. And that's something I learned in this organization.

(Applause)

I say all this to bring several things to the forefront. First, instilling confidence, reliability and resilience starts at home. Letting our children take risk. Letting them know that, yes, they are wonderful and have gifts. Not because they are blind, but because they have very specific gifts and talents. All of these contribute to shaping future employees and future leaders.

Second, that in face of oppression, we as a collective are the best to develop each other's gifts and talents. We provide ‑‑ wait a second.

(Laughter).

Got it. We provide a space where we support each other but also constantly challenge each other to grow. And when the world won't provide, we fill in the opportunity gaps to ensure that our youth have a full and well‑rounded set of life experiences.
Are we perfect? No. Being disabled does not mean that we do not hold ableist beliefs, we must always work to dismantle them. Even as we push each other, we must find ways to uplift each other and not fall into the trap of oppressing each other. We know ‑‑

(Applause)

We know there isn't one right way to do blindness. And we must provide space for that. We know that blindness is often accompanied by other disabilities. And we must cultivate spaces where those of us with multiple disabilities can thrive.

As I think about employment and the collective movement, I keep coming back to the evolution of our own organizations. Today we are having conversations about our identities taken together and how they form an intersection inseparable from how we experience the world.

When I started in the NFB, I embraced this idea that blindness was just a characteristic like my hair. And y'all, I have gorgeous curly hair. But as I have grown into my work and dived into my entities, I actually think disability is far more than that. My disability is part of my identity. You see, if I had the same hair in 20/20 vision, I probably would have access to instructional materials in graduate school. However, because of my disability, I did not.

And so, this is also impacted by my other identity, such as my gender, skin color and language. And I no longer believe that asking for equal access is actually enough. Rather in my work, have to advocate for equitable access.

(Applause)

I'm glad you like that.

(Laughter).

That is to provide the tools and resources that individuals need to be successful. Equity is equality and providing stairs for everybody. Equity is providing stairs, elevators and ramps in equally convenient places so people can choose their path.

(Cheers and Applause).

And because equity is much more complex, that means there isn't a simple solution. In his speech, "The Nature of Independence" Dr. Jernigan wrote ‑‑ I am getting there because I want to do it justice. Unless you make advances over what we have done, you will in a very real sense fail to keep the faith with those who have gone before you and those who follow. And I challenge us all to stay on this path of seeking not just equality but equity. Because if freedom is the right to choose, then equity is the path to freedom.

(Applause)

Thank you. Employers I have words for you. Any employers in the room? Okay! There are three best practices I want to leave you with. First, design with us, not for us. Oftentimes the employers ask me, oh, my god, so what can disabled people do? And how do I hire them? And where are they? And then programs are launched with names that include words like "differently abled" and "special talents" and "uniquely gifted." I dare say that we are all "differently abled" but not all blind. Here's the good news. You are here with us. So you are already in the room where it happens. And so, engage with us to understand the value that we bring. And yes, it is going to be messy and difficult. But when we work with each other, we create talent‑based strategies which truly open up opportunity.

Second, let's stop performative hiring. A lot of times, the Fortune 500 competition showed up and they were going to see who was going to hire the most disabled workers. I showed up and they said they were looking for internships. Being curious, I walked around and said, is there anything for me? They said, nope. Friends, it is not enough to hire at entry‑level.

First, when you hire talent at entry‑level, ask yourself, what am I doing to develop talent into true leaders? How am I removing the barriers? And also, disabled talent is far from just being entry‑level talent. We need to really shift the ways we think about what executive leadership looks like, because executive leadership is blind, is deaf, is disabled, is autistic, is dyslexic. Do not put it on us to be good enough to break your glass ceiling. It is your job to take off your own roof.

(Applause)

If you do these two things with us and critically assess and revamp your recruitment strategies, then you start slowly to reach to the higher fruit that will stretch ‑‑ that stretch will get you to brush the tips of the branches of belonging. Belonging is a sense that each of us is fundamentally valued and our uniqueness is treasured. I will tell you now, there's only one week in the year I feel like I truly belong, and it is in this Convention.

So all of us in this room, my ask is to not only give back but to always pay it forward. Mentoring, advocating, connecting, these are all ways of paying it forward. So I will leave you with this question. What will you do to pay it forward? In that spirit, I want to pay it forward today. For the stubborn child who refused to accept society's narrative about her blindness.

For every person in this room who is just finding their community and for every parent who fights every day for their child's future without limits. I'm going to say this in Spanish first. And then I will translate it.

(Speaking Spanish)

I love how half the room understood that. In honor of the woman who raised me to be courageous, fearless, authentic and a strong advocate, I am now pledging ‑‑ wait a second. Let me not say the wrong number now.

(Laughter).

$3,300 to the NFB in honor of Clara Roman, my mother.

(Cheers and Applause)

That's $100 from every year that there's been NFB. We need to educate our youth to push the boundaries of what we have been told is possible. Education has been the touchstone of my success. My mother, the unwavering support. And the NFB, the community that has helped me and on whose shoulders I stand.

MARK RICCOBONO: Great job. Great job. Mary Fernandez, everybody.

(Cheers and Applause)

Those who left early for the banquet, they don't know what they missed. And we are going to get to some door prizes, don't worry, but we have another very important presentation here. And it is too bad that the folks who had to leave to get ready for tonight are going to miss this as well.

## Working Together to Elevate the Blind in America: A Leader and Partner of the Organized Blind Movement

MARK RICCOBONO: This is Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee who earned a B.A. in Political Science from Yale University with honors. And she followed that up by getting a JD from the University of Virginia Law School.

She is serving in her 14th term as the United States House of Representatives Member. She represents the 18th Congressional District of Texas centered right here on Houston. She has been in front of this audience before, although not at National Convention. She presented at our Congressional Reception during the Washington Seminar. But we are here now on her turf, and I assured her, and I think you will back me up on this, she said, how has the hotel been treating you? I said great. She wondered out loud if we want to come back. What do you think?

(Laughter)

Well, when the time comes that we may come back, I think we may find that Sheila Jackson Lee is providing leadership in a different way, because she has announced that she's running for Mayor of Houston.

(Applause)

So here's a true champion of equality and a friend of the cause of the Organized Blind Movement. Please Welcome Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee.

SHEILA JACKSON LEE: Welcome! Howdy! Let me take a moment to thank my friends at the Hilton Americas. I am always checking. This is a great hotel. Built with hard‑working hands and union labor. We are excited. We are excited about their commitment to people. Jacques, the leader of the hotel, does an outstanding job. I'm excited when you think about the conventions in years to come, you will put Houston, Texas, on the map!

(Cheers and Applause)

Let me take a moment as well to thank our President, Mark Riccobono, for this introduction. But also his leadership in this National Federation. He has taken it to another level. We know the National Federation in Washington, D.C. Give Mark a big hand.

(Applause)

I am grateful to have been greeted by John and certainly our National President, Norma. We have visited in Washington and certainly I'm so glad I was able to take from Maryland my great friend Gabe who has been working with me on climate change. They are all great. They don't let anything stop them. Give them a very big hand, please.

(Applause)

And how about Mary Fernandez? Give her a round of applause. Please make sure that I continue to the encourage you to visit your representatives to visit in the United States Congress. If you ever have an opportunity to go, your only answer should be yes, yes, yes. But in any level of government, local or state, your answer should always be, when you can go to make a fight to make the lives of others better, you show up! You show up!

(Applause)

I love the words of Martin Luther King who said injustice anywhere is an injustice anywhere. And if there's an injustice for people who are living with visual concerns, impairments and there's an injustice around the corner or in another state, it is an injustice everywhere that must be stopped.

We should have a nation where there's no bar for people living with disabilities. No bar. We should look with every moment to ensure that the nation, our states, our cities and counties, our villages and rural communities should all have as their mantra, as their standard, there will be no bar, if you will, to persons with disabilities. That is the crux of what we should be doing.

And let me thank you again for allowing me or inviting me to come. It is my purpose to try to as carefully as possible send you and give you an important part of the work that we are doing. And it is certainly important for me to be here and to work on these issues. It is empowering to see so many people gathered here with the purpose of training, support and information for the blind community. That is the goals, aspirations and of course the motto and strength of the Federation.

The National Federation of the Blind is a community of members and friends who believe in the hopes and dreams of people living with visual impairment. They, too, are America. And we should acknowledge that they, too, have the access to the wonderment of the Constitution that says we have come to create a more perfect union. And that the Bill of Rights provides us with the right to free access, due process, the 14th Amendment of Equal Protection, none of that is denied to those living in the country with an impairment. You, too, are America!

And in this week that we all become red, white and blue, we are teary‑eyed about the birth of the nation and the freedom of its democracy. This is the right week to be here from July 1 to be able to commemorate the nation's birthday founded on freedom and democracy for all! For all!

You are much more than the visually impaired. You experience the world through sound, sensation and touch to make sure that they have the freedom to pursue the American dream. That is what July 4th, the nation's birthday, is all about. Freedom is never free. Our soldiers go off to battle. And those visually impaired are veteran soldiers who got their wounds fighting for our freedom in this nation. Freedom is never free. It requires an effort on the part of people of good will to make right the wrongs in society. Which includes not having an equal access and opportunity for people with disabilities and those who are visually impaired.

Let me explain affirmative action. No, I did not like the decision that was made, because affirmative action is more than just dealing with a person's race, ethnicity or religion. Affirmative action is affirming the wonderment of this nation, the beauty of diversity, that we all can sit together and be empowered at the seat of empowerment. That's what affirmative action is. And to be able to shut the door, close the door, it impacts people in different walks of life and impacts people who are ‑‑ who are disabled. This affirms the right of all persons to have access to institutions of higher learning and involves everyone who may be left out or left behind. Everyone should have an access to institutions of higher learning. And you do that by affirmative action. Wrong decisions, wrongheaded. Just open the door and let everyone be a part of this effort.

And let me as well express my concern with the idea of how people are assessed. Persons with visual disabilities note that too many people make assumptions about mental acuity and ability based on the perception of what a person with a visual impairment can and cannot do. How can you do that? Talk to them, interview them, become their friends and know the genius that is there. This view harms the ability of those with visual impairments to progress in light and to have access to opportunities.

As a member of the House of Representatives, I have sought to increase awareness on the skills and capacities of a person with disabilities so that my staff and fellow members of the House can learn to look past whatever disability is, in this instance, visual impairment, and see the real person, a fellow American! A mother, a father, a sister, a brother, a child. This does not mean that our society should be blind to the important contributions that persons with visual impairments can make.

For example, I previously hosted women with disabilities strengthening roles and responsibilities in peace‑building and politics. The fifth installment of the women peace and security Capitol Hill briefing.

Along with peace and security, I have been able to provide a place for international women and women in the nation to come together, women with disabilities, strengthening roles and responsibility in peace‑building and politics. There's no exclusion to people with a disability. They have the door open to everything.

I have lived what I have said. I was delighted to have a Texas Tech Fellow in my office by the name of Ashley. Ashley was a bright, Engaged Fellow in my office put to work on projects just like Other Fellows. She was born with tinnitus and a genetic condition that causes blindness. Why should I look to her different? She brought to me the best, the greatest of her talent. But she did not allow that to deter her pursuing goals, which included spending a summer in the Congressional Office with all the moving and shaking and different parts and meeting people. She was a Great Fellow in our Washington, D.C. office.

(Applause)

So those of you on the rise coming out of high school and college, those doors are open to you as well. She was faced with adversity from childhood and able to overcome obstacles such as when people were not prepared to teach her, she found Google short‑cuts, typing on Braille keyboards and receiving assistance from her service dog, good‑ole Truffle. Truffle knew what he was doing. We had fun With Truffle. And I see a few Truffles in the room. Because of her intuition, blindness did not hold Ashley back and she made significant contributions to our office with ‑‑ we provided the necessary equipment in our office that should be provided to all.

(Applause)

Legislative priorities in the National Federation of the Blind should be known to all members of Congress and should be noted and inspire me to seek positive change through Congress.

Just as an aside, this is not dealing with those visually impaired but to tell you how seriously I take the fight. I had a young man who graduated from Annapolis who stuttered. And he was therefore not seen to be able ‑‑ after four years of doing excellence in Annapolis, to be able to move into the Navy. That was not something I took lightly.

And we went up almost to the President of the United States to ensure that he would have the respect. But what we ultimately did was we changed the law that if you get into the Academy, whatever your challenge is, they will help you and you will get into the particular military force that you are getting in, they will find a way to put you in there.

(Cheers and Applause)

Hard work cannot be ignored, can it? If you are a hard worker, no matter what your disability is, you should be in the mix, should you not? I love it. We work with the National Federation of the Blind. And so in the 110th Congress, I introduced HR‑420, the Bill of Veterans Affairs to establish a scholarship program for students seeking a degree or certificate in the areas of visual impairment and orientation mobility. Let's get more professional staff to work with our community! And those veterans that come home, give them that opportunity. I strongly support the application of technology to fully open the world to persons with visual impairment.

Ashley had to develop her own mountain until she found Google searches and others to help her. In the 116th Congress, I co‑sponsored the diabetic Vision and Blindness Loss Act providing Medicare coverage of the digital retinal imaging with remote. Interpretation used to detect or assess a certain diabetic condition. The citizens with Medicare or Medicaid must ensure beneficiaries that receive such services are also given information about available diabetes self‑management training and that such training includes information about the importance of annual eye exams.
I am saying our two distinct funding for healthcare should be in tune to people visually impaired and give them the resources and direction so their care is good care. Good care.

I also supported the Helen Keller National Center Reauthorization Act for adults and youth that are deaf and blind for the center of federal endorsement. We went on to co‑sponsor a bill that requires non‑visual access standards on electronic devices to create a new office within the Department of Commerce to enforce what we are doing.

(Applause)

We went on to do other legislation. The Pedestrian Safety Enhancement Act, which you should know about. Which required motor vehicles to reduce and maintain a minimal level of sound while operating that they would serve as a method of alerting the blind and other pedestrians.

(Applause)

Blind Persons Return to Work Act to allow for blind individuals entitled to disability insurance benefits through social security to receive a variable amount of monthly insurance so they can work!

(Applause)

We should keep the doors of opportunity open. For example, the websites and software application accessibility would end website and software application inaccessibility for blind Americans. We want that! More than 307 million Americans use the internet and 81% of Americans say they access the internet at least once each day. Let us not keep blind Americans from having the full opportunity to be able to access it.

According to the American community survey conducted by the U.S. census, there are 41 million Americans with a disability. This means millions of disabled Americans and those visually impaired shouldn't be kept away from the doors of opportunity. Many businesses are required by law to make their websites accessible. We need to make sure that the Federal Government is in sync with that and working with you.

(Applause)

We must make sure the sites are accessible. Along with others like the medical device, I'm really supporting that, Medical Device Non‑visual Accessibility Act 2023. That must become law. And the transportation To Competitive Integrative Employment Act, they must become law. We must make sure if you have a medical device, you know how to use it or you can use it! You have to get healthy, too!

(Applause)

Our community has about 10% of nose who have a disability. The numbers are probably higher. And according to the CDCs Health initiative, more than 60,000 people in Texas report blindness or severe difficulty seeing even with glasses. More specifically, according to the Houston State of Health, 2.1% of Houston's population is blind or have vision difficulty. That's a whole lot of people. It may not seem like a large number, but it is. And these Houstonians can be overlooked.

I am barring discrimination against people with disabilities. We are not going to do that. In Houston, 37% of working age 18 to 64 with disabilities are employed compared to 76% of those without disabilities. We want full opportunity for work. And we want full opportunity for the glory of this great nation.
As I con collude, let me say that among those working in Houston, more than 30,000 people or 37% workers with a disability are earning less than $25,000 compared with 38% of those without disability. 57% are learning $25,000. And it is far different from those without. We should want everybody to have a better quality of life, a decent living and a livable wage. That should be our goal as Americans. We should stand up and be counted.

As we celebrate the nation's birthday, be reminded that they flagged persecution, they came to a nation to see the brightness of opportunity and freedom and equality and diversity. And they wanted to worship without fear, live without fear, that's what America stands on. And that's what we should give to all those, no matter who they are, under the red, white and blue of this nation, it should be a flag that says ‑‑ no matter who you are, we are standing with you! So my roll call is the software is for blind Americans to return to work, and the Transformation to Competitive Integrative Employment, that's your message to America. That's your message to the United States Congress! That's your message as Americans.

You are here, free, under the bright blue sky. You are Americans. You, too, deserve the freedom and equality that should be given as a member of the United States Congress. And yes, to lead the City of Houston, it will be proclaimed, no band, no bar to disabilities and people with disabilities. Please be reminded we will not bar them, we will not bar people. We will open the doors of opportunity! God bless all of you. And God bless the United States of America!

(Cheers and Applause)

MARK RICCOBONO: Beautiful. Thank you so much. God bless you.

SHEILA JACKSON LEE: I want to provide a special Congressional Resolution. This honors the National Federation of the Blind in its 83rd National Federation of the Blind Convention in Houston, Texas. It chronicles the great history of the Federation, how it has given people hope, it has held the hands of opportunity, it has spoken clearly to the leaders of government from the President to the United States Congress.

And it concludes by saying ‑‑ your contribution and commitment to the City of Houston and the spirit of the great State of Texas and the United States of America, it is deserving of the accommodation, respect and admiration of the United States Congress, Sheila Lee Jackson, July 6, 2023. We will place this in the United States Congressional Richet in honor of the National Federation of the Blind. Let's take a picture here.

(Cheers and Applause)

MARK RICCOBONO: Beautiful. Thank you for your service. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you so very much. Thank you very much, Congresswoman.

## Digital Access for All: Leading the Way in Advancing the Right to Live in the Twenty-First Century

(Cheers and Applause) all right. Hang in there with me, because we have one more awesome presentation. And I'm so excited about this. I am disappointed that this gentleman could not be with us in‑person. He had a last‑minute thing that prevented him from being here with us. But he is with us on Zoom. We are honored to have him here. So he's ‑‑ he's worth staying for.

And I appreciate everyone hanging in here with us for this. And he's a retired member of Congress who served in the 15th Congressional District of California from 1979 to 1989. He started his career as a staffer in Congress working for Congressman Sisk. When the Congressman decided to retire, he ran for the seat.

Earlier in his career, he was diagnosed as having epilepsy. And when he ran for Congress, in the very first election, his opponent asked the question of how people would feel if their Representative went to the White House. And when their Representative went to the White House, he had a seizure, how would they feel? Well, the press called him up, called Mr. Coelho up and said, well, what do you have to say to this criticism? He thought about it for half a second and said, well, for about 13 years, I have been providing service in Washington, D.C. And I have known a lot of people who have gone to the White House. And they have had fits. At least I would have an excuse!

(Applause)

His colleagues in Congress credit him as the Chief Architect of the Americans With Disabilities Act. Although he's been out of Congress for 30 years, he keeps up the fight. And he has taken on our fight for digital access, which is why we are so proud to welcome him here to our virtual stage. Without any further delay, here is a true champion of equality. Here's Tony Coelho!

(Applause)

Well, we hope we have him. Do we have him? All right.

TONY COELHO: Hello!

MARK RICCOBONO: We got him! Go for it.

TONY COELHO: I had trouble getting connected here. First off, it's great to be with you at your National Convention. And what I would like to do to begin with, I don't know if she's still there, but why don't we give another round of applause for Sheila Jackson Lee. She's one of the great members of Congress. I served with her there. So Sheila, we will all give you a nice round of applause. Your comments were great.

(Applause)

All right. So good to be with everyone. I'm sorry I'm not able to be there in person. I was setback yesterday, but I'm happy to be with you today.

I also want to express sincere gratitude for being invited to speak to you. To your President, Mark Riccobono, wow, what a great leader he is. To the Federation's Board and staff of the NFB, as members of this organization, you also deserve to be acknowledged for the work you're doing to lead us towards a more inclusive world. It is impressive and incredibly important. And more inclusive world perhaps the final frontier and the fight for equity.

The fight for equity and justice has been a long one including historic efforts of African Americans, the Voting Rights Movement and the rights of LGBTQ communities among many others. As disability rights advocates, we have learned the lessons of activism well throughout the years and our time has now come. From occupations of federal buildings and the crawlings of the Capitol steps to the support of the ADA to draft, lobby and pass a historic piece of legislation to protect our civil rights, the disability community has come a long way. There's no doubt we have also all fought our own personal battles as we fought equity for our community. Doing so has been my life's work. In the Senate I worked closely with Senators Ted Kennedy, and Bob Dole plus many others. To seek the passage of the Americans With Disabilities Act.

When the Bill stalled in Committee, we needed bipartisan support. And President Bush, supported the passage having personally learned the tragic cost of exclusion, seeing his young daughter who had a disability pass away. But to get to that point, tremendous work was needed to bring the nation to the point where people with disabilities could demand these same basic human rights as anyone.

Watching Papa Bush sign the ADA into law is something I will always remember. We all know that the struggle for equity was not won that day, but it marked a terrific new milestone for our community. Since then, we have worked alongside to make sure the protections and entitlements of the ADA wouldn't be thrown aside. When the Supreme Court amended the ADA, we fought hard to make sure the ADA Amendments Act not only protected but in fact expended our rights. And we reversed the Supreme Court's decision.

When President Obama called for the passage of the healthcare Act, we wanted to secure healthcare for millions. And when President Trump attempted to reverse it, the disability community marched to ensure that individuals in need, disabled or not, would continue to receive the healthcare they needed and deserved. Especially pre‑existing conditions.

Every point along the way the National Federation of the Blind and its membership, all of you, has been front and center in the fight for full inclusion in society. Now as you know, we are bringing the fight for inclusivity to the digital access to ensure that blind and low‑vision Americans and around the world may participate as faithfully in the digital world as they do in their respective communities.

Among the tragic losses of COVID where many in the disability community perished because of healthcare, we witnessed over and over situations where individuals were unable to continue their work or education because they could not access the internet.
It has been my pressure to work with John Beret, the executive Director of Advocacy and Policy, to work and draft legislation guaranteeing that everyone, including blind and low‑vision users, can fully participate in all things related to the worldwide web and mobile devices. The website and the Healthcare Accessibility Act was first introduced last September by Senator Duckworth directing the Federal Government to establish accessibility regulations for website and mobile application creators to adhere to. Also at this very moment, I'm working John and others in the blind community to get the White House to issue the ADA Title II Website Regulations.

(Applause)

We are on the cusp of a break through. This is an effort that we have been pursuing for 13 years. In 1990, when the ADA passed, we couldn't have fathomed how significant a role that the internet and digital connectivity would play in the daily lives of Americans. Yet here we are. Many have come to rely on the internet daily, hourly, for education, shopping, travel planning and communication. Millions of Americans cannot access the internet easily and independently.

We must achieve access so each and one of us can embrace and benefit from the transformational power of computing. It is simply a moral imperative and it makes solid business sense. Because of its clear and overwhelming impact, achieving equitable digital act sense is as significant ‑‑ access is as significant as anything the disability community has done. I put this at the same level as our fight for the ADA. I think it is a moral issue that millions of Americans are not able to participate in the internet explosion. I appreciate that over 189 different disability organizations have joined in this effort. They should.

As you were there when you joined in the fight for the A ‑‑ for the ADA Amendments Act and many other issues. In the civil rights movement tells us anything, it is that we are a community with much to contribute. And that when we make the world more accessible for persons with disabilities, it becomes better for everyone. That means what we do here in the United States to make the internet usable by all will affect more than 1 million people globally with disabilities.

Said another way, as the National Federation of the Blind works to advance the civil rights of the blind and helps blind people live the life they want, you in turn make the world a much better place to live. And for that, I am forever your partner. Thank you.

(Applause)

MARK RICCOBONO: Thank you very much, Mr. Coelho. We are deeply honored. We are glad you are okay, but we are disappointed you couldn't be here with us in person. Tony will be participating in the banquet with us virtually. So we'll look forward to that. And we look forward to a future convention when we can have him here in‑person to celebrate the passage of the website And Mobile Applications Accessibility Act.

TONY COELHO: I'm all for that. I agree.

MARK RICCOBONO: Excellent. Thank you for being with us. We look forward to speaking with you more this evening. All right. Bennett, you better get on it. Now, if you are in this room and your name is called, you better jump up and wave really quickly. Because we're going to move on the we do not find you.

BENNETT: I have to great door prizes to give away. The first one is a folding blanket with goodies in it and $200. That goes to Sandy North of North Carolina. Sandy North of North Carolina, are you here? Come on. Not here? How about Tamara Little of Alabama.

MARK RICCOBONO: If you can refrain cheering for your friend's name, we can find people easier.

BENNETT: Linda Dizzy from South Carolina. We got her. And now we have one more. This is at the end.

MARK RICCOBONO: Before you get to that, let me just say, those who have an assistive listening device and will be returning it after banquet, please, please, please bring your receiver, headphones and charger to the crew recovering those outside of the banquet room at the conclusion of the banquet. Please bring all of those items to the banquet so you don't have to go back upstairs. We love providing the devices, but we need to get them back. So please bring all of the pieces of your device to the banquet and return it to the table outside of the ballroom at the conclusion of the banquet. That announcement comes from Karen Anderson and Corbb O'Connor. Go for it.

BENNETT: Hello there. We are trying to work out logistics here. Okay. We have the final item as $600. So for those of you who want to leave, please do. How about Madison Flores of Louisiana. Are you here? Pipi Adams of Colorado. Are you here? How about Jessica Ellerbe of North Carolina? Everybody stood up, turned around and went to the door. How about Hermon Jones of Texas. I can't keep one the Jones', I guess. How about Kaden Pires of Rhode Island. I didn't think anybody was here yet. Jennifer Havert of Texas. How about Jennifer Durant from Oregon. My old home state. Jennifer Durant from Oregon? Anybody still here?

(Cheers)

How about Earnest Peterson from Colorado? Are you here?

MARK RICCOBONO: Remember the portrait studio will be open right outside the ballroom here.

BENNETT: Bryson Jones of Arkansas. We got him!

MARK RICCOBONO: We stand adjourned.