

Statement of The National Federation of the Blind

Before the House Committee on Resources,

Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation, and Public Lands

Presented by James D. McCarthy

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Chairman Pearce and members of the subcommittee:

My name is Jim McCarthy and I am pleased to have the opportunity to comment on behalf of the National Federation of the Blind (NFB). I am the director of Governmental Affairs for the NFB. My address is 1800 Johnson Street, Baltimore Maryland 21230. My phone is (410) 659-9314 extension 2240 and my email is [jmccarthy@nfb.org](mailto:jmccarthy@nfb.org).

The National Federation of the blind is this nation's largest organization of blind people. The vast majority of our members are blind as are all of our leaders. We often point out that, *of*, the smallest word in our name is the most important because it indicates that decisions made by our organization are decisions made by blind people. Therefore, we are "the voice of the nation's blind."

I want it clearly understood that my comments are only meant to be the views of blind people not of the broader disability community. I live every day with blindness, but do not have a perspective that permits me to speak to the access needs of all individuals with disabilities. Other witnesses on this panel will be comfortable speaking for the broader community, but they should not be understood to speak for the blind.

Accessibility as applied to the National Park system should be a concept that is applicable to the vast array of differing installations within its domain. Unfortunately, this may be easier said than actually accomplished. I will suggest broad principles to make installations within the system accessible to blind people with some more specific recommendations that apply to particular kinds of sites.

Blind people do not generally require significant physical modification to either the built or natural environment. Many of the sites within the system have been included because of their natural importance like the great parks out west. We do not believe that special changes to their environments should be contemplated because these are thought to offer us access.

People who venture in to these natural parks should expect certain challenges, which is probably why most of them visit. Trails should remain in their natural state or in the state that park officials determine is safe for their use. The perceived needs of blind people should never be a part of such determinations. This is so because in the experience of the NFB, when our needs are considered, most individuals not familiar with what the blind can or cannot do, vastly under estimate our abilities.

To expand a bit on this idea, park officials must avoid (but in the rarest of circumstances) denying blind people admission to parks because of their concerns for our safety. I understand that "direct threat" is a defense to a claim of discrimination under the Americans with Disabilities Act, but it should be construed most narrowly. Conditions should not be placed on admission of blind people to parks for the same reasons. The assumption must always be that if a blind person wants to visit a particular park, the person fully understands the risk being taken and wants to visit anyway.

When blind people think of access, we generally are referring to information much more than to physical ability to enter or travel within a place. Though blindness would not stop me from scaling the wall of this room, I doubt that I am able to climb to its ceiling unaided. On the other hand there may be text on its walls and printed material distributed here and blindness assures that I have no access to either.

Blind people miss information that the rest of society receives which may be our greatest barrier. Braille is the method of reading and writing that is most efficient for blind people and even the room numbers of this building and its elevators now have Braille. However, I think Braille signage on trails in the natural parks is probably not a practical solution.

To those familiar with the views of the NFB and the esteem we have for Braille as a medium for the blind to use for reading and writing, stating that Braille signs are not practical would seem to contradict all that we hold dear. However, though the information that could be placed on Braille signs would be extremely useful, most of the signs would go unnoticed by the precise people they were intended to help. This is so because I cannot think of any standard for their placement where

blind people could regularly find them when desired.

Technology may soon offer a suitable solution. Today there are devices known as talking signs that use infrared technology, a receiver held by a blind person and transmitters that provide information spoken through the receivers if they are pointed at the transmitters. It also seems likely that RFID tags will offer promise as a means of conveying information contained on signs to blind trail visitors.

For buildings in National Parks, Braille signage is critical to enhance access for blind visitors. As has become common, room numbers, rest rooms elevators and the like should have Braille signage because there are well-established standards for their placement. Braille signage should also be affixed to displays when print signage is offered.

The inability to see objects can create experience deficits for blind people, but this can be readily addressed. Parks should permit blind visitors to touch their holdings whenever possible. At our conventions, the NFB regularly has what we call a sensory safari where taxidermy animals found in the wild are made available to touch and this is always very well received. I realize that contact with live animals in natural settings or with delicate artifacts cannot always be offered, but in such cases, to scale replicas would certainly suffice.

Finally, for blind and disabled people, access is significant because it makes integration possible. Therefore, I would propose that the National Parks Service work with blind people to develop opportunities under the Randolph-Sheppard Act to offer products to park visitors. The Randolph-Sheppard program is the most successful program for the employment of blind people, but the numbers of opportunities are on a steady decline and the national parks have largely been unwilling to permit blind business people to operate under this program within the parks of this nation.

In conclusion, if success can be claimed for the Americans with Disabilities Act, it is most evident in society's greater expectation that Americans with disabilities will participate in the full range of activities available. Its emphasis on access for individuals with disabilities makes integration possible. However, though access may be important for all individuals with disabilities, a one-size fits all access solution will not work, and should be assiduously avoided.