

## 2021 LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES FROM THE BLIND OF VIRGINIA

### **Priority #1: Enable blind people to vote independently and accessibly**

**Action: Co-patron HB1888 (Patron Delegate Schuyler VanValkenburg) and SB 1331 (Patron Senator Bryce Reeves)**

**Issue:** The right to cast a private and secure ballot is a fundamental pillar of American democracy that is currently denied to blind and print disabled Virginian voters, as absentee ballots are not made available in electronic format such that a blind or print disabled voter can use screen-reading or other technology to complete and submit the ballot. Instead, these voters must rely on sighted assistance to complete a paper ballot, compromising privacy and increasing the risk of errors.

**Solution:** HB1888 includes a provision that will allow blind and print disabled voters to receive a ballot electronically, use a computer to indicate how they wish to vote, and print out the ballot to be mailed to their local election official. SB1331 is a stand-alone bill containing just these provisions. This process is largely already in use by uniformed and overseas citizens (UOCAVA voters).

### **Priority #2: Streamline the hiring process for Virginians with disabilities seeking employment with the Commonwealth of Virginia**

**Action: Co-patron HB 2140 (Patron Delegate Guzman)**

**Issue:** One in ten Virginians have a disability as defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. On October 27, 2020, the Virginia Department of Human Resource Management (DHRM) released its Progress Report on Employment Opportunities for Individuals with Disabilities. Though DHRM implemented a disability self-identification form, according to the report, individuals with disabilities represent just 1% of Executive Branch employees—well below the 5% benchmark set in 2017.

**Solution:** This action will support the increased hiring of people with disabilities into Virginia's government jobs and will enable data to be gathered regarding progress toward the 2017 hiring benchmark of 5%. Through this legislation, the General Assembly establishes hiring of people with disabilities as a priority of Virginia government.

## **Additional Priorities:**

### **Priority #3: Enable blind Virginians to live independently**

#### **Action: Support the Governor's budget proposal for DBVI**

The Department for the Blind and Vision Impaired (DBVI) provides employment and independent living training to assist Virginians who are blind, deaf/blind, or vision impaired to live productive lives. In 2020, the General Assembly approved \$1.9 million to support employment and independent living services. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the General Assembly unallotted the \$1.9 million for the DBVI. This year's Governor's budget request restores funding for independent living teaching (\$57,000 in 2021 and \$357,000 in 2022).

### **Priority #4: Add Disability to the Virginia Human Rights Act (HB 1848 Patron Mark Sickles)**

#### **Action: Co-patron HB 1848**

This bill adds discrimination on the basis of disability as an unlawful employment practice under the Virginia Human Rights Act. These changes help to reduce unemployment for blind people and provide protections from discrimination on the basis of disability in employment, thus modernizing the Virginians with Disabilities Act.

### **Priority #5: Make new crosswalks safer for drivers and blind pedestrians (HB1841 Patron Mark Keam)**

#### **Action: Co-patron HB1841**

This bill standardizes new crosswalks to use the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) approved zebra markings for crosswalks and tactile markings at end points. Tactile markings enable blind pedestrians to identify and safely navigate street crossings. Standardizing these features comports with VDOT's 2014 pedestrian policy.

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## **ABOUT THE NATIONAL FEDERATION OF THE BLIND**

The National Federation of the Blind is America's largest and most active organization of the blind. With more than 50,000 members, we are not an "agency" claiming to speak for the blind; we are blind people speaking for ourselves. In Virginia, we are organized into 14 local chapters throughout the Commonwealth, and into various special interest divisions.