

Open Letter on Sexual Misconduct and Abuse Experienced through Programs of the National Federation of the Blind and National Blindness Professionals Certification Board

Content Warning: Discussions of sexual misconduct, racism, ableism, psychological and other forms of abuse.

Dear Members of the Board of Directors of the National Federation of the Blind and Members of the Board of Directors of the National Blindness Professional Certification Board:

We, the undersigned, are victims, survivors, and witnesses of sexual and psychological abuse at programs, conventions, and blindness rehabilitation centers affiliated with the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) and/or the National Blindness Professionals Certification Board (NPBCB) and their allies and supporters. We are writing this open letter to urge action to be taken to reduce and eliminate the widespread instances of emotional/psychological abuse, sexual assault/harassment, racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, and all other forms of abuse within these agencies.

Although NFB and NBPCB both have codes of conduct and official mechanisms for handling such abuses, they are inadequate and not equitably implemented. Those who have come forward have faced retaliation for their efforts. This has included alienation from involvement, being excluded from communication, and serious damage to personal and professional relationships and reputations. Victims are often questioned and even when proof is provided, encouraged to remain silent in order to maintain the image of the above listed organizations and their affiliated agencies and programs. It has led some victims to withdraw from crucial training programs, step down from leadership and/or participation, and leave employment within these organizations. This issue is one of which many across the country are intimately aware and countless have been affected. We affirm that speaking openly and honestly about this is the only acceptable path forward.

We do not, of course, make this statement lightly. Many of us have benefited from attending and/or receiving services from these centers, programs, and conventions. We use some or all of the skills we learned at these rehabilitation/training centers every day. We have learned about technology, programs, laws, and resources at conventions that have changed our lives for the better. We have formed deep, long-lasting friendships that we cherish.

However, the recent #MarchingTogether movement on social media has brought into focus the prevalence of the following issues with NFB, NBPCB, and their affiliated training centers, youth programs, chapter meetings, state conventions, and national conventions:

- Sexual abuse - Inappropriate verbal remarks; non-consensual touching; sexual harassment; and rape;

- Child abuse – Sexual and psychological abuse of minors, including grooming, harassment, assault, and rape;
- Emotional and psychological abuse – Belittling, bullying, and demeaning participants; psychological manipulation and guilt-tripping; traumatizing and/or re-traumatizing, ganging up on students with differing perspectives during group seminars at training centers, and more;
- Racism – Racially-motivated microaggressions; racist comments; racist epithets by training center staff; training center students bullied for speaking languages other than English during their leisure time; students made to read aloud racist epithets during Braille classes; training center staff and students making jokes about participants' immigration statuses;
- Cultural and religious discrimination – Demeaning comments from training center staff about consumers' cultures or religious faiths; not respecting clients' wide variety of cultural definitions of independence and interdependence;
- Ableism – Shaming rehabilitation center consumers who struggle to complete center requirements due to other physical, intellectual, cognitive, or mental health concerns; rigid curricula that are not tailored to individual abilities, skill sets, and goals; pressuring students to complete tasks and assignments that lead to physical pain, fatigue, injury, trauma, re-traumatization, or degradation due to the presence of additional disabilities, mental health concerns, and chronic illnesses;
- Mishandling of reports by leadership - Unwillingness to take reports of abuse seriously, gaslighting, belittling, or threatening people who attempt to come forward; encouraging people not to talk about these issues openly in order to protect the reputation of the organizations;
- Failure to comply with mandatory reporting requirements to protect youth and vulnerable adults (which generally includes participants in programs geared toward people with disabilities).

Not only are experiences of abuse humiliating, upsetting, or horrifying in the moment, but many participants carry these experiences with them for the rest of their lives. Unfortunately, victims and witnesses are often unwilling to come forward or report their experiences because of, but not limited to, the following factors:

- Reliance on the services they are receiving and a fear of losing those services if they come forward;
- Reliance on the advocacy these organizations provide and a fear that they won't receive needed advocacy for discrimination they face in the future;
- Housing insecurity and the fact that rehabilitation center apartments or dormitories may be the only housing a consumer may have at that time;
- Fear of retaliation by training center staff, fellow students, NFB leadership, NBPCB leadership, and other members of the blindness community;
- Fear of financial consequences, such as lost or diminished scholarship or internship opportunities;

- Fear of marginalization, harassment, or loss of friends, mentors, and supporters within the NFB and NBPCB communities.

NFB, NBPCB, and their associated blindness rehabilitation centers should serve the blind community respectfully, ethically, and with clear codes of conduct in place. In order to achieve this goal, we make the following recommendations:

- By August 31, 2021, NFB and NBPCB must put clear policies in place regarding the swift and thorough investigation and reporting of physical, sexual, and psychological violence, harassment, or abuse. These policies will ensure that there is no financial retaliation, eviction from programs or housing, withdrawal of services, or any other retaliation against victims or those who report concerns of abuse through these mechanisms.
- By August 31, 2021 NFB and NBPCB must ensure that no member, employee, or consumer will face loss of rehabilitation services, loss of future advocacy services, agency-provided housing, or employment due to reporting allegations of abuse to supervisors, directors, or others in leadership positions.
- All allegations of code of ethics violations should immediately result in the alleged victim being sent information on victim support services in their communities.
- All allegations of misconduct should be investigated and handled by a third-party agency with professional expertise in handling investigations of abuse and harassment and who have no personal, social, or professional ties to either the alleged victim or the alleged perpetrator.
- All alleged victims of misconduct must be assured of the confidentiality of the proceedings and of their rights, including the right to have an advocate of their choice present.
- All alleged victims and alleged perpetrators must receive a summary of the investigatory process in their chosen format (print, large print, Braille, or electronic). They must also have the process summarized for them verbally before it begins and be provided the opportunity to ask questions and receive answers. Alleged victims and perpetrators must be provided with any needed accommodations, such as ASL interpreters, accessible meeting spaces, and communication support.
- All NBPCB certificate holders should be required to sign a waiver allowing NBPCB staff to contact their previous employers to inquire about the circumstances of their departure.
- Individuals who are found guilty of sexual or other forms of significant misconduct should be immediately removed from blindness rehabilitation center environments.
- Individuals who are found guilty of sexual or other forms of significant misconduct should be removed from all positions of trust in the NFB, including permanent loss of any elected leadership roles; bans from volunteering or working with youth or students of any kind; and loss of licenses issued by NBPCB, if not total expulsion from the organization.

- Individuals who are found guilty of sexual or other forms of significant misconduct should be reported within ten (10) work days to all members of the NFB Board of Directors, NBPCB Board of Directors, all NFB state affiliate presidents, chapter presidents, and national division presidents.
- NFB and NBPCB will form an advisory counsel made up of ten (10) survivors of sexual, physical, or psychological abuse, three (3) mental health professionals, and two (2) professional victims' rights advocates from outside of NFB and NBPCB to put forth recommendations of how NFB and NBPCB can make reparations to those who have been professionally, financially, or psychologically impacted by abuse, the covering up of abuse, and retaliation against survivors and whistleblowers. NFB and NBPCB will offer and publicize an open process for anyone to nominate themselves and others to this advisory council. This advisory counsel will offer open forums for comment and suggestions and the advisory counsel is strongly encouraged to take feedback during the 2021 National Federation of the Blind National Convention.
- Effective July 1, 2021, all NFB and NBPCB paid staff, Boards of Directors, state affiliate presidents, and national division presidents, as well as all rehabilitation center staff members, from instructors to administrators, should receive substantive, interactive annual in-service training from an appropriate, outside organization in EACH of the following areas. Click-through electronic training modules do not meet this requirement:
 - o Prevention of harassment, violence, and discrimination;
 - o Mandatory reporting requirements regarding abuse of both youth and adult consumers;
 - o The disability justice movement, in order for leaders to better appreciate, respect, and support the diverse disability identities of consumers, staff, and members.
- With financial and/or logistical support from the National Federation of the Blind, state affiliate presidents shall be responsible for orchestrating annual training in the areas listed above for their local chapter presidents and state-level division presidents. Click-through electronic training modules do not meet this requirement.
- Effective IMMEDIATELY, consumers at blindness rehabilitation centers must be allowed to say "no" to any activity that makes them significantly uncomfortable, and they should not be retaliated against for doing so by, for example but not limited to, being treated differently by staff, volunteers, and consumers, or having rights to which they are otherwise entitled withdrawn or suspended as a result. No student or staff member should be required to read aloud graphic sex scenes or racial epithets in Braille class. No student should be forced to do an activity through tears. No student should be told that "they signed paperwork saying that they would do whatever the instructors told them to do." No student should be bullied, forced, or coerced to do something that causes them significant pain or anxiety, or do something that exacerbates existing physical or mental health conditions. We understand that consumers at blindness rehabilitation centers benefit from leaving their comfort zones, but the decision to do so needs to be their choice. Students' physical, mental, and psychological boundaries must be respected at all times and in all circumstances.
- Effective IMMEDIATELY, no policies should exist at blindness rehabilitation centers that discourage consumers from going home on weekends, during the first month of training, or at any other time they are not participating in program activities. Alienating consumers from family and friends is an outdated practice. Concerns about family members "undoing our work" are ableist, paternalistic, and custodial. Consumers are people, not work projects.

- Each training center/blindness rehabilitation center should have a full-time mental health counselor on staff and a standing contract with a mental health clinic with several providers for a client to choose from if the on-staff counselor is not a good fit for them. This counselor could, among other duties, assist students in dealing with ableism, stigma, and microaggressions; mental health concerns; past and current trauma; personal and family concerns; and advising students on ways to pursue legal justice in the event of sexual or physical abuse. We encourage these agencies to consider making regular individual counseling sessions a part of each student's curriculum, so as to avoid any stigma involved in seeking such services. Group "seminars" led by staff with no professional experience in mental health counseling may also be provided, but they do not meet this requirement.

We recognize that the NFB, NBPCB, and its affiliated programs and blindness rehabilitation centers were founded to raise blind people's expectations of themselves and to provide them with the skills they need in order to be successful in school, on the job, and within their communities. But the NFB was founded in 1940. The first NFB training center was founded in 1985 and its philosophical and methodological underpinnings were developed in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. The values, ethics, goals, and priorities of blind people have evolved since then. What blind consumers want in the year 2020 is not what they may have wanted in previous decades. We don't want to be bullied or humiliated or have our boundaries pushed "for our own good". We value one another's cultural differences. We want those of us with additional disabilities, mental health concerns, and chronic illnesses to be regarded as first-class members of the blind community, worthy of high expectations, and afforded respect for our bodies, minds, and boundaries. And we won't tolerate sexual, physical, or psychological abuse or those who ignore, deny, or perpetuate it.

We are sincerely hopeful for action to be taken by the NFB and NBPCB Boards. We were encouraged that many of our points were acknowledged in the apology released by NFB on December 16, 2020. While we think this an excellent step forward, we insist that it be backed up by survivor-led actions. We thank you for your recognition of these top priorities of blind people today.

Sincerely,

(Note, to add your signature in support, please proceed to the next page of this survey. Signatures will be collected until Friday, December 25, 2020 at 11:59 PM Hawaii Standard Time.)

Original Signatories

Jasmin Thien
Ally Mendez
Danielle Montour (she/her/hers)
Kimberly Banks
Stacy Cervenka, MRC
Dr. Cynthia L. Bennett, Ph.D.
Jackie Anderson
Maida Avdic, MSW, MPA, PCMSW, PLMHP
Samantha Barrasso
Cee Blair

Peter Brooks, The Horace Mann Action Coalition
Lydia X. Z. Brown
Rebecca Cokley
Penny Duffy
Nicole D. Fincham-Shehan
Carrie Gilmer
Natalie Gross
Shafeka Hashash
Caitlin Hernandez
Bridgit Kuenning-Pollpeter
Elizabeth Lalonde
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Laurel H. Maury
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Cicely Morales
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Isabel Rodriguez
Victoria M. Rodriguez-Roldan, J.D.
Merry Schoch, LCSW
Justice Shorter
Arielle Silverman, Disability Wisdom Consulting
Lucy Sirianni
Sophie Trist
Derrick Tuff
Jessica Wilson

New Signatories

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Jessica Yu
Kyla Billington
Dimitrios Kouniaris NFB Member
Rebekah Robertson
Jennifer Duffell-Hoffman
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Yahya Khalid, he/him/his: Inclusive Design (University of Minnesota)

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Amy Jine, ally & advocate, transition program specialist for youth who are blind
Lakeria Taylor
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Aman Gill
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Daniel Miller
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Heidi Aulenbach
Sarah Blahovec
Tesfalem
Bianca Samaniego
Nefertiti Matos Olivares, Access Technology Educator; Cultural Accessibility Consultant; Community Organizer and Speaker
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Vee Tames (ally)
Georgina Taylor
Stephanie Hall
Regan Thibodeau, PhD, CDI, SSP/CN
Jade Kelly.
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Reuben Morris
Dacia Cole NFB member
Frank W Jones
Erica Bennett
survivor
Tasha Raella Chemel, Ed.M., MSW
Laura Jaffee
Christine Telford
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Kimberly Tedesco
Kara Goldrick, MSSA, LCSW
Jessica Callahan
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Rose Morales Waagan
Marsha Gephart
Miriam Stoner
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Kirt Ethridge
Aline Kelly-Costello - blind ally
Madeline Bright, Ally
Kathryne Hart, ally and parent of child with multiple disabilities including blindness
Nancy Alisberg
Sadie Meka
Ms. Laurel Whitney
Matt Hagen
yaya ramirez (they/them), disabled survivor showing solidarity
Veronica Becker
Kayleigh F. Bondor
Carly Myers
Caroline Moore
Jessie Rogers
Nallym Bravo
Honorata Kazmierczak, supporter, Retired Teacher, disability Rights Advocate
Barbara Grappone
Precious Perez
Zackary Derrick (Ally)
Jessica Hodges
Beverly J Williams
Stephen Clower
Justin Ekis
Sarah Russell
Sabrina Epstein
Ami S. Hyten, JD
Cal Montgomery
Lindsay Baran
Grace Trumpower
Ana Jacob: blind ally
Liza Rutherford
Alicia Hopkins
Kathy Cooper
Stephanie Woodward, J.D.
Jennifer Wolff
Chloe Crawford
Cami Renfrow
James Watson
Alyson Perry
Scott Blanks
Whitney Walker
Sarah Launderville
Matt McCubbin
Jason Edward Polansky, President, Capital Chapter of NFB of PA, Louisiana Center for the Blind alumnus
Kelsey Bell

Justin T Young
Joel Zimba
Rosina Foster
Rachel Bradley
Sophie Annunziato
Samantha
Julia Bazar
Lester Bennett
Matthew Langland
Priya Penner
Mayling Barnes(Ally)
Will Fried
Anna Landre
Kristen Witucki: MA, MFA, Ed.M; blind survivor of harassment in unrelated training program; blind ally.
Kia Yang
Brooke Benson
Taylor Dews
Anonymous Survivor
Bobbi A. L. Pompey, MA, CVRT, Survivor, She/They
Iyana Kellerman, they/them
Bronwen Tedesco
Heather Coon
MÃ;jire O'Donoghue
Justin Michael Champagne
Dorvell Stewart
Andy Smith, Braille Instructor, NFBNJ Member
Tosha Snyder.
Amy Billman
Phillip A. Magalnack,Justice of the Peace. Past affiliate 1st VP/Chapter Pres. NFB [CT.LS](#) 88. Experienced repercussions for doing the right thing.
Cindi Eskew Matthews, M. Ed, Teacher of Blind
Walter J Gephart I am the father of a blind young women and a member of the NFB.
Jason Meddaugh
Jim McCollum, Board Member, NFB of Connecticut
Daria Bannerman, MSW
Arden Alexandra Phoenix
Christopher G Reagan
Christopher Paulus
Jessiaca J evans Survivor
Dana Fink
Kathy Nimmer
Abbey Dalton (blind ally)
Brandon Peters, Secretary of the Nebraska Association of Blind Students (NABS)
Esther Gillyard
Amber A

Michelle Bernstein
Nick Cocchiarella, ally, graduate of Blind, Inc.
Chris Nestrud
Mia Ingallina
Caleb Elliott, MA, VRC, former NFB member
Mel Finefrock
Jean Fultz; ally, Parent of a blind child, sighted member of NFB, NOPBC, NYPOBC, Fellow (non-NFB/NBPC related) Survivor.
Nancy Urquilla
John Albarran
Isabella Barnett
Pratik Patel
Kat Bottner, Survivor/National Federation of the Blind of Delaware affiliate president.
Graham Harrison (they/them)
Haley Sumner
Lindsay Kerr
Faolan Cordero
Chaas Cordero
Ruthie Rayne Clark (survivor, ally)
Liz Bottner - CATIS, CVRT
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Jolly Beyene
Kris Foley
Toni Wilson
Lindsay Sloan NFB member, ally
Delia Garcia
Lauren Thomson
Jules Elizabeth Stark
Billy Lei
Seyoon Choi, Board Member, Missouri Association of Blind Students
Courtney Mazzola, L MFT
Patricia Longhorn
Carly Fahey
Clyde A. (Buddy) Brannan
Estelle Roos: Blind woman, Friend and ally to multiple survivors of sexual assault at the hands of the NFB, a sexual assault survivor.
India Scott
Ricky Enger
Sarah Nunes Korcz, NIC
Maura J. Loberg
Valerie Arlene Alcaraz, member of the blind community and ally to survivors
Julia Langlois
Louise du Plessis
Amir Rahimi
Molly Faerber

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Youme Nguyen Ly
Nancy Smith
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Lydia Olmsted
Kristi Peters, ally & mother of son who is blind
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Jeremy Fifield
Walei Sabry
Michael Hansen
Thomas Moore
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Laura J. Cummings - NFB member, ally, survivor
Frances Whittaker
Paul Brown
Crystal McNaughton
Pipi Adams
Casey Wolfe
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Margie Donovan
Juan Pablo Bello
Jennifer Hanvey
Ashley
Sarah Baebler
Paige Morra
Kayla Weathers
Ronnie Kellogg
Bhavya Shah (ally)
Martha Harris, NCUEB, rehab tech specialist, survivor
Kiersi Coleman
George Ashiotis - former Artistic Director Theater By The Blind
Jane Suh
Rachel Leibovich
Tara Fannon (blind ally)
Kelsey McAlister
Sarah Erb, Ally & Parent of a blind child
Aleeha M. Dudley, survivor
Sydney Warwood

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Sabra Ewing
BelÃ©n ChÃ¡vez
Erin Ross
Annabel Vazquez
SM Lesch MÃ¼ller, ally, special education teacher
Preston Radtke
Elizabeth Von Iderstein
Robin Mandell, blind woman standing in solidarity with survivors
Stephanie Palocz
Jennie Drummond, ally and public school teacher
Amanda Martins
Governor Staten
Michelle Good
Ashley Morgan
Sydney Bell (she/her/hers) -an ally and friend
Leslie Hernandez
Miguel Sanchez
Kelsey McAlister
National Office Staff Member (Survivor)
Melissa Black
Andrea Anderson
Sofia Webster
Sarah F. Wiles
John Spowart, ally
Davina Riddles (she/her) nfb chapter member
haley brown
Maria Gutierrez
Sylvia Vigil, member of the NFB.
Ari Jones
Benoit CÃ´tÃ©, blind
Cherice Fleming Togun
Raphael Togun
Amanda Meth, they/she, friend of someone who's blind
Kerri Johnson
Anna Beucler
Xianna Rodriguez
Heather Johnson-Skrivanek
Steph Ban
Lauren Siegel
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Jenny Battle
Andrew Battle

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CS Ahn
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Tina Reisner
Katie Nelson, member and ally
Holly Miller
Tess Gordon
Amanda, Chet, Helena and Viktoria Nachtmann
ND
Kate Borg-- ally, friend, supporter
Shawn Lambert
Michelle Wentzel
Patricia Renfranz
Nikki D.
Tony Childers Survivor of retaliation from CCB
Grace King, survivor
Maryann Paradise
Ling Tham
Amira Lucas, MA, LPC - President of Colorado Parents of Blind Children and mental health therapists
offenders and victims/survivors
Marina Reyes Lopez Mautner
Misty Dawn Bradley, Blind Supporter
Lydia Roth
tara sessa
Paige Furbush
Danielle Uttley
Ethan Hin Fung
Kyle Lucas, PhD, LPC - parent of child with low vision and licensed mental health therapist for offenders
and victims/survivors
Young Democrats of Massachusetts
Young Democrats of America Disability Caucus
Courtney Smith
Jenny Smith
Miso Kwak
Jywanza maye
Leslie Templeton (she/hers; Womens March)
Ash Strickland, ally to survivors
Khari Washington Sr.
Juan Carlos Gil

Saleica Hayles

Susan Tabor, NFB Member, retired LSCSW, survivor

Michael Chopra (Totally blind)

Alicia Butler

Kathy Cahill, MSW, Assistive Technology and Accessibility Specialist, ally

Jennifer Renee Echols MSW, Survivor, blind parent and advocate

Athena Hatfield

Shane Aguilera

Michelle Faulkenberry

Melissa Barry, parent, ally

Mary Swetka Yu

A. Margie Donovan, M.A.