

# Open Letter of Apology from President Riccobono

Wednesday, December 16, 2020

Content warning: the following letter addresses sensitive topics regarding sexual misconduct and violence.

Dear Fellow Federationists:

Many NFB members, former members, and people within our blindness community are hurting. For some, the pain comes from their lived experience of being abused or violated by one of our members and/or made to feel like no one else was listening or came to their defense at a Federation event or training program. For others, what they feel is empathy for survivors who were harmed by participating in the National Federation of the Blind, recognizing that we have not done enough within our movement and systemically within our community. We are deeply sorry that this is true and apologize for where we have failed. As the elected President of this movement, I carry the responsibility of this pain. I am profoundly sorry that anyone has been harmed by experiences in our movement. As a husband, father of three children, and leader who tries to live by a strong set of ethical values, I hurt for the survivors, and I deeply regret that I have made mistakes along the way. At each opportunity that I have to sit with my young children, I am directly reminded how fragile the balances are in our lives and how much our actions can have a lasting impact on others. I live with the regret and sorrow for the mistakes I personally made in dealing with inappropriate behavior in the past. Sometimes my mistakes have only been illuminated later through the honest reflection of a friend or the vulnerable sharing of someone who has been harmed. How do you adequately write a letter to apologize for that? How do you spread this sentiment to an entire movement of people including those who have left our organization? How do we, collectively, create an adequate action plan to promote healing, prevent future incidents, and continue our development of a culture that is welcoming, safe, and eliminates the barriers to bringing concerns forward for resolution? This letter attempts to explore those questions, but this is merely a single moment in these needed conversations.

Our hearts break for the survivors of abuse and sexual misconduct who have bravely shared incidents that have happened within our organization over the decades. During the past couple of weeks, a number of courageous individuals have shared painful stories about their experiences on social media and in individual conversations. We thank those brave survivors for sharing their stories because we recognize how difficult that is and how each story creates a unique set of emotions and challenges. We deeply regret that over our eighty years we have not handled each situation appropriately or been able to heal the

pain that such incidents create. We do not reject these feelings of pain. In fact, we want to find and establish better ways to hear them and continuously eliminate the actions that caused them. We have no intention of debating the circumstances of any instance. Instead we acknowledge that if a survivor was left feeling the situation went unaddressed, then we have failed. The membership demands we do better. I, as President, demand this of myself and expect it from our movement. We will do better. In addition to calling upon all Federationists to listen better, honestly reflect upon your own biases, and to actively align our actions to our words, I call upon you not to dismiss those who cannot believe that our intentions are sincere or those who have had the courage to come forward. It is our individual and collective action, positively focused on making things better that will create belief. That is what has been true for us since 1940, and it will continue to be true for us going forward.

Let us get down to the hard facts. Words appear to mean nothing without actions, so below I've outlined six steps that we are committing to in the near future. Before I list them, please understand that these are initial steps, and we are committed to exploring and implementing whatever policies, programs, trainings, or resources necessary beyond these steps to appropriately address these horrible situations.

## **Improvements to Reporting of Incidents**

We are currently thoroughly reviewing the pathways for reporting incidents and how those paths are handled. We are open to revamping all of the reporting mechanisms we have. We are in discussion with outside consultants who are expected to do a complete review of our processes with a specialized emphasize on sexual misconduct and harassment. We will rebuild all of our procedures if needed. We expect our revised processes to involve a third-party entity, but since we do not yet know how that will turn into actionable efforts within our organization, we cannot be specific about that process. Our hope is to be more transparent about our partnership and timelines for action during the first quarter of 2021. We hear you about the uncomfortable position some people feel is created by the current reporting system when a person must report through members they will later need to deal with personally. Regardless of the reporting mechanisms we maintain and create, we must be very clear on one point: Every elected leader of this organization must be prepared to take concerns seriously and to act upon information they are given as quickly and thoroughly as possible. Furthermore, the safety of blind youth who are under our supervision is our highest priority, and any incident that is discovered must be dealt with immediately.

## **Open Meeting and Supporting Survivors**

We are committing to hold an open meeting or series of listening sessions to discuss these issues and solicit feedback on what support and resources victims and survivors need. We have not yet detailed what the open meeting and conversations will be. Because we do not want to unintentionally contribute to further pain among survivors, we want blind people with lived experiences and our consultants to guide that process. In the meantime, we continue to answer calls and emails from Federation members seeking clarity about these issues and offering solutions that we will carefully weigh as our learning continues. We are grateful to those of you who have reached out directly offering your personal experiences as a guide to future development. The members of the Federation are expected to shape what we do, and your readiness to bring solutions makes a big difference. Our goal is to provide support and healing to victims and survivors.

## **Enhancing the Code of Conduct Work**

Prior to recent events and the stories that have emerged, we were in the process of considering and implementing several enhancements surrounding our Code of Conduct and its related procedures and programs. We have now paused those efforts. Why? Because we are listening. We have done horribly at messaging and sharing our internal procedures and our plans for effectively administering our organization's Code of Conduct. I say paused because we want to carefully evaluate where we are and our next steps guided by the expertise of anti-sexual-violence experts from outside our movement. If we must completely reset, that is what we will do. For now, our Code and existing procedures are in place to set expectations within our organization. We will carefully evaluate current grievances to ensure that they continue to be safely and swiftly investigated even while our procedures are under review.

## **Illuminating Expectations**

You may already know, but the board made its annual revisions to the Code and procedures process on December 5, 2020. When we went to post the revisions, we realized that the FAQ we planned to post after the December 2019 review did not happen. No excuses, that was a pretty big dropped ball. That document is intended to answer questions like what happens when a grievance is filed, how is information kept confidential, and what communications can a filing party expect? Overall, we have failed to communicate broadly the procedures we have been using. For example, we allow for advocates to participate with parties who are involved with Code of Conduct investigations. Moreover, these FAQs will also be informed and expanded based upon questions that continue to be raised. They will also evolve as we implement additional

avenues for raising concerns and for training members of the organization. We take ownership for the misinformation that is now circulating. Please keep those questions and suggestions coming.

## **Continuous Training**

Training on issues around misconduct and abuse is something we have only skimmed the surface of in the recent past. We have done a minimal amount of training for affiliate presidents and workshops at our national convention. We were not satisfied that our training was sustainable, so we have been seeking other partners. That has been unreasonably slow. No excuse, we understand. We are going to be putting together training with the specific goal of preventing misconduct and abuse at Federation events and to strengthen the level of comfort with reporting. We have also hired an individual to assist in a number of areas including coordinating training—that person only started on November 30, which is why we had not yet introduced her to the membership.

## **Consistency across NFB Training Centers**

A lack in consistency in practices across the three training centers that are affiliated with the National Federation of the Blind has been raised as a concern. It is worth noting that only BLIND Incorporated, the Colorado Center for the Blind, and the Louisiana Center for the Blind have made the specific partnership commitments necessary to be formally and officially affiliated with the organized blind movement. On a regular basis, I have been meeting with our training center directors with the specific goal of better aligning our practices and policies. There is more work to do there. We expect these centers to fully commit to our Code of Conduct practices and set the highest standard of professional practice in all programs. During the most recent revisions of our Code of Conduct, we discussed the topic of consistency in handling and reporting concerns at our centers. We will be conducting a full review and implementing consistent training for the personnel at each of our centers. I stand with those who have been harmed by any employee, contractor, or volunteer at one of our centers, and I am prepared to help eliminate ineffective practices and urge the termination of those employees and contractors (as well as the exclusion of volunteers) who violate our policies in this area. Let me also add that our training centers have made a great difference in raising the standard of training for blind people in this nation and all around the world. As a graduate of one of our centers, I share that pride for the training I received but also the pain that even one person coming through one of our centers would have had a harmful experience. The employees at our centers are some of the most dedicated and thoughtful folks I know, and they are committed to the safety and wellbeing of program participants. However, that does not excuse harmful incidents that have happened in our training programs. I know our centers

are committed to doing better. I know the executive directors and boards of each of these training centers will be prioritizing the advancement of these conversations. Most importantly, I know they feel your pain in a very deep and personal way.

Again, these are immediate actions and commitments. This is not a complete roadmap for the years to come, but it outlines some of the forthcoming actions we are focusing on. We know that we need to examine more ways to support our members such as mental health resources and the expertise of crisis professionals. Members of the Federation have a right to demand information about what is being done, and Federation leaders are expected to share that information. When we committed to the Code of Conduct in 2018, we made a commitment to a much-needed journey. Our commitment has not wavered even if we have not been outwardly demonstrating a commitment that you can trust. As leaders, we will continue to work to earn your trust, and we will remain committed to continuous improvement and an open dialogue for organizational change. We are committed to finding ways to heal that pain, while preventing any future pain that results from unacceptable behavior. We are going to need the ideas and support of the members of this movement to do that in a meaningful and effective manner, so all are welcomed.

You continue to be our wise teachers. You who have shared your personal experiences and who have dared to open yourselves continue to guide us. In the National Federation of the Blind, we value diversity, we strive to be fully inclusive, and we want to be the safe space for all blind people. Every blind person in this nation deserves what this movement has to offer, and we recognize we have work to do so that every blind person feels like there is a place here for everyone. We are going to get there together. We apologize that we have not yet made it all the way, but we pledge that the commitment is deep and it is real. We are not done with our changes.

With love and commitment, we are #MarchingTogether.

Mark Riccobono, President  
[officeofthepresident@nfb.org](mailto:officeofthepresident@nfb.org)  
410-659-9314

The National Federation of the Blind Board of Directors shown below requested that the President write an open letter regarding our commitments. By signing below, each of us affirms our support and commitment to the content of the letter above. Anybody with concerns regarding the content of this letter, the commitments that have been expressed, or potential incidents that may have happened at Federation events are welcome to contact any of the individuals endorsing this statement.

Pam Allen, First Vice President and Board Chair, [pallen@louisianacenter.org](mailto:pallen@louisianacenter.org), 318-251-2891  
Ron Brown, Second Vice President, [rb15@iquest.net](mailto:rb15@iquest.net), 317-213-7031  
James Gashel, Secretary, [jgashel0923@gmail.com](mailto:jgashel0923@gmail.com), 808-234-9259  
Jeannie Massay, Treasurer, [jeanniemassay@gmail.com](mailto:jeanniemassay@gmail.com), 405-600-0695

Denise Avant, [davant1958@gmail.com](mailto:davant1958@gmail.com), 773-991-8050  
Everette Bacon, [bacone@yahoo.com](mailto:bacone@yahoo.com), 801-631-8108  
Amy Buresh, [amy.buresh74@gmail.com](mailto:amy.buresh74@gmail.com), 402-440-4722  
Shawn Callaway, [callaway.shawn@gmail.com](mailto:callaway.shawn@gmail.com), 202-352-1511  
Norma Crosby, [ncrosby@nfbtx.org](mailto:ncrosby@nfbtx.org), 281-968-7733  
John Fritz, [president@nfbwis.org](mailto:president@nfbwis.org), 608-622-7632  
Ever Lee Hairston, [ever.hairston@gmail.com](mailto:ever.hairston@gmail.com), 323-654-2975  
Carla McQuillan, [president@nfb-oregon.org](mailto:president@nfb-oregon.org), 541-653-9153  
Amy Ruell, [aruell@comcast.net](mailto:aruell@comcast.net), 617-752-1116  
Joe Ruffalo, [nfbnj1@verizon.net](mailto:nfbnj1@verizon.net)  
Terri Rupp, [terri.rupp@gmail.com](mailto:terri.rupp@gmail.com), 702-524-0835  
Adelmo Vigil, [nfbnewmexicopresident@gmail.com](mailto:nfbnewmexicopresident@gmail.com), 575-921-5422