**ACB Legislative Seminar
General Session 4, 2/23/2021, 4-5:30p EST**

**American Foundation for the Blind legislative update remarks**

**Sarah Malaier, AFB Senior Advisor for Public Policy and Research**

Hello, ACB members. I am Sarah Malaier, Senior Advisor for Public Policy and Research at the American Foundation for the Blind. I apologize that I couldn't be there live today. And I know that Stephanie Enyart, Chief Public Policy and Research Officer, also sends her best regards. Thank you for the opportunity to speak and for this chance to talk a little bit about some of our policy work. It's always a pleasure to join you.

As you may know, over the last year, AFB has shifted to focusing on COVID work. Our research has really informed our policy priorities in this area. And so I want to extend a thank you to ACB and to any attendees today who may have shared or participated in the Flatten Inaccessibility or Access and Engagement research studies. We've released two reports so far, and we've got a third forthcoming. Flatten Inaccessibility was our first COVID survey that looked at adult experiences early in the pandemic. And it had over 1900 participants. Access and Engagement looked at student and professional experiences and had over 1400 participants. The second round of A & E is still being analyzed, and we hope to have a third round later this spring.

Because of the thousands of participants, we have an extraordinary amount of data that we haven't had before, about a wide array of blind and low vision educational and daily experiences. We're still working on further analysis and publications, and these should provide a better understanding of the communal experiences and the needs of the community. Very little of the data is surprising. COVID has created some new barriers, but more than anything, it has magnified the barriers that we've known about for years. From difficulties with transportation, technology inaccessibility, lack of attention to the unique needs of people with disabilities, and fear of discrimination.

Here are just a couple of the findings that really have been informing our policy work. First, 68% of respondents were concerned about transportation. Some of the top concerns were safety when using transportation services, concern that the respondent would not be able to get themselves or a family member to a test center or health facility, and concern that transportation services have been or will be cut in their community.

A second big issue in 2020 was voting. Although 91% of the adult participants that they were registered to vote, 39% were unsure if they had an accessible voting system, and 23% reported that they did not have an accessible system. In education, 43% of students attending online had difficulty or were unable to access online programs because of their visual impairment. Also, students had tools at school that they did not have access to at home.

There were also bright spots, of course. For example, we learned how better communication between families and teachers may improve services to blind kids, and how the pandemic may create opportunities for more communication and open doors to engaging families in the services that children are receiving. We are continuing to use this data to advocate for appropriate COVID response policies. Here's a few of those priorities. We're in a place where we're shifting from emergency responses to considering the effect of the pandemic and the societal changes that are going to come out of it in the so-called new normal. For example, we're using the experiences of COVID to push for more accessibility and usability in educational technology. Now that schools have used technology for 100% of instruction, we know that teachers will inevitably adopt different tools in normal in-person classroom practice. We want to be sure that these tools do better with accessibility going forward, and they have so far.

We'll also be paying attention to similar challenges in ongoing disparities in broadband and device availability. Tele-health accessibility and accessibility of the job search. One data point from our surveys was that one in five respondents who had used tele-health found it to be inaccessible. And that's pretty significant when so many healthcare services are moving online.

We can't talk about COVID and education though, without paying attention to learning loss and the return to school. We'll be working with partners and creating a path to restoring learning opportunities for blind and low vision children. At the end of last year, 13% of students did not receive educational services during the COVID-19 pandemic. 61% had attended school online. And with the data point that I gave earlier, 43% attending online having difficulty accessing online programs because of their visual impairment, we know that there are gaps in the instruction that students have had over the last year. And time without instruction can mean that students miss not only opportunities for academic learning, but access to the expanded core curriculum and services like orientation and mobility. Students will need ongoing evaluation and potentially revisions of their IEPs, and in some cases, extended school years to make up for lost learning. All of these are going to take staffing, guidance, coordination, and funding, and we'll keep pushing to make sure that those are available to students.

Another big COVID priority is, of course, vaccines. We're advocating for the removal of transportation barriers to accessing COVID-19 testing and vaccines. With an understandable focus on the distribution challenges, states have largely not prioritized getting people to the vaccine yet. And we'd like to see better partnerships for transportation to those sites, as well as establishing more mobile [inaudible 00:06:01]. We know that there are other barriers: lack of information, the need to arrive in a vehicle to a drive-thru facility, a lack of existing transportation infrastructure. There's legitimate fear about using shared vehicles. There's a dependence on family and friends, and ongoing healthcare discrimination, all of which make it harder for people to get access to the vaccines that they need.

We know that there are bright spots. Congress has allocated transit relief funding that can be used to fill gaps in vaccine access. And FEMA's Public Assistance Program is working to secure 15 mobile vaccination units. But with so many transit deserts, many more units and many more solutions will be needed to bring resources to these communities. Of course, we're always looking beyond COVID to create a world of no limits for the blind and low vision community. COVID-19 will eventually become an endemic, not a pandemic disease, and we want to strive for the best possible world that we can imagine.

We're continuing research projects on technology in the workplace, guide dog usage, and medical accessibility that may shape our policy work in the years to come. We're continuing a focus that we started a few years ago on transportation that seeks to remove significant barriers to independent living for older adults and to employment. Alongside ACB, we are working with members of Congress to pass the Disability Access to Transportation Act and the Surface Transportation Reauthorization Bill. We're calling for more transit operations funding to prevent significant longterm cuts to transit that might come out of COVID. And we're always attentive to ensuring autonomous vehicles will be accessible.

A couple other priorities, of course, are finally securing the adoption of website accessibility regulations by the Department of Justice that we hope will have a ripple effect for digital inclusion. And additionally, we support community-wide efforts to pass the Transformation to Competitive Employment Act and support policies to improve access to competitive integrated employment. AFB continues to work with new partners to expand pathways to the workforce, and our policy priorities will follow from the direction we ultimately pursue for better workforce programs.

It is always a pleasure to speak with the members of ACB. The partnership between ACB and NFB is really important to us. And we look forward to mutually supporting our policy objectives in the coming year. On behalf of AFB, we all wish you the best of luck with your advocacy meetings this week, and thank you for the opportunity to join you today.