



NATIONAL FEDERATION
OF THE BLIND
MARYLAND

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To: House Economic Matters Committee

The members of the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland urge the House Economic Matters Committee to give a favorable report with amendment to HB0153. This bill requires newly constructed or substantially renovated multi-unit rental properties to include air conditioning.

Seniors, people with disabilities, and those with chronic health conditions will benefit most from this bill, because they will have access to reliable cooling during extreme weather. Given that extreme heat exacerbates many medical conditions, air conditioning is not a luxury, but a public health necessity.

Nonetheless, we are respectfully requesting that this bill be amended to add a provision that would require *any air-conditioning system installed or upgraded under this bill include thermostats or control mechanisms that are nonvisually accessible to blind users, either through accessible physical controls or through a smartphone or other digital interface that is compatible with commonly used screen-reading software.*

Modern HVAC systems increasingly rely on **touchscreen thermostats, flat-panel controls, or visual-only interfaces** that provide little or no audible or tactile feedback. These systems often:

- Lack physical buttons or discernible Braille or tactile markings.
- Require interaction with visual menus or icons.
- Are inaccessible to screen readers, such as VoiceOver for the iPhone and TalkBack for Android devices, when paired with mobile applications.

As a result, blind tenants may be **unable to adjust the temperature**, confirm system status, or respond to heat-related emergencies without assistance from a sighted person. This loss of independence undermines the very protection that House Bill 153 seeks to establish, since it prevents tenants from independently controlling the temperature of their units.

House Bill 153 already ties air-conditioning requirements to **new construction and substantial renovations**. This makes it the *ideal moment* to ensure accessibility, because:

- Accessible thermostats and controls are **widely available and cost-comparable**.
- Accessibility can be achieved **without altering the overall HVAC design**.
- Retrofitting later is far more expensive and disruptive than building accessibility in from the moment of installation.

Importantly, this amendment would not require a single specific technology. Accessibility can be achieved **either directly on the thermostat itself** (e.g., tactile controls, speech output) **or through a fully accessible smartphone application** that works with screen-reading software, which provides either verbal feedback or Braille output through a connected refreshable Braille display.

For those reasons, we ask for a favorable report with amendment on HB0153. For questions, please contact me at President@nfbmd.org or at 443-426-4110.