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From: Ronza Othman, President
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To: House Government, Labor, and Elections Committee

The members of the National Federation of the Blind of Maryland urge the House Committee on Government, Labor, and Elections to give a favorable report to HB0439. This bill renames the Office of Deaf and Hard of Hearing as the Office of Deaf, Deafblind, and Hard of Hearing, updating all statutory references to reflect the new name. This office already serves the aforementioned groups, and the previous name, which did not mention deafblind people, only served to confuse its constituents, people in the office, and others. The bill also clarifies the duties and responsibilities of the office, but does not make any changes to its programs, responsibilities, staffing, or structure.

Name changes to offices like this may seem fairly trivial, but inclusivity is integral to disabled patrons. Deafblind constituents already receive services through this office, but they must know where to go to receive these services, and delays in getting this information will cause them to feel disheartened and confused. It may cause prospective patrons to give up on looking for an office which might help them pursue gainful employment and education.

The challenges deafblind people face combine those blind people encounter, and those deaf people encounter. There are also unique challenges for this group. The clarification in this bill that this office shall collaborate with various organizations serving deaf and deafblind advocacy organizations will be essential to helping all constituents of the office feel safe and included. This bill also includes a clause about sensitivity training, which will ensure that current and future staff gain an understanding of how to communicate with deaf and deafblind constituents with dignity and respect. In a world full of ableism and discrimination, it is essential for all populations to feel and be welcome.

For those reasons, we ask for a favorable report on HB0439. For questions, please contact me at President@nfbmd.org or at 443-426-4110.