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## **PRESERVE EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR BLIND ENTREPRENEURS AT INTERSTATE REST AREAS**

**Today, vending services are provided to travelers who take safety breaks at approximately 1,100 interstate rest areas by state agencies for the blind. These services are primarily provided through businesses owned and operated by blind entrepreneurs.** This number represents approximately one-third of the vending facilities operated nationwide through the Randolph-Sheppard Program. In 1982, Congress stipulated that blind-owned businesses have a priority to operate vending machines at interstate rest areas.<sup>1</sup> These vending machines, which enable many blind entrepreneurs to earn a living and provide for their families, are the only commercial activity allowed to take place at most rest areas throughout the country.

**Previous efforts to commercialize rest areas have failed because Congress recognized that allowing commercial activities at rest areas would hurt blind entrepreneurs as well as local communities and businesses.**<sup>2</sup> This fundamental reality has not changed. Interstate rest stop commercialization will not generate new revenue, as proponents argue. Instead, rest stop commercialization will redirect revenue from cash-strapped localities adjacent to Interstate highways to state coffers.<sup>3</sup>

**Congress must consider ways to fund infrastructure projects without selling out blind business owners and small businesses located at interstate off-ramps.** The idea of lifting commercial prohibitions at interstate rest stops in lieu of raising taxes may seem innocuous on the surface. However, the cost of such a monumental policy shift would be devastating to blind entrepreneurs as well as off-highway travel centers, convenience stores, and restaurants located at interstate exits. Local government entities that rely on taxes from these businesses would suffer, as decreased business would result in reduced taxes collected.<sup>4</sup> Rather than sacrificing small businesses for infrastructure upgrades, Congress must explore alternative viable revenue-raising options to fund these projects.

**Rest stop commercialization would immediately displace blind entrepreneurs who service vending machines at interstate rest areas.** These job-creators will lose their livelihoods and many will be forced to rely on government subsidies to make ends meet. This would only exacerbate an already staggeringly high unemployment rate among blind Americans, which currently hovers at seventy percent.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the very existence of some state Randolph-Sheppard programs would be jeopardized.

# SUPPORT BLIND ENTREPRENEURS SAY “NO” TO INTERSTATE REST STOP COMMERCIALIZATION

## For more information, contact:

Gabe Cazares, Manager of Government Affairs, National Federation of the Blind  
Email: [gcazares@nfb.org](mailto:gcazares@nfb.org) Phone: 410-659-9314, extension 2206

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<sup>1</sup> 23 U.S.C. § 111(c)

<sup>2</sup> Tiffany Wlazlowski Neuman, “NATSO, Allies Urge House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee to Support Off-Highway Businesses,” April 30, 2019, [https://www.natso.com/en\\_us/articles/articles/view/natso-allies-urge-house-transportation-and-infrastructure-committee-to-support-off-highway-businesses](https://www.natso.com/en_us/articles/articles/view/natso-allies-urge-house-transportation-and-infrastructure-committee-to-support-off-highway-businesses).

<sup>3</sup> “The growing threat of competition from state-owned rest areas,” National Council of State Legislatures, retrieved May 1, 2019, <http://www.ncsl.org/documents/transportation/halfano1210.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Tiffany Wlazlowski Neuman, “NATSO Urges House T&I Committee to Maintain Prohibitions on Commercial Rest Areas, Tolling in Infrastructure Legislation,” May 11, 2019, <https://www.natso.com/articles/articles/view/natso-outlines-policy-priorities-for-ti-committee>

<sup>5</sup> American Community Survey. The percentage of non-institutionalized persons aged 21-64 years with a visual disability in the United States who were employed full-time/full-year in 2017.