



Marc Maurer, *President*

200 East Wells Street
at Jernigan Place
Baltimore, MD 21230
Phone 410 659 9314 **Fax** 410 685 5653
www.nfb.org

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CONTACT:

Chris Danielsen
Director of Public Relations
National Federation of the Blind
(410) 659-9314, extension 2330
(410) 262-1281 (Cell)
cdanielsen@nfb.org

Law Schools Discriminate Against Blind Applicants

National Federation of the Blind Files Complaints Against Nine Law Schools

Baltimore, Maryland (May 5, 2010): The National Federation of the Blind (NFB), the nation's oldest and largest organization of blind people, announced today that it has filed complaints with the United States Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, requesting investigations of nine prominent law schools for violating the civil rights of blind and other print-disabled law school applicants. The NFB filed the complaints because the law schools require applicants who wish to have the convenience of applying online to use a centralized Internet-based application process provided by the Law School Admissions Council (LSAC) through its Web site (www.lsac.org) that is inaccessible to blind law school applicants. While sighted law school applicants can use the LSAC system to submit multiple law school applications at once, blind students must seek sighted assistance to use the LSAC system. Title III of the Americans with Disabilities Act requires these law schools to offer equal access to their programs and services. The nine law schools named in the complaints are The University of Chicago Law School, Yeshiva University's Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law, Atlanta's John Marshall Law School, University of Denver's Sturm College of Law, Washington and Lee University School of Law, University of Miami School of Law, William Mitchell College of Law, Gonzaga University School of Law, and Northeastern University School of Law. The complaints ask the Justice Department to require these law schools to suspend use of the LSAC application system until it is accessible to blind and other print-disabled students and to require each law school to provide the same application process in a format available to all students. The NFB already has a lawsuit pending against the LSAC for violating California law by maintaining an inaccessible Web site.

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Blind people access Web sites on computers equipped with screen access software that converts what is on the screen into synthesized speech or Braille. The keyboard is used instead of a mouse to navigate the Web site and click on selected links or buttons. If a Web site is improperly coded, however, blind computer users cannot access or interact with the site. The LSAC application process does not present information to screen access software and thus requires blind users to resort to sighted assistance.

Dr. Marc Maurer, President of the National Federation of the Blind, said: "The National Federation of the Blind expects those who control admission to the practice of law to obey the law. Forcing blind law school applicants to use a separate and inherently unequal application process violates both the letter and the spirit of the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Rehabilitation Act. Accessibility standards for Web-based forms like those used in the Law School Admissions Council's application system have been in place for years and have been successfully implemented by many other Web sites, so there is no reason why the LSAC cannot make its application service available to blind law school applicants. That is why we have asked the United States Department of Justice to act swiftly and decisively to ensure that blind law school applicants are treated the same as their sighted peers."

The National Federation of the Blind is represented in this matter by Daniel F. Goldstein and Mehgan Sidhu of the Baltimore firm Brown, Goldstein, and Levy; Laurence W. Paradis, Anna Levine, and Karla Gilbride of the Berkley firm Disability Rights Advocates; and Scott C. LaBarre of the Denver firm LaBarre Law Offices.

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About the National Federation of the Blind

With more than 50,000 members, the National Federation of the Blind is the largest and most influential membership organization of blind people in the United States. The NFB improves blind people's lives through advocacy, education, research, technology, and programs encouraging independence and self-confidence. It is the leading force in the blindness field today and the voice of the nation's blind. In January 2004 the NFB opened the National Federation of the Blind Jernigan Institute, the first research and training center in the United States for the blind led by the blind.