



**Testimony of Jesse Shirek, Representing the National Federation of the Blind,
Before the United States House of Representatives Committee on Appropriations,
Subcommittee on the Legislative Branch**

Wednesday, April 9, 2025

Good morning Chair Valadao, Ranking Member Espaillat, Chair Cole, Ranking Member DeLauro, and other members of the Committee. My name is Jesse Shirek, and I am a Government Affairs Specialist with the National Federation of the Blind, the transformative membership and advocacy organization of blind Americans. Thank you for granting us the opportunity to share the critical importance of the National Library Service for the Blind and Print Disabled (NLS) talking book service.

We acknowledge that our government is undergoing a critical time of examination in which we must ensure that programs and services are operating at utmost efficiency and effectiveness. Simultaneously, we must protect the programs and services that our citizens are reliant upon. The NLS talking book service is one of those essential programs and is without substitute. We urge you to maintain at least the current level of funding for the program.

According to the American Community Survey conducted by the United States Census Bureau, in 2023, an estimated 2.5 percent of the United States population, or approximately 8.3 million non-institutionalized people report having a vision disability. To further break it down by age, there are 624,600 individuals 17 and under, 4,280,000 individuals between the ages of 18-64, and 3,396,500 individuals aged 65 or older.

The NLS talking book service and the associated network of state and regional talking book libraries is the only comprehensive source of talking books, hardcopy and electronic Braille nonfiction books, fiction books and publications available to blind, low-vision, and print disabled Americans. These materials are delivered in a variety of formats suitable for readers from a wide range of backgrounds and technical abilities. The talking books can be experienced on a standalone talking digital player, a smart phone app, or a smart speaker. Electronic Braille can be utilized through the Braille e-readers distributed through the associated network of talking book libraries, but can also be accessed on a wide range of Braille reading devices. A person with normal eyesight can walk into their local library and have access to thousands of reading materials on the shelves, but a blind or low-vision person does not have that same level of access to accessible materials, which is why the network of talking book libraries are so critically important to provide access to blind and print-disabled individuals.

I would like to illustrate these points through my personal experience. I am a blind person. I have been using reading materials from the NLS for thirty-nine years. I signed up for the service when I was seven years old. This was a transformative moment in my

life, because until that moment I was reliant upon another person to read to me, but when I gained a library card to the state talking book library I had control over what I read, when I read it, and for how long I was able to read. I was able to read without burdening a friend or family member for the first time, and that is a sense of freedom that cannot be understated.

To this day I continue to use electronic Braille and audio talking books for both recreational reading and professional development. I would have been able to make it through school or function at my current professional level without my previous and current access to reading materials through the NLS. Furthermore, in my previous career I taught blind skills instruction to newly-blind adults. One of the first things that I would hear from newly-blind individuals is that they used to love to read, but after becoming blind reading was no longer an option. I would demonstrate the use of a talking book player and how easy it is to obtain and read talking books. This would often shift the perspective of the blind individual from feeling hopeless to gaining an understanding that life is not over and it is possible to enjoy reading without eyesight. This would in turn create further shifts in the individual when they gained understanding that they were once again able to experience past joys and to reconnect with the world in a more meaningful way. The NLS talking book service is quite literally a pathway to a successful education for our young people, a tool to be successfully employable for working age adults, and a source of recreation, stimulation, and joy for older Americans living out their golden years. We urge Congress to recognize the importance of the National Library Service for the Blind and Print Disabled talking book service and to

ensure the full funding of this vital program in the Fiscal Year 2026 Legislative Branch Appropriations Bill.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of the National Federation of the Blind and the millions of blind Americans across the country.