

Testimony

American Printing House for the Blind

Before the U.S. House of Representatives

Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies

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For over 140 years, the American Printing House for the Blind (APH) has received federal funding to support “manufacturing and furnishing books and other materials specifically adapted for instruction” to serve the tens of thousands of blind students throughout the United States. This federal mandate was established in 1879 when Congress passed the Act to Promote the Education of the Blind. This Act designates APH as the official supplier of educational materials in all educational settings, for students in the U.S. who meet the definition of blindness and are learning at less than college level. For FY 2024, APH requests at least \$53.4 million, a \$10 million increase over FY23, to accelerate initial production and distribution of game-changing braille technology that will level the learning playing field for blind or low vision students.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies Subcommittee today. I also want to thank you for the longstanding support the subcommittee has provided to the American

Printing House for the Blind (APH). I am especially grateful to Chairman Aderholt, Ranking Member DeLauro, subcommittee members and staff for the most recent increase the subcommittee provided to APH in the FY 2023 spending bill enacted last year. Today, I plan to provide an overview of how APH is utilizing these resources and outline our request for FY 2024.

As the world's largest nonprofit organization creating accessible learning experiences through educational, workplace, and independent living products for people who are blind and low vision, APH has excelled in researching, designing, and manufacturing a wide range of materials, tools, and technologies. APH currently offers over 600 products, many incorporating universal design, which means they are designed to be usable by everyone, to ensure students who are blind or low vision, often with other disabilities, can participate fully across the educational environment. From essentials like textbooks in braille or large print to accessible learning tools tactile maps and models, the federal investment in education and opportunity for students who are blind has fostered groundbreaking improvements in instructional material, technology, and practices. APH has ensured that these opportunities were put into the hands of students who are blind or who have low vision. APH has also significantly expanding training resources and hopes to add additional regional partners to enhance assistive technology training for teachers, parents, and students throughout the United States.

Fluency in reading and writing braille is a key component to educational and employment success for individuals who are blind and APH has been at the forefront of the evolution and advances in the use and production of braille. However, braille

textbooks are expensive and time-consuming to produce, challenging to ship, and immensely difficult for school districts and students to manage and store due to their size.

In FY 2024, APH is prepared to release The Monarch, game-changing braille technology that will transform access to education for blind students. This technology successfully builds on the research supported in the FY 23 appropriations legislation.

The development of the Monarch, a multi-line electronic braille and tactile graphic display, is a landmark achievement for blind students who will finally have a truly modern, electronic reading device that will support full participation and inclusion in the education environment and set them up for lifelong success.

Until the advent of the Monarch, there have been few significant advancements in portable electronic braille technology. Currently available electronic braille devices provide only one line of refreshable braille cells. In contrast, the Monarch is capable of rendering 10 lines of braille and tactile graphics, text, and pictures on the same surface. With a built-in web browser, books will be transmitted within minutes over an Internet connection, removing the time-consuming barriers involved in producing and shipping braille textbooks. This new device will dramatically increase opportunities for blind or low vision students to engage in STEM education by providing access to complicated charts and graphs and educational apps such as a scientific graphic calculator, along with enhanced capabilities to read and write computer programming. In addition, APH is working to ensure that the Monarch also includes tools to provide access to material created by classroom teachers which remains a significant accessibility challenge for blind students today. Because state and national exams have also been challenging to

make accessible for braille readers, APH is working with major educational testing companies to enable this new device to be used in an exam mode, dramatically improving current testing approaches for blind students. To maximize the success of this effort, APH is partnering with Humanware, a leading developer of assistive technology, and the National Federation of the Blind, a highly effective advocacy organization of blind individuals.

While traditional paper braille books will continue to be an essential option for instruction, APH is committed to ensuring that students who are blind have access to technological innovations, like The Monarch, designed to support efficient and more immediate access to braille textbooks and classroom content, including graphics. In short, the Monarch transforms educational opportunities, classroom experience, and expands the world of learning for blind and low-vision students with immediacy not previously possible.

APH is honored to carry out the Act to Promote the Education of the Blind. The federal investment ensures that students whose needs might otherwise be overlooked or unmet are afforded opportunities to be fully included in our nation's schools. APH partners with key stakeholders, including state education agencies, to ensure that materials are provided to eligible students throughout the United States. The federal appropriation is critical in ensuring that these students have the opportunity to understand the building blocks of life or the design of the universe through the use of tactile models, share their thoughts through braille or the use of adapted communications devices, or express their imagination with accessible tools to create compelling art. The appropriation, overseen by this Subcommittee, makes this possible,

and the staff of the American Printing House for the Blind is proud and humbled to be the instrument that brings educational opportunities to fruition. Thank you for your ongoing support, and I look forward to answering any questions you may have