



**Statement of the National Federation of the Blind  
Presented by John G. Pare, Jr., Executive Director for Advocacy and Policy  
Before the Committee on Appropriations  
Subcommittee on the Legislative Branch  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC**

**April 17, 2018**

Chairman Yoder, Ranking Member Ryan, and other committee members, thank you for this opportunity to testify before the committee. My name is John G. Paré, Jr. I am the executive director for advocacy and policy at the National Federation of the Blind. My address is 200 East Wells Street, Baltimore, MD 21230; my telephone number is 410-659-9314, extension 2218.

On behalf of the National Federation of the Blind, I appreciate this opportunity to propose an appropriation be made to the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (NLS) in order to fund a new program to distribute refreshable Braille displays, or “e-readers,” to its patrons.

The NLS is the primary provider of reading material for hundreds of thousands of Americans who are blind or have physical limitations that make it impossible for them to read print. Patrons of the service include senior citizens who are losing vision, students at all levels of education from kindergarten to graduate school, military veterans who are blind or have physical disabilities, and blind professionals in all fields. NLS is the only public library that serves the blind in the United States. In fact, it is more than a public library. If a public library in a given city closes down or cuts back on services due to funding concerns, sighted readers can visit another library, go online to purchase books or e-books, or go to Barnes and Noble or their favorite local bookseller. These are not realistic options for many blind people.

An appropriation to the NLS for a refreshable Braille display distribution program will save money and lead to the proliferation of critically needed Braille material for blind Americans. As previously mentioned, blind Americans rely primarily on NLS to distribute Braille books across the nation. Currently these are hardcopy offerings, but new, low-cost displays can produce electronic Braille, saving money, saving paper, and providing a small device where formerly multiple and large volumes were required for just one book.

Since 1931, hardcopy Braille has been embossed and distributed to patrons through a network of regional and sub-regional libraries. The cost, size, and process to emboss books severely limits the quantity that can be produced. Furthermore, it is impossible to predict the titles that might be requested at any particular regional library. As a result, there could be five copies of *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (thirteen volumes of Braille) in Boise, Idaho and none in Topeka,

Kansas or Cleveland, Ohio where several patrons are currently waiting. Moreover, a 2016 Government Accountability Office report titled “Library Services for Those with Disabilities,” indicated that the cost of embossing, housing, and shipping hardcopy Braille volumes was \$17 million annually.

Fortunately, technology exists that can greatly reduce this cost. It is now possible for Braille to be produced in electronic files. Like other types of electronic files, the same Braille book can be read by potentially thousands of patrons at the same time with refreshable Braille displays. Today, the mass production and distribution of Braille content is not only technologically possible, but the method is cost effective. Vast quantities of Braille material can now be stored, transported, and instantly accessed on refreshable Braille displays.

As if that alone was not cause enough for celebration, converting to an electronic format will save a tremendous amount of money. That same GAO report I mentioned before estimates that refreshable Braille displays and electronically distributed books will incur an annual cost of \$7 million. That is an annual savings of \$10 million over the current system. While the program will require a small initial investment, it will result in significant annual savings.

Aside from streamlining the distribution system and saving millions of dollars annually, we predict that the distribution of refreshable Braille displays will have the additional benefit of increased literacy among blind Americans. We predict that increased literacy will in turn increase the employment rate of blind Americans. According to the Census Bureau’s 2016 American Community Survey only about 40 percent of blind and low-vision Americans had at least a part-time job. When the criteria is more specific, and we include only those with full-time, full-year employment, the number decreases even further to less than 30 percent. These numbers are well below the national employment average, and we firmly believe that one of the prime causes is a lack of Braille literacy.

A 2015 report by Dr. Edward Bell and Natalia Mino affirmed that blind people who were literate in Braille and used it extensively as their primary reading medium, were employed at a higher rate than those who do not. The evidence is clear. Greater access to Braille for the blind means increased employment for the blind.

Eighty-seven years ago Congress passed the Pratt-Smoot Act, which created the NLS and centralized the collection and housing of the very small number of individually produced Braille books then existing in the United States. But even though NLS services have been made available to blind people on a national scale, the broad distribution of hard-copy Braille books is inefficient. In acknowledgement of this fact and the importance of Braille literacy, in 2016 the 114th Congress amended the Pratt-Smoot Act to authorize NLS to provide its patrons with refreshable Braille displays. The foundation for the future of the NLS has been laid, now the library needs the resources to make that dream a reality.

In a separate, but equally important matter pertaining to the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, we strongly support the relocation of the NLS headquarters to a more prominent location close to the Library of Congress.

In a letter to Chairman Yoder dated March 8 of this year, the president of our organization, Mark Riccobono, outlined certain criteria that the National Federation of the Blind would like to have considered in choosing the new location of the NLS headquarters. We recently learned that one of the locations in consideration as a leading site for the relocation was inside the Government Printing Office building on North Capitol Street. For the reasons outlined in the letter, we fully endorse the selection of this location, and we look forward to the day when we are able to visit the NLS in their new office.