

**Statement of the National Federation of the Blind  
Before the Subcommittee on the Legislative Branch  
Committee on Appropriations  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC  
April 2, 2019**

Chairman Ryan, Ranking Member Herrera Beutler, and members of the subcommittee, my name is Gabe Cazares. I am the Manager of Government Affairs at the National Federation of the Blind. My address is 200 East Wells Street, Baltimore, MD 21230; my telephone is 410-659-9314, extension 2206.

On behalf of the National Federation of the Blind, I appreciate this opportunity to propose two appropriations be made to the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (NLS) in order to fund the program to distribute refreshable Braille displays, or “ereaders,” to its patrons, and to enhance the capacity of the Braille and Audio Reading Download “BARD” service.

The NLS is the primary provider of reading material for over 800,000 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 ebooks, or their favorite local bookseller. These are not options that are readily available to many blind people.

An appropriation of \$2.375 million over a five-year period to the NLS for the ereader 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 (ereaders) 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* (13 volumes of Braille) in Boise, Idaho and none in Richmond, Virginia where several patrons are currently waiting. Moreover, a 2016 Government Accountability Office (GAO) 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, modern technology has already created a potential solution to this problem. It is now possible for Braille to be produced in electronic files. Like other types of electronic files (such as printed materials in .docx format), the same Braille book can be read by potentially thousands of patrons at the same time with refreshable Braille ereaders. 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 previously mentioned estimates that refreshable Braille ereaders and electronically distributed books will incur an annual cost of \$7 million. That is an annual cost savings of \$10 million over the current system.

Aside from streamlining the distribution system and saving millions of dollars annually, we predict that the distribution of refreshable Braille ereaders will have the additional benefit of increased literacy among blind Americans. That increased literacy will in turn increase our community's employment rate. According to the Census Bureau's 2017 American Community Survey, only about 40 percent of blind and low-vision Americans had at least a part-time job. When the criteria are 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 the under proliferation of Braille material.

In an effort to expand the availability of Braille and Audio formats, the NLS launched the Braille and Audio Reading Download service, commonly referred to as "BARD." BARD allows patrons to download materials from the NLS catalog onto a compatible book player (such as the NLS digital talking book player), onto their personal computer, or to the BARD mobile application—available for iOS and Android devices. According to the NLS, 45,484 patrons are currently subscribed to the BARD service, which holds 108,450 books in its collection. Both numbers are expected to increase. However, the existing infrastructure that supports the BARD service is at capacity. In order to fully harness the potential of the BARD service, both hardware and software upgrades are necessary. An appropriation of \$5 million over a three-year period to the NLS will allow the NLS to make the necessary upgrades that will enable the BARD service to keep up with increasing patron demand. An upgraded BARD service will also allow for seamless interaction between the service and the NLS ereader program. This marriage will be a cost-saving asset to the federal government, as previously discussed.

In a separate, but equally important matter pertaining to the NLS, we strongly support the relocation of the NLS headquarters to a more prominent location closer to the Library of Congress Capitol complex.

In a letter to Chairman Ryan dated February 26, 2019, Mark Riccobono, President of the National Federation of the Blind, urged the subcommittee to “provide the necessary funding to relocate the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (NLS) to 501 First Street, SE.” Mr. Riccobono’s letter listed a number of operational reasons why relocating the NLS to this site makes sense, but most importantly, he also highlighted the strong message such a move will send to not only people with disabilities, but the general public as well. We look forward to visiting the NLS at its new location in the near future.