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Frequently Asked Questions on an Appropriation to the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (NLS) for the Purchase of Refreshable Braille Devices

What is a refreshable Braille display?

Why the NLS? Aren't refreshable Braille displays widely available through other means?

Does the proliferation of refreshable Braille displays mean that hard copy Braille will no longer need to be produced?

How many patrons will benefit from the availability of refreshable Braille displays, and what is the estimated cost of the appropriation?

Q: What is a refreshable Braille display?

A: A refreshable Braille display is a device that produces dot patterns by electronically raising or lowering pins to display information in Braille. Users of these displays access text in a number of different electronic formats, by either loading the file on to the display itself, if it has that capability, or by connecting the display to a host, such as a computer or mobile device equipped with screen access software. Braille documents, including books, are often distributed electronically in BRF files, which can be read on these devices. These files make it possible for a Braille display user to carry thousands of pages of Braille which would otherwise require vast resources to store and transport.

Q: Why the NLS? Aren't refreshable Braille displays widely available through other means?

A: In 1931, Congress established the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (NLS), through the passage of the Pratt-Smoot Act, in an effort to centralize the creation and distribution of accessible reading materials to blind adults. Today, NLS serves about 430,000 patrons through its nationwide network of regional and sub-regional libraries, providing accessible reading material in Braille, audio, large print, and other formats. Because of its role as one of the leading providers of accessible content to blind Americans, the NLS should take the lead in providing its patrons the convenience and flexibility that refreshable Braille displays have to offer.

However, because refreshable Braille displays can range in price from five hundred to four thousand dollars, most blind Americans find obtaining these devices for themselves to be cost prohibitive. By procuring, at a minimum, ten thousand refreshable Braille displays through the bidding process, NLS will be able to comfortably serve the over twelve thousand patrons already using its electronic Braille files.

Q: Does the proliferation of refreshable Braille displays mean that hard copy Braille will no longer need to be produced?

A: No. Hard copy Braille materials will always be necessary, and even though electronic Braille files and refreshable Braille displays are the most advanced way to access reading materials, there are still many people who would prefer to read a physical Braille copy of a book or document. Moreover, certain Braille formats such as math or music Braille are more efficiently usable in hard copy. The intent of this appropriation is not to replace hard copy Braille, but rather, to offer a modern alternative by which patrons can obtain accessible reading material.

Q: How many patrons will benefit from the availability of refreshable Braille displays, and what is the estimated cost of the appropriation?

A: According to a 2016 report from the Government Accountability Office, eleven percent of all NLS patrons currently access hard copy and electronic Braille materials. Given this figure, we estimate that a one-time appropriation of five million dollars will enable the NLS to procure at least ten thousand low-cost refreshable Braille displays. And, we fully expect those patrons who are already accessing NLS's electronic Braille files to be some of the first interested parties in obtaining a refreshable Braille display.