

**Statement of Jason Broughton
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**Before the
Committee on Rules and Administration
United States Senate**

“Oversight of Library of Congress Modernization Efforts”

October 20, 2021

Chairwoman Klobuchar, Ranking Member Blunt, and Members of the Committee, it is an honor to appear before you representing the National Library Service for the Blind and Print Disabled, or NLS, and the Library of Congress. I want to thank you for this wonderful opportunity to join you today.

You in Congress have played a key role in NLS’s creation, history, and recent successes, so I am especially excited about our continued work together. I thank you as well for your respective March remarks in the *Congressional Record* commemorating our 90th anniversary. Your support is essential to our service and to our success.

After the Pratt-Smoot Act became law on March 3, 1931, the Library of Congress’s book program for blind Americans began four months later. Throughout nine subsequent decades of service, NLS has continued to innovate and adapt to meet the reading needs of blind and print disabled Americans across the nation and overseas.¹ Encompassing an institutional history that traverses phonographic records, cassette players and tapes, digital talking book machines and USB flash memory cartridges, large-print and musical works, and the Internet, all the while continuing to supply hardcopy braille materials, NLS is more than well-positioned for an exciting future.

As only the third Director of NLS in the last 48 years, I am honored and humbled to lead such an incredible team with such an extraordinary mission. Drawing from my life and career-shaping experiences in numerous states, most recently as the state

¹ NLS’s mission is “[t]o provide books, magazines, musical scores, foreign language, locally produced materials and texts in braille and recorded formats to blind and print disabled individuals in the United States & U.S. citizens living abroad.” Its Vision Statement is *That All May Read*.

librarian for the great state of Vermont, I am excited about NLS's unique mandate, mission, and capacity to serve blind and print disabled Americans.

My background has allowed me to serve Americans as an educator, as one devoted to workforce development, and as one gathering and sharing information and knowledge, the lifeblood and vital nutrients of democracy and representative government, available and accessible to citizens of all backgrounds, ages and walks of life.

This diverse background has empowered me with the experience to serve you and the Library as NLS Director by being attuned to what state entities and Americans need and should expect from a federal entity, by knowing the rich ability state-level entities have to serve citizens and patrons in those states and localities, and by being knowledgeable about what libraries and library-based services can offer their patrons.

NLS is not a small part of the Library of Congress with an obscure headquarters located in Washington, D.C. It is a rich tapestry of libraries spanning this great nation and all its territories. Currently comprised of 98 entities – regional libraries, sub-regional libraries, machine lending agencies, advisory and outreach centers, and multistate centers – NLS has been serving the Library, Congress, and the American people for now over ninety years. Building on previous efforts to serve America's blind individuals, as well as our service members in World War I, NLS was born thanks to the foresight of Congress. Even during the turmoil and uncertainty of the Great Depression, Members such as Rep. Ruth Pratt and Sen. Reed Smoot saw fit to put a national service for the nation's blind in the Library of Congress.

A national service still thriving and ready to serve.

Current Highlights of NLS Service

Despite the extreme challenges of COVID-19, NLS continued and continues to serve its hundreds of thousands of patrons via its 98 partnering library entities. During Fiscal Year 2020, NLS circulated 20,278,288 books, magazines, and music collection items to its nationwide network of libraries and collaborative partners (i.e., 4,406,337 audio downloads; 13,835,174 digital cartridge; 233,771 ebraille downloads; 190,088 hardcopy braille; 1,612,918 large-print items). During this fiscal year, to date, NLS has produced 4,452 books now added to its collection (i.e., audiobooks, ebraille, and print braille; as compared to 3,786 in fiscal 2020 and 4,637 in fiscal 2019). NLS Braille Audio and Reading Download interface now contains

an astonishing 147,273 total items (i.e., books available in audio; books available in e-braille; magazine issues; music collection items) and over 7,900 items were added to BARD just this year. NLS has over 310,807 items in its collection overall.

Congress's support has been indispensable to this success. From increasing our base funding each year, to supporting our additional funding requests for our IT modernization work and eReader development, to updating our statutory authorization to meet current needs, you have supported us and we thank you.

Your funding support for our IT modernization work has allowed NLS and its partners in the Office of the Chief Information Officer (OCIO) to move our Braille and Audio Reading Download (BARD) to the cloud, thereby dramatically and exponentially increasing download speeds for audiobooks and allowing for ongoing development work to continue that will make BARD and the platforms upon which it resides more agile, user-friendly, secure, and equipped to handle our patron bases of the future.

In addition, building upon your work in 2016, which became Public Law 114-219, NLS is continuing to increase its eReader capabilities in service of our braille-reading patrons. We now have thousands of eReaders deployed to our libraries in the hands of patrons. As one patron has expressed:

I just started beta testing the eReader a week ago. This morning I did something I never dreamed I would have the ability to do in my lifetime: I sat down with a cup of coffee and my local newspaper, and I physically read it. No one read it to me via audio format; I didn't have to scan it first; I actually read the words for myself, relishing in the unusual spellings (Travis Kelce—k-e-l-c-e—who knew??? Go, Chiefs!) Thank you, NLS and Humanware, for opening a door to a level of dignity I never fathomed could ever exist. I just couldn't believe I was physically reading the newspaper, in Braille. And—the next sighted person who says there's "nothing" in the newspaper is likely to get an earful from me. Any newspaper you can physically read for yourself, has something worth reading within its pages.

Likewise, as part of the Further Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2020, you passed the Library of Congress Technical Corrections Act of 2019. This vital legislation allowed NLS to update its name, conform its terms of eligibility to the

Marrakesh Treaty, and empowered NLS to participate in international exchanges as part of that Treaty.

Our stakeholders and network were very pleased with the long overdue name change to more accurately describe and promote our service. Our updated regulations made reality a decades long sought after change to our certifying authority requirements. Moreover, the results of our Marrakesh Treaty implementation work have been tremendous. NLS is helping the United States be a leading international partner in the spirit and letter of Marrakesh. To date, NLS now has over 1,270 Marrakesh-based works in eight languages on BARD, has over 101,000 works now available on the World Intellectual Property Organization's Accessible Books Consortium's Global Book Service for other Marrakesh Authorized Entities (AEs) to consume, and can report glowing feedback from its network and international partners in terms of NLS's ability to use Marrakesh as it was intended, to serve blind and print disabled individuals with the content they want and to alleviate the book famine.

And that is not all. This year NLS continued to expand its Duplication-on-Demand (DoD) technology to 13 more network libraries (equaling a total of 53), whereby these libraries can receive content electronically, avoid stockpiling physical inventories, and fulfill individual requests from patrons more quickly with content-customized cartridges containing one or multiple audio files.

Over the last two years, NLS has executed NLS's first reorganization in over 40 years, which, among many structural realignments, established a new Modernization Program Office under the Deputy Director, as well as established a new Patron and Network Engagement Division.

As mentioned, after soliciting feedback from network and related stakeholders toward updating NLS's certifying authorities, as well as completing a dual-state pilot of reading disabled individuals, NLS, with your assistance, was able to update NLS's regulatory language and certifying authorities to ease access for reading disabled individuals, resulting already in a 35% increase in reading disabled individuals served.

NLS continues to research, investigate, and pilot next generation devices (i.e., eReaders, smart phones, smart speakers with voice user interface capabilities, and a digital talking book player with enhanced Wi-Fi and cellular connectivity) to prepare for continued delivery development, research, and eventual device selection(s) for patron introduction.

As well, NLS continued its multiyear, multimedia advertising/outreach campaign that focused on digital outreach during this fiscal year. The campaign received excellent feedback from network libraries and resulted in notable engagement with potential patrons, their friends, family, and caretakers, including 21,367,820 impressions, 167,260 campaign web site visits, and 9,026 requests for information. NLS also launched a separate digital campaign in Fiscal Year 2021, aimed at engaging professionals who work with NLS stakeholders, including ophthalmologists and occupational therapists. This campaign resulted in 35,322,969 impressions and 26,658 visits to the campaign page.

Finally, NLS continues to seek collaborative opportunities both within the Library and with similarly situated entities through partnerships with the Veterans Administration and through events like the NLS-sponsored November 2019 concert event in the Coolidge Auditorium featuring the *José André Trio* and the March 2020 virtual concert event featuring jazz pianist Matthew Whitaker.

In Closing

In closing, this is an incredibly challenging and exciting time in NLS's history.

NLS met and will continue to meet the challenge of COVID. NLS will continue to work to build a new suite of services for patrons with a holistic approach to content that provides even more value to the reader (i.e., supplementary and tactile material often discarded for text-only braille or audio recordings). With a continued focus on understanding and reaching current and potential patrons (i.e., a continued digital campaign, as well as a new public-facing website to reach potential patrons), NLS will be reaching out to blind and print disabled audiences of all ages and all backgrounds so *That All May Read*.

Members of the Committee, during the 1931 congressional debate over what came to be NLS, it was described as “a noble purpose.” One Member stated: “The main object . . . is to provide suitable books and get them out among the blind according to some well-regulated system, and I do not know any agency better designed to accomplish this end than the great national library known as the Library of Congress, which is directly responsible and accountable to Congress[.]”

During committee debate, Helen Keller had testified: “Books are the eyes of the blind. They reveal to us the glories of the light-filled world. They keep us in touch with what people are thinking and doing. They help us to forget our limitations. With our hands plunged into an interesting book we feel independent and happy.”

Members of the Committee, NLS remains a noble purpose. And books remain the eyes of the blind and the glories of the light-filled world.

As the new Director of NLS, I commit to you my dedication to continue NLS’s shining legacy, to serve more patrons, and to steward and shepherd NLS into its next 90 years.

I am happy to answer any questions you may have.