



February 26, 2019

The Honorable Tim Ryan, Chairman
Subcommittee on the Legislative Branch
United States House of Representatives Committee on Appropriations
1126 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

RE: National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped

Dear Chairman Ryan:

The National Federation of the Blind urges the House Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on the Legislative Branch to provide the necessary funding to relocate the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (NLS) to 501 First Street, SE. Established in 1931, the NLS has a long history of providing quality materials to the blind when few were available and is now admired as the most successful library program for the blind in the world. As the program approaches its ninetieth year, the time has come for the United States to give this national treasure a permanent place to celebrate America's past investment and to build for the future. On behalf of the blind of America, we urge Congress to make this an immediate priority.

The National Federation of the Blind is the oldest and largest membership organization of blind people in the United States. Founded in 1940, we have an affiliate in each of the fifty states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico representing more than fifty thousand active members. In partnership with the NLS, we operate a free service called NFB-NEWSLINE which provides access to hundreds of publications for over one hundred thousand blind people--all of whom benefit from the work of NLS. Our organization has had as a priority during our seventy-eight years to ensure that the consumer voice is included in programs for the blind and the success of that work is best observed in the work of the National Library Service. We have been strong advocates throughout the history of the library including urging the program be expanded to children in 1952, to include music materials in 1962, and most recently, to include the distribution of refreshable Braille displays. With our country's recent ratification of the Marrakesh Treaty to Facilitate Access to Published Works for Persons who are Blind, Visually Impaired or Otherwise Print Disabled our nation has once again affirmed its commitment to equal access to information by the blind. Yet, the one program that every blind person in this country benefits from is managed from a rented building miles away from the Library of Congress and hidden from the view of our citizens and visitors to our nation's capital. The time has come for us to display proudly the commitment we have made to equal access in our nation and to highlight the full participation of the blind and others with disabilities by having a dedicated building for the most well-known library for the blind in the world.

My wife and I are both blind and our two daughters are also blind. Imagine how disappointing it is when we take them to our nation's capital to experience the rich history of our nation. They can experience the physical celebration of our great presidents, touch the memorials to our fallen war heroes, and even step into the legacy of knowledge that we preserve in the form of the Library of Congress.

When they ask "Where is the National Library Service for the Blind?" -- a program they have grown up with and that has fueled their quest for literacy--what are we to tell them? That our nation does not regard their library as important enough to have its own building? That their library has been hidden from the view of visitors to our nation's capital either because we are not proud of it or because it is not valuable enough to be celebrated? That their participation in the American democracy is on the fringe and not in the center of the mainstream of society simply due to their blindness? These are the unintended messages we send by not having a place for our nation's most successful program for sharing equal access to the world's knowledge. Now that we have welcomed the world to share their accessible works with us through the Marrakesh Treaty, we should welcome our own citizens to know of the outstanding commitment our nation makes to the full participation of the blind through a commitment to a national library system. The library for the blind should, like other libraries, be a place where people can gather to share knowledge and create understanding.

There are many practical reasons why locating a building for the library for the blind at 501 First Street, SE makes sense from an operations point of view. Proximity to the main Library of Congress buildings, easy access to public transportation, increased awareness through convenient public access to the property, cost savings from eliminating long-term rent agreements, improved storage and security of library holdings, and increased use of the access to the knowledge base of the staff at the National Library Service are some of the real benefits that will result from dedicating a building to this library. This is not to mention the significant public statement it will make about the role of people with disabilities in our society.

Bring this national treasure out of hiding. Let us demonstrate that our commitment to equal access to information is not out of charity but out of a set of fundamental beliefs embedded in our Constitution. Let us make the National Library Service another example of the commitment this nation has had since its founding to give every citizen the freedom to use their talents to pursue their dreams.

My family is prepared to be the first to arrive at the ribbon cutting for this new building and I pledge to you that there will be many hundreds right behind us. It is not often that Congress can take what appears to be a simple administrative action which will have such a profound impact on the hearts, minds, and lives of Americans. The National Federation of the Blind is prepared to work with Congress, the Library of Congress, and others along every step of the way to ensure that this new facility lives up to the expectation of being in the midst of our nation's most treasured buildings.

Please call on us if we can provide further information about our support for this important proposal. We ask you to give it consideration equal to what it means to each and every blind person in our nation.

Sincerely,



Mark A. Riccobono, President
National Federation of the Blind

cc: The Honorable Jaime Herrera Beutler, Ranking Member
The Honorable Ed Case
The Honorable Katherine Clark
The Honorable Dan Newhouse
The Honorable Dutch Ruppersberger
Dr. Carla Hayden, Librarian of Congress