

## My USPS Experience

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As an aspiring author, the intake of knowledge and literature is important, and as a new Braille learner, getting my hands on a steady supply of Braille is crucial. This material is sent by federal, state, and private agencies via the U.S. Postal Service (USPS) as free matter for the blind. According to its website, this federally-funded postage is to be treated as first-class mail. However, free matter for the blind has long experienced delays. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, delivery times ranged from one to two weeks. Post pandemic, they have increased to one to two months. While other mail has mostly returned to normal, free matter for the blind has not, and these lengthy delays have impeded my ability to learn Braille.

When the Maryland State Library for the Blind and Print Disabled (LBDP) asked me to join the Braille E-reader pilot program, I readily agreed. The first device was sent out on October 21, 2020. It should have arrived within a week. On November 10<sup>th</sup>, a librarian informed me that other patrons had also not received their mailed packages, and I was issued a replacement. It wasn't until Christmastime that the two packages arrived together. Refreshable Braille displays are expensive, and I suddenly had two in my possession.

Because of my E-reader connectivity issues with the online service, I opted for Braille book cartridges. The first, sent on April 12, 2021, was never delivered and was returned to the library by USPS for unknown reasons. LBDP sent another book cartridge on June 9<sup>th</sup>. It came exactly one month later while regular mail from Baltimore reaches Frederick within a few days.

On behalf of the National Library Service, the Gallup Poll is surveying E-reader participants at two, four and six month intervals. Because the original E-reader was delayed, it arrived just as the surveys began, and of the three, I could only complete one survey. The Braille book cartridges came too late for me to properly assess the E-reader device. Based on follow-up phone calls, I fear that I will time out of this poll, and the opportunity for feedback and funds allocated for my participation in this pilot program will have been wasted.

Mail delays have also affected free matter for the blind from other organizations. In March of 2020, the Maryland Division of Rehabilitation Services ordered literacy books to continue my Braille learning at home. These books did not arrive until the summer, delaying my progress. In the fall, I began virtual Braille instruction. At the end of our three month session, my instructor had still not received her Braille books. Lessons were to continue once the next set of books arrived. Conditioned by the prolonged mail delays, I waited for the books and it wasn't until March of 2021 that I learned that the new order had fallen through. It was another one to two months before they were finally in my hands. The lengthy delays have made having consistent lessons difficult and my virtual instruction has been postponed until this fall.

The USPS offers a mail tracking system called Informed Delivery that could have allowed me to verify the status of my packages. However, this image-based program is not accessible to blind users. In 2018, the National Federation of the Blind requested that USPS make this system accessible but no action was taken.

Letter-sized mail is similarly affected. As a companion to virtual instruction and to accelerate my learning, I also enrolled in a correspondence-based Braille literacy course

through Hadley School for the Blind. Due to mail delays, the instructor has waived the requirement that I wait for the grading of submitted written work before moving on to the next lessons. Though this is a missed opportunity for timely feedback, it is the only solution given the drawn out correspondence via free matter for the blind.

My transition to Braille is vital. Born sighted, I am no longer able to read print, and I yearn to make the switch from audio to Braille. This transition is not simply a preference; I have a profound hearing loss and I am losing the last of my hearing. From my perspective, the federal, state and private agencies that support me are being thwarted, and I feel marginalized when free matter for the blind suffers prolonged delays that regular mail does not.

My voice is but one from the many who have been affected. Attached to this testimony is Resolution 20-2105 which was recently passed by the members of the National Federation of the Blind.

## Resolution 2021-05: Regarding Mail Problems that Interfere with NLS Services

WHEREAS, the National Library Service (NLS) for the Blind and Print Disabled, Library of Congress, and its cooperating network libraries provide books and magazines in specialized formats to blind and print-disabled children, working-age adults, and seniors losing vision; and

WHEREAS, this valuable service not only provides the major source of reading material for these people, but also fosters literacy skills for children, interaction in community life for adults, and hope and encouragement for the newly blind; and

WHEREAS, NLS and its network libraries depend on the United States Postal Service (USPS) to distribute its materials and the digital players, Braille displays, and other equipment needed to listen to or read these books; and

WHEREAS, these libraries are permitted to use the Free Reading Matter provisions of the postal regulation and the USPS claims on its website that Free Reading Matter is “treated as First-Class Mail for purposes of processing, delivery and forwarding, and return if undeliverable”; and

WHEREAS, from June 2020 to the present, far too many library customers across the nation have experienced long delays or total absence in receiving their books and equipment, even though the libraries have sent them to the individual patron using the USPS; and

WHEREAS, this failure by the USPS not only has a detrimental effect on the lives of blind and print-disabled Americans, but is also creating a loss of taxpayer dollars since digital players, Braille displays, and other valuable equipment are stuck in the post office, never reaching the people who need it; and

WHEREAS, blind and print-disabled citizens cannot use the USPS Informed Delivery service for residential customers to see if they will be receiving library materials or equipment because it is inaccessible; and

WHEREAS, in Resolution 2018-19, the National Federation of the Blind urged USPS to make this service accessible and informed the agency that it was violating federal law, but the result was no action; and

WHEREAS, although Congress created and funded the Books for the Blind program under the Pratt-Smoot Act of 1931, neither the Library of Congress nor Congress itself demands any accountability from the USPS, which plays a vital role in the success or failure of the program: Now, therefore,

BE IT RESOLVED by the National Federation of the Blind in Convention assembled this tenth day of July, 2021, that this organization condemn and deplore the failure of the United States Postal Service to deliver materials and equipment to and from library patrons in a timely manner; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that this organization insist that the Librarian of Congress annually issue a report card to USPS based on data from NLS and its cooperating network libraries on the timely delivery of materials and equipment; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that this organization strongly urge the United States Congress to require the USPS to report to the Congress on steps that the USPS intends to take to improve timely delivery of library materials and equipment to ensure that these items are truly treated as First-Class Mail; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that this organization demand that the USPS immediately end its discriminatory practices by making its Informed Delivery service accessible to blind and print-disabled citizens.