

Testimony of James Gashel
before the Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education Subcommittee
COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC
March 23, 2004

Mr. Chairman, My name is James Gashel, and I am appearing here today on behalf of the National Federation of the Blind. Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this hearing this morning.

By way of introduction, I want you to know that the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) is the "voice of the nation's blind." All of our elected leaders and the vast majority of our members are blind. We know first-hand the challenges of living without sight and the potential which exists for blind people to contribute as taxpaying members of society. This is why I am here today.

Mr. Chairman, when I say that blind people have potential to contribute, most people think first of what they would not be able to do if they could not see. In the NFB, however, we are dedicated to solving problems and overcoming barriers. Today I would like to show you one of our most innovative and promising solutions -- a small computer and digital camera which will evolve into a pocket-sized audio reader for the blind within two years. This demonstration system will speak for itself in about twenty seconds after I snap the picture of a printed page.

Not being able to see this page and read it for myself, I would say that this technology is truly phenomenal. Think about the barriers to productivity that will fall when reading things in print can be done without seeing. Street signs, signs on doors, appliance controls, ATM's, voting machines, consumer products of all kinds, even money, and more will all be readable, even though we cannot see them.

In the National Federation of the Blind we have the collective experience of more than fifty-thousand men and women who confront the need to do ordinary things without seeing, or without seeing very well, every day. We know that blindness does not need to be a tragedy, but not being able to read things in print is a definite limitation. Our goal is for every blind person to be as productive as possible. We want to pay taxes and lead normal lives. Technology, such as a portable, pocket-sized reading device will be a revolutionary step forward to achieve this goal. I realize my personal bias in saying this, but, on the list of priorities for our country, the small cost needed to secure the value of this device is an investment that most people would really want the Congress to approve.

Mr. Chairman, I have great respect for this Subcommittee's challenge in distributing funds to address the diversity of human needs affecting virtually every person in America.

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Our federal request is for a project earmark of \$2.85 million. This project will eventually bring benefits to individuals in every Member's district and should be viewed as a project of unique national significance. Moreover, this project is consistent with current statutory authorities for several programs in the Departments of Labor or Education, or the office of Library Services in the Institute of Museum and Library Services. All of the funds will be used to place handheld beta test readers with blind people in a wide variety of user situations. Moving this device out of the laboratory into real world testing is absolutely essential to insure its reliability and genuine usefulness, particularly in education and employment. This is a proper and meaningful role for the federal government.

Thank you Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity to explain our need and the progress we are making to meet it. No other single decision on appropriations which you will make this year will have such a profound effect on blind people nationwide, well above 70 percent of whom are unemployed. Solutions, such as this portable reading technology will help us change that picture for blind people in the decades to come. Beyond that, once we have a small device that will read print aloud, the potential of this technology to grow to meet other needs should not be overlooked. Once again, I thank you.