

January 30, 2020

The latest on our new initiatives

Braille eReader prototypes have arrived; pilot will begin soon

Two weeks ago, NLS Director Karen Keninger discussed “The Role of NLS in Promoting Braille” on an hourlong program sponsored by the Hadley Institute for the Blind and Visually Impaired. The development of a refreshable braille display for NLS patrons was much on Keninger’s mind—and on listeners’ minds too.

With audio recordings of books so widely available, Keninger said, she often has to explain why braille is still important. So when someone—especially a sighted person—asks her “Why does braille matter?,” she has a ready response:

“Why does print matter? You know? Why aren’t you just listening to everything? It’s the same thing. Braille gives us the same level of literacy that print gives our sighted peers, and there is no other way to get the granularity that you need to be a totally literate person if you aren’t looking at the text, the spelling, the punctuation, the page layout, the paragraphing, the heading structures—all of those things that are so important in interpreting a text. You don’t get those from listening to a talking book.”

That’s why development of a refreshable braille display, or eReader, for our patrons has been one of Keninger’s goals since she became NLS director in 2012.

Prototypes of a refreshable braille display developed for NLS by HumanWare were delivered this month. Prototypes of a second model, developed by Zoomax, will be delivered in February. After a few months of in-house testing at NLS, network libraries in Iowa, Kentucky, Utah and New Jersey will begin testing the two eReaders in June. Consumer organizations that represent blind people will also take part in that six-month pilot.

The two eReaders have 20 braille cells and Bluetooth and WiFi connectivity. They can also be used as braille screen readers. But to keep costs down, they don’t have notetaking functionality or some of the other bells and whistles of expensive commercial devices.

The pilot, Keninger said, will help NLS “find out how much training people need, how willing people who’ve never used refreshable braille are to learn to use it, and all of the ins and outs of supporting it at the library level and maintaining it.”

If the pilot goes well, NLS hopes to begin distributing the eReaders to network libraries throughout the country in 2021.

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Richard Smith, chief of the NLS Network Division since 2014, retired this month. Richard (at right with the commemorative clock he was given at his retirement party) was well-known to many of you; he previously led network libraries in Louisiana (1982–1988) and Missouri (2000–2014). He and his wife, Ann, will be settling in Pensacola, Florida, where Richard will be volunteering, painting and perhaps teaching. Please contact Stephen Prine, spri@loc.gov, with any questions that would have otherwise been directed to Richard. A search is underway to fill this position and we will keep the network apprised of our progress.



Watch for the next issue of *On the Move* in your inbox on February 27!