

TESTIMONY OF
THE NATIONAL FEDERATION OF THE BLIND OF NEW YORK
IN SUPPORT OF LEGISLATION ALLOWING USE OF SURPLUS FUNDS
IN THE TARGETED ACCESSIBILITY FUND TO BE USED TO
FUND NFB-NEWSLINE®

Good afternoon:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify here today.

My name is Luis Mendez. I am Director of the NFB-Newsline program for the National Federation of the Blind of New York. I represent the National Federation of the Blind of New York State. I am testifying today in support of assuring continued funding for NFB-NEWSLINE by providing for its funding through the Targeted Accessibility Fund which is administered by the Public Service Commission.

The advent of text-to-speech and refreshable electronic Braille technologies and the convergence of these technologies with the unprecedented growth in digital telecommunications services has brought about an opportunity to extend the benefits of written information to people who would otherwise be left out due to a disability such as blindness or deaf-blindness.

WHAT IS NFB-NEWSLINE?

NFB-NEWSLINE is an information access service provided free of charge to people who are blind and print-disabled. The service provides access to a variety of different information and publications. Currently the service provides access to newspapers, magazines, blindness-specific publications, Spanish language newspapers, breaking news publications from major networks, emergency weather alerts and forecasts, TV listings, job listings, and weekly circulars from national retailers.

NFB-Newsline is proudly made available to New York State residents by the New York State affiliate of the National Federation of the Blind. Since March of 2002, New Yorkers who have registered to receive the service have been able to call a toll-free or local telephone number to gain access to ever-increasing diverse content ranging from breaking news and updated coronavirus information to the latest happenings in the world of sports and entertainment.

NFB-Newsline can also be accessed via a mobile app, through Amazon's Alexa platform, on a fully accessible website, and through on demand emails. The NFB-Newsline app also allows registered users to access and use basic features of the KNFB Reader to scan documents and convert them to speech, allowing eligible NFB-Newsline subscribers to gain access to print materials anywhere.

The NFB-Newsline service, though made available free of charge to registered users, must be paid for by the NFBNY affiliate. Two of our subscribers in the Utica area have recently requested that we explore making that city's major daily paper available via NFB-Newsline. However, the cost of doing so may be as high as \$10,000.00 per year.

As part of the service, we repeatedly call subscribers to get feedback on the use of the service and issues that they may be encountering. Users report a high degree of enjoyment and satisfaction with the service. However, a significant number of subscribers have also indicated that there is a need for training to use the various platforms through which NFB-NEWSLINE content can be accessed more effectively.

In 2020 the cost to the affiliate to provide NFB-Newsline to New Yorkers who are subscribed to receive the service was approximately \$155,000.00. These costs do not cover the significant investments needed to mount a comprehensive outreach effort to the estimated six hundred thousand (600,000) New Yorkers who may be eligible for the service, to provide comprehensive training and support to registered subscribers, and to develop educational programs and other efforts to meet the needs of our older subscribers and people dealing with the recent loss of vision. We need the means to bring NFB-NEWSLINE to a greater number of blind and print disabled New Yorkers, provide broader hands-on training, and increase the amount and range of content available.

New York State currently provides telephone service to its deaf citizens by means of a telephone relay service through the Targeted Accessibility Fund. This service was established pursuant to federal law and is funded by imposing a small surcharge upon landline telephone bills throughout the state. Surplus revenue from this surcharge can be used to fund the NFB-NEWSLINE service, without increasing the existing surcharge and without imposing an additional surcharge.

Twelve states, including Texas, California, Alabama, and Georgia, use this funding stream to fund identical programs in their states. A list of the States providing funding as proposed is attached for your convenience. Our proposal **WOULD NOT** cost the citizens of our state any more money than is already being collected for these purposes and would not impact the budget deficit.

The New York State Commission for the Blind currently funds this program on a contractual basis. Passage of this legislation would enable the Commission to direct these funds to other needed services for blind New Yorkers while augmenting our ability to provide this valuable service to countless other New Yorkers.

Respectfully submitted,

Luis A. Mendez

Sponsored states that use the Universal Service Fund as a funding source
02/24/20

Alabama
California
Colorado
Georgia
Illinois
Maine
Maryland
Minnesota
New Hampshire
Pennsylvania
Texas
Wisconsin