

Why GAO Did This Study

NLS, within the Library of Congress (LOC), provides free audio and braille materials for U.S. citizens and residents who cannot read standard print due to visual and other disabilities. In fiscal year 2016, the NLS program received about \$50 million in federal funds to provide these materials through a national network of libraries. The House report accompanying the fiscal year 2016 legislative branch appropriations bill included a provision for GAO to review NLS's users and the technology it employs to meet their needs.

GAO examined (1) the characteristics of NLS users and the steps NLS is taking to ensure eligible individuals' access and awareness, and (2) how NLS provides materials and the extent to which it is considering emerging trends in technology. GAO reviewed relevant federal laws and regulations, NLS documents, and administrative data; interviewed NLS officials, librarians from 8 of the 101 network libraries selected for geographic diversity and a range in the number of users, and officials from research and advocacy groups and assistive technology companies; and reviewed literature on NLS-eligible populations and trends in assistive technologies.

What GAO Recommends

Congress should consider authorizing NLS to provide its users devices for reading electronic braille files. In addition, GAO recommends that NLS re-examine its eligibility certification requirements, evaluate its outreach, and assess alternative approaches to delivering audio content. LOC generally agreed with these recommendations.

View [GAO-16-355](#). For more information, contact Daniel Bertoni at (202) 512-7215 or bertonid@gao.gov.

LIBRARY SERVICES FOR THOSE WITH DISABILITIES

Additional Steps Needed to Ease Access to Services and Modernize Technology

What GAO Found

The National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (NLS) is primarily used by older adults with visual disabilities, and NLS has taken some steps to ensure eligible users' access to and awareness of available services. In fiscal year 2014, about 70 percent of the program's 430,000 users were age 60 and older and almost 85 percent had visual disabilities, according to the most recent NLS data available at the time of GAO's review. Federal regulations establish eligibility for NLS services for people with a range of disabilities. However, medical doctors must certify eligibility for people with reading disabilities such as dyslexia, which is not required for those with visual or physical disabilities. According to officials from network libraries and other stakeholder groups, the requirement for a doctor's certification is an obstacle to accessing services because of additional steps and costs to the individual. These officials and stakeholders said other professionals, such as special education teachers, are also positioned to certify eligibility for applicants with reading disabilities. GAO has previously noted the importance of disability programs keeping pace with scientific and medical advances. However, the certification requirement has remained largely unchanged for more than 40 years. NLS has taken steps to inform eligible groups about its services, such as partnering with other organizations that serve these groups, developing a new website, and distributing an outreach toolkit to network libraries. However, NLS has no plans to evaluate which outreach efforts have resulted in new users in order to ensure resources are used effectively—a key practice identified previously by GAO.

NLS offers materials to its users in a range of formats, but its efforts to adopt new, potentially cost-saving technologies are hampered by limitations in both its statutory authority and its analyses of alternatives. Users may choose to receive, through the mail, audio materials on digital cartridges or hard copy braille documents. Users may also choose to download audio and braille files from an NLS-supported website. During fiscal year 2014, 86 percent of users chose to receive audio materials on digital cartridges, according to NLS data. NLS officials said they would like to provide users with devices for reading electronic braille files, a faster and less bulky approach than braille documents, and per the agency's July 2015 analysis, could become more cost effective with technological advances. However, federal statute does not authorize NLS to use program funds to acquire and provide braille devices as it does for audio devices, which prevents the agency from taking advantage of technology that has the potential to reduce costs. NLS is also examining new technologies for audio materials but has not fully assessed available alternatives. For example, NLS is considering supplementing its collection of human-narrated audio materials with text-to-speech (i.e., synthetic speech) materials, which some evidence suggests could be produced more quickly and at a lower cost. However, NLS has not comprehensively compared the text-to-speech option to its current approach in order to make a decision on whether to move forward, as called for by GAO best practices for alternatives analysis. Without this analysis, NLS may miss an opportunity to meet its users' needs more efficiently and cost effectively.