

MEANINGFUL ACCESS TO CURRENCY

ISSUE:

In May 2002, the American Council of the Blind filed a federal lawsuit against the Secretary of the Treasury (*American Council of the Blind v. Paulson*) alleging that the Department of the Treasury failed to provide “meaningful access” to U.S. currency for blind and other visually impaired individuals. In October 2008, the court issued its ruling that required the Secretary to take such steps as may be required to provide access to currency in conjunction with the subsequent redesign of each denomination of banknotes.

Prior to the court’s ruling, the Bureau of Engraving and Printing (BEP) commissioned a comprehensive study to analyze: the needs of the blind/visually impaired; examine existing methods that could potentially provide improved access; and the cost of accommodation to the government and industry sectors. The BEP’s recommendations from the study were as follows: a) include a raised tactile feature on currency; b) continue adding large, high-contrast numerals/colors on currency; and c) distribute currency readers to blind and visually impaired individuals.

a) Notes with Tactile Features

The BEP anticipates that the first redesigned denomination containing a tactile feature (as well as improved large, high contrast numerals) and new security features will be the \$10 note, anticipated to be released for circulation in 2020.

b) Notes with High Contrast Numerals

The BEP began adding high-contrast numerals and different colors to U.S. currency in 1997 as a part of the redesign of the \$50 note, followed by the same redesign of the \$5 note in 2008. These features were included in the redesign of the \$100 note released in 2013, and the BEP will continue to refine them in future currency redesigns.

c) Currency Reader Program

The BEP launched a nationwide currency reader distribution program in January 2015, well in advance of the circulation of the tactile-enhanced currency. The BEP expects the program to be in effect for several years primarily because current law prohibits redesign of the \$1 note; tactile-enhanced currency is likely to be issued one denomination at a time; and currency without tactile features is likely to co-circulate with tactile-enhanced currency in the foreseeable future.

NAMA POSITION:

New currency design will invariably impact stakeholders across several industries. Devices produced by banking equipment manufacturers, ATMs, currency handling equipment, and bill validators may require redesign, modification, or replacement, all of which could amount to significant costs.

- NAMA urges the BEP, the Treasury Department, and the Federal Reserve to ensure that the aforementioned impacts are balanced against the need to develop durable tactile-featured currency and supports government measures to ease the burden on the convenience services industry of accommodating new currency designs.