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**Braille Transcriber Apprentice Program**

*A Model Transition and Reentry Initiative*

*Pilot year: FY2015*

*Through the Braille Transcriber Apprentice Program (BTAP), APH will recruit transcribers who learned braille and earned national certifications while incarcerated as they transition back into society. Participants will live in Louisville for a few months while they transcribe for APH and receive training to learn about independent braille production, small business management, and networking. At the end of each apprenticeship, APH may decide to either hire qualified transcribers to work at APH full-time, or subcontract with them for braille transcription services after they return to their home states.*

**Purpose**

BTAP addresses two clearly identified and reciprocal needs:

* APH's current and anticipated need for more highly qualified braille transcribers, and
* The need of transcribers who learned braille in prison for guidance, a structured environment, and networking opportunities as they establish braille transcription careers following release.

**Rationale**

APH

Since 1879, the American Printing House for the Blind (APH) has worked in partnership with the federal government to identify the unique learning needs of students working below college level who are blind and visually impaired, and to develop and produce accessible education tools and materials for this population. As a line item in the President's budget, APH receives an annual appropriation from the U.S. Department of Education to research and manufacture educational products. APH completes a census each year of students with vision loss, and then provides the bulk of appropriation funding to states and outlying areas to purchase APH products for their students on a per-capita basis.

Providing textbooks and support materials in braille for blind students is key to APH fulfilling its national role in educating visually disabled students. The Braille Improvement Project, which APH launched in 2006 and continues to implement, calls for the full-time employment of 18 braille transcribers. In spite of concerted efforts, APH has struggled to maintain this number, currently employing 12 full-time transcribers. APH also outsources braille transcription jobs to over 400 individuals or groups across the country. While APH never has trouble outsourcing literary textbooks, we often have problems outsourcing Nemeth Code transcription because it requires a higher level of learning.

Since braille requires considerable time to learn and become proficient, there are significant challenges to building a qualified transcriber workforce. Adding to this challenge, the Braille Authority of North America (BANA) voted in 2012 to adopt an updated braille code (Unified English Braille, or UEB) for the United States. The current code used is English Braille American Edition. With implementation of UEB set to begin with textbook orders for the 2015-2016 school year, some older, more experienced transcribers have indicated that they will retire or leave the profession rather than learn the UEB Code. And all current transcribers will need UEB instruction and retraining if they are to maintain certification to transcribe textbooks. APH will endeavor to provide this training to all BTAP apprentices.

National Prison Braille Network

In 2000, APH partnered with the Kentucky Correctional Institution for Women and Kentucky Correctional Industries to establish KCI Braille Services in Pewee Valley, Kentucky. That same year, APH launched the National Prison Braille Network. Vision and corrections professionals working with prison braille programs across the country join the network, free of charge, and many participate in the National Prison Braille Forum hosted by APH each October in conjunction with Annual Meeting. There are currently 33 known prison braille programs nationwide, with a combined total of approximately 800 men and 200 women transcribing braille. A recent survey conducted by APH indicates there is a large pool of qualified applicants for BTAP. *[See Attachment A.]*

The primary purpose of the Network is to provide people working directly with braille production facilities behind prison walls with opportunities to discuss common concerns, identify useful resources, celebrate accomplishments, and explore potential solutions to the unique challenges that these programs present. Typically, about 50 professionals attend the Forum each year. They consistently indicate that this conference provides them with a much-needed and meaningful chance to network and learn from colleagues across the country.

***A major concern of Network members, which has been expressed repeatedly over the past 14 years, is that too frequently, highly qualified, motivated, experienced transcribers in prison braille programs across the country do not continue transcribing braille following their release.*** Starting a business of any kind requires seed money to purchase hardware, software, and supplies, and to cover other operating expenses until revenue is produced. Building connections within the transcription industry is also critical for transcribers as they market their skills, as is the need for continuing education on braille code changes, advances in tactile graphic production, and much more.

In many instances, corrections policies prohibit relationships among prison staff and other former offenders once an inmate is released, severing ties with the braille network. Unfortunately, many offenders leaving prison after serving a long term do not have a support system or the funds needed to get a transcription operation up and running. Braille transcription is an ideal "cottage industry" and historically most transcribers have produced braille in their own homes or offices.

At this point, however, the field of vision is losing many highly experienced transcribers who want to continue transcribing upon release from prison, but simply don't have the resources to do so. APH staff coordinating the National Prison Braille Network continually receive requests for help from offenders who are either soon to be released or recently released and are eager and anxious to continue their transcription work on the outside. *[See Attachment B.]* Currently, there is no mechanism in place to provide the support these transcribers need.

**Program Overview**

During the pilot year of the Braille Transcriber Apprentice Program (FY2015), APH will identify and actively recruit up to six qualified transcribers from prison braille programs. They will come to Louisville for a period of time immediately following their release from prison -- estimated to be between two and six months. They will work at APH as braille transcriber apprentices while they receive the additional training, work experience, and networking opportunities necessary to establish successful independent transcription careers when they return to their home states. The level of training and work experience needed and the length of time each apprentice will work at APH will be determined on an individual basis. Continual evaluation of work skills will be conducted throughout the BTAP experience.

APH may decide to offer some of these transcribers full-time, regular employment, if the company has job openings for which they qualify. APH may also choose to negotiate with some transcribers to contract for their braille transcription services after they return home.

**Apprentice Compensation**

While in Louisville, braille transcriber apprentices will be paid the same rate that APH pays beginning transcribers (currently $14.25 per hour). In addition, the program will cover expenses for travel to and from Louisville, an allowance for housing and transportation (for up to 2 months), and a daily stipend for meals and other essentials (for up to 30 days). Apprentices will not be eligible for benefits, such as health insurance.

The program mentor will help apprentices set up checking and savings accounts (if they have not done so already), and provide budget training as needed. Apprentices will understand that when the daily stipend and monthly allowance periods end, they will be expected to cover their own expenses. They will be strongly encouraged to save as much of their salary as possible during the first two months of BTAP while this extra income helps them with living expenses.

**Participation Eligibility**

To qualify for this model reentry program, applicants must have...

* Participated in a prison braille program that is affiliated with the National Prison Braille Network. (Membership is free and open to all programs.)
* Earned Literary Braille Certification through the NLS (National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, Library of Congress).
* Preferably earned at least one advanced certification: Textbook Formatting, Literary Braille Proofreading, Nemeth Braille Code for Math and Science Notation, Nemeth Braille Proofreading, and Music.
* Preferably gained tactile graphics design and production experience.
* A commitment to pursuing a career in braille transcription.
* Motivation to learn all aspects of accessible media production, including electronic file manipulation.

Ideally, offenders still working in prison braille programs with between six months and one year remaining before parole or serve-out will be selected for the program. This will allow time to help participants gather their portfolio and make a smooth transition to APH. APH staff will work with inmate case workers and parole officers during this time to ensure that release requirements (if any) are fulfilled. Transcribers who meet other program criteria and have already been released from prison will also be considered.

*Sex offenders will not be eligible to participate in the BTAP pilot initiative.*

**Application Process**

While funding is currently available for only the pilot Braille Transcriber Apprentice Program in FY2015 (October 1, 2014-September 30, 2015), the APH Prison Braille Advisory Team will be working to secure additional funding to continue BTAP into the future. For that reason, two application categories have been established: Current and Future. **Current Applicants** will be considered for the FY2015 pilot initiative. Information on **Future Applicants** will be kept on file as potential candidates if BTAP continues. Data gathered from future applicants will assist with APH efforts to show the need for BTAP to continue. The primary difference between Current and Future Applicants is that Current Applicants have either already been released from prison, or have **less** than one year until their next parole board meeting or serve out date. Future Applicants have **more** than one year until their next parole board meeting or serve out date.

Both Current and Future Applicants must complete a BTAP Application Form and send it to APH. Current Applicants must also send several attachments along with the Application Form, as follows:

* A personal letter or essay explaining why they are applying for BTAP, including:
* a description of their experience in the prison braille program,
* what braille means to them,
* their career goals,
* challenges they will face to achieving these goals following release, and
* resources available to them upon release to complete their goals.
* A resume or list of their transcription work in the braille program.
* A copy of each braille certficate earned.
* 3-5 samples of tactile graphics produced from masters that the transcriber created independently (if he/she produces tactile graphics).
* 5-10 pages of braille transcription work they have produced independently, along with print copies of these pages.
* At least two (but no more than five) letters of recommendation, one of which must be from a corrections professional (preferably the braille program manager) who can speak about the transcriber's conduct during incarceration and tenure in the braille program. If the applicant works or has worked with a vision professional who can attest to his/her braille production experience and transcription quality, a letter from that individual would be helpful.

**Pilot Program Staffing**

During the BTAP pilot year, an APH staff member who is highly qualified in braille and has considerable education and experience in the field of criminal justice will be re-assigned from her current position as Accessible Media Editor to spend approximately 10 hours each week mentoring apprentices and handling all "off work hours" issues, such as transportation, housing, and meeting parole requirements. APH's Coordinator of Braille Transcription Services and our liaison with KCI Braille Services prison braille program will oversee braille training once apprentices arrive at APH. These two professionals will work together to customize an "action plan" for each participant upon hire, projecting an approximate length of time that each will work at APH.

The APH Prison Braille Advisory Committee and Public Affairs staff managing the National Prison Braille Network will administer BTAP and provide support as needed to ensure that BTAP apprentices have the training, tools, and contacts they will need to establish successful careers.

**Timeline: FY2015** (October 1, 2014-September 30, 2015)

The BTAP pilot program will be launched on October 15 at the National Prison Braille Forum. Application packets will be made available at that time, and staff will begin identifying and recruiting candidates. A preliminary report on the program will be produced in June, 2015.

**Partners**

APH partners with hundreds of professionals and organizations around the world each year to develop products, programs, and services that make life better for individuals with vision loss. Key to the success of BTAP is that we reach out to local, state, and national entities for both their expertise and their support.

On the national level, APH staff coordinating the National Prison Braille Network has worked for many years to keep both the U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Assistance, and the U.S. Department of Education, Correctional Education Division, informed on the purpose and scope of prison braille programs. With our encouragement, the Department of Justice added "prison braille programs" to the list of programs eligible to receive federal funding through Second Chance Act grants, and two prison braille programs received grants through the 2008 funding cycle, totaling $1.5 million. Officials with whom we communicate in these departments are extremely supportive of prison braille programs and have asked to be kept informed of related initiatives.

On the state level, Kentucky Department of Corrections Commissioner LaDonna Thompson is well-informed on prison braille programs and supports KCI (Kentucky Correctional Industries) Braille Services. APH has worked in partnership with the Kentucky Correctional Institution for Women and Kentucky Correctional Industries to create and maintain this prison braille program since 2000. APH has subsequently hired four braille transcribers released from this program for full-time employment.

On the local level, we have established a working partnership with Prodigal Ministries, a non-profit agency that provides stability and support to former prisoners, helping them develop the community living skills and accountability that they need upon release to redirect their lives and become productive citizens. With three transitional houses for men and one for women in the Louisville area, Prodigal Ministries is partnering with APH on BTAP to make housing available for program participants, and to provide access to all transitional services that the agency provides (such as alcohol and drug counseling, assistance with parole requirements, access to clothing...). Prodigal Ministries works with many other non-profits across the region (clothes closets, food pantries, volunteer mentors...), and APH is working to secure their support for BTAP.

In addition to these resources, APH is a member of the Greater Louisville Reentry Coalition and has presented information on prison braille programs to this group. Member agencies have offered their services to help with reentry initiatives in the Louisville area.

**Successful Outcomes**

To ensure a positive experience for transcribers and a positive return on investment for APH, pre- and post-program testing will be conducted with all apprentices. Two separate checklists will be developed -- one for technical skills (braille, computer and software), and one for "soft skills" (time management, work ethic, personal budgeting...). These checklists will be completed with each individual apprentice to customize goals and objectives, and to establish a timeframe for completion of the program.

What will ultimately determine the success of BTAP is whether or not APH successfully adds knowledgeable, productive professionals to the braille transcription workforce across the country. We would prefer to add these experts to our team - either here at APH or as long-distance contract workers. However, if participants in the program successfully complete goals and objectives and end up producing braille for individuals or agencies other than APH after returning home, we will consider the program successful at building these transcription careers since they will further advance opportunities for people with vision loss to read and learn.

**APH National Prison Braille Advisory Committee and**

**BTAP Development Team**

Nancy Lacewell, Chair

 Director of Government and Community Affairs

 National Prison Braille Network Coordinator

 BTAP Coordinator

 1839 Frankfort Avenue

 Louisville, KY 40206

 Toll free: 800-223-1839 ext. 339

 Direct: 502-899-2339

 Email: nlacewell@aph.org

Becky Snider, Public Affairs Coordinator, National Prison Braille Network Administrator, and

 BTAP Administrator

Jayma Hawkins, Accessible Media Editor and BTAP Apprentice Mentor

Gary Mudd, Vice President of Public Affairs

Bob Brasher, Vice President of Advisory Services and Research

Vicki Buns, Vice President of Human Resources

Jan Carroll, Director of Braille Transcription Services

Jane Thompson, Director of Accessible Textbooks

Dawn Wilkins, Braille Pre-Production Manager





**ATTACHMENT A**

 **Data Gathered from Survey of Prison Braille Programs in the U.S.**

**August 2014**

Number of Prison Braille Programs sent the survey 33

 [Total number of known programs at this time.]

Number of programs that have responded to date 30

 [91% of known programs participated in survey]

Total inmate capacity for these programs 867

Total inmates currently in programs 626 \*

Total braille transcribers in programs 332

Number eligible for BTAP who will serve out

 or be up for parole in 2014-2015 46 \*\*

 " " " " in 2016 17

 " " " " in 2017 9

Total numbers of transcribers who have been released

from prison within the past 3 years (since 2011) who

are eligible for BTAP 109 \*\*

**Prison Braille Program Recidivism Rates**

These questions were asked of all prisons:

To your knowledge…

How many inmates who participated in your prison braille

program and earned NLS Literary Braille Certification have

been released from prison? 310

How many of these released inmates are now transcribing

Braille (either full time or part time) on the outside? 88 (28%)

How many of these released inmates have reoffended and

returned to prison? 15 (4.8%)

*\* This number includes all inmates in the program, including those who do not learn braille. They may produce tactile graphics only, manage production schedule or bookkeeping, package and ship braille materials..., but they are not on track at this time to become full-time transcribers.*

*\*\* These 155 transcribers are potential candidates for the BTAP pilot initiative.*





**ATTACHMENT B**

APH staff coordinating the National Prison Braille Network (NPBN) continually receive letters from inmates in prison braille programs. Most often, these inmates request our help to continue transcribing braille following their release. Here are some exerpts:

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*I am currently incarcerated at the Nebraska State Penitentiary and have been employed by Prose and Cons Braille since 7/9/07. I have certifications in Literary, Nemeth, Literary Proofreading, UEB (Unified English Braille) through Canada, and am currently working on the Braille Formats certification. ... I have a parole hearing in October of 2015 and am trying to get as much information as possible to lay my braille plans out to the Parole Board and whomever will be my assigned Parole Officer. I am trying to get an idea of what help is available to me to become a successful braille transcriber before release so I can more accurately make plans and set goals. ...My ultimate goal is to eventually open my own family owned and operated braille shop in my home town of Poplar Bluff, Missouri.*

*I am an efficient and accurate braillist. I work hard and take pride in the braille I produce....Any information you can supply to give me some direction into the above matters would be greatly appreciated by myself and my family.*

***James; NE State Penitentiary; Prose and Cons Braille Program; June, 2014***

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*I am writing you as well as various other organizations for braille employment information. I am a certified braillist. As you can tell from my address I am currently a guest of the state of Missouri. However, it is almost certain my case will be turned over quite soon. I anticipate being home in 2014.*

*I am a Library of Congress certified Braillist. I formatted textbooks for 3 years before moving into the QC department where I check braille. I have also studied the National Braille Association's Textbook Formatting course, though I have not taken the test. I have done all this work through the Center for Braille and Narration Production in Jefferson City.*

*Ideally I would like to work from home if at all possible. However, if the pay and benefits are good I will relocate. I have other options as I am a boat builder with much experience in the custom fiber glass field. Furthermore, I build and design automobiles* *and do home renovations. I have owned businesses in all these areas before my incarceration.*

*Continued on page 10*

*I would like to do braille though. Because I largely do textbooks I like knowing that I am helping give the blind a chance to learn as well as the sighted students. this speaks to the educator in me as I was also a tutor for as long as I've been a braillist... Thank you for any information you can provide me.*

***Willy; Jefferson City (MO) Correctional Center, Center for Braille and Narration Production; May, 2012***

*+++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++*

*I am currently incarcerated at the Idaho Correctional Center in Boise, Idaho. I am certified in Literary Braille and I am currently working on my Textbook Formatting certification, which I hope to complete by the end of this year. At that point, I plan to undertake a proofreading course of study.*

*I am writing today to ask what help is available, if any, through APH, for inmates to help get them back on their feet after they get out. I'm starting to think about what will happen when I get out in 2012 and to be frank, it's a little scary.*

*Also, what qualifications do you look for when you consider a prospective employee? What could I be doing to make myself more hireable? ... I eagerly look forward to hearing back from you.*

***Eric; Idaho Correctional Center; ICC Braille Transcription Center; March, 2010***

*+++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++++*

*I am currently an inmate at Miami Correctional Facility in Indiana, home of MAMP (Miami Accessible Media Project). I am a certified braille transcriber with experience in textbook and Promising Practices (K-3). I am extremely computer literate and fully understand NIMAS code and the programming to transform the code into braille, large print, and accessible PDF's.*

*Now, I have explained who I am, let me explain why I am writing. I am currently working on a sentence modification, trying to get out early. It would greatly improve my chances of success if I could get a letter from you showing you're willing to contract transcription work to me. After I get established, I intend on starting a small company providing multi-media transcription services and a wide range of other products for the visually impaired. ... I will eagerly await your reply.*

***Carl; Miami (IN) Correctional Facility; Miami Accessible Media Project; July, 2010***