

BRAILLE TRANSCRIPTION SERVICES: BREAKING THE CODE

BY MELISSA FORTSON AND JENNIFER LEGG

FILE PHOTO

Braille is a vital source of information and communication for persons who are blind or whose eyesight is not sufficient for reading printed material. Braille is not a language but a means by which languages such as English or Spanish may be read; persons who are blind or have low vision use their fingers to read this code comprised of raised dots. Braille provides important equal access to information. According to the Braille Plus, Inc. Web site (www.brailleplus.net/school), "Braille readers can get the information they need, reduce their reliance on others, protect their privacy and participate more fully in their careers and daily life." Print or electronic documents can easily be translated into Braille through the use of transcription services.

A Braille transcriber converts printed text into Braille. Transcription may be done manually or with the use of translation software. It is important to note that the availability of such software allows sighted persons who are not fluent in Braille to transcribe; however, fluency in Braille enables transcribers to format and proofread more effectively. After transcribing a document's contents, the transcriber then prints it using a Braille printer. Braille printers work much like regular computer printers, but emboss the Braille onto heavyweight paper as opposed to printing characters in ink.

BRAILLE TRANSCRIPTION: THE WHY

Medical advances have resulted in an increased incidence of blindness. "Premature babies are being saved but can be faced with lifelong disabilities. Older adults are living longer and can develop degenerative eye diseases," reports the Web site of the American Printing House for the Blind, Inc. (www.aph.org). As the occurrence of blindness increases, the need and importance for Braille transcription increases too. While assistive technology, such as magnifiers and computer software which enlarges or simulates a voice reading print, is increasingly available, there is still a need for Braille. Braille is an alternate format that empowers persons who are blind to be independently literate and is easily substituted for print; many persons who are blind prefer Braille when it is available.

"Technology is great, but expensive," says Carol Francisco of the Middle Tennessee Council of the Blind. Synthesized speech can also be difficult to understand. Ms. Francisco says, "I have always found it difficult to use recipes on tape."

In some cases, the provision of Braille documents allows organizations to comply with applicable laws. Martha Lafferty, senior attorney at the Disability Law & Advocacy Center of Tennessee, says that while there is no legal requirement that specifically requires Braille documents, "the ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act] and similar laws typically require that government entities and private businesses provide effective communication to people with disabilities. If Braille documents are necessary for effective communication,

then government and businesses will typically have to provide them unless doing so would be an undue burden or alteration in services."

Brenda Dillon, a member of the Tennessee Council of the Blind and Nashville's Mayor's Advisory Committee for People With Disabilities, shares that even when the ADA does not require them to do so, many government offices and private businesses provide Braille forms and applications upon request. "The practice is becoming more prevalent," she says.

"...having an actual hard copy in my hand, as the speakers talked was more helpful than even I realized it would or could be."

By providing materials in Braille, organizations not only comply with any applicable laws, but also promote the full involvement and independence of persons who are blind. Ms. Francisco explains: "It is well known that those of us who use Braille are more likely to be employed and hold better paying jobs. After all, it is hard to learn proper spelling and punctuation, if all your reading is done orally."

Ms. Dillon agrees: "When you are not able to read for yourself and are relying on listening, your writing suffers...having Braille enables you to communicate professionally."

Persons with visual disabilities should have equal access to information and resources; agencies demonstrate their commitment to meeting their consumers' needs by providing documents in Braille. Jan Rosemergy, director of communications and dissemination at The Vanderbilt Kennedy University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDD), notes that communication and dissemination of knowledge has been a part of the Center's mission since its founding. "We have a responsibility to [communicate] in a way that is accessible for specific purposes and audiences. Accessibility can take many forms. For persons who are blind, we provide our most important print items in Braille."

Braille copies are provided on request and all Center publications are listed on its Web site, which the Center strives to make as accessible as possible for text-reading software; for more information, contact (615) 322-8240 or email kc@vanderbilt.edu.

As a member of the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center's Community Advisory Council, Ms. Dillon appreciates the availability of Braille minutes and agendas. There is a huge communication barrier, Ms. Dillon says, when people refer to printed materials. "It is also hard to discuss and make decisions based on material that is read...when information isn't accessible to you that is accessible to others, it makes you feel inadequate to give an educated or informed response."

"Having the Braille...helped me to focus... and not lose concentration or attention."

In addition to meeting consumers' needs, providing Braille materials is also good business: "My husband is also blind," says Ms. Francisco, "so we go to restaurants that have Braille menus whenever possible."

BRaille TRANSCRIPTION: THE WHERE

Though there is a nationwide need for increased awareness and availability of transcription services, these services are available in Tennessee. Organizations serving people who are blind should have all pertinent documents and information transcribed into Braille. When they update their written documents and flyers, they should also update their Braille material.

Insert quotes from Sheri Grigsby, current Partners in Policymaking participant.

Melissa Fortson is an information & referral specialist/program coordinator with Tennessee Disability Pathfinder, a joint project of the Council on Developmental Disabilities and the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center UCEDD. Jennifer Legg is an undergraduate social work student at Belmont University who recently completed an internship with the Pathfinder program.

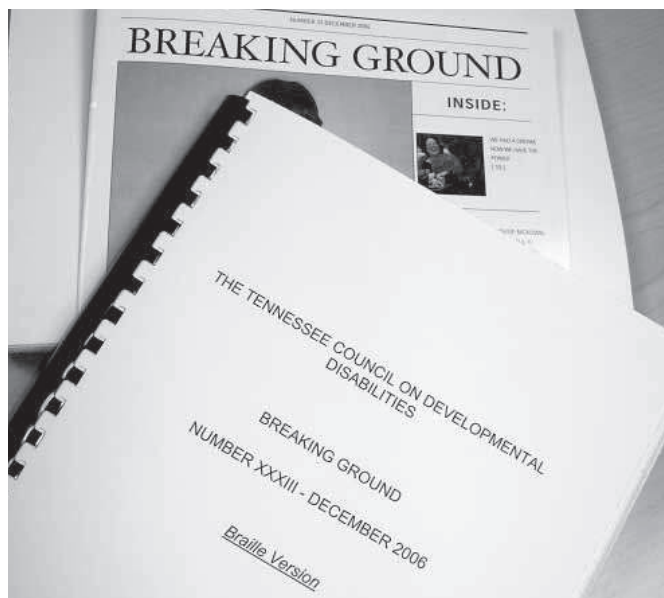


PHOTO: ASHLEY COULTER

TENNESSEE-BASED BRAILLE RESOURCES

The following individuals and organizations provide Braille transcription; for more information on their services, contact the provider directly. Braille materials are also available to students enrolled in Tennessee schools and colleges. For information about or access to Braille services, students may contact their special education teacher, teacher of students with visual impairments, or campus disability student services office.

Katherine Moore, disABILITY Resource Center (Knoxville)
 Email: kmoore@drctn.org
 Phone: 865-637-3666
 Rates: Available upon request

Lois Symington, East Tennessee Technology Access Center (Knoxville)
 Email: lsymington@aol.com
 Phone: 865-219-0130
 Rates: \$1.25 per Braille page

Crumley House Brain Injury Rehabilitation Center (Limestone)
 Email: CrumleyHouse@yahoo.com
 Phone: 423-257-3644
 Rates: Available upon request

Diana Dluhos, Clovernook Printing House (Memphis)
 Email: wclay@clovernook.org
 Phone: 901-523-9590
 Rates: 5 cents/page; \$16/hr; \$7 for binder

Tom Hopton, Center for Independent Living of Middle Tennessee (Nashville)
 Email: Tom_h@tndisability.org
 Phone: 615-292-5803
 Rates: Available upon request

Charles Couey (Nashville)
 Email: brocharles@bellsouth.net
 Phone: (615) 331-6098
 Rates: Determined on a sliding scale/individual basis

Bill Schenk, Tennessee School for the Blind (Nashville)
 Email: bschenk@tsb.k12tn.net
 Phone: 615-231-7321
 Rates: 10–15 cents/page