

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-14-823](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

All blind and many persons with low vision are unable to distinguish currency denominations without assistance. The U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia found that Treasury failed to provide meaningful access to U.S. currency to visually impaired persons, and in 2008, ordered Treasury to take steps to do so. The court did not define meaningful access, leaving it to Treasury to choose a course of action. Within Treasury, BEP designs and manufactures currency. GAO was asked to review the progress BEP has made toward meeting the district court's order. In addition, the Explanatory Statement accompanying the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2014, mandated GAO to report on strategies for minimizing the cost of developing currency with accessibility features.

This report examines (1) the status of BEP's efforts to provide currency that is accessible for visually impaired persons and how BEP is considering costs as part of these efforts and (2) factors that may affect BEP's efforts. To answer these questions GAO reviewed court and BEP documents, and interviewed officials from BEP, the Federal Reserve Board, and the Secret Service as well as representatives from advocacy organizations for visually impaired persons and trade associations for cash-handling companies.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends BEP evaluate its currency reader program while it develops a tactile feature in the next redesign of currency. BEP did not take a position on our recommendation.

View [GAO-14-823](#). For more information, contact Dave Wise at (202) 512-2834 or wised@gao.gov.

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U.S. CURRENCY

Reader Program Should Be Evaluated While Other Accessibility Features for Visually Impaired Persons Are Developed

What GAO Found

The Bureau of Engraving and Printing (BEP) has progressed in making currency accessible through a three-pronged approach it adopted and is considering the costs of its approach as it continues its efforts. BEP has:

- Added large, high-contrast numerals to notes, and it plans to continue to refine these numerals.
- Started to distribute free currency-reader devices that can scan a note and audibly announce its value. However, BEP's plans to evaluate the effectiveness of this new program are incomplete, and without a complete evaluation, BEP cannot determine the program's effectiveness.
- Made limited progress in developing a raised tactile feature on notes, which would provide the ability to determine the note's value by touch. While BEP has narrowed the options of what a tactile feature would look like on a note and how it would be applied, BEP officials stated that challenges developing the feature will delay selecting an option to test until March 2015—over a year behind schedule.

Supplementing these efforts, BEP developed a smartphone app that identifies notes. High-contrast numerals add little additional cost, and BEP estimates it will spend about \$35 million on currency readers over 3 years. Cost estimates to produce a tactile feature are preliminary and range widely.

GAO identified three factors that may affect BEP's efforts to complete its three-pronged approach. First, the inclusion of a tactile feature will require a redesign of currency, but it is not known when this will occur. Because BEP makes changes to currency to stay ahead of counterfeit threats, redesign occurs as needed and not at regular intervals. Second, BEP has faced difficulties developing a raised tactile feature, falling behind its internal schedule. Third, senior BEP and Federal Reserve officials told us that they have discussed the Federal Reserve's concerns about the potential cost impact of a tactile feature and whether technological changes since the 2008 court order could provide alternative options to BEP's current approach. BEP officials stated that they have not yet determined how these concerns might be addressed. Advocates for organizations representing visually impaired persons consider a tactile feature to be important and are concerned about the length of time it is taking BEP to provide access to currency.

Large, High-Contrast Numeral and Currency Reader Device



Sources: U.S. Bureau of Engraving and Printing and GAO. | [GAO-14-823](#)