

Court says U.S. paper currency discriminates against the blind

By Sandra Block, USA TODAY

A federal appeals court ruled Tuesday that the U.S. currency system discriminates against blind people because all paper money feels essentially the same. The ruling could force the government to change the size, shape or texture of the bills in your wallet.

The decision was a victory for the American Council of the Blind, which has been fighting the case in court for nearly six years. The court ruled that the current system violates the federal Rehabilitation Act, which was intended to ensure that people with disabilities could fully participate in society.

The court noted that most other nations' currency systems have accommodated the blind. Canada's currency, for example, contains embossed dots that vary by denomination. And the euro, introduced in 2002, has a foil feature that makes denominations distinguishable by touch.

The Justice Department is reviewing the decision. If it decides to appeal the 2-1 ruling by a three-judge panel, the government could seek a hearing by the full appellate court. Or it could ask the U.S. Supreme Court to take the case.

In a statement, the Treasury said the Bureau of Engraving and Printing has hired a research firm to study ways to help the blind and visually impaired. The results of that study will be available by early 2009, Treasury said.

In contesting the lawsuit, the Treasury had argued that changing the size of currency denominations could force companies to spend billions of dollars to redesign their vending machines. In addition, Treasury noted, the blind and visually impaired can use credit cards instead of cash.

But forcing blind people to ask strangers for help identifying denominations makes them vulnerable to fraud, says Eric Bridges, director of government affairs for the American Council of the Blind.

"I rely upon the kindness of people," says Bridges, who is totally blind. "You can't imagine how frustrating that is. It's money that I've earned. I should be able to independently tell what I've got."

The council isn't recommending a specific solution, Bridges says. But he says it wants the

government to address the problem with help from visually impaired people.

At least one advocacy group, the National Federation of the Blind, opposes the council's lawsuit. The federation doesn't oppose making changes to U.S. currency, says its president, Marc Maurer, but it doesn't think the problem rises to the level of discrimination.

Visually impaired people use U.S. currency for thousands of transactions every day, Maurer says. "To say that we don't have access to currency is foolishness."

Maurer, who is completely blind, says he's been using currency for nearly 50 years and doesn't believe he's ever been defrauded.

"If I'm in a grocery store line," he says, "I hold up the bill and say, 'What is this?' Nobody is tempted to lie to you under those circumstances."

"Relying on strangers," Maurer adds, "is not the end of the world."

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