



# NEWS



from the Office of the  
New York City Comptroller  
William C. Thompson, Jr.

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## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## THOMPSON TO TREASURY: STOP DISCRIMINATING AGAINST THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED

New York City Comptroller William C. Thompson, Jr. was joined by advocates for people with visual impairments and disabilities at a news conference today to call on the U.S. Treasury to accept the recent decision by a federal appeals court, which found that United States currency discriminates against those with limited vision.

In a letter to Secretary Henry M. Paulson Jr. – which can be viewed at [www.comptroller.nyc.gov](http://www.comptroller.nyc.gov) – Thompson urged the U.S. Treasury to embrace the ruling and not appeal it.

“More than 100 countries vary the size of their paper currency, or add other features that can be distinguished by touch, in order to assist those who are sight impaired,” Thompson wrote. “For all of our advances, the United States remains virtually alone in the world in its use of currency – in all denominations – that is identical in size. The court’s decision should be applauded; it is sensible, forward-thinking and long overdue.”

Thompson was joined by several advocates for people with visual impairments or disabilities, including the American Council of the Blind (the Council), which initiated the lawsuit back in 2002.

"The members of the American Council of the Blind are extremely pleased with the recent court decision upholding Judge Robertson's decision calling for the US Treasury to make paper currency accessible for people who are blind," said Mike Godino, the Treasurer of the American Council of the Blind. "It's time for the United States to get in line with the rest of the world, hopefully the Treasury will conform and decide to move forward for the good of all who are blind."

"The Treasury Department's efforts to make cash identifiable for visually impaired people is simple common sense," said Helen Keller Services for the Blind's Trustee Adrian Spratt. "Without different-sized bills or currency machines, blind vendors are easy prey for unscrupulous customers. And as a blind customer, I sometimes encounter sales and delivery people who are anxious at handing me change when I cannot

independently tell if it is correct. It is damaging for everyone concerned when daily transactions that out to be readily verifiable are needlessly transformed into exercises in trust. If all the other 178 countries that issue paper currency can eliminate this uncertainty, why can't we?"

By a 2-to-1 vote, the US Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit upheld a 2006 ruling by U.S. District Judge James Robertson. The appeals court ultimately rejected the Treasury's argument that making currency accessible would impose an undue burden on the government.

A majority decision penned by Circuit Judge Judith W. Rogers upheld the original ruling, which determined that the Treasury Department's failure to design and issue paper currency that is readily distinguishable to the visually impaired violates Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. The decision held that visually impaired Americans are denied "meaningful access" to currency, and remanded the case back to district court to address the Council's request for injunctive relief.

The U.S. Treasury can now decide whether to follow the ruling, or it can appeal to either the federal appeals court en banc or the U.S. Supreme Court.

"In addition to correcting a longstanding practice, the recent appeals court ruling has the added benefit of expanding the opportunity for entry-level positions for the blind and visually impaired," Thompson added. "The decision also addresses the needs of a rapidly aging population and the debilitating impact of diabetes upon the vision of those within our communities."

According to the American Foundation of the Blind, there are approximately 10 million visually impaired people in the United States; 1.3 million of whom are legally blind. More than half, approximately 5.5 million are senior citizens. Of the numerous countries that issue paper currency, only the United States prints bills that are identical in size and similar in color in all denominations.

"We are obligated to correct the vestiges of poorly conceived policy and on behalf of all New Yorkers, I urge that the Treasury Department embrace the appeals court ruling," Thompson said.

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