

**Statement of Commissioner Gloria Tristani  
on the Adoption of a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking  
on Access to Telecommunications Services,  
Telecommunications Equipment, and Customer Premises Equipment  
by Persons with Disabilities**

April 2, 1998

Today we take concrete steps to assure that the tremendous benefits of the telecommunications sector will be available to people with disabilities. Telecommunications is at the core of our society -- it is, increasingly, how we communicate with one another, how we learn, how we work. To be denied access to those activities would be, in essence, to be relegated to the sidelines of our national life. Congress wisely acknowledged this in enacting Section 255, mandating that telecommunications services and equipment be accessible to people with disabilities, where readily achievable.

I firmly believe that few actions we take as commissioners could be as important as those promoting real, meaningful access to telecommunications for all Americans. So we have worked, for example, to facilitate access for people in rural and high cost areas, to connect our schools and libraries, and to guarantee that wireless callers -- including TTY users -- have the benefit of E-911 services.

In my mind, this NPRM is long overdue. I believe that the guidelines and procedural rules we propose will have substantial impact in the lives of the 54 million Americans with disabilities. Imagine, for example, the frustration felt by someone using a voice board (an augmentative or alternative communications device) when they call emergency or directory assistance (911 or 411), only to be disconnected because the person answering does not understand that this is a real call. Imagine someone with cerebral palsy or multiple sclerosis, who then faces the prospect of using a TTY device, yet may not have the manual dexterity necessary to do so. Imagine doing that in an emergency.

These are striking examples. But they portend larger social and economic realities. Unemployment among people with disabilities is roughly 73 percent. And those who are employed earn on average only one-third the income of the non-disabled population. In our world today, access to telecommunications services and equipment translates into opportunity and participation.

I am committed to doing all I can to make that access happen. Today we set forth a number of proposals, relating to both the substantive mandates of Section 255 and the procedures for enforcing it. I believe we have proposed a workable framework for cooperation and creativity in finding innovative access solutions. I recognize that this is a beginning, and I look forward to working with both industry and consumers to build on this framework.