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BEFORE THE
FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION
WASHINGTON, DC 20554

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In the matter of	)	
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Telecommuncations Relay Services and	)	**CC Docket No. 98-67**
Speech to Speech Services for Individuals	)	
with Hearing and Speech Disabilities	)	

REPLY COMMENTS OF THE DIVISION OF SERVICES FOR THE DEAF AND THE HARD OF HEARING STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA

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The Division of Services for the Deaf and the Hard of Hearing (DSDHH) of North Carolina submits its reply comments in response to comments on FCC's NPRM on TRS submitted on July 20, 1998.

The DSDHH was established in 1989 by the legislature of North Carolina. Relay North Carolina (RNC) was the result of the mandate of the North Carolina G.S. 62-157 in 1989. The law mandated the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) to administer the relay program. DHHS delegated the daily operational responsibilites to DSDHH. RNC is a state relay program in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. The Utilities Commission of North Carolina regulates the relay services as it has with other public utilities.

Some issues that DSDHH wants to respond to comments that were sent to FCC on July 20, 1998 are as follows:

1. Scope of TRS

DSDHH applauds the FCC to have the costs of providing interstate "improved" relay services reimbursed by the interstate TRS Funds. Furthermore, STS and VRI should be recognized as "improved relay services". STS and VRI costs should be recoverable by the TRS Fund. North Carolina has been using the TRS Funds to pay for VRI services.

We also applaud the FCC's decision to expand the requirements of Title IV to include STS and VRI as improved services. We agree that the Title IV applies

to wireless or radio communication services as well. A lot of wireless communication companies do not collect revenues from their customers who use TRS via their cellular or wireless phones and do not deposit the monies with the TRS Funds. The need to do a feasibility study on wireless communications industries is obvious.

We support Stephen Gregory's argument to have FCC set up a ruling to improve transmission speed in TRS service to allow business and customers to speed up their conversations with less exasperations. Ultratec asked the FCC to expand the list of improved services to include utilization of voice recognition applications such as Fastran.

2. Speech to Speech (STS)

DSDHH agrees that the FCC should require states to provide STS within two years with the understanding that federal rules will assist states in setting up cost effective and regional or national centers to handle STS calls.

Our main concern is that STS may be a very minimal service for the size of the population of speech impaired people in North Carolina. It can be a very expensive service because a very small number of people will take advantage of this service. A sole center in North Carolina can be too expensive. A regional remote center would be cost effective to serve this population. The FCC will need to assist the states to develop cost effective regional center where STS calls will be handled.

One idea is to have one service provider to bid and set up a national relay center only for STS calls for the whole country. The use of specially trained CAs

would help facilitate the STS calls in a much more effective way with the STS users.

The timing to set up STS is very critical. The FCC recommends the limit of two years to set up STS, but we agree with the Florida Public Service Commission that it would be more appropriate to time the provision of STS to current contract.

We like Leo LaPointe's suggestion to have the FCC review a proposal for three way voice calling as an enhanced feature as part of STS call process. It would allow the STS users to speak for themselves and the CA would interrupt when a hearing person would not understand what is said.

3. Video Relay Interpreting (VRI)

DSDHH disagrees with the FCC that VRI should not be mandated by the Commission's TRS rules. We agree with NAD and CAN that VRI be available through local and centralized sites to which VRI calls would be handled. The cost for VRI will eventually decline when the costs for videoconferencing equipment declines.

We agree with the State of Maryland Department of Budget and Management and the USA Deaf Sports Federation that the FCC needs to revisit this issue and reconsider its ruling. Maryland suggests that there would be development and utilization of regional, centralized sites of TRS qualified interpreters, to be accessed by TRS programs, and have interpreter training centers offer classes to train students to handle relay and VRI calls.

We support the USA Deaf Sports Federation's suggestion that the VRI be included as a mandatory service because the population of deaf people with limited English skills would use VRI more than the relay services. Their English skills would limit them to express words via TTY; therefore, only VRI could properly meet their needs.

North Carolina was the first state in the country to implement permanent VRI on August 19, 1997 and is still the only state to provide this permanent VRI as part of relay services. The VRI has been in service from 8:00 am to 5:00 pm Mondays to Fridays. MCI operates the VRI center in Arizona. It hired more than 12 interpreters who are RID certified and/or state certified to handle VRI calls.

People in North Carolina have been very pleased with the interpreters' professional skills to process the calls. The VRI center in Arizona is very close to the Phoenix College's interpreter training program. Most of the interpreters were trained at that college. The VRI center in Arizona will soon handle California's VRI calls on trial basis. It is obvious that a regional VRI center can be cost effective for a number of states to use for their VRI services. The regional center or the VRI center should be located closely to interpreter training programs so more interpreters would be more available for VRI jobs.

Many hearing people in NorthCarolina love VRI because their conversations are more natural, smoother, and faster. They do not need to say GA or SK while the basic relay services require them to say GA or SK. VRI allows users to

communicate using their primary language, American Sign Language. Using TTY via relay force deaf users to use English which is considered their second language.

The VRI agent is able to express exactly what the hearing person says on the line to deaf and hard of hearing people. Many deaf and hard of hearing people feel more at ease when they actually know the real feelings of a hearing person on the line.

The voicecarryover (VCO) works well with the VRI system. North Carolina is now in the process of installing VCO phones to VRI equipment. Some hard of hearing customers love that service because they are able to talk directly to hearing people on line and to read the VRI agent'signs on the screen.

One good thing about VRI is the ability to handle messages from answering machines. The VRI interpreters are able to explain what the machine says to the fullest. The user is able to tell the interpreter to press the key for specific information on spot without having the intepreter to hang up and redial the number and listen to messages more closely. A lot of relay communications assistants do not understand clearly what the answering machines say because the messages go too fast or the voices are not clear.

During a relay call it is normal that a communications assistant tends to place at least two calls when an answering machine or automated system is reached. With VRI it takes one call and everything is done fast. It helps save time and money to do the VRI calls.

Videoconferencing equpment is becoming more and more common at offices and at homes. The desktop PC would be sufficient with ISDN lines. The video standards (H.320, H.321, and H. 324) are becoming standardized. Yet, we need to ensure that the video standards will be common. We recommend that the standards for video conferencing equipment be mandated in order to to be more friendly hand-shaken with each other.

North Carolina has video conferencing equipment made by Picturetel Venue 2000. It runs at 30 frames per second. The more frames per second it runs, the more clear and sharp the pictures on the screen are.

Each remote site in North Carolina has three ISDN lines, except for two sites in Wilson and Morganton that have T1 line because ISDN service is not available in these areas.

We recommend that the 800 toll free number for VRI calls be offered. A need of VRI at homes is obvious because all customers prefer to place calls from their houses. The 800 toll free number for VRI has not been implemented, yet. Many people are not very enthusiastic to drive to the remote sites to make a few VRI calls. They prefer to stay at home and make calls.

Privacy for VRI calls is always the top priority for everyone. The 8 remote sites have separate rooms only for VRI. Many customers feel very comfortable to be in the room alone while processing VRI calls. No one else is in the room with the customer. Everyone has 100 percent privacy in the room.

North Carolina Funds cover VRI instrastate calls. The customers must use their calling cards for long distance calls. We strongly recommend that the VRI costs should be recoverable by TRS Funds.

The implementation costs should be taken care of by telephone companies and state relay administrators collaboratively. The VRI contractors must offer support services for VRI.

4. Multilingual Relay Services (MRS) and Translation Services

DSDHH believes that the TRS fund should cover the services for multilingual relay services. It also encourages that each state would decide the various languages based on state language needs and populations.

5. Access to Emergency Services

DSDHH supports the FCC's proposal to allow customers to make emergency calls to relay centers. We agree with the NAD and CAN that each relay center must pass a caller's ANI to an emergency services center. We support the Northern Virginia Resource Center for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Persons that the TRS should be required to support 9 1 1 calls as a backup.

The TRS vendors should encourage the customers to call the 9 1 1 centers first to save time, especially for life and death situations. It should be a part of the outreach work done by the relay providers.

All communication assistants should be able to handle emergency calls in the same manner as they handle TRS calls. Their relay systems should be efficient enough to transfer ANIs automatically to the emergency services centers.

The Department of Justice recently developed a document to require all 9 1 1 centers to have each PSAP line accessible to TTY. The document will help the 9 1 1 centers expand their accessibility services to deaf and hard of hearing people.

6. Access to Enhanced Services

We agree with the NAD and CAN that the relay centers must be able to offer access to voice menu driven services. All kinds of calls must be treated equally. SHHH argues that it does not make sense to allow access to make a phone call via TRS but not to allow access to navigating a voice menu driven service.

It is very important that all deaf and hard of hearing customers have equal access to automated systems. However, some messages go too fast that the communications assistants are not able to listen for specific information. The CA should be allowed to do what the TRS user wants to summarize the message or relay the message verbatim.

DSDHH strongly promotes functional equivalency to mandate enhanced relay services. That is what equal access to telephone system is all about.

7. Speed of Answer Requirements

DSDHH supports the FCC's proposal to require relay providers to answer at least 85 percent of all calls within 10 seconds by a CA when a call is placed or answered on a daily basis.

Alfred Sonnestrahl's recommendation that the 85 percent- 10 seconds rule should be only with live CAs, not automated answering systems is in our favor.
We support Mr. Sonnestrahl's suggestion that the abandoned calls should be part of the attempted calls before they are answered.

North Carolina disagrees with FCC's conclusion that abandoned calls not be included in ASA calculations. The customers in North Carolina have had experiences with this issue. The volumes of abandoned calls have been increasing for the last few months that have caused frustrations among the TRS users. We support the Maryland Dept of Budget and Management and Kansas Relay Service, Inc. that when a call becomes abandoned after 60 seconds, it should be included in ASA.

8. CA Quality and Training

DSDHH agrees with the NAD, SHHH, CAN, and the Association of Tech Act Projects that the FCC should impose a minimum typing speed for CAs.
A federal ruling for the minimum typing speed must be established so all relay center CAs typing skills can be consistent.

We like David Coco's idea about having test calls be made by an independent quality assurance organization to measure the CA's relay performances. Spelling accuracy is one of the most important skills the CA should have. More and more deaf and hard of hearing have high level professional jobs and expect the CA to handle their calls in a very professional way. The CA should have the minimum typing speed of at least 60 wpm and at least 12th grade spelling and English skills.

9. In-Call Replacement of CAs

DSDHH supports the FCC's rule to require the CA who answers and places a TRS call must stay with the call for at least ten minutes before an in-call CA transfer can take place. All customers hate to be distrupted by the CA when the CA changes. We support the Northern Virginia Resource Center for Deaf and Hard of Hearing, SHHH, University Legal Services, NAD, and the CAN's positions to support the FCC's proposed rule on in-call replacement of CAs.

10. Multivendoring

DSDHH supports the FCC's conclusion that the intrastate TRS multivendoring be not required. We agree with Kansas Relay Service, Inc. that states should not have to operate under a constraint of a mandatory low-bid requirement. Each state should determine the kind of relay services, sole or multivendoring at their discretion. Reasonable costs and good quality of services are top priorities for competition among the bidders.

11. Treatment of TRS Customer Information

DSDHH recommends that the transfer of callers profiles and customer information database be made to a new relay contractor without proprietory restrictions. We are only interested in information in the database that should be transferred to a new relay provider.

We had some difficulties with Sprint when MCI took over relay services in North Carolina. Sprint flatly refused to transfer information to MCI because it was a proprietory resource. Many customers got very angry at MCI and Sprint when Sprint refused to release their information to MCI and when MCI encouraged them to re-apply for customer profiles. That situation caused many customers to be confused, especially with VCO users. It took a while for MCI and the state to promote the callers profiles to the communities. It was very time consuming for everyone involved in this process.

The USA Deaf Sports Federation made a good point about the proprietory information that belongs to the customers, not the TRS providers according to Section 222 of the Act. The customers are the ones to give information to the relay providers; therefore, the providers must ask them for permission to transfer information to new relay contractors. The FCC should be encouraged to look into the Section 222 of the Act to ensure that information belongs to the customers.

12. Enforcement and Certification Issues

DSDHH supports the FCC's requirement to have states to notify the FCC of changes in their state TRS programs within 60 days of the change. That will help the FCC know if the states will be in compliance with the FCC's mandatory minimum standards. It will also help FCC know that intrastate and interstate relay services are provided to customers.

We agree with NAD and CAN's argument that states must keep a log of consumer complaints and provide that to the FCC. North Carolina has been doing this since the first day of our relay services. The TRS Administrator for the state has kept a log of all complaints and resolutions made by our current relay provider. The TRS Administrator even developed a customer complaint report form for customers to fill out and mail to that office. Our current relay provider was required to provide a list of customers names and their complaints to the TRS Administrator every month. The promotion of the location, address, and telephone numbers to file complaints has been done a lot in North Carolina.

We support USA Deaf Sports Federation's idea to consult with consumer organizations for their inputs on re-certifications.

We disagree with the SHHH's recommendation to require the providers to confirm customers' complaints within 15 days after filing. If it is not solved with a period of 30 days, it should go to a formal process. We do not agree with that

because each complaint should be treated individually depending on how complicated it would be.

13. Outreach activities

DSDHH recommends that the TRS providers be required to do and pay for comprehensive outreach work. All vendor contractors tend to do outreach efforts by themselves. They also pick up the tab for outreach work, too. All relay providers should be responsible to provide outreach staff, develop, plan and fund the outreach activities, also.

14. Other Issues

DSDHH disagrees with the FCC's decision not to pursue the rules for enhanced services, such as Caller ID recognition, call release, and automatic call forwarding. Almost all telephone companies offer enhanced services to hearing people to help make their accesses to the system more convenient. Why are the specific populations of deaf, hard of hearing, and speech impaired not given opportunity to have their access more convenient at their choice? It is not fair that the FCC allows hearing people to have more sophisticated telephone services than deaf or hard of hearing individuals.

We strongly believe that each customer (deaf, hard of hearing, speech impaired, or hearing) should have an equal access to enhanced services they choose. Therefore, the relay providers must be able to handle all enhanced services.

TDI's suggestion for an annual progress report from the states on outreach and information activities on relay providers is a valid one. North Carolina has been in that practice for getting annual progress reports from its current relay provider for a while. All states should require the relay providers to submit annual progress reports to the TRS administration office in their states.

We recommend that the training on how to file comments and/or complaints with the FCC be developed and implemented for deaf and hard of hearing people. Many customers have not had the experiences filing comments because they do not know how to process the filing. The FCC should work closely with a non-profit organization to develop and implement the training package for this population.

15. Token of Appreciation

The Division of Services for the Deaf and the Hard of Hearing wants to express its thanks to the FCC for moving forward with proposed rulings on TRS. It is very important that the FCC revisits this TRS Order and re-considers the changes to improve the quality of our relay services.

North Carolina is looking forward to upgrading the relay services with the new TRS Order from the FCC.