

Dialogue Session Between the Wireless Industry and Persons with Speech and Developmental Disabilities

Introductory Remarks of FCC Commissioner Kathleen Q Abernathy June 24, 2002 As Prepared for Delivery

Thank you all for being here. An effective dialogue only works if you have the right parties at the table, and I think we have achieved that here today. We have representatives from the six largest wireless service providers, three major wireless phone manufacturers, and our hosts – CTIA – that pulls them all together. In addition, the augmentative communications industry association is also represented. We also have researchers and individuals from various disabilities service groups. And, from the FCC, we have staff members that work on disabilities and wireless issues, including Dane whom you just met and Wireless Bureau Deputy Chief, Jim Schlichting. Again, thank you all for taking time out of your busy schedules to be here today.

I believe that the cause that brings us together – furthering a dialogue between and among government, industry, and the disabled community – is noteworthy. My experience both in and out of the government convinces me that this is the right approach to resolving many issues. Too often the failure to communicate results in the failure of markets, the failure of good intentions, and often the intervention of government. I believe the people in this room share many common goals, and can work together to achieve many of them – without government mandates, without grandstanding, and without undermining the missions of their respective organizations. I am hoping today’s session will remind us that we are all trying to do the right thing – and how energizing it can be to work together to achieve common missions.

I feel as if I know a bit about the common missions in this room because, as many of you know, much of my career has been spent at the Commission or in the wireless industry. My involvement in wireless began in full force when I left the FCC to go to work at AirTouch Communications. At the time, I think a lot of my colleagues thought I was crazy. I was giving up being a legal advisor in the FCC Chairman’s office to venture out into the uncharted waters of wireless. I remember more than one person saying, “Why would you leave the FCC to join such a narrow niche industry – there is just no widespread market out there for wireless services.” How wrong they were!

I knew the critics were underestimating the potential success of wireless, but even I’ll admit that I’ve been amazed by how rapidly this industry has developed. Wireless phones have revolutionized both how we work and how we play. According to our most recent competition report – today over 128.5 million Americans have wireless phones – over 45% of the population. Ninety-four percent of Americans live in counties with access to three or more providers. The average cell phone user is on the phone for 385 minutes a month – over six hours – that’s actually only slightly longer than some Commission meetings feel! All this while prices continued to fall – innovation through data network deployment and new offerings continued to

thrive – and carriers continued to build out their networks in all parts of the country. So by all accounts – wireless service has arrived as an integral part of most Americans’ lives.

The revolutionary impact the wireless industry has on people who have speech or developmental disabilities was crystallized for me when I visited the Institute on Disabilities at Temple University last year. Wireless communications transformed lives by bridging the old wireline communications divide for these consumers. For those I visited at Temple, a wireless phone was not a mere substitute for a wireline phone. It was an altogether new form of communication. I came to appreciate that wireless phones allowed unprecedented access to communication networks.

After that visit to Temple – it struck me that we could bring my old friends in the wireless industry together with my new friends at Temple. Whenever possible, I prefer to see consumers and providers determine through the marketplace the best way to form and maintain healthy relationships. These parties can often respond to each other’s needs more effectively than government can. Indeed, I am convinced that fully functioning markets invariably make better decisions than regulators. My early days in the wireless industry lent support to this notion. The amazing changes in wireless offerings – the dramatic drop in prices and increase in variety of service plans – were driven not by government, but instead by market competition. Indeed, even if the FCC had deigned to impose weighty regulations on wireless companies, I don’t think any official ever would have considered mandating the prices and service offerings available today. The change was just too radical. There is no better example of the value of market competition than that found in the pages of the short but dynamic history of wireless phones.

However, with such competition and choices, also comes more responsibility for the consumer. When AT&T was the only phone company, it was clear where you were going to get your long distance service. And if there was a problem, government officials had only one company to regulate. Consumer life was simpler. The break up of AT&T, the birth of wireless, and the 1996 Telecommunications Act forever changed this environment. With the introduction of competition to the marketplace, came more choices – and more places for confusion.

In this new environment, the role of government changes. And one of the new responsibilities for government, in my view, is to educate consumers about their rights under our laws and regulations. I myself have taken this to heart and have created a consumer newsletter entitled “Focus on Consumer Concerns.” In this bimonthly newsletter – also posted on my website – I discuss ways in which FCC rules affect everyday consumer life. This month my newsletter discusses Section 255, and how the FCC has worked to achieve the important policy goal of making telecommunications accessible to people with disabilities.

But government’s role does not stop there – government is sometimes called upon to intervene in the marketplace – because markets in some ways are far messier than the neat and tidy monopoly world from which this industry grew. And government must decide when and where to intervene and in what way. I have been a strong advocate of government restraint – of intervening only when there is an identifiable and highly likely market failure. But acting as if the only possible role for government is via regulatory mandate is far too shortsighted. Companies in a competitive environment must get creative to succeed – so too must government.

Sometimes government can succeed – just by getting people to talk – and I am hoping today is one of those times.

We should be successful because of our common goals. The consumers here today represent millions of people that could become loyal wireless phone customers. 2.7 million Americans have a significant speech disability. These are valued customers for the wireless industry.

Moreover, learning from people with disabilities can also create benefits not only for those individuals, but also for a company's broader customer base. Many notable inventions were created for the initial purpose of serving people with disabilities. For example, the first known working typewriter was built by Pellegrino Turri to enable his friend, the Countess Carolina Fantoni, to write to him. The Countess was blind.

I know of a university chaplain that was once charged with the task of bringing together various heads of major religious groups on campus to find common ground and build cooperation among them. Not an easy job. The chaplain struggled at first, but he finally found success, he said, when he could convince students that it was more important to seek to understand, than to be understood. I encourage you all to adopt that approach today. We all have a lot to learn from one another.