

**STATEMENT OF
COMMISSIONER MICHAEL J. COPPS**

Re: Provision of Improved Telecommunications Relay Services and Speech-to-Speech Services for Individuals with Hearing and Speech Disabilities

I am pleased to support this declaratory ruling that will make Internet Relay available as an option for the millions of Americans with disabilities and those who communicate with these citizens. As new technologies develop, we have an obligation to do everything we can to realize the vision of Congress that those with disabilities have access to **functionally equivalent** services so that ***all*** citizens can participate fully in our society.

I saw a demonstration of IP Relay and other new technologies at the TDI conference in South Dakota last summer, and it is clear that the advanced products and services I saw can go a long way toward enabling people with disabilities to obtain information and to communicate with others in ways that we could only dream about a few years ago. I am truly pleased that we will be holding a Forum and Expo here at the FCC on May 3 that will focus on relay services. This will be a great opportunity to see these new technologies in action and to draw public and, I hope, Congressional attention to a wide range of disabilities issues. I hope we can all work hard to make this Forum and Expo a huge success.

The item we approve today is part of a larger whole. It is just one of the important initiatives and challenges that we face in meeting the several disabilities challenges before us. The Commission needs to complete its section 255 proceeding on accessibility to equipment and services and to ensure that we are doing all we can to carry out fully Congress' directives. We should address other important issues such as hearing aid compatibility for digital wireless phones, accessibility to digital and interactive television, and implementation this year of video description and TTY access to E-911.

We must always be sure that our rules are being enforced. And finally, we must get our own house in order through such actions as making sure that those with disabilities are able to access government information through the Internet or via other information technologies, as Congress directed.

This is such an important area. The reality is so far away from how things should and could be. I was astounded to learn that the unemployment rate in the disabilities community is in the vicinity of 75 percent. That's just unacceptable. It's a waste of national talent and national treasure that costs not only these people, but our country, greatly. These issues affect all of us – not only the millions of Americans with disabilities, but also the millions more who communicate with these citizens and whose lives would be improved as their lives are improved.

So I'm pleased we're moving forward on this, and I commend the Bureau for the item.