



NEWS

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This is an unofficial announcement of Commission action. Release of the full text of a Commission order constitutes official action.
See MCI v. FCC, 515 F.2d 385 (D.C. Cir. 1974).

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FCC LAUNCHES FUNDAMENTAL RESTRUCTURING OF VIDEO RELAY SERVICE PROGRAM SERVING AMERICANS WITH HEARING AND SPEECH DISABILITIES

Reforms Will Improve Service by Spurring Innovation and Empowering Consumers to Use Off-the-Shelf Equipment While Curbing Waste, Fraud, and Abuse

Washington, D.C. – The Federal Communications Commission today unanimously adopted comprehensive reforms to further protect and strengthen the Video Relay Service (VRS) program that enables people with disabilities to do what most Americans take for granted: make a simple phone call.

The VRS program permits people with hearing and speech disabilities to use American Sign Language to communicate with other individuals over a broadband connection. Using a video link, an intermediary – called a communications assistant – translates the user’s signed communications to the hearing person on the other end of the conversation, and then signs back the spoken words to the user, allowing the conversation to flow in near real-time. The program is financed through the FCC’s Interstate Telecommunications Relay Services (TRS) Fund.

Building on a foundation of ongoing reforms and program improvements, the Order initiates fundamental restructuring of the program to support innovation and competition, drive down ratepayer and provider costs, eliminate incentives for waste that have burdened the TRS Fund in the past, and further protect consumers. Measures to improve the structure and efficiencies of the VRS program while promoting consumer protection include:

- Ensuring that VRS users can easily select their provider of choice by promoting the development of voluntary, consensus interoperability and portability standards.
- Enabling consumers to use off-the-shelf tablets and smart phones for any provider’s VRS services by developing and deploying a VRS application to work with these devices, based on the consensus standards.
- Creating a centralized TRS User Registration Database to combat fraud, waste, and abuse by ensuring VRS user eligibility.
- Encouraging competition and innovation in VRS call handling services – such as American Sign Language interpretation – by contracting with a neutral third party to build, operate, and maintain a platform for communications services.
- Spurring research and development on VRS services by entering into a Memorandum of Understanding with the National Science Foundation.

- Piloting an iTRS National Outreach Program that is not dependent on individual provider branding to educate the general public about relay services.

In addition, the Order moves VRS compensation rates toward actual costs over the next four years, initiating a step-by-step transition from existing tiered TRS Fund compensation rates toward a unitary, market-based compensation rate. In this manner, VRS rates will better approximate the actual, reasonable costs of providing VRS, and will considerably reduce the costs of operating the program. Ensuring the integrity of the TRS Fund while providing stability and certainty to providers remain core objectives. The Commission also is proposing to transition to a new ratemaking approach that makes use of competitively established pricing – contract prices set through a competitive bidding process – where feasible.

For more information about VRS, visit: <http://www.fcc.gov/guides/video-relay-services>

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