

**STATEMENT OF
COMMISSIONER MICHAEL J. COPPS**

Re: *Telecommunications Relay Services and Speech-to-Speech Services for Individuals with Hearing and Speech Disabilities*, Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, CG Docket No. 03-123

Less than two weeks from now we will celebrate the 16th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act which has done so much to ensure that those with disabilities can access the tools they need to lead prosperous, productive and fulfilling lives. Today we take another step along the path by helping to ensure that the deaf and hard of hearing receive the Telecommunications Relay Services they are entitled to, that providers are fairly compensated for their services, and that the Commission is enabled to administer the program.

Before going forward with this rulemaking, it is important that we take a moment to take stock and review where we have been. While improvements have been made over time, sometimes in the past we have tended to address the squeakiest wheels without fixing more of the systemic problems associated with the TRS-reimbursement program. These include the need for better outreach to the deaf and hard of hearing communities, the need to quickly take into account the potential and the challenges presented by new technologies, and the need to make the TRS rules more transparent.

A hero to many in both the hearing and deaf communities, Dr. I. King Jordan, the President of Gallaudet University, told me recently that while VRS by all accounts has revolutionized how the hearing disabled communicate, he was astonished to find that there are still people who just don't know about the service. Imagine living your life with a disability for years and then learning that there was a technology readily available that could have eased many of the challenges you faced, if only you had known about it. That's just not acceptable and it underscores why it is so important that we have the right rules in place to guide our VRS program into the future.

One thing is for sure, we cannot have déjà vu all over again whereby we are sitting in this building a year from now without a well-oiled TRS machine. That is why I am so encouraged by today's item, which seeks comments on a wide range of difficult issues and looks to tackle them head-on. I am looking forward to constructive and creative input from both the provider and our disability communities because we have a real opportunity here to build a TRS system that can truly meet the needs of these communities as well as those of the FCC.

So my thanks go out to Monica Desai, the Bureau and the Disability Rights Office for working tirelessly not only on this item but also on the Commission's obligations to the deaf and hard of hearing. Good job and I look forward to bringing it all home!