

**STATEMENT OF
COMMISSIONER MICHAEL J. COPPS**

Re: Telecommunications Relay Services and Speech-to-Speech Services for Individuals with Hearing and Speech Disabilities, CG Docket No. 03-123.

A cornerstone of the Americans with Disabilities Act is to ensure that persons with disabilities can access the tools they need to lead prosperous, productive and fulfilling lives. With this as a guiding principle, it continues to be essential that the Commission ensure that the deaf, hard of hearing and those with speech disabilities receive the communications services they are entitled to, that providers are fairly compensated for their services, and that the Commission be able to effectively administer the program.

In July of last year we sought comment from consumers and providers on how best to build a rate reimbursement system that serves consumers well and fairly compensates providers. At the time I said we must not find ourselves unable to meet the challenge upon the completion of the rulemaking. I am pleased to say that after essential input from members of the disabilities community and service providers, along with the hard work of Commission staff, we are hopefully putting the Telecommunications Relay Services rate reimbursement system on a solid footing for the future to best serve the deaf, hard of hearing and speech impaired consumers.

In particular, the Commission adopts new rate recovery methodologies for the variety of services available to the disabilities community. The adoption of the Multi-state Average Rate Structure Plan for a number of services is expected to simplify the rate process while setting more predictable, fair, and reasonable rates. For Video Relay Services, the Commission adopts tiered compensation rates based on call volume. In doing so the Commission encourages competition for services while recognizing that there are efficiencies when larger providers have achieved economies of scale. In the case of Speech-to-Speech services, I am particularly pleased that the Commission directs additional funding be used for outreach to this underserved community. Further, the Commission remains committed to doing ongoing audits and oversight and therefore requires providers to submit detailed information to allow for ongoing reviews of the integrity of these reimbursement programs.

The benefits of the new reimbursement system are certainly promising but the Commission will need to monitor it closely to ensure that it is working as intended. It remains essential that going forward all of the stakeholders affected by these new rules, particularly members of the disabilities community, provide us with their input on where it is working well and where any adjustments are needed. We stand ready to address any unforeseen consequences as these rules are implemented.

I want to thank Chairman Martin for his willingness to work closely with us to reach such a favorable outcome. My thanks also go out to the Bureau, particularly Cathy Seidel and the Disability Rights Office, for working tirelessly not only on this item but also on the Commission's obligations to the disabilities community.