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TWO MAJOR FCC CONSUMER INITIATIVES TO BEGIN MARCH 1 *Speech to Speech Relay Services and Interstate Relay Services in Spanish Become Available Nationwide Tomorrow*

Washington, D.C. – Beginning tomorrow all Americans with speech disabilities and Spanish-speaking people who have speech or hearing disabilities will have two new telecommunications tools.

Starting March 1, 2001, the FCC is requiring telephone companies to provide speech to speech (STS) relay service. This service allows a person with a speech disability to access a specially trained operator (called a communications assistant, or CA) who makes the call and repeats, or relays, the words that the caller is saying to the called party. The called party responds directly to the caller and does not go through the CA.

STS is a part of the more extensive telecommunications relay service (TRS). After March 1, all TRS interstate services will be available in Spanish.

TRS is a telephone transmission service, originally required in the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act and implemented nationwide in 1993. It enables persons with hearing and speech disabilities to communicate by telephone with persons who may or may not have such disabilities. As a result, many Americans who had limited or no practical access to telephone services can use the telephone via relay service. TRS now uses a variety of services to facilitate telephone communication by persons with hearing or speech disabilities. Currently the FCC requires text to voice relay services. This type of services uses a CA to speak what a text telephone (TTY) user types, and to type what a voice telephone user replies. TRS users do not pay extra to use these services. Generally, phone companies cover the costs of providing TRS through a subscriber line surcharge of a few cents a month.

The Commission anticipates that STS will be especially valuable to Individuals with cerebral palsy, Parkinson's disease, laryngectomies, Alzheimer's disease, stuttering, muscular dystrophy, stroke, and other conditions affecting loudness or clarity of speech. Individuals with speech disabilities, and their friends and family members wishing to telephone people with severe speech disabilities call the number in their state

for relay services and ask for the STS communications assistant to dial the number they desire to call.

Beginning tomorrow, for interstate calls, Spanish-speaking persons with speech or hearing disabilities will have access to Spanish-speaking CAs who will receive messages either by voice or TTY in Spanish, convey the message to the called party in Spanish and respond to the caller, if necessary. (This is not a translation service.)

The two new extensions to TRS are critical, given the importance that telecommunication plays in a person's ability to participate in this information age. It provides telephone access to a significant number of Americans who without it may not be able to make or receive calls from others. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 10.9 million Americans have a functional limitation in hearing what is said in a normal conversation and 2.5 million have a functional limitation in having one's speech understood.

Improving the quality of TRS will enhance employment opportunities for people with hearing and speech disabilities and may contribute to a decrease in their unemployment rate. According to recent statistics on employment of persons with disabilities, while 82.1 percent of the general working age population (ages 21-64) is employed, only 52.3 percent of all people with disabilities are employed. This figure includes persons who have difficulty performing functional activities such as hearing and having one's speech understood. Among those with severe disabilities, only 26.1 percent are employed.

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