

**COMMISSIONER ROBERT MCDOWELL  
FIELD HEARING ON BROADBAND ACCESS  
FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES**

**Gallaudet University  
November 6, 2009**

First, many thanks to President Devila and the wonderful people of Gallaudet University for hosting this valuable event. Your campus is beautiful and it is an honor to be here. It is also an honor to share the dais with a talented Academy Award winner who is also a dynamic force in advocating for the rights of people with disabilities, Marlee Matlin.

All of us should also give our sincere thanks to Commissioner Mike Copps for hosting this important field hearing. His leadership on disabilities issues is impressive, and I have appreciated working with him and my colleagues on these important matters.

As the Commission works on a National Broadband Plan, it is highly appropriate and critical that it include all interested parties in the process. The Commission has had a longstanding commitment to ensuring communications systems serve disabled Americans. The information and opinions we receive today, and beyond, will help drive our efforts to keep disabled Americans connected to society. A core function of government is to help people help themselves when all else fails, and that is our focus today.

In this spirit, during my tenure on the Commission, I have wholeheartedly supported efforts to improve the availability and choices of communications services for people with disabilities. With Telecommunications Relay Services (TRS), for example, the Commission has helped ensure that persons with hearing and speech disabilities obtain “functionally equivalent” communications services. In addition, because Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) services are rapidly becoming a substitute for traditional phone service in the marketplace, it was imperative that the Commission extend the accessibility obligations mandated under statute to those services. I was therefore proud to support a Commission action in 2007 which extended to providers of interconnected VoIP services, and manufacturers of specialized interconnected VoIP equipment, the accessibility obligations contained in those statutes.

Additionally, I felt it was essential to support the Commission’s decision last year to ensure the successful transition of Internet-based TRS to ten-digit numbering. That action makes it possible for Internet-based TRS users to be able to make and receive calls in the same manner used by voice telephone consumers – using a standard ten-digit telephone number. This was a major step towards ensuring that those with hearing and speech disabilities are afforded “functionally equivalent” telephone services. This order will become effective next week.

Also, earlier this year, I thought it imperative that the Commission proceed ahead quickly with two important notices of proposed rulemaking, each of which have the real potential to significantly improve the quality of life for those Americans living with

chronic conditions. And many thanks once again to Mike Copps for all that he did on these matters. As a result, first, the Commission is analyzing the Alfred Mann Foundation's request to use spectrum for implanting small radio devices into patients with paralysis and other neuromuscular ailments. These devices will help restore mobility for stroke victims, people paralyzed by car accidents and combat wounds as well as those who suffer from other ailments. Secondly, we are also examining a similarly interesting proposal submitted by GE Medical Systems, which seeks to use spectrum to develop advanced body sensing technologies that will allow continuous patient monitoring whether the patient is located within or outside of a hospital setting. I hope you will join me in thanking the AMF and GE Medical for their groundbreaking work. I am grateful to be a small part of the effort, which, to me, is all the more gratifying given my belief that our work in these proceedings represents government duty at its best. I am committed to doing my part to ensure that we complete these two proceedings in an expeditious manner.

On another matter, in February of 2008, I was proud to have worked with my fellow Commissioners and the Hearing Aid Compatibility Joint Consensus Working Group to update the Commission's rules governing hearing aid-compatible mobile handsets. I commend the working group, comprised of organizations representing the interests of consumers with hearing loss, wireless carriers and handset manufacturers, for its hard work on that issue. In adopting their Joint Consensus Plan, the Commission not only advanced the goals established by Congress in the Hearing Aid Compatibility Act, but we recognized the working group's expertise as well.

In the traditional media arena, the Commission has worked to ensure that video programming complies with the closed captioning mandates established by Congress – not only for English-language programming but for Spanish-language programming as well. Late last year, the Commission voted to streamline the complaint process concerning closed captioning. While implementing those changes is still a work in progress, our staff is laboring to make the best possible use of online technology to help people file complaints quickly and easily.

More recently, the Commission has established a working group to address technical problems that have been triggered by closed captioning in the digital television environment. We expect to receive recommendations on steps to resolve those problems within a few months. In the meantime, the Commission continues to enforce our rule that video programming distributors – whether broadcasters, cable, satellite TV or telco providers – make any emergency information they transmit accessible to those with hearing or vision disabilities.

This is only a partial list of initiatives the Commission has undertaken in the past three years to help people with disabilities. The next mountain for us to climb is to submit to Congress a National Broadband Plan by February 17<sup>th</sup>. Among the many issues Congress has asked us to address is how America's broadband ecosystem can be improved to help people with disabilities. I cannot think of a more noble endeavor for us to pursue.

Today's hearing will add the depth and texture needed for us to fully understand the challenges and, more importantly, the opportunities that lie before us. The Commission does this today in the best way possible: by piercing beyond mere words on a page and examining these issues from the perspectives of real human beings. Today we do not try to explore how best to help the disabled; rather, we endeavor to empower people with disabilities. I thank the panelists for agreeing to participate in this field hearing today and thank all of you for your commitment to these important issues.