

STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN TOM WHEELER

Re: *Accessible Emergency Information and Apparatus Requirements for Emergency Information and Video Description: Implementation of the Twenty-First Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act of 2010*, MB Docket No. 12-107, Second Report and Order and Second Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking.

Universal access and public safety are two of the core values that underpin our communications networks. Today, we advance both values by adopting rules to make sure individuals who are blind or visually impaired get critical details of an emergency shown on television in a timely manner.

In an emergency, every second counts. If a tornado warning appears on your television in an on-screen crawl, that can give you the time you need to seek shelter, if you can read it.

As Nancy Rumbolt-Trzinski of Pittsfield, Massachusetts, wrote to the Commission, “Information needs to be provided visually as well as in audio form so everyone can be as prepared as possible.” Information access is a right and there should be no question as to implementation of policies ensuring equal and accessible dissemination of important and necessary information so all people can be prepared.”

For Nancy, this is not just a matter of principle or policy; this is about being able to take care of herself and her loved ones during emergencies. Nancy is blind. During Hurricane Irene, the roof was blown off of her home. Unfortunately, because she couldn’t see the television screen, Nancy was not able to access the same emergency information that her neighbors had.

In 2013, the Commission adopted rules to ensure that individuals who are blind or visually impaired have access to visual emergency information when it is shown during non-newscast television programming. For example, if there is an on-screen crawl, an aural presentation such as three tones will notify blind viewers to switch to a secondary audio stream to hear the alert.

More and more Americans today watch programming – whether it be local news, a network sitcom, or public television events - on their laptops and smartphones in a service offered by their service provider. The fact that the provider has moved delivery to a second screen should not eliminate the responsibility to provide emergency alerts.

That’s why the Commission moves today to extend that accessibility to emergency alerts to television programming being watched on these “second screens.”

The new rules require that emergency information be made accessible on a secondary audio stream on tablets, smartphones, laptops, and similar devices when subscription television providers, such as cable and satellite operators, permit consumers to access

scheduled programming over their networks using an app on these devices. Making this work is not rocket science – most of these devices already have the capability to decode secondary audio streams. Operators need only ensure their apps leverage these built-in capabilities to make emergency information accessible.

The new rules also require that the equipment used to receive and play back television programming, such as set-top boxes, have a simple and easy to use mechanism to switch from the main program audio to the secondary audio stream to hear audible emergency information. It should not be necessary for a blind person to go through multiple menus in an emergency to access essential information.

We also adopt a Second Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking seeking comments on additional issues related to the accessibility of emergency information, such as how to prioritize emergency information if there is more than one on-screen announcement.

I hope and expect that these new rules will enable individuals who are blind or visually impaired to more quickly respond to time-sensitive emergency situations.