

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

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CFB
Consumer
disability
accessibility

May 21, 2015

The Honorable Tom Wheeler
Chairman
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street, SW
Washington, DC 20554

Dear Chairman Wheeler:

Recently, all six U.S. providers of Video Relay Service (VRS) presented the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) with a proposal to enhance and preserve this service, which is the means by which deaf and hard-of-hearing consumers who use American Sign Language (ASL) communicate over the telephone with hearing individuals. We understand that the providers' "Joint Proposal" would increase the speed with which calls are answered, improve interoperability among providers, and test new service offerings, while preventing the potentially catastrophic deterioration of this service by freezing the rates paid to VRS providers across all tiers. As Members of Congress who stand behind the Americans with Disabilities Act's promise of equal access; who represent deaf consumers; who host VRS call centers in our home states; and/or who believe the FCC should support, not hinder a robust and competitive VRS marketplace, we are writing to urge the Commission to promptly consider the VRS providers' proposal.

VRS is the primary technology used by the signing community to communicate over the telephone with people who are hearing. We have been told that the introduction of high-quality VRS in 2003 has been transformational in the lives of people who are deaf and has helped level the playing field for many. Dr. I King Jordan, the first deaf president of Gallaudet University, wrote in a 2013 op-ed, "I do not exaggerate when I say that VRS has changed my life."

The Americans with Disabilities Act mandates the provision of functionally equivalent telecommunications service for people who are deaf. Because VRS provides a near seamless way for people who are deaf to communicate with those who are hearing and vice-versa, it is the only service today that comes close to meeting this mandate. However, providers of VRS have become alarmed that the steep rate cuts set in motion by the Commission's June 2013 Order threaten the viability of VRS. These service providers have warned that as rates continue to ratchet down, service quality and innovation will necessarily deteriorate, and some providers will be forced to leave the market. This is exactly what happened when the FCC similarly cut rates for IP Relay, leaving the deaf with only one provider. Any similar deterioration in service will have a catastrophic impact on VRS consumers.

The major deaf consumer groups and the organization representing ASL interpreters support the VRS providers' Joint Proposal. Leaders of nine consumer groups filed a letter with the FCC on April 7th urging adoption of the Joint Proposal. The Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) also filed a letter last month encouraging the same. This unprecedented consensus of opinion speaks to the seriousness of the situation.

Given the importance of VRS to providing functionally equivalent telecommunication services to people who are deaf, and of upholding the promise of the Americans with Disabilities Act, we urge you to address the necessary issues to ensure that VRS can continue to serve the needs of the American people.

Sincerely,



Mia B. Love
Member of Congress



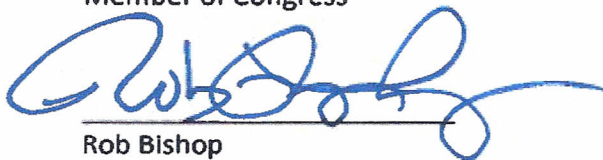
Dave Loebsack
Member of Congress



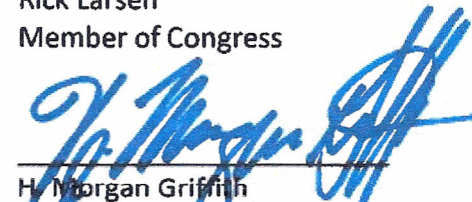
Chris Stewart
Member of Congress



Rick Larsen
Member of Congress



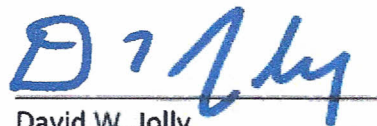
Rob Bishop
Member of Congress



H. Morgan Griffith
Member of Congress



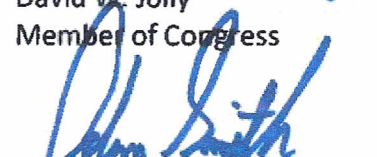
Betty McCollum
Member of Congress



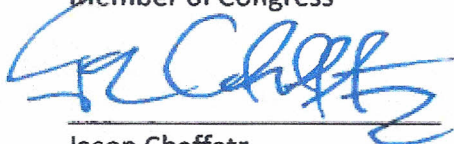
David W. Jolly
Member of Congress



Steve Chabot
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Adam Smith
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Jason Chaffetz
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