REMARKS OF FCC CHAIRMAN TOM WHEELER
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Thank you. It's great to be here.

I know I'm listed as the keynote speaker this morning, but the way I see it, I'm just the warm-up act for the FCC's Karen Peltz-Strauss and Greg Hlibok.

Karen and Greg will be hosting a town hall meeting on the CVAA immediately following my remarks. This audience understands that when it comes to championing accessibility, Karen and Greg are true rock stars at the FCC – or anywhere for that matter.

Thank you to TDI for your invaluable contributions to expanding communications access for all. Your organization started out in the 1960s re-wiring, restoring, and delivering the original TTY machines, which weighed as much as 200 pounds. Fast forward 47 years, and TDI is one of the nation's most powerful advocates for equal access to communications in the Internet age.

Special thanks to TDI's leadership. First, I want to recognize TDI's former Executive Director, Al Sonnenstrahl who with us today. During his 15 years with TDI, "Sonny" as you all know him, helped spearhead many of the giant advances in telecommunications access – for example, access to 911, the ADA's requirement for relay services, and closed captioning. I even understand that it was Sonny who pushed the FCC into creating its Disability Rights Office. Telecommunications equality would not be what it is today without your extraordinary work during those early years and we thank you for that.

And, of course, thanks to my friend Claude Stout, who has counseled me on accessibility issues from my first week at the Commission. If I had to pay royalties for every time I used Claude's line that, "Closed captioning is what allows deaf people to hear," Claude would be a very rich man. Thank you Claude for being a source of sage advice and inspiration.

One of the most memorable experiences I've had at the FCC was the day that Claude brought some folks in to meet with me on text-to-911. I heard stories on the difference this new technology makes and the experiences they had, including one from a young lady that will stay with me as long as I live.

I mention the text-to-911 meeting, because it captures the central theme I want to highlight today, which is the power and importance of using broadband-enabled technology to attack the challenges facing an individual with a disability.

At the FCC, we are all about broadband. But it is not broadband per se that is transformational – it is what broadband enables. A broadband connection coupled with the capabilities of Internet Protocol-based technology has created a magnificent moment when we can apply these technologies to attack timeless challenges facing individuals with disabilities.

You constantly see stories of new technologies that read like science fiction but are a reality in the digital age: an iPad app that translates sign-language into audible words, a Google Glass app that live captions nearby speakers, GPS-enabled walking canes. We were promised jetpacks, but what we're getting is even better.

This is our moment. The forces of technology and networks have aligned. We must seize the opportunity. This our moment not only because today's technology is so much more powerful, but because, as we enter this new era of communications technology, our understanding of accessibility issues is so much greater.

When the telephone system was initially established, it was not designed to be accessible to people with these disabilities, even though Alexander Graham Bell was a teacher of deaf children and the son and husband of deaf women.

For years, the deaf and hard of hearing community has been relegated to older communications technologies, created in silos, which have failed to take advantage of emerging and mainstream technological innovations.

With the broadband revolution, we have an opportunity to get in on the ground floor as technologies are being developed. Accessibility must be a first thought, not an afterthought.
At the FCC, we are determined to seize this new opportunity.

Wherever necessary, we are updating policies and modernizing our rules to advance accessible communications technologies and services.

Last year, we adopted rules governing the quality of closed captioning in response to a petition that TDI filed with other disability organizations in 2004. 2004! Unbelievable! I stand before you to apologize that it took us 10 years.

These rules make sure that captions are accurate, complete, timely, and displayed appropriately on the screen. The rules also require a newer, enhanced version of the Electronic Newsroom Technique, which is intended to make sure viewers who are deaf and hard of hearing have access to a greater amount of local news programming. We are monitoring the extent to which this technique has been successful in our ongoing efforts to achieve full access to this vital information, and if it isn't, we will have to consider the need for further action.

We expanded the captioning requirements of Internet content to cover video clips, so that viewers who are deaf and hard of hearing can have access to news clips and other important information that had been captioned on TV, along with the rest of the public.

We have committed to transitioning our National Deaf Blind Equipment Distribution program – what we call iCanConnect – from a pilot to a permanent program to ensure that low-income people who are deaf-blind can get the communications equipment they need to fully participate in society.

Most recently, we improved our rules requiring access to emergency information on TV for people with are blind or visually impaired, by mandating that this information be available not only on TV sets but also on second screens, such as laptops, tablets and cell phones.

To help chart a course for future action, we formed the Disability Advisory Committee. This team of 40 consumer, industry, government, and academic stakeholders has a simple mandate – to provide the Commission with actionable recommendations on policies to improve communications access. The DAC is off to a great start –since their first meeting in March, they have already come up with 4 recommendations for us to consider.

We have also been taking our message of communications equality globally, through visits to other countries and meetings with diplomats who visit with us here in the U.S. We are happy to share what we

have been doing to advance these accessibility issues around the world, in the hope that others might follow our lead.

We are endeavoring to be a leader through our practices. Around a year ago, the FCC became the first federal agency to use broadband interactive video to allow callers to use ASL. And we have seen tremendous success. More than half of the issues raised by consumers who call our ASL video line are resolved right on the spot. Why? Because we hired a deaf person, Robert McConnell, to staff this line. Robert communicates in ASL with callers to get to the heart of the problem swiftly and effectively. We are promoting the use of direct video communication across federal and local government agencies and businesses. We are encouraging them to harness broadband video and hire ASL users to receive calls. To understand the need for these services, consider this: The Social Security Administration receives about 3 million minutes a year of VRS calls. In the broadband era, there is no reason for social security, or any agency that is the recipient of VRS calls, not to have direct video communication. And they should, of course, hire people who are deaf or hard of hearing fluent in ASL to take those calls. The response we've received from evangelizing to other federal agencies is encouraging.

This June, the Small Business Administration stepped up and became the first agency to follow our lead and commit to using direct video communications. I applaud Administrator Maria Contreras-Sweet for her vision and commitment.

Just a few weeks ago, we got great news when the Census Bureau and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission announced that they would follow suit. We are excited that this is catching on, and will continue pressing to get other agencies on board.

Companies are joining in as well. I know Jenny Lay-Flurrie, who is here today, has championed video accessibility at Microsoft. Verizon just announced a similar program and Jeff Kramir from Verizon is here today.

So we've got new policies; we've got new practices; but what I'd like to debut today is another "P" – a new platform.

Now, when I use the term "platform," what exactly am I talking about?

Most of you have probably used the Mozilla Firefox Web browser, but you may not know how it came to be. Well, the "Mozilla" in Mozilla Firefox is a non-profit foundation that develops free, open-source software, and invites people to use their software and build on it to make a better Web experience for everyone. The Firefox browser was built on that platform.

The FCC is taking that same concept and applying it to accessible communications.

As a first step, we are building a platform of open source, standards-based applications working on mobile and desktop operating systems, which will allow for text, voice and high quality video calling into existing TRS providers. Think of this platform as a way of providing the basic building blocks that are common to any IP-based application. The platform also will establish a set of interoperability standards to be used by current TRS providers, ensuring seamless usability while maintaining freedom of choice for all TRS users.

For step two, we are using the platform to make it easy for any entity, to provide direct video communications. Now we've just been thinking about direct video communications; it's nothing new. So what's the big deal? How is this different?

Make no mistake, IP-based relay services, especially video relay service revolutionized communications for the better. However many of the video technologies used within the VRS network have not been compatible with video technology commercially available outside of VRS. That's because VRS has remained a closed system, with callers unable to call to videophones outside the system and unable to receive video calls from individuals not on the "VRS network." Other video calling systems that are outside of the "VRS network" are closed systems as well.

It is time for people who speak with their hands and hear with their eyes to enjoy modern advancements in communications technologies. It's time for you to be able to have your video products work together, so you can call whomever you wish, whenever you wish, from anywhere. The platform we are launching has tremendous potential to ensure that you will be able to do this.

Step three is what has me really excited. This new platform – this new software – is open source. That means anyone with know-how will be able to build to it in ways that can expand and enhance access. In other words, it will be publicly available for anyone to expand on the platform with new and innovative applications.

By this time next year, anyone with an innovative idea will be able to hook on and create new, accessible ways to send and receive communications and information.

But a picture is always worth a thousand words. Here's a quick video to explain a little bit more.
Now, as you saw on the video, we've been calling this project the Video Access Technology Reference Platform, or VATRP – what an awful name! So here at TDI, we're renaming it: Accessible Communications for Everyone, or ACE.

We are working with VTC Secure's brilliant team of researchers, students and professors at Gallaudet University, the National Technology Institute of the Deaf of the Rochester Institute of Technology and TCS Associates, a deaf-woman-owned business, to make ACE a reality.

Already, they have come up with innovative new applications for use by individuals who are both deaf and blind.

I met a deaf student at the Rochester Institute of Technology, who is exploring ways to use the platform to leverage the Internet of Things to give her notifications for sounds around the house – such as when a microwave or washer/dryer is done or the water is left running.

VTC Secure is working on an app that would allow a person who is deaf-blind to use their smartphone camera to transmit images in real-time to a call center where an assistant could return descriptions in Braille, essentially becoming the eyes of the sender.

These apps highlight another benefit of the platform, beyond improved accessibility. They can help create jobs. There will be demand for deaf people who know ASL to work in call centers. There will also be growth opportunities for software development jobs for deaf individuals. Who better to design useful applications than the people who will actually use them?

This is the future. This is the promise of broadband. The beauty of Internet Protocol is that it is a lingua franca that ends silos and niche technologies. This is not functional equivalence. It is full and equal access.

But wait…There's more! At a meeting with New York Mayor Bill De Blasio a short time ago I told him of this project – he got it immediately and signed on. Here's a message from Mayor De Blasio.

Thanks to Mayor De Blasio for embracing this technology in New York. I hope and expect others to follow his lead.

No doubt, the possibilities of an accessibility platform are truly astounding. But here's the final point: If we want to seize these opportunities and take full advantage of this platform, it's up to you.

At a minimum, we are rolling out an open source platform that will enhance video and text communication. But this can be so much more. This needs to become a living, breathing thing that continually opens new doors of opportunity. For that to happen, we need you to use this platform and the applications it enables. We need you to develop to this platform, using your insight as users to develop the most impactful apps. We need you to see this platform as your future.

This must be the place where you can explore solutions to meet your needs. This platform must belong to you, the public community.

I believe you will grab this opportunity, because you've done it before. The TTY was created in the late 1960s by three deaf men who grew tired of not having Ma Bell respond to their requests for accessibility. Claude will tell you, my favorite expression in ASL is "This is only the beginning." I truly believe that ACE is an important beginning.

Working together, we can use broadband to attack challenges that have plagued the deaf and hard of hearing community for decades, and build a brighter future. I look forward to working with you over the next year and a half on this exciting journey. Let's make it happen.

Thank you.
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