

**Remarks of Chairman Tom Wheeler  
As Prepared for Delivery  
Association of University Centers on Disabilities  
Washington, D.C.  
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Thank you, Liz, for that introduction.

Thank you to AUCD for welcoming me tonight. I am truly delighted to be here. Most importantly, thank you for your advocacy on behalf of people living with intellectual or other cognitive disabilities.

Also, congratulations to tonight's award winners.

There are over 28 million Americans with cognitive disabilities – They are our parents, our children, our coworkers and our fellow citizens.

We are living in a unique period in time where technology is creating new tools for the diverse population of individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities. A broadband connection coupled with the capabilities of Internet Protocol-based technology has created a magnificent moment when we can apply new technologies to attack the challenges of individuals with disabilities like never before.

The forces of technology and networks have aligned. I was impressed when I learned of the Arc's toolbox; a search engine to discover appropriate online applications. That is the opportunity. We must seize the opportunity. And we must do this, not just because it is the right thing to do; it's the law.

Today's technology is so much more powerful, and our understanding of accessibility issues is so much greater. This is our moment. I have seen up close and personal the power of Internet applications to help individuals with cognitive disabilities learn and achieve independence.

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.

The recent report on technology by the President's Committee on People with Intellectual Disabilities highlighted some of this potential. And we all know that President Obama appointed Liz Weintraub to PCPID.

At the FCC, we are determined to seize this new opportunity.

We too often receive complaints from individuals with cognitive disabilities about barriers to their access to telecommunications. One individual may not be able to use email, because he has difficulty remembering a unique password. Another may face challenges in using new telephone equipment or understanding service plans or pricing. Some are unable to navigate the confusing menus of service providers' web sites. Others complain of service personnel who are insensitive, refuse to address their concerns, and who even make fun of their disabilities.

So what are some of the actions the FCC has taken to address challenges such as these?

We have rules in place requiring companies to provide access to telecommunications and advanced communications services and equipment – including access to phones, laptops, tablets and cell phones – and those rules apply as equally to protect individuals with cognitive disabilities as they do to protect people with any other types of disabilities.

We have undertaken initiatives to ensure that federal agencies improve such access in their own telecommunications systems so that they can have better daily interactions with these citizens.

We have helped find accessible telecommunications solutions for veterans with brain injuries, directed companies to provide consumers with better explanations of their telephone services, and helped people find equipment that is easier for them to operate and, therefore, more accessible.

I am especially proud of what we have done at the Commission to advance the integration and independence of people with cognitive disabilities.

The FCC is trying to build a prototypical program for federal agency employment of people with intellectual disabilities thanks to the leadership of Mindy Ginsburg, our Assistant Managing Director. In just under a year, we went from an idea to successful employment opportunities. Working closely with partners the Arc and St. John's Community Services, we have five new colleagues who have been a great match for our needs. We have also begun an intern program with George Mason's LIFE program, providing young students with cognitive disabilities much needed experience in an office environment. To support our entire workforce, we developed in-house training designed to make all of us more sensitive to the needs of our colleagues. In addition, just this summer, USAC, the administrator of the Commission's \$8 billion Universal Service program, hired two people with cognitive disabilities who have quickly integrated into their fast-paced and challenging work place. The next step is to help our contractors stand up to their responsibilities.

Other federal agencies, seeing what we've done, have started to implement our model and employ people with intellectual and cognitive disabilities.

Insofar as policy development, 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. In fact, I understand that several committee members are here today. We thank you for your contributions.

So that's a quick overview of what the Commission has already done to address the communication needs of people with cognitive disabilities. Now, let's look ahead to what's next.

Just a few weeks ago, the Commission held a Summit on the communications needs of people with cognitive and intellectual disabilities. We had some of the thought leaders from around the country come to the Commission and share ideas for how to ensure that telecommunications products and services are accessible. Over the years, policy makers – including us at the Commission – have focused less on access for individuals with I/DD and more for those with physical disabilities. By bringing together this collection of experts, we got

a greater understanding of the communication and technology needs of the I/DD population, so that we can work together to find ways that the Commission can better address these needs.

To be clear, this Summit was not some intellectual exercise. Its purpose was to inform and inspire action, and that's exactly what happened.

The Summit identified two pressing challenges: first, the lack of equipment and services that meet the unique and varied needs of people with cognitive disabilities; and, second, the lack of awareness across government and the private sector about accessibility rights and enforcement mechanisms.

Drawing from these lessons learned, we have charted out next steps.

It starts with a more comprehensive needs assessment to determine the types of accessibility features needed to advance the current state-of-play. We look forward to working with you, telecommunications companies, our Disability Advisory Committee, and other stakeholders to convene a roundtable for this purpose.

Next, we will begin targeted outreach efforts in early 2016 not only to educate individuals with cognitive disabilities about their rights to communications products and services, but also to engage individuals who can help.

Then we plan to step up engagement with other agencies, with requests for expanded research on these issues.

By mid-2016, our goal is to have a Cognitive Accessibility Pledge for telecommunications carriers, service providers, and government stakeholders that outlines principles for an inclusive ICT ecosystem and a commitment to greater engagement for policymaking and innovation.

We will expand the Commission's Advancements in Accessibility Awards, given out each June, to recognize pioneering efforts to empower people with cognitive disabilities by ensuring they have the communications tools they need to become independent and productive.

To culminate these efforts, we are pointing to issuing a white paper next fall that compiles the lessons of these activities. This of course, will inform further progress.

My favorite expression when dealing with disabilities issues is, "This is only the beginning." The issues related to individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities are now on our agenda. We are open for business.

With continuing advances in technology, I believe that if we can imagine it, we can do it. So let's ask ourselves, "What do we want the world to look like for individuals with cognitive disabilities in 30 years? 20 years? 10 years?" Then let's push to realize that vision and expand opportunities for individuals with cognitive disabilities . . . and then push some more. Working together, anything is possible. Let's make it happen.

Thank you.