

**STATEMENT OF
CHAIRMAN THOMAS E. WHEELER**

Re: *Implementation of the Twenty-First Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act of 2010, Section 105, Relay Services for Deaf-Blind Individuals, CG Docket No. 10-210.*

For individuals who are deaf-blind, our changing communications environment poses both new challenges and new opportunities. As more and more information is delivered visually and aurally by our computers, phones, and electronic devices, making communications accessible to those who are deaf-blind requires innovative solutions. For individuals who are deaf-blind, the technology needed to make this happen can be very expensive.

To address this challenge – and carry out a mandate of the Twenty-First Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act (CVAA) – the Commission established the National Deaf-Blind Equipment Distribution Program.

Launched on a pilot basis in July 2012, this program – also known as “iCanConnect” – has empowered more than 3,000 low-income individuals who have both limited sight and hearing, helping to ease their sense of isolation and open up the world in new ways.

People like Roger Cicchese who, through iCanConnect, obtained a portable device called a Braille Sense U2 that allows access to a computer via a braille display. The equipment enabled Roger to take a job in New Hampshire where he narrates from scripts that he reads in braille. With this device, Roger also is able to exchange e-mails with his loved ones and has been empowered to pursue his dream of becoming a writer.

People like Ava Bullis, a 10-year-old who is profoundly deaf and has a progressive vision loss, who can now communicate with her teachers and classmates and socialize with family and friends. As to the value of iCanConnect, Ava says: "It provides you with things you need. It makes me feel like everybody else."

People like Burgon Jensen, who became deaf-blind at birth, but now has the independence she needs to attend college. Now a full-time college student at the University of Utah, Burgon said, “There’s no way I could be successful in college the way I am now without [this] equipment.”

No deaf-blind American should be denied access to this life-altering technology because they can’t afford it. That’s why it’s so important that we make this highly successful initiative a permanent program.

The new iCanConnect will continue to provide up to \$10 million a year, but adds three new territories, so that now 56 state- and territory-based programs can distribute a wide range of equipment enabling low-income individuals who are deaf-blind to access telecommunications, advanced communications, and the Internet.

In addition, the iCanConnect programs in each state will verify applicant eligibility; conduct communications technology assessments to determine which equipment will meet the individual’s needs; install the equipment where necessary; and provide individualized training on how to use the equipment. Some funds under this program also will be made available to address a persistent shortage of qualified trainers who can teach people who are deaf-blind how to use the equipment they receive.

To enhance accountability, efficiency, and effectiveness, the permanent program incorporates performance goals and measures and directs the creation of a centralized database, which must be used by certified programs to submit reports to the Commission. The database can also be used by programs to generate reimbursement claims. In addition, entities seeking certification to participate in this program

will be required to have administrative and financial management experience. Finally, the permanent iCanConnect program will have informal complaint procedures for consumers.

Adopting iCanConnect as a permanent program will ensure that, for years to come, we at the Commission will be doing our part to help individuals who are deaf-blind break down communications barriers and lead more independent lives through access to 21st century communications.