

**STATEMENT OF
COMMISSIONER MICHAEL J. COPPS**

Re: *Telecommunications Relay Services and Speech-to-Speech Services for Individuals with Hearing and Speech Disabilities, Order (CC Docket No. 98-67, CG Docket No. 03-123), FCC 05-141*

Telecommunications Relay Services and Speech-to-Speech Services for Individuals with Hearing and Speech Disabilities, Report and Order (CG Docket No. 03-123, CC Docket No. 98-67), FCC 05-140

Telecommunications Relay Services and Speech-to-Speech Services for Individuals with Hearing and Speech Disabilities, Order on Reconsideration (CC Docket No. 98-67, CG Docket No. 03-123), FCC 05-139

Closed Captioning of Video Programming Telecommunications for the Deaf, Inc. Petition for Rulemaking, Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (CG Docket No. 05-231), FCC 05-142

We all join in celebrating the fifteenth anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act. It's hard to believe it's already been fifteen years since Congress directed the Commission to ensure that people with disabilities have access to functionally equivalent communications services. "Functional equivalency" may sound like Washington jargon, but for 54 million Americans it translates into equal opportunity, equal rights and fuller participation in society.

We have come a long way in these fifteen years. And I am pleased that the Commission has been a part of some of that progress—expanding TRS, bringing new services like IP relay and VRS into the TRS fold, ensuring hearing aid compatibility with wireless phones. But this would be a hollow celebration if we did not also use this anniversary as a time of rededication, a time of commitment to new goals and new challenges. Because while the old obstacles of access and education and outreach have not been resolved completely, new challenges, born of technology and economic change, rise up to confront us.

The Commission takes on some of these challenges today. By finding that two-line captioned telephone service is eligible for support from the TRS fund, we expand functional equivalency for millions of Americans who are hard of hearing. By developing speed of answer requirements for VRS, we recognize that the ability to make a telephone call without delay is fundamental to our concept of a "rapid, efficient, Nation-wide" communications system. To date, VRS customers have endured unacceptably long waiting times—sometimes, I am told, up to 30 minutes—before being able to place a call. This kind of delay undermines functional equivalency. So I am pleased that today we introduce speed of answer standards that will pare down waiting time, without sacrificing the quality of the interpreting service.

We also reverse last year's misguided decision to exclude some forms of non-shared language TRS from reimbursement. As I pointed out at the time, Spanish speakers are the fastest growing minority group in the deaf school age population in the United States. For this population to communicate in a functionally equivalent manner with their Spanish-speaking parents, American Sign Language-Spanish VRS should be eligible for compensation from the TRS fund. I am pleased that we finally reach this conclusion here.

In addition to these actions on the TRS front, the Commission initiates a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking to update our closed captioning policies. For individuals who are deaf and hard of hearing, closed captions provide a critical link to news, entertainment and emergency information. By granting the petition for rulemaking filed by Telecommunications for the Deaf, the National Association of the Deaf, Self Help for Hard of Hearing People, the Association for Late Deafened Adults and the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Consumer Advocacy Network, we make an effort to keep our rules current and ensure that video programming is accessible to everyone.

Though we make progress today, there are many issues that still need our attention. There are open questions about equipment interoperability and certification for national VRS providers. There is the need always for more outreach and education. And, on another front, the disability community is justly concerned about fallout from the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Brand X*. They do not want to see semantic exercises in classification and reclassification deny them the victories they have already won and the opportunities that new technologies hold for the future.

So we have our work cut out for us. Even as we celebrate this fifteenth anniversary, there is still a long and winding road to travel—rules to be adopted, jobs to be secured, people to be appreciated for their talents and humanity, hearts and minds to be really won over. Our actions today represent some good strides down that road. I am pleased to support them in full.

Finally, a note of appreciation for the Consumer and Governmental Affairs Bureau. The Disability Rights Office is not the largest office in this agency. But millions of Americans with disabilities—and their friends, and their families, and their co-workers—are better off because of the work of this office. Their efforts keep us all better connected. Thank you.