

**STATEMENT OF
COMMISSIONER JONATHAN S. ADELSTEIN**

Re: In the Matter of Telecommunications Relay Services and Speech-to-Speech Services for Individuals with Hearing and Speech Disabilities, CG Docket No. 03-123 and CC Docket No. 98-67; FCC 05-139, FCC 05-140, FCC 05-141 (July 14, 2005).

In keeping with the fifteenth anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act, which we celebrate this summer, we adopt today three items that will improve the quality of and access to important communications services for the deaf and hard of hearing community. These individuals rely on telecommunications relay service (TRS) not only to communicate with friends and family, but also to run successful businesses, reach operators in the event of an emergency, and complete everyday tasks that many of us take for granted. Having been a staff member in the U.S. Senate when the ADA was enacted and having worked on its passage, I remain committed to the goals of the ADA and its requirement that telecommunications services for hearing and speech –disabled individuals be “functionally equivalent” to those services provided to hearing individuals. We must continue our efforts to ensure that these services are available and of high quality. With an understanding of how critical these services are, I approve these Orders, each of which brings us closer to ensuring functionally equivalent services for millions of hearing-impaired and speech-impaired Americans.

I am particularly pleased that the Commission found non-shared language Spanish translation Video Relay Service (VRS) to be a form of TRS compensable from the Interstate TRS Fund. Non-shared language Spanish translation VRS allows a person signing in American Sign Language to communicate with a Spanish speaker through a communications assistant, who translates what is signed into spoken Spanish. When we addressed this same issue in 2004, I emphasized how our country is growing increasingly multi-ethnic and multi-cultural and that I believe the FCC must be responsive to these communities. Today’s Order does just that. As a result of this measure, deaf individuals, particularly children who are raised in Spanish-speaking homes but who are taught ASL in school as their primary language, will again be able to harness the power of VRS to communicate with their families and community members.

Today’s Order also adopts a speed of answer rule for VRS, requires that VRS be offered around the clock, and provides compensation for VRS Mail from the Interstate TRS Fund. Each of these measures ensures that VRS will remain a high quality service. While many hearing persons take it for granted that they will hear a dial tone when they pick up their telephone, this is not always the case for the millions of hearing-impaired or speech-impaired Americans. We received comments indicating that some individuals have had to wait up to twenty minutes before reaching a communications assistant to begin taking information for their call. These delays are unacceptable, especially considering that the person waiting could be trying to call for an ambulance or to report a crime.

By adopting a phased-in approach for the speed of answer requirement, this Order also responds to concerns that there may not be enough interpreters today to meet our ultimate goals for speed of answer. I’m pleased that we state clearly our intent to re-examine the speed of answer rule in 2007 to determine whether to further tighten this rule, even as we afford VRS providers a reasonable time to reduce their speed of answer times. I appreciate how providers, community organizations, and state and local governments have worked together to support schools across the country in their efforts to recruit and train more qualified interpreters. I hope that this kind of cooperation will continue as more and more interpreters are needed to meet the growing demand for VRS.

Finally, we clarify that two-lined captioned telephone service is a type of TRS eligible for compensation from the Interstate TRS Fund and adopt a specific methodology for compensating such calls. Like one-line captioned telephone service, two-lined captioned telephone service allows the user, typically someone who has the ability to speak and some residual hearing, to both listen to what is said over the telephone and simultaneously read captions of what the other person is saying. Two-lined captioned telephone service also offers several additional benefits, like call waiting and call forwarding. More important, this service also allows users to directly access 911 emergency services. Today's action not only takes another step forward toward securing functional equivalency of TRS services, but it also ensures that this critical service will continue to be offered to the hard of hearing community.

I want to thank Chairman Martin and my colleagues for their commitment on these issues, particularly for their willingness to look again at the question of Spanish-language VRS, which was particularly important to me. I also want to thank Monica Desai and the staff of our Consumer and Governmental Affairs Bureau for their hard work and dedication on these items. I look forward to working with my colleagues and with the hearing and speech impaired communities as we continue to work towards the ADA's enduring standard of accessibility and functional equivalency for all Americans.