

**STATEMENT OF
COMMISSIONER DEBORAH TAYLOR TATE**

Re: Telecommunications Relay Services and Speech-to-Speech Services for Individuals with Hearing and Speech Disabilities, CG Docket No. 03-123

Today, we not only ensure more independence for the hearing impaired, but, by requiring interoperability among Video Relay Service (VRS) providers receiving interstate Telecommunications Relay Services funding, we ensure that VRS consumers are more likely to have access to this tool in the event of an emergency.

There are over 31 million Americans with some degree of hearing loss. This number is rising dramatically with the aging of baby boomers, and is expected to reach 78 million by 2030. I recently discussed the difficulties and challenges with one of my good friends and a respected attorney just diagnosed with a disease which causes hearing loss for men as they reach 50. His courage and faith touched me and I hope to do as much as possible to keep all Americans connected to vital information, whether in everyday life or in an emergency.

In March I attended a meeting of the FCC Independent Panel Reviewing the Impact of Hurricane Katrina on Communications Networks in Jackson, Mississippi. At that meeting, Cheryl Heppner, a representative for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Consumer Advocacy Network, reminded us that, in the event of an emergency, while people with hearing loss use many strategies and tools for communications, the very nature of the emergency or disaster can stress those options and take away many tools ordinarily available to the hearing impaired.

In the case of Hurricane Katrina, for example, many of the hearing impaired were cut off from their support service providers who facilitate communication. Moreover, network outages made it difficult or impossible for the hearing impaired to reach the professionals who provide visual interpretation to facilitate communication with the hearing world. As we review our response to Hurricane Katrina, and look to disaster plans that provider interoperability and redundancy of communications systems for hearing consumers, it is imperative that we also consider the needs of the hearing impaired.

Prohibiting a VRS provider from blocking access to other VRS providers ensures that, if a consumer cannot promptly reach help through the VRS provider associated with his/her equipment, that consumer is not simply stranded, but is able to reach help through another VRS provider. Moreover, in the event of a large-scale emergency, if a VRS provider's service is shut down or overwhelmed by an influx of calls, interoperability will allow consumers to have access to all other VRS providers, as well as all available interpreters, no matter who they work for.

Even in the non-emergency context, interoperability is important. As stated in our Order, if a consumer is limited to using only one provider's service, the consumer is dependent solely on that provider to place a call. Thus, absent interoperability, a VRS user is at a disadvantage compared to voice callers – unlike voice callers, the VRS user cannot promptly reach a “dial tone.”

Finally, I agree that that requiring interoperability will help to level the playing field and foster competition by encouraging new providers to offer this service. It is my hope that our action today, including our Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking addressing technical issues such as the feasibility of establishing a single global database of proxy number for VRS uses, is an important step toward providing not only functionally equivalent services to the hearing impaired, but equivalent access to, and choice of, VRS providers.

I want to thank the many people who have shared with us the unique challenges faced by the hearing impaired. I look forward to working with my colleagues to see that we are always cognizant of the needs of the hearing impaired and those with disabilities as we address critical issues such as disaster preparedness and response.