

**STATEMENT OF
CHAIRMAN TOM WHEELER**

Re: *Structure and Practices of the Video Relay Service Program*, CG Docket No. 10-51;
Telecommunications Relay Services and Speech-to-Speech Services for Individuals with Hearing and Speech Disabilities, CG Docket No. 03-123, Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking

Video Relay Service (VRS) is a revolutionary communications tool for people with hearing and speech disabilities. It allows individuals whose primary language is American Sign Language (ASL) to communicate over the phone system with hearing persons without having to type what they want to say.

The Commission has acted responsibly to ensure that the fees paid for this service to VRS providers – fees generated from consumers' phone bills – are just and reasonable. To this end, in 2013, the Commission unanimously adopted reforms that began a four-year, four-step reduction in VRS rates, to be more closely aligned with provider costs. We are currently in the third year of these reforms.

However, as is typical in telecommunications services, some providers have scale economies and others do not. In an effort to assure opportunity for small operators, the TRS Fund's payment schedule is tiered and adjusted gradually to reflect the declining costs of VRS, while providing a reasonable opportunity for all providers to grow and increase their efficiencies during this glide path.

This further notice proposes action to ensure the fairness of these rates. By temporarily freezing the VRS rates for the smallest providers, we can afford these companies an additional opportunity to make this a competitive market. Among other things, the notice recognizes that smaller providers may serve niche disability communities that larger VRS providers do not. At the same time, the item adopted recognizes our fiduciary responsibility to telephone subscribers whose payments contribute to the TRS Fund.

The further notice also reflects the Commission's interest in ensuring high quality, functionally equivalent communications services for consumers who rely on VRS. It proposes or seeks comment on service feature improvements for the VRS program, including an improved speed by which VRS calls are answered; a trial for sign-language interpreters that are skilled in certain subject matters (e.g., medical, legal, and technical) to more easily handle calls dealing with these issues; the use of deaf interpreters to supplement hearing interpreters on calls from persons with limited language skills; the use of at-home interpreting services to address interpreter shortages and facilitate the provision of VRS during overnight hours and unforeseen emergencies; and the assignment of ten-digit numbers to hearing individuals to facilitate direct (point-to-point) video calls between individuals with and without disabilities. As discussed in the FNPRM, these measures have been proposed in this item because it appears they can be implemented or at least given a trial without significantly increasing VRS costs. Each of these measures is designed to address the communications needs of VRS users, and to ensure that VRS is functionally equivalent to its voice telephone counterparts.

Video Relay Service was a significant leap for communications equality for people who are deaf or hard-of-hearing. With this item we take a step forward to improve the effectiveness of this critical tool.