

**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*, Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, CG Docket No. 10-210.

Communications technology has the power to transform people's lives. Few initiatives more vividly illustrate that power than the National Deaf-Blind Equipment Distribution Program, what we call iCanConnect.

For thousands of Americans who have both limited sight and hearing, iCanConnect has helped ease their sense of isolation and open up the world in immeasurable ways. iCanConnect reminds us of this agency's power to make a difference. Today, we move to make this life-changing program permanent.

Established by the FCC in July 2012, the National Deaf-Blind Equipment Distribution Program empowers low-income individuals who are deaf-blind to access 21st Century communications services.

The program provides up to \$10 million annually for free communications equipment designed for individuals who have both limited sight and hearing. In addition, it supports outreach to those communities to ensure that improved access is coupled with increased usage.

Programs are in place in all 50 states, plus the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands, and they are having powerful impact. Thousands of individuals have been served, thousands of pieces of equipment have been distributed, and many hours of training have been delivered.

The response from the program's beneficiaries has been profound.

Lori Siedman of Boston says, "I feel more equal, more independent. It changed my life."

Rosetta Brown of Conyers, Georgia reports, "I just don't have the words to explain how exciting this is for me and how very significant this is to me."

Riverdale, Utah's Ramona Rice adds, "I've been given a chance to be a productive member of society."

Although iCanConnect is transforming lives across America, it's currently is set to expire on June 30, 2015. Our companion order extends the pilot program for one year and includes a commitment to seamlessly transition to a permanent program. The Commission launched the National Deaf-Blind Equipment Distribution Program, which is authorized by the Twenty-First Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act (CVAA), as a pilot program.

Today's Order and Notice of Proposed Rulemaking would extend the pilot program past June 30 and simultaneously move forward with rules to establish the permanent program and improve upon the pilot program. To start along this road, the Commission had already issued a public notice asking for comments on how to improve the program. The proposed rules reflect ideas for improvements gathered from the public notice and lessons learned from the pilot program.

Communications technology can tear down barriers for people who are deaf-blind, opening up new opportunities for more active daily lives, community involvement, and even employment. No deaf-blind American should be denied access to this life-altering technology because they can't afford it. Today, we move to make sure none will be denied. By extending and improving the National Deaf-Blind Equipment Distribution Program, we empower thousands to lead more independent lives and ensure that the fundamental American promise of opportunity for all includes low-income Americans with disabilities.