

**Before the  
FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION  
Washington, D.C. 20554**

In the Matter of	)	
	)	
	)	
Improvements to Benchmarks and Related	)	WT Docket No. 15-285
Requirements Governing Hearing Aid-Compatible	)	
Mobile Handsets	)	
	)	
Amendment of the Commission’s Rules Governing	)	WT Docket No. 07-250
Hearing-Aid Compatible Mobile Handsets	)	

**Comments of Arctic Slope Telephone Association Cooperative**

Arctic Slope Telephone Association Cooperative (ASTAC) is the incumbent local exchange carrier serving the North Slope region of Alaska, an area in excess of 92,000 square miles above the Arctic Circle. Seven insular Inupiat Eskimo villages, the City of Barrow and the oilfields of Prudhoe Bay comprise our exchanges, all of which have wireless service.

Similar to other small carriers, ASTAC struggles to provide our members with the latest wireless phones, due to economies of scale and exclusivity agreements between the manufacturers and the national carriers. Nonetheless, we actively manage our product line to meet existing hearing-aid compatibility requirements *and* provide non-hearing impaired members with robust choice, whether their buying decision is based on price, device intelligence, ruggedness or a combination of these attributes. Our current line-up of 13 models include 8 models that are HAC compliant. All models are Bluetooth enabled and with the use of a Bluetooth streamer device,<sup>1</sup> the remaining 5 models become a viable choice for hearing impaired members with Bluetooth enabled hearing-aids, as well as those who do not have a hearing impairment. An additional benefit of the Bluetooth streamer device is that it can act as the interface not only for the wireless phone, but for all Bluetooth enabled devices, e.g. televisions, iPods, etc.

ASTAC faces a similar challenge in procuring a HAC compliant, inexpensive wireless phone for our Lifeline program members with a hearing impairment. We are meeting that demand today using an older 3G HAC compliant flip phone. This will become problematic in the not so distant future, however. We are in the process of migrating to a 4G wireless network and hearing impaired members are not going to be satisfied staying on a 3G device. To date, we have been unable to procure an inexpensive 4G capable HAC compliant phone for the Lifeline program. Our stock of the 3G flip phones is finite and spare batteries are aging out.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.healthyhearing.com/help/hearing-aids/bluetooth> for a description of how this pairing works with Bluetooth hearing-aids

Non-HAC compliant, Bluetooth enabled, inexpensive 4G phones exist through our vendors that could serve the hearing impaired with the addition of a streamer. However, should we be required to only offer 100% HAC compliant phones, it could deprive *some* Lifeline eligible members of a wireless alternative to wireline service. This would be due to the intermediate cost HAC device being out of their price range. Unless manufacturers start to produce an inexpensive (under \$100) HAC compliant phone, it seems likely that cost will preclude some Lifeline recipients from utilizing the wireless option. This would be an unfortunate unintended consequence for an otherwise socially responsible initiative.

Likewise, mandating a 100% HAC compliant requirement on small carriers with no market power to influence manufacturers will decrease choice for the majority of our members who are non-hearing impaired, removing 5 popular wireless phones from today's line up. Reducing choice for the consumer makes the small carrier less able to compete on a variety versus "latest and greatest" basis that the national carriers enjoy. Reducing consumer choice and stifling competition do not serve the overall public interest.

A couple of proposed solutions come to mind. Changing the *de minimus* exception for providers from a metric of two or fewer devices offered to a more realistic metric of total revenue from CPE sales of wireless phones would easily parse out the small carriers, allowing them to compete by offering a robust line up of wireless phones. We would suggest the small carriers would qualify for the *de minimus* exception if their yearly CPE wireless handset sales do not exceed \$500,000.

Allowing non-HAC compliant phones to be sold as long as they have the Bluetooth feature gives both the hearing impaired *and others* more choice. The hearing impaired with Bluetooth enabled hearing aids can widen their choices with the addition of an inexpensive streamer and benefit from using the technology not only for the phone, but all other Bluetooth enabled devices such as televisions and MP3 players.

#### Conclusion

While improving access to HAC compliant wireless phones for the hearing impaired is a laudable initiative, it must be balanced with other public interest tenets; consumer choice, competition and access for our nation's economically disadvantaged to an inexpensive wireless phone. Until and unless manufacturers make all devices concurrently available to all providers on a non-discriminatory basis and address the need for a HAC compliant inexpensive wireless handset, small carriers should continue to operate under current HAC regulations. Determining the threshold for qualifying for the exception should be based on CPE revenue for wireless handsets, not the quantity of handsets offered and wireless providers with annual CPE sales of handsets of \$500,000 or less should qualify for the exception.

Respectfully submitted,

*s/ Steve Merriam*

*Via ECFS at 1/4/2016*

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