

Concerning Docket No. 98-676 (DA 02-2761)

The following article from the Honolulu Star Bulletin cites TRS/STS regulation violations which should be corrected before HI TRS is granted recertification.
- Bob Segalman, Ph.D., Founder of Speech to Speech.

<http://starbulletin.com/2002/08/15/news/story4.html>

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Bob Segalman gave a demonstration recently of the Speech-to-Speech service, which enables people with speech disabilities to make an independent phone call. With him were revoicer Eda Wilson, center, and Barbara Fischlowitz-Leong, Assistive Technology Resources Centers of Hawaii executive director.

Island phone system
for disabled criticized

The founder of a federal program
says the system is a failure

By Helen Altonn
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The founder of a federally mandated system enabling people with speech disabilities to use the telephone says Hawaii's system is not working right.

Bob Segalman came here to demonstrate and encourage use of the Speech-to-Speech relay system, which he developed because of a cerebral palsy-related speech disability.

But if he had realized how bad the system was in Hawaii, he said: "I wouldn't have come here. I would have advocated that they fix it before I come."

Segalman, who talks in a whisper because of his impairment, and this reporter used the relay system for an interview this week.

After an operator functioning as translator repeatedly said, "Please repeat," he broke off the connection and used a communication assistant with him to finish the talk.

The Speech-to-Speech service was mandated by the Federal Communications Commission in 1991 and is available in all states 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

It enables people with cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy, Parkinson's disease, stroke, a brain injury or other problems hampering speech to make phone calls like anyone else to fill a prescription, order a pizza or talk to a friend.

It is estimated that about 11,000 islanders could benefit from the system, but "our understanding, based on discussions, no official report, is that usage has been near zero," said Barbara Fischlowitz-Leong, executive director, Assistive Technology Resource Centers of Hawaii.

They can call 711 toll-free and give the operator the number they want, using their own voice, voice prosthesis or communication device. Specially trained operators act as translators, repeating the words of the speech-disabled caller.

"The (main) problem in Hawaii is that Verizon insists on contracting with AT&T, and AT&T operators are all back in Virginia and they don't understand the Hawaiian dialect," Segalman said, referring to pidgin and ethnic dialects.

The operators are supposed to be trained to understand difficult speech and have good amplifiers so they can hear the caller, Segalman said.

"But the AT&T communications assistants don't have the equipment to amplify my voice, so that doesn't work."

Another problem in Hawaii, Segalman said, is that the operator can take up to five minutes to connect the caller after 711 is dialed. "People just give up."

One person who tried the 711 route and became frustrated is dialing a toll-free 877 number that goes through Washington state, Fischlowitz-Leong said.

"We were circumventing Hawaii because Washington contracted with Sprint services, which are excellent."

Ann Nishida, Verizon Hawaii spokeswoman, said she could not say how many islanders are using the AT&T relay service or what it costs because that is "proprietary information."

"I can say we are disappointed with STS usage in Hawaii thus far, but we hope that through our continued outreach efforts, usage will increase.

"Based on recent customer feedback about the service, we've met with the vendor and are working to resolve any issues," Nishida said.

"Prior to this, Verizon Hawaii had not received detailed customer feedback about STS upon which to follow up."

She said Verizon wants people to get all the benefits possible from the telephone, and if those using STS encounter problems, "we need for them to tell us about it so it can be addressed with the vendor."

Nishida said Verizon Foundation gave the Assistive Technology Resource Center a \$10,000 grant to educate prospective STS users and health care professionals about the system.

Verizon offers free booklets to inform people with hearing and speech disabilities about available telecommunications services. They are at all Verizon PhoneMart stores.

Fischlowitz-Leong said her agency has developed training programs to work with service providers and people who will use STS. It is also trying to document system problems so Verizon can track bad calls, she said.

Verizon customers are assessed 17 cents per month in their phone bills for FCC-mandated relay services, including STS and services for the deaf and hard of hearing, as well as equipment, staff, materials and training. Some people with speech disabilities use a TTY, or text telephone, to make calls. It is a teletype-like device used by the deaf and hard of hearing, as well as hearing people who want to talk with another TTY user.

STS is an option for people who do not have the ability to type or to type as fast as they wish. Segalman said it would be much better for Hawaii to train local communications assistants, as the Assistive Technology Resource Center recommended.

Nishida said Verizon wanted to train local people to handle the calls but did not have enough time before the system was required to start in March of last year.

"The problem is, the local people would like to fix it, but the people in the corporate office back in Texas don't want to spend the money," Segalman said.

If it is decided to use local operators, he said, "I will be glad to come back and train them the way I've done in other places without a fee. ... I've been

working on this for 10 years. I just want people like me to be able to use the telephone."