Speech Communication Assistance By Telephone, Inc.

Via electronic filing
Marlene H. Dortch, Secretary
Federal Communications Commission
445 Twelfth Street, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20554

Re: *Ex parte* notice – *Telecommunications Relay Services and Speech-to-Speech Services for Individuals with Hearing and Speech Difficulties*, CG Docket No. 03-123

Dear Ms. Dortch:

This letter updates our 7/18/07 filing to correctly reference Section 255. I am writing to you on behalf of Speech Communication Assistance by Telephone, Inc. (SCT). Our organization represents consumers with speech disabilities. We are very concerned with Speech-to-Speech quality of service and outreach issues. We understand that the Commission is considering adopting the "MARS Plan" for setting interstate rates for various forms of TRS, including Speech-to-Speech ("STS") service. We wish to clarify our position on the MARS plan:

> **We do not object to the MARS plan specifically <u>as long as:</u> The STS NECA rate reimburses providers for all costs for providing STS. That is, providers must have the economic incentive to ensure that every American with a speech disability who can use STS is supplied information on how to do so, just as all Americans have received information on how to use POTS.**

Section 255 of the Communications Act requires the Commission to ensure that the various forms of interstate relay service are "functionally equivalent" to traditional phone service. As the FCC has recognized, the need to achieve functional equivalency is particularly urgent for "people with severe speech disabilities, an insular community that has been, for the most part, denied access to the telephone network."[1] To meet this

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[1] 15 FCC Rcd 5140. That same order also explains that "STS will help break the insularity barriers that confine members of the community of people with speech disabilities and offer them opportunities for education, employment, and other, more intangible benefits (freedom, joy, self-reliance) that are concomitant with independence

need, the Commission wisely established STS as a form of TRS. Sadly, however, the Commission has not followed through on its promise to ensure that the community of consumers with speech disabilities has information about this service. Generally, providers provide STS below cost as part of a package which reimburses them at a higher cost for other services, but gives them no economic incentive to do STS Outreach.

On June 29, the FCC froze the interstate rate for STS at $1.409 per minute. This rate is much lower than the various compensation rates proposed this year by NECA. For the 2007-08 rate year, NECA has suggested various methodologies which would set the STS rate anywhere from $2.49 to $3.45. Clearly, providers cannot provide functionally equivalent STS when they are denied the opportunity to recover their costs; nor can they undertake the kind of vigorous outreach needed to educate the public, including hundreds of thousands of speech-disabled Americans who do not appear to be aware of the availability of STS.

To our knowledge the reimbursement rate has never been high enough to give providers the incentive to do outreach, but until the recent establishment of this non-profit organization (SCT), consumers lacked a voice to object to this low rate. A majority of consumers with speech disabilities are not equipped to advocate for STS.

If the interstate STS rate is determined by the MARS Plan, this rate must be one that ensures that providers have enough economic incentive to conduct outreach to effectively reach and educate consumers with speech disabilities about STS relay services. That is: the interstate STS rate must not be lower than providers' estimated costs. The Commission should not deprive providers of the funding they need to adequately serve the speech-disabled community. Depriving STS providers of sufficient funding would cause severe harm to speech-disabled individuals, reducing critical outreach education programs and decreasing service quality. On the contrary, ensuring that the MARS Plan pays STS providers what they need to educate people with speech disabilities would send a clear message that the FCC cares about the speech-disabled population.

Pursuant to the Commission's rules, this letter is being submitted for inclusion in the public record of the above-captioned proceeding.

Sincerely,

/s/ Bob Segalman
Bob Segalman, Ph.D.
Founder, Speech to Speech