As a family member or friend of a Video Relay Service (VRS) provider, I have the great fortune of knowing first-hand how deaf individuals communicate by videophone in American Sign Language using VRS. I have seen that this empowering service is a vital link that connects deaf people to the hearing community.

Ensuring that deaf individuals have access to VRS and encouraging improvements in VRS should be a high priority for you as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires the FCC to make available to all deaf individuals nationwide ?functionally-equivalent? communications.

When you set the VRS rate, you will determine whether America makes progress toward the statutory goals of functional equivalence, nationwide access and inclusion ? or force deaf users to revert to TTY communications ? a product that most deaf individuals no longer own as TTYs have been replaced by videophone equipment. And, you will determine whether VRS fulfills its potential to drive broadband adoption by the deaf, even in the face of poverty and isolation.

I was deeply troubled by the Commission?s recent Public Notice on VRS rates. These proposals would put an end to VRS as we know it. I have recently been informed that if these proposed rates are adopted, Sorenson Communications  would head into bankruptcy. This would be disastrous for deaf VRS users.

The FCC should be increasing the availability and use of VRS, not cutting back. You should adopt a rate that encourages continuing improvements in VRS technology and continues to improve service levels. Recent developments in VRS are a good example of how the service can be improved, such as enhanced 911 services, 10-digit numbering, a larger and better-trained pool of interpreters and better videophones with an array of enhanced features. Monthly payments for broadband are a big expense for many deaf people, and instead of trying to cut back on VRS, you should be exploring ways to make VRS over broadband more affordable to deaf individuals.

Progress towards functional equivalence will be destroyed if the FCC does not encourage VRS providers to improve VRS and make it more widely available. VRS is a recent and dramatic advancement that benefits those who are deaf, but so much more can be done. It would be tragic if the FCC were to destroy this broadband service that is so vital to the deaf.

Recent reports of fraud in the VRS industry are disturbing to taxpayers like myself who recognize a company like Sorenson that has operated within current FCC guidelines and has worked to maintain the integrity of the VRS fund. The FCC must devote more of its time and energy to focusing on the elimination of fraud.

I urge you to establish a fair and predictable rate for VRS that will encourage VRS providers to invest in improving VRS and in reaching more deaf individuals.

Sincerely,

Robin R Barreca