

I urge the federal government to require cell service carriers and vendors to provide equal service at equal cost via fully accessible devices to people who are blind or deaf.

I've been a cell phone user since the mid 1990s. As a blind woman who survived a stocker, I purchased my first cell phone primarily for safety reasons (I attended school at night, and working payphones were becoming harder to find). Then when I entered the work force, my cell phone became an integral part of my job, but as cell phones evolved and access technology didn't, the cell phone became a greater and greater obstacle at work.

My first two handsets and calling plans were comparable to those of my sighted peers. Over the years, however, this changed. Handsets rose in price and offered more features. My sighted peers could do a whole host of activities from keeping a calendar and texting with coworkers to listening to music and playing games. I was paying for the same devices (cheaper, more basic models were no longer available), but could only dial calls, check voice mail, and if a sighted person set things up for me, call from contacts.

The disparity became more obvious and troubling in my work as a freelance community interpreter. Initially jobs came to me over the phone. Later they tended to come over text message. While my current handset had text messaging, the feature was not available to me, so I had to purchase a phone with messaging I could use. The new device was a smart phone. It cost more money, required the purchase of a screen reader, and involved a data plan.

That phone didn't put me on a par with my colleagues, however. The screen reader cost about as much as the handset; the monthly data plan cost forty-five dollars a month, fifty percent more than the standard data plan "because of the screen reader" (the explanation given to me by a Verizon employee); and while I was paying for data use, the screen reader's handling of both email and web were so buggy as to be unreliable for work.

At the time that I was celebrating the fact that I could text and thereby continue getting jobs, my colleagues were using their smart phones to get turn-by-turn directions to their assignment locations, using the net to research subject areas during idle time, and looking terms up in electronic dictionaries"none of which was available to me.

Eventually, I traded that smart phone in for an Android device, in large part because Android includes built-in accessibility. While I am generally happy with my new phone and while I am willing to be patient as Google further develops accessibility, this has not been an ideal solution either. Since Android accessibility is a work in progress, I am still not able to perform certain basic tasks, like navigate and edit emails, texts, and other notes or documents I write; review segments of documents I read; fully enjoy the calendar to keep track of work related appointments; listen to electronic books,

even text-to-speech enabled Kindle titles.

Moreover, I am concerned about the trend toward Android customization by carriers. It means I can't just buy any Android phone knowing it will work, and it means that I need to hurry up and thoroughly test the device to find out which aspects of the phone are affected and how significant those disruptions are. I would prefer one of the following solutions to this problem: (1) prohibit customization, (2) allow users to turn off customization, or (3) ensure that customization does not disrupt accessibility.

I'm really tired of paying full prices for devices I can't really use; I'm even more tired of being expected to pay more for the privilege of getting significantly less; and I'm more tired still of the way these issues keep me on the fringes of society and the workplace.

Please help me and people like me become part of the mainstream by reminding cell phone manufacturers and carriers that we are also customers.