Open the VRS 10-Digit Number Database

Judy Jonas, M.A., New Jersey

Like many of you, I am a hearing individual who is involved in the Deaf community. When we interact with the Deaf community, our common language is American Sign Language (ASL). Years ago, many of us bought text telephones (TTYs) and called deaf people directly using our land line phones which connected to their land line phones. We all figured out how to put our telephone receivers on the TTY coupler. It wasn't rocket science to check whether our call was a voice or a TTY call. If it was a TTY call, we would type our conversations. It was sometimes a struggle, since English is not all deaf people's primary language, but we managed.

In the early 90s after the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed and 24/7 Telecommunication Relay Service (TRS) was required, no government body prevented us from calling one another using our TTYs. If deaf people needed to make a doctor appointment, they would use the relay service. But if both parties had TTYs, like many of us, we just dialed the number directly and chatted by typing to one another.

Over a year ago, were you excited to hear about the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) ruling regarding video relay service (VRS) and Internet Protocol Relay (IP Relay) users? Oh, you never heard of the ruling? Deaf people got "real" ten-digit numbers instead of the "proxy" numbers they were originally given, so they could make and receive VRS calls in addition to calls from one videophone (VP) to another. The deadline for getting a "real" ten-digit number was mid-November 2009. Innocent and foolishly, I thought my D-link VP, for which I had happily paid $200, would allow me to make and receive calls to deaf people using the "real" ten digit numbers. I saw all the ads from the VRS providers and went online to get one. But the only way I could get a "real" ten-digit number was to swear I was deaf or speech impaired. There were serious penalties for lying. Disappointment didn't describe my reaction. Fury is a better word choice.

Like many of you, I work as an interpreter and need to use the phone as one form of communication with my clients. I also have deaf relatives I like to chat with, just to keep in touch. Eight years ago, I co-authored a book with a deaf business partner. We travel widely making presentations to both deaf and hearing audiences. We need to stay in touch with one another to discuss and make arrangements. Another deaf woman and I are co-authoring a book. We need to converse in our common language, ASL, regularly.

You may be thinking, "This woman could use VRS to call any of these people. What's her problem?" The problem is, although we both have VPs, I have to use a VRS interpreter to call deaf people. They have to use a VRS interpreter to chat with me. Why should we be forced to use an interpreter when we speak the same language? As interpreters involved in the Deaf community, we all know the value of direct communication. I hope I don't need to convince this audience on that idea! In addition, what a waste of time and money because, as you know, we are all paying for VRS calls through charges on everyone's phone bills.

The essence of the problem lies in the FCC ruling that says a hearing person cannot have a ten-digit number. Did you know that? When I filed a complaint with the FCC, they told me ten-digit numbers are available ONLY to deaf and hard of hearing people; only deaf people can be part of the VRS database of "real" ten digit numbers. I know deaf people can call one another using their new ten-digit numbers, but even though I need to call deaf people, I cannot! Can you imagine my chagrin?

Why did the rules change when VRS occurred, in contrast to TRS when we could call one another with our TTYs? Why did the FCC forbid hearing people from getting "real" ten digit numbers to use with their VPs? I didn't mind paying for my D-link VP, although deaf people got theirs free, but what was the point if I couldn't use it as a "functionally equivalent" phone? The intent of the ADA was to assure "functional equivalency." The status quo is not "functional equivalency!" The major consumer groups: the National Association of the Deaf (NAD), Telecommunications for the Deaf Inc. (TDI), Hearing Loss Association (HLA) and RID have all filed comments with the FCC to rectify this situation, but so far, nothing has changed.

Deaf people have expressed their concern as well. Marla Berkowitz, CDI, and Charisse Heine, a science teacher at a residential school for the deaf, wrote to the FCC, saying:

> *"The issue is we cannot deny the facts that there are people like yourselves who are hearing people such as our parents, relatives, interpreters, service providers and friends that we are forbidden to call because our current videophone cannot call their videophones. In addition, our new ten-digit number lets us call only people who are deaf but we are unable to call directly (without the use of VRS) to those hearing people who use ASL just like us. Many of them do not purchase videophones because of your policy – they know we can't call them with ours. This is very frustrating, especially for face to face phone calls."*

A frustrated hearing voice is Deacon Tom Smith (CSW), Pastoral Minister of the Deaf from New Jersey, who wrote the following when I asked him to write to the FCC about this issue:

> *"I thought I was the only one. All my clients/church members are deaf and most have VPs now (not TTYs) but I am forced to rely on VRS as a third party to all our communications, some of which are very private and personal. I feel like it is 15-20 years ago, before I had a TTY, and had to rely on that form of slow, voiced/typed relay services. Except this time it's even more frustrating since it's not necessary. I feel I am forced again to talk with strangers instead the intended party.*
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> *Your letter is a very important step toward getting real justice around this issue. The VP providers I've contacted have all indicated that I need to be deaf to 'use their services' with my webcam-equipped laptop. One creative representative from a VRS company suggested I apply as a hearing person (like you said in your letter - not able to lie) but have a deaf person present when they come to install the service, acting as my assistant. (They've probably had requests like mine before). Why should we have to play these deceitful games just because those who wrote these regulations were foolish enough to think that only deaf people would need regular direct contact with other deaf people? I am copying your letter and asking our church members to sign and send to Senators Lautenberg and Menendez and Pallone, etc. Thanks for your chutzpah!"*

Have any of you tried to get a ten-digit number? I have. And no matter which company I approach, like Deacon Tom Smith learned, I have to swear that I am deaf or speech impaired. I am aware that some interpreters and codas have said they were deaf and let VRS providers install VPs for them. Some have kept their deaf relative's VP just so they could talk directly to their deaf children, consumers or friends. As you know, many deaf people have several VPs so leaving one with their hearing relatives was not a problem. But I am not willing to lie to get a ten-digit number and should not have to! In this "communication age," it is beyond my comprehension that the FCC technocrats can't figure out a way to open the database to allow hearing people who can sign, like most of you reading this, to have ten digit numbers. If you agree with me and the consumer groups about this issue, how about letting the FCC know how you feel? The simplest way would be to write to the FCC and insist they "open the VRS database to allow hearing people who can sign to get ten digit numbers." You can fax the FCC at: (fax) (1-866-418-0232) or e-mail them at fccinfo@fcc.gov.

If you would like sample petitions to use, please refer to the Government Affairs Program (GAP) page on the RID Web site, or contact me directly at jajonas@verizon.net. ■

Judy Jonas received a B.A. from Brooklyn College, an M.A. in Deaf Education from Teacher's College, Columbia University and two certificates from Union County College: ASL/Deaf Studies and Interpreting for the Deaf. She holds an EIPA NJ Educational Interpreter certification. She was a co-founder of the Fair Lawn Deaf Program which provided Adult Basic Education and employment services to deaf adults and helped to establish similar programs in New Jersey. After 20 years with the Fair Lawn Deaf Program, she currently works as a freelance sign language interpreter. She is the interpreter/editor for the memoir, "Growing Up Deaf: Issues of Communication in a Hearing World " by her deaf friend, Rose Pizzo. She has also established a non-profit corporation, Sister Brother Deaf Inc., and is working on book with Marla Berkowitz, M.A., CDI, about deaf people and their hearing siblings. Judy has deaf relatives: a brother, sister-in-law, nephew and niece.