

CG Docket Nos. 03-123 and 10-51

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing to comment about the FCC's proposed changes to the Video Relay Service (VRS) program. I believe the proposed changes will negatively affect the VRS industry, as well as the lives the many thousands of people who use VRS on a daily basis

My name is Katie Sofranko, and I am a nationally certified sign language interpreter. I have my Bachelor of Science degree in American Sign Language/English interpreting from Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania, and I have been a practicing interpreter in the greater New York/New Jersey area for over 8 years. I have worked in VRS as a video relay interpreter for Sorenson Communications for just under 3 of those years.

The proposed changes will have a tremendous impact on the Deaf community who use VRS services. The first way the changes will affect the Deaf community is through the restructuring of the VRS program, which will force members of the Deaf community to purchase "off the shelf" hardware and to all use same government-issued software. Currently, the system is set up so that competing companies can each develop and issue their own "version" of a videophone. This competition has lead to great innovations that specifically reflect the needs of the Deaf community. Simple ideas, such as a flashing light "ringer" and visual "voice mail," as well as more complex ones, such as running high video quality on a lower bandwidth, have become reality in part because of the VRS companies trying to compete with each other and attract customers with the "next greatest thing." This is no different than the innovations we have seen with "smart phones" used by the general public. If Apple, Motorola, Samsung, and other companies did not have to continually improve their technology in order to satisfy the needs and wants of their consumers, we would not have features like text messaging, touch screens, or "Face Time." Without competition, there would be little reason to innovate and improve technology, a fact that can be applied to any industry in the world.

In VRS, better technology often leads to better, clearer calls. When a call is made, and the interpreter and the Deaf consumer can see each other clearly, the call can be completed quickly and easily. If the FCC succeeds in changing the equipment that is used, a reduction in call quality may occur. In the mainstream, if a phone company constantly has "dropped" calls, or calls that have poor audio quality, customers will switch to another company. If the FCC's proposed regulations pass, the Deaf community will have no "other company" to switch to. They will instead simply have to accept poor call quality as a way of life. This does NOT meet the goal of "equal access" or "functional equivalency" for persons with disabilities that the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requires from the telephone relay system here in the United States.

Aside from restructuring the VRS system, another way the FCC's proposed changes will impact the Deaf community is through the proposed rate cuts. When the FCC cuts the per-minute reimbursement rates of VRS companies, those companies are forced to take drastic measures to survive. A few negative consequences can happen as a result of this

action. First, some companies may be forced to close if the amount of revenue they earn from the FCC is greatly surpassed by the amount they are spending in operational costs. This will reduce the number of VRS companies in the field, which will lead to an overall reduction in competition, which will thereby reduce technological innovation in a field that relies on technology for its very existence.

For those companies that remain open, drastic measures will have to be taken for the company to remain solvent. VRS companies could try to “save” money under the proposed cuts by reducing the pay of the sign language interpreters who work for them. The documentation I have read about this situation refers to sign language interpreters as “CAs,” short for “Communication Assistant.” While we interpreters do “assist communication,” what we do is a far more complex task than typing on and reading from a TTY/TDD, which is the task that a CA was originally assigned to do. While a pre-VRS relay operator worked verbatim from English to English, VRS interpreters are working from a spoken language, such as English or Spanish, to a signed language, such as American Sign Language, which follows a completely different grammatical structure than the spoken language being used. By doing this work, VRS interpreters allow Deaf and Hard of Hearing Americans to use their native language, American Sign Language, in order to communicate, rather than forcing to use their second language of English on a TTY/TDD. However, this work is complex, challenging, and both mentally and physically exhausting. Generally, interpreters command a high level of pay, and, as in most professions, the higher their rate of pay, the more qualified the individual usually is. To do the incredibly demanding task of VRS interpreting requires an individual to be highly qualified. It is not unreasonable that the earnings of a highly qualified member of any profession are commensurate to his or her level of skill, education, and certification; however, the amount of money VRS interpreters make is substantially lower than those interpreters with similar skills who work in sectors outside of VRS. If the VRS companies are forced to further reduce the rate that they pay interpreters, it is likely that the best, most-qualified interpreters will leave the field of VRS. This will negatively affect the Deaf callers in two ways. First, the overall number of interpreters working in VRS will decline, leading to longer hold times in order to make a call. Those of us who can hear can simply pick up the phone and connect with someone, a concept that should drive the goal of “functional equivalency” and the VRS industry. Spending more time on hold in order to access an interpreter goes against this fundamental concept. Second, those interpreters who remain are likely to be of a lower quality than those who currently work in the VRS industry. Obtaining and maintaining levels of certification and education are expensive, and if interpreters cannot earn enough in VRS to support those credentials, they will find work in other sectors. Those interpreters that remain will likely be uncertified, less experienced, and under-educated. Often, VRS calls are of a sensitive nature, including topics such as one’s personal finances, employment, medical diagnoses, legal issues, and even 911 emergency calls. If an under-qualified interpreter had to interpret such complex topics, the amount of errors made would likely go up. This could result in a caller losing a job, losing his or her money, or even dying, if, for example, the interpreter misinterpreted the type or amount of medication to take, or misrepresented pre-surgery instructions.

Clearly, adopting the proposed changes would be detrimental, if not dangerous, to the Deaf community, and doing so also clearly goes against the ADA's goal of functional equivalency and equal access. However, implementing these changes also has a detrimental effect on those people "behind the scenes" in VRS: the staff members who work for the companies, including the aforementioned sign language interpreters. If the FCC forced the proposed rate cuts onto the VRS industry, I, along with many others, would likely lose my job. After the last round of government cuts left Sorenson and other VRS companies doing triage, I, along with around 300 other workers, was laid off from Sorenson in August, 2010. While it is true that many interpreters can transfer to other sectors, there may not be enough work in these sectors to sustain both the interpreters who already work there *plus* an influx of unemployed/underemployed VRS interpreters. Simply put, due to the economic recession we are currently in, business for sign language interpreters has been reduced. If there was to be a sudden influx of practitioners to an already saturated pool, the nation's over ten thousand sign language interpreters could instantly find themselves grossly underemployed, if not completely unemployed. Additionally, closing either individual VRS "centers" or whole companies could potentially cause thousands more individuals who work as marketers, installers, secretaries, and managers to be laid off as well. Many of the "behind the scene" VRS employees are also Deaf, members of a group of people that have traditionally been underemployed. VRS companies not only provide the opportunity for a Deaf person to be on equal footing with his or her hearing counterpart regarding the telephone, but they also provide equal access in the workplace as well, providing jobs at all levels to members of the Deaf community.

In conclusion, I believe that approving the proposed changes to the VRS program will have a damaging effect on the lives of thousands of Americans. Many of us stand to lose our jobs in already volatile economic times. Many thousands more will lose something much more basic: the freedom to pick up a phone and connect with the outside world. The relay service was initially put into place in order for a Deaf person's experience to be "functionally equivalent" to that of a hearing person using the phone. By changing the equipment and cutting the rates, the FCC is making equal access an impossibility. Please follow the spirit of the ADA and do not make these changes!

Sincerely,

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