



NEWS

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See *MCI v. FCC*, 515 F.2d 385 (D.C. Cir. 1974).

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NEW RULES ADOPTED TO IMPROVE VIDEO RELAY SERVICE *Speed of Answer Requirements Now Mandated*

Washington, DC – Today, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) adopted rules moving the Video Relay Service (VRS) closer to the goal of providing deaf and hard of hearing persons functionally equivalent access to the nation’s telephone system.

VRS is a form of telecommunications relay service (TRS). TRS enables an individual with a hearing or speech disability to communicate by telephone or other device through the telephone system with a person without such a disability. VRS allows communications using sign language through a communications assistant (CA), who facilitates the call, via a video link, rather than through typed text. Through VRS, the conversation between the two end users, deaf and hearing, flows in near real time and in a faster and more natural manner than with a TTY or text-based TRS call. As a result, VRS calls reflect a degree of “functional equivalency” unimaginable in a solely text-based TRS world. The use of VRS reflects this reality: in April 2005 the monthly minutes of use were approximately 1.8 million, a ten-fold increase in the past two years, and more than the number of interstate traditional TRS minutes.

The new rules establish, for the first time, mandatory speed of answer requirements for VRS, require VRS to be offered 24 hours a day, seven days a week (24/7), and permit VRS providers to be compensated for providing VRS Mail.

The Commission recognized VRS as a form of TRS in March 2000, but waived the speed of answer rules for VRS until January 1, 2006. “Speed of answer” refers to the amount of time that elapses between receipt of dialing information and the dialing of the requested number.

Specifically, the new rules require that:

- Speed of answer requirements for VRS be phased in as follows, measured on a monthly basis: (1) by January 1, 2006, VRS providers must answer 80 percent of all VRS calls within 180 seconds; (2) by July 1, 2006, VRS providers must answer 80 percent of all VRS calls within 150 seconds; and (3) by January 1, 2007, VRS providers must answer 80 percent of all VRS calls within 120 seconds.

- VRS providers must offer service 24/7 to be eligible for compensation from the Interstate TRS Fund. The Commission noted that as consumers increasingly rely on VRS as their preferred means of using TRS to access the telephone system, it becomes important for consumers to have access to this service at all times.
- VRS Mail be recognized as a VRS service eligible for compensation from the Interstate TRS Fund. When a deaf or hard of hearing person makes a VRS call to a hearing person who is not able to take the call, the VRS provider can leave a voice message for the hearing person, and the VRS call is eligible for compensation from the Fund. Under the new rules, when a hearing person leaves a message for a deaf or hard of hearing person using VRS, that call will also be compensable from the Fund.

The order will be effective 30 days after publication in the Federal Register.

Action by the Commission July 14, 2005, by Report and Order (FCC 05- 140). Chairman Martin, Commissioners Abernathy, Copps, and Adelstein. Separate statements issued by Chairman Martin, Abernathy, Copps, and Adelstein.

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