



August 2008

TRS Grows Up

Peter Tannenwald
tannenwald@fhhlaw.com
703-812-0404

The FCC has invited comments on proposals to amend its Telecommunications Relay Service (TRS) rules with respect to speech-to-speech (STS) services, including: whether Communications Assistants (CAs) should have to remain on the line longer; how abbreviated dialing “711” access can be assured; how STS services should be compensated; which entities should be authorized to provide STS; and ensuring access to Internet STS users by conventional telephone subscribers.

TRS enables persons with hearing and/or speech impairment to communicate with other persons with the assistance of a CA, who interprets the conversation in each direction according to the capabilities of the parties to the call. The earliest form of TRS allowed one party to type on a specialized terminal, and later on a computer, with the CA voicing the words in one direction and typing words in the other direction. Later, Video Relay Service (VRS) was introduced, where the CA uses visual sign language with one party to a call and voice with the other party. A further enhancement is STS, where a skilled CA can understand the impaired speech of one party and repeats the words to the other party who could not otherwise understand impaired speech, eliminating any need for keyboard use.

While TRS was originally provided over conventional telephone circuits, many users now communicate through their computers or specialized terminals over broadband circuits (IP TRS), allowing faster communication overall and higher resolution images when sign language is used. Dial-up service is still available, and “711” has been adopted as the nationwide abbreviated dialing code to reach TRS services. State government agencies oversee the provision of TRS and select entities to provide TRS services within their jurisdiction. Telephone service providers are required to provide access to TRS and normally do so by handing off TRS calls to specialized TRS service providers.

The FCC has now invited comment on several issues relating to TRS. One is how long a single CA must stay with a call before handing the call off to another CA. The minimum time between CA changes is now 15 minutes; but because it takes time for one CA to

acclimate to the speech pattern of an individual speech-impaired caller, the FCC asks whether the time should be extended to 20 minutes to reduce the frequency of interruption of a long call while a new CA acclimates. The FCC also asks whether the 20-minute minimum should be extended or should be deemed not to start until the CA understands the impaired caller's speech well enough to start a two-way conversation with the other party to the call.

Another issue is how STS users can be assured access to an STS-skilled CA when accessing TRS by 711 dialing. The first response to a 711 call is normally not an STS-capable CA. STS may even be provided by a separate service provider, and some calls have apparently been disconnected while being transferred to an STS CA. The FCC suggests that the opening menu for an incoming 711 call include an easy and reliable transfer to an STS CA.

The FCC tentatively concludes that STS provided via the Internet is a form of TRS compensable from the interstate TRS fund when the service is provided in compliance with FCC rules. IP STS providers will be eligible for certification by the FCC, but a separate certification will be required, and those certified to provide different types of TRS will not automatically qualify to be STS providers. The FCC also anticipates exempting STS providers from requirements applicable to other TRS providers, including keyboard skills, call release (where the CA drops off after setting up a call), hearing and voice carry over (which allow a caller with a disability to use voice in one direction and keyboard in the other), equal access to interexchange carriers, access to 900 calling, and 711 dialed access.

Comments are requested on what emergency call handling requirements should be imposed on STS providers, including the possibility of requiring IP STS providers to obtain conventional 10-digit telephone numbers so that traditional telephone users may reach their hearing and speech impaired customers.

Comments are also requested on whether states should be required to increase TRS compensation rates to cover the additional costs of STS and whether the STS compensation rate should include an element to fund educational outreach. Finally, the FCC asks whether STS use will be so light that it will be uneconomical for service providers to be certified for each state, so the FCC should certify one national STS provider.

Comments will be due 60 days after publication of the proposals in the Federal Register.