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Video Relay Services

FCC Consumer Facts

Background

Video Relay Service (VRS) is a form of Telecommunications Relay Service (TRS) that enables persons with hearing disabilities who use American Sign Language (ASL) to communicate with voice telephone users through video equipment, rather than through typed text. Video equipment links the VRS user with a TRS operator – called a “communications assistant” (CA) – so that the VRS user and the CA can see and communicate with each other in signed conversation. Because the conversation between the VRS user and the CA flows much more quickly than with a text-based TRS call, VRS has become an enormously popular form of TRS. For more information about other forms of TRS, see the FCC’s consumer fact sheet at www.fcc.gov/cgb/consumerfacts/trs.html.

How VRS Works

VRS, like other forms of TRS, allows persons who are deaf or hard-of-hearing to communicate through the telephone system with hearing persons. The VRS caller, using a television or a computer with a video camera device and a broadband (high speed) Internet connection, contacts a VRS CA, who is a qualified sign language interpreter. They communicate with each other in sign language through a video link. The VRS CA then places a telephone call to the party the VRS user wishes to call. The VRS CA relays the conversation back and forth between the parties -- in sign language with the VRS user, and by voice with the called party. No typing or text is involved. A voice telephone user can also initiate a VRS call by calling a VRS center, usually through a toll-free number.

The VRS CA can be reached through the VRS provider’s Internet site, or through video equipment attached to a television. Currently, more than a half dozen providers offer VRS. Like all TRS calls, VRS is free to the caller. VRS providers are compensated for their costs from the Interstate TRS Fund, which the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) oversees.

Benefits of VRS

VRS has quickly become a very popular service. It offers several features not available with the text-based forms of TRS:

- VRS allows those persons whose primary language is ASL to communicate in ASL, instead of having to type what they want to say.
- Because consumers using VRS communicate in sign language, they are able to more fully express themselves through facial expressions and body language, which cannot be expressed in text.
- A VRS call flows back and forth just like a telephone conversation between two hearing persons. For example, the parties can interrupt each other, which they cannot do with a TRS call using a TTY (where the parties have to take turns communicating with the CA).
- Because the conversation flows more naturally back and forth between the parties, the conversation can take place much more quickly than with text-based TRS. As a result, the same conversation is much shorter through VRS than it would be through other forms of text-based TRS.
- VRS calls may be made between ASL users and hearing persons speaking either English or Spanish.

What Consumers Should Know

VRS is different from some of the other forms of TRS in two important ways: (1) the conversation between the VRS user and the CA is made through a video link and sign language, rather than typed text; and (2) the service relies on the Internet, rather than the telephone system, for the connection between the VRS user and the CA. It is a relatively new service and, unlike some other forms of TRS, it is not mandatory. Here are some things you should know:

- Preferential treatment of calls is prohibited. VRS (and TRS) providers must handle calls in the order in which they are received. They cannot selectively answer calls from certain consumers or certain locations.
- Unlike with some of the other forms of TRS, the VRS CA may not be able to offer or handle some call services, such as operator-assisted calls and 900 (pay-per-call) calls.
- For emergency calls (for example, calling the fire or police department), a VRS CA may not be able to automatically direct the call to the appropriate emergency service provider or know the caller's location. TRS and VRS should not be used for emergency calls. Emergency calls should be placed by dialing 911 directly on a TTY using the regular telephone network.
- The TRS rules do not require you to choose or use only one VRS provider. You can choose any of several different providers of VRS.
- Accepting VRS equipment from one provider does not prohibit you from using another VRS provider on other equipment you may have.
- VRS (and TRS) providers may not offer you financial incentives to use their service or to make more or longer VRS (or TRS) calls.
- VRS is not the same as Video Remote Interpreting (VRI). VRI is the use of an

interpreter located at a remote location through a video connection when two people are together and they need an interpreter. VRS may not be used in such circumstances. VRS is a type of telephone call.

Speed-of-Answer and 24/7 Requirements for VRS

The FCC has adopted various rules to improve VRS service. Speed-of-answer requirements were phased in during 2006 and took full effect on January 1, 2007. Now VRS providers must answer 80 percent of all VRS calls within 120 seconds. VRS providers must also offer the service 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Filing a Complaint with the FCC

If you have a problem with VRS, first try to resolve it with the provider. If you are unable to resolve it directly, you can file a complaint with the FCC. There is no charge for filing a complaint. You can file your complaint using an on-line complaint form found at esupport.fcc.gov/complaints.htm. You can also file your complaint with the FCC's Consumer Center by e-mailing fccinfo@fcc.gov; calling 1-888-CALL-FCC (1-888-225-5322) voice or 1-888-TELL-FCC (1-888-835-5322) TTY; faxing 1-866-418-0232; or writing to:

Federal Communications Commission
Consumer & Governmental Affairs Bureau
Consumer Inquiries and Complaints Division
445 12th Street, SW
Washington, D.C. 20554.

What to Include in Your Complaint

The best way to provide all the information the FCC needs to process your complaint is to complete fully the on-line complaint form. When you open the on-line complaint form, you will be asked a series of questions that will take you to the particular section of the form you need to complete. If you do not use the on-line complaint form, your complaint, at a minimum, should indicate:

- your name, address, e-mail address, and phone number where you can be reached;
- whether you are filing a complaint on behalf of another party, and if so, the party's name, address, email address, day time phone number, and your relationship to the party;
- preferred format or method of response (letter, fax, voice phone call, email, TRS, TTY, ASCII text, audio recording, or Braille);
- that your complaint is about TRS;
- the name, address, and telephone number (if known) of the company or companies involved with your complaint; and
- a brief description of your complaint and the resolution you are seeking, and a full description of the equipment or service you are complaining about, including date of purchase, use, or attempt to use.

For More Information

For more information about VRS or TRS, or to learn more about FCC programs to promote access to telecommunications services for people with disabilities, visit the FCC's Disability Rights Office Web site at www.fcc.gov/cgb/dro. For information about other telecommunications issues, visit the FCC's Consumer & Governmental Affairs Bureau Web site at www.fcc.gov/cgb, or contact the FCC's Consumer Center using the information provided for filing a complaint.

For this or any other consumer publication in an accessible format (electronic ASCII text, Braille, large print, or audio) please write or call us at the address or phone number below, or send an e-mail to FCC504@fcc.gov.

To receive information on this and other FCC consumer topics through the Commission's electronic subscriber service, visit www.fcc.gov/cgb/contacts.

This document is for consumer education purposes only and is not intended to affect any proceeding or cases involving this subject matter or related issues.

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