

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE

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SENATOR MIA COSTELLO SENATE DISTRICT K

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SPONSOR STATEMENT Senate Bill 80

“An Act relating to telecommunications services for certain disabled subscribers; and providing for an effective date.”

Senate Bill 80 updates state statute to improve technology service for Alaska’s deaf, hard of hearing, and speech impaired community.

In the early 1990s, the Legislature granted the Regulatory Commission of Alaska (RCA) the authority to require telephone utilities to serve the deaf, hard of hearing, and speech impaired citizens of Alaska. These policies allowed telephonic communication between impacted Alaskans and those without impairment. This is accomplished through a telecommunications relay service (TRS) that provides interpretive service operators to relay tele-typed, voice, or signed messages from one party to another. The provider also runs an equipment distribution and outreach program allowing access to public telephone service for this subscriber group.

Currently, the program’s scope and the surcharges which fund it are limited in statute to wired devices like tele-type units (TTY) and CapTel telephones. This limitation is antiquated given the expanded use of cell phones and other technology.

RCA regulations provide for cost recovery through a surcharge which is currently only applied to the dwindling number of landline telephones. With a statewide move toward wireless (mobile/cellular) phones and Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) technology, the most efficient and effective service to this subscriber group is lacking resources from the diminished wirelines to which a surcharge applies. SB 80 allows the RCA to provide equipment and services that best serve the communities’ needs.

This bill allows the RCA to more equitably assess the TRS surcharge to a growing number of cell phone and VoIP users, expand the type of telecommunication devices and software available to disabled subscribers, and provides for a July 1, 2017, effective date which correlates with the operating agreement cycle with the current TRS provider.

SB 80 modernizes and enhances services provided to Alaskans with disabilities and allows for greater independence and an improved quality of life.

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