

STATEWIDE INDEPENDENT LIVING COUNCIL of ALASKA



February 27, 2017

Commissioners
State of Alaska Regulatory Commission
701 West 8th Avenue, Suite 300
Anchorage, Alaska 99501

Dear Commissioners

The Statewide Independent Living Council of Alaska (SILC) is an independent nonprofit corporation whose members are appointed by the Governor as required under the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (amended under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)). The purpose of the SILC is to give voice to Alaskans with disabilities and to plan, coordinate, and evaluate the state plan for independent living which includes identifying the underserved regions and groups within the state. In other words, we work in conjunction with centers for independent living, disability service providers, and state partners to increase the independence of all Alaskans with disabilities.

Of the underserved groups of Alaskans with disabilities, two of them, Deaf Alaskans and Elders with disabilities, are dramatically impacted by the availability of the telecommunications relay service (TRS) in Alaska. Luckily, we have a good system in Alaska which is operated by ATLA and Sprint. The folks that run the TRS in Alaska are truly committed to improving the lives of Alaskans with disabilities, but it seems their hands are tied by two stipulations in the regulation. The first stipulation limits the type of equipment that can be distributed under the Telecommunications Equipment Distribution Program (TEDP). The only equipment that can be offered at no additional cost are TTY machines and CapTel phones. The TTY is the oldest technology used to help Deaf Alaskans communicate via the telephone; it was invented in the mid-1960's and isn't always compatible with new electronics. The CapTel phone is a phone that allows the individual to read what a person is saying over the phone. We suggest broadening the list of items that can be distributed to eligible participants to include equipment that is more contemporary, including an amplified phone for those with hearing loss, but who aren't completely deaf. Currently, the TEDP doesn't offer any equipment for individuals with speech disabilities, but there are phones and equipment that offer a text to speech option. This equipment can be used with an operator or without one - allowing the individual with a speech impediment to make calls without the need of a third party.

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Another requirement, if we want to improve the system, would be expanding the TRS to include wireless communications. Wireless communication offers the individual more freedom and options to the participant. Wireless and Voice over Internet Provider (VOIP) are the systems used most frequently today and will offer TEDP participants the opportunity to explore low cost apps (on smart phones and tablets), engage in business using their smart phones, and the safety of knowing the TRS is available regardless of location/equipment.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input and guidance on the TRS. It is important that the Regulatory Commissioners understand the needs of Alaskans who are deaf, deaf-blind, speech disabled, and qualify for the program. If you have any questions or would like a training on the topic, please contact me at heidi@alaskasilc.org or (907) 263-2092. Thank you again for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Heidi James Frost". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Heidi James Frost
Executive Director