

Overview

With technology seemingly always one step ahead of us, it's easy to confuse the various telecommunication services used to visually connect hearing and deaf/hard of hearing individuals wishing to communicate with each other. There are three primary telecommunication services in use today: 1) video relay service (VRS); 2) TTY relay service (TRS); and 3) video relay interpreting (VRI). VRS and TRS are free programs regulated by the FCC, while VRI is a fee-based service that satisfies the communication-related mandates of the ADA. As their names suggest, VRS and VRI are video-based services, while TRS is text-driven.

How do the various telecommunication services differ?

Video Relay Service (VRS): VRS is a free subscriber-based service. Available 24 hours a day, it is described by the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) as a process whereby "...a deaf or hard of hearing person [is able] to make and receive telephone calls through a communications assistant (CA) who is a qualified American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter." Using videophones, smart phones, or computers with video communication capabilities, the subscriber (individual who is deaf or hard of hearing) calls the VRS provider who through an interpreter calls the hearing person on a standard phone and then relays the conversation between the two parties. Conversely, a hearing person wishing to call a subscriber simply dials the subscriber's phone number, which is automatically routed to the VRS provider.

VRS in Action



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A VRS provider, by FCC regulation, cannot provide free interpreting services when all parties wishing to communicate are in the same room.

Video Relay Interpreting (VRI): VRI is a fee-based service. Unlike VRS, VRI is not a telephone service but rather a means for two or more individuals in the same room to access an interpreter remotely. VRI is an alternative to on-site interpreting (whereby the interpreter is physically in the room). It is not effective in all circumstances, and in some cases can be counterproductive. The Department of Justice notes that VRI "...will not be effective if the person who is deaf or hard of hearing has difficulty seeing the screen (either because of vision loss or because he or she cannot be properly positioned to see the screen, because of an injury or other condition). In these circumstances, an on-site interpreter may be required."ⁱⁱ

VRI in Action



Telecommunications Relay Service (TRS):

TRS is a free text-based service. It is reached by calling 7-1-1. Relay operators serve as intermediaries between people who rely on a text telephone (TTY) or text messaging and people who use standard voice telephones. Relay operators convey to the telephone user what the other party is typing and then types to the TTY user what the telephone user is saying.

Telecommunication Service at a Glance

VRS: Interpreter, deaf person, hearing person are all in different locations. The hearing person uses a standard telephone, while the individual who is deaf or hard of hearing uses a visual screen. Cost of the service: Free.

VRI: Deaf and hearing person are in the same location, interpreter is in another location. The interpreter is accessed via a visual screen. Cost of Service: Fee-based.

TRS: Person who is deaf or hard of hearing, hearing person and the communication assistant are all in different locations. Primary equipment is text based. Cost of the service: Free.

Resources

National Consortium of Interpreter Education Centers
www.interpretereducation.org/specialization/vrs-vri

References

ⁱ <http://nad.org/issues/telephone-and-relay-services/relay-services/video-relay-service-vrs>

ⁱⁱ Video Relay Service and Video Remote Interpreting: What's the Difference?
http://files.rid.org/articles/0608_VRS_VRI.pdf