

Minutes of the
Governor's Advisory Board for Telecommunications Relay Meeting
Rocky Gap Lodge
Cumberland, Maryland
May 6, 2000

Board Members in Attendance: Mitch Travers (Chair), Isaac Agboola, Rebecca Ladew, Joy Larson, Susan Miller, Al Sonnenstrahl, James Stevenson.

Absent Board Members: Patsy Bowman, Robin Krout, Adele Stuart

TAM Staff: Gilbert Becker, Maggie Griffiths, Sue Holiway, Willis Mann, Pam Stewart

Representatives from Sprint: Paula Holbrook, Randy Murbach

Interpreters: Anne Acampora, Jeanie Tackett-Cole

The meeting was called to order at 9:15 a.m.

MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The following corrections were made to the minutes of the previous meeting:

- At the bottom of page two, last paragraph, change the words: "up to 210 words per minute" to: "up to 110 words a minute for TTYs manufactured by Ultratec"
- Delete the words: "or eliminate" in the first paragraph on page three.
- Replace the brand name "Ameriphone" with "Krown" in the first paragraph on page four. In the same paragraph add the information that the TTY used with the pocket VCO system is made by Ameriphone and called the Q90.
- In the fifth paragraph of page 5, replace the words: "TRS team" with: "NAD Telecommunications Advocacy Network (TAN)".

The minutes were accepted as corrected.

TAM STAFF REPORTS

Pam Stewart

Connection Time Delay Complaints: In response to complaints about delays in call connection time, Pam Stewart explained why delays might occur. She described the sequence of activities between the time a user dials the relay number and the time the operator responds. Delays may be due to several factors, including the time it takes to determine how to process an incoming 711 call, busy circuits (which may not be apparent to a deaf user), and the availability of an operator. She requested that consumers should specify, when possible, which part of a call appeared to be taking a long time in order to more effectively address the complaints.

Local Exchange Carriers: Relay users should make informed decisions when selecting an LEC because some of them may not offer the features a relay user might want, such as 711 access or caller identification capability.

711 Answering Priority: There have been many inquiries as to why 711 calls are answered voice first. A primary reason for this policy is to encourage hearing people to use the relay and return calls from deaf relay users. Recent call volume data has shown that since the 711 number was established, the volume of calls initiated by voice callers has increased significantly.

Al Sonnenstrahl noted that a business may not have 711 access due to the way their PBX system works or perhaps because their LEC does not offer 711 access. Pam Stewart responded that the problem would persist until 711 access is required for all carriers.

Brenda Kelly-Frey (*Gil Becker substituting*)

MAT Program Updates: Since the last board meeting, an additional 165 pieces of equipment were distributed to 70 individuals. In February, the program distributed 6,215 pieces of literature to retirement and independent living associations. In March, over 2,000 mailings were sent to social service organizations. In April, about 550 mailings were sent to organizations that serve deaf and hard of hearing people. These mailings have generated considerable interest in the program.

Gil Becker

Universal Service Fee: Bell Atlantic has notified the TAM office of its intention to change the name of the fee charged to all phone users for the relay service and shown on their monthly bills. The reasons for the change request were to avoid confusion with another universal service fee that was mandated in 1996 and to comply with an FCC order requiring that all items on a phone bill must be clearly explanatory. The intended replacement name -- relay center surcharge—is not entirely correct because the monthly charges also pay for other things, such as the equipment distribution program. In response to a letter from TAM, Bell Atlantic is changing the name to: Telecommunication Access of Maryland Fee.

Comparing 711 Service in other States: The general practice in other states that provide 711 service is to answer 711 calls voice first. In Pennsylvania and other states served by AT&T, 711 calls are handled in much the same way Maryland does: translating to an 800 number, which is answered voice first. However the system is automated and answered by computer first, rather than a live operator. In Massachusetts, MCI WorldCom also answers 711 calls voice first, and by live operator. But they also use a customer database to determine whether the call should be handled TTY first. If an incoming 711 calls appears to be from a deaf caller, it will be answered TTY first. In Nevada, Sprint uses a customer database to determine whether a 711 call is from a deaf user.

In response to a question from Mr. Travers, Gil Becker said that many Maryland relay users have not taken advantage of the customer profile feature, so the system would not be able to identify many deaf relay users as such when they use the 711 number.

Effects of 711 on Call Volumes: Since 711 began in Maryland, there has been a 1.4 percent increase in TTY calls compared to a 17.6 percent increase in voice calls. This indicates that more hearing people are using the relay and returning calls from deaf relay users. There was a 6.3 percent average increase in total call volume.

Mitch Travers suggested including clarifying captions in future call volume charts to make it easier to understand the charts.

Willis Mann (*A written report was previously distributed*)

Board Vacancies: Two new applications were received for appointment to the GABTR, which has two vacancies.

SPRINT REPRESENTATIVES REPORT

Randy Murbach

Utilization of New Features: Recent data suggested that relay users are learning to use the dedicated phone numbers for VCO, ASCII, etc. Relay users are also becoming more familiar with the ASL translation service and relay operators are gaining experience in using it.

Customer Feedback: The number of complaints, commendations, and general feedback has remained essentially stable.

Staff Changes: Paula Holbrook has been promoted to Program Manager and will be moving to the midwest. Her major role will be to facilitate meeting the new FCC rules and orders. The Board thanked Paula and extended congratulations.

Mitch Travers requested that future customer feedback reports indicate the specific types of complaint and commendation, and whether essentially the same people provide most of the feedback. Pam Stewart said Board members also have a responsibility to be alert for complaints, and to share those with TAM and Sprint. She said the complaint forms are being revised in order to be able to provide better information.

In a discussion on consumer complaints, it was noted that calls handled by the Maryland relay center operators generate fewer complaints than calls handled by outside centers. The Board was asked to help educate relay users to file complaints rather than to harass the operators during calls, which is becoming increasingly common.

In response to a question from Isaac Agboola regarding how commendations are handled, Mr. Murbach said that commended operators are properly recognized on the floor and the commendations are reflected in their performance review. In order to be properly processed, the commendation should be sent to a supervisor citing the operator number, date, and time of the call. Pam Stewart added that commendations could be sent via email, phone, letter, or even through the relay website. Established privacy policies would prevent a complimentary comment made by a relay customer during a call from becoming a part of the operator's performance record.

BOARD MEMBERS REPORTS

Jim Stevenson

New Grant Project: Jim Stevenson reported that he is working on a new grant to keep middle graders in Allegany county safe after school and to help steer them away from negative influences. As part of this, TAM and Sprint have been approached to come to Allegany County next year to share their expertise and to disseminate information about the relay among about 2,000 students.

Students-to-Students: There is a plan to bring the program to students in Kent County, which has many students around the poverty line. They could benefit by interacting with, and performing activities with students from more affluent neighborhoods.

Rebecca Ladew

TAN Activites: Rebecca Ladew reported that she continues to serve as a speech disabled representative on the Telecommunications Advocacy Network, which recently met with some of the FCC commissioners in February. So far, 12 states offer speech-to-speech (STS) services. There is an STS group on the Internet and also a web site --stsnews.com-- devoted to STS.

Susan Miller

Pam Stewart commended Susan Miller for her hard work and support for the relay. She said Susan is instrumental in making the Maryland Public Service Commission a more effective partner of the Relay compared to other states and she has helped in recent times with the carrier of choice issue.

Joy Larson

Update on Deaf-Blind Users Call Volume: There has been noticeable increase in calls made by deaf-blind relay users. As Braille TTYs become available, the volume of calls should increase significantly.

Paula said that the relay has implemented a new software for deaf-blind relay users that asks them if the call processing speed is right for them --not too fast or too slow. She asked Joy to help spread the word about the availability of that feature.

Al Sonnenstrahl

Recent meeting between TAN and the FCC: Al Sonnenstrahl provided a personal viewpoint about the recent TAN/FCC meeting and the ongoing efforts of the TAN group. He said he made calls to the participating commissioners after the meeting and that the results indicated that they were more impressed with the quality of Maryland relay compared to some other relay centers.

Isaac Agboola

Using Computers as TTY: Mr. Agboola reported that he sometimes experienced garbled messages when he used his computer to make relay calls and that this happened even when he called using the dedicated ASCII number. Randy Murbach said it might be a software or setup problem, and Mitch Travers added it might also be caused by the quality of the line at

the time the call was placed. Paula Holbrook suggested making additional calls and observing where and how difficulties occur and then reporting to Sprint. Fred Orr said a brand of software called “Easy TTY” contains a feature that could help clean up garbled messages.

OLD BUSINESS

FCC Report and Order: The Board discussed the recent FCC Report and Order released on March 6th, which contains new requirements in TRS. Gil Becker said Maryland Relay is already in compliance with some of the requirements (e.g., STS) and that we will be in compliance with the other requirements as soon as feasible. He noted that the compliance deadline might not be realistic for most states due to the necessary lead time for contract renegotiating, training, and other management issues.

Future of VRI: Al Sonnenstrahl asked about the future of video relay interpreting in Maryland, referring to a recent report from the NECA on TRS and the availability of an interstate TRS fund to pay for the cost of video relay service. Gil Becker responded that the matter is complicated but under consideration. Some vendors who want to provide the service have approached Maryland and TAM is still working on it.

911: Al Sonnenstrahl expressed concern about the way Maryland Relay presently handles incoming 911 calls, in particular the proprietary nature of the procedure Sprint uses to handle the calls and the lack of clear information to the public about how this type of call is processed internally. Gil Becker responded that Maryland Relay has specific procedures to handle 911 calls and recognizes the urgent nature of such calls, but that Maryland does not presently provide automatic transfer of the number. Pam Stewart said the FCC does not regulate 911 and how it is handled; each state decides how to do that.

711 Response Time: Al Sonnenstrahl reported that there are serious complaints from deaf Maryland Relay users about the slow response time when they use the 711 number. He suggested that a comprehensive survey should be conducted in order to properly evaluate the impact of 711 and any access problems associated with using the number. Gil Becker said the FCC does not require 711 to be answered either voice first or TTY first. He said Maryland Relay has consistently exceeded the required 3.3 seconds overall response time to answer calls after they reached the relay center.

Al Sonnenstrahl (*Secunder not identified*) moved that TAM should undertake a formal effort to gather statistically valid data about how long it takes for people using 711 to get an operator on the line. The motion passed unanimously.

Carrier of Choice: Al Sonnenstrahl referred to a consumer complaint about the limited choice of carriers (26) available to Maryland relay users relative to about 350 carriers that provide access in Maryland. Gil Becker responded that the TAM has tried and is trying to get more carriers signed up but that it has been difficult, with many of them either unresponsive or expressing reluctance to sign up for one reason or another.

Maryland Relay Web Site: Pam Stewart reported that the RFP to update the Maryland Relay web site was released and a number of bids were received. A company called Graphics Three won the bid and they have already visited the relay center as part of their preparations to update the site.

Speech-to-Text Trial: Gil Becker reported that TAM is still waiting for a final report on the trial from Sprint. Preliminary observation indicates that the users felt there was too much dead air time waiting for the operator to catch up.

NEXT MEETING

The next Board meeting was scheduled for August 26th in Ocean City.

The meeting adjourned.