

Telecom Notice of Consultation 2013-155

Feasibility of Video Relay Service

Saskatchewan Telecommunications Comments

1. Mr. Vice-Chairman, Commissioners, I am Bob Hersche from SaskTel's Regulatory Affairs and with me today, also from Regulatory Affairs is Kevin Spelay.
2. In talking to you today, I will not reiterate all of SaskTel's involvement with the disabled over the past years. Everything from our hiring practices, our work with provincial disability organizations, to our various programs are all outlined in our previous comments in this proceeding. All I wish to point out is that as a Crown Corporation we have remained cognizant of the needs of the disabled and have always acted to accommodate the requests of disabled residents in Saskatchewan.
3. As an industry we have a myriad of programs for the disabled, if I could name a few: MRS, closed captioning, text to 911 or IP relay for the deaf; TrueTone devices for the speech impaired; described video and special speaker phones for the visually impaired; equipment and training for the cognitively challenged; and Operator 168 and unique speed call systems for the motion impaired. The industry also has a range of social programs to assist those with economic or social disadvantages, such as maintaining payphones or recycling cellular telephones for women in shelters. This is not to mention the range of public safety mechanisms being developed or proposed for both telecommunications and broadcast entities.
4. I will not go on to name all of the programs we support. Suffice it to say we have continued to go far beyond any accessibility measure outlined or even envisioned under any interpretation of Section 27 of the Telecommunications Act's language suggesting that any carrier is subjecting the deaf to an "unreasonable disadvantage".
5. SaskTel is not protesting any of these measures.

6. Unfortunately, despite our record in supporting persons with disabilities, we find ourselves in the uncomfortable position of not being able to responsibly support the adoption of a VRS project. This difficult decision was taken after careful consideration of the record which in our view does not provide a compelling case for VRS implementation - we seem to be replicating past initiatives established in other countries without due consideration of the new technologies being developed to assist deaf and hard of hearing persons. Just because the United States had developed this service a decade ago it does not mean that we need to establish a Canadian service now.
7. First and foremost we readily admit to having no expertise in the delivery of a VRS service. This entire service, outside of internet connections, has very little to do with telecommunications. We have read the Mission report, TELUS' assessment and the various responses put forward in this hearing process. These of course leave us with more concerns and uncertainty. I would like to share these concerns with the Commission and it is our hope that they will be considered in your final decision in this matter.
8. In particular we wonder how many people will actually be assisted with VRS and at what cost.
9. Today SaskTel has only 320 deaf users registered through our various programs. This number has remained constant for a number of years. This being the case the Mission report indicates that only 45% would use the VRS system due to a number of reasons such as lack of signing ability or that their communications needs are served by other means such as texting. This would leave us with a gross estimate of less than 150 people who would use a VRS system from our Province.
10. Assuming payments would be assessed in the same manner as the current high cost service fund formula, a \$30 M to \$100 M per year Canadian VRS system could cost SaskTel some \$1 M to \$3 M per year, ad infinitum for less than 150 users. I know that one of the top criteria for a VRS system put forth by the Canadian Hearing Society is the creation of "employment opportunities for Deaf

people, sign language interpreters, and service providers”¹. This is analogous to building more hospitals just to generate job opportunities for more nurses. Given the potential impact on jobs for deaf people and cost per user we can hardly say that this form of job creation is efficient or effective. From our perspective this is possibly the worst case scenario. Unfortunately, the record of this hearing has not placated our fear that this is the direction we seem to be taking.

11. This hearing is contemplating establishing a new institution which could be with us for at least the next 20 years at a cost to Canadian consumers of telecommunications products of at the very least \$30 M per year. Yet the major benefits for the deaf remain ill defined. The words and the intentions of the deaf can be distributed in a myriad of other ways - cheaper, faster and better.
12. Today the deaf can correspond with others through voice to text, directly on-line or through sign to sign using video such as Skype. There are literally hundreds of new apps for the deaf on line and all indicators point to the fact that these applications are growing and improving daily. Consumers, who are deaf or hard of hearing, have a myriad of communications choices.
13. In the TELUS trial, 70% of the calls made by trial participants were point to point calls between deaf or hard of hearing videophone users that did not require any sign-language interpretation.² Videophone enabled devices are extremely common today and would satisfy all of these point to point calls without a special VRS institution.
14. Thus given the limited number of overall number of users, the number of calls which truly require sign-language interpretation, the availability of alternate technologies and the projected cost of a VRS institution, I reiterate we are hard pressed to see the cost/benefit of this step.
15. I have worked in the public service for decades. In my experience, once the Commission, or any other government agency, embarks upon the creation of a

¹ May 15th 2013, Canadian Hearing Society comments

² TELUS Video Relay Services Trial, Final Report, 14 March 2012, page 15.

service such as VRS it is unlikely we will ever be able to shut it down regardless of the alternatives available; and regardless of the availability of new technology. Like MRS and the new IP Relay services, numbers of users will continue to drop as easier, commercial alternatives become available, yet no one contemplates the removal of these programs even with the possible advent of VRS.

16. Ten years ago VRS may have been a leading edge concept necessary to enhance the life style of the deaf. Today, with technological alternatives increasing at a prodigious rate, it is not. We are contemplating establishing an anachronistic program which we may not be able to curb with a \$100 M price tag.
17. If VRS is mandated in Canada, SaskTel believes the Mission Study proposal which recommends that a single, national VRS provider, with the experience and expertise to offer a quality service, would be appropriate. The overall volume of business and the cost of operations would augur against the economics of each TSP operating their own service.
18. Given that using tax revenues to fund this institution is a non-starter, if VRS needs to be created, the model should be centrally funded, with revenues collected through a surcharge on network access services including internet access to recover the costs of providing VRS. If TSP's and ISP's are to become tax collectors for public policy goals, this surcharge should be transparent to Canadian consumers. Using the current Portable Contribution Fund as a mechanism to collect these funds from TSP's and ISP's would seem to be the most efficient and effective course of action. However the base must be broadened beyond an assessment on individual NAS by TSP's. In Saskatchewan, if the same assessment base is used as MRS the monthly assessment could go up to between 20 cents to 50 cents per subscriber depending on the overall cost of the system. It would also seem odd to use the Contribution Fund to finance training in universities for interpreters as opposed to telecommunications services.

19. If VRS is mandated, SaskTel believes a phased-in approach, as recommended in the Mission Study would seem most appropriate. According to the TELUS Final Report, "most of the VRS calls were placed during the day time, between 8 AM and 10 PM from Monday to Friday"³ with virtually no calls between midnight and 8 AM. There would need to be demonstrable demand before the VRS institution were to move to a 7/24 format.

20. Finally, we must attempt to avoid the abuses so evident in the American VRS model. The Canadian model should not operate on a for-profit model which artificially creates need and usage in order to grow its revenues.

- a. The institution should have a board of directors made up of representatives from both TSP's and the deaf community;
- b. Funding must be capped with the institution having to work within that budget. Many of the reports and interventions suggest that the cap should be \$30M. While we believe this may be excessive for the real demand for this service, we again recognize our lack of expertise in operating such an enterprise and defer to others as to a recommendation of the correct amount. However it should have a cap at whatever limit is deemed appropriate; and
- c. There should be a nominal charge to the participants of this service based on the length of time an interpreter is required. While we have limited experience in VRS, we have sufficient experience to know that a "free" service leads to abuse. Although we recognize that many of the deaf and hard of hearing also experience economic hardships there must be some deterrents to using an interpreter for an inordinate length of time. This cannot and should not become a "chat" line. There are other less costly venues for that kind of interaction.

21. As a conclusion, I suppose it is needless to say that SaskTel believes that creating a new VRS institution for Canada at this time would be inappropriate. VRS is neither efficient nor effective in solving the communication needs of the

³ TELUS Video Relay Services Trial, Final Report, 14 March 2012, page 16.

deaf and hard of hearing. It just provides another communications tool, but only for a select few and at great cost. New technology applications abound. There is little need for the interjection of the Commission at this point when the technological marketplace is serving the vast majority of needs of the deaf but is clearly becoming more sophisticated in how it serves those needs.