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| **Keywords:** | Telecoms relay services; ASR; VRS; CTRS; FCC |
| **Abstract:** | This document contains examples of impact of the current pandemic on persons who are deaf or hard of relying on telephone relay services. |

# Introduction

The current global pandemic and the need to work remotely including primary health services, has presented serious issues for access to telecoms for deaf, deafened and hard of hearing people worldwide.

# Discussion

**UK examples:**

**VRS.** Currently, there is no nationwide VRS relay service. There are fragmented solutions in place such as BSL 111 and local health authorities budgets for interpretation.

Deaf people who use British Sign Language have had 25,000 calls made by VRS to and from their local doctors, on a voluntary basis by a charity in England, only to be no longer available since 1st April 2021. The link to the information is here <https://signhealth.org.uk/press-release/no-money-bsl-health-access-is-closing/>

**Text Relay**. Deaf and hard of hearing people have had serious telephone communications during the Covid-19 pandemic. This includes difficulties of their GPs (General Practitioners/local doctors) not understanding how best to use the text relay service, which requite require use of prefix as well as inability of deaf and hard of hearing people to receive the call as the systems require toggling between app and phone system or even worse, using IP connection and phone line at the same time. Deafened and hard of hearing people who found it difficult to use the text relay had to rely on family members to relay calls and if the matter was confidential, the only option was to have face to face appointment, putting at significant risk those who have been advised to shield.

During the recent WHO- IDDC workshop , an UK speaker described in detail barriers encountered using telephone consultations. To watch the seminar recording please click the [link](https://who.zoom.us/rec/play/SxQnI8UXyp3Q3-ZV0-gvnNYN7dA-n9UqkcQtv1cmj3Bq8MjmKH8IGVdou9ti_eJo2gDT8c32caVquoS6.pLQx0n4yL3E8Rxbc?continueMode=true&_x_zm_rtaid=PvRJA66ESRq_n652VI3dPw.1617650177666.8306fa8753dd78ec223cd6abe2b293d8&_x_zm_rhtaid=943).

What is missing in the UK is the need for a CTRS/IPCTRS service and VRS service which will provide a functional equivalent and access. In the UK a new campaign group has been formed DAART – Deaf Access to Alternative Relay Telecommunications, one of the DAART priorities is to challenge current KPI**s** for UK text relay which does not take into account technology development and the variety of services required. A captioned telephone relay service cannot be measured using the current KPI’s in the UK for text relay because it is a different service and require compatible KPI’s for that purpose

From the anecdotal evidence, those issues as described are not confined just to the UK, with the exception being USA relay services.

Increased use of ASR in relay services and telecare.

Further concerns have been raised regarding the introduction of ASR (Automatic Speech Recognition) only Captioned Telephone Relay Service (CTRS) by the FCC against the regular CTRS with Communication Assistants.

ASR only Captioned Telephone Relay Service does not fully meet functional equivalency.

Those concerns were raised in IFHOH/WFD joint statement <https://www.ifhoh.org/view-asr-statement> and consortium of deaf and hard of hearing organizations in the USA showing their concerns <https://www.hearingreview.com/hearing-products/amplification/amplified-caption-phones/fcc-proposes-automating-phone-captioning> . Clear to Connect organization has also added their concern <https://clear2connect.org/the-issue/>

Recent changes in the provision of Captioned Telephone Relay Services (CTRS) in both Australia and New Zealand where the national relay services awarded new contracts has raised some serious issues. Both countries lost their CapTel services provided by ACE to Concentrix which have had no experience of providing a CTRS service. I understood Concentrix is using ASR hence winning the contract from ACE

A simple comparison of two reports from the Australian Quarterly reports for their NRS National Relay Service. Unfortunately they changed the format of reporting from Quarterly to Monthly.

Monthly Report Feb 2021 shows 302 Outbound calls made by NRS Captions for the month with the service being provided by Concentrix.

<https://www.communications.gov.au/documents/national-relay-service-monthly-performance-report-february-2021>

Quarterly Report Quarter 1 2019-20, shows the yearly total of outbound calls made by CapTel handsets of approximately 220,000 calls per month with the service being provided by ACE.

<https://www.communications.gov.au/documents/national-relay-service-quarterly-performance-report-quarter-1-2019-20>

There is a significant drop in the CTRS calls from 220,000 down to 302 calls.

Two factors for drop in the number ofcalls can be potentially explained by the change from CapTel handsets to IP devices or minicom which most of the users are elderly and find it difficult to make the change. Lack of robust monitoring and data on quality of services is needed.

# Conclusion / Proposal /Proposals

We propose that ITU-T together with ITU-D and Q26/16 organise a workshop dedicated to topic of developing robust accessible telecoms framework with national coverage, which includes a range of relay services, mainly VRS, captioned telephony ( CTRS) and text relay, which provides equitable access to telecoms, providing a choice for the range of deaf, deafened and hard of hearing who have different needs and requirements.

Governments, telecoms regulators and persons responsible for public procurement services need to be aware of the issues mentioned and consult directly with organizations and groups representing persons who are deaf or hard of hearing when developing relay services and awarding contracts to ensure the service meets functional equivalence criteria.

Developing robust KPIs for CTRS is a matter of urgency as advocates of the persons with disabilities and their representatives are seeking reviews with their respective regulators, notably in Australia, New Zealand, USA and the UK. Robust procurement criteria will allow national regulators to have the confidence in the services offered to persons who are deaf or hard of hearing.

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