



Florida Public Service Commission

Consumer Bulletin

Braulio L. Baez, Chairman



An Overview of the Telecommunications Relay System

Access to the telecommunications system in this country has long been regarded as a necessity, not simply a convenience. In furtherance of the goal of universal access to the telecommunications network, the Legislature created the Florida Telecommunications Relay System (TRS) in 1991. The relay system is an initiative designed to provide access to the telecommunications network for individuals with speech, hearing or dual sensory disabilities.

A permanent Florida resident who is certified as deaf – meaning an individual with permanent hearing loss who is unable to recognize speech sounds over the phone without an amplification device – deaf and blind (an individual with permanent hearing and visual impairment) or having a speech impairment that renders standard telephone use impossible, is eligible for assistance. Available assistance may come in the form of specialized telephone equipment and/or ring signaling devices. Equipment is loaned to qualified individuals for as long as the equipment is needed. There is no charge for the equipment.

To fund the relay system, the Legislature approved a mechanism that assesses each Florida telephone customer a few cents each month. Currently, the monthly per-customer charge is 15 cents.

The relay program is administered by Florida Telecommunications Relay, Inc. (FTRI), a non-profit corporation that has arrangements with 15 regional distribution centers throughout Florida to assist individuals who qualify for and receive specialized telecommunications equipment. The FTRI's Web site (www.FTRI.org) provides a listing of the regional centers, the specific types of equipment available and information about how to qualify.

Equipment is divided broadly into two categories, specialized telephones and ring signaling devices. Ring signaling devices are used to alert an individual that they are receiving a call, either by an audible, visual or tactile signal. A variety of telephonic devices are available, tailored to meet the individual's specific disability or disabilities. Examples of available telecommunications devices include volume control phones for individuals with hearing impairments or speech impairments, in-line amplifiers and text telephones.

Since the program's inception in 1991, the Florida TRS has provided assistance to more than 250,000 qualified individuals. While this represents a substantial accomplishment in terms of extending the benefits of the telecommunications system to individuals with disabilities, it is estimated that this only represents 15 percent of the eligible population. Anyone who knows of an individual who has a speech, hearing or dual sensory disability who is not receiving assistance, can have the individual contact – or can contact on behalf of the individual – FTRI (1-888-292-1950) or the Public Service Commission (PSC) at 1-800-342-3552.

Because certain types of specialized equipment cannot communicate directly with conventional telephones, a separate relay system was created to provide a bridge. The system, which can be accessed by dialing 7-1-1, puts callers in contact with a special operator. The operator serves as a confidential link between the individual using specialized equipment and the individual using conventional telecommunications equipment. Special operators are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week with no restriction on the number or duration of calls.

The benefits available through today's telecommunications system are essential components of our modern lives. Through vision and commitment, Florida has insured those benefits are available without regard to disability.

If you have any questions about the telecommunications relay system or require additional information, you may contact the PSC's Division of Regulatory Compliance and Consumer Assistance toll-free at **1-800-342-3552**, or by e-mail at contact@psc.state.fl.us. The Florida Public Service Commission's Web site is located at www.floridapsc.com and offers information on a range of utility topics. Please feel free to visit this Web site to review our many brochures and reports about the industries that we regulate.

Braulio L. Baez is the Chairman of the Florida Public Service Commission. The PSC sets the rates regulated utility companies charge for natural gas, electric and telephone service within the state. In 37 counties, it sets the price you pay for the water you drink, if your water company is privately owned.