

***Children & Family Services
Committee***

SSB 5875

Brief Description: *Changing provisions relating to telecommunications services for hearing or speech impaired.*

Sponsors: *By Senate Committee on Economic Development & Telecommunications (originally sponsored by Senators T. Sheldon and Stevens; by request of Department of Social and Health Services).*

Brief Summary of Substitute Bill

- The bill updates Telecommunications Relay Service and Telecommunications Access Service statutory language for changes in technology and recent FCC changes, deletes obsolete statutes, and broadens the authority of the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) to determine program operating procedures and eligibility requirements.*

Hearing Date: *3/26/01*

Staff: *Deborah Frazier (786-7152).*

Background:

The Office of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (ODHH) of the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) provides services to the deaf, hard of hearing, and deaf-blind communities throughout Washington State. There are approximately 14,000 profoundly deaf citizens in Washington; approximately 62 percent receive a service from DSHS.

The ODHH, under a license from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), contracts for Telecommunications Relay Services (TRS) which provide telecommunications access to all teletypewriter (TTY) users in the state. The Telecommunications Access Service (TAS) distributes equipment such as TTYs, TTYs with Braille, amplified phones, and signaling devices to deaf, deaf-blind, hard of hearing, and speech-impaired persons.

The TAS buys equipment in bulk. Program applicants receive purchasing discounts based on income. Applicants who pay for the equipment own the equipment; others are loaned the state-owned equipment. Contracted trainers deliver and install the equipment, train the user, and trouble-shoot any equipment malfunctions.

The program is funded through the telecommunications relay service excise tax. The program budget needs are determined by the ODDH and the Office of Financial Management. The Utilities and Transportation Commission then determines the amount of the excise tax needed to fund the program. The tax may not exceed 19 cents per month per access line. The tax is identified on each ratepayer's bill with the statement "Funds federal ADA requirement".

Summary of Bill:

The bill updates TRS and TAS statutory language for changes in technology and recent FCC changes, and deletes obsolete statutes.

The bill broadens the authority of the DSHS to determine program operating procedures and eligibility requirements.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.