

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 5875

As Reported By Senate Committee On:
Economic Development & Telecommunications, February 28, 2001

Title: An act relating to telecommunications devices and services for the hearing or speech impaired.

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

Sponsors: Senators T. Sheldon and Stevens; by request of Department of Social and Health Services.

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Economic Development & Telecommunications: 2/20/01, 2/28/01 [DPS].

SENATE COMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT & TELECOMMUNICATIONS

Majority Report: That Substitute Senate Bill No. 5875 be substituted therefor, and the substitute bill do pass.

Signed by Senators T. Sheldon, Chair; B. Sheldon, Vice Chair; Brown, Fairley, Finkbeiner, Haugen, McCaslin, Rossi and Stevens.

Staff: William Bridges (786-7424)

Background: The Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS), through the Office of Deaf and Hard of Hearing, administers the Telecommunications Access Service. This program enables hearing and speech impaired persons to access telecommunications systems.

Under the Telecommunications Access Service, DSHS distributes text telephone devices that allow persons to communicate directly with each other by the use of a keyboard and a readable display. DSHS buys the devices in bulk and either sells or lends the devices to clients depending on their income.

The Telecommunications Access Service also provides a Telecommunications Relay Service (TRS) which enables a text telephone user to communicate with a hearing person via an operator who converts printed text to spoken words and vice-versa. The TRS is currently funded by a monthly 15-cent excise tax on each telephone access line. The Utilities and Transportation Commission determines the tax amount based on reports from DSHS and the Office of Financial Management. The tax may not exceed \$.19 per month per access line.

The TRS is required by the federal Americans with Disabilities Act and is governed by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). In June 2000, the FCC revised its regulations concerning the TRS. Among other things, the FCC expanded the definition of TRS to

include the following: (1) speech-to-speech relay services involving the use of specially trained persons who can understand and repeat the words of persons with speech disabilities; (2) video relay interpreting which allows a trained person to view and interpret the caller's sign language and relay the conversation to a voice caller; and (3) non-English language relay services involving trained interpreters.

Summary of Substitute Bill: The following statutory provisions are repealed: (1) definitions concerning technology used by the Telecommunications Access Service, (2) TRS program and eligibility criteria, and (3) outdated TRS program requirements.

The statutory description of TRS is expanded to cover new FCC requirements. In addition, DSHS is required to adopt rules concerning program requirements for the Telecommunications Access Service, such as program eligibility, user obligations, and user fees.

Substitute Bill Compared to Original Bill: Wireless companies are removed from the TRS excise tax.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

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

Testimony For: Text telephone users make 130,000 calls per month in Washington. The state is considered a leader in telecommunications services for the deaf and blind. The changes specified in the bill are necessary to keep up with new technology and new FCC rules.

Testimony Against: None.

Testified: Leon Curtis, DSHS/ODHH (pro).