

## Let's Make Internet Protocol Captioned Telephone Service Available to Everyone Who Needs It!



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**M**aking a phone call should be simple, right? When you have a hearing loss, it might not be so simple at all.

Do you use a CaptionCall, CapTel (service providers: Hamilton or Sprint), or Ensemble (ClearCaptions) phone, or maybe the mobile apps provided by InnoCaption, Sprint or Hamilton? If so, you are benefiting from a type of Telecommunications Relay Service (TRS) called Internet Protocol Captioned Telephone Service (IP CTS).

Captioned phones have long been the first choice for people with significant hearing loss who use their voices. For those of us who want a phone that works as seamlessly as a traditional phone, but also allows us to actually understand what is being said, captioned phones are heaven-sent. And captioned mobile apps on our smartphones are a huge help when we are on the move.

However, finding the people who could benefit from IP CTS is not that easy. People with hearing loss don't all live in one small community; we are spread all over the country and to make matters worse we often don't identify ourselves as having a hearing loss. I still hear stories of people who struggle on amplified phones but have never heard of a captioned phone. That should never happen. HLAA supports getting an IP CTS phone to every consumer who needs one.

By the same token, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), the administrator of the program, makes it clear that only people who cannot use an amplified phone should

turn to IP CTS. That's because IP CTS service is funded through the TRS Fund, which was established by the FCC in 1993 to help people with hearing loss or speech disabilities use telecom services. In recent years, the number of users of IP CTS has increased dramatically, but the source of the fund—landline and VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) phones—has declined. If the number of IP CTS users continues to increase over time, the FCC is concerned that the fund will go bust. HLAA agrees that the FCC must be good stewards of the TRS Fund.

Access to phone service for people who have a hearing loss is not just a nice thing to do; it's a civil right. Under Title IV of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), Congress established that people with hearing loss are entitled to the same access to telecommunication services as everyone else, using a service that is "functionally equivalent."

So why are we concerned about IP CTS now? The FCC wants to update the rules that cover IP CTS by issuing a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM), which is a public notice that is issued when a government agency wants to add, remove or change a rule or regulation. As of press time the NPRM on IP CTS had not been released. The FCC drafts the NPRM and the five FCC commissioners have an opportunity to make changes before it goes to a vote before the Commission.

While we don't have the final word, we believe the FCC will take a look at eligibility requirements for

*Lise Hamlin is director of public policy at HLAA and can be reached at [lhamlin@hearingloss.org](mailto:lhamlin@hearingloss.org).*

IP CTS. They might ask questions such as who is receiving the phone, how do they assure the FCC that they are eligible, or should consumers with hearing loss have to try out an amplified phone before receiving an IP CTS phone? They might also look at the technical standards for quality of the service and standards for how the phones should work, such as whether the captions should be required to be turned on and off easily.

The FCC also is looking at automatic speech recognition (ASR) and considering it for the future of IP CTS. Someday, we won't need a caller assistant to revoice what is being said. Computer software will be good enough to create text automatically and quickly, as soon as the person speaks. Many of us are already using Siri, Alexa and other speech recognition products. But is it good enough to caption a call from your

**You can help the FCC better understand the system from the user perspective. Help us make captioned phone service better for all the people who need and depend on those captions for a simple phone call.**

doctor telling you what medications to take and for how long? We don't think we are there quite yet, but would like this to be a reality in the near future and look forward to the time when we won't need to have a third party between the caller and the one we want to call.

#### **What Can You Do to Help?**

The forthcoming NPRM is our opportunity to weigh in. HLAA will certainly stay actively involved in the process, as we have been all along, but we want anyone who uses a captioned

phone to join us to make their voices heard. In fact, individual comments from people who actually use the system are taken very seriously.

HLAA will be sending out more information when the NPRM has been released. If you haven't signed up to receive our *e-News*, please do, it's free, easy, and the best way to get the most current news on many topics. Just go to [hearingloss.org/content/e-news-sign](http://hearingloss.org/content/e-news-sign) to fill out the short form and it will come right to your inbox. And of course, check the homepage of our website frequently. If you need assistance sending your comments we will be here to help.

You can make a difference. You can help the FCC better understand the system from the user perspective. Help us make captioned phone service better for all the people who need and depend on those captions for a simple phone call. **HLM**

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