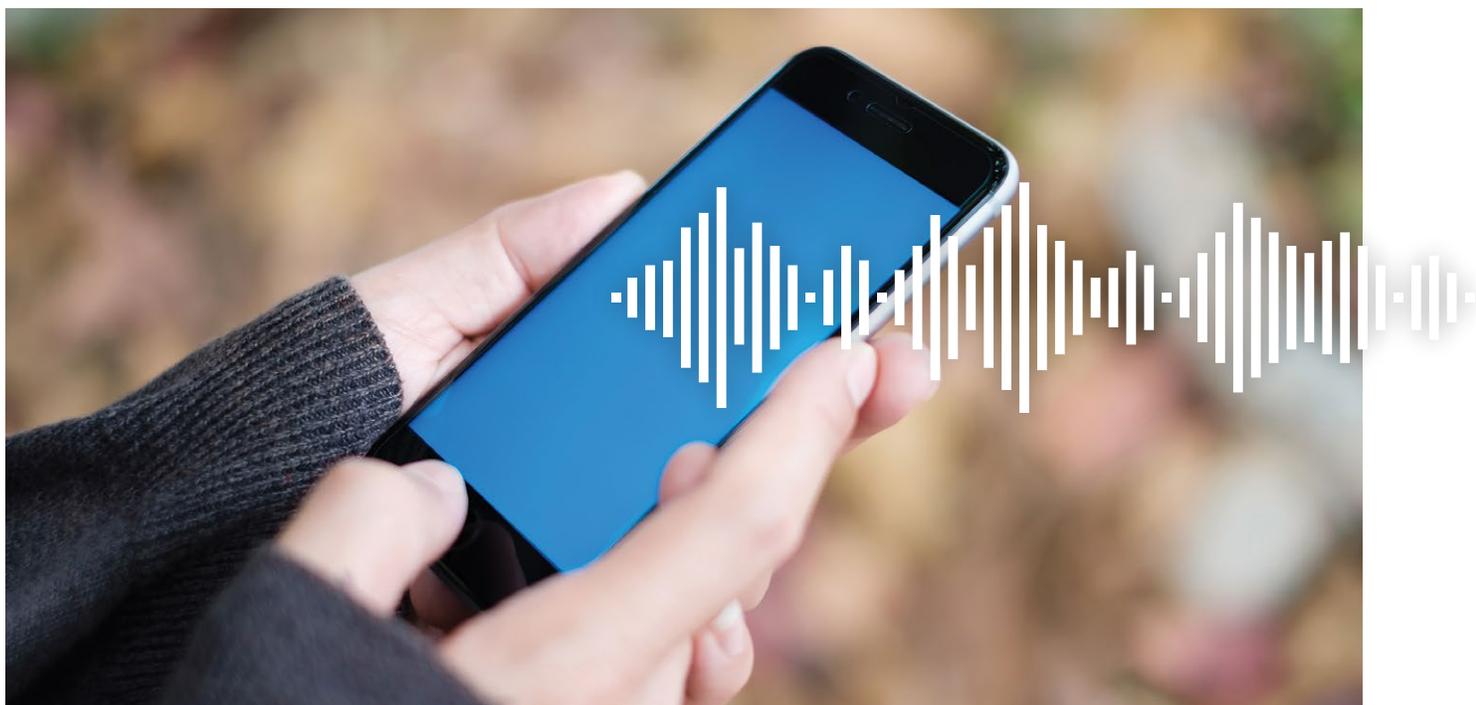


IP CTS, the FCC, and You

BY LISE HAMLIN



If you have a hearing loss, you know that making a simple telephone call is often not simple at all. If you have a cell phone, you worry about whether it's hearing aid compatible, if the environment is quiet and the connection is good. Does it work well with your telecoil? If not, does that mean you can use the microphone setting or do you need to use the speakerphone and let the whole world hear? If you are home or at work, can you use an amplified telephone, or is your hearing loss so severe that doesn't work for you? Do you need an IP CTS telephone or app?

Internet Protocol Captioned Telephone Service (IP CTS) is a form of Telecommunications Relay Service (TRS) that allows a person who can speak but cannot hear well to use an internet protocol-enabled telephone to simultaneously listen and read what the other party to the call is saying. Currently, when the IP CTS user places or receives a call, he or she is automatically connected to a communications assistant (CA). Some IP CTS

providers use CAs who repeat what the hearing party says into a speech recognition program which then provides the captions that appear on the user's telephone, tablet or smartphone. One provider uses CART to display the captions.

There is no cost to the TRS user for the service. IP CTS providers are compensated from a federal fund through a program administered by the Federal

Communications Commission (FCC). There are currently five IP CTS providers who are compensated from the TRS fund.

Potential Impact to User Access

Recently, the FCC released four items that have the potential to impact your access to and use of IP CTS: a Report and Order, Declaratory Ruling, Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, and Notice of Inquiry.

- The **Report and Order** (R&O) establishes new compensation rates, adopts rules to limit IP CTS use, rules to separate captions from amplification controls, includes a requirement that IP CTS providers include notifications about IP CTS and how it works, and has a general prohibition against providing IP CTS to ineligible users.
- The **Declaratory Ruling** (DR) allows IP CTS providers to use fully automated speech recognition, that is, captions that are generated without the use of communications assistants.
- The **Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking** (FNPRM) proposes and seeks comments on measures to improve the compensation, plan funding and structure of IP CTS and proposes to clarify requirements for IP CTS marketing. The FCC seeks comments on whether state equipment distribution centers should have an expanded role in providing IP CTS, including authority to certify providers of these services and handle user eligibility assessments. Comments for the FNPRM are due September 17, 2018.
- The **Notice of Inquiry** (NOI) seeks comments on IP CTS performance goals. Comments related to the NOI are due October 16, 2018.

This FCC proceeding is an opportunity to have an impact on the future of IP CTS. For example, in the FNPRM, the FCC asks whether certified state TRS programs should be allowed or required to take more active roles in the administration of IP CTS. Because these state programs have experience administering TTY and analog CTS services, and because state staff are physically closer to the consumers who use IP CTS services, the FCC says it believes the states are in a good position to administer IP CTS. Are they?

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Will States Be Able to Run an IP CTS Program?

Administering IP CTS could mean that the state would be responsible for handling the funding of the program and the certification of providers. But more importantly for people with hearing loss who want to apply to use IP CTS, the state's role could also include assessing whether or not consumers who are applying for an IP CTS phone are eligible to receive the phone and the service—or not.

Because there is currently no standard assessment for eligibility, the FCC also asks whether they should amend the rules to require that each prospective IP CTS user undergo an objective assessment to determine whether the individual has a hearing loss that necessitates a captioned phone. In short, the FCC wants to make sure that no one who could use an amplified phone is getting a captioned phone and they want the state relay program to make that decision.

The FCC does ask more questions focused on the delivery of IP CTS services in the FNPRM. In addition, in the NOI the FCC asks for help setting long overdue performance standards for IP CTS. This is important for ensuring quality for all forms of IP CTS but becomes particularly urgent because Automatic Speech Recognition (ASR) without the help of a caller assistant is close to becoming a reality.

IP CTS has long provided a service welcomed by people with hearing loss. But this is the first time we've seen the FCC and industry alike so focused on determining what makes a quality service, how we can ensure that all providers are providing that quality service to consumers and how to ensure that IP CTS will be around for the long haul.

HLAA will be filing comments on this proceeding and will post those to our website when we do. If you have questions or comments on IP CTS, feel free to email me. **HL**



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