

So Just What Is the FCC?

BY LISE HAMLIN



We all pretty much know what the FCC—or Federal Communications Commission—is, right? Most people would say that they do, but I wonder if that’s because we always hear about “the FCC this” or “the FCC that” in the news (although it would be nice if we heard it more in relation to hearing loss). And based on the context of the story we can, for the most part, at least somewhat grasp the importance of what the FCC does.

But, what does the FCC really do and why is what they say and do so important, not just to people with hearing loss and other disabilities, but to the whole country?

The FCC has jurisdiction over a wide range of telecommunications issues. Some of those impact your life, even if it’s not disability related. They are responsible for all-things telecom—from net neutrality to spoofed

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robocalls (those annoying calls that look like they are coming from a friendly phone number but really aren't).

The FCC also handles telecom issues that do impact people with hearing and vision loss, including:

- Telecommunications relay services
- Closed captioning
- Video description
- Access to televised emergency information
- Access to video programming apparatus
- Access to telecommunications services and equipment
- Access to advanced communications services and equipment
- Hearing aid compatibility
- Access to 911 emergency services
- The National Deaf-Blind Equipment Distribution Program
- The impact of IP and other network transitions on people with disabilities

Some of these issues have a direct impact on your life. Have you ever gone to a carrier's store (such as AT&T, Verizon, Sprint or T-Mobile) and tried out a phone to see if it's compatible with your hearing aid or cochlear implant? If that store allows you to try before you buy, it's complying with rules that the FCC established to help consumers who need to find a phone that actually works. If you are not allowed to try the phone in the store they are not in compliance with the FCC rules. If that is the case, you can send a complaint to the FCC at consumercomplaints.fcc.gov.

HLAA and the FCC

On December 2, 2014, the FCC announced the establishment of a new federal advisory committee, the Disability Advisory Committee (DAC), to provide

advice and recommendations to the Commission on a wide array of disability issues within the FCC's jurisdiction. A second two-year term of the DAC was authorized on December 29, 2016.

On October 3, 2018, the DAC held the last meeting of the current two-year term. HLAA was honored to be appointed co-chair during the 2016-2018 term. We have applied to be members of the next chartered DAC, which we expect to see up and running in 2019.

We always encourage you to contact the FCC directly. It's your right as a citizen. But, you can also talk to us. Because we sit on the DAC, we can funnel your complaints, compliments and ideas directly to the FCC.

On the FCC's website, they tell us, “The DAC provides a means for stakeholders with interests in accessibility issues to exchange ideas, facilitate the participation of consumers with disabilities in proceedings before the Commission and assist the Commission in educating the greater disability community and covered entities on disability-related matters. The Committee keeps the Commission apprised of current and evolving communications issues for persons with disabilities.”

In 2019, we expect the hot issues to be IP CTS (Internet Protocol Captioned Telephone Service, which we know as captioned phones), hearing aid compatible phones, captioned televisions and emergency communications. If some of these issues sound familiar, it's because we've been working on them for years. And we will continue to do so for years to come, until access for all is a reality. **HL**



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