



ODEP

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Telephone Relay Systems: Enabling Telephone Access for Customers & Employees

There are 28 million individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing in the U.S. Thousands of new cases of deafness occur each year, including veterans who return from war with hearing loss and those who lose hearing as part of the aging process. There are also a large number of people in the U.S. who have speech disabilities. Fortunately, technologies and services are available to facilitate telecommunication for persons with hearing or speech disabilities. One such service is a telephone relay system.

What is a Telephone Relay System?

A telephone relay system is a service (usually offered by the telephone company) to foster communication between those who have communication difficulties and those who do not. Many different services exist to best fit the caller's needs, with a common goal of tearing down communication barriers.

Why should employers use and promote Telephone Relay Systems?

Employers can leverage telephone relay systems to enhance their businesses' accessibility and to reach the often neglected customer base of individuals with hearing impairments. In addition, as the workforce ages and employees become more susceptible to hearing loss, employers who use these systems will be better positioned to retain experienced, qualified employees.

How does a Telephone Relay System work?

In a telephone relay system, there is a third party on the telephone known as a Communication Assistant who serves as a go-between, relaying information between two callers using their preferred method of communication.

What does a Communication Assistant (CA) do?

- **When you are making a phone call** – After you are connected with your local relay service, a CA dials the phone number of the person you wish to call. You speak on the telephone directly to the person who has a disability, and the CA turns your words into transcription or into American Sign Language. The customer or employee has special equipment that can receive the transcription or show a video feed of the CA interpreting your words into American Sign Language. The customer or employee receives this information in real-time and can respond to what you are saying. He or she may speak directly to you, may transcribe a response to you, or may use sign language to respond. The CA then reads the transcribed response to you or translates the signed response to you as needed. Some persons with speech disabilities may choose to speak their responses. In this situation, the CA, who is trained to comprehend difficult to understand speech patterns, facilitates communication by listening to the caller's response and repeating to you what he or she says.
- **When a customer or employee is calling you** – Telephone relay systems can also be used by customers or employees with disabilities to call your business. In this case, the CA dials your business's telephone number and voices to you what the customer or employee is typing or signing. The CA then relays your response to the caller.

How do I find my local Telephone Relay Service?

Each state has its own access numbers which can be found online at: www.fcc.gov/cgb/dro/trsphonebk.html or **by dialing 711** on your telephone, which will automatically connect you to your nearest relay service provider. Many relay services are also available in Spanish. The majority of relay service providers are free to users, as providers receive reimbursement from the Federal Communication Commission.