

THE OPPORTUNITY TO COMMUNICATE IS A BASIC HUMAN RIGHT.

Communication is the most fundamental of human capacities.

People need to be able to communicate to fulfil their social, educational, emotional and vocational potential. Everybody has the potential to communicate.

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Submission: Proposed changes to the NZSL Video Interpreting and Relay Services

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Services used: I use NZ Relay Speech to Speech, plus I've also tried to use Video Assisted Speech to Speech in the past.

More information: I'm the current Speech Impaired representative on the NZ Relay Advisory Group. I'm currently in my third, 3 year term; my first Advisory Group meeting was in March 2013.

Dear Ministers.

I have a physical disability called Athetoid Cerebral Palsy (CP), as I had a very long and difficult birth. CP makes most of my movements, mobility and speech difficult and challenging, plus physically exhausting. I require special assisted software on my computer to be able to write this submission, as my hand function/dexterity is very limited.

I'm baffled and upset that Ministers Sepuloni and Faafoi wish to take away one of my most human needs, the choice to use my own voice to communicate via the phone.

It's proposed to "Stop Speech to Speech services," a service I rely on when making important phone calls to people that don't know me, nor can understand my speech impairment.

Change 1: Get you to register as a user.

I can understand the need for this for data collection but surely NZ Relay has the ability to already do this, as they currently provide minutes used per month. To my knowledge there is nowhere else in New Zealand that anybody is asked to register just to make a phone call. Having to register would also make it confusing and a barrier for many of our older speech impaired community, as well as potential new users to NZ Relay. Registration could also be a barrier and confusing for abled-bodied/non impaired public, when making a relay call to someone that has communication impairment.

There are also concerns with privacy and security when storing someone's personal information on a computer database.

Change 2: Make the video interpreting service more available.

If there is a proven need or enough people prepared to use this service outside of NZ Relays hours, why not trial this for 6 months first and see if there is a true need? Australian Relay extended their Relay times but when their Government changed, they stopped Australian Relay services completely! Could this same scenario happen to NZ Relay services as well?

Change 3: Move to digital text-based relay services.

There is more demand for text-based relay for callers that have the ability to use text, but there is still a need for callers that can, and prefer to use their own voice to do so - callers using Speech to Speech services still have this need. Not all people that need help to communicate have access to the Internet, as low incomes prohibit this extra cost. Something else to consider: more severely physically disabled often don't have the motor skills, hand dexterity nor the speed to use a keyboard quick enough to be able to use 'text-based relay'. NZ Relay is there to provide assistance to "all New Zealanders" with communication impairment, please remember this!

Change 4: Phase out CapTel equipment.

As I don't use a CapTel phone, I can't really give much feedback. But there one question: Will Government use a buy-back system if or when this service is phased out? All CapTel phones have a surcharge to be paid by the customer, before receiving their CapTel phone.

Change 5: Stop using Teletypewriter (TTY) equipment.

To my knowledge there are only 3 to 5 Teletypewriters still in service. If NZ Relay was to be upgraded to new and better technology, these people would need support to upgrade to more suitable equipment, so they can still use NZ Relay.

Change 6: Stop speech-to-speech services.

Sprint International (Sprint) is an American company with a system tailored to assist Americans with communication impairments. This same system is being used at NZ Relay, but has been poorly adjusted to accommodate NZ culture and our unique use of language. Sprint also has poor volumes of Speech to Speech calls within the individual States it has a contract with in America, and sadly some of my Speech impaired American colleagues have told me they get very frustrated with their service as well.

NZ Relay has always had poor volumes of Speech to Speech calls, why is this when New Zealand has over 16,000 speech impaired people? NZ Speech Therapists Association (NZSTA) uses the International figure of 1 in 10, this equates to 400,000 New Zealanders with some type of speech, language or communication impairment. NZ Relay user volumes are around 180 minutes per month; this figure completely baffles me, as we have over 16,000 (taken from 2013 NZ censors) speech impaired New Zealanders! Could NZ Relay Speech to Speech service have a historical problem that possibly has never been addressed in the past?

I agree there are new technologies and devices being used, but not all users have access to these new technologies, as expense/funding for technology and devices is often another barrier. One size doesn't always suit all user groups, especially our older generation. Older callers still prefer to use a landline phone than mobile, as hand dexterity to use mobile phones can also be barrier to consider.

More people could be using Speech to Speech services, but only if these people knew it is there and how to use it. There has always been a huge need for better marketing and public awareness of both NZ Relay and Speech to Speech service, but sadly poor funding has always been a barrier.

Speech to Speech users have different needs than the deaf and hearing impaired communities. Most calls are shorter in duration and for different reason; making an appointment with their Doctor, to book a taxi, basically to give or receive information.

Often speech impaired people have had previous/historical bad experiences when using the phone, and sadly avoid using the telephone now. A lot have lost confidence to communicating and live very isolated and lonely lives.

Speech impaired don't have a National body in New Zealand, this makes sharing information to this community very difficult. Often speech impaired people can also have multi disabilities/impairments, usually as the result of brain injury; hearing impaired, physically (poor motor function) impaired, low vision, learning and cognitive skills can also be mixed in to their diagnosis as well. Fatigue can also be a factor as our body and brain function start to slowdown and we lose concentration, so many will find mornings and the start of the week are often their best time when needing to use the phone.

I also tried the current Video Assisted Speech to Speech service, designed for the more severely speech impaired callers. This is a very clumsy and difficult system to be able to use. Firstly the person wanting to use this service has to have the ability to phone NZ Relay Speech to Speech and request a Video Assisted call, something most severely speech impaired users are unable to do. Secondly this system uses both a landline call for audio plus a one-way Skype call to help the Relay Assistant to have the ability to see your face and expressions, but the caller is unable to see the Relay Assistant at all. For anybody with a severe speech impairment to have the ability to use a phone, plus have the ability to use their computer for Internet/Skype at the same time has to be "a magician"! For this service to work at all, there is a need to have a two-way Skype call only, that the caller can initiate themselves, and forget any phone usage altogether. A microphone headset would also be extremely helpful, as this gives the Relay Assistant better voice input as the microphone is closely by the users mouth, plus the caller can hear the Relay Assistant better through the audio output in the headset earmuffs – a win, win for all involved!

Over my seven years on the Advisory Group I've repeatedly requested that microphone headsets to be available to callers that find it very difficult to hold onto a phone. MIBE have approved this request twice now, but I'm frustrated that there are still no microphone headsets yet available. I've even suggested that if a GP's medical certificate is needed for proof of need, this could be a way of eliminating any misuse of need. Can there be some urgency to find out when MIBE has this equipment available please!

There is a need to have a technical adviser from the Office of Disability asked onto the Advisory group, just as we have a technical adviser from the Telecommunication Forum. The team from MIBE often don't have the knowledge nor the expertise around Government policy about disability.

I can think of several Organisations that could be helped by NZ Relay Speech to Speech, but NZ Relay and Speech to Speech Relay Assistants would have to be prepared to have more specialised training to understand and support these groups first.

I'm sure with better awareness of NZ Relay and the Speech to Speech services that are available, plus more awareness within NZ Relay of this communities specific needs, hopefully speech impaired New Zealanders will find their confidence, to hopefully use this service again.