



Disability Services

Everybody in Australia has the right to reasonable access to a basic fixed line telephone service—the standard telephone service (STS). For people with disabilities who cannot communicate using voice telephony, an equivalent means of communication must be provided. A range of customer equipment and services is available to deliver the STS to people with disabilities, and consumer safeguards apply to promote and protect their interests.

What arrangements apply to people with disabilities?

Provision of the standard telephone service

The *Telecommunications (Consumer Protection and Service Standards) Act 1999* is the Commonwealth legislation that guarantees access to the STS. This guarantee is known as the universal service obligation (USO).

The USO requires that people with disabilities have reasonable access to voice telephony, or an equivalent form of communication if voice telephony is not practical. This is consistent with the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992*, which makes it unlawful to discriminate against people with disabilities when providing goods and services.

Under the current USO arrangements, Telstra is the universal service provider. Telstra's obligation to provide the STS to everybody includes supplying customer equipment for use in connection with the STS if requested. This means that Telstra must give its customers the option of leasing equipment appropriate to their needs.

Customer equipment needs for people with disabilities range widely. Regulations and standards specify the equipment that must be available. These are listed below.

Particular features of standard customer equipment

Customer equipment that is generally available in the community must have certain features to enable access to the STS for people with disabilities.

The *Telecommunications (Equipment for the Disabled) Regulations 1998* specifies features and equipment that must be available on or for use with the standard rental telephone handset.

These are:

- **one-touch dialling memory;**
- **handsfree capability**—a speaker and/or a handset cradle;
- **built-in hearing aid coupler;**
- **cochlear implant telephone adaptor;**
- **volume control**—to amplify either the incoming or outgoing caller's voice;
- **alternative alerts to indicate that the telephone is ringing**—either an additional ringing device with adjustable volume, tone and pitch, or a visual alert;
- **lightweight handset;** and
- **facility to connect a second piece of equipment in parallel with the existing telephone.**

The ACA Technical Standard *AS/ACIF S040:2001* requires that, from 1 July 2003, standard customer equipment used in connection with the STS, including fax machines that have a handset system, must include:

- **a raised 'pip' on the '5' digit key**—this tactile indicator will assist people who are vision impaired to locate number keys on the keypad; and
- **a limit on interference between handsets and hearing aids**—a hearing aid coupler built into the handset limits the strength of the magnetic field radiated from standard handset receivers and minimises interference for a person with a hearing aid.

Customer equipment to access the National Relay Service

The *Telecommunications (Equipment for the Disabled) Regulations 1998* specifies that equipment to access the National Relay Service (NRS) must be available. The NRS enables people who are Deaf, Deaf-blind or have a hearing or speech impairment to communicate with other people over the telephone network via operator-assisted text and voice telephony.

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The following equipment must be available to access the NRS:

- **teletypewriter (TTY)**—this device enables people who are Deaf or have a hearing or speech impairment to type their message on a keyboard and read the conversation on a screen;
- **modem**—this device enables people who are Deaf or have a hearing or speech impairment to use a computer to type their message and read the conversation on the computer screen; and
- **telebraille**—this device enables people who are blind, Deaf-blind or visually impaired to type their message on a Braille keyboard and read the conversation in Braille

The NRS provides:

Text based communication

If a person with a TTY or a computer modem wants to communicate with someone who does not have this type of device, they can use the NRS. Alternatively, a hearing person who wishes to communicate with someone who is Deaf or has a hearing or speech impairment, but does not have a TTY or a computer modem, can also use the NRS. The NRS can facilitate a text to voice or voice to text call.

Hearing carry over

The hearing carry over (HCO) service offered by the NRS allows people with a speech impairment to better access the telephone service. A HCO user can listen to the phone conversation of another person and type their responses on a TTY. The NRS facilitates such a call by connecting the two parties.

Voice carry over

The voice carry over (VCO) service is primarily for people who have a hearing impairment but no speech impairment. A VCO user can use their natural speech to communicate with a hearing person over the telephone and read the responses on a TTY. The NRS facilitates such a call by connecting the two parties.

The NRS also offers a service that allows communication between two VCO users, known as VCO to VCO. It enables two people with a hearing impairment to both use natural speech to

communicate with each other via the NRS and read the responses from the other person on a TTY.

Speech to speech relay

This service is offered by the NRS for users who have a speech impairment. It enables a person with a speech impairment to have a two-way conversation over the telephone. The speech impaired caller speaks directly to another person over the telephone while the NRS relay officer listens in the background to the call and will repeat any part of the message that has not been understood by the receiver of the call. The relay officer spends time at the beginning of the call getting to know the caller's speech style and if necessary, the details of what the call is about.

Text emergency service

The TTY and modem number for the Emergency Relay Service is **106**.

The 106 Emergency Relay Service allows people who are Deaf or have a hearing or speech impairment to contact emergency services (police, fire and ambulance services) using a text based communication device such as a TTY or a computer with modem access.

Local, free and long distance calls

Local, free call and long distance NRS assisted calls within Australia can be made without the need for a separate account with the NRS provider. However you will need to open an account with the NRS provider if you wish to make international calls or calls to information numbers, such as those starting with 1900. The current NRS provider is the Australian Communication Exchange Limited (ACE).

The numbers to access the NRS are:

- local and chargeable calls (within Australia): **133 677** (or **133 NRS**);
- free calls (within Australia): **1800 555 677** (or **1800 555 NRS**);
- calls to Australia from overseas: **+61 7 3815 7799**;
- speech to speech relay: **1300 555 727**; and
- free call speech to speech relay: **1800 555 677**.

How do I obtain accessible customer equipment?

Under the USO only Telstra is required to offer the full range of disability equipment. However, both Telstra and Optus have Disability Equipment Programs (DEP) which provide both standard customer equipment with particular features and disability equipment to customers. In addition, other phone companies who are resellers of Telstra's services have an agreement with Telstra to provide their customers with disability equipment.

It is important to note that Telstra may not be required to supply accessible customer equipment if it would suffer 'unjustifiable hardship' in doing so.

However, generally, anti-discrimination law requires that equipment suitable for disabled people must be made available on the same terms and conditions (including price) as standard customer equipment.

To find out about equipment that is available, contact:

Telstra

Telephone (Free call): 1 800 068 424
 TTY: 1 800 808 981
 Website: <http://www.telstra.com.au/disability/index.htm>

Optus

Telephone: 1 33 066
 TTY: 1 800 500 002

Other services for people with disabilities

The Priority Assistance Service may also be relevant to people with disabilities. The service is designed to help people with diagnosed life-threatening medical conditions who depend on a reliable home telephone service to be able to call for assistance when needed.

Telstra is the only service provider required to offer priority services, however other providers may offer a similar service.

The ACA oversees Telstra's arrangements for priority assistance. Eligibility requirements and how to apply are explained in the ACA consumer fact sheet, *Priority assistance—a rapid telephone repair and connection service*.

Other consumer safeguards

The *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* provides an additional consumer safeguard for people with

disabilities. It imposes a general obligation on telecommunications service providers to ensure that the services they are in the business of providing are accessible to people with disabilities. This may extend to the provision of equipment.

For assistance with complaints under the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* contact the Disability Rights Office at the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC).

To lodge a complaint about access to the STS you can contact the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman (TIO). The TIO is an office of last resort so you must first notify the telephone company and give it an opportunity to resolve the complaint.

More information

Australian Communication Exchange

Telephone: 1 800 555 660
 TTY: 1 800 555 630
 Fax: 1 800 555 690
 Email: feedback@aceinfo.net.au
 Website: www.aceinfo.net.au

Disability Rights Unit

Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission

Telephone: (02) 9284 9600
 1 300 369 711
 TTY: 1 800 620 241
 Fax: (02) 9284 9611
 Email: disabdis@hreoc.gov.au
 Website: www.hreoc.gov.au

Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman

Telephone: (03) 8600 8700
 1 800 062 058
 TTY (free call): 1 800 675 692
 Fax: (03) 8600 8797
 Fax (free call): 1 800 630 614
 Email: tio@tio.com.au
 Website: www.tio.com.au

The ACA has consumer and industry fact sheets on various topics available from ACA regional offices and from the ACA website.

Please note: This document is intended as a guide only. For this reason the information contained herein should not be relied on as legal advice or regarded as a substitute for legal advice in individual cases.