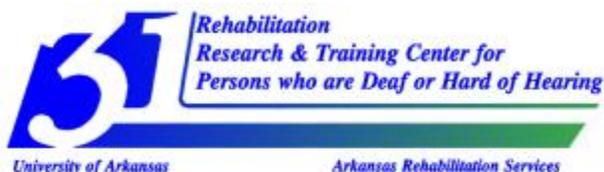




[www.alda.org](http://www.alda.org)



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## KNOCK YOUR SOCKS OFF RELAY

Mike Ellis

My name is Mike Ellis and I am late deafened myself. At the age of 20, I had a diving accident that resulted in profound deafness. At that time I was a music and psychology major in college. And I remember the day that I came home from the hospital after they told me that I was going to be deaf, and wanting to call my grandpa. And for the first time I realized, I couldn't understand what he was saying over the phone. I immediately realized that my independence of being able to use the telephone had been severely impacted.

That day that changed my life. I realized that we needed to do something about telephone access. This was back in 1983. About six years later Sprint recruited me and I have now been working in telecom for the last ten years. And I have my independence back. And I am able to do things I never imagined I would be able to do.

I want to share with you some of those things that can help us all be independent. I'm not here to educate you about relay 101—we are ten years beyond that.

There are several different companies providing relay. Sprint, of course, is one. There is also AT&T, MCI, Hamilton and the unique state of California which is the only state in the country that has multiple vendors which allows the consumer to pick a provider on a call by call basis. Then there are a few very small contract providers, like GTE, SBC, and AmeriTech. I would recommend you get involved with your state relay advisory counsel, because the states usually do contracts on a three years basis, and they need your input when contracts come up for renewal. If you are not happy with your relay, talk with your state relay advisory boards. If you don't know who in your state is responsible you can contact me and I will be happy to show you for all 50 states.

As of July 1st of this year, Sprint began what we call sprint relay online. It is different than traditional relay in that with the old relay, you need a TTY, and you call an 800 number, which then connects you with who you want to talk to, and vice versa. So under the restrictions of the old relay, if you didn't have a TTY or know someone who had one you, couldn't make a call. But with this system, if you have access to the web, anywhere, anytime, anyplace, you can put in that link and pull up the relay service. It's very easy. We call it SRO—Sprint Relay Online. We have a very secure and accessible web based relay, which offers multiple language accessibility in Spanish, English and French. It is very different from old TTY. It makes relay accessible to anyone, anywhere as long as you have web access. You can go to any computer anywhere that has the web and make a call. One of the challenges with SRO is that there are many different browsers out there and some of them may not be compatible. That's not unique to Sprint. Other companies that also have web access have the same problem. These are challenges we have just because of the nature of the beast. We have designed our access to be compatible, but this factor is a problem.

Accessibility for the deaf-blind is also sometimes a challenge using the web. If you can't see the screen you can't access the web. So we are working on tactile options. We are always releasing upgrades and changes, which is what makes this field so exciting.

Briefly, some of the features that we have on the web page are slick. We have ASL Emoticons, or buttons on the web page. So if I want to tell someone I am laughing I can simply click and shoot out a macro that says, "laughing." You can also enter your language preference. You can change the font and the color. When you are finished with the call, you can print it, save it and file it. And it is secure, very private.

One of the challenges we have is compatibility. In the past this was not Mac compatible. Now it is.

Audience Member: Can you use this web relay to contact someone using an ordinary TTY?

Mike: Technically, the answer is yes. Physically the answer is no, not yet. This program is being temporarily being funded by the FCC. The FCC has strict requirements that are based on the traditional relay. And those requirements say a call must originate/terminate with the TTY two-voice. They will not reimburse for TTY to TTY, or text to text. So, yes, technically it's possible but it is not paid for it so it's not necessarily good business to make that service available yet. We are working with the FCC, to convince them to allow those types of stretches of the policies as to what is permissible.

Relay providers need to hear questions and requests like that. We need your ideas. We are going to miss some things, because it's such a diverse product, so we need to hear your ideas.

Someone asked if you could use this system with VCO. Again, technically, yes, but today, it doesn't work very well. As of yet computers don't do a very good job of taking my voice and carrying it over data lines. We have microphones and stuff but the technical support of carrying both data and voice, which is called voice over I-P, is still not of good quality. You can use what is called a P-C-S which carries voice, but not simultaneously with data—so at this point it is an either or situation.

I mentioned previously a new product—Cap Tel that is being offered by Ultratec. Sprint and Ultratec have a very good relationship and are working together to provide the service to several customers and states that have been selected to be in a trial. It is simple to use; all you need is the phone. These phones will be available retail for about \$495, within the next year. Without the phone you cannot access the service.

This is a system that is based on advanced voice recognition. To use it you pick up the phone and dial the number you want directly. Whoever answers talks directly back to you and you can use any residual hearing you may have, AND at the same time it is being sent to you in text form.

Everything this person says is typed back to you through the Cap Tel operator. This is a very powerful voice recognition system, which almost instantaneously transcribes what is being said directly to the Cap Tel phone. The phone has the capability to connect you at the same time to the relay operator and whoever you may be calling and you never have to interact with the CA who remains invisible. It is very different than the regular relay where you must first call the relay and explain who you want to call before even beginning the call. With Cap Tel all of that is eliminated. Then when the person you are calling answers you can both listen and read what is being said at the same time with almost no time lag as there is a regular relay call. The flow of the conversation is almost normal. You can also use it to retrieve voice mail.

Sprint has just launched a seven-state trial. The reason we are doing trials is because this is a new baby. Ultratec wants to be very, very certain that the quality is under control, and we have operators and phones out there to support the calls. So we are launching it very slowly. The states on the trial list are Washington, Oregon, Florida, California, Minnesota and (CAN YOU ADD THE OTHERS?) If you want to participate in this trial you should contact your relay administrator. Two hundred will be participating (IN EACH STATE OR ALL TOGETHER?) in the trial. That's not very many, but it is a controlled trial. We need feedback on how this thing works. We need to work together and see if we can convince the states to pay for the service.

Audience Member: Do you know what the cost per minute will be.

Mike Ellis: We don't know yet. Here's why: we haven't figured out yet how many operators it's going to take to process an unknown number of calls a minute. We do know that the average TTY call is about 5 minutes. And with the regular relay the average caller makes 5 calls a month. Cap Tel is going to increase that number as well as

the length of calls. The average Cap Tel call is 18 or 19 minutes. People love it and use it much more frequently and for longer periods of time. This is another reason we need the trials—to figure out the costs.

Right now with the trials there are limits during the day when Cap Tel is available, but we hope to have it up to 24/7 by spring. You also cannot make 911 calls and those in the trial have to sign a waiver regarding this. Also, there are no translation services into other languages as yet. Operators have to spend about a week or two being trained to the software system based on their voice. The voice recognition software out there is not yet ready for other languages—though technically it's possible.

People who want to call a deaf person using this system must first call an 800 toll-free number. They then are connected to an automated request to put in the number they want to call. It is very simple.

Audience Member: How will we be able to tell if a number is busy and so forth?

Mike Ellis: It works just like a regular phone. If it's busy, the operator will indicate that to you in text form.

Audience Member: How can we tell if it is a Cap Tel call versus a regular one for someone else in the family?

Mike: If it rings you will see text. If you don't see text it is not a Cap Tel call. You see a note that says "setting up captions" if it is a Cap Tel call. If the call is not captioned and you pick it up, it works like a regular telephone.

Audience Member: I am the only deaf person in my family. How would Cap Tel affect hearing members who want to use the phone?

Mike: If hearing members of the family don't want to use the Cap Tel option they simply turn the caption button off and it works like a regular phone. It also has amplification and tone fluctuation. So it can be customized for various levels of hearing loss. It is a very responsive, intelligent and flexible phone. So one phone works for everyone.

Jack Busenbark: I'm Jack Bbusenbark. I currently live in Minnesota, and my role is as a trainer of the interpreters in how to work with video relay services—or VRS. We have a certain number of centers throughout the U.S. I visit those centers and train the interpreters.

VRS is a completely new concept, and basically what it is the use of a video camera instead of a TTY so that a sign language interpreter can relay the call. What happens is that a deaf sign user calls the video interpreter, tell them the phone number they wish to call and with the use of the camera the CA interprets the conversation.

This is for sign language users, obviously. For those of you who are not signers, this type of relay would not be for you. If you can read sign and produce it yourself, then it would be a useful service to you. The advantage of this is that deaf people are able, with this service, to use their native language.

VCO is also available with video relay services and it's a rather interesting approach. Suppose I am a VCO caller, and want to call a hearing person, but I also want to speak for myself. I can do this through the web—the web on the internet, and using the camera use sign to understand what is being said, while speaking to them with my own voice. I speak directly to the hearing person, who speaks to the CA who then signs to me. There is no lag time as you can see immediately though sign what is being said, whereas that can be a problem with a regular TTY call which due to typing speeds may have trouble keeping up with the hearing person's responses.

Audience Member: You don't have to use signals like "GA" or that sort of thing?

Jack: No, it's not necessary. There is no need to use cues typically used on the TTY, as this system is much more akin to a natural normal communication without any assistance.

Now let's talk about the charge. There have been a lot of questions about the charges for the service. People want to know if it costs money. But there's no charge to the consumer. You do have to have a computer to access it, so there are costs involved with the hardware equipment, but there is no charge for the service itself. Those funds come from the FCC, which reimburses on a per-minute basis for each call. These funds are shared, subsidized by the common carriers. It all goes into a pot at the FCC and that money is there to support relay services. On your phone bill each month there is a small charge that goes to support relay services. All consumers are basically paying for relay services of all kinds.

I want to talk about ISDN now which is a special type of digital telephone line that is used for video conferencing and video relay. Cameras that can be used with this vary anywhere from \$80 to \$100. You also need a web browser with net meeting and often times that comes included with Windows 98 and above. If you have a Windows 98 operating system or better it's going to be already included in your system. Now if you use only VCO with the VRS you won't need a camera as the CA will hear you and there is no need to see you as they do with someone who only signs. Only you need to see the interpreter, which you will do on your computer screen. If you don't use VCO then you would need to have your own camera.

You do need to have high speed internet access as well as cable modem services, and obviously you have to have a standard telephone if you are a VCO user. Most computers on the market today meet the basic or minimum requirements for use with this service. With some of the older computers, you might have to check to make sure they are

compatible, and that they have the basic requirements to work with the system. And yes, the system is Mac compatible.

There is one software that works with a video cam, called Video Link Plus. And I can't remember how much it costs, but it does cost. But you buy the software and you buy the web cam, then you are all set. The advantage of this is the software—the disadvantage is that it is not compatible with OSX—though they are working on it.

In terms of your Internet connections, if you have a 56-k modem, I can tell you now forget it. It's not going to work. I can tell you right up front don't even try it. The result visually is a very robotic, tedious video quality, and it's impossible to read sign language through that. So the interpreter might be doing a good job but you will see freeze frames of what the interpreter is doing, but it will not be fluid enough to understand. So you have to have a high-speed Internet connection.

Our web site at Sprint for VRS is: [www.usavrs.com](http://www.usavrs.com).

For hearing people who want to make a call to a deaf person, there is a 1-800, or 866 number. They then give the CA the internet number for the deaf person they are calling. And obviously no video camera would be needed by that person calling as they are using their voices to talk to the CA. This system can be used for single calls as well as for teleconferencing. The only trick there is that people have to identify themselves as they take turns speaking. You can use VCO in teleconferences as well. If it is a long teleconference one thing you will notice is that the interpreters might pause so that another interpreter can come in and relieve them because they cannot go on non-stop without a break.

Let me explain a little bit about the web site. We have CSD and Sprint—who are the two players in this service. When you go to the nationwide web site you first identify what state you are calling from and fill in the other information it asks for. Your profile information will be saved but never ever shared with any other business or sold, it is kept strictly confidential so you will not be spammed because of you use of the relay.

The relay operator will make the connection and then as with a regular TTY call explain the service to the person on the other end.

Questions: Can you use cap Tel for a conference call?

Answer: Yes.

Question: Has a formal request been made to the FCC for coverage of the cost of the Cap Tel phone?

Answer: There is an open docket right now in front of the FCC asking for comments and reply comments on the subsidy of Cap Tel. So far all of the comments have been

positive. We see no reason why the FCC won't endorse this. But you never know. Only time will tell, but we are working hard on it.

Bio: Mike Ellis is the Branch Sales Director for Sprint Relay. He received his B.A. from Baker University and M.A. from Gallaudet University. A true ALDAn, Mike lost his hearing at the age of 20, has worked as a Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC) in the field of Deafness, and for the past 10 years, been a member of Sprint Relay's management team.

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