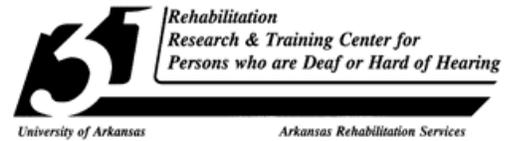




Selected Proceedings of ALDAcon 2005



ADVOCACY

Presenter: CHERYL HEPPNER

CHERYL HEPPNER: What we're going to talk about today is the good, the bad, and the ugly of captioning. The good part is the different laws and regulations that are related to closed captioning, on television. The bad part is problems with TV captioning that still need to be solved. And the ugly part involves us rolling up our sleeves to do something to try to solve the problems.

I'm going to cover only specific laws and regulations related to closed captioning. They are the decoder chip bill, the digital television captioning regulations and closed captioning of TV programs. I will also cover visual information in emergencies, and the emergency alert system, also known as EAS. I will not be covering movie captioning or captioning of DVDs, videos, CD ROMS or anything on the Internet. And I'll not be able to cover captioning in the Americans with Disabilities Act or Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

We are going to start now with the regulations related to closed captioning. The first one is the decoder chip bill. This bill was passed way back in late 1992. In July 1993, all TV sets with screens that are 13 inches or larger had to have a chip built into them that would allow the captions to be decoded once they are transmitted to the TV. The 13-inch was actually the measurement of the TV screen diagonally. The chips are also going to be required in all digital TVs and in all receivers for digital television that have been sold since July 1, 2002.

Digital captioning is very, very important to us, because it's happening already. Analog television, what we're used to, the old ones, the broadcasts of captioning in analog will be stopped on December 31, 2006. That is in the regulation. However, there are strong hints that Congress will change its mind about that and give an extension possibly to December 31, 2008.

In 2007, all televisions 13 inches or larger will have digital television tuners built in. Digital television gives a clearer picture. It gives you a possibility of that surround sound

experience, the kinds of things that you enjoy in a movie theater. And right now, more than 1,400 TV stations across the country are already broadcasting digitally.

Your old television, the one you bought years ago, can receive digital signals with an antenna, but they will need a converter unless the television you have is called DTV ready, or plug and play, where you just take it out of a box, plug it in and it's ready to go without any software and all of the adjustments. You also can get DTV equipment from your cable company or satellite provider if you have either of those. But if you're using an analog television, you wouldn't get the same picture quality.

Why are we moving to digital captioning? Because it's more efficient than analog. Digital television can carry much more in a signal and get much better quality with the same amount of bandwidth. Digital frees up the air waves for other user, and right now that is a concern that people who work in first responders, like police and fire, they are not able to communicate with each other sometimes because they can't have the bandwidth to do it. It will also add the ability for new emergency features and new wireless services that we don't have now, which means things like cell phones that will give us captioning. The spectrum that we will have if we can have back the analog spectrum will also give us the ability to have cell phones and pagers to be able to get a signal that will penetrate right into a building, no matter what the construction, it will be a lot easier to do that.

Digital captioning is what we will have if we have a digital television. With digital captioning coming in, you'll have new abilities. You can choose fonts that are easier for you to read. You can choose the color instead of the black background with the white letters that we have now with closed captioning. You have a choice up to 8 colors, sometimes more, for either one of them. Some manufacturers may add other features, like the ability, if you're watching something like sports, and the guy goes to swing, and the captions are blocking it, you can try moving the captions someplace else. DTV closed caption features are required in all receivers with some restrictions in size and all DTV tuners, whether or not they are marketed with a display screen, this is since July 1, 2002.

Now, back to closed captioning of TV programs. Back in 1997, Congress passed a law and part of that law included something related to closed captioning. And I remember how much fun it was fighting for that. When we got this, we had to give up a few things in order to get a few things. The regulations that were written by the Federal Communications Commission for this law decided that instead of requiring closed captions for all TV programs, which would be impossible with the captioners that we have now and the CART, they would phase it in over 8 years. And that started in 1998. So January 1, 2006, new years day, 100 percent of new television programs in both digital and analog must be captioned. Spanish language programs also are required to be captioned. 50 percent of captioning is required now, and that will grow to 75 percent in January 2007.

Now we talk about the bad part. When we say all TV programs, there are exceptions. There are two different kinds of programs. There is something that is called preworld programs. They were what we used to call reruns or rebroadcasting. They are something like an old "Flintstones" or another "Get Smart" and other programs. They are coming back for many network and cable and satellite channels.

The ones that we saw before January 1, 1998, or July 1, 2002 for digital, up until January 1, 2008, only 30 percent of those have to be captioned. But after January 1, 2008, 75 percent must be captioned. So this is the reason why when you flip channels, often you don't see captions, because they are old shows. And I know some of them are favorite ones we would like to get back, but maybe in another couple of years.

For Spanish language programs, until January 1, 2012, only 13 percent have to be captioned; 75 percent isn't. One of the things that I just like about these exceptions is that between 2 and 6 o'clock in the morning, there is no requirement for any captioning of programs. And I know many people who shift their work hours and they don't keep regular hours. Where I live in the Washington area, I know it's similar in some big cities, the morning commute starts long before 6 o'clock for some people. And you want to get your traffic reports before you head out for work. That one exception could be a problem.

Also, there are many small shows, like educational TV or maybe a community sports program that will be broadcast. This is by the little TV stations, not the broadcasters. Those are not required to be captioned if they don't have what they call "repeat value." Something like a parade that you see one time and people don't see it over and over. Commercials of five minutes or less don't have to be captioned, and instructional programs produced locally by public TV stations for use in K through 12, or postsecondary schools, do not have to be captioned.

Programs in languages other than English and Spanish, no captioning. And if there is a new network, the first four years it's been set up it's not required to have captions. Public service announcements and promotional ads of less than 10 minutes don't have to be captioned. We had the home shopping network and other programs like that, and they said we shouldn't have to caption. And the FCC found in our favor. They said with ten minutes or more, you have to do that.

Programs by providers with an annual gross revenue that is under 3 million dollars don't have to caption their programs. But they must, if there was a program that was already broadcast with captions and they are showing it again, even though they are exempt from new captioning of their programs, they still have to pass that through and show it to you with the captions.

The captioning regulations also have special requirements for news programs. ABC, CBS, FOX, NBC and their affiliates must realtime caption their news in the top 25 television markets. You can't imagine how long it took me to get an idea of what the top

25 markets are. It has to do with population centers of the country. And so where there are large cities grouped together, for example, the Boston area, because we have Rhode Island, Boston, and several other areas in one concentrated place, that would be one of them. California. Chicago. Bigger areas like that.

Also, non-broadcast networks such as cable, which serve at least 50 percent of households subscribing to video program services must realtime caption their news. Everybody else may use electronic newsroom technique or ENT, which is a pain. If any of you have experienced news programs with that kind of captioning, basically what you get is somebody who has already typed in their notes for what they're going to say. It's in a sort of teleprompter. And anything that is live that they want to add, like weather reports, where somebody is in a remote location, you don't get any captions for that. News programs must follow the same captioning requirements, which means 100 percent of news must be captioned after January 1, 2006.

Now, I'm going to move to a whole different area and this is visual presentation of local emergency information. That was another battle we fought very hard for. Because in emergency or in danger, we don't get information. And more and more people turn to television for their news. In our research after September 11th, 2001, I found that many, many deaf and hard-of-hearing people, when they found out that something was going on, the first thing they did was go to turn on their television to get more news. Visual presentation of local emergency information is a different law from closed captioning. It is required of broadcast cable and satellite TV, that they provide us with visual information in emergencies. This emergency information is defined as information that is intended to protect your life, health, safety, or property.

Some of the examples of things that qualify as an emergency are dangerous weather, like hurricanes, tornados, floods, earthquake, tidal waves, widespread fire, warning and watch of impending change in weather, or dangerous situations like widespread power failures, discharge of toxic gas, industrial explosion, civil disorder, school closings, changes in school bus schedules resulting from these conditions.

What visual information you have to be able to see is specific details about the areas that will be affected by an emergency. They have to tell you about evacuation orders, with detailed descriptions of areas to be evacuated and specific evacuation routes. They have to tell you about approved shelters or how to take shelter in your home. They have to give you instructions on how to secure your personal property, and tell you about road closures and how to obtain relief assistance after an emergency.

Moving on to the last regulation: the emergency alert system or EAS. I find that many people aren't familiar with this. It is a nationwide broadcast system that was set up many, many, many years ago for use in national or large-scale disasters. It was designed for use by the president of the United States, but it's never been used, not even on 9/11. It can be used by national, state and local authorities, too. And some of them are doing that. It has the ability to send emergency information by broadcast

cable and wireless cable systems. It can take them all. But it has to, at the local level or state level, it has to have the cooperation of the station. The president, if he wants to send out a message, has the ability to take over all of those systems. It's required to carry those broadcasts from the president.

I've given you the regulations and the laws. Now I want to talk about the challenges. Laws and regulations are meaningless unless they are enforced. It doesn't matter how great the law is that you have on the books if you don't have an agency that is going to do something to make sure people follow it. And, second, the laws and regulations that we have don't always cover everything that we need. Electronic newsroom technique is a good example of that. The exemption between 2 and 6 o'clock in the mornings are not all right. So there are still some gaps that we have to fill. And, third, no matter how good our laws and regulations are and how pretty the language is, they are not always interpreted the way that we intended them to be.

The Federal Communications Commission, FCC, has oversight of all the captioning-related laws that I mentioned so far in this presentation. Their oversight includes monitoring and enforcement of the regulations. However, politics and funding have everything to do with how responsive they are to our needs. You can't really separate the politics from the funding. They are very much related.

If you have a Congress that decides that these things are not really that important, they are not going to give the funding to the agency to enforce a lot of things. And what funding does come to the FCC, it's been very, very thin right now. They have many responsibilities, a lot of work to do. There are simply not nearly enough people to do it. And that's our laws and regulations. They are not moved up on the priority list. They don't get much attention, and that is what happened to us for much of the last four years. And now it's starting to change.

Specific challenges: I told you about the decoder chip bills that require chips in televisions that are 13 inches or larger that would apply to current TVs and to the other televisions. But many of us, in an emergency, there is no power. You can't plug one in. And those little battery operated televisions, which we could use, are often too small to have captioning.

In emergency preparedness we have found only one battery operated television that has captioning. It's in limited supply. Most people cannot find it. And there is an issue that many people are turning to these small personal devices that have everything built in. You can use it for a cell phone, pager. You can use it to play video games. You can use it for watching television. You can use it for browsing the Internet, checking your e-mail. Those things will be perfect for us in an emergency to get information if we had captioning capabilities.

A lot of people are contacting me about problems with digital televisions. What we're finding is that when you go to check, to buy a digital television, you want to see what the

captioning looks like. And very often you're going to find a salesperson that doesn't really know anything about captioning. They don't know how to turn it on, they don't know how to find it, they don't know what the features are, they don't know about the change in fonts and colors and sizes and all of that. So you also have trouble not just seeing the captions, but knowing the quality, because the way they set things up in the showroom, you can't actually use them to see a broadcast, a live broadcast. They have their own in-house system that feeds right to their television to make them all look pretty.

Consumers also are telling us that once they buy digital televisions or equipment and take it home, it doesn't work for them. And very often if you bought one of those big TV screens, it's really not going to be fun to pack it up and take it back. The problems we are having are all of the same exactly that we had when the first captioning came out. If some of you would think back when you were traveling, you might remember going to hotels where you would arrive and you would say "I would like to have captioning in my room" and they had no idea how to set up the decoder box or find it in televisions. They still do. Also, we're finding out that a lot of equipment that you use with your television, your DVD player or your VCR, maybe TiVo, something that you use to record them, that are a lot of problems with them being compatible with the digital TV captioning.

More broad challenges that we have, broadcaster, cable and satellite people do not monitor the captions. The FCC has not required any of them to report on their progress for captioning, and has never fined broadcaster, cable or satellite provider for any purpose related to the captioning.

There is exactly one situation where Calbine Breck, who is working for the NAD as their advocacy program, put in a complaint because he wanted to watch court television, and he found that it didn't look like they could possibly be meeting the regulations. So, he asked for more information, and I think that that cable program didn't really know that they were supposed to be doing captioning. They gave them information about how much captioning they were providing. And he just used that to show the FCC that they're not doing what they're supposed to. They were not fined. They were given a little hand slap and told not to do it again. And actually, that was directed towards Comcast, the cable company that was supposed to be monitoring.

Also there is a shortage of qualified captioners to do this work. There are misspellings, missing captions and global caption mistakes in our captions right now, and not all the broadcasters are broadcasting the digital captions that are required. The major networks, like ABC, CBS, and NBC, and FOX, they are doing well with the volume of captioning. If you go to those three major networks, FOX, if we include them, they are pretty good about having most everything captioned now. The cable programs, if you have cable and you go from channel to channel, it's a whole different story. And we have heard that they are going to be really struggling to meet the regulations on January 1. And, again, electronic newsroom technique gives poor news.

Moving to visual information in emergencies, one thing I want to stress when we say visual information in emergencies, this does not require closed captioning. Visual information can be presented by open captions, or closed captions, but it has to be there. We have problems with the definition of what an emergency is. The FCC gave some examples of what an emergency is in their regulations, and many of the broadcasters look at the list and if it's not on there, it's not covered. I think our list of what is an emergency and their list of what is an emergency could be very different. Because they're not at all sure. They have not had to get along with such limited information.

We have an easy solution for that: turn the sound down, all the way. So, one of the things that I did at my center during the sniper shootings that you may remember, we were not getting any information in the whole Washington area. It was just like a war zone. People were terrified. Schools were not having any after school sports or programs. They were being locked down when the kids were in the schools. And we had so much trouble getting information. And every day, people would go on news programs and say the latest about what was happening, and that was not captioned.

So collectively I captured as much information as I could from people who said at 6 o'clock, this man was on TV, and talking about the sniper shooting and there were no captions. And I sent this whole package to the FCC as a formal complaint. And long story short, they came back and said well, the sniper shootings are not an emergency. And we strongly disagreed. And fortunately, they took another look at it and completely agreed with us and reversed themselves and sent out a follow-up to all of the broadcasters saying that is also another example. So we can get that changed.

The second problem with information in emergencies is that if you want to complain about it, you have to write down detailed information. And part of those details, the date of the program, the time of the program, as close as you can get the time, and then what information was missing.

I was presenting at a forum at the Federal Communications Commission, probably about a year and a half ago, and toward the end of the forum when I was back in the audience, they had an open discussion. And nobody brought this issue up, this whole focus on the emergency communication. I raised my hand; I have to ask this question. And I was called upon. And I said have you given any thought to how you might address the catch 22 of visual information in emergencies when we are told that if we complain to you about missing information, we need to tell you what is missing? And how could we know that if we don't have the captions to tell us? I would say 15 or more deaf or hard-of-hearing people were in the audience and they gave me a standing ovation. But they still haven't fixed that part.

Also in this area, the investigations by the FCC take time. They have acted on three complaints now and every one of them was right up against the deadline. From the

time you file a complaint to the time they must take action on it is one year. And every one of them has been just within days or hours of the deadline.

And now we have a new challenge, the latest complaints were against Florida TV stations related to hurricanes last year. Three of them. And the FCC found in favor of consumers, and ordered fines. Those broadcasters got together and started a campaign to have people contact the FCC and tell them that this is ridiculous. They are saying, we beat ourselves up trying to give good information to everybody for 8 days during the hurricane and we missed like two or three little things and you're fining us for that? That is more than just a couple. It was only that the FCC chose to pick three out of the many things they probably saw, and fine only on those three. But there is growing opposition and we are not always so good at saying thank you, we did the right thing. You know, the emergency alert system, the challenge for access, has anybody seen it used? We don't know if it will work for us.

Next, this one is what is not in our regulations. Many of you have noticed that a lot of news is moving to the Internet. You can go to websites now like CNN or your local news programs, and they will have video clips or breaking news right up there. No captions. The reason why is there is still a debate that may be settled within the next few months over whether things done on the Internet fall under the definition of information service or telecommunication service, because the FCC has no jurisdiction over anything that is an information service right now. They have not been given that authority; only telecommunications.

The one thing that is in our favor is something called data mining. I don't know if you're familiar with it. But some really brilliant guy found out how to use closed captioning. He developed software that allows you to take anything that has ever been closed captioned, and search it. If any of you have ever used a Google search, you type in a key word to do a search on the Internet, and it will give you a list of things. They can do that with closed captioning. So all of a sudden our captions are becoming something that is not just great for deaf and hard-of-hearing people, it's great for everything. Because if your program has closed captioning, you can type in "Punky Brewster," and then maybe "July 4," and you will get the July 4th program of Punky Brewster. They are actually using this now.

I want to tackle something with the time we have left. Our topic is the caption quality petition. That is what we call it. ALDA participated with telecommunications for the Deaf incorporated, the National association of the Deaf, Self-Help for Hard-of-Hearing person, and other organizations in filing this petition. And recently the FCC decided to pay attention to it. It is now in a process called the notice of proposed rule making or NPRM. It's been given the docket number 05-231.

And it already has opposition from the National Cable and Telecommunications Association. That was back in October 2004. We put this petition in last year. Basically, this association disagrees with almost everything we said about everything.

The key issue that we brought up in our petition is that Congress intended closed captioning to insure that all Americans will have access to video services and programs, particularly as video programming becomes an increasingly important part of home, school and workplace.

The FCC said, in 1997, that it intended to review the rule to make sure that expectations were being met, but it didn't establish any compliance report. The FCC also didn't set any standards for captioning accuracy, correct spelling, punctuation, placement of the captions, the speed by which they fly across the screen or don't, or the font. They expected that competition among the captioning providers would take care of that. They were wrong. The FCC set some technical standard for what we talked about before, if captions were there on a program once, then you have to allow them to pass through the next time you show it, no matter where they go. And it did not require any monitoring to make sure that that is happening.

The FCC's current complaint process, if you have a problem with your captions for any reason, if you are watching a program and you are brought 1 hour 45 minutes of a mystery and the captions disappear in the last 15, you can complain. But whenever you complain, they have up to four months to respond to you, depending on when you file your complaint.

The FCC also did not give us an easy way to know where do we complain, who do we complain to? And we have found over and over again that no matter where you complain, they often report -- they just say well, it's not us, that's them. You know, it's the captioning company or no, it's the cable provider. And the FCC didn't set up fines.

So, in this notice of proposed rulemaking we have an opportunity. There are questions that they want answered. They are asking do we want to have standards for non-technical quality? Do we want to have standards for correct spelling, like saying 99 percent accuracy, 100 percent accuracy of all these things?

And before I go on any further, as ALDA advocates in Washington, I will explain that I always view advocacy as always going for the best, on the understanding that no matter what you shoot for, you always are going to have to give up something. But you shouldn't ever be the one to decide okay, well, I'll only ask for 97 percent, because that's reasonable. No. We stand for 100 percent accuracy. If they are going to force us to go lower, they are going to force us to go lower, but we are going to be kicking and screaming every inch of the way. So we do all our advocating, when you're writing your comments, please keep that in mind. Ask for what you really need, and that's the best. They don't ask people who are hearing: Oh, so there was a problem with the audio, would it be okay if it works 99 or 98 percent of the time? No. They don't ask people who are hearing: Oh, it stopped in the middle of this program? We will get back to you in four months.

Moving on to number two, they are asking us should there be a process to prevent and remedy technical problems and what should it be? In our captioning petition to the FCC, we said that we felt that it was important that all of our captions be monitored all the time. Somebody should be watching them to be sure that when they are being transmitted, and the way they are received should be correct. If we had somebody doing this, they wouldn't have to wait for us to complain to them, to know that they have problems. The FCC is asking should there be a specific process for monitoring and maintenance, which is basically, the same thing? Do we want somebody to be sitting there watching or not?

I would tell you that one is going to be a very tough sell. I met with the National Association of Broadcasters, and they told me that they have somebody monitoring broadcasts all the time. But it's possible for that person to be working around the station doing a lot of other things while they are listening to different programs. It's not possible for them to be watching captioning and doing something else. It's a money issue for them. However, I think we should ask for it anyway. Not necessarily a person, because I believe that there is software under development that can do it for them. And we should encourage its development. They're asking if the captioning complaint process should be changed. Well, how many of you want to wait four months? How many of you have ever complained about captioning locally? You have?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I have complained to the TV station. They were captioning over captions, which made it impossible to understand anything. The TV program, they always say that it's not their problem. It's what they're really saying, that it's the captionists problem and they can't do anything about it.

CHERYL HEPPNER: Yes. That's exactly what happens. What we have asked for in our petition is that we want a specific complaint form. We want something so you know what information to put down. We want the process to be much shorter before you get a response back. We want the broadcasters and cable companies to all have their information posted on the FCC's website so you know exactly who to send your complaint to. And you have a phone number, and you have an e-mail address, and anything else already up there.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I'm just wondering how much of the problem is with the captionist. Because when we have different captionists for the ALDA meetings, the software is different for every single person. If the software was standardized, you'd have the right background, you'd have all these things. But sometimes we are delayed for a half hour, 45 minutes, can't get the equipment to work. We are expecting the TV stations to come up with perfection in something that we know is not a perfect situation. So how can the captioning industry improve their methods to make sure that they're not the problem?

CHERYL HEPPNER: That's a tough problem. I would say that there is blame to go around for everybody right now. Some of it, I know, is there are many good people

doing captioning. Many. But there are also people who will take captioning jobs who really aren't qualified. And they are able to do that because we don't have any standards. A lot of that is because it will go to the lowest bidder, not to the one with the highest quality.

It's really not just that. I think it is reasonable with live captioning to expect a lesser standard than 100 percent. But I don't think it's unreasonable to expect something that can be done well before broadcast time not to be perfect. Part of the reason I say this is my other hat with movie captioning, this has come back to haunt us. The average person going into a bar today or a health club where there is a lot of noise, if they have captioning on the television and they are watching news programs and they are seeing this terrible captioning, and they are thinking oh, if I go to a captioned movie, it's going to be like that. Well, it's not. So when we fight to get movie captioning, people are resistant to it because they think it's going to be this way.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: One of my pet peeves about captioning is when people talk on TV, like newscasters, they always put the captions over someone's name. They have no way of identifying. And another pet peeve I have is poor captioning. Yesterday I went to the Sanderson complex, and the captioner was okay, but she wasn't doing as good as this one.

CHERYL HEPPNER: Well, the second one up there, should we have a process to prevent and remedy technical problems? The first thing you brought up related to that one. There is no earthly reason why captions should cover up other captions or titles or anything on the screen. The TV stations have the ability to move them around. And we should say that that is unacceptable. It's already in there. But they are just not monitoring it. They are not watching it. They are watching TV without the captions. They don't see that it's going on.

Let me run through this very quickly. They have also asked whether we want to have fines when there are captioning problems. And we have proposed in our petition a fine of \$8,000 for every complaint. That sounds very high. But, that is also the same standard we have for emergency captioning. And remember, we have to start high. They might bring us down. We are starting with \$8,000. We want a fine that will hurt, so they will pay more attention. Because right now, there is nothing that will get their attention, that will make them want to have better quality and be responsive to us.

We also ask whether there would be a compliance report. In other words, every quarter should they have to tell us how much captioning they're doing? We like that idea. We understand it is burdensome, but if you're using the same captioning company, it should be pretty simple to have records to submit. So, let them worry about that.

They ask should there be a ban on electronic newsroom technique being expanded beyond the top 25 markets? We haven't specifically told them that we would rather have realtime captioning everywhere. We think that that is the ultimate goal. We

understand that at this point, there are not enough good captioners available to do it. But we know, also, that we have been pushing Congress to help encourage more people to be trained to do this kind of work and become skilled. So we think this is something that possibly could be phased in over time, because we know that with electronic newsroom technique we are missing some of the most important information, the traffic reports, the weather reports, all those other things.

They are asking another question about people who request exemptions from captioning a program, should they be required to file those requests electronically? I just mention this, because sometimes only when we know about the exemptions we can fight them, it's when they are in a place where we can see that they have been filed. So the question is whether they should start making that requirement.

They asked, also, what the current supply is of available captioners. Well, that is not something that we consumers can answer. We should only say: Not enough good ones. Now, it's back to this. The notice of proposed rule making will be published in the Federal Register. I'm hoping it will be available soon. We have known about it now for two months and it still hasn't been published. After it's in the Federal Register we will have 45 days to write comments about it, to answer those questions that I just showed you.

If you are not able to reach that first 45 days deadline, you get a second chance. The second chance is supposed to be what they call reply comments. That's for people that sent comments in. And then everybody looks at what everybody else wrote and they say I disagree with this and they write reply comments. But, you don't have to already have comments on file to be able to send them in. You can still register your opinion.

I really want all of you to help participate in this and go back home and encourage other people to do this. How many of you have had problems with captions that disappear in a program?

(Showing of hands.)

How many of you have had problems with captions that are garbled?

(Showing of hands.)

Okay. How many of you have had problems with a program that was supposed to be captioned, but there weren't any captions?

(Showing of hands.)

AUDIENCE MEMBER: So is there anything that we can do as a group, you're talking more about doing this individually, but can we also as a group, there is strength in numbers, you know? I'm saying as a group, can we file a petition or whatever and have most of the members to sign?

CHERYL HEPPNER: Petitions are not really going to be helpful. It's an individual thing. What you can do is join the ALDA advocacy group on the Internet. If you have Internet access, we will be working on this as a pilot. We will be having people submit

individual comments. Petitions do not get the same attention. I'm asking this of individuals, because we have already filed this petition as an organization. It's not a single petition so much as petitioning them to do something that suggests different changes.

So at this point, we want to sit back, because our comments are what prompted this whole thing. But we want individual consumers to back us up. So many voices are much more powerful. We will work with you and you will need to pull up those experiences you've had. I have always had many problems with the FCC in the past for the single reason that whenever I bring these problems to them, they go: Nobody ever complains. We never hear these complaints. And I go I hear these complaints all the time. I have these complaints myself all the time. And I have explained to them repeatedly, this is not a good process for us. If I am watching a TV program and the captions disappear, or they don't show up, and I have to go through this whole process of finding who to complain to, write the complain, send it in and wait a long time. How does this help me? I've already lost the program. It's not coming back on again.

Cheryl Heppner is Executive Director of the Northern Virginia Resource Center for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Persons, and has served for many years as ALDA's voice in Washington. She is currently Advocacy Chair; she is a past President and ALDAcon chair.