



## **Emergency Services & Deaf People Position Paper**

### **Executive Summary**

This paper outlines the views of Deaf Australia (previously Australian Association of the Deaf) and its members in relation to emergency services access for Deaf people in Australia, with particular focus on the use of 000 and 106 emergency service numbers.

At the moment, for Deaf people to access 000 emergency services they must use a telephone typewriter (TTY) or a computer with a modem to call 106 Emergency Relay Service, a dedicated emergency services number for Deaf people, or those who have a hearing or speech impairment. There is no other way for Deaf people to access 000 emergency services. Like 000, 106 is only to be used in a time critical emergency where police, fire or ambulance is required.

There is a growing trend in the Deaf community for Deaf people to move away from the use of a TTY towards the use of mobile phones with Short Messaging Service (SMS) because this enables Deaf people to contact their hearing peers directly and without the use of the NRS.

In late 2004, Deaf Australia through its Deaf Telecommunication Access and Networking (DTAN) project, which is funded by the Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy (DBCDE), prepared a discussion paper 'Emergency Services Telecommunication Issues for Deaf People' and collected feedback from 20% of Deaf Australia's Deaf membership base. Information gleaned from feedback to the discussion paper confirmed what we envisaged the Deaf community thought regarding emergency services. Information was also gathered from recent research and experiences overseas.

Today, more Deaf people are reliant on the use of their mobile phones using either SMS, IM (on some mobile phone handsets) and to a lesser extent, video calling. Technology today is making it easier for Deaf people to communicate with each other than ever before and videophones are poised to make an entrance that will further enrich the telecommunications experience for a Deaf person.

Our hearing peers in Australia are able to access 000 emergency services through their mobile phone handsets, which means that from any given place they are in they can access emergency services. But Deaf people are still expected to only use TTYs in event of emergency. TTYs are not mobile. What happens when Deaf people are involved in life threatening situations and require assistance but a TTY is not available? They may have a mobile phone but are not able to use it to contact emergency services.

It is time that other options are explored that will enable Deaf people (and other people who are reliant on 106) to access 106 using other communication devices, not just TTYs and computers with modems. Some of our Deaf cousins overseas are better equipped than we are to deal with life threatening situations either for themselves or their fellow citizens; they are able to access their emergency services using SMS and other communication options, varying from country to country.

## **Evidence supporting recommendations**

### **In Australia**

For some years DBCDE has been approached about the possibility of expanding the current set up of the 106 Emergency Relay Service to include other forms of communication, i.e., SMS, and their stated position is that SMS is not reliable enough for them to permit the use of SMS to access emergency services. DBCDE has expressed the view that SMS is an unreliable method of communication, particularly in a life threatening emergency because the delivery of SMS messages cannot be guaranteed and there is no means of tracking or tracing by either the sender or recipient; therefore, neither party could determine if a message remained undelivered or unanswered. In addition, if an SMS message does not contain accurate location information, the emergency services call centre is unable to enter into a real time conversation with the caller to determine where and what assistance is required.

Yet, some service providers in Australia such as roadside assistance and taxis currently provide an SMS service for Deaf people where messages sent by Deaf people are automatically replied to by the computer to advise them that the message has been received and in situations where more information is required, the service provider then sends a text message and so on.

### **What is happening internationally?**

In Network Strategies' final report 'Assessment of text any-to-any connectivity options'<sup>1</sup> for DBCDE prepared on 20<sup>th</sup> July 2006, the whole of Section 8 is dedicated to SMS emergency services provided overseas for Deaf people. This report covers briefly what is happening internationally and provides a good overview on what is happening in Finland, which is implementing an SMS emergency system.

Currently Deaf people in Hong Kong, Northern Ireland, Sweden, Finland and Iceland are able to access their emergency service in other forms. In some countries such as Sweden, Deaf people are able to access emergency services using internet based calls (such as internet relay) and video relay service which also handles emergency calls, relaying them to the 112 voice operator. (NB: 112 is the emergency number used in Scandinavia.)

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.dbcde.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/58380/Final\\_report\\_-\\_Connectivity\\_Options.pdf](http://www.dbcde.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/58380/Final_report_-_Connectivity_Options.pdf)

### **What do the Australian Deaf people say?**

One of the questions asked in the discussion paper was: if an alternative emergency service for mobile phones was available in Australia for Deaf and hard of hearing people, would you use it? 92% of respondents said yes. During the community consultations that DTAN regularly organises throughout the year with the Deaf community, the question about access to emergency services never ceases to be raised.

Deaf people in Australia are increasingly mobile and are fluent mobile phone users. Even older Deaf people have taken up the use of SMS possibly because more of their Deaf peers are not using their TTYs. Quite a large number have hearing children, family members and friends; they find using SMS much easier to maintain contact and therefore, are anxious and keen to see access using other communication methods implemented to improve access to the current 106 service.

### **Deaf Australia's position:**

The current problem with the 106 emergency service is that it is only accessible to Deaf people or other NRS users in situations when a TTY or computer with modem is available. It needs to be remembered that the TTY relies on the use of electricity and is not portable, so in the event of power outages or when an accident happens outside the range of a TTY, the Deaf person's options for obtaining assistance are severely jeopardised.

Deaf people, like everyone else, are keen to keep up with the changes happening in the area of telecommunications and are on the look out for solutions that meet their requirements. Every single Deaf person has a different set of needs and most of these needs are related to communicating in their own language, Auslan. Newer forms of telecommunications of most interest to Deaf people currently are video calling on 3G mobile handsets and broadband based dedicated videophones. The survey that informed our position paper 'What is Deaf Equivalent to Voice Telephony' confirmed that Deaf people feel strongly that it is time for Deaf Australia to start focusing on video communications as the new equivalent to the voice phone.

Deaf people should not be denied their right to have access to emergency services anywhere in Australia, be it using their mobile phone text messaging or equipment using video communication.

### **Recommendations:**

Deaf Australia recommends that serious consideration be given to and action taken on the following recommendations and that the telecommunications industry, Government and regulators work together to achieve these outcomes.

1. That Government, emergency service providers, industry and consumer representatives such as CTN, Deaf Australia and other peak consumer organisations work together to look at ways to expand the 106 service to include other forms of contact such as mobile phone handsets or videophones, not just by the use of TTY and computer modem alone.
2. In addition, that current 106 emergency service provision be progressively updated to include other communication methods such as real time instant text messaging and other relay services that handle both Internet and video based relay calls.

## **About Deaf Australia:**

Deaf Australia Inc. (previously Australian Association of the Deaf) is the national peak organisation for Deaf people in Australia. It represents the views of Deaf people who use Auslan (Australian Sign Language).

It is a true consumer organisation - only Deaf people have the right to vote on Deaf Australia business and to be elected to the Board.

The Deaf community can be recognised by their unique sign language - Auslan. Deaf Australia is committed to promoting and preserving sign language as the official and indigenous language of the Deaf community.

Deaf Australia believes that Deaf people belong to a linguistic minority group and are disadvantaged by a lack of access to communication, education and services. Deaf Australia works with and on behalf of Deaf people in seeking their rights as citizens of Australian society.

Deaf Australia was established in 1986 at the National Deafness Conference in Adelaide, South Australia to improve the quality of life of Deaf people in Australia. Since then, Deaf Australia has made many positive changes, but there is still much work to do to achieve equal opportunity and full participation in the community for Deaf people.

Deaf Australia has six state branches: New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria, Tasmania, South Australia and Western Australia and is the Australian national member the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD).

### ***Deaf Australia's Vision***

*"An Australia where Deaf people have no barriers"*

### ***Deaf Australia's Mission***

*"Deaf Australia (previously Australian Association of the Deaf) is the national peak body managed by Deaf people that represents, promotes, preserves, and informs the development of, the Australian Deaf community, its language and cultural heritage."*

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