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Senator the Hon. Stephen Conroy
Minister for Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy
The Senate
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

By email: senator.conroy@aph.gov.au

Dear Minister,

National Relay Service Request for Tender

Deaf Australia would like to raise a number of urgent issues in relation to the National Relay Service Request for Tender (NRS RFT), which closes on 10th October 2012.

The NRS was established in 1995 and in 17 years of operation the only significant improvements have been to add Internet relay and the 106 emergency service – which can only be accessed from a TTY, technology that is now almost 50 years old (the TTY was invented in 1964). Technology, the human rights environment for people with disabilities, and the Australian Government's commitment to improving services for people with disabilities, as expressed in the *National Disability Strategy*, are all vastly different now than in 1995.

And yet the NRS RFT does only one quite minor thing to improve the current NRS: the mandatory requirement that the current one-way Internet relay be upgraded to two-way Internet relay.

Deaf Australia is extremely disappointed at this lack of commitment to bringing our National Relay Service into the 21st Century. In particular we are concerned that the NRS RFT does not mandate much needed improvements, some of which we have been requesting Government implement for almost a decade.

1. Mobile access to emergency services, in particular SMS emergency call service

Deaf Australia has received a copy of a letter sent to you by Ms Johanna Plante on 16th September 2012 that sets out very clearly the issues surrounding the urgent need for an SMS emergency call service. Her letter calls for an addition to the NRS RFT to mandate the provision of a text-based mobile emergency call service solution that is available to all Deaf and hard of hearing people and people with speech impairment, regardless of what type of mobile handset they use – i.e. an SMS emergency call service.

Deaf Australia has been pointing to the need for an SMS emergency call service since around 2006. It has become a national disgrace that despite your April 2010 announcement that an SMS emergency call service would be implemented (an announcement that provided great hope of relief from anxiety for people who will use it) such a service is still nowhere in sight.

We strongly support Ms Plante's letter and her request.

2. Video Relay Service

The NRS RFT allows for a Video Relay Service (VRS) to *perhaps* be provided for limited hours. Australian Communication Exchange has been operating a limited VRS using its own funds for some time now and has clearly demonstrated that there is a need for a VRS. Deaf Australia has been advising the Department of Broadband, Communications and the Digital Economy for many years now that there are significant numbers of Deaf people who do not have sufficient English literacy skills to effectively use the NRS in its current form.

Deaf people who use Auslan do so because they **need** it. A VRS operating 24/7 is a **need**, not a luxury. Deaf people who **need** this service are citizens of Australia and Government has a responsibility to ensure that their need for effective and equitable access to telecommunications is met. Further, this need does not restrict itself to limited hours. It is a 24/7 need, just as the need for a text based NRS is a 24/7 need.

We request that the NRS RFT be amended to include a VRS operating 24/7 as a mandatory requirement.

3. Qualifications for VRS staff

The NRS RFT states that a VRS if implemented is required to employ staff who are bilingual in Auslan and English. It does not state that staff must be NAATI accredited Auslan/English interpreters. This directly contradicts Australian Government policies that interpreters must be accredited – e.g. NABS (funded by the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs), and the Employment Assistance Fund (funded by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations) require that only NAATI qualified interpreters be employed.

It is equally imperative that only NAATI qualified interpreters are employed for a VRS.

The function of a VRS is for a relay officer to interpret a conversation conducted in two distinct languages. Interpreting is a specialist skill. The ability to use two languages does not automatically equip a person to act as an interpreter. VRS staff will be required to interpret in a wide range of situations where it is important that they interpret accurately and appropriately. To allow the use of bilingual staff rather than appropriately qualified interpreters is highly risky and irresponsible.

We request that you to redress this situation and require that VRS staff be qualified NAATI accredited Auslan/English interpreters.

4. Captioned telephony

The NRS RFT allows for a captioned telephony service to *perhaps* be provided for limited hours. Australian Communication Exchange has conducted a captioned telephony trial using its own funds that has clearly demonstrated that there is a need for captioned telephony. For many people captioned telephony provides the most effective, efficient and equitable access to telecommunications.

We request that the NRS RFT be amended to include a captioned telephony service operating 24/7 as a mandatory requirement.

We believe that it is imperative that these four issues be resolved as a matter of urgency.

I understand that changing the NRS RFT at this stage is not a simple matter. It is unfortunate that the authors of the NRS RFT did not consult with us and other relevant organisations on its content before its public release.

The NRS RFT calls for the provision of the NRS for a further five years, and possibly eight years, from July 2013. If these serious problems with the requirements for the NRS are not fixed now, Deaf

people and people who are hard of hearing or have a speech impairment will continue to be disadvantaged, even discriminated against, until at least June 2018 and possibly June 2021. This is not at all in the spirit of Australia's *Disability Discrimination Act*, the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, the *National Disability Strategy* or even the recently released *Review of access to telecommunications by people with disability, older Australians and people experiencing illness*.

Minister, you have in the past shown that you respect the rights of seriously disadvantaged people and that you want to do the right thing by people who are Deaf, hard of hearing or have a speech impairment. I trust that you will fix these four serious problems before the NRS RFT tender closes on 10th October 2012.

Yours sincerely



Ann Darwin
President

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