

# Telecommunications: VRS, VRI, and TRS

**TS**  
Tip Sheet

## Overview

With technology seemingly always one step ahead of us, it's easy to confuse the various telecommunication services used to visually connect hearing and deaf individuals wishing to communicate with each other. There are three primary telecommunication services in use today: (a) video relay service (VRS), (b) telecommunications relay service (TRS), and (c) video remote interpreting (VRI). VRS and TRS are free programs regulated by the FCC and VRI is a fee-based service that satisfies the communication-related mandates of the ADA. VRS and VRI, as their names suggest, are video-based services; TRS is text-driven.

## How do the various telecommunication services differ?

**Video Relay Service (VRS):** VRS is a free subscriber-based service. Available 24 hours a day, it is described by the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) as a service that enables deaf individuals "to make and receive telephone calls through a communications assistant (CA) who is a qualified American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter."<sup>1</sup> Using videophones, smart phones, or computers with video communication capabilities, the subscriber (deaf individual) calls the VRS provider who, through an interpreter, calls the hearing person on a standard phone and then relays the conversation between the two parties. Conversely, a hearing person wishing to call a subscriber simply dials the subscriber's phone number, which is automatically routed to the VRS provider.

A VRS provider, by FCC regulation, cannot provide free interpreting services when all parties wishing to communicate are in the same room.

## VRS in Action



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1. Deaf user signs to interpreter
2. Interpreter speaks simultaneously to the hearing user
3. Hearing user speaks to interpreter
4. Interpreter signs the message simultaneously to the deaf user

**Video Remote Interpreting (VRI):** VRI is a fee-based service. Unlike VRS, VRI is not a telephone service but rather a means for two or more individuals in the same room to access an interpreter



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remotely. VRI is an alternative to on-site interpreting (whereby the interpreter is physically in the room). It is not effective in all circumstances, and in some cases it can be counterproductive. The Department of Justice notes that VRI "...will not be effective if the person who is deaf or hard of hearing has difficulty seeing the screen (either because of vision loss or because he or she cannot be properly positioned to see the screen, because of an injury or other condition). In these circumstances, an on-site interpreter may be required."<sup>2</sup>

**Telecommunications Relay Service (TRS):** TRS is a free text-based service. It is reached by calling 7-1-1. Relay operators serve as intermediaries between people who rely on a text telephone (TTY) or text messaging and people who use standard voice telephones. Relay operators convey to the telephone user what the other party is typing and then type to the TTY user what the telephone user is saying.

## Telecommunication Services at a Glance

**VRS:** Interpreter, deaf person, and hearing person are all in different locations. The hearing person uses a standard telephone while the deaf individual uses a visual screen. Cost of the service: free.

**VRI:** Deaf and hearing person are in the same location while the interpreter is in another location. The interpreter is accessed via a visual screen. Cost of Service: fee-based.

**TRS:** Deaf person, hearing person, and CA are all in different locations. Primary equipment is text-based. Cost of the service: free.

## Related Resources

- National Consortium of Interpreter Education Centers (NCIEC):  
[www.interpretereducation.org/specialization/vrs-vri](http://www.interpretereducation.org/specialization/vrs-vri)
- Video Relay Service and Video Remote interpreting: What's the Difference?:  
[www.tinyurl.com/June2008VIEWS](http://www.tinyurl.com/June2008VIEWS)

Additional resources on this subject may be available at [www.nationaldeafcenter.org/resources](http://www.nationaldeafcenter.org/resources).

## References

<sup>1</sup> National Association of the Deaf. (n.d.). *Video relay services*. Retrieved from [www.tinyurl.com/NADvrs](http://www.tinyurl.com/NADvrs)

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Justice. (2014). *ADA requirements: Effective communication*. Retrieved from [www.ada.gov/effective-comm.htm](http://www.ada.gov/effective-comm.htm)



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Additional resources can be found at [www.nationaldeafcenter.org](http://www.nationaldeafcenter.org)