

Landmark Technology Access Bill Heads to President Obama's Desk

Legislation Expected to Revolutionize the Way Companies Design Smart Phones and Video Programming Technologies

Washington, DC (September 29, 2010)—The 21st Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act, which requires that smart phones, television programs and modern communications technologies are accessible to people with vision and hearing loss, has now passed both chambers of Congress and is headed to the President's desk. President Obama is expected to sign the bill.

“Today marks a huge step forward for people with disabilities,” said Paul Schroeder, VP, Programs & Policy for the American Foundation for the Blind (AFB). “Once enacted, this legislation will ensure that the 25 million Americans with vision loss, and the millions more with other disabilities, can fully take part in the digital era. It will improve job opportunities, education opportunities, and more.”

Twenty years ago when the ADA was signed into law, no one could have predicted the new technologies that now shape daily lives and work routines. In today's digital world, smart phones, DVD players, and the Internet have become part the workplace, the classroom and daily life. Many of these products remain inaccessible to people with vision loss, despite the fact that a growing number of Americans need technology to include accessibility features.

“Legislation can't solve everything, but it can chart a course for the future,” said Mark Richert, Policy Director for AFB and a principal negotiator with the communications and TV industries. “For millions of Americans just like me who have been largely shut out of the amazing technologies most people take for granted today, the new law means we'll be able to work more productively, respond to emergencies more safely and effectively, and participate even more in society and culture. It's about moving from isolation and dependence to inclusion and opportunity.”

When signed into law, this legislation will give individuals with vision or hearing loss improved access to television programming, smart phones, the Internet, menus on DVD players, program guides on cable TV, and more. Specifically, it will:

- Mandate mobile phone companies to make web browsers, text messaging, and e-mail on smart phones fully accessible.

- Restore and expand requirements for video description of television programs, in addition to requiring cable companies to make their program guides and selection menus accessible to people with vision loss.
- Ensure people with vision loss have access to emergency broadcast information.
- Provide \$10 million in funding each year for assistive technology for deaf-blind individuals
- Ensure that Internet-enabled mobile phones are hearing aid compatible.

“With baby boomers aging and the rates of vision loss from glaucoma, diabetes, macular degeneration and other age-related eye conditions, expected to double by the year 2030, there is an urgent need to make communications technology accessible,” added Schroeder. “It’s not just the right thing to do, it’s a smart business decision, and companies like Apple are already ahead of the curve by making the iPhone and iPad accessible to people with vision loss.”

The 21st Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act passed Congress with bipartisan support. A number of members played a key role in moving the legislation forward. In the U.S. Senate, the bill was championed by Senator Pryor (D-AR), with the support of Senator Kerry (D-MA), Senator Rockefeller (D-WV), Senator Hutchison (R-TX), and Senator Ensign (R-NV). In the U.S. House, it was championed by Rep. Ed Markey (D-MA), with the support of Rep. Henry Waxman (D-CA), Rep. Rick Boucher (D-VA), Rep. Joe Barton (R-TX), and Rep. Cliff Stearns (R-FL).

###

The American Foundation for the Blind (AFB) is a national nonprofit that expands possibilities for people with vision loss. AFB’s priorities include broadening access to technology; elevating the quality of information and tools for the professionals who serve people with vision loss; and promoting independent and healthy living for people with vision loss by providing them and their families with relevant and timely resources. AFB is also proud to house the Helen Keller Archives and honor the more than forty years that Helen Keller worked tirelessly with AFB. For more information visit us online at www.afb.org.