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**National Relay Service upgrade adds real-time calls for hearing impaired**

Australians who are deaf or hard of hearing will be able to have phone conversations in near real-time thanks to a new 24/7 communications service switched on today.

Captioned relay, provided under the National Relay Service (NRS), allows callers to speak directly to the other person using a landline or mobile and have the responses captioned by a relay operator using voice recognition software. The person with the hearing impairment can view the captions with just a 1-2 second delay over the web, on a smartphone/tablet or on specially designed captioned telephony handsets.

“Captioned relay is an important new service for people who are hard of hearing because they can have easy flowing conversations without the stilted delays of speaking through text messages,” said ACCAN CEO Teresa Corbin.

The NRS is an Australia-wide phone service at no additional cost for people who are deaf or have a hearing or speech impairment. It now offers eight different call options.

In July the NRS introduced two new options: video relay and SMS relay. The former allows Deaf Australians to contact people or services by making a video call in their first language, Auslan. The message is then interpreted into English and spoken to the recipient by the NRS relay officer, who signs responses back to the caller. SMS relay enables users to send text messages to people or services that don’t use SMS, simply by sending a text to the NRS relay officer who relays the messages by voice to the recipient and sends responses back by text.

Captioned relay is particularly attractive because it is the closest NRS call option to an ordinary phone call and the one where the NRS operator is most in the background. While many in the Deaf community, particularly those who are non-verbal, will continue to use the other NRS offerings such as video relay, captioned relay is expected to be heavily adopted by seniors and others who have developed hearing impairments but can still speak.

“Growing old is universal and it sometimes leads to hearing or other impairments, so services such as the NRS are vital to safeguarding welfare and access to communications for an ageing population,” said Nan Bosler, president of the Australian Seniors Computer Clubs Association.

While anyone with an internet connection and a phone will be able to access captioned relay, a private operator, AccessComm, is offering limited numbers of landline handsets which contain built-in screens to display the captions.

While traditional TTY handsets provide similar functionality to captioned relay, the TTY is a dated analogue technology which can only handle up to 45 words a minute, whereas captioned relay can match the speed of normal speech which is 150-180 words a minute.

The Australian Communication Exchange has previously conducted a limited four-year trial of captioned telephony.

**Find more information about the NRS and the new captioned relay service at** [**www.relayservice.gov.au**](http://www.relayservice.gov.au)**.**

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