

**Prepared Remarks of Chairman Julius Genachowski
Federal Communications Commission**

“Empowering Americans with Disabilities Through Technology”

**Americans with Disabilities Act 20th Anniversary Celebration
Washington, DC
July 19, 2010**

Thank you, Kareem. You are an inspiration, and your work on disability policy in the White House is making a tremendous difference. I’m very pleased that we’ve been able to work with you on these important issues, and on today’s events.

I’d also like to acknowledge my colleague Commissioner Copps, as well as Aneesh Chopra, Larry Strickling and Todd Park. Thank you for joining us today.

It’s a pleasure to be here with all of you celebrating the twentieth anniversary of the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

The ADA has revolutionized the lives of people with disabilities, and dramatically changed our country for the better. Before the ADA, many people with disabilities were dependent and isolated. They couldn’t easily communicate with family and friends, or anyone who didn’t live nearby.

Now, thanks to this landmark Act, we’ve made real progress on our goal of empowering Americans with disabilities to communicate with anyone, anywhere, at any time; to have real access to education, jobs, and health care; and to participate fully in our economy, our democracy, and the daily life of our society. Today, many Americans with disabilities can use communications technologies that would have been hard for any of us to imagine twenty years ago.

All of us at the FCC are proud of the role the Commission has played in fostering an important part of this revolution. As Chairman of the FCC, I’m more than proud to push forward the agency’s commitment to progress in this area.

My strong feelings here have old roots. As some of you know, when I was in high school on a college trip with my father, he took me into the stacks of the MIT library, and showed me engineering plans he had drafted as a graduate student studying engineering. They were for a device designed to someday help blind people “read” words on paper by translating text into physical signals.

The lessons I learned from my father have remained with me all these years: Communications technology has the power to transform lives for the better, and everyone should have access to communications.

As one sign of our agency's commitment to disability rights, I'm very pleased that we've been able to bring back Karen Peltz Strauss in the lead role on disability rights issues at the Commission. Karen literally wrote the book on improved communications for people with disabilities. She's been a nationally respected advocate, a legal expert in the field, and now an energetic official at the FCC dedicated to continuing our work on these issues.

I'd also like to thank Karen for the work that she and others did to plan today's wonderful events, including Joel Gurin, Sherrese Smith, Roger Goldblatt, Pam Gregory, Elizabeth Lyle, and other FCC staff.

By implementing the ADA and other laws that followed, the FCC has helped set the stage for better and better innovations in communication. We've adapted our rules year by year to help inventors and entrepreneurs make the best possible use of new technologies.

We've come a long way from the early days of TTY relay service. Now we have video relay service, which the Commission is fully committed to supporting, and which has enabled deaf people to communicate naturally using American Sign Language. We've had great advances in speech-to-speech service, captioned telephones, hearing-aid compatible handsets, and the most thorough closed-captioning program of any nation in the world.

Just look at a few examples of progress:

- Television, a medium that was closed off to people who could not hear for its first 50 years, became fully accessible to deaf and hard of hearing people with the creation of closed captioning.
- The telephone – closed off to people with hearing loss for 100 years – became accessible first through relay services, and later through hearing aid technologies.
- Talking caller ID machines now allow people who are blind to figure out whether they want to answer the phone, during dinner or otherwise – just like the rest of us who can see who is calling.
- And perhaps most remarkable of all is the newest phone technology that allows people who can't see, to use audio prompts to navigate touch screen menus on smart phones.

The FCC has helped spur this investment and innovation through a public-private partnership. We've laid out goals and ground rules to help everyone from large corporations to creative startups that are working to improve communications access. American business has taken up the challenge.

More and more companies are starting to serve what they now rightly see is a very large market of more than 50 million Americans with disabilities. That's one out of every six people in our country. Both American and foreign companies are working on new products for the more than 600 million people with disabilities worldwide.

These new products and services don't just help people with disabilities – they can help the mainstream public as well. How many hearing people now use closed captions on the treadmill at the gym, or in a crowded, noisy bar? How many people would appreciate cell phones that are easier to use – not just for people with physical limitations, but for anyone? It's a simple concept: When you innovate for one group, you benefit all.

The ADA has helped millions of people navigate the physical world. Now these same people need to navigate the virtual world as well.

In the National Broadband Plan that we announced in March, the FCC set out a comprehensive list of recommendations to help more Americans use broadband and realize its benefits. Several of those recommendations addressed broadband access for people with disabilities.

We know that only 42 percent of Americans with disabilities now use broadband at home, compared to 65 percent of the entire population. People with disabilities are at an unacceptable disadvantage in connecting with the world today.

The National Broadband Plan has several important recommendations to help people with speech, hearing, or vision disabilities access the Web – both at home and when they're using a mobile device.

Today we're moving forward on implementation of a number of these recommendations. For example, this morning the FCC issued a Public Notice seeking public input on how wireless devices – including smart phones – can be made accessible to people who are blind or have low vision, including those who are both deaf and blind.

That public notice follows up on a workshop we held in April, which showcased exciting new ideas for making wireless service more accessible. Our Broadband Action Agenda also includes looking at real-time text, Internet video programming, and other important new areas.

Now, at this event, I'm proud to launch the Accessibility and Innovation Initiative, which is one of the most exciting and promising projects the Commission is leading right now and a key recommendation of our National Broadband Plan. We're going to bring together everyone who has a stake in helping improve communications for the disability community: those from industry, academia, government, business, and people from the community itself.

In partnership with the White House and Department of Commerce, we're holding the very first brainstorming session for this Initiative this afternoon after this event. That brainstorming group is going to come up with a list of problems in access and send out a challenge to inventors and entrepreneurs to come up with solutions in a short amount of time.

We'll be following up in the months ahead with workshops and events across the country. In October, we'll be launching a special challenge on cloud-computing solutions for access, together with the Coleman Institute and Silicon Flatirons.

One item we'll be looking at: how can digital technologies help children with disabilities with their education? Last week Blair Levin and Erik Garr, two leaders of our National Broadband Plan effort, drew attention to the opportunities of shifting to e-readers from paper textbooks. E-textbooks that can be personalized can bring enormous opportunities for children with disabilities – for example, children with hearing challenges, or autism. Our initiative will work with all stakeholders to explore seizing these opportunities.

I'm also pleased today to announce the FCC Chairman's Awards for Advancements in Accessibility that we'll award next July at the next anniversary of the ADA. These awards will recognize the best achievements in the field by individuals and companies in the private and public sectors.

Starting today, you can read about this awards contest, and everything else the FCC is doing in this area, at our new website for the Accessibility and Innovation Initiative. Among many other features, this website will have a problem-solving commons – a place where everyone with an interest in communications access can meet to share creative ideas. You can find it at www.broadband.gov/accessibilityandinnovation.

Today's event itself embodies the kind of collaboration that we at the FCC hope to promote. Here we've all come together: people from the disability community, business, government, and the general public.

Another example of our commitment to collaboration: as many of you know, the Senate Commerce Committee recently approved disabilities legislation focused on modernizing accessibility standards for the latest technologies. We, at the FCC, look forward to working with the Committee and Congress as a resource on their efforts.

We also look forward to working with all of you in the years ahead to meet the full promise of the ADA: that every American, with or without a disability, should be able to enjoy full and equal access to the latest and best communications technologies.

I hope you'll all take time to check out the exhibits we have here from more than 40 companies. It's an inspiring look at the future of communications.

And now, as a reminder of just how far we've come in the last 20 years, I'm happy to introduce a short video from the FCC on the progress that's been achieved in the first two decades of the ADA. I hope you enjoy it.