

July 25, 2005

The Honorable Ted Stevens  
U.S. Senate  
522 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Stevens:

On this 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the enactment of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), we are writing to urge you to make it the highest priority of the Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee to update the 1996 Telecommunications Act to foster the more rapid deployment of broadband technology to all Americans, and in doing so, to include provisions that ensure access to communications for persons with disabilities.

Fifteen years ago, the ADA was a momentous achievement for persons with disabilities. In 1996, Congress also made a significant statement when it enacted Section 255 of the Communications Act, which ensured for the first time that telecommunications equipment and services were to be accessible to, and useable by, people with disabilities. Today, as you develop comprehensive legislation to update the 1996 Telecommunications Act to encourage further communications innovations and its widespread deployment, we urge you to do so with the needs of persons with disabilities clearly in mind.

What to many people are "nice to have" features are to us necessities of basic communications. Yet, the potential for us has only barely been touched. With the promise of ubiquitous true broadband service, we can imagine a day when the life functions of many people with disabilities are truly revolutionized.

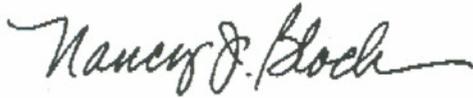
A report issued last month, Two-Way Technologies: A History of the Struggle to Communicate, by Hofstra University professor Frank Bowe, highlights the urgency with which the disability community views policy making to bring technology and law into coherence. Increasingly, the quality of life for many of people with disabilities rests on decisions that only Congress can make. Among them: shouldn't people with disabilities be assured of accessibility to services delivered over broadband connections as they now are to the same services offered over traditional public switched telephone networks?

Technology has advanced so rapidly that the ways in which Americans communicate bear little resemblance to the ways in which the 1996 Telecommunications Act envisioned that they would.

- o Instant Messaging is now used by tens of millions of Americans every day. It first appeared in 1996.
- o A staggering 160 million Americans now use cell phones daily. There were wireless phones in 1996, but those phones did not include cameras and certainly did not receive and display video.
- o Broadband – always-on, high-speed, voice/video/data – is now used by about one-third of American households. Among them are deaf people who actually sign to each other over phone lines. The 1996 Act barely even mentions broadband.

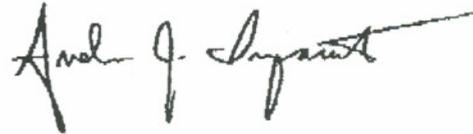
We celebrate the 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the ADA, and as we do so we look forward to working with you to achieve greater advances for all Americans with disabilities. Again, we urge you to develop and pass comprehensive telecom legislation that will include provisions that ensure access for persons with disabilities, building on the legacy of the ADA.

Sincerely,



Nancy J. Bloch

National Association of the Deaf



Andrew Imparato

American Association of People with Disabilities



Mark Breimhorst

World Institute on Disability



Melanie Brunson

American Council for the Blind