



MEDIA RELEASE

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MINISTER PLEDGES NATIONAL RELAY SERVICE (NRS) WILL DELIVER WHAT AUSTRALIA NEED!

Minister for Communications and the Arts, in response to an Australian Sign Language video question on the ABC's Q and A program last night, pledged that Australians who are deaf, deafblind, hearing and/or speech impaired will have the service they need when the Government implements the next NRS contract.

The question, submitted by Deaf Australia CEO Kyle Miers, on behalf of coalition of NRS user organisations, asked Minister Fifield how the government would be able to assure the NRS community that no services would be cut back given that the current cost of providing the NRS is in excess of \$32 million per annum and the recently released NRS request for tender has capped the service funding at \$22 million per annum for the next 3 years. Questioning how a 30% reduction in funding can ensure that the services will continue on a 24/7 basis.

While Minister Fifield stated that there are new and merging mainstream technologies that many NRS users may be able to access instead of relying on the NRS, Mr Miers has today said, "People with disability are already using mainstream technologies as a first choice", adding "the high usage of NRS services indicates that there are no adequate mainstream services suitable for many NRS users'. The NRS service with the highest take-up is captioned telephony where a hard-of-hearing person speaks their part of the conversation and reads the text of the other person's response in addition to using their residual hearing. Mr Miers pointed out that there is no mainstream equivalent service for these NRS users and that few alternative technologies provide the real-time equivalence of a phone call.

Mr Miers also said that Minister Fifield incorrectly stated that the NRS has always been funded at \$22 million per annum. "The \$22 million funding cap was introduced in the current contract. Previously, the NRS was funded on a cost-recovery basis funded by the NRS levy impost on Telecommunications providers" said Mr Miers, noting that the Government has covered the funding shortfall in part from a drastic reduction in the NRS outreach service. Mr Miers asserts that "The NRS, as an essential communications bridge for many Australians with disability, needs to be provided on a cost-recovery basis and not capped at some arbitrary amount".

In a follow-up question on the Q and A program Mr Miers asked Minister Fifield if he would pledge on National television that NRS users would not be worse -off as a result of the current tender process. The Minister answered in the affirmative, pledging that NRS users would have the service they need.

Mr Miers and the NRS community will be pressing the Government to ensure that it delivers on the Ministers pledge.

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National Relay Service background brief

- The NRS is a communications service for Australians who are Deaf, hearing and/or speech impaired. Introduced in 1995 under the Universal Service Obligation (USO) as an alternative for people who are deaf, hearing and/or speech impaired to have access to a standard telephone service (STS);
- The NRS allows people who are Deaf, hearing and/or speech impaired to use a number of different technologies to make and receive phone calls with the broader community;
- It is provided through contracts managed by the Commonwealth and funded by the Telecommunications Industry Levy (TIL);
- The current contract has been extended to January 2019 while the Government runs a request for tender for the next contract period;
- The current funding envelope was set at \$22 M per annum in 2013 at the same time as the Commonwealth introduced a number of new relay services – SMS relay, captioned relay and video relay (for Auslan users). All of the current relay services are available 24/7 365 with the exception of the video relay service which operates between 7 am and 6pm M-F;
- The last financial year the cost of the service was in excess of \$32 M due to the uptake of the new relay services introduced since 2013; and
- The Government tender for the next 3-year contract is capped at the 2013 amount of \$22 M per annum including GST. This is a 30% reduction in the cost of the current services.

In discussions and consultation with the Government and the Department of Communications over the past several months the NRS user community have repeatedly been assured that there will be no reduction in services.

This seems very unlikely given the \$22 Million cap the Government has mandated.

The tender requirements only mandate that text access to 000 be provided on a 24/7/365 basis leaving the possibility that current 24/7/365 services will not be available at all times.

There is also no mandate that the video relay service – the only way for many Deaf Australians to make and receive phone calls – will be available at all times, in fact it may not be available for the limited hours that it is currently being provided.