

GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF NORTH CAROLINA
SESSION 2003

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SENATE BILL 975

Short Title: Accessible Electronic Info Act/Blind/Disab'd. (Public)

Sponsors: Senators Dorsett; Dannelly, Jenkins, Kinnaird, Lucas, Malone, Metcalf, Moore, and Purcell.

Referred to: Appropriations/Base Budget.

April 3, 2003

A BILL TO BE ENTITLED

AN ACT TO ESTABLISH AN ACCESSIBLE ELECTRONIC INFORMATION SERVICE FOR BLIND AND DISABLED PERSONS AND TO APPROPRIATE FUNDS FOR THE SERVICE.

The General Assembly of North Carolina enacts:

SECTION 1. Article 7 of Chapter 62 of the General Statutes is amended by adding a new section to read:

"§ 62-157A. Accessible Electronic Information Act.

(a) Short Title. – This section shall be known and may be cited as the 'Accessible Electronic Information Act'.

(b) Legislative Findings. – The General Assembly finds and declares all of the following:

- (1) Thousands of citizens in the State have disabilities, including blindness or visual impairment, that prevent them from using conventional print material.
- (2) The State fulfills an important responsibility by providing books and magazines prepared in Braille, audio, and large-type formats made available to eligible blind and disabled persons.
- (3) The technology, transcription methods, and means of distribution used for these materials are labor-intensive and cannot support rapid dissemination to individuals in rural and urban areas throughout the State.
- (4) Lack of direct and prompt access to information included in newspapers, magazines, newsletters, schedules, announcements, or other time-sensitive materials limits literacy, participation, and educational opportunities for blind and disabled persons.
- (5) This limitation can best be overcome through use of high-speed computer and telecommunications technology, combined with

1 customized software, that provides a practical and cost-effective means
2 to convert electronic text-based information, including daily
3 newspapers, into synthetic speech suitable for statewide distribution
4 with modern telecommunications technology.

5 (6) Low-cost interstate telecommunications rates make distribution of
6 electronic text-based information to eligible users both efficient and
7 cost-effective for the State.

8 (7) Federal funds have been used to develop the technology and
9 infrastructure needed for statewide toll-free access to daily newspapers
10 and other timely information of local, State, and national interest
11 through a service known as NFB-NEWSLINE®, providing an efficient
12 and cost-effective means of reader registration, content acquisition,
13 and interstate telecommunications support.

14 (8) Use of this accessible electronic information service will enhance the
15 State's current efforts to meet the needs of blind and disabled citizens
16 for access to information that is otherwise available in print, thereby
17 reducing isolation and supporting full integration and equal access for
18 these individuals.

19 (c) Definitions. – The following definitions apply in this section:

20 (1) Accessible electronic information service. – A service where news and
21 other timely information, including newspapers, is provided to eligible
22 individuals from a multistate service center, using high-speed
23 computers and telecommunications technology for interstate
24 acquisition of content and rapid distribution in a form appropriate for
25 use by blind and disabled persons.

26 (2) Blind and disabled persons. – Those individuals who are eligible for
27 library loan services through the Library of Congress and the State
28 Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped pursuant to 36
29 C.F.R. § 701.10(b).

30 (3) Director. – The Director of the Division of Services for the Blind in
31 the Department of Health and Human Resources.

32 (4) Qualified entity. – An agency, instrumentality, or political subdivision
33 of the State or a nonprofit organization that:

34 a. Provides interstate access for eligible persons to read daily
35 newspapers producing audio editions by computer.

36 b. Provides a means of program administration or reader
37 registration on the Internet.

38 (d) Administration of Service. – The Division of Services for the Blind shall
39 administer the statewide accessible electronic information service, including its
40 establishment, operation, and promotion. The Director of the Division of Services for
41 the Blind shall enter into an agreement with a qualified entity to provide an accessible
42 electronic information service for eligible blind and disabled persons. The Division of
43 Services for the Blind shall plan for continuation of the service from year to year and
44 make maximum use of federal and other funds available by obtaining grant or in-kind

1 support from appropriate programs and securing access to low-cost interstate rates for
2 telecommunications by reimbursement or otherwise.

3 (e) Accessible Electronic Information Service Fund. – In order to support an
4 accessible electronic information service for blind and disabled persons:

5 (1) The Commission shall require all local exchange telecommunications
6 companies to impose a periodic surcharge on bills rendered to all local
7 exchange telecommunications company subscribers.

8 (2) The Commission, in consultation with the Director of the Division of
9 Services for the Blind, shall annually determine the amount of the
10 surcharge based on the amount of funding necessary to support the
11 accessible electronic information service.

12 (3) The amount of the surcharge may be computed as a portion of any
13 other surcharge required under existing law. In no event shall the
14 surcharge exceed any existing surcharge by more than one cent (1¢)
15 each line each month.

16 (4) Local exchange telecommunications companies shall remit the amount
17 received from the surcharge to the Director of the Division of Services
18 for the Blind less any amounts allowed for administration in
19 accordance with a schedule determined by the Commission in
20 consultation with the Director of the Division of Services for the
21 Blind.

22 (f) Power to Regulate. – The Commission shall have the same power to regulate
23 the operation of the accessible electronic information service as it has to regulate any
24 public utility subject to the provisions of this Chapter."

25 **SECTION 2.** There is appropriated from the General Fund to the
26 Department of Health and Human Services the sum of seventy thousand dollars
27 (\$70,000) for the 2003-2004 fiscal year to be used by the Division of Services for the
28 Blind to establish an accessible electronic information service for blind and disabled
29 persons in this State.

30 **SECTION 3.** This act becomes effective July 1, 2003.