



WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF MICHAEL J. ELLIS
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For the
Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee

“Leveraging Higher Education to Achieve Employment Outcomes for People who are
Deaf or Hard of Hearing”

Chairman Harkin, Ranking Member Enzi and Committee Members:

Thank you for this opportunity to testify before the Committee as you examine opportunities for positive employee outcomes for individuals who are Deaf or hard of hearing. Through our discussion, I plan to share my experience as both an individual who lives with a disability, hearing loss, and as an executive of the business community that has helped Sprint deliver services to the Deaf, hard of hearing and speech disabled community for the past 20 years.

My personal journey of living with deafness as a disability began at the age of 14 and then again at the age of 20 as a result of diving accidents. With the most profound hearing loss occurring one week prior to my senior year of college, I adjusted my life with little to no support or any type of reasonable accommodation. However, I didn't let deafness define me. One of the very first professionals in the field of deafness that I met was Dr. Gerald Buckley, current president of the National Technical Institute of the Deaf (NTID). Gerry encouraged me to use my education, recent hearing loss and personal experience to further my education as a graduate student. So I applied and was accepted to Gallaudet University. Becoming a graduate student at Gallaudet was a positive, life changing event. While at Gallaudet, I was taught how to embrace my disability and turn my hearing loss into a positive. After graduating from Gallaudet with a M.A. degree, I worked in the field of human services for 5 years before I joined the ranks at Sprint. At the time, Sprint recognized me as someone that understood the challenges of living with hearing loss and the related barriers and felt that my experience, education and training could help Sprint provide better services to people with disabilities. Thus, almost 20 years ago, Sprint hired and empowered me to be a part of a solution that broke down barriers via our relay services. I now work side-by-side with many other Deaf and hard of hearing employees at Sprint where we provide functionally

equivalent telecommunications access for people who are Deaf, hard of hearing or speech disabled in all 50 States, Washington D.C. and Puerto Rico.

As the National Director of Sprint Relay, I am responsible for nationwide domestic and international telecommunications relay services, including traditional 711 services, wireless, CapTel, relay conference captioning, internet and video relay customer applications. I currently serve on the Foundation Board for NTID and Gallaudet University's Board of Associates.

Overview of Sprint involvement with the Deaf and hard of hearing community

Sprint has a long history of providing products and services to the Deaf and hard of hearing community, as well as being an employer who enthusiastically employs a workforce that is diverse from many perspectives. Sprint is an Equal Opportunity Employer, which includes employing those individuals with disabilities. The company embraces a diverse and inclusive workforce. At Sprint, we believe diversity fosters creativity, sensitivity and growth. Through diversity we have been able to grow our product portfolio to be more inclusive.

Sprint has developed partnerships and/or fostered mutually beneficial relationships with higher education institutions, such as Gallaudet, NTID, California State University – Northridge (CSUN), and regional, state and local Deaf and hard of hearing organizations. Many of the people behind Sprint products and services for the Deaf and hard of hearing community are also people that live with deafness or hearing loss, every day. These employees are actively involved in serving on the boards of organizations such as NTID and Gallaudet. We also hire Deaf and hard of hearing summer interns for 10-week assignments which provides them with the experience they can apply in future studies and employment. Through the personal experiences of our employees and knowledge gained from our partnerships, Sprint is able to better relate to and support the communities we serve.

Our efforts to foster inclusion in both the workplace and marketplace have resulted in Sprint being recognized by numerous external organizations.

The Sprint Foundation supports the Deaf and hard of hearing community through grant support for K -12 education programs targeted at improving middle school student achievement in science, technologies, engineering and mathematics (STEM).

Sprint technology for employees and customers

Sprint supports and promotes accessibility for our employees and customers who are Deaf or hard of hearing. Iconic and award-winning devices and relay services provide a great wireless value for people who are Deaf, hard of hearing or have a speech disability. These services include:

- **Data only plans:** includes email, internet access, instant messaging, text and picture messaging (SMS)
- **Hearing aid compatible wireless phones**
- **TTY compatible phones** allow people with hearing and/or speech loss to make and receive telephone calls
- **711 dialing to access** in-state Telecommunications Relay Service (TRS)
- **Relay services include** traditional TRS, Sprint IP Relay, Sprint Video Relay, CapTel, Relay conferencing captioning, Sprint Relay with AIM and Web CapTel
- **Sprint Relay Video Customer Service (VCS)** enables Deaf or hard of hearing customers to contact a Sprint representative who uses American Sign Language

Sprint also offers a comprehensive array of technology to our Deaf and hard of hearing employees. Many of these go beyond the definition of “reasonable accommodation” that was crafted as part of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Described below are just a few examples of how we provide accessibility from the application process to performing essential functions of the job that allow our employees to enjoy equal benefits and privileges of a social, economic and employment environment.

- Phone amplifiers
- American Sign Language staff and contract interpreters are available in a variety of settings and locations.
- A multi-point video software tool much like “Hollywood Squares” is used to allow up to 40 Deaf and hearing employees, contractors and consultants to simultaneously see each other while using an ASL interpreter and/or audio conference technology. The technology is made available via a licensing agreement with Nefsis.
- Sprint offers the same accessible technology to our employees that we offer our customers (see above).

On any given day, an employee at Sprint that happens to be Deaf or hard of hearing has the same access to meetings, conference calls, email, texting and socializing as their hearing counterparts. He/she may use a wireless device with a forward-facing camera to connect with a video interpreter that will call a hearing co-worker to arrange for a meeting later in the day. He/she will then use Nefsis, a multi-point video tool from their computer with built-in webcam to see conference call participants as well as an ASL interpreter. In the afternoon he/she may take a training course through Sprint’s i-learn curriculum and the content will be captioned. Total inclusion and accessibility is available, breaking down barriers to create a very productive work experience at Sprint.

The Americans with Disabilities Act provides equal employment opportunities for those individuals with a disability who can, either with or without a reasonable accommodation, perform the essential functions of a position they have or are seeking. The law provides for an interactive process between the employer and the employee or applicant to determine what an effective and reasonable accommodation might be. Many individuals with disabilities require no accommodation to perform the positions they hold, but they may need an accommodation for a different position.

In addition to a flexible work environment that includes a number of technology and mobility tools, Sprint provides employees with access to a robust process to address their needs for an accommodation to ensure their productivity. This not only ensures that we are fully compliant with regulations but can positively impact a temporary disability, ongoing need or an employee’s return to work after a health event. The company grants over 1000 formal accommodations every year.

The confidential accommodation process is an interactive one between an employee and his/her manager. The process provides resources to employees and their managers regarding their role in the process. Additionally, Employee Experience Managers are available to consult with both employees and management as necessary.

Finally, Sprint acknowledges that providing our employees with disabilities reasonable accommodations is an integral part of who we are as a company. The general predisposition under our reasonable accommodation process is to provide an appropriate and effective accommodation if at all possible when an employee presents their request. Our main goal is for Sprint employees to be productive and high-performing thus enabling them to provide the best possible service to our customers.

Higher education’s role

Higher education institutions can help educate corporations, both big and small, by reaching out and inviting corporations to participate in paid internship placements, job mentoring programs and transitional support programs. As part of these career placement programs, higher education institutions could offer the corporations consultative and training programs on how to provide reasonable accommodation to

current and prospective employees who are Deaf or hard of hearing. This consultation and training support should help employers address the types of environmental, communicative and attitudinal barriers that can be common in the workplace. Helping companies overcome and address these attitudinal barriers about deafness and disabilities in general is a critical step towards inclusion. In the Deaf community, leaders such as I. King Jordan, have long emphasized that “Deaf people can do anything but hear.” This is so true and can only be fully understood if Deaf and hard of hearing prospective employees are given a chance to prove it. Higher education institutions can work with corporations to address attitudes that people with disabilities “can’t” just because they are different from the non-disabled.

Additionally, higher education programs can help further prepare Deaf or hard of hearing students by enabling them to become self-advocates. This can be done by providing students with information regarding reasonable accommodations available to them under Title 1 of The Americans with Disabilities Act. Based on my experience, graduates would benefit from more training and experience to effectively and continuously advocate for themselves. They need more training and support on this critical success factor if they are to achieve sustainability in an increasingly competitive world of work. Students should engage the employer prior to entering the interview process, discuss any accommodations that have proven successful in the past and utilize the accommodation process the employer has provided understanding that each employer is unique and must evaluate the situation on a case by case basis. This facilitates the employer being prepared for the needs of the applicant and will improve the student's chances of successfully finding not just a job but a career.

An expansion of the current Postsecondary Education Programs Network (PEPNet) to focus on transition from higher education to the world of employment would also be beneficial. The PEPnet Regional Centers are currently supported by contracts with the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, and Office of Special Education Programs. PEPNet's “Getting a Job! Tools, Techniques, and Trainings” website was developed and designed for students who are Deaf or hard of hearing and transitioning to work as well as for the professionals who work with them. The website offers a series of topical videos accompanied by supporting documents and related materials, educator's guides and role model videos. For more information, go to: <http://www.pepnet.org/getajob/>

In sum, higher education should work in cooperation with the Rehabilitation Services Administration and the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education, to maximize resources, centralize funding and stimulate better preparation programs for prospective employees who are Deaf or hard of hearing.

Conclusion

My personal experience as someone who lives with a disability and overcomes the challenges of hearing loss along with my involvement in the Deaf and hard of hearing community and my corporate experience developing services for this community has led me to believe it will take a strong partnership between higher education institutions, corporations and Congress to achieve more favorable employment outcomes for people who are Deaf or hard of hearing.