

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-15-409](#), a report to the Honorable Jeff Sessions, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

TRS allows persons with hearing or speech disabilities to place and receive telephone calls, often with the help of a communications assistant who acts as a translator or facilitator between the two parties having the conversation. FCC is the steward of the TRS program and the federal TRS Fund, which reimburses TRS providers.

GAO was asked to examine FCC's management of the TRS program. This report examines, among other things, (1) changes in TRS services and costs since 2002, (2) FCC's TRS performance goals and measures and how they compare with key characteristics of successful performance goals and measures, and (3) the extent to which the design of the program's internal control system identifies and considers program risks. GAO analyzed 2002 through 2014 service and cost data, compared TRS performance goals and measures to key characteristics of successful performance goals and measures, compared the design of the TRS's internal control system with GAO's standards for internal control, and interviewed officials from FCC, the 10 companies providing interstate TRS, and associations representing the deaf and hard of hearing.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that FCC develop specific TRS performance goals and measures, conduct a robust program risk assessment, and improve the communication of TRS's rules and procedures. In commenting on a draft of this report, FCC agreed with the recommendations and discussed actions it plans to take to implement them.

View [GAO-15-409](#). For more information, contact Mark Goldstein at (202) 512-2834 or goldsteinm@gao.gov.

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TELECOMMUNICATIONS RELAY SERVICE

FCC Should Strengthen Its Management of Program to Assist Persons with Hearing or Speech Disabilities

What GAO Found

Since 2002, the overall minutes of use and costs for the Telecommunications Relay Service (TRS) program have grown significantly due to the advent of Internet-based forms of TRS and increased usage by the deaf and hard-of-hearing communities. Program data show that total TRS minutes have grown from about 53 million in "rate year" (July-to-June) 2002–2003 to about 249 million in rate year 2013–2014, an almost five-fold increase. Total TRS costs have grown from about \$104 million in the 2002–2003 rate year to about \$818 million in the 2013–2014 rate year, an almost eight-fold increase. These increases stem from the popularity of new forms of TRS that use the Internet—such as Video Relay Service (VRS) and Internet Protocol Captioned Telephone Service—and the growth in consumers' use of them, according to FCC, some providers, and one consumer group that GAO interviewed.

The purpose of the TRS program under federal law is to provide persons who are deaf or hard of hearing or have a speech disability with telecommunications services that are "functionally equivalent" to those provided to persons without a hearing or speech disability, but FCC has not established specific performance goals to guide its efforts. FCC has established some performance measures for TRS in the form of minimum performance standards for TRS providers, such as regulations requiring that TRS communications assistants must answer 85 percent of TRS calls (except VRS) within 10 seconds; however, these standards are not linked to higher-level performance goals. By establishing performance measures before establishing performance goals, FCC may be spending time and resources on efforts not well linked to key dimensions of the program. Because of the lack of specific TRS performance goals—and specific performance measures crafted around those goals—it is difficult to determine in an objective, quantifiable way if TRS is making available functionally equivalent telecommunications services, and it is difficult for FCC to manage the program in a proactive, results-oriented manner.

FCC has designed some internal controls for the TRS program, but lacks a comprehensive internal-control system to manage program risks. To address fraud, FCC has designed numerous controls to address compliance risks. For example, FCC eliminated the ability of TRS providers to use subcontractors in 2011 and strengthened TRS's provider-certification rules and user registration rules in 2013. Internal control standards call for the completion of a risk assessment to identify and analyze program risks. FCC's last risk assessment, in 2013, was a one-page document that did not comprehensively identify programmatic risks. A robust risk assessment would help FCC identify risks to providing functionally equivalent services and inform the development of the overall internal-control system. Internal control standards also call for effective external communications to groups that can impact the program, such as TRS's users and providers. FCC's program policies are spread across numerous reports and orders. Six of 10 TRS providers told us they experienced difficulties understanding TRS rules. FCC has sought comment on how best to reorganize its rules to improve clarity, but has not yet adopted any such changes. Doing so could improve FCC's communication of TRS rules and procedures to the deaf community and the companies providing services.