

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) and Answers on Video Relay Services (VRS)

(Updated 7/6/2014)

What is VRS?

Video Relay Services (VRS) permit a deaf or hard of hearing person to place a phone call to, or receive a phone call from, hearing persons. VRS consists of a video connection between the d/hh person and the VRS provider that permits them to communicate in ASL, and a separate audio (traditional telephone) connection with the non-ASL (oral) speaker. A VRS provider may be located anywhere and is automatically connected to calls to/from the d/hh person's phone. The VRS system permits an ASL speaker to communicate with any non-ASL speaker over the non-ASL speaker's telephone without the non-ASL speaker having any special equipment.

Are VRS and VRI the same thing?

No. Video Remote Interpreting (VRI) is not the same as VRS. They are intended for totally different purposes, they function differently, are paid for differently, and regulated differently. The Michigan Deaf Persons' Interpreters Act and Rules apply only to VRI.

What are VRS and VRI used for?

VRS enables a d/db/hh person to communicate with others who are at different locations. VRS is essentially an accommodation that provides equal communication access to the publicly available telephone system.

VRI is intended to accommodate communication between one (or more) hearing and one (or more) d/db/hh person(s) who are in the same location. VRI is essentially an accommodation intended to provide equal access to a publicly available in person service like a medical or other business, non-profit or government entity. For example, a person might call a doctor's office to make an appointment using VRS, and then be provided VRI by the doctor at the appointment itself.

How do VRS and VRI function differently?

When using VRS a d/db/hh person places or accepts a call using a two-way video connection and is automatically connected to an interpreter at a remote location. The d/db/hh VRS user signs to the interpreter on the screen who then voices whatever is said to the hearing party who is connected to the interpreter using a traditional voice telephone connection. The same interpreter also listens to the hearing person's statements and signs them over the video connection to the d/db/hh participant. VRS requires that the d/db/hh person have (or have access to) special video equipment (including camera and screen) and a high speed data link over which to communicate with the interpreter. This equipment is typically located at his or her home and/or business, but may also be mobile or provided at a location as a public service. It requires absolutely no special equipment or even prior knowledge of the service's existence from hearing participants.

When using VRI, an off-site interpreter is connected to both (all) parties by a single integrated audio/visual connection, and approximates interpreting as would take place if he or she were interpreting in person -- except that they are communicating with the ASL user via the video, and the oral speaker over the audio, portions of the equipment and connection. VRI requires that the business or service provider who is providing the accommodation possess the necessary equipment. Like VRS this includes a high speed data link, video camera, and screen. Unlike VRS the special equipment used also requires integrated two-way audio (which for VRS is a separate standard telephone connection).

How are VRS and VRI funded and regulated?

VRS is fully funded and regulated by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) as part of the national telephone communications system. VRS Vendors supply 'video phones' to qualified persons at no charge and then bill the FCC for interpreting calls placed on their devices. The FCC (Federal Communications Commission) covers the costs of VRS calls through an Interstate Telecommunications Relay Fund that consists of funds collected through other phone service fees. In addition to funding VRS, the FCC has sole regulatory authority over it. VRS is thus an accommodation providing equal communication access to the telephone system that is paid for and regulated as part of that system. FCC rules also specifically forbid providers from interpreting conversations between ASL and oral speaking persons in the same location because it is intended only for telephone calls.

The costs for VRI, on the other hand, are borne by the person or entity that is providing the accommodation (called the appointing authority by Michigan law). The necessary equipment may be purchased, or rented from a VRI vendor, and it must be obtained by an appointing authority prior to being needed. The appointing authority is also responsible for whatever fees the VRI vendor charges for the interpreting they provide. Thus, for instance, if a medical office wishes to use VRI it must procure the equipment and pay the bill for the interpreting services provided. However, it must be noted that the appointing authority would also be required to pay the costs associated with providing a live interpreter if VRI was not being utilized, so this burden is not an additional one. The use of VRI is not federally regulated in the way VRS is, because its focus is not on providing access to communication taking place over a federally regulated system like the telephones, but to communication taking place between people located in the same room. Because VRI is an accommodation provided an appointing authority covered by state law, VRI regulation falls mainly to the states. (Thus the Michigan rules require that appointing authorities provide interpreters for communications taking place in Michigan must use only interpreters who meet Michigan interpreter qualification requirements, regardless of where the interpreter might be sitting when he or she does so.)

Other than the differences in the way they are used, structured, funded and regulated, is there any other difference between VRI and VRS that is significant in terms of disability law?

A very important one. Disability law is intended to provide *equal* access, in this instance equal communication access. While this may not at first blush seem like an additional distinction to a hearing person, think about the difference in the quality of a conversation held with someone over the telephone and in person. Consider especially why one might choose to meet in person for a particular discussion rather than talk over the phone. *Equal*

communication access is intended to provide a person who communicates in ASL with the same opportunity to communicate with their doctor during an appointment as is available to those not needing the accommodation. While difficult to quantify, this difference does indicate that a somewhat heightened degree of scrutiny is required for equipment used in VRI that is selected, maintained and controlled by someone other than the d/db/hh person relying on it, than upon the equipment that person has set up in their own home or office in the way best suited for their needs.

Do the Michigan's Deaf Persons' Interpreters Act and/or the Michigan Qualified Interpreter Rules apply to VRS interpreters?

No, interpreters working as video relay interpreters for VRS companies are covered only by federal laws and regulations (which preempt a state's ability to regulate this part of telephone services). Such interpreters therefore do not need to register in Michigan and are not regulated by the Michigan Act or Rules when performing such services, regardless of where the interpreter or any of the participants are located. However, the same interpreter would be subject to both the Act and Rules (and all other applicable state or federal laws) if they provide any non-VRS interpreting service in Michigan.

Can an interpreter who provides VRS services also provide in person and/or VRI interpreting in Michigan?

Yes. There is nothing prohibiting a person from providing interpreting services by multiple means; however they must be certified by the Michigan Division on Deaf and Hard of Hearing in order to be recognized as qualified to provide any interpreting service in Michigan other than VRS and they are covered by the Michigan law and rules when doing so. An interpreter who is certified as a qualified interpreter in Michigan should be aware that while breaches of appropriate interpreter conduct related to VRS cannot be directly disciplined by Michigan in a way that limits the interpreter's VRS practice, the conduct may still in some instances support disciplinary action related to the interpreter's Michigan certification. (Rule 70)

Is there any reason why an interpreter who provides only VRS services to persons in Michigan, should be concerned about what Michigan's rules say?

Yes. Even though the Michigan rules do not directly regulate VRS interpreters, a VRS interpreter's conduct, like a criminal record, may be considered should that interpreter later apply for Michigan certification under the Deaf Persons' Interpreters Act, even if the ethical and/or criminal violation occurred while that interpreter was working exclusively in the VRS setting.