

BEFORE THE HOUSE HUMAN SERVICES  
AND HOUSING COMMITTEE

House Bill 3273

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The Public Utility Commission of Oregon (PUC) recognizes the innovative and unprecedented access the National Federation of the Blind Newsline service provides individuals who are blind or print disabled. Although the PUC has taken a neutral position on this legislation, we support the Newsline service and its functional equivalency concept that these populations have access at any time and place to the same essential and entertaining news that other subscribers enjoy. We understand that funding for this important service is not stable; however, we have some concerns about using the Residential Service Protection Fund revenue to support this service.

The statewide audio newspaper service does not appear to be a telecommunications service as described in the Residential Service Protection Fund statute. Nor does it seem to fulfill the State's policy of ensuring affordable and adequate telephone service for all Oregonians. The Newsline appears to be like a subscription service that allows blind or print disabled individuals to access recorded news and information from newspapers, etc. by the use of a phone or secure website whereas the four Residential Service Protection Fund programs provide **fundamental access** to residential telecommunications service for Oregonians (i.e., low income phone bill subsidy, specialized phone equipment for the disabled including blind and low-vision, relay for disabled and non-disabled, and emergency medical certificates).

The current \$0.12 Residential Service Protection Fund rate is sufficient for the provision of current program services and is significantly below the \$0.35 statutory cap. However, responsible management of the fund requires that we plan for potential future increased program costs due to population growth or changes in the cost of specialized telephone equipment. Other factors affecting the surcharge rate include but are not limited to potential Federal Communication Commission mandates that may increase low-income phone bill subsidy and relay costs. Changing the law to allocate or divert surcharge revenue for other purposes may jeopardize the program's flexible funding mechanism.

Paying for the Newsline out of Residential Service Protection Fund revenue could potentially trigger other organizations in Oregon to seek Residential Service Protection Fund surcharge funding. Once a precedent is established for funding services that does not seem related to telecommunications access, it would be very difficult to exclude other groups.

Organizations may include:

- Hearing Loss Association of Oregon
- Oregon Association for the Deaf
- Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis Association - Oregon and SW Washington Chapter
- Multiple Sclerosis Society of Oregon
- Muscular Dystrophy Association in Portland
- Quadriplegics United Against Dependency in Portland
- Oregon Paralyzed Veterans of America
- Oregon Lions Sight and Hearing Foundation
- Northwest Human Services Connection Program
- Deaf Services of Southern Oregon
- Oregon Home Energy Assistance Team
- Community Action Partnership of Oregon

And these organizations are only a few of many groups that may seek Residential Service Protection Funds. Though worthy causes, if they were funded through the Residential Service Protection Fund surcharge, the funds required could easily exceed the \$0.35 cap. Again, the Public Utility Commission recognizes the need for consistent funding of this vital service for blind or print disabled Oregonians; however, the Public Utility Commission shares these concerns to avoid unintended consequences that may dilute or deviate from the intent of the core mission of the Residential Service Protection Fund law.