

Technology and Disability Policy Highlights

October 2017

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Overview

October 2017 was celebrated as National Disability Employment Awareness (NDEAM), and the contributions and achievements of people with disabilities were recognized and honored at events and in publications. The Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) 2017 theme for NDEAM was “Inclusion Drives Innovation.” In keeping with the theme, the Federal Communications Commission’s (FCC) Consumer and Governmental Affairs Bureau and Connect2HealthFCC Task Force convened the *Accessibility Innovations Expo*. Open to the public, the event was a unique showcase for pioneering accessible technology solutions to enhance the quality of life of people with disabilities. The FCC also approved revisions to the Hearing Aid Compatibilityregulations to ensure that millions of Americans with hearing loss can continue to benefit from modern audio technologies. The revisions, among other things, include new volume control standards for wireless mobile phones.

In Wireless RERC News, we are continuing data collection on our latest Survey of User Needs (SUN). The SUN is the Wireless RERC's cornerstone survey on wireless technology use by people with disabilities. User responses will help designers and engineers make new wireless devices and services that are accessible to and usable by people with a variety of disabilities. Data from the SUN also provides important information to the wireless industry, government regulators, and other researchers to help them make wireless technologies and services more accessible and useful. For example, results from our hearing aid compatibility (HAC) survey were used to inform recommendations concerning HAC volume control rules. Please [Take the Survey](http://b.gatech.edu/2yvCHnz) and [Share the Survey](http://www.wirelessrerc.gatech.edu/wireless-rerc-launches-latest-survey-user-needs) so we can continue to provide evidence-based policy and technology recommendations. To this end, the Wireless RERC submitted reply comments in response to the Federal Communications Commission’s *Notice of Inquiry Concerning Deployment of Advanced Telecommunications Capability to All Americans in a Reasonable and Timely Fashion* [**GN Docket No. 17-199**]. Comments supported the requirement for the presence of both fixed and mobile advanced telecommunications services in a community to be considered reasonably and timely delivered. Additionally, we agreed with recommendations to collect and report data on the demographic characteristics of unserved and underserved areas and specified that disability status be included as a variable.

This issue also includes news about virtual reality, the Disney Research Group, voice control technology, workplace inclusion, smart home technology for aging in place, and more.

**Click the headings below to link directly to a particular section.**

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Legislative Activities

**Congressional Letter to Chairman Pai Expresses Grave Concern**

October 5, 2017 – Forty-five members of the U.S. Congress signed a letter to FCC Chairman Ajit Pai expressing their grave concern about the FCC’s *Notice of Inquiry Concerning Deployment of Advanced Telecommunications Capability to all Americans in a Reasonable and Timely Fashion* [GN Docket No. 17-199]. The letter states their opposition to allowing mobile broadband to be considered equivalent to fixed broadband, and that any reduction in speeds would be deemed a regulatory fix to meet deployment benchmarks. “The policy changes contemplated by this NOI would run counter or the intent of Congress by attempting to fulfill that statutory obligation through definitional changes, rather than concrete action to connect more Americans online.” Further, the letter asserts that weakening the broadband deployment policy would have negative and differential impacts on people living in rural and tribal lands. “Simply moving the goalposts is not a policy solution, and weakening the definition of high-speed internet is a disservice to the rural and tribal communities the FCC has an obligation to serve.”

#### Additional Information:

[Read the Letter](https://huffman.house.gov/sites/huffman.house.gov/files/10.5.2017%20FCC%20Chariman%20Pai%20letter.pdf)

[<https://huffman.house.gov/sites/huffman.house.gov/files/10.5.2017%20FCC%20Chariman%20Pai%20letter.pdf>]

Regulatory Activities

**October 2017 was National Disability Employment Awareness Month**

The contributions and achievements of people with disabilities were recognized and celebrated during October’s National Disability Employment Awareness (NDEAM).  The Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) 2017 theme for NDEAM was “Inclusion Drives Innovation.” U.S. Secretary of Labor Alexander Acosta stated, “Americans of all abilities must have access to good, safe jobs… Smart employers know that including different perspectives in problem-solving situations leads to better solutions. Hiring employees with diverse abilities strengthens their business, increases competition, and drives innovation.” The Presidential Proclamation read, “We are committed to giving all Americans opportunities to gain the skills they need to fill the jobs of the 21st century. We know that includes Americans with disabilities, who want to work, provide for themselves and their families, contribute to their communities, and build up our Nation. We will stand alongside them to help turn their American Dreams into reality.”

#### Additional Information:

[Read the news release](https://www.dol.gov/newsroom/releases/odep/odep20170802)

[<https://www.dol.gov/newsroom/releases/odep/odep20170802>]

[Learn more about NDEAM history, obtain planning tools, and get materials at the link below.](https://www.dol.gov/odep/topics/ndeam/)

[<https://www.dol.gov/odep/topics/ndeam/>]

President Donald J. Trump Proclaims October 2017 as National Disability Employment Awareness Month

[<https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/09/29/president-donald-j-trump-proclaims-october-2017-national-disability>]

**FCC Revises Hearing Aid Compatibility Regulations**

October 24, 2017 - The FCC approved revisions to the Hearing Aid Compatibilityregulations to ensure that millions of Americans with hearing loss can continue to benefit from modern audio technologies. The revisions include a revised volume control standard for more precise audio processing and amplification on wireline telephones, as well as a Twenty-First Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act provision, to adopt within two years, the revised regulations for allVoice-Over-Internet-Protocol (VoIP) wireline phones. Further, the revisions specify for manufacturers and service providers that all newly certified wireless phones must also include the updated volume control standards.These revisions to the rules address one of the access barriers identified by people who use hearing aids. Respondents to the Wireless RERC’s 2014 HAC Survey indicated that volume control impacted the usability of their wireless handset. When asked, “What, if any, assistive technology do you use to make your cell phone hearing aid compatible?” 25% of respondents indicated they used technologies that enhance sound clarity and loudness: amplifier (7.5%), Neckloop (17.7%). Additionally, when asked, “*What, if anything, would you change about your cellphone to make it work better for you?*” 29% of responses to this open-ended question addressed loudness/volume control. The Wireless RERC is pleased to see that the FCC has put forth regulations that are responsive to the needs of consumers with disabilities. For more information on the FCC’s updated rules and regulations, please visit: <https://www.fcc.gov/general/hearing-aid-compatibility-and-volume-control>

#### Additional Information:

[FCC Adopts Rules to Improve Accessibility of Wireless & Wireline Phones by People With Hearing Loss](https://transition.fcc.gov/Daily_Releases/Daily_Business/2017/db1024/DOC-347380A1.pdf)

[<https://transition.fcc.gov/Daily_Releases/Daily_Business/2017/db1024/DOC-347380A1.pdf>]

Report and Order: [Word](https://apps.fcc.gov/edocs_public/attachmatch/FCC-17-135A1.docx) || [PDF](https://apps.fcc.gov/edocs_public/attachmatch/FCC-17-135A1.pdf)

[<http://transition.fcc.gov/Daily_Releases/Daily_Business/2017/db1101/FCC-17-135A1.pdf>]

**Accessibility Innovations Expo**

October 23, 2017 - The FCC’s Consumer and Governmental Affairs Bureau and Connect2HealthFCC Task Force convened the Accessibility Innovations Expo. Open to the public, the event was a unique showcase for pioneering technology solutions for improved quality of daily living in general, and health outcomes, specifically. The showcase featured many technologies from home automation and control to accessible entertainment and communications. Some of the technologies included Aira, AudioEye, Gallaudet University Technology Access Program, Project Ray, and Samsung and IrisVision. Commisisoner Mignon Clyburn remarked, “There are 56 million people in our country, and over a billion people globally, with one or more disabilities and with advancements in medicine and our focus on fitness, those numbers will continue to climb as we live longer. So the time is now to close the digital divide that too many people with disabilities face. We must ensure that technologies are accessible and that anyone and *everyone* is able to enjoy and benefit from the innovation over the horizon.”

#### Additional Information:

[FCC Accessibility Innovations Expo](https://www.fcc.gov/news-events/events/2017/10/fcc-accessibility-innovations-expo)

[https://www.fcc.gov/news-events/events/2017/10/fcc-accessibility-innovations-expo]

Wireless RERC Updates

**Wireless Independence Now (WIN) Accessibility Workshop**

October 28, 2017 - The Wireless RERC, in collaboration with AT&T, convened a WIN workshop in Atlanta, Georgia at the Atlantic Station AT&T store as part of their *Experience More* outreach campaign. Lex Gillette, brand ambassador, World Record Holder, Paralympic Medalist & World Champion was in attendance. Attendees heard Lex Gillette’s story and then stayed to learn about the accessibility features of their mobile devices. More WIN workshops are planned for venues across the United States. People with disabilities, their caregivers, friends, and family are all welcome. You do not need to be an AT&T customer to attend these free events. To ensure you are notified of the next WIN Workshop date and location subscribe to the Wireless RERC’s Consumer Newsletter *Re: Wireless* at the following link: <http://bit.ly/2j1SBS1> or text WIRELESSRERC to 22828.

**Wireless RERC on the Record: Deployment of Advanced Telecommunications Capabilities**

October 5, 2017 - The Wireless RERC submitted reply comments in response to the Federal Communications Commission’s Notice of Inquiry Concerning Deployment of Advanced Telecommunications Capability to All Americans in a Reasonable and Timely Fashion [**GN Docket No. 17-199**]. The Inquiry sought stakeholder input on a number of issues, not the least of which were considerations on how to evaluate and include (a) deployment and use of mobile services, (b) the demographic characteristics of unserved areas, and (c) deployment based on demographic characteristics, independent of geographical location. Reply comments supported and elaborated on initial comments submitted separately by the Colorado State Broadband Office (SBO), the Communications Workers of America (CWA), Public Knowledge, et al., National Electrical Manufacturers Association (NEMA), National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA), the Multicultural Media, Telecom and Internet Council (MMTC), and others. The Wireless RERC concurred with comments made in support of the need for both fixed and mobile advanced telecommunications services in a community to be considered reasonably and timely delivered. Regarding the hot-button topic, Public Knowledge, et al. poignantly stated that “Because consumers who can afford [emphasis added] both mobile and fixed connections typically purchase both, they should be seen as complementary, not substitute products, that the Commission measures separately…if two products were truly “interchangeable,” no one would buy both.[[1]](http://www.wirelessrerc.gatech.edu/wireless-rerc-record-deployment-advanced-telecommunications-capabilities" \l "_ftn1" \o ")”

Wireless RERC reply comments also addressed underserved populations and areas. Our knowledge of wireless technology access and the need for both mobile and fixed broadband to deliver robust services to people with disabilities led us to recommend that data be collected on availability and usage amongst people with disabilities. A successful broadband deployment and adoption strategy must take into account availability, affordability, and usability. Further compounding the issue, as it relates to rural areas, is that there is a higher prevalence of disability in rural America compared to urban areas.[[2]](http://www.wirelessrerc.gatech.edu/wireless-rerc-record-deployment-advanced-telecommunications-capabilities" \l "_ftn2" \o ")  Placing rural residents with disabilities in a double jeopardy with regard to access to broadband services and the benefits said access affords. That said, we agreed with recommendations to collect and report data on the demographic characteristics of unserved and underserved areas and specified that disability status be included as a variable.

Many more recommendations and comments were made regarding closing the digital divide, mobile edge content, accessibility, and affordability. To read the full document, select the following link below.

#### Additional Information:

[Read the Comments of the Wireless RERC](https://www.fcc.gov/ecfs/filing/1005674827669)

[<https://www.fcc.gov/ecfs/filing/1005674827669>]

**Take and Share the Survey of User Needs**

The Rehabilitation Engineering Research Center for Wireless Inclusive Technologies (Wireless RERC) announces the launch of its updated Survey of User Needs (SUN). The SUN is the Wireless RERC's cornerstone survey on wireless technology use by people with disabilities. It has been completed by over 7,500 consumers with disabilities since it was first launched in 2001.

This latest version represents the 6th version of the survey, which is updated periodically in response to changes in technology. In addition to questions about cell phone and tablet use, this latest version of the SUN collects information about wearables, "smart" home technologies, and other next-generation wirelessly connected devices. User responses will help designers and engineers make new wireless devices and services for people with disabilities. Data from the SUN also provides important information to the wireless industry, government regulators, and other researchers to help them make wireless technology more accessible and more useful to people with all types of disabilities.

If you have a disability, please consider taking this survey. If you know someone who has a disability, please forward the survey to them.

[Take the Survey](http://b.gatech.edu/2yvCHnz) and [Share the Survey](http://www.wirelessrerc.gatech.edu/wireless-rerc-launches-latest-survey-user-needs)

#### Additional Information:

[Take the Survey](http://b.gatech.edu/2yvCHnz)

[<http://b.gatech.edu/2yvCHnz>]

[Share the Survey](http://www.wirelessrerc.gatech.edu/wireless-rerc-launches-latest-survey-user-needs)

[http://www.wirelessrerc.gatech.edu/wireless-rerc-launches-latest-survey-user-needs]

Other Items of Interest

**Immersive Digital Therapy Uses VR to Reduce Phantom Pain in Patients with Spinal Cord Injury**

October 2017 - Using a pair of fake legs and virtual reality (VR) headsets, researchers from the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL) in Switzerland have found a way to alleviate the pain thatindividuals with paraplegia experience. Phantom pain is a phenomenon where people experience sensations (including pain) from a missing limb. The VR headset provided people with a spinal cord injury with a first-person view of their virtual legs. When researchers stimulated the false legs with taps and bumps, participants said that they felt them, and experienced less neuropathic pain. Olaf Blanke, lead author and Foundation Bertarelli Chair in Cognitive Neuroprosthetics, wrote, “We managed to provoke an illusion: the illusion that the subject’s legs were being lightly tapped, when in fact the subject was actually being tapped on the back, above the spinal cord lesion. When we did this, the subjects also reported that their pain had diminished.”

Polona Požeg, co-author of the study and neuroscientist at the Lausanne University Hospital (CHUV) wrote, “We tapped the back of the subject near the shoulders and the subject experienced the illusion that the tapping originated from the paralyzed legs. This is because the subject also received visual stimuli of dummy legs being tapped, viewed through the virtual reality headset, so the subject saw them immersively as his or her own legs.” The team is currently working on furthering their work into ‘immersive digital therapy’ to provide visuo-tactile simulations for patients with spinal injury and other people with mobility impairments.[Source: Hillary Sanctuary, Mediacom]

#### Additional Information:

[Virtual reality reduces phantom pain in paraplegics](https://actu.epfl.ch/news/virtual-reality-reduces-phantom-pain-in-paraplegic/)

[<https://actu.epfl.ch/news/virtual-reality-reduces-phantom-pain-in-paraplegic/>]

**Disney’s “Feeling Fireworks”**

October 22, 2017 - The Disney corporation has a long history of implementing accessibility features for the diverse needs of their guests. In a recent article from the Disney Research group, a team of researchers is testing “feeling fireworks” that would allow guests that are visually impaired to experience some of the sensations of a fireworks show tactically. Using directable water jets on a flexible screen, the team has been able to create subtle and dynamic effects that can be felt with the hand. Adaptable and cost-effective, the “feeling fireworks” offer guests that are visually impaired one more way to experience the magic of Disney.

#### Additional Information:

[Disney Research Working on “Feeling Fireworks” a Tactile Fireworks Show for Blind and Visually Impaired Guests](https://www.disneyresearch.com/publication/feeling-fireworks/)

[<https://www.disneyresearch.com/publication/feeling-fireworks/>]

**Virtual Assistant “Ubi” Paves the Way for Voice-only Access**

October 19, 2017 - In late 2012, Leor Grebler and a small team of engineers announced Ubi, a device that acts as a virtual assistant capable of making phone calls, sending and reading emails, and answering questions, commanded solely by the voice of the user. This voice-activated technology points towards innovations in technology accessibility for persons with disabilities. Devices such as the Ubi have the potential to allow for many of the functions of a mobile phone, such as call, email, and text while being specifically optimized for use with only speech and hearing. The user does not need to charge, see, or touch the device to be able to access its full functionality.

Now five years past the announcement, and with an expanded company from investments and financing, the Ubi team now runs UCIC (Unified Computer Intelligence Corporation), and works to bring their voice interaction expertise and software to other devices. This company represents a newly expanding industry of virtual assistant and voice interaction technologies, as evidenced by the success of Amazon’s Echo and Google’s Google Home. Now that Ubi has passed the torch of standalone virtual assistants to Echo and Google Home, UCIC works to bring voice-only, hands-free accessibility features to other devices. The UCIC continues to work with voice interaction technologies; the company now works with other computer hardware companies to improve voice accessibility features and strives towards “making interaction with technology seamless and natural.”

Additional Information:

[The Ubi on CTV News - October 19, 2012](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KVJQrt2B0IE&feature=youtu.be)

[<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KVJQrt2B0IE&feature=youtu.be>]

[About UCIC](http://www.ucic.io/about)

[<http://www.ucic.io/about>]

**Report Demonstrates Benefits of an Inclusive Workplace with Employees with Disabilities**

October 12, 2017 - A recent report by the Center for Talent Innovation (CTI), in partnership with the US Business Leadership Network (USBLN), finds that as many as 30% of white-collar professionals in the U.S. have some form of disability. Of this group, 62% reported having “invisible disabilities,” or disabilities that are not readily apparent. This statistic represents a large portion of the current workforce and demonstrates the current and potential contributions that employees with disabilities have been and can offer to their employers. The study, which was conducted online and over one-on-one interviews in the U.S. and five other countries demonstrates the benefits of a diverse, inclusive workplace. Executive Vice President and Director of Publications at CTI, Julia Taylor Kennedy wrote, “From our interviews and focus groups, we learned that people with disabilities are particularly innovative. In order to navigate the world with a disability, they have to problem-solve each day. They can contribute this gift to their employers, but only if they know they will be recognized and rewarded for it.”

Speaking to the traditional challenges of disability centric employment and engagement, Jenny Lay-Flurrie, Chief Accessibility Officer at Microsoft wrote, “How do we build great products and services with disability in mind? Disability is part of being human. We’re creating products for humans. We need to find ways for all humans to use our technology to support their work every day.” The report makes a strong argument for inclusive leadership and the fostering of skills of employees with disabilities. Laura Sherbin, co-president of CTI and a managing partner of Hewlett Consulting Partners, wrote, “now that we know employees with disabilities make up nearly a third of the white-collar workforce, employers simply can’t afford to ignore this crucial talent cohort. By understanding employees with disabilities—and listening to their ideas—companies can unlock enormous potential.” Source: USBLN.

Additional Information:

[A Global Untapped Talent Pool: Employees with Disabilities](http://usbln.org/global-untapped-talent-pool-employees-disabilities/)

[<http://usbln.org/global-untapped-talent-pool-employees-disabilities/>]

**New Technology Shows Potential of Virtual Reality to be Inclusive**

October 6, 2017 - Researchers at Binghamton University, led by professor of Computer Science Lijun Yin, are working to develop software that interprets facial recognition data in real-time to enhance the virtual reality (VR) experience. The team has successfully paired several facial expressions and movements in a simple VR game so that the user can navigate the virtual reality environment using movements of the head and mouth solely. New facial recognition features, such as the technology created by Professor Yin and his team, point to ways in which VR experiences can be inclusive of people with disabilities. Simple entertaining experiences like the researchers’ game that allowed for virtual looking around, walking, and eating can now be controlled using movements of the mouth rather than relying on coordinated movements of the arms and hands that excluded some individuals from taking part. As virtual reality communication applications such as interviews and training programs expand, this technology demonstrates the potential of an accessible interface option for greater inclusivity in the VR experience.

While this user interface is still in its infancy, there are many potential applications for more advanced programs and devices that could build on this technology. Seemingly the most direct use case is virtual “interviews and communication” that allows for live facial expressions to be communicated realistically. Professor Lin believes technologies like this will allow a virtual reality experience to seem more authentic, which could in turn increase development of VR the applications. Professor Yin and his team intend to make the technology work with more than one person at a time. The team believes that the most effective use of their technology will be in making collaborative and communicative programs more realistic. [Source: Global Accessibility News]

Additional Information:

[New technology uses mouth gestures to interact in virtual reality](http://globalaccessibilitynews.com/2017/10/06/new-technology-uses-mouth-gestures-to-interact-in-virtual-reality/)

[<http://globalaccessibilitynews.com/2017/10/06/new-technology-uses-mouth-gestures-to-interact-in-virtual-reality/>]

**Best Buy Invests Heavily in Smart Home Care for Aging Populations**

October 4, 2017 - Best Buy is one of the newest entrants into the smart home arena geared towards aging adults. The company is currently piloting a variety of smart devices in two of its stores that, through monitoring and awareness, hope to give older adults greater independence and healthier lives. Best Buy is offering an entry-level bundle of devices to assist with challenges of aging, with an additional option for a monthly monitoring service.

As reported in Bloomberg, by 2020 there will be approximately 117 million seniors in the U.S., being cared for by 45 million people. With costs of care continuing to increase, devices and services aimed at improving quality of life and maintaining independence are expected to be a burgeoning market. Best Buy has teamed up with UnitedHealth Group Inc., an insurance company with expertise in providing trained dietitians, therapists, and other personnel for the unique needs of aging populations. Speaking of the challenge of proving appropriate accommodations for this rapidly growing population, Dr. Rhonda Randall, Chief Medical Officer of UnitedHealthcare Retiree Solutions, wrote, "We don’t have enough long-term-care facilities to take care of people, and 90 percent of seniors want to stay at home. They may be nervous about that.”

Best Buy is betting big that smart home devices and home monitoring will help people, as they get older, maintain more active, healthier lives at home. [Source: Matthew Boyle, Bloomberg]

#### Additional Information:

[Best Buy Bets on Adults Remotely Monitoring Their Aging Parents](https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-10-04/best-buy-bets-on-adults-remotely-monitoring-their-aging-parents)

[<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-10-04/best-buy-bets-on-adults-remotely-monitoring-their-aging-parents>]

Upcoming Events

# 2017 Georgia Assistive Technology in Education (GATE) Seminar

The GATE seminar, hosted by the Metro Atlanta Assistive Technology Consortium, will convene on December 8, 2017, from 8:00 am to 4:30 pm at the Georgia Institute of Technology. The seminar is geared towards educators, parents, community stakeholders, and therapists who want to learn about assistive technology to help achieve success in the classroom for students of all abilities. Seminar session topics include Augmentative Alternative Communication (AAC), Education/Learning, Sensory Impairment, and Accessibility. Focus will be placed on best practices, classroom implementation, product demonstrations, and strategies that will support students. In addition to presentations, there will also be an opportunity to meet with vendors for an up-close look at various types of assistive technologies and services.

#### Additional Information:

[2017 GATE Seminar](https://www.eventbrite.com/e/2017-gate-seminar-tickets-36880227754)

[<https://www.eventbrite.com/e/2017-gate-seminar-tickets-36880227754>]

**2018 CSUN Assistive Technology Conference**

The *33rd CSUN Assistive Technology Conference* (CSUN) will convene March 19 to March 23, 2018, in San Diego, California. CSUN is the largest international conference addressing topics regarding people with disabilities and assistive and accessible technologies. Conference topics typically pertain to the domains of education, employment and workplace, entertainment, independent living, law and policy, and transportation.

#### Additional Information:

[Conference Web Page](http://www.csun.edu/cod/conference)

[<http://www.csun.edu/cod/conference>]

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