

House Research Act Summary

CHAPTER: 81

SESSION: 2005 Regular Session

TOPIC: Accessible electronic information service for blind persons

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Overview

Chapter 81 establishes an accessible electronic information service allowing blind persons access to newspapers and other timely information and requires the human services commissioner to provide grants to television stations to provide real-time captioning of local news programs. Both programs are funded through a surcharge on telephone bills.

Section

1 **Assessment.** Makes the commissioners of employment and economic development and human services jointly responsible with the commissioner of commerce for annually recommending to the Public Utilities Commission a surcharge on phone bills to pay for programs designed to make telecommunications services accessible to blind and deaf persons. The maximum annual budget for the new requirement to provide an accessible electronic information service (section 4) is \$100,000, and for grants to television stations to provide closed-captioning for local news programming (section 5), \$300,000.

Specifies that if the fund balance cannot support all the programs eligible for funding, the purchase of communication devices for blind and deaf persons, and the operations of the Telecommunications Relay Service, through which they access the telephone system, will be fully funded, while expenditures to provide an accessible electronic information service and closed-captioning of local news will be reduced on a pro rata basis, until the commissioner of commerce determines that a sufficient fund balance exists to allow such expenditures to resume.

2 **Appropriation.** Appropriates money in the telecommunications access Minnesota fund to

the commissioner of employment and economic development to implement the accessible electronic information service and to the commissioner of human services to implement grants to television stations for closed-captioning of local news programs.

3 Definitions.

Subd. 1. Scope. Specifies that definitions in this section apply to sections 248.061 and 248.062 (sections 3 and 4 of the bill).

Subd. 2. Accessible electronic information service. Defines the term to mean news and other timely information provided to eligible individuals from a multistate service center that uses high-speed computers and telecommunications technology to acquire and rapidly distribute content in a form appropriate for use by the individuals.

Subd. 3. Eligible individual. Defines the term to mean an individual eligible for library loan services through the Library of Congress and the State Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped.

Subd. 4. Commissioner. Means the commissioner of employment and economic development.

Subd. 5. Qualified entity. Defines the term to mean an agency, instrumentality, or political subdivision of state or a nonprofit organization that:

- provides access for eligible individuals to read daily newspapers by producing audio or Braille editions by computer; or
- provides a means of program administration and reader registration on the Internet.

4 Duties of commissioner. Requires the commissioner to enter agreements with qualified entities to provide an accessible electronic information service for eligible individuals. Requires the service to be planned for continuation from year to year.

5 Duties of human services commissioner. Directs the commissioner to enter into agreements with television stations to provide real-time captioning of local news programming of non-commercial broadcasters and commercial broadcasters not subject to federal closed-captioning requirements.

6 Effective date. Makes sections 1 to 4 as they relate to duties of the commissioner of commerce with respect to providing an accessible electronic information service effective the day following final enactment. Provides that sections 1 to 4 apply to the budget for accessible electronic information services provided after April 15, 2005.

7 Sunset. Sections 1 to 5 expire June 30, 2010.