

GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF NORTH CAROLINA  
SESSION 2003

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SENATE DRS75221-LUF-51 (3/25)

Short Title: Accessible Electronic Info Act/Blind/Disab'd. (Public)

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Sponsors: Senator Dorsett.

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Referred to:

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A BILL TO BE ENTITLED

AN ACT TO ESTABLISH AN ACCESSIBLE ELECTRONIC INFORMATION SERVICE FOR BLIND AND DISABLED PERSONS AND TO APPROPRIATE FUNDS FOR THE SERVICE.

The General Assembly of North Carolina enacts:

**SECTION 1.** Article 7 of Chapter 62 of the General Statutes is amended by adding a new section to read:

**"§ 62-157A. Accessible Electronic Information Act.**

(a) Short Title. – This section shall be known and may be cited as the 'Accessible Electronic Information Act'.

(b) Legislative Findings. – The General Assembly finds and declares all of the following:

- (1) Thousands of citizens in the State have disabilities, including blindness or visual impairment, that prevent them from using conventional print material.
- (2) The State fulfills an important responsibility by providing books and magazines prepared in Braille, audio, and large-type formats made available to eligible blind and disabled persons.
- (3) The technology, transcription methods, and means of distribution used for these materials are labor-intensive and cannot support rapid dissemination to individuals in rural and urban areas throughout the State.
- (4) Lack of direct and prompt access to information included in newspapers, magazines, newsletters, schedules, announcements, or other time-sensitive materials limits literacy, participation, and educational opportunities for blind and disabled persons.

- 1           (5) This limitation can best be overcome through use of high-speed  
2 computer and telecommunications technology, combined with  
3 customized software, that provides a practical and cost-effective means  
4 to convert electronic text-based information, including daily  
5 newspapers, into synthetic speech suitable for statewide distribution  
6 with modern telecommunications technology.
- 7           (6) Low-cost interstate telecommunications rates make distribution of  
8 electronic text-based information to eligible users both efficient and  
9 cost-effective for the State.
- 10          (7) Federal funds have been used to develop the technology and  
11 infrastructure needed for statewide toll-free access to daily newspapers  
12 and other timely information of local, State, and national interest  
13 through a service known as NFB-NEWSLINE®, providing an efficient  
14 and cost-effective means of reader registration, content acquisition,  
15 and interstate telecommunications support.
- 16          (8) Use of this accessible electronic information service will enhance the  
17 State's current efforts to meet the needs of blind and disabled citizens  
18 for access to information that is otherwise available in print, thereby  
19 reducing isolation and supporting full integration and equal access for  
20 these individuals.
- 21       (c) Definitions. – The following definitions apply in this section:
- 22           (1) Accessible electronic information service. – A service where news and  
23 other timely information, including newspapers, is provided to eligible  
24 individuals from a multistate service center, using high-speed  
25 computers and telecommunications technology for interstate  
26 acquisition of content and rapid distribution in a form appropriate for  
27 use by blind and disabled persons.
- 28           (2) Blind and disabled persons. – Those individuals who are eligible for  
29 library loan services through the Library of Congress and the State  
30 Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped pursuant to 36  
31 C.F.R. § 701.10(b).
- 32           (3) Director. – The Director of the Division of Services for the Blind in  
33 the Department of Health and Human Resources.
- 34           (4) Qualified entity. – An agency, instrumentality, or political subdivision  
35 of the State or a nonprofit organization that:
- 36               a. Provides interstate access for eligible persons to read daily  
37 newspapers producing audio editions by computer.
- 38               b. Provides a means of program administration or reader  
39 registration on the Internet.
- 40       (d) Administration of Service. – The Division of Services for the Blind shall  
41 administer the statewide accessible electronic information service, including its  
42 establishment, operation, and promotion. The Director of the Division of Services for  
43 the Blind shall enter into an agreement with a qualified entity to provide an accessible  
44 electronic information service for eligible blind and disabled persons. The Division of

1 Services for the Blind shall plan for continuation of the service from year to year and  
2 make maximum use of federal and other funds available by obtaining grant or in-kind  
3 support from appropriate programs and securing access to low-cost interstate rates for  
4 telecommunications by reimbursement or otherwise.

5 (e) Accessible Electronic Information Service Fund. – In order to support an  
6 accessible electronic information service for blind and disabled persons:

7 (1) The Commission shall require all local exchange telecommunications  
8 companies to impose a periodic surcharge on bills rendered to all local  
9 exchange telecommunications company subscribers.

10 (2) The Commission, in consultation with the Director of the Division of  
11 Services for the Blind, shall annually determine the amount of the  
12 surcharge based on the amount of funding necessary to support the  
13 accessible electronic information service.

14 (3) The amount of the surcharge may be computed as a portion of any  
15 other surcharge required under existing law. In no event shall the  
16 surcharge exceed any existing surcharge by more than one cent (1¢)  
17 each line each month.

18 (4) Local exchange telecommunications companies shall remit the amount  
19 received from the surcharge to the Director of the Division of Services  
20 for the Blind less any amounts allowed for administration in  
21 accordance with a schedule determined by the Commission in  
22 consultation with the Director of the Division of Services for the  
23 Blind.

24 (f) Power to Regulate. – The Commission shall have the same power to regulate  
25 the operation of the accessible electronic information service as it has to regulate any  
26 public utility subject to the provisions of this Chapter."

27 **SECTION 2.** There is appropriated from the General Fund to the  
28 Department of Health and Human Services the sum of seventy thousand dollars  
29 (\$70,000) for the 2003-2004 fiscal year to be used by the Division of Services for the  
30 Blind to establish an accessible electronic information service for blind and disabled  
31 persons in this State.

32 **SECTION 3.** This act becomes effective July 1, 2003.