

Maryland Relay – Combatting Social Isolation in the Age of COVID

By Arin Jayes

BIAMD's weekly membership content aims to keep our members informed, engaged, and inspired. We do this by sharing cutting-edge research, spotlighting change-makers in the field, and spreading awareness about important state policy initiatives. This week, I am highlighting an organization in the state of Maryland that has gone above and beyond to improve the lives of individuals living with brain injury and other disabilities.

[Maryland Relay](#) is a program Administered by Telecommunications Access of Maryland and is guided by the Governor's Advisory Board of Telecommunications Relay, with funding from the Universal Service Trust Fund (USTF). Since its founding in 1991, Maryland Relay has been providing a wide variety of services to meet the needs of Maryland residents who have difficulty using a standard telephone. These services include call relay, free adaptive telecommunications equipment to eligible Marylanders, and educational community outreach.

Maryland Relay's services are more relevant now more than ever in the age of COVID-19, which has hit the brain injury community especially hard. Social distancing has exacerbated the isolation that many individuals living with brain injury already experience. [In a major study published in May of this year](#), history of TBI was significantly associated with greater loneliness compared with individuals without TBI in a representative sample of 724 US adults. These were the results without the added factor of COVID-19, which began right as the study was published.

Asia Johnson of Maryland Relay describes the profound impact of their call relay services: "We empower people to connect with others. At one outreach event, a woman came up to me and told me her husband had both hearing and vision loss, and how isolated he was becoming from friends and family. When we talked about our calling options and equipment solutions, her eyes filled with tears and she said, "I just have to hug you... this is going to change our lives." And that's what Maryland Relay does, it changes lives."

How Does a Relay Call Work?

The Relay user places a call through Maryland Relay, typically through the use of an assistive communication device. A Maryland Relay Operator greets the Relay user, provides his/her Operator identification (ID) number, and requests the number of the person the Relay user wishes to call. Once the two callers are connected, the Maryland Relay Operator speaks and/or types what is said between the Relay user and the other person. The other person speaks as he/she normally would. By law, the entire conversation is kept confidential.

Here is a list of the call relay options that Maryland Relay provides:

[Traditional Relay \(TTY\)](#) for those who are Deaf, hard of hearing, late-deafened or have difficulty speaking

[Hearing Carry-Over](#) and [Speech-to-Speech](#) for those who have difficulty speaking

[Voice Carry-Over](#) for Relay users who prefer to use their own voice in phone conversations

[Captioned Telephone](#), which lets hard-of-hearing users read every word callers say, as they listen

[Braille TTY](#) for DeafBlind callers

[Spanish Relay](#) for Spanish-speaking callers who have difficulty using a standard telephone

[Customized Relay options](#), including Customer Profiles which users can set up to expedite calls and store their calling preferences

Alternative Relay services, including [Video Relay Service \(VRS\)](#) for American Sign Language users, as well as [IP Relay](#) and [IP Captioned Telephone Service](#) for callers wishing to connect on their smartphone, computer, or other Internet-connected device (these services are not provided by Maryland Relay)

How does a captioned telephone work?

Individuals who have difficulty hearing over the phone can enjoy clearer conversations with a captioned telephone. A captioned telephone works just like a standard phone, with one important difference: it displays word-for-word captions of what the other person says throughout the conversation. Learn more about captioned telephones by clicking [here](#).

How does STS (Speech-To-Speech) work?

People who have mild to moderate speaking difficulties—and can hear clearly on the phone—can use Maryland Relay’s Speech-to-Speech (or STS) service to stay connected. The STS user speaks with his/her own voice, voice synthesizer, voice enhancer, or other assistive device. A Maryland Relay Operator listens to everything the STS user says and re-voices it, as needed, to the other person. As that person responds, the STS user listens directly to what is said. [Click here](#) to learn more about Speech-to-Speech.

How can I get telephone equipment provided by the state?

Get the telecommunications equipment needed to independently make or receive phone calls. The Maryland Accessible Telecommunications (MAT) program, a service of Maryland Relay, offers a wide variety of solutions and tools—from amplified phones to Braille TTYs to tablets—to support day-to-day communications. [Click here](#) to learn more about how the program works and how to apply for free equipment.

BIAMD thanks Maryland Relay for the innovative and creative solutions they have created to keep Marylanders living with disabilities connected. To learn more about all that Maryland Relay has to offer, visit their website by clicking [here](#).