

NZ First Right 'Hear' in Franklin

With around 7,000 profoundly deaf people and another 750,000 people hearing impaired to some degree in New Zealand, Counties Power seized the opportunity to assist by tendering to provide a telecommunication relay service. The result, a service that allows deaf, deaf-blind, or those who have a hearing, speech or other communication impairment to gain greater independence and empowerment through the use of an everyday product that most people take for granted.

After a gap was identified in the New Zealand telecommunications sector in 2002, the Human Rights Commission advised that there was a breach in the Human Rights Act for providing services to the deaf and hearing impaired. Although taking another two years to reach fruition, in 2004 the deaf finally had the promise of access to the telephone.

Sprint, a world leader in the relay market, in conjunction with Counties Power won the tendering process and the New Zealand Relay Service was born. This led to a revolution for the deaf and hearing impaired of New Zealand, allowing them the freedom to communicate via telephone, something that had previously been out of reach. The enthusiasm of Andrea Cooke, Customer Care Manager for Counties Power is evident, and she is extremely proud of her team and the work they do, not only for the Franklin area but for the service provided nationally for the whole of New Zealand.

Utilizing two different forms of communication the technology works in much the same way as a three way conversation. Two rooms have been set up for the call centre. The first, a room set up with a video relay system, allows a caller to call in and interact with the call taker, referred to as a Video Interpreter or VI, via sign language. The VI then repeats the information via a standard fixed line telephone to the recipient of the call, then the receiver can respond using the help of the VI. Another service for those who may not have NZ Sign Language as their first language is offered in a separate area. This second service utilizes text telephone services, a telephone with an additional keyboard and other features that allow use by the deaf or hearing impaired to communicate into the call centre. A message comes through on the screen of the relay assistant, which is then read out to the recipient of the message. The recipient is then able to respond via voice to the relay assistant who types the conversation verbatim to be sent back. Both methods allow two way communications with the aid of the relay assistant.

The passion and vision of NZ Relay really comes to light when you see the amount of letters of gratitude that have been received as



Video Relay in Operation - Roseanne Butler-Stoney communicates with Viola Luki

a result of providing such an extraordinary service. Following on from this comes the rewarding feeling that the team feels at the conclusion of their shift knowing that what they do does make a difference in breaking down the barriers that are faced. Words cannot describe this feeling. An extract from one of the letters reads "I don't know where I would be without it!!"

This technology has the potential to be life saving, but given the strictest degree of confidentiality for each of the users, just how lifesaving this technology is will never be known. No details of any conversation are ever discussed and are all 100% confidential.

Just how successful NZ Relay is was reflected last year through the biennially held Enterprise Franklin Awards where they were a finalist in both the Innovation and the Excellence in Service Delivery categories, an extremely prestigious title which is highly sought after.

"Everyone has got an Auntie Nelly" says Andrea. "Each time we go out to talk to a group you can guarantee that someone in the room will go 'that will be just right for my Auntie Nelly'. "Word of mouth and family influence are extremely important, with those that are deaf or hearing impaired often feeling very isolated. The new video technology allows NZ sign language users to communicate in their first language and make any phone call they want such as, phoning for a taxi or making a salon appointment."

The subscription base sits at 700 active text telephone users, and an unknown number of internet users. If you have an 'Auntie Nelly' in your family, now is the time to take action and grant her the freedom that she deserves. In most cases this service is free, visit www.nzrelay.co.nz or contact the NZ Relay help desk on 0800 471 5715 (voice) or 0800 4713 713 (TTY) for further information for further information. ■