



**Media Minutes**  
**Show Date: 8-20-10**

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## **TRANSCRIPT**

### **New Legislation Closes Digital Divide for Blind, Deaf**

We often think about the digital divide in terms of people who don't have Internet access. But what about the folks who can't access new digital devices and technology because of sensory disabilities? Millions of blind and deaf Americans are being left out of the digital age as technology evolves and society demands a connection.

But a new bill traveling through Congress could help. The legislation, introduced in the House by Rep. Ed Markey, would mandate that consumer electronics, entertainment and communications industries make their technology accessible to blind and deaf consumers. It would, for instance, allow blind consumers to purchase smartphones with built-in speech software that helps them to surf the Net. And it would require online TV shows to include closed-captioning.

Eric Bridges, the director of advocacy and governmental affairs for the American Council of the Blind, said he's been working with a group called the Coalition of Organizations for Accessible Technology on the legislation for the last three years.

**Eric Bridges:** *What we're seeking to do in this legislation is to ensure greater accessibility and equal access to technology such as mobile devices and smart phones. A cell phone is not just a cell phone anymore. It's an all encompassing information device. It has an Internet connection. It has email, text messaging, all of that included in it. Those aspects of what a phone can do are critical to success in employment, education and social networking.*

Bridges said that young people with hearing and visual disabilities in particular need to be connected to emerging and dominant technologies.

But he also said that the legislation could impact a growing number of people.

**Eric Bridges:** These are issues that more and more Americans are going to face because the predominant population of individuals who are blind are older people. Aging is the leading cause of vision loss. As get old, you tend to lose some hearing as well. As the

baby boomers age, this isn't going to go away. This is a population that has become very tech savvy who isn't just going to go quietly into the night.

There are an estimated 50 million vision- and hearing-impaired people in the United States. . For more information, visit at the Coalition of Organizations for Accessible Technology at [www.coataccess.org/](http://www.coataccess.org/).

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### **Standing Rock Telecom: First Tribally Owned Wireless Company in U.S.**

The Standing Rock Reservation stretches over 3,500 square miles of North and South Dakota. The Sioux Tribe lives on these vast plains and has mostly been left behind by telecommunications companies unwilling to build out in such a rural and sparsely populated area. In 2001, the Tribe started studying how to build its own broadband infrastructure.

By 2007, they were constructing the first of 16 towers. And just this week, Standing Rock Telecom launched its month-long grand opening. Miles McAlister is Standing Rock's General Manager.

**Miles McAlister:** *We just basically wanted to improve communications that were non-existent here. It's a rural area with lots of isolated highways, roads. We have severe weather here – cold winters, severe winters – and there're always emergency situations that will come up where communications would help a great deal. It seems, from opportunities to improve education, other infrastructure – lots of issues out there that improved communications will take care of.*

Standing Rock Telecom is the first tribally owned wireless communications company in the United States. It offers Tribal members first-class technology, with broadband speeds up to 18 megabits per second.

**Miles McAlister:** *This is a wireless world now, so we see it as a chance to get the wireless infrastructure here and to leapfrog these communities forward so we can operate a lot like other places do.*

The company is owned and operated by the Sioux Tribe. There are three stores on the reservation where people can buy wireless phones, handsets and the services that go with them, along with wireless broadband connections. The company has been open since March and already has more than 300 subscribers. McAlister hopes to have 2,500 by next summer.

The goal is to get every tribal member connected. McAlister says its important to have the same opportunities on the reservation as those who live in towns like Bismarck, N.D., just 50 miles away.

**Miles McAlister:** *If we have better infrastructure, better opportunities exist for education; business; networking; good, healthy activities; public activities; public planning. Hopefully the local economy and opportunities for children – both in the classroom and in their individual lives and homes will improve and be a lot like communities like Bismarck and other cities enjoy.*