HOUSE BILL NO. 1541

AN ACT TO ESTABLISH A TELEPHONIC READING SERVICES PROGRAM FOR BLIND AND DISABLED PERSONS, WHICH SHALL BE ADMINISTERED BY THE DEPARTMENT OF REHABILITATION SERVICES; TO PROVIDE THAT THIS SERVICE SHALL BE AVAILABLE TO BLIND AND DISABLED PERSONS WHO ARE ELIGIBLE TO RECEIVE SPECIALIZED LIBRARY SERVICES PROVIDED THROUGH REGIONAL LIBRARIES DESIGNATED BY THE NATIONAL LIBRARY SERVICE FOR THE BLIND AND PHYSICALLY HANDICAPPED OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS; TO AUTHORIZE THE PROVISION OF THIS SERVICE THROUGH A CONTRACT OR AGREEMENT WITH A QUALIFIED ENTITY; AND FOR RELATED PURPOSES.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF MISSISSIPPI:

SECTION 1. This act may be known and shall be cited as the "Telephonic Reading Act."

SECTION 2. The Legislature finds and declares all of the following:

(a) Thousands of citizens in the state have disabilities (including blindness or visual impairment) that prevent them from using conventional print material.

(b) Governmental and nonprofit organizations provide specialized materials, including books and magazines prepared in braille, audio and large-type formats.

(c) 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.

(d) Lack of direct and prompt access to information included in newspapers, magazines, newsletters, schedules, announcements and other time-sensitive materials, limits educational opportunities, literacy and full participation in society by blind and disabled persons.
(e) Creation and storage of information by computer results in electronic files used for publishing and distribution.

(f) The use of high-speed computer and telecommunications technology combined with customized software provides a practical and cost-effective means to convert electronic text-based information (including daily newspapers) into synthetic speech suitable for mass distribution by telephone.

(g) Recent reductions in telephone rates (particularly for high-volume, interstate service) make telephonic distribution of electronic text-based information to eligible users both efficient and cost-effective for the state.

(h) Federal funds are available to support statewide toll-free access to daily newspapers and other timely information of local, state and national interest through a service known as Newsline, providing an efficient and cost-effective means of reader registration, content acquisition and interstate telecommunications support.

(i) Telephonic distribution of time-sensitive information (including daily newspapers) will enhance the state's current efforts to meet the needs of blind and disabled citizens for access to information that is otherwise available in print, thereby reducing isolation and supporting full integration and equal access for such individuals.

SECTION 3. As used in this act, the following terms have the following meanings, unless otherwise indicated:

(a) "Director of telephonic reading services" means the Executive Director of the State Department of Rehabilitation Services.

(b) "Qualified entity" means an agency, instrumentality, or political subdivision of the state or a nonprofit organization that provides audio reproduction of daily newspapers and other timely information of local, state and national interest.
national interest through telephone access using computer and telecommunication technology.

(c) "Telephonic reading service" means audio information provided by telephone, including the acquisition and distribution of daily newspapers and other information of local, state, or national interest.

SECTION 4. The director of telephonic reading services shall provide access to a telephonic reading service for blind and disabled individuals who are eligible to receive specialized library services provided through regional libraries designated by the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped of the Library of Congress. This service shall be planned for continuation from year to year and administered through a contract or agreement with a qualified entity. The director shall secure appropriate arrangements, including grant support from appropriate programs and obtaining financial support for telecommunication costs, by reimbursement or otherwise, in order to make maximum use of federal and other funds available.

SECTION 5. This act shall take effect and be in force from and after July 1, 2002.