

THE DIGITAL TELEVISION TRANSITION

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Educating and Protecting Older Adults



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INTRODUCTION

After February 17, 2009, all full-power television stations will stop broadcasting in analog and switch to digital broadcasting. Digital broadcasting will require less airwave space, improve picture and sound quality, expand television programming features for persons with disabilities, and open greater airspace for emergency planners, responders and public-safety communications.

The total number of television households within the United States is now estimated at 111 million, according to Nielson Media Research. Demographics within U.S. television homes show that male and female viewers aged 55+ comprised almost 68 million people. A recent study conducted by the Association of Public Television Stations found that Americans aged 65 and older are consistently more likely to receive television signals by analog “over-the-air” antennas than younger Americans and therefore are less prepared to transition from analog to digital-only television. This study further concluded that seniors should receive unique public education attention with impending digital television transition.

It is estimated that half of existing American households already have digital television. Estimates range from 13 to 22 million U.S. households that rely solely on analog “over the air” television broadcasts. In a recent address to aging network and other information and referral professionals, the U.S. Department of Commerce projected these households, on average, are more likely to include older adults, persons with disabilities, minorities, limited English speaking, rural residents and persons with economic disadvantage. Aging advocates are concerned that vulnerable older adults will represent a disproportionate number of consumers needing additional supports with making successful digital television transition.

While the digital television transition may be a relatively simple process for many, it will require unique communication and assistance for others. Some consumers will want to weigh options, including whether to purchase a new television set, subscribe to paid cable television programming for the first time or purchase a converter box. Additional supports may include formal education about options, conversations about choices, assistance with completing applications for the converter box coupon program, assistance with television and converter box purchases, and help with television and converter box installation.

DTV TRANSITION FACTS

Congress has directed the U.S. Department of Commerce, National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) to administer a variety of transitional assistance programs, including help with communications equipment for police, firefighters, smaller broadcasters and consumers who wish to keep older television sets after February 17, 2009.

Over \$1.5 billion has been designated by Congress to establish a converter box coupon program for consumers who wish to keep older televisions working after February 17, 2009.

Consumers who use “rabbit ears” or “rooftop antennas” with older model televisions must take action to continue receiving television broadcasts after February 17, 2009.

Television households with antennas have three options to make a change to digital television:

1. Connect to cable, satellite or other pay television service.
2. Purchase a digital television.
3. Buy a converter box that plugs into an existing television to keep it working.

The NTIA Converter Box Program offers redeemable discount coupons to assist television households with purchasing converter boxes. Following are important facts about the converter box program:

1. The converter box is a one-time cost. All U.S. households are eligible for the discount coupon program. A maximum of 2 coupons may be requested by each U.S. household. Coupons must be used to purchase certified TV converter boxes. Requests for coupons to purchase converter boxes can be made between January 1, 2008 and March 31, 2009.
2. Coupons look like plastic gift cards. Consumers must apply for converter box coupons, by telephone, fax or online. Redeemable coupons are mailed to consumers.
3. Coupons expire 90 days after mailed and cannot be replaced or reissued.
4. Consumers pay the difference between the coupon value (\$40) and the price of the converter box, plus tax.
5. By law, nursing facilities must follow the U.S. Census Bureau’s definition of a U.S. household which limits the entire facility to two coupons.
6. Digital television sets and television sets connected to cable or satellite service **do not** require a converter box from this program.

ISSUES AND CONCERNS

1. A Call to Action: Are older consumers responding to public service announcements about the digital television transition?

While the airwaves are currently filled with DTV transition messages, a central question remains whether older adults with televisions that operate with antennas understand they must act before February 17, 2009 or lose television reception. And, will older consumers know what questions to ask to make informed choices about transitioning to a new television, cable television service or a converter box? Who will provide the installation assistance if it is needed? While the U.S. Department of Commerce reports that 14 million coupons have been requested, it is not clear what percentage represents households with older persons.

2. Applications, Additional Fees and Time Limits: Will the application requirements deter participation in the coupon program?

An application is required to obtain the converter box discount coupons. There is also a 90 day expiration date for these coupons. Consumers must act within the limited timeframe to avoid losing the coupon benefit. Each coupon represents a \$40 value. The national average cost of the converter boxes ranges from \$50 and \$70. Some older consumers may experience difficulty covering the difference between the coupon value and actual converter box cost.

3. Instructions Included: Will vulnerable older consumers experience difficulty with converter box installation?

Older adults with sight impairment, dexterity depreciation, cognitive impairment, limited English speaking/comprehension, and low literacy may have unique public education needs. Currently, there are no technical support services for converter box installation provided by the converter box coupon program.

4. Fraud Alert: What is the likelihood of Converter Box Program scams and fraudulent activity?

Advocates for older adults are asking the federal government and consumers to beware of the potential for fraudulent activity related to the coupon converter box program. Requests for social security numbers and date of birth **are not** required for the coupon program. Efforts to encourage older consumers to make unnecessary television and equipment purchases, pay for the free coupons and seek customer service for a fee must be monitored.

STATE ACTIVITIES

ALABAMA

The Alabama Department of Senior Services hosted a presentation by the FCC on DTV transition for state staff including nutrition and caregiver personnel. Information and materials were distributed to Area Agency on Aging Coordinators and other key aging network staff. The AAA information and referral staff received an informational briefing. Additional outreach to senior centers and churches is planned in the future.

FLORIDA

Florida's local Elder Helpline provider that serves Palm Beach and the Treasure Coast areas has included DTV transition information in their database and placed a link to DTV resources on their website.

MAINE

The Maine Office of Elder Services is working with the Maine Broadcasters Association and the FCC to get information out to consumers about the DTV transition. The state unit on aging has the DTV link on its website and both the Maine Broadcasters and FCC have done presentations in various parts of Maine.

NEW JERSEY

The New Jersey Division of Aging and Community Service forwarded an FCC produced factsheet on the DTV transition to its 21 area agencies on aging. Area Agencies on Aging are placing articles in their newsletters.

NEW YORK

The DTV Transition issue was included in New York State Office for the Aging's Federal Funding and Policy Priorities for 2008 that was shared with the aging network in NY earlier this year.

NORTH CAROLINA

The North Carolina Division of Aging and Adult Services is having an extremely positive experience with the transition to digital television. The Division has been working closely with the AAAs and local senior centers to make special efforts to get information out about all aspects of this topic (what it is, when it will occur, coupon program, etc.). Many of their regions have had speakers to provide information about the transition, put information in their local papers and have assisted seniors in applying for coupons. The Division has a staff member that coordinates DTV transition efforts and information is posted on the state unit on aging's web site. The Division has sent out educational materials statewide to the aging network that can be customized at the local level. The FCC has chosen Wilmington, NC as the first market to test the transition in advance of the nationwide transition on February 17, 2009. The North Carolina aging network there has been involved in this process.

OHIO

The Ohio Department of Aging published an article titled, *How Will Digital Television Affect Seniors?* in its February 2008 *Aging Issues* publication, found at: http://goldenbuckeye.com/agingissues/ai_2008_02b.html.

OREGON

Efforts are currently underway to reach providers and consumers. Digital TV resources have been added to the Network of Care website. Information and Assistance staff are routinely updated at quarterly meetings and several senior centers and branch offices have hosted educational forums for clients and the community. A breakfast forum was hosted for providers to discuss commonly asked questions. Efforts are underway with the Elders in Action advisory group to apply for a grant to help reach low income elders that need assistance with getting converter boxes. Home delivered meal clients have been identified as a target group for support. If funded, volunteers will help customers apply for as well as install converter boxes. Efforts to make outreach “elder friendly” are designed to reduce potential fraud. The grant proposal includes an educational component to have a speaker’s bureau. Part of the grant proceeds will be used to pay for the difference in price over the coupon coverage for converter boxes. If funded, projects DTV transition support for about 500 clients.

RHODE ISLAND

The Rhode Island Department of Elderly Affairs (DEA) has placed articles about the Digital Television conversion and the coupons in an Information Memorandum for agency personnel. The Older Rhode Islander, the DEA newspaper for the general public also carried a feature article. Digital Television Transition training was conducted for information specialists, senior center social workers, and housing resident service coordinators. And the local cable television station carried a Digital Television Transition program on the statewide interconnect channel. This program has a potential audience of more than 400,000 persons.

WEST VIRGINIA

The West Virginia Bureau of Senior Services recently hosted a statewide senior conference. This conference included a presentation, “Preparing for the DTV Transition” presented by Richard Caine, Senior Agent for the FCC’s Enforcement Bureau. Additionally, the FCC will sponsor part of West Virginia’s upcoming Governor’s Summit on Aging in September 2008. This summit will include information specifically about the transition. The West Virginia Bureau is currently redesigning its website and will include a link to DTV resources.

WISCONSIN

Information been shared in list serves. The keynote presenter for the upcoming WisconsinAIRS Conference will speak on DTV. There may be local presentations at ADRCs, senior centers, meal sites and other key locations.

NATIONAL COALITION EFFORTS

The “Keeping Seniors Connected Coalition” is a group of national aging organizations working to ensure that older adults continue to have television access after February 18, 2009. The coalition has been educating Congress and federal agencies about the challenges that millions of vulnerable television viewers face. The coalition has also proposed a multi-faceted campaign targeted to educate and directly assist the most vulnerable older adults across the nation. Building on the public education efforts spearheaded by government

and private industry, the Coalition hopes to leverage support to offer customized, intensive and personal assistance to millions of older adults to help them stay connected.

Members of the coalition include: National Association of Area Agencies on Aging, AARP, Asociacion Nacional Pro Personas Mayores, Meals On Wheels Association of America, National Association of Nutrition and Aging Services Programs, National Asian Pacific Center on Aging, National Association of State Units on Aging, National Caucus and Center on Black Aged, National Council on Aging, National Hispanic Council on Aging and the National Indian Council on Aging.

STRATEGY EXCHANGE

- Inform statewide aging network programs that have information, counseling, outreach and assistance components, such as, Information and Referral, Aging and Disability Resource Centers, Senior Health Insurance Counseling and Assistance Programs, Family Caregiver Support, Long Term Care Ombudsman, Elder Abuse, and Nutrition about DTV transition facts and unique challenges for vulnerable older adults and persons with disabilities.
- Invite FCC representatives who are currently scheduling outreach visits to conduct information seminars in senior centers in your local communities.
- Consider establishing state and area agency website links to digital television facts and materials.
- Develop and disseminate customized messages and outreach materials from existing templates found on the U.S. Department of Commerce's DTV Transition website that address the unique education needs of older adults and persons with disabilities.
- Create information and referral "telephone hold messages" to encourage consumers to take action.
- Inform caregivers of the potential opportunity to assist with DTV transition discussions and decisions.
- Identify and engage state and local partners that can help with message dissemination and coordinating support.
- Contact your state's local collegiate 4-H chapter to get more information about new 2008 National Service Projects that are forming around the nation to provide assistance with converter box application and installation.
- Become familiar with specific communication supports designed to help persons with disabilities. Braille applications are available upon request. TTY information hotline numbers have been designated. And, large print options are available on the DTV website.

RESOURCES

- U.S. Department of Commerce’s TV Converter Box Coupon Program website: www.DTV2009.gov. Apply for coupons, download customized materials, get frequently asked questions, check coupon application status and locate converter box retailers. Materials are available in English and Spanish. Access The Converter Box Coupon Program 101 PowerPoint Presentation, public service announcements, sample newsletter articles, web banners, partner toolkits and brochures.
- U.S. Department of Commerce’s TV Converter Box Coupon Program hotline: 1-888-388-2009 provides customer service support 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Language relay lines are available to accommodate up to 150 additional languages. English TTY: 1-877-530-2634 and Spanish TTY: 1-866-495-1161.

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