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Federal Communications Commission
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This is an unofficial announcement of Commission action. Release of the full text of a Commission order constitutes official action. See MCI v. FCC, 515 F 2d 385 (D.C. Circ 1974).

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
October 4, 2001

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FCC ADVISES PUBLIC OF WAYS TO PREVENT THE VIEWING OF OBJECTIONABLE TELEVISION PROGRAMS

Upon Request, Cable Systems Must Fully Scramble or Block Channels
Not Subscribed to by the Household

Washington, DC – The Federal Communications Commission today issued a Fact Sheet designed to help consumers make choices about the television programming that is available in their homes. Many persons are concerned about the content of some of the programming that is available on television. Such content may be inappropriate for children; may contain violence or unacceptable language; or may depict activities that an individual deems objectionable. To address this concern, federal law and Commission rules provide various tools that an individual may use to block a program or channel that a person does not wish to view. The implementation of one or more of these tools will permit a television viewer to filter the programming so that only content that is acceptable to the individual may be viewed in the home.

Section 504 of the Communications Decency Act of 1996 is one of the tools available to address these concerns. This federal law was enacted for the specific purpose of addressing the problem of “signal bleed” on cable television systems. Signal bleed occurs when a person who has not subscribed to a specific channel or service is able to access the audio and/or the video portions of that channel or service for brief periods. For example, if a person does not subscribe to a premium movie channel but is able to view and/or hear portions of the programming on that channel, the person is experiencing signal bleed. To address this specific problem, Section 504 requires a cable television company to fully scramble or block any channel that is not included in the programming package that the subscriber has purchased. The company must fully scramble or block the channel upon the subscriber’s request and at no charge to the subscriber.

Cable subscribers who are experiencing “signal bleed,” i.e., receiving the video and/or audio portion of a cable channel that is not included in their programming package should contact their cable company. If they do not receive timely assistance, they should call the FCC at 1-888-CALL-FCC (1-888-225-5322) voice or 1-888-TELL-FCC (1-888-835-5322) TTY.

In addition to the protection provided by Section 504, there are other tools that may be used by individuals to ensure that they are not exposed to unsuitable programming. These tools include the “v-chip” and a “lockbox.”

As a result of a 1996 federal law, most television programming is rated to inform viewers that the program may contain specific types of content that an individual may find objectionable. These ratings appear in the upper left corner of the television screen during the first 15 seconds of a television program and also may appear after a commercial break. The ratings information also may be included in programming guides that are published in newspapers, magazines, and other sources. This federal law also required that all televisions manufactured or imported in the United States be equipped with circuitry that is capable of identifying all programs with a common rating and blocking the programming so that it cannot be viewed. This circuitry is known as the v-chip. Manufacturers of televisions with at least a 13-inch screen were required to include the V-chip on at least 50% of their products by July 1, 1999 and on the remaining 50% by January 1, 2000. Persons with older televisions may purchase a v-chip from a retail outlet and attach it to the television.

Finally, cable subscribers may purchase or lease a lockbox from the cable company or from a retailer. The lockbox permits the cable subscriber to “lock” the cable system so that a specific channel(s) cannot be viewed.

By using one or more of these tools, the viewers may tailor programming to suit their individual preferences and may ensure that objectionable programming is not available to household members.

For more information about Section 504 and other consumer issues, visit the Consumer Information Bureau’s Web site at www.fcc.gov/cib.

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