

COMMISSIONER JONATHAN S. ADELSTEIN
SECOND EN BANC HEARING ON THE DIGITAL TELEVISION
TRANSITION

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With the new transition date of June 12, 2009 fast approaching, the Commission is finally doing what we should have been doing for years – with coordination, transparency, and a spirit of collegiality. I am grateful to Chairman Copps for his strong leadership, and to Congress for its faith in our ability to help rectify years of mismanagement.

Thanks to the hard work of Congress, most Americans were not forced transition to digital TV before they could be ready. While just over 15 percent of TV households were significantly impacted on February 17, less than 2.5 percent of households saw all of their local analog channels shut off. And while not everyone had a smooth transition on February 17, it did go better than expected. We are also evaluating the experiences of those who had problems. By looking at what went right and wrong, we can prevent much greater problems between now and June 12. So while February 17 was a down payment on the transition, the balloon payment comes due on June 12 when most of the country switches.

We are using this opportunity to finally implement a DTV transition plan that I have sought for years: a unified message and a coordinated national approach.

Those who did transition on February 17 shed light on where we need to focus now. Specifically, we are now redoubling our efforts to educate consumers about antenna issues, the need to rescan and signal loss problems. And we are revamping our consumer outreach efforts.

Antennas. Many of those who transitioned last month were left in the dark due to antenna issues. Many consumers need to reposition their antennas in order to receive some stations' digital channels. In some instances, antennas do not pick up both UHF and VHF stations. Consumers with antenna problems may need to look into adding an amplifier to their antenna, upgrading from an indoor to an outdoor antenna, or replacing an older antenna. The Commission is working with antenna manufacturers and consumer groups to provide guidance to consumers.

Rescanning. Once people have installed their converter boxes, they need to scan the channels to ensure that they receive all of the digital stations broadcasting in their area. Failure to scan channels was a common error on February 17, but one that is easily corrected. As more stations make the digital switch between now and June 12, consumers need to periodically rescan their channels to make sure that they are not missing channels. On June 12, almost everyone affected will need to rescan, and we need to educate and prepare people for it.

Signal Loss. There are many regions throughout the country where we have every reason to expect people will lose signals of some stations. We are working with broadcasters in these areas in order to pinpoint potentially problematic localities, and to set up the necessary infrastructure in order to prevent these areas from going dark on June 12, or at least to inform consumers as to what to expect.

Outreach. Our increased awareness of these consequences for consumers, in combination with transparent leadership, led us to revamp our consumer education campaign. Specifically, the Commission is adopting a four-pronged approach to consumer education. First, we are targeting outreach efforts to populations and geographical regions most at-risk of being left in the dark on June 12. Second, we are seeking to establish walk-in centers where consumers can learn first-hand how to install their converter boxes or address other problems. Third, we are identifying resources to provide in-home converter box installation for consumers with special needs. Finally, we are enhancing in-home service for consumers struggling with other technical issues.

In order to implement these plans, we are coordinating our own resources and reaching out to a variety of partners. More than 200 FCC staff members from our headquarters and field offices are the driving forces behind this effort. We have also enlisted the support of private companies, and not-for-profit, consumer-focused organizations. At long last, we are engaging help from the AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps volunteers -- something I suggested in testimony before the Senate Special Committee on Aging in September, 2007. If we had acted on that suggestion, that help could have been in place already.

These partnerships will allow us to put people on the ground to provide direct assistance in underserved communities across the country. In conjunction with the National Telecommunications and Information Administration's implementation of the enhanced converter box coupon program, it is crucial that we change from our earlier message of awareness to a plan for assistance.

I am confident that the current analytical and restructuring approach that we are taking will mitigate much of the harm to consumers that would have occurred if Congress had not passed the DTV Delay Act. This is our last chance to get it right. And we are doing everything we can to do so.