

FCC Consumer Advisory Committee Recommendations Regarding DTV Transition

The Commission's Consumer Advisory Committee recommends that the Commission initiate, continue, or more fully implement the following actions:

1. Ramp up the FCC Call Center and other direct consumer assistance.

The Commission should significantly ramp up its Call Center operations. Augmented front-line staff should be trained to identify the nature of consumer problems and solve them if they can. If the front-line staff cannot resolve a particular issue, they should have resources at their disposal to refer the inquiry to the proper venue. Technical staff should be on duty for specific questions about converter boxes, antennas or other issues. These staffers should have access to every government-certified converter box (and its installation instructions) on the market.

For consumers who need more hands-on assistance, the Commission should provide resources to, and facilitate the development of, local partnerships—e.g., civic, religious, and other community groups; local fire or police departments and other public entities; local phone companies, cable companies, retailers and other businesses. FCC staff could refer appropriate cases to these entities for the kind of hands-on assistance that many consumers will need—not only prior to the transition but in its aftermath to restore any service losses as quickly as possible.

The Committee also recommends that the FCC establish a specific channel of communications to respond to issues related to closed captioning and video description (including, but not limited to, e-mail address, TTY line, and dedicated voice line).

2. Prepare comprehensive DTV contingency plans.

The Commission and the National Telecommunications and Information Administration should jointly:

- coordinate and prepare detailed contingency plans for the transition, in consultation with Congress, industry, and other interested stakeholders; and
- focus on three time periods, each of which has its own challenges—the days and weeks leading up to the transition, the transition date itself, and its aftermath.
- Address issues related to the renewal, expiration, and late distribution of converter box coupons.

3. Conduct additional field testing and soft cut-offs.

The Commission should encourage more soft cut-offs by broadcasters and, to the extent practicable, conduct field tests in various markets, focusing on digital television (DTV) reception issues. These tests should:

- examine issues such as the digital “cliff effect” and whether consumers are able to receive all of the stations they received in analog with their existing antenna set-up or whether they need to move their antenna or buy a new one—e.g., an outdoor antenna where an indoor antenna worked in analog, which could be a hazardous prospect for many consumers to contemplate in the middle of the winter;
- test consumer reception as is, not as broadcast engineers assume them to be;
- be done in partnership with broadcasters or other local organizations to enlist the participation of actual consumers trying to make the switch in their homes; and
- provide real-world “lessons learned” to help the Commission focus its message and plan the kind of support consumers will need nationwide.

4. Educate consumers on DTV trouble-shooting, including antenna issues and the need to “re-scan” converter boxes and sets.

The Commission should continually refine and disseminate trouble-shooting checklists for consumers facing these real-world issues, including re-scanning, antenna functionality, closed captioning, and the digital “cliff effect.” This information would be tailored to specific markets.

5. Convene a Technical Working Group on digital closed captioning and video description.

The Commission should convene a technical working group on digital closed captioning and video description that includes representatives from the broadcast, cable and satellite industries, consumer electronics manufacturers and retailers and providers and consumers of captioning and video description. The working group would:

- identify current and anticipated problems with the transmission and display of digital captioning and video description;
- evaluate the captioning and video description capabilities of digital equipment; and
- develop solutions to ensure that captions are passed through intact to the consumer.

6. Dedicate a special FCC Team to the needs of at-risk communities.

The Commission should dedicate particular FCC staff to work with each community designated as “at-risk.” The FCC staff should

- be publicly identified as working with a particular at-risk community;
- given no other responsibilities other than to work with that community on the transition;

- immerse themselves in the unique issues and institutions unique to these communities, build trust, and maintain close contact in a way that broader efforts cannot; and
- provide a single point of contact at the Commission, and provide the FCC internally with the kind of specialized knowledge that may prove invaluable in the coming months.

7. Broadcast an analog message to consumers after the transition.

The Commission should recommend that Congress pass and the President sign the Short-term Analog Flash and Emergency Readiness Act (SAFER) (H.R. 7013 and S. 3663). This legislation would allow for the short-term continued analog broadcast of essential information after the February 18, 2009 nationwide transition to digital television (DTV), including broadcasts of emergency information and information that the transition to digital has taken place, and providing a phone number for further information on how to prepare their televisions to receive digital signals.

8. Create an online DTV Consumer Forum.

The Commission should quickly establish a Consumer Forum on the FCC website for consumers confronting similar issues to talk to and learn from each other. Users of the forum could exchange information on:

- how to get good reception from different local stations;
 - which local retailers have which converter boxes in stock;
 - converter box capabilities and installation issues;
 - trouble-shooting; and
- addressing special needs.

9. Encourage the rapid deployment of small, battery-powered DTV sets.

The Commission should encourage the development of small battery-powered, fully accessible (captioning and video description) DTV sets and converter boxes and work with industry to ensure that these products are widely available in the market in sufficient numbers.

10. Ensure that broadcasters meet their construction deadlines.

The Commission must ensure that the stations that have not completed their post-transition digital facilities meet their deadlines.¹¹ Commission should ensure the accountability and transparency of all public funding related to the DTV transition.

12. Commission should recommend that Congress investigate opportunities to facilitate the goals of the DTV transition using appropriate financial resources.

13. Commission should work closely with the Presidential transition team to ensure a seamless, efficient and effective DTV transition effort.

Adopted, November 14, 2008 (with 4 members abstaining)

Debra R. Berlyn, Chairperson
Consumer Advisory Committee