

STATEMENT OF FCC COMMISSIONER MICHAEL J. COPPS
ON THE DIGITAL TELEVISION TRANSITION
JULY 2, 2009 AGENDA MEETING

I think I can sum up my feelings and the feelings of the entire FCC staff in a single word: “Whew!”

This has been quite a ride. Long before I became Acting Chair in late January, I knew we were nowhere near ready for a transition on February 17. In January we inherited the wind rather than a real and coordinated public-private partnership to deal with the impending chaos. So I first want to thank Congress and the President for the DTV Delay Act and then for making resources available through the Recovery Act to use the extra time to make a real difference.

While it was not possible to compress into four short months all that should have been done in the previous four or more years, we tried to do everything possible to make up for lost time. And with the tireless efforts of my colleagues, our totally awesome FCC team, and our public and private partners, we were able to make a lot of progress. We cut the number of completely unprepared households by over 65 percent. Just as importantly, the call center, in-home assistance and other measures we were able to put in place meant that, where consumer disruption did occur—and I had long warned it would occur—we were able to respond more quickly and comprehensively than would have been possible only a few months earlier.

This was, I believe, the most extensive and finest effort I’ve been part of in my 30-plus years of public service. Now, if anyone asks whether public-private partnerships can really work, point them to DTV. If anyone asks whether government can work quickly and efficiently, or if it can conduct effective consumer outreach, point them to DTV. And if anyone needs an example of what true public service looks like, tell them to look no further than at the hundreds of Commission staffers here and around the country who have been devoting themselves right up until today to making the transition work.

In fact, the transition is such a singular event that we should not let the opportunity slip by to learn what we can from it. As Acting Chairman, I told our folks we needed to develop a comprehensive “lessons learned” report that will capture what we just went through—what went right, what could have gone better, and what we learned about how to make future transitions and changes as painless as possible for consumers.

I’ve often wished that someone had created such a report after Y2K. The transitions were obviously very different and required very different things of the American people. Still, it would have been a tremendous help to have a record of how they went about trying to educate and support consumers leading up to Y2K, and how government and the private sector coordinated to prepare the country in that case.

There is so much to be mined from the DTV experience: setting up and publicizing a national call center; consumer outreach; the close coordination with the

Commerce Department and other government agencies from federal to hyper-local; the unique partnerships with groups like AmeriCorps and the International Fire Chiefs; and the way we turned a cozy little agency on the banks of the Potomac into a grass-roots organization in every market in the country.

These lessons seem so immediate now, but the natural course is for them to fade with time. So we need to compile, write down, and preserve them now. Future Commissions and future transitions will thank us.

By creating a “lessons learned” report, I don’t mean to imply that the transition is over. Far from it. As I’ve said many times, the transition did not end on June 12. It is a continuing process that will take place over coming weeks and months—and for our low power TV service, over the coming years.

The great majority of our full-power stations—and their viewers—made it through June 12 without lingering problems. But, as with any transition of this magnitude, there are issues still to be worked through. Technology changes are seldom if ever painless and when they don’t get the attention they deserve until the last minute, some level of disruption is guaranteed. But as you heard today, our team—working with affected consumers and the stations serving them—will stay with it until these problems are resolved.

Since this may be one of the final DTV updates at our monthly meetings, it is time to say another “thank you” to our FCC team, and to everyone involved, for the amazing work they did:

- First and foremost, our wonderful and dedicated FCC staff. From across every bureau and office, from the top down, these folks engaged. They gave their talent, their energy, and a commitment to succeed like I’ve never seen before. It wasn’t just a job for them—it was a *mission*. And the determination they had to succeed is the enduring memory that I will take with me of this whole exercise.
- My colleagues Rob McDowell and Jonathan Adelstein for their tireless leadership and their work, both inside this building and in dozens of cities around the nation, to help folks get prepared. Our call center operation without Rob and our consumer outreach without Jonathan would have been far less effective than they were.
- I thank my new colleague and Chairman for all his tireless DTV efforts to come. As I said, this transition is not over, but I know that under his leadership we will stay on the job until it is done and done well.

- Our colleagues at the Commerce Department, other government agencies and the White House, with whom we worked closely and collaboratively over these past five months.
- Our industry partners who stepped up impressively, both in preparing themselves and preparing consumers for the switch—not only broadcasters around the country, but cable, satellite, consumer electronics manufacturers and retailers.
- And all of the community, church, civic and civil rights groups, local governments and many, many others who reached out to friends, relatives and neighbors to make this transition happen as smoothly as it could.

The country owes you all a debt of gratitude. And from the bottom of my heart, I thank you as well.