

Testimony of
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Committee on Oversight and Government Reform Subcommittee on Government
Management, Organization and Procurement

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Good morning Chairman Towns, members of this panel, visitors and guests. My name is Bill Ritter and I am co-anchor of Eyewitness News at 6 and 11 on WABC-TV in New York City and I'm also a correspondent for the ABC News magazine 20/20, which is also produced here in New York City.

First, I want to thank you for holding this important and timely hearing as we begin the seven-month countdown to the transition to all digital broadcasting.

There are approximately 69 million analog television sets currently in use that will stop working after February 17, 2009, unless consumers do one of three things: connect their analog set to a digital converter box; subscribe to cable, satellite or a telephone service provider; or purchase a new television set with an integrated digital tuner. Those affected the most by the digital television transition (DTV) are the elderly, the economically disadvantaged, minority populations and those living in rural areas.

Broadcasters are leading the way to educate consumers about DTV. We are fully committed to ensuring that no viewer is left behind and loses access to free television after the switch. Broadcasters across the country have spent more than \$5 billion upgrading their equipment, and have committed another one billion dollars to provide educational information about DTV.

Local television stations, including WABC, are currently using digital television technology to provide crystal clear pictures and sound, as well as new multicast program services. As a member of the DTV Transition Coalition steering committee – that’s the industry and government coalition made up of nearly 240 groups and organizations – WABC is fully engaged in educating New Yorkers about the transition and the options available to them to successfully make the switch.

WABC is actively participating in the National Association of Broadcaster’s DTV consumer education plan adopted by the Federal Communications Commission on March 3. As part of this plan, we have committed to a comprehensive program of DTV public service announcements, air time, community events and other on-air features. Our campaign is based on a combination of quarterly DTV Public Service Announcements (PSA) commitments, airing of a 30-minute educational program, airing of informational messages through crawls, snipes and news tickers and other TV features, such as countdown activities beginning 100 days from the transition date.

We like to say that sometimes numbers in news tend to confuse, but if you’ll indulge me, here are some numbers: during the second quarter of this year, WABC aired a total of 321 PSAs and 434 crawls and snipes on the DTV transition. The PSAs aired over various day parts, including primetime and during highly watched programs like Eyewitness News and Oprah. These spots have also aired in Live with Regis and Kelly, the morning talk show produced by Channel 7 here in New York, which airs on more than 200 stations across the country. Here’s a sample of one of our PSAs.

Also, just last weekend, we aired a 30-minute special program on the transition, which we will air again before the February transition.

Over the last several months, Eyewitness News has aired DTV news stories and will continue to ramp up our DTV consumer education coverage throughout the fall and early winter.

We are also in discussion with other New York City broadcasters to create a plan for a coordinated over-the-air “test” sometime in the upcoming months. It will go something like this: “If you can see this image, it means you have an analog television set and you will need a digital converter box by Feb. 17, 2009 to continue watching television.”

We are also setting up several town meetings in the fall – throughout the Tri State area- where we can speak one-on-one with people who have questions about the digital transition. In fact, with my bosses here right now, I am volunteering to help host some of those town meetings and talk directly to viewers who may have questions.

Additionally, we are using the Internet to get the transition message out and prepare viewers for the change. We have placed a helpful DTV link on our Webpage, www.7online.com, which guides people to the frequently asked questions and the easy answers they’ll need to make the transition.

Our goal in all this is rather simple: we want to reach New Yorkers – and indeed everyone in the Tri State – using every media platform at our disposal. This is not just our goal for this digital transition, but it is indeed our goal as a television station and as a news organization.

It’s in our interest to make sure that as many viewers as possible are able to watch television – and hopefully that means – watch WABC Channel 7 Eyewitness News. And, as the first responders in terms of public information during emergencies, it is also in the public’s interest to make sure everyone has access to television signals.

I hope I’ve shown you in this brief presentation just how committed we are to this. It’s a huge effort. The good news is that the Tri State has some of the lowest numbers in the nation of people who are affected by this. The overwhelming majority already have DTV capability, and there are many parts of the country where that is not the case.

But we have something of a zero tolerance goal here. It is our responsibility to the communities we serve – that every viewer with a TV be able to watch CHANNEL 7.

This is our philosophy as we proceed towards February 17, 2009.

Thanks for the opportunity to testify and I look forward to answering any questions you may have