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United States Senate

SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON AGING

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6400

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May 25, 2007

The Honorable Carlos M. Gutierrez
U.S. Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20230

Chairman Kevin J. Martin
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street, SW
Washington, DC 20554

Dear Secretary Gutierrez and Chairman Martin:

I am writing to you about the scheduled transition to digital television (DTV) and its anticipated impact on households including or headed by seniors. This transition must occur in a seamless manner without any disruption in service for the millions of affected households. Unfortunately, I am concerned that the vast majority of households that include or are headed by seniors are not sufficiently aware of the upcoming transition and its implications to them. America's seniors would benefit from a program to inform them of the February 17, 2009 DTV transition and how to prepare for it.

Public awareness of the DTV transition is extremely low and a high percentage of the households that will be impacted by the transition include seniors or are headed by seniors. A recent survey of over-the-air viewers conducted by the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) revealed that over half of the respondents had "seen, read, or heard nothing" about the transition to digital television, and only 10 percent were able to guess that the transition would occur in 2009. According to NAB, approximately 19.6 million households rely exclusively on free over-the-air broadcasts. Of the 19.6 million households, approximately 8.6 million include at least one person over the age of 50, according to the Nielsen Media Research TV Household Estimates.

It is now six years after the communication failures of September 11, 2001 spurred government adoption of a set DTV transition date. Disappointingly, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and Department of Commerce still have not adequately ensured Congress that vulnerable households will be properly educated and prepared for the transition. Since older Americans account for over 40 percent of the population that rely on over-the-air broadcasts, it is imperative that your agency develop a strategic outreach plan to educate this segment of the population. To that end, the Special Committee on Aging requests that you report in writing your plans to address the following questions:

- How will your agency ensure that older Americans who rely on over-the-air broadcasting are not left without television service on February 17, 2009?

- How will your agency address the unique needs of frail, homebound, disabled, limited English proficiency, minority, rural and low-income older Americans that will need specific guidance and assistance in order to purchase and install a converter box through the National Telecommunications and Information Administration's (NTIA) Digital-to-Analog Converter Box Coupon Program (coupon program) without any undue burden?
- How will your agency provide guidance to the families, caregivers, and aging support networks of these vulnerable older Americans?
- How will your agency mitigate potential scams that may target the elderly once the coupon program is initiated?

Ultimately, I urge you to jointly develop and implement a program to inform and educate households that include or are headed by seniors of the transition and the steps to take to ensure uninterrupted television service. In the development of such a program, it may be beneficial to consult with members of the National Aging Network, such as the Administration on Aging. At a minimum, the program should include the following:

- An easily comprehensible explanation of the DTV transition, including its effective date and who is affected;
- The public safety and emergency preparedness concerns the DTV transition will address, such as updating of the Emergency Alert System and the potential public safety hazards of not successfully transitioning;
- Instructions to determine whether a television(s) will receive a digital signal and, if not, the options to ensure reception of a digital signal and the related costs;
- Information related to the coupon program, eligible versus non-eligible converter boxes, certified retailers and important associated deadlines; and
- Tips on how to avoid potential fraudulent schemes related to the DTV transition that may target the elderly.

Older Americans represent a significant percentage of the households that will be affected by the February 17, 2009 DTV transition. In order to ensure a seamless transition, this segment of our population warrants particular attention. As you embark on your general consumer education campaign, I hope you will adopt my recommendation to inform and prepare households including or headed by seniors for the transition. Please let me know of your intention and ability to implement a program along the guidelines specified above.

Thank you for your attention to this important issue facing our nation's elderly citizens. I look forward to receiving a written response by June 15, 2007 on this critical matter. Should you have any questions, please feel free to contact Cherie Wilson with Aging Committee Majority Staff at (202) 224-5364.

Sincerely,

Herb Kohl
United States Senate

CC:

John M. Kneuer

Assistant Secretary for Communications and Information

National Telecommunications and Information Administration

U.S. Department of Commerce