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# United States Senate

SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON AGING

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6400

(202) 224-5364

September 10, 2007

Josefina Carbonell  
Assistant Secretary for Aging  
Administration on Aging (AoA)  
One Massachusetts Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Assistant Secretary Carbonell,

I am writing to you about an impending issue facing our nation's seniors, their families, caregivers, and aging support networks. As Chairman of the Special Committee on Aging (the Committee), I am particularly concerned about the February 17, 2009 scheduled transition from free over-the-air analog television to digital television (DTV) and its potential impacts on older individuals. This transition must occur in a seamless manner without any disruption in service for the millions of affected households. Unfortunately, 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. Studies show that about 60 percent of all Americans are completely unaware of the DTV transition.

Roughly 20 million households rely exclusively on free over-the-air broadcasts. In about 40 percent of these households, there is at least one person over the age of 50. This July, the Association of Public Television Stations (APTS) released a study indicating that people over the age of 65 are more likely to be found in over-the-air households and are, therefore, a much more vulnerable group with respect to maintaining television service as the digital transition is completed. APTS also found that older Americans as a group are less likely to own a digital television. They concluded that older individuals will need a special focus in efforts to educate the public about the DTV transition.

Older Americans, particularly those that are homebound, disabled, live in rural areas, have low or fixed-incomes, and/or have limited English proficiency, as well as those that are residents of nursing homes, will be extremely vulnerable to the DTV transition. For instance, many seniors that utilize free over-the-air television and cannot afford to upgrade to cable, satellite, or a television with a digital tuner may need targeted guidance and assistance 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). Seniors will also need to be wary of the "up-selling" of products that do not qualify for the coupon program at the point of sale. Additionally, it is imperative that we consider consumer education to be a matter of public safety. Access to essential information in the event of an emergency will be restricted and individuals will be unable to receive national and local emergency alerts or weather updates aired over television if they fail to take the appropriate steps necessary for a seamless transition.

As you may be aware, last year Congress mandated that our nation transition to DTV without authorizing sufficient funds or setting standards for a widespread consumer education campaign. As a result, it is critical that we now work with government agencies such as your own and with national and community based organizations to get the word out to older individuals who may be left behind when the transition takes place. I believe that America's seniors would benefit from a dedicated program to inform them of the DTV transition and how to appropriately prepare for it. I have reached out to other appropriate government agencies and industry groups inquiring about their efforts.

I am disappointed to report that currently our nation is woefully unprepared to educate our seniors about the transition. As a result, I am holding a hearing on the DTV transition on September 19, 2007 and developing critical legislation that will establish and fund a public-private partnership between the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), the Department of Commerce's National Telecommunication and Information Administration (NTIA), the Administration on Aging (AoA) and its allied aging network, and members of the DTV Transition Coalition, which consists of industry and advocacy groups. This public-private partnership would launch a nationwide consumer education campaign crafted to ensure that older individuals who depend on analog TV are not left without TV service on February 17, 2009. I would welcome your support in this endeavor and would like to inquire about the AoA's ability to participate in such a partnership. It is my understanding that the NTIA has contacted the AoA and that the FCC has coordinated with your agency about establishing a partnership to educate older individuals, their families and caregivers about the DTV transition. In what capacity have the FCC and NTIA interacted with the AoA to ensure that the aging network is well apprised of the DTV transition?

As the preeminent federal agency with a network of state, tribal and local partnerships that serve about seven million older individuals and their caregivers, I believe the AoA could play a critical role in advancing awareness about the DTV transition among our nation's seniors. As you are aware, the National Network on Aging consists of 56 State Units on Aging; 655 Area Agencies on Aging; 233 Tribal and Native organizations; two organizations that serve Native Hawaiians; 29,000 service providers; and thousands of volunteers. Given that these organizations provide assistance and services to older individuals and their families in urban, suburban, and rural areas nationwide, they are in a unique position to disseminate a unified message about the DTV transition. I acknowledge that these entities will need access to additional resources to participate in a successful partnership and I am taking steps forward to address this necessity.

Thank you for your attention to this important issue facing our nation's seniors. Please consider the Committee as a resource on the DTV transition as the AoA begins to cover this issue more in-depth. I look forward to receiving a written response from you at your earliest convenience, preferably before September 19, 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,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Herb Kohl". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name and title.

Herb Kohl  
Chairman