



Highlights of [GAO-07-1248T](#), a testimony before the Senate Special Committee on Aging

## Why GAO Did This Study

On February 17, 2009, federal law requires all full-power television stations in the United States to cease analog broadcasting and broadcast digital-only transmissions, often referred to as the digital television (DTV) transition. Federal law also requires the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) to create a program that subsidizes consumers' purchases of digital-to-analog converter boxes. After the transition, households with analog sets that rely on over-the-air broadcast signals must take action or they will lose television service, but some households might not be aware of this potential disruption. This testimony provides preliminary information on (1) the consumer education efforts currently underway, (2) education efforts being planned, (3) difficulties with the implementation of consumer education programs, and (4) ongoing GAO work on consumer education and awareness regarding the transition. GAO interviewed officials with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and NTIA. Further, GAO met with a wide variety of industry and other stakeholders involved with the transition, including members of the DTV Transition Coalition—a group of public and private stakeholders, and experts on strategic communications. GAO discussed this testimony with FCC and NTIA officials and incorporated their comments.

[www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-1248T](http://www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-1248T).

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## DIGITAL TELEVISION TRANSITION

### Preliminary Information on Initial Consumer Education Efforts

#### What GAO Found

A number of federal and private stakeholders have begun consumer education campaigns, with both independent and coordinated efforts underway. FCC has taken several steps to promote consumer awareness, such as launching a Web site, participating in events intended to educate the public, and requiring sellers of televisions to include consumer alerts on non-digital televisions. NTIA has created brochures in English and Spanish to provide the public information about its converter box subsidy program and is partnering with organizations to perform outreach to disadvantaged groups. Earlier this year, the DTV Transition Coalition was launched to help ensure that no consumer is left without broadcast television due to a lack of information. Over 160 private, public, and non-profit groups have joined the Coalition to coordinate consumer education efforts.

While widespread and comprehensive consumer education efforts have yet to be implemented, various efforts are currently being planned. FCC, NTIA, and private sector stakeholders have plans to further educate consumers as the DTV transition nears. For example, voluntary public service announcements to raise awareness of the transition are planned by industry groups and FCC is considering requiring broadcasters, manufacturers and cable and satellite providers to insert various messages and alerts in their products and programming. In addition, the converter box subsidy program will have a consumer education component. Because many education efforts are in the planning or early stages of implementation, it is too early to tell how effective these efforts will be.

Various factors make consumer education difficult. While private sector stakeholders are participating in outreach efforts, these actions are voluntary and therefore the government cannot be assured of the extent of private sector efforts. Strategic communications experts from industry, government, and academia identified potential challenges to a consumer education campaign, including (1) prioritizing limited resources to target the right audience, (2) educating consumers to help protect them from making unnecessary purchases, (3) reaching underserved populations, and (4) aligning stakeholders to form a consistent, coordinated effort.

GAO has work planned to assess the progress of consumer awareness. In particular, GAO plans to conduct a series of surveys to determine the population affected by the DTV transition, levels of awareness about the transition, and demographic information about the affected population. Throughout the transition, GAO will continue to monitor government and industry education efforts and analyze these efforts relative to best practices for consumer education campaigns. GAO plans to review the government's responsibility for consumer education, monitor the outcome of FCC's rulemaking related to consumer education, and collect details of the consumer education component of the converter box subsidy program.