

A Plan for the Provision of Technical Assistance in Relation to the Implementation of the “DTV Transition Assistance Act”

This document augments the TV Converter Box Coupon Program’s (Coupon Program) Consumer Education Plan and addresses how to meet the informational and technical assistance needs of vulnerable populations as well as describing the mechanisms to accomplish Agency goals expeditiously. This document will be the basis for guiding the National Telecommunications and Information Administration’s (NTIA) use of the funds made available in the DTV Transition Assistance Act.*

On February 17, 2009, full-power broadcast television stations in the United States will stop broadcasting programming on analog airwaves and begin broadcasting only in digital. This important change benefits consumers by offering sharper pictures and more channels. It will also free valuable spectrum for use by emergency responders. To keep their analog-only TV sets working after the transition date, consumers who receive broadcasts over the air using an antenna will need to (1) purchase a digital TV, or (2) subscribe to cable, satellite or other pay TV service, or (3) purchase a converter box. To support the nation’s digital transition, the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) will provide, upon request by an eligible household, up to two \$40 coupons to apply toward the purchase of coupon-eligible converter boxes. These converter boxes decode the digital signal for display on analog TV sets, enabling them to keep working after the transition.

Some television viewers, including many consumers in rural communities, watch programs over translators or via low-power (LPTV) stations which may continue broadcasting analog signals after February 17, 2009. TV viewers along the southern border may also continue to watch analog broadcasts after the transition. These viewers may wish to select converter boxes that will pass through analog signals. The National Association of Broadcasters has launched a website, LPTVAnswers.com, that allows consumers to type in their zip code to see what LPTV stations are broadcasting in a given area.

The Digital Television Transition and Public Safety Act of 2005 (Title III of Pub. L. No. 109-171) (the Act) authorizes NTIA to administer the TV Converter Box Coupon Program (Coupon Program). NTIA has developed and is executing a consumer education plan with the goal of minimizing the number of consumers adversely affected by the February 17, 2009, digital transition. The Agency’s plan targets consumers who rely on free, over-the-air television and who are at the greatest risk of losing their TV service after February 17, 2009.

* The Consumer Education Plan is available on NTIA’s website at http://www.ntia.doc.gov/dtvcoupon/DTV_ConsumerEducation_120607.pdf.



Market research shows that these over-the-air-reliant households tend to be disproportionately minority (African American, Asian, Hispanic, Native American), rural, seniors, disabled and/or economically disadvantaged.

To reach these populations in the most efficient and effective manner, the Agency is executing a three-pronged strategy of: (1) providing relevant messages and materials; (2) engaging media on a nonpaid basis to carry our messages; and (3) enlisting partners who are trusted and credible intermediaries who can communicate with their constituents about the Coupon Program. The latest phase of NTIA's messaging urges consumers to follow three steps and allow at least 6 weeks to apply for their coupons, buy their converter boxes and try them to make sure they work.

As called for in the "DTV Transition Assistance Act" (Pub. L. No. 110-295) (Assistance Act), NTIA has developed this plan for use of funds authorized under Section 3008 of the Act (Low-Power Television and Translator Digital-To-Analog Conversion) to provide consumer education and assistance about the Coupon Program to nonprofit or public-interest groups. NTIA will reserve up to \$4.5 million for awards under this authority for unsolicited proposals that can be awarded by November 15, 2008. Use of these funds may include, but is not limited to, partnering with, providing grants to, and contracting with non-profit organizations or public-interest groups in achieving these efforts. In making any awards under the Act, NTIA is cognizant of the need to achieve the greatest public benefit within a rapidly closing time horizon.

Focus of Efforts

In a May 2008 report, "The February 2009 Digital Television Transition: Overview of the Digital Readiness of U.S. Households and Analysis of Viewing to Unready Sets," The Nielsen Company indicated that about 9.4 percent of TV households, slightly more than 10 million, are "unready" for the digital transition because they do not have a television set with a digital tuner, either internal to the set or external (e.g., an analog TV connected to a digital converter box).

NTIA's goal is to maximize opportunities for these over-the-air consumers to avail themselves of the Coupon Program and to provide to vulnerable Americans whatever help is warranted under the Assistance Act. NTIA is focused on the following four major areas to optimize the use of its limited resources. While these four elements are priority areas of concentration, they do not circumscribe or limit potential use of the funds by NTIA's Assistant Secretary.

1. NTIA will consider supporting activities that concentrate consumer education and technical assistance strategies on populations that are on average more reliant on OTA broadcasts, including minorities (African American, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American), seniors, rural residents, low-income individuals and people with disabilities. In its Consumer Education Plan, NTIA has identified 45 priority markets in the United States where the Agency will focus its activities.
2. Using coupon request data at the Designated Market Area (DMA) level, NTIA will focus its assistance on those markets in which participation in the Coupon Program by



over-the-air-reliant households is lower than expected. As of September 1, 2008, there are 23 markets with very low household coupon request rates. These markets include those that are smaller in population, southern border communities, rural markets, and ones with a disproportionate number of translator and low-power stations.

3. NTIA acknowledges the need not just to inform consumers about the Coupon Program but to provide where appropriate and feasible hands-on assistance to vulnerable Americans who may have difficulty completing the application, picking up a converter box or connecting it to their TV sets. The Agency is encouraged by the variety of private-sector voluntary initiatives that are springing up across the Nation to provide assistance, such as faith-based and community-based initiatives. The Agency would consider support for timely and realistic efforts to provide technical support services where organizations can provide local hands-on support to hard-to-reach consumers. Given the need to achieve results in a condensed period of time, NTIA would look to organizations with pre-existing grassroots networks with the capability to mobilize and make a difference on very short notice.
4. On September 12, 2008, the Office of Management and Budget and the Office of Science and Technology Policy hosted a meeting of federal agency officials to enhance DTV transition awareness building and to coordinate the federal government's campaign to ensure a smooth transition for all Americans. NTIA will work with other federal agencies to enhance its awareness-building activities focused on vulnerable populations and its priority markets, including rural and southern border communities with a disproportionate number of translator and low-power stations. NTIA would consider supporting the efforts of other federal agencies, such as providing flyers or "stuffers," to continue to get the word out about the Coupon Program.

Execution

In consideration of the speed with which NTIA will need to meet the goals of the Assistance Act, NTIA has established mechanisms to make noncompetitive awards with discretionary funds made available under the Assistance Act. NTIA will accept certain unsolicited proposals for use in fulfilling its mission to provide consumer education and technical assistance to targeted, hard-to-reach populations at risk of losing their television service after February 17, 2009. A proposal would be expected to result in an increase in coupon applications from—and hands-on assistance to—vulnerable populations in the Agency's priority communities and among its targeted populations.

In making any awards under the Assistance Act, priority will be given to organizations that have a proven track record of working with one or more of the target populations in one or more of the priority markets; have the organizational capacity to carry out consumer education and or technical assistance in an abbreviated period of time; have existing relations or network



of relations with populations of interest to begin hands-on work immediately; and have experience in dealing with the issue of the digital transition.

