



Highlights of [GAO-08-881T](#), a testimony before the House Subcommittee on Telecommunications and the Internet

## Why GAO Did This Study

The Digital Television (DTV) Transition and Public Safety Act of 2005, requires all full-power television station in the United States to cease analog broadcasting by February 17, 2009. Low-power stations are not required to cease analog transmissions and most will continue broadcasting in analog. Federal law also requires the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) to subsidize consumers' purchases of digital-to-analog converter boxes. After the transition, households with analog sets that rely on over-the-air broadcasts must take action or they will lose television service, but some households might not be aware of this potential disruption. This testimony provides information on (1) technical and coordination issues facing full-power broadcast stations as they transition to digital, (2) issues pertaining to low-power broadcasting and how they affect consumers, and (3) the extent to which American households are aware of the DTV transition and likely to utilize the converter box subsidy program. GAO interviewed officials with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and NTIA and met with a wide variety of industry participants and other stakeholders. GAO conducted a Web-based survey of broadcasters to determine their status in transitioning to digital and issues they were encountering and commissioned a survey of the U.S. population on consumer awareness. This statement is based on GAO's body of work on the DTV transition.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-881T](#). For more information, contact Mark L. Goldstein at (202) 512-2834 or [goldsteinm@gao.gov](mailto:goldsteinm@gao.gov).

## DIGITAL TELEVISION TRANSITION

### Broadcasters' Transition Status, Low-Power Station Issues, and Information on Consumer Awareness of the DTV Transition

#### What GAO Found

Broadcasters have made significant progress in preparing for the DTV transition. In fact, many stations are already broadcasting their full digital signal with the only remaining step being to turn off their analog signal. As of February 2008, 91 percent of broadcasters responding to our survey reported that they were already transmitting a digital signal. Nine percent of stations in our survey had yet to begin broadcasting a digital signal, but almost all of those stations expected to be broadcasting digitally by the transition date. In finalizing the transition to digital, some stations still must resolve technical, coordination, and construction issues. Technical issues include relocating either digital or analog antennas and, in some cases, constructing new broadcast towers. Some stations are bound by financial constraints related to the costs of resolving these issues. In addition, some stations have outstanding coordination issues, such as the U.S. government reaching agreements with the Canadian and Mexican governments regarding signal interference issues and coordinating with cable and satellite providers.

Since most low-power stations will not transition to digital by February 2009, it is possible for viewers to receive programming in analog and digital after the transition. Potentially millions of viewers can receive low-power analog transmissions, including programming from the major networks, Spanish language broadcasting, and public television. To have access to both analog and digital television signals after the DTV transition, viewers could purchase a special kind of converter box that passes through an analog signal and a digital signal, or purchase other equipment. Public and private stakeholders have taken steps to educate the public about the low-power broadcasts potentially remaining in analog but some advocacy groups and others have expressed concerns that the messages intending to explain the low-power issue are instead confusing the public. Further complicating matters, many consumers do not know the difference between full-power and low-power stations or whether the signals they receive are full or low power.

Most households will be unaffected by the DTV transition and a vast majority have heard of the transition. About 84 percent of people have heard of the transition, but fewer have more specific knowledge about the transition. Those at higher risk of being affected by the transition—households viewing over-the-air television signals—have higher levels of awareness than those who will be unaffected. Over half of the population has heard of the converter box subsidy program and those households at risk of losing television service who plan to take action are likely to utilize the program. However, only a third of those indicating plans to purchase boxes and utilize the coupons know how to obtain coupons. In addition, there are indications that some consumers are confused about the transition, as 45 percent of those households who are at risk plan inadequate or no action to prepare for the transition. Conversely, amongst those unaffected by the transition, 30 percent indicated they have plans to ready themselves for the transition—despite the fact that no action will be required to maintain television service.