

FCC Consumer Advisory

Closed Captioning and Digital-to-Analog Converter Boxes for Viewing Free Over-the-Air Programming on Analog Televisions

Overview of DTV Transition

The digital television (DTV) transition refers to the switch from analog to digital broadcast television. When the DTV transition is completed on June 12, 2009, all U.S. full-power TV stations will stop broadcasting in analog format, and will transmit only in digital instead. After that time, consumers who subscribe to pay television services (for example: cable, satellite) will continue to receive broadcast (“over the air”) television programs through these subscription services. Consumers who do not have subscription TV services will have two choices: (1) they can purchase a digital TV (either a stand alone digital TV or separate digital tuner set-top box) or (2) they can acquire a digital-to-analog converter box for each of their analog TVs to continue receiving free over-the-air digital television programming. The converter box will convert the over-the-air digital signals into signals that analog TV sets can receive and display. Starting in 2008, a government program run by a separate agency – the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) – will make available \$40 coupons, two per household, to help consumers pay for converter boxes. (Please note that these coupons will expire 90 days after mailing). More information on the digital-to-analog converter box coupon program is available online at www.dtv2009.gov, or by calling 1-888-DTV-2009 (voice) or 1-877-530-2634 (TTY).

Some consumers have expressed concern about how the converter boxes will work and whether consumers will continue to receive closed captions after the transition to digital television takes place. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) wishes to reassure consumers that its rules do require digital-to-analog converter boxes to pass through closed captions. This advisory explains how consumers will be able to access closed captions using these converter boxes.

Closed Captioning and the Digital-to-Analog Converter Box

Closed captioning displays the audio portion of a television program as text on the television screen, enabling people with hearing loss and others to better access television programming. FCC rules require DTV equipment such as converter boxes to be capable of passing through closed captioning. The digital-to-analog converter box receives closed caption signals and passes those closed caption signals to your TV automatically. In addition, many converter boxes will generate captions through the converter box itself, thus enabling you to change the way your captions look.

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How to Control Closed Captions Through Your TV

Analog TVs that are 13 inches or larger, and were manufactured after July 1993, can display closed captions. When using any digital-to-analog converter box on one of these TVs, you can follow the instructions that came with your TV to turn closed captions on/off through your TV or TV remote control, just as you always have. If you were able to see closed captions on your TV before you got the converter box, you will continue to see closed captions on your TV the same way after attaching the box. As before, captions will appear as white text on a black background.

Analog TVs that are smaller than 13 inches and TVs manufactured before July 1993, are not required to display closed captions. If your converter box is equipped to generate closed captions itself, however, you may be able to see closed captions on these TVs by following the instructions below.

How to See Closed Captions Through Converter Boxes Equipped Themselves to Generate Closed Captions

In addition to passing through closed caption signals, many converter boxes also include the ability to take over the captioning role that the tuner plays in your analog TV set. To determine whether your converter box is equipped to generate captions in this way, you should refer to the user manual that came with the converter box. If your converter box is equipped to generate captions in this way, then follow the instructions that came with the converter box to turn closed captions on/off via your converter box or converter box remote control. When you access the closed captions in this way, you also will be able to change the way your digital captions look. The converter box will come with instructions on how to change the caption size, font (style), caption color, background color, and opacity. This ability to adjust your captions is something you cannot do now with an analog television and analog captions.

What To Do if You Have Problems Getting Captions

If you turn on the digital-to-analog converter box and see a double row of overlapping captions, it may mean you are seeing captions through both your TV and your digital-to-analog converter box. You should turn off the closed captioning function either on your television or on the converter box.

If you are able to get captions when you tune to one station, but not another, most likely this is not a problem with your converter box. You should contact the television station airing the program that does not have captions.

If you are using a digital-to-analog converter box with an analog TV set and cannot see any captions, you should contact the manufacturer of the converter box.

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Filing a Complaint with the FCC

If you have tried to resolve your problem viewing closed captioning in any of these ways but it continues, you can file a complaint with the FCC alleging a violation of the Television Decoder Circuitry Act and the FCC's implementing rules. There is no charge for filing a complaint. If your complaint concerns the inability of your converter box to deliver captions, you may complain directly to the FCC. If your complaint concerns the lack of captioning on a specific program or channel (i.e., you receive captions on some channels, but not others), you must first complain to the programming distributor (meaning the broadcast TV station). For more information on filing a complaint with your programming distributor and the information to include in such complaints, see the FCC's closed captioning consumer fact sheet at www.fcc.gov/cgb/consumerfacts/closedcaption.html. If you are uncertain where to file your complaint, contact the FCC's Consumer Center using the contact information provided for filing a complaint with the FCC below.

You can file your complaint using an FCC on-line complaint form found at esupport.fcc.gov/complaints.htm. You can also file your complaint with the FCC's Consumer Center by e-mailing fccinfo@fcc.gov; calling 1-888-CALL-FCC (1-888-225-5322) voice, 1-888-TELL-FCC (1-888-835-5322) TTY; faxing 1-866-418-0232; or writing to:

Federal Communications Commission
Consumer & Governmental Affairs Bureau
Consumer Inquiries and Complaints Division
445 12th Street, S.W.
Washington, DC 20554.

Note: On November 3, 2008, the Commission adopted rules revising the procedures for filing closed captioning complaints. These rules, however, will not take effect until approved by the Office of Management and Budget. Therefore, consumers must continue to follow the instructions for filing complaints that are contained in this advisory until further notice. Under the new rules, consumers will no longer be required to file complaints with the video programming distributor. Consumers will have 60 days from the date the captioned program aired to file a complaint either with the distributor or the Commission. If the complaint is filed with the Commission, the Commission will forward it to the distributor. After receiving a complaint, either directly from the consumer or from the Commission, the distributor will have 30 days to respond to the complaint. The Commission also adopted new rules requiring that video programming distributors make specific contact information available to consumers to assist consumers in contacting the distributors about closed captioning concerns.

What to Include In Your Complaint to the FCC

The best way to provide all the information the FCC needs to process your complaint is to complete fully the on-line complaint form. When you open the on-line form, you will be asked a series of questions that will take you to the particular section of the form you need to complete. If you do not use the on-line complaint form, your complaint, at a minimum, should indicate:

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- your name, address, email address, and phone number where you can be reached;
- whether you are filing a complaint on behalf of another party, and, if so, the party's name, address, email address, day time phone number, and your relationship to the party;
- preferred format or method of response (letter, fax, voice phone call, email, TRS, TTY, ASCII text, audio recording, or Braille);
- that your complaint is about closed captioning for DTV;
- the name, address, and telephone number (if known) of the company or companies involved with your complaint;
- the date and time or other details about timing of the lack of closed captioning;
- television station call sign (WZUE), TV channel (13), location (city and state), and name of program involved; and
- a brief description of your complaint and the resolution you are seeking, and a full description of the equipment or service you are complaining about, including date of purchase, use, or attempt to use.

For More Information

For more information about the DTV transition, visit www.dtv.gov, and see the FCC's consumer fact sheets at www.fcc.gov/cgb/consumerfacts/digitaltv.html and www.fcc.gov/cgb/consumerfacts/dtvcaptions.html. You can also contact the FCC's Consumer Center using the contact information provided for filing a complaint.

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For this or any other consumer publication in an accessible format (electronic ASCII text, Braille, large print, or audio) please write or call us at the address or phone number below, or send an e-mail to FCC504@fcc.gov.

To receive information on this and other FCC consumer topics through the Commission's electronic subscriber service, visit www.fcc.gov/cgb/contacts/.

This document is for consumer education purposes only and is not intended to affect any proceedings or cases involving this subject matter or related issues.

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