

FCC EN BANC HEARING ON DTV TRANSITION
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TESTIMONY OF MARK LLOYD

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Federal Communications Commission. The Leadership Conference on Civil Rights and the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights Education Fund work in coalition with over 200 organizations across the nation to advance the goal of equal opportunity and equal justice in America.

We are now working nationally with our coalition partners and paying special attention to seven communities cities as the nation makes the transition from analog to digital television. Before I describe our education and assistance work, I'd like to thank former FCC Chairman Richard Wiley for introducing me to this issue when I worked with him some 17 years ago. I'd also like to thank my fellow founding members of the DTV Transition Steering Committee, especially the National Association of Broadcasters, the National Cable Television Association and LG Electronics. And I'd like to thank the National Telecommunications and Information Administration for supporting our work.

The LCCR field department has been working hard on getting information to the most vulnerable Americans about the DTV Transition. Erica Swanson and Sonal Patel have been managing the work of LCCREF coordinators, a dozen DTV assistance centers and other local community based organizations and partners in Atlanta, Detroit, Minneapolis, Portland, Seattle, San Antonio and the San Francisco Bay area.

We are continuing the work we've been doing for over a year now to inform people about the coupon program, and we are providing information about where to get converter boxes and antennae, how to set up that equipment with their existing television sets, and providing a resource for people to donate and receive donated coupons.

Despite the rollercoaster ride of reports about NTIA running out of money, the failure of Congress to act on a delay, the passage of a delay, the news that not all the television stations will delay, and that additional funds have not yet been committed to fund NTIA or the FCC through the delay . . . there is an eagerness in all the communities we are working with to work together and share information with the public and commercial broadcasters, the retailers, and local and federal government officials.

We still get questions about the coupon program. Some of these questions are as basic as how to sign up, when will we receive the coupon, and can we reapply. But, as compared to when we began the work last January, there are clearly now more questions about what is the best and least expensive converter box and antenna, and how is this equipment set up, and how to rescan for local channels. And it is also very clear that for many Americans at this time an outlay of thirty to seventy dollars for a converter box and antenna is a big expense.

We have been able to generate substantial local media coverage and our assistance centers are frankly overwhelmed by the response. Many small community based operations do not have press offices or staff trained in handling reporters and camera operators, nor are they used to seeing more than a few new people walking through their doors every day. They are seeing many more than that looking for answers about this transition to digital television.

If we have a challenge, it is that we are determined to meet the needs of our target populations (the elderly, the disabled, ethnic minorities, those whose first language is not English) but we cannot turn away the general population looking for assistance.

We are also hearing from people who have done everything they were told to do and still they cannot get the television service they used to get.

Most of our assistance centers have been open for about a month now and we have trained tens of thousands of people and provided direct assistance to well over a thousand people, but let me tell the story of one woman before I end with a few recommendations.

I'm going to call her Mrs. Dorothy. Mrs. Dorothy has a terminal illness. She lives on a fixed and limited income. Her illness and her income make it next to impossible for her to leave her home. Mrs. Dorothy does not have a computer. Her lifeline is over the air TV. She knew the transition was occurring in February and believed she had plenty of time to apply, but when she called to apply for a coupon in late December she was put on the waiting list. Because of her basic cost of living and her very high medical and prescriptions expenses she understood quickly that buying a converter box without a coupon was not a possibility for her. A direct service provider in Minneapolis put her in touch with one of our Assistance Centers and our Local Coordinator. We are conducting a coupon exchange program in the Twin Cities – so the LCCREF local coordinator mailed her one of our donated converter box coupons. Mrs. Dorothy's brother is going to help her redeem the coupon and purchase a converter box, and help her set it up. When our Coordinator talked with Mrs. Dorothy and her brother to help them figure out how she could keep her TV service she started crying. She said she was confused, frustrated, and scared to lose her TV.

Mrs. Dorothy and the thousands like her need all of us to help. She is just as much an American as anybody. We must not stop trying to keep her connected to her community.

Recommendations:

There must be a centralized database of all those in each community across the country working to assist people in this transition. We are working hard with our partners in the seven cities to reach out to the local broadcasters, the state broadcasting associations, the retailers, and local and federal officials. But we know there are many people working beyond our seven cities trying to fill needs as well. There must be coordination in all our communities and it starts with knowing who is doing what.

There must be an easy to use resource that will tell us what stations are shutting off their analog service and when, and this resource should also tell us when a household is beyond the reach of a strong digital signal.

There must be an intelligent interactive call center in place that is accessible to people in multiple languages and to people who have hearing or visual limitations.

And finally, community based organizations are under tremendous strain given our nation's current economic challenges, this transition to digital should move forward, but it must not be another unfunded burden for local groups. We need to make sure local community groups get the resources they need to assist our most vulnerable citizens.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify and I look forward to your questions.