

Statement of Larry Sidman
President and Chief Executive Officer
Association of Public Television Stations

Before the Federal Communications Commission
June 3, 2009

Chairman Copps and Commissioners Adelstein and McDowell, thank you for the opportunity to speak this morning on behalf of the nation's locally owned and operated public television stations. My name is Larry Sidman, and I am President and CEO of the Association of Public Television Stations.

We are now T-minus ten days and counting to the conversion of our nation's broadcast system from analog to digital transmission. Before addressing the measures that should be taken to ensure that the conversion goes as smoothly as possible, we should pause to celebrate this historic moment, more than a generation in the making.

Digital television is the product of remarkable scientific breakthroughs created by years of technical endeavors by teams of some of the most talented engineers and programmers ever assembled in the United States. It reflects a remarkable collaboration of industries, not always conflict-free, and of the private and public sectors. The result is the breathtaking video experience of high-definition television; the availability of multiple standard-definition video channels for education, foreign language and children's programming; and the liberation of significant spectrum to enhance public safety and advanced commercial wireless services. We can confidently state that digital television is a public good of which we can be justifiably proud.

But, like almost all new technologies, digital television is inherently disruptive. The Congress, NTIA and the FCC have spent a great deal of time and effort in the past several years attempting to mitigate that disruption to the maximum possible extent. The government-subsidized converter-box program has dramatically reduced the economic burden of the digital

conversion upon consumers. The FCC's DTV consumer education rules have promoted vastly expanded consumer awareness. The industries represented on this panel have collectively expended more than \$1.2 billion dollars according to the DTV Transition Coalition, preparing the public for the digital conversion.

Our nation cannot rest content, however, until we are certain that together we have done everything reasonably possible to ensure that all Americans, especially the elderly and historically underserved communities, including minorities, non-English speakers and rural residents, have access to digital television services. They cannot be stranded.

The reinvigorated oversight of the DTV transition this year by the Obama Administration, Congress and the FCC has gone a long way to ensure a more seamless DTV conversion. In particular, the delay in the DTV conversion urged by the new Administration and enacted by the Congress in the DTV Delay Act has not only given consumers four additional months to adapt but, perhaps more significantly, has created a staggered DTV conversion as opposed to a nation-wide "flash cut." The public television community is especially appreciative of the manner in which the Commission implemented the DTV Delay Act to enable many local public television stations suffering unprecedented economic hardship as a consequence of the deep recession to shut off analog before June 12. Together with numbers of "soft shutoffs" of analog, this staggered DTV conversion leads public television to make several observations and recommendations for the final 10 days of the DTV transition and the period immediately thereafter.

First, on-air education is working. At this late stage, information about potential service loss areas and the need for rescanning converter boxes is particularly useful. Public television

stations have invested major resources in these efforts. For example, KNME in Albuquerque, New Mexico, has spent more than \$400,000 in air time and production costs alone.

Second, in addition to the FCC's national call center, we recommend that stations or groups of stations staff their own call local help lines or centers to field inquiries from local viewers. For example, Iowa Public Television will have a call center of 16 phones. More than 50 staffers from all areas have been trained by the station's Chief Engineer and will work around the clock in shifts.

Third, walk-in centers and in-home assistance for converter box and antenna installation and operation, particularly for the elderly, are critically important. It's all about the last meter to the television set. We applaud the Commission for its grassroots initiatives and contracts to fulfill these needs. Though the preference for for-profit small businesses in the award of the recent round of contracts unfortunately prevented willing public television stations from playing a greater role in this program, we are pleased that two public television stations did obtain such contracts.

Fourth, and finally, public television stations' early transitions have underscored one inescapable reality: no matter what they do, some viewers, especially in rural or mountainous areas, will not be able to get all the same stations they did before the transition because of differences between the analog and digital technologies. Stations need to be prepared to respond to these viewers and work toward expanding service and filling in service gaps. We commend the Commission for its recent adoption of rules for the new "replacement" translator service, and for implementing public television's recommendation to expand the construction period to three years. Idaho Public Television has already informed us that this will enable it to line up funding to resume service through replacement translators to six primarily rural communities, including

four seats of county government. To ensure that these rules will fulfill their purpose, we are urging Congress to restore the Public Telecommunications Facilities Program at NTIA and the Public Television Digital Transition Grant Program of the Rural Utilities Service, which have been proposed for elimination in the Administration's FY 2010 budget. These grant programs are essential if local public television stations are to continue to strive toward providing educational and informational, digital programming to *all* Americans.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak today, and for your attention to ensuring a successful digital conversion. I am happy to answer your questions about our efforts.