

Digital TV Beckons, but Many Miss the Call

Jacques Steinberg



Vesta Clemmons, left, watches as Samantha Greenwood tries to hook up a digital converter box.

Vesta Clemmons, who is 77 and lives alone, relies on the battered Zenith television in her tiny apartment here as more than just a lifeline to the outside world.

"It's like a friend," she said in her living room, which is also her dining room and bedroom. "I would feel very isolated without it. I get lonesome anyway."

So Ms. Clemmons was concerned to learn from a public-service campaign that after Feb. 17 the rooftop antenna connected to her television would no longer function properly, and thus neither would her TV — unless she bought and installed an adaptor. On that day the country's broadcast stations have long been scheduled to shut down the old-fashioned, analog signals that have carried their programming since the days of Milton Berle, and replace them with high-definition digital signals that offer a clearer picture, among other benefits.

But less than a month before the Feb. 17 deadline, so many American households have yet to take the necessary steps to continue to watch over-the-air television — more than 6.5 million, according to Nielsen Media Research — that Congress has considered giving them more time.

On Monday night the Senate passed a bill, supported by President Obama, that would extend the deadline until June 12. The House of Representatives took up the same measure on Wednesday but failed to muster the two-thirds majority needed for it to pass on a fast-track procedural vote. Its fate is now unclear.

Regardless of when the switchover takes place, viewers with cable or satellite systems, and many others with digital televisions purchased after 2004, need not do anything in anticipation of the deadline, nor will they notice much of a change afterward. But for those older and low-income viewers like Ms. Clemmons who still use set-top rabbit ears or rooftop antennas to pull in images of "The Oprah Winfrey Show" or "The Young and the Restless," the switchover to digital television has often proven a bewildering and cumbersome burden.

That so many viewers here and around the country risk losing something as basic as a free television signal is a function, at least in part, of the government's failure to anticipate that those most affected would be among the nation's most frail and vulnerable. Further aggravating the confusion and uncertainty has been that a coupon program established by Congress to defray the cost of converter boxes — each American household is entitled to two \$40 vouchers, which cover most, if not all, of the cost of the adaptors — ran out of money in

early January, leaving hundreds of thousands of applicants to languish on a waiting list. (The program has already issued more than \$1 billion worth of coupons.)

Ms. Clemmons, a woman whose slight frame and white mane belie her taste in music — Pink Floyd, Ozzy Osbourne and Nine-Inch Nails are her favorites — said she had made several attempts to call the government's toll-free number in recent days to request a coupon and had not been able to get through.

Ultimately she received peace of mind from an unlikely source: Meals on Wheels. For several months now, drivers and volunteers for the Houston-area program have been delivering and installing digital converter boxes for its clients — as a side dish alongside the baked chicken and stewed peaches that are their usual fare. Ms. Clemmons's turn came last week.

In Houston, which is the nation's 10th-largest television market and whose flat topography makes it relatively easy to watch TV with only an antenna, the problem is particularly acute: 1 in 10 households remains out of compliance, by Nielsen's estimates, ranking it behind only Albuquerque and Dallas.

Mindful of the need for such efforts, Consumers Union, the nonprofit advocacy group and publisher of Consumer Reports, is among those that lobbied Congress to put off the Feb. 17 deadline by four months. It has estimated the cost of replenishing the coupon program alone at nearly \$1 billion, said Gene Kimmelman, vice president for international affairs. To defray the cost of the efforts by Meals on Wheels here, Interfaith Ministries for Greater Houston, the social service organization that administers the program, appealed last year to congregants in churches and synagogues around the city to donate the converter coupons they may have already received; more than 1,500 people answered that call.

"After I heard about the process of what it would take for a person to get the coupon, and get the boxes, I was pretty livid," said Bridget Samuel, chief operating officer for Interfaith. "I still go out on the routes making deliveries. Most of them are sitting in front of their TVs. They're watching 'Price Is Right.' They're watching 'Judge Judy.' That's their company."

Meals on Wheels is hardly the only entity in Houston, or around the country, that has been trying to bring viewers' outdated equipment into compliance. The National Association of Broadcasters estimates that its stations and networks, have, collectively, allotted more than \$1 billion worth of advertising time to raise public awareness.

The CBS affiliate here, KHOU-TV, ran a series of tests during its local newscasts in which viewers were told that the analog signal was about to be temporarily replaced by the digital one — and that if their screens go to a test pattern, they should call the phone number listed to learn how to get up to date.

Skip to next paragraph When KHOU and several other local stations ran the tests one day in December, nearly 14,000 viewers called the hot line in response. When the test was rerun on Jan. 6, 8,000 more calls were logged.

KHOU also joined with a local grocery chain, H-E-B, for a series of promotional events at which thousands of customers lined up to apply for coupons, and, if they already had them, to buy converter boxes. Most were able to do so at no personal expense, with H-E-B having priced the boxes at \$40, the value of the coupons. (Other electronics retailers have been charging as much as \$100.)

Through surveys of its nearly 4,000 clients, Meals on Wheels identified Ms. Clemmons as among those needing assistance. And so, on Jan. 21, Samantha Greenwood, the program's assessment coordinator, arrived to install her converter box.

As it turned out, Ms. Greenwood couldn't get the converter, which is about the size of a cable box and is connected to both the antenna and TV, to work, because of some wiring problems in the back of Ms. Clemmons's Zenith. But she vowed that her husband, an engineer, would return well before the Feb. 17 deadline to solve the problem.

Ms. Clemmons, who risks losing access to "World News with Charles Gibson," her favorite news program, said she would be waiting.

Earlier that morning Ms. Greenwood had fared better in the apartment of Ramona DeFore, a widow in the same building who is also 77. On her own Ms. DeFore had gotten a coupon and a box but had been baffled as to how to connect it to her Magnavox TV, a set so old she couldn't remember when she had bought it.

After Ms. Greenwood made the connection successfully, Ms. DeFore was able to tune in Channel 2, the local NBC affiliate, for the first time in years. "I think Phil is on 2," she said, with obvious excitement, in reference to "Dr. Phil." "I've missed him. I wish I had him a few years back, when I had my husband."

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