

Get digital converter soon if you need it

BY LEE TERRY

The writer, a Republican, represents Nebraska's 2nd District in the U.S. House of Representatives.

As others have said, television as we know it is about to change. On Feb. 17, 2009, TV stations will stop broadcasting in analog and switch to digital. This means that if you do not have cable or satellite and you watch TV on an analog set with rabbit ears or a rooftop antenna, you must act to continue watching TV as you do today. Why the change? Converting to DTV will free up parts of the broadcast spectrum. Those portions then can be used for emergency services, such as police and fire departments. Digital broadcasting will offer more programming choices and promises a better picture and sound quality.

However, many viewers are still unprepared for the change and are at risk of losing TV reception, including access to important news, weather and emergency information. With the switch less than two months away in the heart of winter, it is critical to act now. If you are prepared, check to see if your family and neighbors are prepared, particularly vulnerable people such as senior citizens and the disabled.

To make sure you don't lose your TV signal with the transition, you have three options: You can buy a converter box that will plug into your analog TV; you can buy a digital TV; or you can connect your analog TV to cable, satellite or another pay service.

If you choose to buy a digital-to-analog converter box, the government is providing coupons to help buy it. All U.S. households may receive up to two \$40 coupons toward the purchase of up to two boxes. If you have not applied for a coupon, you should do so immediately, given the four- to six week turnaround time for requesting and receiving the coupons. Due to increasing demand for coupons, if you do not order it by the end of December, you may not receive it prior to Feb. 17. To apply for a coupon, call 1-888-DTV-2009 or go to [http:// www.DTV2009.gov](http://www.DTV2009.gov). The coupons expire 90 days from the day they were issued, so you need to use it as soon as you receive it.

If you have applied for a coupon in the past but were denied because you live in a rural community and have a post office box, or you are a resident of a licensed nursing home, intermediate-care facility or assisted-living facility, you should reapply. The federal government now has a program in place to assist individuals in these communities.

It is also important to note that you still will need an antenna to continue watching free, over-the-air television after the transition to DTV. In many cases, as was discovered in a recent test in North Carolina, you may need to purchase a more powerful antenna to receive a crisp signal. The antenna issue is a common problem. Prior to the DTV transition date, I encourage you to set up your converter box or digital TV to test reception in your area.

Area broadcasters conducted a test of the new DTV system in early December. Area TV stations and 211 took more than 600 calls among them from viewers on the transition. Many people still have questions or are not prepared for the nationwide change now quickly approaching. Local TV stations will conduct another test Wednesday, Jan. 7, at 6:58 p.m. A message will appear on your TV screen that will indicate if your TV is ready for the switch or not. Other stations in Nebraska will have similar test dates. If your TV is not ready, you will need to make one of the changes mentioned earlier. Otherwise, you will not be able to watch TV as you do today.

The Government Accountability Office has identified the transition to digital TV as one of the 13 most urgent issues needing the immediate attention of the 111th Congress and President-elect Obama during the presidential transition. I applaud the members of the Nebraska DTV Transition coalition of collaborative local public and private partners, who have met voluntarily over the past year to work on various DTV issues that impact our local community. The hard work to make this transition as smooth as possible will continue to require a "village" effort. I assure you that we are all fully committed to that effort. If you have questions or need assistance, please call 211.

To get a coupon by Feb. 17, call 1-888-DTV-2009 or go to <http://www.DTV2009.gov> by year's end.

