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The Digital Divide: Protecting Seniors' Information Life-Line

by Senator Norm Coleman

Take a minute and imagine if one day your only means of getting news – be it television, newspaper, radio station or the internet – was no longer available, and you had no idea why or how to get your news. Unfortunately, for a good number of Minnesota's senior citizens this may well be the case as their television sets go dark on February 18, 2009, due to the transition from analog to digital television (DTV).

DTV is the advancement in broadcasting technology that will allow broadcasters to offer a higher quality of picture and sound. More importantly, it will free up the broadcast spectrum to be used for other important services, such as public and safety services for police and fire departments.

At a time when many of us get our information from cable and satellite television, it may come as a surprise to learn that Minnesota ranks third in the nation in the number of analog broadcast-only households. According to the Association of Public Television Stations (APTS), 24 percent of households in Minnesota use only analog TVs. Among households over the age of 65 that number increases to 28 percent.

As anyone who is close to a senior knows well, access to over-the-air television programming is extremely important to seniors. Not only does it serve as a source of entertainment, it is often the primary way they gain critically important and at times life-saving information. If seniors are not prepared for the upcoming digital transition, they run the risk of losing their primary way

of staying informed and up-to-date on current events and information that impacts their daily lives. Without question, it is critical that this transition be as hassle-free as possible.

While the February 18, 2009, transition deadline may seem far off, it will arrive faster than we think. The sooner we all prepare for the transition, the better chance we have to ensure no one will be left in the dark. During a recent Senate Aging committee hearing, officials from the General Accountability Office and the Federal Communication Commission warned the Committee that we are not prepared as we should be for this once-in-a-lifetime change. Certainly the word has yet to reach the mass viewing public – the APTS has found that 61 percent of households utilizing over-the-air analog television sets had no idea about the transition.

At the end of the day, government and the private sector need to do a better job of working together to ensure that this transition succeeds – not least of all for our seniors. In the upcoming weeks and months, outreach to seniors must become a priority. To that end, I will continue working with my colleagues to do everything we can to ensure the successful debut of digital only television come February 18, 2009.

To find out more about the digital transition and how to further prepare yourself, please visit the DTV website at www.dtv.gov or call 1-888-CALL-FCC (1-888-225-5322).