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Region not quite ready for digital television transition

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With the nation's switch to digital television fast approaching, tens of thousands of local residents still are facing the prospect of blank screens on Feb. 17.

One of every 20 households — just over 65,000 of them — in the St. Louis area aren't ready for the change, according to projections released Thursday by the Nielsen Co. Among black households, the estimate is nearly one in 10.

That may sound dire, but the picture has improved significantly since December, when Nielsen's estimate of unready households stood at 105,000. It remains to be seen whether that's enough progress to stave off efforts by President Barack Obama and others asking for a delay.

Obama has urged Congress to give people more time to prepare and to be sure resources are there to help those who run into trouble when broadcasters end their analog signals. Congress has refused, under pressure from broadcasters, who stand to lose millions of dollars in analog broadcasting costs. Emergency responders also are eager to claim the channels that will be vacated during the transition.

While the debate plays out in Washington, a national public awareness campaign rages on as broadcasters, public service groups and government agencies get people ready for the day when rabbit ear antennas will be virtually useless.

"Even with all the communication, I'm convinced there are a lot of people who don't understand their TVs are about to be obsolete," said Rob Enderle, a technology analyst with the Enderle Group in San Jose, Calif.

DIGITAL AMBASSADOR

On a recent Wednesday morning, a woman from the Federal Communications Commission stepped into the lobby of the Midwest BankCentre on Lemay Ferry

Road. For an hour, she talked and answered questions from a group of 50 senior citizens gathered for the bank-sponsored event.

They drank coffee, ate donuts and quizzed her.

— If you have cable, do you need a converter box? "No."

— Do you have to have an outdoor antenna? "No. But you do need one that can pick up a UHF signal."

— If I need to buy a new TV, do I need to get a high definition television? "Only if you want one."

— Do I have to fiddle with my antenna to get a good signal? "Maybe."

Rebekah Bina is an FCC outreach coordinator, one of about 150 scattered across the nation. They're what you might call digital ambassadors.

Bina is in the midst of a three-month stint, much of it spent on the ground in St. Louis where there are an estimated 180,000 households getting TV signals exclusively through antennas. Many others have a spare set somewhere in the house that isn't hooked up to cable or satellite.

She's supposed to spur residents into action. She speaks with community groups, meets with politicians and helps with phone banks at local TV stations. She distributes information at stores on weekends. She's lost track of how many locals she has met.

"Just think about how many people are at a Wal-Mart on a Saturday," Bina said.

Among those she encountered in the bank lobby was Fara Puleo of Mehlville. Her nephew hooked up her TVs to converter boxes, but the connections don't work. She came looking for answers, but seemed resigned to the idea that TV — and her 20-year relationship with the daytime soap "The Bold and the Beautiful" — may soon be a thing of the past.

"If I can't get anybody to help me out, I'll give it up," Puleo said. "I'll just listen to the radio."

Unfortunately, there's no one-size-fits-all solution. Bina offers a few suggestions and tips. She says she understands the frustration felt by Puleo and others: "They've been watching their TVs the same way for 40 or 50 years. And they don't want it to change."

LEFT BEHIND

The biggest task facing the FCC and local broadcasters is getting people to do something before Feb. 17. Most people, after all, know something's about to happen.

"There has been a hell of a lot of publicity out there about this magic day when change is going to occur," said Nicholas Johnson, a visiting law professor at the University of Iowa, and a former FCC commissioner.

That awareness hasn't convinced everyone to act. Many still haven't bought converters or tested their systems to see if they also need new antennas or televisions.

Local stations such as KETC (Channel 9) have been assisting viewers throughout recent months, offering one-on-one guidance through hot lines and phone banks. The PBS station also has a program with the St. Louis City Fire Department that sends firefighters to city residences to hook up converters. (The firefighters also do a smoke detector checkup).

And yet, no matter how much assistance is offered, most experts say it is inevitable that there will be viewers left behind, at least initially.

"There's always going to be a segment of the population that will wait to the last minute," said Jack Galmiche, KETC's president.

Most agree, however, the conversion effort was dealt a blow earlier this month when the government's billion-dollar program that defrays the cost of converters ran out of money. That has left more than a million consumers on a waiting list for the \$40 coupons and no guarantee they will get anything in time.

The scenario is particularly worrisome considering that low income and elderly residents represent a significant portion of viewers who rely on over-the-air

signals. Neither group is likely to be willing to spend the \$50 or more required to buy a converter, experts say.

Unless something is done, it could have significant ramifications for a group of people operating on society's fringes, said Elayne Rapping, a professor of American studies at the University at Buffalo.

"These are people who are disenfranchised already," she said. "This is an information age. And people who don't know how to get access to information are in bad shape."

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