

**Opening Statement of Senator Herb Kohl
Special Committee on Aging Hearing
Preparing for the Digital Television Transition: Will Seniors Be Left in the Dark?
September 19, 2007**

Good morning, I would like to welcome our witnesses and thank them for their participation. We are here today to bring attention to the unique needs and vulnerabilities of seniors as the nation transitions from free over-the-air analog TV to digital TV. Commonly referred to as the DTV transition, broadcasters will stop airing their signals in analog after February 17, 2009. Without proper preparation, millions of Americans may turn on their TVs on February 18, 2009 only to find themselves left in the dark without access to critical weather updates, emergency alerts, news or entertainment programming.

Some claim that the transition will be the most significant advancement in technology since the dawn of color TV. There will be many benefits. Most importantly the transition will improve the lines of communication between our nation's first responders during emergencies. Unfortunately, my committee's investigation has left me deeply concerned about how the DTV transition will be implemented. As one of the witnesses will tell us today, we need an investment in consumer education akin to the multi-million dollar awareness campaign for Medicare Part D. However, we must learn from the disastrous implementation of Medicare Part D that left millions of seniors confused and scrambling for help.

The fact is – Congress mandated this transition. What Congress did not do is clearly determine who should oversee and take responsibility for the transition. Today we will hear from GAO that there is little coordination between the government agencies that have jurisdiction over different aspects of the transition. Nor did Congress provide adequate funding for a widespread awareness campaign about the transition. As of now, only \$5 million dollars have been set aside to educate 300 million Americans about the impending transition over the next 17 months. This is a pittance compared to the \$400 million being spent in Great Britain to educate 60 million citizens about their own digital transition.

Millions of American families may be impacted by this change—there are roughly 20 million households that rely exclusively on free over-the-air programming. Seniors are particularly vulnerable to slipping through the cracks of the transition. Not only are they more likely to rely on free over-the-air analog TV signals, as shown in a study by the Association of Public Television Stations, but for many seniors television is their only link to the outside world. Several of today's witnesses will tell us that seniors need targeted outreach – and I agree. This committee's investigation has revealed that, in spite of this need, little is being done to address the unique needs of seniors and provide entities in the aging network with the resources they need to ensure a successful transition.

I am deeply concerned with how seniors and Americans in general, will be able to find, install, and afford the converter boxes to allow their analog television sets to continue to work. The government's plan is to provide coupons worth \$40 to partially

offset the cost of converter boxes. However, the Committee's investigation has determined that this coupon program is fraught with confusion and vulnerable to fraud and abuse. Seniors may not realize that the coupon will not pay for the entire cost of the converter box and be stuck with bills they did not expect and cannot afford. Retailers may try to sell seniors more expensive TVs or converters than they need. One of today's witnesses will be detailing such misleading sales that are already occurring in electronics stores around the D.C. area.

I will be introducing critical legislation to help address many of these concerns. The bill will establish and fund a public-private partnership that will be charged with making sure older Americans and their families are educated about the transition. The bill will also require commercial broadcasters to air public service announcements, require easily-identifiable labels to be placed on coupon-eligible converter boxes, and establish a toll-free number to answer questions and provide installation assistance. These are just a few of the common sense changes to help consumers, and especially seniors, weather the DTV transition.

If properly planned for and implemented, the DTV transition could be relatively seamless. Without adequate planning and coordination, many seniors will be left in the dark.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today and we will continue to work with each of you to identify and address the shortfalls of the DTV transition.