

Analog TV Cutoff Brings Confusion to Some

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NEW YORK (AP) - TV stations across the U.S. started cutting their analog signals Friday morning, ending a 60-year run for the technology and likely stranding more than 1 million unprepared homes without TV service.

The Federal Communications Commission put 4,000 operators on standby for calls from confused viewers, and set up demonstration centers in several cities. Volunteer groups and local government agencies were helping elderly viewers set up digital converter boxes that keep older TVs functioning. Sets hooked up to cable or satellite feeds are unaffected by the transition.

"When you're alone like me, that's my partner," Patricia Bruchalski, 82, said about her TV.

Bruchalski, a pianist and former opera singer who lives in Brooklyn Park, Md., got assistance Thursday from Anne Arundel County's Department of Aging and Disabilities and a community organization called Partners in Care. After her converter box was installed, Bruchalski marveled that digital broadcasts seemed clearer and gave her more channels — about 15 instead of the three she was used to.

"You're going to be up all night watching TV now," volunteer installer Rick Ebling told her.

A survey sponsored by broadcasters showed that Americans are well aware of the analog shutdown, thanks to a yearlong barrage of TV ads. But many people simply procrastinated.

"We know some viewers will wait until the very last minute, or even after June 12, until they take action," said Paul Karpowicz, second vice chair of the television board of the National Association of Broadcasters.

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Laura Hand, community relations director for Barrington Broadcasting Co.'s three-channel station in Syracuse, N.Y., said her company had received only about a dozen calls and half that many e-mails by 8:30 a.m., even though Barrington's NBC affiliate went off the air entirely. It abandoned analog at midnight, and its digital equivalent won't be back up until this weekend, because it needs to move to another frequency.

Many other stations will be moving to new frequencies as well, which is why even antenna-equipped digital TV sets and older sets hooked up to converter boxes need to be set to "re-scan" the airwaves on Friday.

Some people might also need new antennas, because digital signals travel differently than analog ones. While an analog station that came in imperfectly might have had static but remained viewable, digital generally comes in all or nothing. Indeed, one of Bruchalski's newly available stations looked pixelated, and Ebling said she might have to get a different antenna.

The shutdown of analog channels opens part of the airwaves for modern applications like wireless broadband and TV services for cell phones. It was originally scheduled for Feb. 17, but the government's fund for \$40 converter box coupons ran out of money in early January, prompting the incoming Obama administration to push for a delay. The converter box program got additional funding in the national stimulus package.

Research firm SmithGeiger LLC said Thursday that about 2.2 million households were still unprepared as of last week. Sponsored by the broadcasters' association, it surveyed 948 households that relied on antennas and found that 1 in 8 had not connected a digital TV or digital converter box.

Nielsen Co., which measures TV ratings with the help of a wide panel of households, put the number of unready homes at 2.8 million, or 2.5 percent of the total television market, as of Sunday. In February, the number was 5.8 million.

Nearly half of the nation's 1,760 full-power TV stations have already cut their analog signals, though they are mostly in less populated areas. Those ending the signals Friday will do so throughout the day, with many waiting until the evening.

Even after Friday, low-power analog stations and rural relay stations known as "translators" will still be available in some areas. And about 100 full-power stations will keep an analog "night light" on for a few weeks, informing viewers of the need to switch to digital reception.

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AP Television Producer Faryl Ury contributed to this report.

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