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Digital TV May Bypass Skid Row

Low-income people who lack addresses recognized by the census can't get coupons for converter boxes

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Steve Richardson, who goes by the name "Gen. Dogon" on the streets of L.A.'s skid row, is the kind of person federal regulators had in mind when they created the digital-television transition's subsidy.

Richardson's job at a civil rights group leaves him with barely enough money for food. He can't afford a converter box to keep his antenna-equipped TV working on June 12, when stations across the country turn off their analog signals and start broadcasting solely in digital.

But when he applied for a \$40 converter-box voucher, he was turned down because he lives in the residential Sanborn Hotel.

"I already feel like a caveman in there," he said of his small downtown apartment. "I don't have a working phone in there, and I don't get half the channels. But now TV is being taken away from me, and there's nothing nobody is going to do about it."

A glitch in the Commerce Department program that administers the coupons has left Richardson and many other poor Americans unable to receive them. The problem lies in where they live.

Single-room occupancy hotels such as the Sanborn, which is operated by the Skid Row Housing Trust, are classified by the federal government as business addresses, not residential, and therefore are ineligible.

All single-room occupancies, group homes and other housing provided by nonprofit groups are excluded, said Bart Forbes, a spokesman for the Commerce Department's National Telecommunications and Information Administration.

That's because the converter box coupons are issued only to "households" as defined by the department's Census Bureau, not by city and state governments.

"The word 'household' is clearly defined for us by the Census Bureau," he said. "We have to follow the law, and the law says we can only issue the coupons to 'households' on an address-by-address basis."

There are about 8,500 single-room occupancy apartments on skid row, with about 3,500 managed by nonprofits, said Becky Dennison, co-director of the Los Angeles Community Action Network, where Richardson works.

As many as 90,000 people in the L.A. area are trying to get by on \$228 a month in government general relief, and the large majority live in nonprofit housing, said Gary Blasi, a UCLA law professor who has worked with the city's homeless and skid row community for more than 20 years.

Across the country, he said, a few hundred thousand people living below the poverty line won't get the converter-

box coupons.

"You're not talking about a constituency that's going to be heard," Blasi said.

"They don't make contributions to campaigns, and they don't speak out about things. So it's unlikely that politicians will go out of their way to pass a new law to include them."

About 4.4% of homes, about 5 million households, aren't ready for the switch to all-digital broadcasting, according to Nielsen Co.

The Federal Communications Commission has received complaints about the coupon eligibility issue for months, Commissioner Jonathan S. Adelstein said during a public forum at the Mount Moriah Baptist Church in South Los Angeles last month.

"It's frustrating," Adelstein said. "We've got a problem, we know we've got a problem and we need to work together to handle it. But any changes in the way the program is administered would have to come from the Department of Commerce, not us."

But Forbes said his agency had no ability to change the guidelines. "It was an oversight in the way the law was written," he said. "We're constrained by the law."

Ray Alvarez, a casework manager for Rep. Lucille Roybal-Allard (D-East Los Angeles), said he had hounded the FCC and the Commerce Department since October about the digital television issue but gotten nowhere.

"We're starting to look into other ways to solve this problem," Alvarez said. "I don't think it would be that difficult for Congress to go back and change this, but there needs to be public support for it, and nobody seems to know this is going on."

Television isn't a necessity like water, food and shelter. But the airwaves are considered a public utility, Alvarez said, offering learning opportunities and emergency information.

Congress has already stepped in on the digital TV transition, delaying it four months from the original switch date of Feb. 17. About 85% of homes in the L.A. area receive TV from cable or satellite providers and won't need digital-to-analog converter boxes, he said.

There are other options, Forbes said. Community leaders could set up programs to help people donate coupons they don't need to those who aren't eligible to get them on their own. A company called Retrevo has set up a website, at www.retrevo.com/dtv, to do just that.

But for many people living in transitional housing, tracking down someone with an extra coupon can be harder than finding the money to buy the box outright, said Synia Adams. She lives at Lamp Village, a group home that helps people with mental-health and substance-abuse problems make the transition from homeless life to having a permanent residence.

Adams said she applied for a converter-box coupon online and over the phone but was denied several times because of her address. Lamp Village has a TV with cable in a common room. But of the more than 40 personal analog TVs in the residence, she said, only five had converter boxes that their owners bought without the help of coupons.

"Just making it, living on skid row, is hard enough," she said. "Getting up the extra money for a converter box isn't something a lot of people out here can handle."