

## TV goes digital, but legions of viewers lag

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Hundreds of people Friday called Kansas City television stations needing help.

Some even carried their TVs into a help center out of desperation.

Friday was D-Day — the switch to digital broadcasting — and as expected, not everyone was ready.

Those with analog TVs and rabbit-ear antennas needed digital converter boxes, and had to hook them up correctly or their screens turned to snow.

Many viewers had already made the switch, but others waited too late or were having trouble with the new technology.

“We’ve got a lot of people who were just not ready,” said Isaura Betancourt, who was operating a Federal Communications Commission-sponsored walk-in center at 2100 Metropolitan Ave. in Kansas City, Kan.

Betancourt, a caseworker at the nonprofit SER Corp., said about 40 people came in during the morning, making it difficult for her to keep up with the phones. She said people came from as far as Liberty and Basehor, upset because they weren’t sure where to buy a converter box or whether they needed a new antenna. Several people brought in their TVs to see how to connect their converter boxes.

(The center will be open this weekend and weekdays until July 31. Call 913-236-9662.)

TV stations were expecting calls — and got them.

“It came about like we thought it would,” said Wayne Godsey, vice president and general manager at KMBC.

The station had six phones that rang steadily for about the first 1½ hours after the 9 a.m. switch, then slowed down. Godsey guessed more would come in as people arrived home from work and found their TVs no longer worked.

KMBC, KSHB and WDAF reported that few callers had been unaware of the transition, and most were asking how to operate their converter boxes.

That was Mandy Brown's problem. Brown, 69, of Kansas City, said she and her husband were having trouble connecting converter boxes to two old TVs and had called to have someone come help them.

"We're just blindfolded," Brown said.

She said her husband had bought a new TV so they wouldn't be without one while they waited for help.

Bob McKinney, district director of the FCC's Kansas City office, who stopped Friday at several TV stations, said the agency had estimated about 16,000 viewers in the Kansas City market were not ready for the transition. But he said many of them probably used their TVs mostly to play video games or watch DVDs.

Nationwide, officials estimated TV shows were replaced by the hiss of static in perhaps 1 million homes.

Hundreds of people began lining up about 3 a.m. Friday outside the FreestoreFoodbank in Cincinnati, five hours before the agency began giving out 250 free converter boxes. The center had given all of them away by 10:30 a.m., and many people were still in line.

The Commerce Department reported a last-minute rush for \$40 converter box coupons: It got 319,990 requests Thursday, nearly four times the daily average for the past month.

In all, the government has mailed coupons for almost 60 million converter boxes. The limit is two coupons per household. The government is accepting coupon requests and offering technical support at 1-888-CALL-FCC.

FCC spokesman Mark Wigfield said that by 2 p.m. Friday, the agency had received 122,389 calls.

Even with a converter box, an analog won't display channels in the sharper digital picture, so some viewers are opting for digital TVs. Others may not see the point in spending money on a converter for a TV they can't even give away.

As a result, an estimated 45,000 tons of analog TVs will be discarded in the area in the next two to five years, estimated Bob Akers of The Surplus Exchange, a Kansas City electronic waste recycler.

Akers and others hope owners will opt for recycling instead of a landfill. Many already have.

The Surplus Exchange has recycled more than 3,000 sets this year, up from only about 100 a year just two years ago, Akers said.

Those old rabbit-eared boxes contain chemicals that can be hazardous if allowed to seep into groundwater.

Nationwide, there are about 280 million analog TVs still in homes, and some will end up in landfills, said John Shegerian, chief executive of Electronic Recyclers International, an electronic waste recycler. Shegerian said those old sets could be almost entirely recycled by companies.

Dennis Gagnon, a spokesman for the Kansas City Public Works Department, said residents shouldn't be too concerned about chemicals from their TVs seeping out because the city's landfill has a liner to prevent that. But he said the city still encouraged residents to recycle their TVs.

Allied Waste and Deffenbaugh charge customers about \$35 to pick up a TV and take it to the landfill. Kansas City will take larger TVs as part of its bulky-items collection by appointment. The city will take smaller ones in trash bags.