

Now up for grabs: Federal funding for your digital-TV upgrade

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If you want Uncle Sam's help in bankrolling your household's switch to digital television before analog channels go dark next year, you can start filing your requests now.

As promised, the U.S. government on January 1 [began accepting applications](#) from American households for \$40 coupons to defray the cost of a basic digital-to-analog converter box.

The gadgets, which are expected to cost between \$50 and \$70, are supposed to enable analog TVs to continue functioning when [analog channels are evacuated on February 17, 2009](#), per Congress' orders. (About a dozen models [have been cleared for use with the coupons](#) so far.)



It doesn't matter how much money you make or how many digital TVs you already own. Every American household will be eligible to receive up to two of the coupons during a first phase, in which 22.5 million coupons are expected to be available. If that first wave is exhausted, Congress could authorize an additional \$450 million, creating up to 11,250,000 more vouchers. That crop would be limited to households that certify that they rely on over-the-air TV.

To sign up for a coupon or two, you can head to [DTV2009.gov](#) or dial 888-DTV-2009 (888-388-2009). You can also apply by mail or fax. The government says it plans to accept applications until March 31, 2009, or until the coupons run out, whichever comes sooner.

As of Wednesday morning, the National Telecommunications and Information Administration had received 277,457 applications for 528,354 coupons, totaling more than \$21 million, according to spokesman Todd Sedmak.

The agency plans to begin mailing the coupons on February 17. By that time, more than 14,000 stores nationwide, including those of eight major retailers--Best Buy, Circuit City, Kmart, RadioShack, Sam's Club, Sears, Target, Wal-Mart--expect to begin stocking the converter boxes, Sedmak said. **Update 3:55 p.m. PST:**The vouchers are programmed to expire 90 days after their issuance.

The NTIA, which is running the coupon program, has said it's confident that the vouchers will not run out, as it has estimated the demand at 10 million to 26 million coupons. [Some Democrats in Congress, however, have called for making more coupons](#) available, arguing that some 70 million television sets are expected to need converter boxes to continue functioning.

Most American TV watchers are not expected to need new equipment.

If you already have a TV, DVD player or other peripheral device equipped with a digital tuner, you're good to go. (Nearly all new televisions purchased after March 2007, for instance, should include a built-in digital tuner, under federal regulations.) Subscribers of satellite, standard digital cable, and Internet Protocol television, or IPTV, services also aren't expected to have to make any changes. In a nutshell, only people who rely solely on free, over-the-air broadcasts will need to make adjustments.