

HOUSE BILL REPORT

HB 1461

As Reported By House Committee On:
Technology, Telecommunications & Energy

Title: An act relating to community voice mail.

Brief Description: Establishing community voice mail as a component of the Washington telephone assistance program.

Sponsors: Representatives Poulsen, Benson, Cooper, Dickerson, Constantine, Morris, McIntire, Santos, D. Sommers, Gombosky, Wolfe, Radcliff, Hatfield, Hurst, Tokuda and Wood.

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Technology, Telecommunications & Energy: 2/19/99, 2/26/99 [DPS].

Brief Summary of Substitute Bill

- Eligible clients of community action agencies and Department of Social and Health Services may receive voice mail services.
- Voice mail services are offered as a component to the Washington Telephone Assistance Program.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON TECHNOLOGY, TELECOMMUNICATIONS & ENERGY

Majority Report: The substitute bill be substituted therefor and the substitute bill do pass. Signed by 10 members: Representatives Crouse, Republican Co-Chair; Poulsen, Democratic Co-Chair; DeBolt, Republican Vice Chair; Ruderman, Democratic Vice Chair; Bush; Cooper; McDonald; Morris; Reardon and Wolfe.

Minority Report: Without recommendation. Signed by 3 members: Representatives Delvin; Mielke and Thomas.

Staff: Julia Harmatz (786-7135).

Background:

The Washington Telephone Assistance Program (WTAP) has been operating since 1987 to help provide telephone services to low-income residents of the state. The program, operated by the Department of Social and Health Services and the Washington Utilities and Transportation Commission, provides for a reduced monthly charge for basic telephone service, connection fee discounts, and waivers of deposits for local service.

The program is funded exclusively by a 13 cents excise tax on all switched telephone lines in the state, except those exempted by federal law. In fiscal year 1998, the excise tax receipts collected from participating telephone companies were \$5.38 million, and the operating costs and expenditures were approximately \$3.49 million. This resulted in an increase in the fund balance of \$1.89 million to a total of \$3.84 million as of the end of fiscal year 1998.

The program currently serves approximately 22 percent of the eligible households. Households are eligible if they have an adult recipient of one or more types of public assistance administered by the department.

Voice mail is a computerized telephone answering system. A central system houses the voice mail and messages are accessible via a phone call from any push button phone. It is not necessary to have a home, or business, or telephone to have a voice mail account. Recipients of voice mail have a mailbox that contains an outgoing personal greeting, and may receive incoming messages.

Currently five Washington cities are operating low income recipients of voice mail programs through their local community action agencies. The department is currently planning a pilot project to offer low income recipients of voice mail services to some of its WorkFirst clients.

Community Voice Mail is a federally registered trademark of Community Technology Institute. US Patent and Trademark Office Trademark Office (Reg. Nos. 1,881,018 and 1,881,020).

Summary of Substitute Bill:

The substitute bill removes a registered trademark and ensures that recipients of WTAP assistance will not also receive voice mail services.

This bill would add voice mail as a component of the telephone assistance available through WTAP. Voice mail would be available to people who are otherwise ineligible to benefit from WTAP, including homeless people.

This bill expands the recipient pool of WTAP benefits to include recipients of both department programs and community action agencies. Eligible recipients are adult recipients of department administered programs such as medical assistance, food stamps, and other supportive services.

Eligible recipients of voice mail are limited to one voice mailbox, a telephone number, and an access code to retrieve messages at no charge. Community action agencies are prohibited from charging recipients of voice mail services.

This bill permits telephone companies and community action agencies offering voice mail to bill the WTAP fund for the services provided. The total annual amount payable to community action agencies for these services will not exceed 10 percent of the total annual WTAP funds collected.

Commission Rules

Implementation rules are created by the Washington Utilities and Transportation Commission in consultation with Department of Community, Trade, and Economic Development. The rules may require community action agencies to obtain matching funds as a condition of receiving support from the WTAP fund.

Payment Priority

This bill states that the commission rules shall prioritize how community action agencies are paid. As per the bill, agencies are to be paid first for start up and installation costs for new voice mail accounts, including staff and training; the installation of toll-free lines for access to voice mailboxes; expansion of capacity; payment for operations; and then maintenance and administrative expenses. The commission may require that the community action agencies receive 50 percent matching funds, or in-kind donations.

The department shall report to the telecommunication committees by the December 1 each year the WTAP program is in place and report the status of the program and the number of participants in both department and community action programs.

Substitute Bill Compared to Original Bill:

The original bill contained a federal trademark. In addition to removal of the trademark, the substitute bill was clarified to ensure that eligible recipients of the Washington telephone assistance program will not also receive voice services in conjunction with WTAP benefits. The determination of eligibility will be made by the Department of Social and Health Services.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Not requested.

Effective Date of Substitute Bill: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Testimony For: People looking for housing and work need an easy and quick way to find out about availabilities. Would provide cost-effective means of communication between case workers and individuals. This is not commercial voice mail. This is not a luxury and does not combine WTAP with voice e-mail. This program is carefully case managed, not just for homeless people. It is for people who are doubled up with relatives, or who don't have a clear connection to a phone. The discretion is left to the case manager.

The intent of WTAP is to provide vital assistance. It offers a service to those who have not been able to take advantage of WTAP for employment, social or other services. Voice mail is a great enhancement and helps the department to serve clients better. Help provide stability and a way to be self supportive.

Helps to serve victims of domestic violence.

Voice mail is proven effective. Plan to become self sufficient is not offered to everyone who walks through the door. The state spends hundreds of millions to help people become self sufficient.

Testimony Against: None.

Testified: Representative Poulsen, prime sponsor; Jennifer Brandon and David Averill, CTI; John Atherton, Department of Social and Health Services; Danielle Welliever, Lutheran Public Policy Office; and Majken Ryherd Kerra, Washington State Association of Community Action Agencies.