

HOUSE BILL ANALYSIS

HB 1461

Title: An Act relating to community voice mail.

Brief Description: Establishing 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.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON TECHNOLOGY, TELECOMMUNICATIONS & ENERGY

Meeting Date: February 19, 1999.

Bill Analysis Prepared by: 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 (department) and the Washington Utilities and Transportation Commission (the 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 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 federal registered trademark of Community Technology Institute. US Patent and Trademark Office Trademark Office (Reg. Nos. 1,881,018 and 1,881,020.)

Summary:

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 eligible recipients of WTAP from recipient of department assistance 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 services such as voice mail to bill the WTAP fund for the services provided. The total annual amount payable to community action agencies will not exceed 10% of the total annual WTAP funds collected.

Commission Rules

Implementation rules are created by 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 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 fifty percent matching funds, or in kind donations.

The department shall report to the telecommunication committees by the first of December 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.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Not requested.

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