
Technology, Telecommunications & Energy Committee

SB 5999

Brief Description: Modifying the telephone assistance program.

Sponsors: Senators B. Sheldon, Fairley, Carlson, Snyder, Rossi, Costa, Eide, Kline and Winsley.

<p style="text-align: center;">Brief Summary of Bill</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">· Expands the eligibility for the Washington Telephone Assistance Program by including individuals who have just completed participation in community voice mail programs.
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Hearing Date: 2/26/02

Staff: Pam Madson (786-7166).

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 provides for a reduced monthly charge for basic telephone service, discounts on connection fees, and waivers of deposits for local service. The WTAP is administered by the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS).

Households are eligible if they have an adult recipient of one or more types of public assistance administered by DSHS. The program currently serves approximately 24 percent of eligible households.

The Washington Utilities and Transportation Commission sets the excise tax which funds the program. The excise tax is limited by statute to no more than \$.14 on all switched telephone lines in the state. The current excise tax is set at \$.13 and is collected from 55 telephone companies. The excise tax does not apply to wireless companies. In fiscal year 2001 the excise tax receipts collected from participating telephone companies were \$5.76 million, and program costs were \$5.95 million. The unreconciled fund balance at the end of the program year was \$7.6 million.

Community voice mail is a computerized telephone answering system that is housed in a lead public agency and is shared by other community service agencies. It allows agencies to provide clients with an individual telephone number and a voice mail box where they can record a personal message and access their messages through use of a code from any location. The service is provided to those who do not have traditional telephone service.

Ten communities in Washington currently operate community voice mail programs through local community action agencies. They serve low-income and homeless people who are searching for employment, housing or are working under other case management plans.

Summary of Bill:

Recipients of community voice mail services are eligible to receive telephone services under the Washington Telephone Assistance Program (WTAP) after completing the use of community voice mail services. The period of eligibility includes the remainder of the current WTAP service year and the following service year.

Community service agencies that administer community voice mail programs must notify the Department of Social and Health Services of participants who are eligible for WTAP services.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

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