

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 5999

As Passed Senate, February 14, 2002

Title: An act relating to the Washington telephone assistance program.

Brief Description: Modifying the telephone assistance program.

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

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Economic Development & Telecommunications: 2/20/01, 2/28/01 [DP]; 2/5/02 [DP].

Passed Senate: 3/12/01, 49-0; 2/14/02, 49-0.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT & TELECOMMUNICATIONS

Majority Report: Do pass.

Signed by Senators T. Sheldon, Chair; B. Sheldon, Vice Chair; Finkbeiner, Rossi and Stevens.

Staff: William Bridges (786-7424)

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 (DSHS) and the Washington Utilities and Transportation Commission (WUTC), provides for a reduced monthly charge for basic telephone service, discounts on connection fees, and waivers of deposits for local service.

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 the eligible households.

The program is funded exclusively by a \$.13 excise tax on all switched telephone lines in the state, except those exempt by federal law. 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 can act like a home answering machine for hundreds or thousands of people in a community. It can provide recipients with an individual telephone number and a voice mailbox where they can record a personal greeting and access their messages from any location, even if they do not have traditional telephone service.

Currently eight Washington cities are operating community voice mail programs through their local community action agencies, primarily for low-income and homeless people who are searching for employment or are working under other case management plans.

Summary of Bill: A new class of eligible recipients is added for the Washington Telephone Assistance Program (WTAP). Participants of community service voice mail programs are eligible for WTAP services after completion of the voice mail program. Their period of eligibility lasts for the remainder of the current WTAP service year and the following service year.

Community agencies that administer community service voice mail programs must notify the Department of Social and Health Services of participants who are eligible under this provision.

Relevant definitions are included.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

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

Testimony For: Community voice mail is a temporary service that assists clients in finding employment and housing. This in turn makes them perfect candidates for the telephone assistance program, but many of them are ineligible under the current DSHS criteria. Low-income veterans are ineligible under the current DSHS criteria because they receive federal benefits, not state benefits, yet they would be helped significantly by the telephone assistance program.

Testimony Against: None.

Testified: PRO: Senator Betti Sheldon, prime sponsor; Eileen Bidwell, Jamie Major, Fremont Public Assn.; Donald Collins, King County Vets; Phyllis Lowe, DSHS.