

# SENATE BILL REPORT

## SB 5332

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As Reported By Senate Committee On:  
Energy, Technology & Telecommunications, February 25, 1999

**Title:** An act relating to establishing community voice mail as a component of the Washington telephone assistance program.

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

**Sponsors:** Senators Brown, Hochstatter, Goings, Fairley, Winsley, Costa and Kohl-Welles.

**Brief History:**

**Committee Activity:** Energy, Technology & Telecommunications: 1/28/99, 2/25/99 [DPS, DNPS].

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### SENATE COMMITTEE ON ENERGY, TECHNOLOGY & TELECOMMUNICATIONS

**Majority Report:** That Substitute Senate Bill No. 5332 be substituted therefor, and the substitute bill do pass.

Signed by Senators Brown, Chair; Goings, Vice Chair; Fairley and Fraser.

**Minority Report:** Do not pass substitute.

Signed by Senators Hochstatter and Rossi.

**Staff:** Andrea McNamara (786-7483)

**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.

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 FY 98.

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 DSHS.

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

**Summary of Substitute Bill:** The legislative intent of the original Washington Telephone Assistance Program (WTAP) is expanded to recognize and address the needs of low-income persons who do not have residences in which to receive local exchange telephone service.

Community service voice mail is added as a component of the assistance available through WTAP.

The eligibility for the community service voice mail component of WTAP is broadened to include eligible clients of community action agencies. Adult clients of community action agencies are eligible to receive community service voice mail if they do not have a home with a telephone, or do not have a reliable way to get calls or messages. Eligible recipients are limited to one voice mailbox, and community action agencies are prohibited from charging recipients for the community service voice mail.

Community action agencies are eligible to receive support from the WTAP fund for providing community service voice mail. The total amount of annual funding available to community action agencies is capped at 10 percent of the WTAP funds collected annually. Within the WTAP resources available for supporting community service voice mail, funding is to be prioritized to extend the benefits of the program to the greatest number of eligible clients.

Rules for implementing the community service voice mail program may be adopted by the 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.

The scope of the report DSHS provides annually to the Legislature on the WTAP is expanded to include information about the community service voice mail component.

Definitions are included for "community action agencies" and "community service voice mail."

**Substitute Bill Compared to Original Bill:** The substitute bill clarifies that the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) will transfer up to 10 percent of the telephone assistance program fund balance to the Department of Community, Trade, and Economic Development (CTED), and that CTED will administer those funds for the community action agencies.

The substitute bill also renames community voice mail as community services voice mail and clarifies the rulemaking authority among CTED, DSHS, and the Washington Utilities and Transportation Commission.

**Appropriation:** None.

**Fiscal Note:** Not requested.

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

**Testimony For:** Community voice mail is a cost-effective way to provide the benefits of telephone access to many low-income clients who otherwise don't have access to telephones. These voice mail services allow homeless clients to be contacted by potential employers, stay in contact with medical and social service providers. The service also protect the whereabouts of domestic violence victims since the location of the phone number cannot be traced to their address. Community voice mail is a natural extension of the state's long-standing policy of supporting universal telephone service and the traditional services funded by the WTAP.

**Testimony Against:** The WTAP is not the appropriate funding mechanism to fund a general social service program. Only the customers of local exchange service pay this tax, and it should be used only for supporting access to local exchange service.

**Testified:** PRO: Patti Rathbun, Opportunity Council; Jennifer Brandon, David Averill, Community Technology Institute; Eileen Bidwell, Jamie Major, Fremont Public Assn.; Majken Ryherd Keira, WA State Assn. of Community Action Agencies; Ed Barton, CTED; John Atherton, DSHS (with amendments); Teresa Osinski, WUTC; CON: Rosemary Williamson, GTE.