

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 5591

As Reported By Senate Committee On:
Technology & Communications, March 3, 2003

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

Brief Description: Modifying provisions of the Washington telephone assistance program.

Sponsors: Senators Schmidt, Poulsen, Reardon, Esser, B. Sheldon and Kohl-Welles; by request of Department of Social and Health Services.

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Technology & Communications: 2/10/03, 3/3/03 [DPS-WM, DNP].
Ways & Means: 3/10/03.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON TECHNOLOGY & COMMUNICATIONS

Majority Report: That Substitute Senate Bill No. 5591 be substituted therefor, and the substitute bill do pass and be referred to Committee on Ways & Means.

Signed by Senators Esser, Chair; Eide, Poulsen, Reardon, Schmidt and Stevens.

Minority Report: Do not pass.

Signed by Senator Finkbeiner, Vice Chair.

Staff: Dario de la Rosa (786-7484)

SENATE COMMITTEE ON WAYS & MEANS

Staff: Brian Sims (786-7431)

Background: The Washington Telephone Assistance Program (WTAP) has been operating since 1987. The program, run 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 services, discounts on connection fees, and waivers for 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 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 2002, the excise tax receipts from participating telephone companies were \$5.5 million, and program costs were \$6.42 million.

Community voice mail is a computerized telephone answering system that can act like a home answering machine for people in the community. It provides recipients with an individual telephone number and a voice mailbox where they can receive and access messages, even if they do not have traditional telephone service. Currently, ten sites 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.

The WTAP program expires on June 30, 2003.

Summary of Substitute Bill: The WTAP program is made permanent. DSHS and WUTC must consult with the Department of Community, Trade, and Economic Development (CTED) to adopt rules necessary to implement a community voice mail service system as part of the WTAP system. A discount on community service voice mail is authorized. Administration costs and program expenses for community voice mail are made by agreement between CTED and DSHS not to exceed 8 percent of the WTAP funding. The community voice mail service may include toll-free lines at community action agencies. Participants in the community voice mail programs are eligible to participate in WTAP after completing use of community voice mail services. The program limits reimbursement to one switched access line or one community voice mailbox.

Local exchange companies provide eligible WTAP subscribers a 50 percent discount on customary charges for commencing telephone service. Part of the remaining 50 percent service connection fee may be paid by funds from federal government programs or other programs for this purpose. Any remaining portion of connection fees is payable by installments of not fewer than 12 months without interest, unless the customer chooses otherwise.

DSHS must provide an annual report by December 1 of each year to the appropriate committee in the Senate and House of Representatives on the status of the WTAP program.

Substitute Bill Compared to Original Bill: Technical corrections are made to simplify telephone company billing procedures of Washington Telephone Assistance Program participants.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

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

Testimony For: This has been a rewarding program for those who administer the program and participate in it. 40 sites across the nation operate community voice mail programs. The program benefits homeless people who are trying to establish themselves as productive members of society. Funding for community voice mail programs has declined, making this bill especially important. The Washington Telephone Assistance Program is also beneficial. The program should be made permanent. This legislation is a priority piece of legislation for homeless people in the state.

Testimony Against: None.

Testified: Senator David Schmidt, prime sponsor; Chuck Schufeider, Community Voice Mail Volunteers of America (pro); Mike Masten, DSHS (pro); Tom Walker, Quest (pro); Tony

Lee, Fremont Public Association (pro); Seth Dawson, Washington State Coalition for the Homeless/Washington State Association for Community Action (pro).