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Madigan opens probe into AT&T TV service

Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan has opened a probe into whether a new type of TV service offered by AT&T violates state law.

Ms. Madigan's spokeswoman confirms that the office is studying whether AT&T is improperly short-changing public and educational access channels -- PEG channels -- by lumping dozens of them into a menu available on channel 99 rather than separately putting them on the main menu with ESPN, HBO and other popular offerings.

AT&T insists it has every right to do so under the telephone-based system it is in the process of rolling out in Chicago and suburban areas. But PEG leaders such as Barbara Popovic, executive director of Chicago Access Network Television, strongly disagree.

"We want to determine whether anything further needs to be done under the law," Ms. Madigan's spokeswoman said. "It's more we're looking into it than conducting an investigation, but I won't mince words. We believe these (PEG) services are services covered under the law."

The spokeswoman said the office has talked to mayors and PEG officials, and met with reps from AT&T.

AT&T's system uses phone wires to access TV via the Internet. Such an action, which puts the firm in competition with cable-TV companies, was authorized under terms of 2006 law sponsored by state Rep. James Brosnahan, D-Oak Lawn.

Mr. Brosnahan says AT&T is acting within the law and any inconvenience to viewers is worth the benefit of providing more TV competition. But Ms. Popovic says the firm "is perfectly capable of delivering PEG channels in a manner equivalent to commercial channels," but just doesn't want to spend the money.

Ms. Madigan's spokeswoman declined to give a timeline on the probe.