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Press Release

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NEW PHOENIX CENTER STUDY FINDS SPEED-TESTS ARE NOT A RELIABLE MEASURE OF BROADBAND DEPLOYMENT

Forthcoming Maps From The Federal Communications Commission Will Be A Far More Reliable Indicator Where Broadband Is Unavailable, But Speed Tests May Serve As A Useful Accuracy Check

WASHINGTON, D.C. — The Federal Communications Commission's existing broadband availability maps have been heavily criticized as inaccurate, especially for the purpose of distributing billions in subsidy dollars to extend broadband networks to unserved areas. Responding to these concerns, the first iteration of new broadband availability maps using the "fabric" approach are forthcoming in November-2022. This release will be the first to use the FCC's new approach, which seeks to overlay provider footprints with serviceable locations. Given the complexity of this task, it is reasonable to expect some inaccuracy in early versions. A challenge process to help correct the data will render improved versions, and the expectation is that a map the National Telecommunications and Information Administration ("NTIA") can use to allocate the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021's Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment ("BEAD") program subsidy dollars will be available by mid-2023.

Still, in a rush to distribute subsidy dollars, some advocates have proposed alternative mapping means using speed-test data to identify areas that lack adequate broadband. In a new study released today entitled *Speed-Tests: Substitute for, or Complement to, Broadband Maps?*, Phoenix Center Chief Economist Dr. George S. Ford evaluates those arguments. To do so, Dr. Ford merges location-specific broadband availability data from Iowa's Broadband Map (Version 5) with Ookla speed-tests results, the most respected source for such data. (Dr. Ford uses Iowa data because the state has developed a broadband availability map at the location level.) The results are not encouraging.

After review, Dr. Ford finds that speed-tests do not appear to be good proxies for actual broadband deployment. In areas where the Ookla data indicate broadband speeds are below the 25/3 Mbps threshold, about 86% of locations have broadband service available above that threshold. At the 100/20 Mbps threshold, about 94% of locations may purchase service meeting or exceeding that threshold. Accordingly, Dr. Ford's analysis demonstrates that speed-test results are not a suitable substitute for rigorous and careful mapping efforts, such as those the FCC is currently

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undertaking. Speed tests may be useful, however, for detecting errors in broadband maps, such as when very high speeds are observed in areas where the map says they are not available.

"New, and hopefully more accurate, broadband maps are forthcoming, though it may take some time to ensure a high degree of accuracy. Until then, substituting speed-test data for a broadband map to allocate subsidies is strongly discouraged," says study author Phoenix Center Chief Economist Dr. George S. Ford. "Speed-tests are an unreliable indicator of what broadband speeds are available. If public officials use bad information to target broadband funds, then the resources will be used in areas where they are not needed and will miss areas where they could be useful."

A full copy of PHOENIX CENTER POLICY PERSPECTIVE NO. 22-05, *Speed-Tests: Substitute for, or Complement to, Broadband Maps?*, may be downloaded free from the Phoenix Center's web page at: https://www.phoenix-center.org/perspectives/Perspective22-05Final.pdf.

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