



Is Your Home On The National Broadband Map?

The Federal Communication’s Commission has embarked on an ambitious plan to make sure every address in America has reliable broadband internet access, and Pennsylvania is part of a full court press to develop a National Broadband Map showing where access is falling short.

In a race to distribute \$42.45 billion to help states string a fiber optic infrastructure across the nation, the FCC has already developed its first national map, and welcomes literally everyone to find it at broadbandmap.fcc.gov. There you can plug in your address – or any address – to see if the FCC has deemed it as having access to reliable broadband, or whether it is falling short. Then if you don’t agree with the information in the map, anyone can “challenge” with just a few clicks of the mouse. Ultimately, the FCC will use the map, and whatever improvements are made through the challenge process, to distribute all that money.

But community and government leaders who met in Washington D.C. late last month for the National Association of Regional Council’s (NARC) 2023 Conference of Regions questioned whether the “Internet for All” is really reaching, well, all the people it should.

“It’s awfully hard to look up a broadband map to see how you are listed if you don’t have access to broadband,” said Angelina Panettieri, Legislative Manager of Information Technology and Communications Federal Advocacy for the National League of Cities, during the NARC conference. “I understand the federal government’s effort to distribute this money quickly, but I’m afraid this rush is making them miss a lot of people.”

Panettieri worried the plan would not only undercount low-income people without access, but Native American tribes and large apartment complexes.

Lehigh Valley municipal, community, government and internet providers have been meeting for months to make sure Pennsylvania’s Broadband Development Authority – the state’s arm in the national effort – has accurate information.

A 2022 preliminary LVPC connectivity data analysis showed that of the thousands of IP addresses analyzed in 65 Lehigh Valley zip codes, many didn’t meet the federal threshold for reliable internet. That threshold is 100 megabits per second (MBPs) of download speed and 20 MBPs of upload speed. The analysis measured median speeds in each zip code against the federal guidelines. Low or no connectivity is especially problematic in the Lehigh Valley’s rural areas. Reliable internet has not only become vital for every day life and most jobs, but it has become essential for education, and it’s role only grew during the COVID-19 Pandemic, when schools were moved to virtual learning and many school districts realized that thousands of students didn’t have adequate internet access.

Nicholas Alexander, Telecommunications Policy Specialist with the U.S. Department of Commerce, said the FCC is working with states, and states are working with municipalities, internet providers and community groups to build as complete a map as possible. The first FCC map was made available in December and government groups had until January 13 to add input and suggest corrections.

In the meantime, the national map remains open for revisions and people, organizations, municipalities and states have until June 30 to continue making “challenges.” The Broadband, Equity, Access and Deployment (BEAD) plan, called “Internet for All”, has been the nationwide plan since the \$1.2 Trillion Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) passed in November of 2021 with \$65 billion for broadband connectivity, including \$42.45 billion to improve existing connections that are slow, unreliable or non-existent. US Department of Commerce broadband czar Andy Berke visited the Lehigh Valley in August with Rep. Susan Wild to promote the program.

Every state will get a minimum of \$100 million, but estimates have Pennsylvania getting between \$1 billion and \$1.4 billion. The US Department of Commerce is hoping to begin distributing the money June 30, and while people have until then to make challenges, federal officials say the sooner a challenge is made, the better the chances that it will make it into the map.

“BEAD is designed as a last mile program,” Alexander said before regional planners and government officials from across the nation during the NARC Conference. “Its intent is to reach into every area to make sure every location has qualifying broadband by the end of the [five-year] program. We encourage you to continue as many challenges as you can. Your challenges will improve the map.”

Based on that map being built until June 30, money will be allocated to the places where the network must be improved with 90% going to unserved or underserved locations and 10% going to hard to reach, high-cost areas, such as rural or remote locations, Alexander said.

But Donald R. Hubler, Central Region Director for the National School Board Association said school districts have not been part of this process. Many haven't heard of this effort and others find accessing the map and making challenges too complex.

"States have a big role, but school districts don't," Hubler said. "This is a tremendous opportunity and I feel like we're blowing it."

Kalie Snyder, outreach and engagement manager for the Pennsylvania Broadband Development Authority said the authority is working with municipal, non-profit and community groups to reach people with little or no internet access, but she acknowledged that's been a challenging task.

"The irony of that is not lost on us," Snyder said, referring to the task of using an internet tool to reach people without internet access. "We are working very hard to reach every single address, and thus far we've logged more than 48,000 challenges that are being used to improve the map."

Alexander noted that it's an "iterative process" in which the map would be updated twice a year, and people would continue to have opportunities to make challenges.

Hubler urged Lehigh Valley school district to contact municipal leaders and Pennsylvania's Broadband Development for direction on making sure they're part of the process, and Panettieri recommend that everyone, who can, visit the map. Pennsylvania has a tutorial on how to use it at <https://dced.pa.gov/programs-funding/broadband-in-pennsylvania/fcc-national-broadband-map/> ((hyperlink this)).

Panettieri recommends that people without a computer or internet access use a friend's or visit the public library and urges everyone to let friends or family without access know where they can access the National Broadband Map.

