



PHOENIX FOR ADVANCED
LEGAL & ECONOMIC
C E N T E R PUBLIC POLICY STUDIES
www.phoenix-center.org

5335 Wisconsin Avenue, NW
Suite 440
Washington, D.C. 20015-0234
Tel: +1 (202) 274-0235
Fax: +1 (202) 318-4909
www.phoenix-center.org

Press Release

Contact: Lawrence J. Spiwak
Phone: +1 (202) 274-0235

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Thursday, October 15, 2009

INTERNET USE CUTS DEPRESSION AMONG SENIOR CITIZENS

Spreading Internet Among Older Americans Would Trim Billions from U.S. Health Costs

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Spending time online reduces depression by 20 percent for senior citizens, the Phoenix Center reports in a new POLICY PAPER released today. In addition to the quality of life benefits, the Policy Paper said reducing the incidence of depression by widespread Internet use among older Americans could trim the nation's health care bill.

"Maintaining relationships with friends and family at a time in life when mobility becomes increasingly limited is challenging for the elderly," says Phoenix Center Visiting Scholar and study co-author Dr. Sherry G. Ford, an Associate Professor of Communications Studies at University of Montevallo in Alabama. "Increased Internet access and use by senior citizens enables them to connect with sources of social support when face-to-face interaction becomes more difficult."

The POLICY PAPER, *Internet Use and Depression Among the Elderly*, examines survey responses of 7,000 retired Americans 55 years or older. The data was provided by the Health and Retirement Study of the University of Michigan and screened to exclude respondents who were still working and also those living in nursing homes in order to limit possible variations that might skew the findings. These limitations reduced the size of the sample from the initial 22,000 to 7,000, but that is still far larger than all previous efforts to consider the effect of Internet use on psychological well-being of the elderly population. Age 55 is the common age cut off for studies of the elderly. Unlike many existing studies on the benefits of broadband, the statistical methodologies used in the analysis aim to determine causal effects and not simply measure correlations.

Phoenix Center President Lawrence W. Spiwak says, "This is the most advanced statistical analysis on the social impacts of broadband to date, and the most believable. If policymakers want better data analysis, they now have it. The study raises the bar for credible statistical analysis when formulating broadband policy."

The implications of the findings are significant because depression affects millions Americans age 55 or older and costs the United States about \$100 million annually in direct medical costs, suicide and mortality, and workplace costs. The Pew Internet & American Life Project estimates that only about 42 percent of Americans aged 65 or more use the Internet, far below the adoption rate of other age groups. Given the relatively low adoption rates by seniors, the study concludes

~ more ~

that the opportunity for better health outcomes from expanded Internet adoption is substantial. Further, with billions spent annually on depression-related health care costs, the potential economic savings also are impressive.

“Efforts to expand broadband use in the U.S. must eventually tackle the problem of low adoption in the elderly population,” says study Phoenix Center Chief Economist and study co-author Dr. George S. Ford. “The positive mental health consequences of Internet demonstrate, in part, the value of demand stimulus programs aimed at older Americans.”

PHOENIX CENTER POLICY PAPER NO. 38: *Internet Use and Depression Among the Elderly*, may be downloaded free from the Phoenix Center’s web page at: <http://www.phoenix-center.org/pcpp/PCPP38Final.pdf>.

The Phoenix Center is a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization that studies broad public-policy issues related to governance, social and economic conditions, with a particular emphasis on the law and economics of telecommunications and high-tech industries.

###