

Capital Region Listening Session | Summary Notes

Introduction

On March 30, 2023, the Capital Region Digital Equity Coalition (CRDEC) hosted an Internet and Digital Equity Listening Session at The Blake Annex in Albany, NY. In partnership with New York State's ConnectALL Office, CRDEC convened approximately 95 residents, including both virtual and in-person attendees.

Overview of Responses

Event attendees participated in facilitated discussions on barriers to internet access and digital equity in their communities. A brief summary of comments shared in response to each discussion prompt appears below.

Question 1: In your experience, what kinds of locations in your community are most important for accessing the internet?

Individuals' homes and communal spaces like schools and libraries were identified as key resources for residents of the region to access the internet. Even if individuals have connectivity at home, residents expressed the importance of shared spaces with connectivity. It was noted that a second space for access can be needed if you don't have privacy for virtual mental health care or private conversations in your home. Others expressed that they would like to have private spaces for virtual appointments at home, but only have connectivity in public spaces. Participants expressed that these public spaces are important for those who do not have reliable connectivity at home. This need was made clear during the pandemic when communal spaces to access the internet were closed and some who relied on them could no longer access job applications and necessary public services only available online. Some rural areas in the region face barriers to service because fiber deployment to the home in low-density regions is expensive. Others noted that those in low-income housing and senior living facilities face challenges securing high quality, affordable service.

Question 2: In your experience, which of the following factors make it hard for people in your community to access and use the internet?

The three primary barriers to access identified in conversation were affordability and reliability of service, device access, and digital literacy. Affordability was raised as an issue for new immigrant populations. Residents noted that those who don't have access at their homes often rely on public settings, like libraries, to access service and devices. However, libraries often have time limits and use restrictions which limit access. For some, travel expenses and childcare needs limit access to these public facilities. It was raised that school device loan programs also restrict children's access to the web, which limits those without personal devices from many social, recreational, and other exploratory aspects of the internet. One young participant spoke to not knowing where to go on the internet for educational resources, saying, "We are all visiting YouTube too much." Residents raised that those without up-to-date devices often rely on phones for internet access, but it can be quite difficult to apply for jobs and public services through a smartphone interface. Digital literacy and understanding of how to use the internet was raised as a challenge, and specifically for formerly incarcerated populations and new immigrant communities.

Question 3: What everyday activities do you/members of your community regularly use the internet for?

Most participants expressed that they themselves or their community members used the internet for most of the activities on the list provided, from applying for jobs, to applying for benefits, and keeping in touch with relatives. Participants raised the importance of the internet for accessing the news. Others raised needs for recreational uses and for financial services like banking and taxes.

Question 4: What are community members' experiences when it comes to accessing public resources online?

Connectivity can be a barrier to accessing public resources. It was raised that government portals are often hard to navigate and require detailed information. When connectivity is unreliable, users may fill out most of a complex form, only to lose their progress when connection cuts out. Residents raised that government websites are hard to navigate on mobile phones, which is challenging for those with limited device access. Even on a desktop or laptop interface, many felt government sites were confusing to navigate. However, it was noted that government websites are often ADA-accessible and can be paired with a screen reader, which is not always the case on non-government sites.

Question 5: Online Privacy & Security: Open Discussion

Residents agreed that cyber safety is an increasingly important conversation, flagging that youth and aging populations are most vulnerable to online scams. The constantly-changing nature of cybersecurity was mentioned, and the need to improve knowledge on safe passwords as hacking gets more sophisticated. The importance of balancing cybersecurity with digital access was raised, noting that complex passwords and dual authentication can often be a barrier to access for those with limited digital literacy.

Question 6: What would you prioritize for improvement for those who have internet access in your community?

Residents named basic in-home reliable and affordable access as a priority, in addition to increased service options. Some suggested making broadband a protected utility or building open-access middle-mile networks to achieve these goals. Residents sought to highlight digital skills training as a pressing need. It was suggested to expand digital and financial skills training in middle and high schools in the region.

Question 7: Do you know of any high-quality programs, services, or resources which are removing barriers to internet use, or increasing accessibility, affordability, and comfort with using the internet for people in your community?

Participants identified the following high-quality programs and services in their community working to support improved internet access and digital equity:

- Capital District Women’s Employment & Resource Center (WERC)
- FCC's Federal Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP)
- SUNY Attain with Albany Housing
- Lending Library with CanCode
- Senior Planet
- ATTAIN Lab

Summary Discussion

Digital literacy education and universal access to reliable and affordable broadband services were brought up as core issues to address in the region. While libraries and other shared spaces serve an important role in digital access, participants brought up barriers that persist including lack of transportation to these centers,

and a limited timeframe with the devices. Others highlighted the barriers that are put in place to limit access when using shared devices or devices on loan through specific programs, like for education.