

## Central New York Listening Session | Summary Notes

### Introduction

On April 4, 2023, the Central New York Digital Inclusion Coalition hosted a Digital Equity Listening Session at the OneGroup building in Syracuse, NY. In partnership with New York State's ConnectALL Office, the Central New York Digital Inclusion Coalition convened approximately 80 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?

While residents expressed that it was important to have access to the internet in the home, they stressed the importance of having connection in libraries and other public spaces. It was suggested that service should be present at all locations people regularly frequent, including parks, restaurants, bus stations, and stores. Some noted that at-home Wi-Fi access is limited in rural portions of the region including Madison and Oswego Counties, due to a lack of service providers willing to build out to low-density areas. Residents highlighted the importance of library service, noting that over the course of the pandemic libraries made Wi-Fi available to students and the public through parking lot access which allowed those without at-home service to access the internet beyond library hours.

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

Participants identified a variety of barriers at different scales. Cost was identified as a common barrier to at-home internet throughout the region. Residents noted that throughout the region, there is a lack of economic incentive for providers to move into more rural spaces, resulting in a lack of service options and competitive pricing. While the federal Affordable Connectivity Program was cited as a helpful tool in addressing cost, participants raised that some who were enrolled in ACP

plans were convinced to sign up for additional, in some cases unnecessary, services which lessened the cost-saving impacts of the ACP. Participants raised a lack of digital literacy and a lack of trust on the internet in the face of online scams as two key barriers, with residents identifying aging individuals as particularly impacted by a lack of digital literacy. A lack of device access was raised as a barrier, specifically during the pandemic. A lack of device competence was also mentioned, including a lack of keyboard skills among youth, as a barrier to accessing the digital world to its full extent.

### 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 reiterated the importance of using the internet for social purposes, and access was noted as important to immigrant populations for connecting with family across the world. For some refugee populations, this connection to family can help individuals adjust to their new home and cope with trauma related to the immigration process. Residents noted that for those who do not have access or have a lack of digital literacy skills, it is very hard to apply for jobs or get hired for positions that require some level of computer competency.

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

Many residents felt accessing public resources was challenging as government sites are not easy to navigate or user friendly. It was noted that these sites are designed to work best on computers. For those with limited device access, this makes it very hard to access public resources from a phone. Accessing these resources was said to be much more challenging for older individuals with limited digital literacy skills. Residents also noted that a lack of trust in these sites makes accessing public resources challenging as people are afraid to submit personal information online. For immigrant populations, limited translation services were brought up as a barrier to access.

### Question 5: Online Privacy & Security: Open Discussion

Residents expressed concern with cybersecurity, citing a lack of media literacy, increasing sophistication of hackers, and AI as threats to online safety. A member of

a regional library system shared that the organization had been hacked in recent years, expressing that it was a wakeup call for the community about online risk. A member of a workforce development organization in the region said that they offer lessons on cyber security, specifically to low-income community members. However, the participant noted that, with competing priorities, it can be challenging for attendees to make time for the classes. It was also suggested that, with a lack of digital literacy, it can be hard to know where and when to provide private information online. For example, while many trainings say not to release your social security number online, many online government forms require this information to access social services.

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 education around available options. It was noted that many community members would like a better understanding of pricing of service options and necessary bandwidth for in-home use. Where service exists, participants wanted to prioritize increased provider options. Participants also wanted to see increased capacity at libraries for digital literacy training classes and 1-on-1 support.

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:

- SUNY ATTAIN Lab
- Knowb4

## Summary Discussion

During the high-level discussions on digital equity at the beginning and end of the listening session, participants stressed the need for increased access, options, and affordability of broadband service in the region, with a suggestion raised that broadband access to be regulated similar to other utilities. Residents also spoke to a lack of digital literacy impacting community members' abilities to access and complete government forms or identify online threats.