

Finger Lakes Listening Session | Summary Notes

Introduction

On March 31, 2023, the Finger Lakes Digital Inclusion Coalition (FLDIC) hosted a Digital Equity Listening Session at the Henrietta Public Library in Rochester, NY. In partnership with New York State's ConnectALL Office, FLDIC convened approximately 65 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?

Participants emphasized that homes are most important for accessing the internet but that home access was unequal across the region. Participants in northern Livingston and Wyoming Counties in particular explained that some parts of the county have the resources they need to access the internet, while the more rural areas struggle. It is in these cases that people will go wherever they can to access the internet, even if inconvenient. For example, participants named Tim Hortons, coffee shops, grocery stores, and parking lot Wi-Fi at a community college in Wyoming County. It was mentioned that for people with mobility issues, these other locations may be more difficult to access and thus home internet for such people is even more important. In better-resourced communities, locations besides individuals' homes that were named as important included community centers, libraries, and recreation centers. Specific computer labs and programs mentioned included SUNY Attain and Senior Planet in Livingston County.

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

All factors were named by participants as barriers to access and use of the internet, including affordability, reliability, hard-to-use online services, lack of digital skills, and affordable devices. However, the two main factors discussed were availability of quality service in rural areas and affordability of quality service in urban areas.

To the point of availability in rural areas, an example was given of Wadsworth Library in Genesee County, which loans out hotspots but they are in incredibly high demand and are always checked out. Similarly in Bloomfield in Ontario County, it was noted that even when they loan hotspots out to students, some cannot use the hotspot as there are no cell towers in range. To the point of affordability of quality service in urban areas, participants representing low-income populations named the need for more subsidies for cable, internet, and phone, similar to the FCC's Lifeline phone program. Participants stated that the federal Affordable Connectivity Program was not enough as enrollees either get internet or phone access, but not both. One participant who runs a homeless shelter in Monroe County explained that they don't have the budget to provide connectivity in the units, preventing residents from working or doing schoolwork on the premises.

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 telemedicine to keeping in touch with family to working. Activities that were not on the list but participants named as important included banking and other financial services such as Venmo and PayPal, online shopping and e-commerce, and entertainment and streaming. The use of the internet for social connections was underscored for people with disabilities who can't always get out of the house as well as for aging populations.

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

Across different covered populations and different resources, participants all described great difficulty accessing public resources online. The specific public resources mentioned included Medicaid, temporary assistance, Section 8, the financial aid process, unemployment, and County government websites. Participants also spoke about these challenges from the perspectives of individuals experiencing homelessness, students, individuals with manual dexterity issues, and individuals with visual impairments. Participants commented specifically on the difficulty of accessing public resources on mobile devices, particularly flip phones, with the example given of two-factor authentication or one-time passwords as a barrier for people that do not have text messaging capabilities and only have home phone landlines. It was noted that anything written above a 4th grade reading level can make a public website inaccessible. Participants also described challenges with

finding in-person assistance to navigate these resources. A participant from a local library system described the challenge of agencies referring residents to the libraries for assistance, when libraries have limited capacity to assist patrons 1:1.

Question 5: Online Privacy & Security: Open Discussion

Participants shared experiences of sensitive information being stolen and accounts being compromised from a variety of online scams including Facebook games, dating websites, and phone scams. Participants focused on the need for strong passwords and password managers to protect yourself online, but noted that learning these skills can be difficult for all ages and that there is a huge need for educational resources on the issue that keep pace with new technological innovations and the evolving sophistication of scams. It was noted that there is almost no up-to-date training on how to make strong passwords and that community members are receiving out-of-date information that would have kept them safe 10 years ago, but not today.

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

Respondents primarily suggested that access, affordability, and speed and reliability of internet service should be priorities for closing the digital divide. Data limits and caps on data usage were named as a priority. It was suggested that having more providers in the area would stimulate competition and bring prices down; as it stands now, with only one provider in many areas of the region, they can provide only a basic plan at an unaffordable price and residents do not have other options available.

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:

- T-Mobile Million Device Program
- SUNY Attain
- Lifeline Program
- Nioga Library mobile hotspot program
- Literary Rochester
- Northstar digital literacy program

Summary Discussion

During the high-level discussions on digital equity at the beginning and end of the breakout session, participants underscored the need in the region for more digital navigators and other trained, professional help to help people use the internet.