

## Long Island Listening Session | Summary Notes

### Introduction

On March 20, 2023, the Long Island Digital Inclusion Coalition (LIDIC) hosted a Digital Equity Listening Session at the Suffolk County Library System Bellport, NY. In partnership with New York State's ConnectALL Office, LIDIC convened approximately 75 residents, who participated in the event virtually or in-person.

### 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 identified public libraries as common locations to access the internet, and one librarian discussed a hotspot lending program as a highly used option for patrons to access wi-fi at home. A librarian mentioned noticing how students visit the library to connect to Wi-Fi more frequently than they do to use the library's academic resources. A teacher discussed the need for her students to have access to wi-fi at home, since they often rely on data from their cellphone plans to do their homework, and they need wi-fi outside of the operating hours of public libraries.

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 lack of digital literacy and computer training amongst adults as common barriers, in addition to affordability. Participants identified two Covered Populations--individuals aged 60 years old or more and individuals who are members of a non-white racial or ethnic group--as especially likely to feel intimidated by broadband. It was suggested that adult English-language learners struggle to find culturally relevant digital literacy content, and they are also

particularly vulnerable to online scams. It was raised that digital skills programs should be tailored to specific populations, such as immigrants, students, and seniors. Elaborating on the challenges faced by aging individuals, it was explained that these individuals struggle to overcome the barriers of device access and low digital literacy because they are more likely to be homebound and unable to travel for digital skills training/support.

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

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 it was suggested that for immigrant populations “being able to keep in touch with family and friends in home countries is as important...as anything else on this list. Academics and learning don't happen if students don't feel safe and empowered and tied to family.” Beyond the list of suggested common activities, participants also raised the importance of using the internet for banking/financial services and accessing accurate information. Every participant who commented on the question mentioned using the internet for multiple everyday activities.

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

Participants discussed the complexity of accessing telehealth, identify verification services, and tax preparation services on the internet. In all cases, participants suggested that people often rely on public libraries and librarians to assist them in uploading and downloading files for various online services, since this often can't be done on their phones. Medicaid and New York's Verify Me program were identified as complex public resources to navigate online, with the latter requiring uploaded photos of a government ID card. It was also shared that library patrons sometimes try to file their taxes at the library and often request assistance from librarians, since they find tax-filing websites intimidating. Participants also asserted that the confusion of online resources is exacerbated for individuals with disabilities, given that “Users with visual and hearing disabilities can struggle, especially when they need a more private space [to focus] than the public reading room.”

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

Participants expressed that basic computer trainings often neglect to cover issues of privacy and cybersecurity awareness, and agreed that they are important topics to discuss. Participants expressed feeling overwhelmed by privacy and cybersecurity issues. It was shared that community members “sometimes don’t understand how vulnerable they are until they fall victim to a scam.” It was suggested that the fear of falling victim to a scam can be a disincentive for folks to take advantage of the internet, and training adults on online privacy and security can actually improve their digital literacy skills more broadly and enhance their confidence. Starting the conversation around developing an awareness of fraud and scams can be a first step to encouraging adults to use the internet safely. The notion of citizen distrust of government also came up during the conversation, but an example was shared of a local government’s police department overcoming this barrier in one instance and having success in implementing a public awareness campaign about online scams.

### 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. It was suggested that accommodations for non-English speakers should be a priority, and other participants agreed that accommodating elderly individuals and those with lower literacy in general should be priorities for digital literacy initiatives. Residents affirmed the importance of connecting elderly individuals to digital skills training to help them adapt to changing technology. Residents identified areas of Long Island with only one cable provider option for their internet, which leaves them without competitive options for more affordable service. Residents suggested that their internet speeds have been insufficient to support video calls, and they know residents who regularly rely on cellphones and wi-fi from restaurants or public spaces to access the internet.

### 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:

- Northstar Digital Literacy curriculum (includes a module on internet safety)

- Make the Road's digital literacy program
- Digital Promise and Barbara Bush Foundation (Digital Literacy Tutors Program)
- CWA Local 1104

## Summary Discussion

During the high-level discussions on digital equity at the beginning and end of the breakout session, participants shared stories about their experiences using the internet for online banking, job applications, making friends and socializing, and collaborating with colleagues at work. Participants discussed the benefits of remote work, and how the ability to work from home has improved their own lives by saving time and eliminating their commute. Participants emphasized the role that connectivity plays in doing their jobs, whether that means mapping their commute online, demonstrating their digital skills to secure a job, or conducting their actual work online.

To inform the state's approach to its digital equity plan, participants encouraged the state to consider culturally appropriate digital literacy, the importance of building awareness around online safety, and the hesitation to access government services among immigrant communities. Participants expressed a desire for more ISP competition and transparency around service costs.