

## North Country Listening Session | Summary Notes

### Introduction

On March 28, 2023, North Country Digital Inclusion Coalition (NCDIC) hosted a Digital Equity Listening Session at The Wild Center in Tupper Lake, NY. In partnership with New York State's ConnectALL Office, NCDIC 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?

Public municipal buildings like schools, libraries, and town halls were identified as key locations for residents of the region to access the internet. Participants noted that at-home Wi-Fi access is limited in rural portions of the region due to the prohibitively high cost of last-mile fiber delivery and the high subscription costs with few available service provider options. Over the course of the pandemic, libraries and schools made Wi-Fi available to students and the public through parking lot access or through mobile vans that could serve as community hotspots. Access was limited, and during the winter, it became expensive for some to run their engine to heat their car while accessing Wi-Fi in these parking lots. Additionally, public transportation is limited, and rural areas are sprawling. It can be challenging for residents to reach public spaces to access service at any given time, whether a result of weather conditions limiting travel or lack of transportation. Residents noted that there is limited access to cafes or private establishments that provide Wi-Fi.

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. Many in the region do not have broadband access in the home. Some are unserved as long driveways and sprawl make it prohibitively expensive for ISPs to wire broadband directly to the home. It was noted that the process to apply for the federal Affordable Connectivity Program was complicated and served as a deterrent to access. Some participants try to access at-home service through satellites, but service can be low-quality and unreliable. Others are underserved with a lack of affordably-priced competitive service provider options. Transportation is an issue in accessing public buildings with service. The low density of much of the region means that these buildings can be very far from residents' homes. Finally, digital literacy can be a barrier, with residents identifying aging individuals as particularly impacted. Even within broadband planning, digital literacy has been a problem, with representatives of local planning entities noting that the FCC database to identify unserved and underserved locations was only available through an online portal that was difficult to navigate. This became a barrier to participation in the FCC's map challenge process.

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 noted that access is important to immigrant populations for connecting with family across the world. Beyond the list of suggested common activities, participants also suggested the importance of using the internet for banking/financial services and taxes.

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

At a baseline, many public resources are no longer available through traditional dial up or in-person providers, and residents expressed that without internet or social media access, it is hard to even learn about available public services. Residents expressed that some government websites are challenging to navigate, and limited digital literacy skills make them more confusing. Residents suggested that accessibility upgrades like larger text and screen readers are needed. Librarian participants described the challenges of helping residents navigate completing

public forms. While they are allowed to assist with basic digital literacy questions, and are often asked to, they are not licensed tax professionals and are often not allowed to provide advice on how to submit necessary government forms such as tax documents. Helping residents set up email addresses was mentioned, a resource required for many modern public resources, but not intuitive to some, especially aging populations. Also mentioned were challenges around password access to government and telehealth portals. Some aging individuals do not have access to smartphones, and two-factor authentication systems that connect to a secondary device are challenging.

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

Residents agreed that cyber safety is an increasingly important issue, with youth and aging populations flagged as most vulnerable to online scams. Residents called for increased education on cybersecurity in local schools. One librarian noted that library goers are sometimes very willing to share private information, like passwords, with librarians, which may speak to a lack of awareness regarding cybersecurity best practices. Senior Planet was noted as a cybersecurity education resource for aging individuals in the region. Others noted that generally libraries, senior centers, and banks can be resources for education on this as well. The New York State Newspaper Foundation News Media Literacy Program was noted as a resource for youth around media literacy and ability to decode misleading online content.

#### 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 digital literacy trainings, and, to a lesser extent, ISP regulation. Residents also called for increased accessibility in public spaces like parks.

#### 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:

- Adirondack Action Broadband
- Finger Lakes Geriatric Education Center
- Rainbow Network Solutions

- New York State Newspaper Foundation News Media Literacy Program
- Senior Planet
- Older Adults Technology Services (OATS)
- Starlink

## Summary Discussion

During the high-level discussions on digital equity at the beginning and end of the breakout session, participants stressed the need for increased access and options in rural areas; the idea was raised of incentivizing small local ISPs that are willing to build out infrastructure in rural areas. Participants flagged a lack of coverage as an issue for local residents, as well as a barrier to increased tourism and Airbnb use in the region. Residents stressed the importance of libraries and the need for increased resourcing and support. Residents requested more funding for programs and staff supporting digital equity in the library system.