Western New York Listening Session | Summary Notes

Introduction

On March 22, 2023, the Western New York Digital Equity Coalition (WNYDEC) hosted a Digital Equity Listening Session at the Highmark Stadium in Orchard Park, NY. In partnership with New York State's ConnectALL Office, WNYDEC convened approximately 125 New York 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 agreed that most of the locations suggested are important for accessing the internet, including homes, workplaces, public libraries, community centers, coffee shops, and schools. Participants expressed that there are connectivity gaps in the more rural areas of the region due to lack of infrastructure, which leaves those residents particularly reliant on locations outside of the home for broadband access. It was suggested that up to a third of Alleghany County does not have sufficient broadband service, with some areas of the County even lacking strong cell service. One participant noted, however, that not all residents in the region are able to travel easily, and "not having reliable transportation to and from the community centers, libraries etc. prevents people from accessing internet at local places that may have." Participants discussed hotspots and mobile internet vans in Erie County as stopgap solutions to help connect individuals who can't travel to community locations to access the internet. Participants also suggested that coffee shops are frequently visited for broadband access, in addition to grocery stores and places of worship.

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 pointed to multiple factors that exist as barriers to accessing the internet, including the lack of affordable internet service, lack of high-quality reliable service, inaccessible or hard to use online resources and services, lack of digital literacy or computer training skills, concerns about privacy/safety, and difficulty finding affordable service. One participant who works with the refugee population in the City of Buffalo shared that "low-tech literacy is a challenge, given [the limited] capacity of case managers to navigate, and many clients don't have devices other than phones." The misconception was also addressed that all college students are tech natives who face no barriers to internet access, when in reality many students rely on smart phones and don't have readily accessible computers to complete their schoolwork. Addressing the particular needs of elderly individuals, one participant shared that the "aging may need training, many need lower price points, and [assistance with] maintaining their cybersecurity properly, as they get taken [advantage of] by scams a lot."

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

Participants emphasized that telehealth is a common internet use, including scheduling appointments for the COVID-19 vaccine. Particularly for individuals aged 60 and older, it was suggested that the ability to communicate with doctors and health professionals online is essential. Participants mentioned that church and faith-based communities rely on the internet to provide remote access to services during the pandemic. Participants listed online banking, paying bills, and accessing financial services as additional everyday activities they conduct on the internet. Another participant representing refugee communities mentioned attending ESL classes, communicating with friends and family, and accessing multilingual resources. Participants also mentioned online registration for events, online food delivery, online booking of transportation/travel, entertainment, and remote work.

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

Participants suggested there are multiple accessibility concerns with websites for public resources, such as the size of text being too small, and websites not being designed to navigate on a phone. Participants described government websites as

being difficult to navigate and "clunky," often outdated, and often lacking translation services. Participants also called attention to the specific public resources they access online, including information on educational opportunities, affordable housing, and unemployment claims. Because accessing public resources online often requires submitting personal identifiable information (PII), one participant suggested that it is especially important to make government websites more recognizable, so residents don't have to question the validity of the sites. They suggested that "safety is a major issue for people accessing governmental websites and services" and that some elderly individuals have been "resistant to filing any unemployment online because they had been victims of fraud or identity theft in the past and they were not comfortable with giving their social security number."

Question 5: Online Privacy & Security: Open Discussion

Participants agreed that privacy and security are crucial components of digital skills training, but that this training is not prevalent enough. As one participant shared, "society has grown numb to this information and it's exhausting" to continually worry about safety online. Similarly, other participants shared that the constant "evolving scams" make it difficult for individuals to keep up with latest guidance on how to protect themselves online, and that phishing email identification is a crucial skill. Participants mentioned multiple programs that exist to teach individuals about these subjects, including public libraries, employers, the organization TechknowledgeMe (run by the Self-Advocacy Association of NYS), and the organization People Inc. It was suggested that individuals with physical or mental disabilities are especially vulnerable to cybersecurity threats, as they "tend to trust untrustworthy sources" that look official; it was also suggested that refugees and recent immigrants are also vulnerable to online scams, due to their limited English language ability, and that this discourages them from using the internet. Participants shared stories of online fraud that they've encountered personally or in their community, including the hacking of the County of Suffolk and extortion of a non-profit community center in Buffalo.

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

Participants identified affordability, accessibility, and digital literacy skills promotion as priorities for improvement. Other participants suggested prioritizing reliability, given that their internet service does not always function correctly and residents could use support to "monitor [their internet service] at home, particularly related to in-home use with technology devices, utilization, etc." Residents expressed

frustration with internet outages in the past, especially during the pandemic, that they believe ISPs did not address quickly enough. A resident from the city of Jamestown referenced a local survey that revealed that reliability was the most important factor to residents, with cost ranking second, and speed ranking third. Choice was also a high-priority factor for participants in Jamestown's survey.

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:

- Erie County Public Libraries (many services)
- Center for Self-Advocacy (Let's Connect Program)
- Mission Ignite: Tech 360 program
- Downtown Buffalo Library (Assistive Tech Room)
- SUNY Exploring Technologies Program
- WNYSTEM.ORG
- University at Buffalo High Quality Program (UB CTSI Health and Tech Equity Program)
- TechknowledgeMe
- OWL Library (Hotspot and Kindle rentals)
- Deaf Access Services
- ErieNet
- Final Mile

Summary Discussion

During the summary discussion, participants suggested that participatory planning is an important element of the process, and they appreciate the opportunity to identify digital equity barriers as a community. Participants reflected on how much the focus of internet access has changed in the last twenty years, and how their community's evolving internet needs have increased the demand for technology like fiber. The director of ErieNet reflected on the first three years of the project's evolution, which could be an example to other communities, as a County-driven initiative to build middle-mile fiber that last-mile providers can take advantage of. Participants continued to reflect on the importance of internet access in their daily lives, which helps them work from home, access healthcare efficiently, access online recreation/cultural resources, take advantage of online education

opportunities, plan their travel efficiently, and conduct outreach to low-income residents to connect them with social services.

In the closing session focused on visioning and next steps, one participant expressed a desire to "see local, community, and state targets articulated in terms of number of people to reach, specific geographies, communities, individuals, small businesses, etc. in order to effectively measure progress and impact on closing the digital divide." Discussing potential solutions to the digital divide, another participant suggested "the State should cap pricing on internet costs to consumers, [and] enshrining internet access as a basic right could be a critical step in this direction." Another resident agreed that the internet should be universally guaranteed and provided as a public utility, given how necessary it is to daily life. One participant employed with an internet service provider suggested the State could intervene by "1. reducing the high cost of make-ready work for pole attachments, 2. eliminating real property taxes for new and existing fiber optic infrastructure, 3. and help[ing to] reduce overall operating costs for businesses in NYS." Residents expressed an eagerness for the State to progress its digital equity planning process and eliminate barriers to internet access.