

## Mid-Hudson Listening Session | Summary Notes

### Introduction

On March 24, 2023, the STEM Alliance hosted a Digital Equity Listening Session at SUNY Purchase in Purchase, NY. In partnership with New York State's ConnectALL Office, the STEM Alliance convened approximately 140 New York residents, including both virtual and in-person attendees. The STEM Alliance collaborated with the following organizations on planning and outreach for the listening session: Mercy College, Mid-Hudson Library System, Mid-Hudson Regional Economic Development Council, Ramapo Catskill Library, Southeastern New York Library Resources Council, Westchester Children's Association, Westchester County Association, and Westchester Library System.

### 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 considered home as the primary location for internet access, though they noted other important locations such as community centers and libraries. Participants agreed that local libraries and schools are key internet access locations, in addition to naming alternate public locations like Panera Bread and McDonalds.

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 insufficient speeds and limited digital literacy skills as barriers to community members using the internet. Participants pointed to certain online activities, such as using online portals and chat boxes, or using telehealth services, that can be particularly complex. Participants identified aging individuals as a population particularly likely to lack digital literacy skills. Multiple participants

expressed that cost can be a barrier to internet access, particularly when the federal Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) discount is not sufficient to cover the entire cost of a service plan. Participants also suggested that internet services are not always reliable, that they have experienced slower speeds on evenings and weekends, and that dead spots in their homes make it difficult to access the internet from certain rooms. Finally, participants identified the lack of adequate devices as a barrier to full access, as some individuals in the community rely on their smartphones to access the internet.

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

Participants listed remote learning, entertainment, transportation planning, and social engagement as everyday activities they conduct online. Participants agreed that they use the internet for all listed activities. Other activities identified include searching news, searching for jobs, and applying for unemployment benefits online. It was shared that senior populations rely on the internet for telehealth, and participants in the breakout session agreed that they themselves use the internet frequently for telehealth services. One participant suggested that “you can’t make it in New York schools without internet access,” given that “every teacher is required to post course content, learning, and grades online,” and students need internet access at home to make the most of the resources available to them. Another participant suggested that “to be a functioning member of society, you need to be online,” as so many opportunities for work and leisure exist primarily on the internet. E-commerce and online banking were also mentioned as common activities reliant on internet access.

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

Participants suggested that is difficult to access and navigate government sites, and “even harder if your connection is not good or you have to do it on something than a laptop.” ID.me was identified as an important site for security on government sites, but characterized as difficult to access. Accessing government benefits often requires identity verification through the ID.me site, but the identity verification is difficult for some to complete, especially if they have language barriers or privacy concerns. Unemployment benefits, COVID vaccination appointments, and other

social services all require internet access and moderate digital literacy skills to access. One participant suggested that government “systems are complicated [and] not easy to navigate for people with high digital illiteracy, let alone for people that need extra help.” Participants agreed that individuals with lower English-language proficiency struggle to navigate public resources online, and that “they often don’t know where to go for help.” This problem is exacerbated for “those with disabilities and those with depression...as many of these people can’t leave their house, so if they do not have internet it’s hard to get help.” Tools such as voice tools to make websites more accessible were mentioned, but it was flagged that basic training and knowledge of these tools is required to take advantage of them.

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

Participants addressed the difficulty of conducting identity verification online for individuals with low digital literacy. Participants also identified vulnerable populations, such as undocumented individuals and victims of domestic violence, who are especially hesitant to use the internet when they fear that their online presence will put them in danger. It was noted that many community members use the internet without knowledge of the privacy settings they can change on their devices. Public Wi-Fi was identified as a potentially risky means of accessing the internet. Another participant shared that they’ve seen misinformation about these topics in their community, resulting in “a lot of fear regarding online privacy and security because people don’t know what to be afraid of.” Participants identified several specific security fears, including the fear of individuals’ identity and information being shared with government agencies, fear of falling victim to a scam online, and fear of engaging in a democratic process online.

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

Participants suggested prioritizing investment in better infrastructure, digital skills training for all types of people (“from youth to seniors”), and education and transparency around ISP pricing and service quality. Participants named affordability as a priority, and others named reliability as a priority, since they have experience slowed broadband speeds at peak hours. It was suggested that the ACP application process could be simplified, both from the enrollee and ISP’s end.

Participants suggested investing more in libraries, both from an infrastructure perspective and from a human resources perspective, so that libraries are well-equipped to support members of the community facing barriers to accessing 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?

Several breakout groups ran out of time to discuss this question, but the following suggestions came from the group who did discuss programs:

- Digital navigators (no specific programmatic affiliation)
- The STEM Alliance Digital Equity Programming/Y-Zone
- State University of New York (SUNY) Westchester Educational Opportunity Center IT Lab
- Community Action Partnership
- Rockland PC Users Group
- AARP Tax Aid Volunteers

## Summary Discussion

Most groups ran out of time for a robust summary discussion to close out the breakout session, but the participants who did address it raised multiple suggestions for digital equity strategies. Priority groups in need were identified as “disabled, seniors, depressed, homeless, and previously incarcerated individuals,” for whom a device, digital skills training, and access to the internet could be life-changing. A campaign-based approach was suggested to educate individuals about existing programs to lower barriers to affordable internet access and digital skills training. The importance of community-based organizations regularly communicating with each other about their digital equity-oriented initiatives was also mentioned, to improve the referral process between organizations.