Southern Tier Listening Session | Summary Notes

Introduction

On April 24, 2023, the Southern Tier Digital Equity Coalition, Southern Tier Central Regional Planning & Development Board, and Southern Tier 8 Regional Board hosted a virtual Digital Equity Listening Session in partnership with New York State's ConnectALL Office. Approximately 90 residents convened over Zoom.

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 expressed that at-home internet service was a critical resource for a variety of groups including children, who need access for homework; older adults looking to age in place, who require access to telehealth services; and individuals with disabilities, who may use at-home services for telehealth and social opportunities. Residents also noted that libraries, religious institutions, and businesses have all been resources for internet access within the region. Residents reported using internet service at restaurants, however noted that the noise level at the establishments were a barrier to good connectivity. Others spoke about using wi-fi at work, even for personal matters, because of poor quality at-home service. Some residents mentioned students using library parking lots for service to complete schoolwork in the absence of high quality at-home connectivity. Others noted the importance of SUNY and Binghamton Community College campuses for connectivity, and specifically student connectivity in the area.

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. A lack of infrastructure for connectivity in rural areas was identified as a primary barrier to

connectivity. While residents felt that most towns had access at their core, houses in less dense areas, or on dead-end streets, often lack coverage. Residents mentioned that the low density of these areas as well as the high cost of last-mile fiber delivery to rural homes has disincentivized ISPs from expanding service to these regions. Residents noted that the regional topography is a barrier to service; given the forested and hilly nature of the region, wireline deployment is difficult and expensive, and satellite options, if available, are expensive and unreliable. Service options were also described as limited, with residents highlighting that there is just a single provider option in Otsego County. Residents raised a lack of digital literacy as a barrier and noted that it is hard to focus efforts on improving digital literacy when so many are struggling to receive basic connectivity. A lack of device access was raised as a barrier, with residents noting that many low-income individuals only have internet access through their phones. This limited device access limits online capabilities and opportunity.

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 use the internet for most of the activities on the list provided, from education and telehealth, to accessing job opportunities and more. Residents reiterated the importance of using the internet for social purposes, including online media. The importance of the internet specifically as a resource for community-building among queer youth was raised. Residents noted that access is important for self-advocacy. Residents highlighted that avenues to provide feedback to elected officials or others in positions of power are often internet-based, and that those without reliable internet service therefore have fewer opportunities to be heard. Residents also noted that access is important for online employment opportunities, raising the possibility that better regional connectivity could attract more individuals to move to the area and increase economic growth in the region.

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

Many participants felt accessing public resources was challenging as government sites are not easy to navigate or user friendly, and noted that many public

resources are now almost exclusively available online. Residents noted that a lack of personal support navigating these resources can make it challenging for people to access these services or can disincentivize people from even attempting to gain access. Older adults were mentioned as particularly disempowered, as a population with sometimes low digital literacy skills. It was noted that these sites are designed to work best on computers, which can make it difficult for those without access to a computer to access these resources. Residents also noted that a lack of trust in these sites makes accessing public resources challenging as people are often afraid to submit personal information online.

Question 5: Online Privacy & Security: Open Discussion

Residents expressed concerns with cybersecurity, citing a lack of media literacy, increasing sophistication of hackers, and AI as threats to online safety. Residents called out youth and aging individuals as particularly vulnerable to online scams due to a lack of digital and media literacy skills. Residents called out veterans as a group that particularly struggles with trust in government resources and online media. Residents brought up their own experiences of being hacked or scammed online. Representatives from libraries spoke to the role of librarians in helping to educate community members on how to avoid online scams and navigate the internet safely. Residents raised the tension between digital accessibility and privacy, noting that the increasing use of two-factor authentication and complex passwords can be challenging for individuals who struggle to keep track of their passwords or who do not have a regular phone number to use in these systems.

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 the biggest priority for improvement in the region. Residents noted that any cost for internet can be too much for low-income families, and that new options on the market need to be both reliable and affordable. Where service exists, participants wanted to prioritize increasing the number of available provider options. Residents also wanted to ensure that any new infrastructure deployed would be planned for future bandwidth needs so that the system can be resilient to changing technology.

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:

- Mission Ignite
- Southern Tier Regional Broadband Collaborative
- betterconnection.org
- Southern Tier 8 Regional Board
- OEConnect
- George F. Johnson Memorial Library
- Knowb4

Summary Discussion

During the high-level discussions on digital equity at the beginning and end of the listening session, participants stressed the need for increased access, options, and affordability of broadband service in the region. Residents also noted that, while there needs to be support for digital literacy training and device support, it is hard to focus on these additive resources or to improve digital skills when many struggle to receive basic connectivity.