New York City Listening Session | Summary Notes

Introduction

On June 14, 2023, New York State's ConnectALL Office hosted a Broadband and Digital Equity Listening Session in partnership with the New York City Office of Technology and Innovation and Silicon Harlem. Approximately 98 residents convened in person to listen to speakers and participate in breakout room discussions, and up to 254 residents viewed speaker presentations virtually.

Attendance/Representation of Covered Populations

Amongst the three breakout groups who met for discussion sessions during the event, the Covered Populations[1] represented* included the following:

Covered population	Attendance
Individuals living in households at no more than 150% of the federal poverty line	✔
Individuals aged 60 years old or more	✔
Incarcerated individuals (non-Federal facilities)	
Military veterans (no longer serving)	
Individuals with physical or mental disabilities	✔
Individuals with language barriers (learning English, or with low levels of English literacy)	✔
Individuals who are members of a non-white racial or ethnic group (this includes individuals who belong to more than one racial or ethnic group)	✔
Individuals who primarily reside in a rural area	
Individuals who are intermediaries to or work with the populations listed above	✔

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[1] As defined in the federal Digital Equity Act.

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.

<u>Question 1: What challenges do NYC residents face in accessing high-speed, reliable broadband?</u>

The greatest barriers to access identified by participants were cost, inability to access internet-enabled devices, and unreliable service.

Residents said that, given few provider options, costs for internet across the city remain high, especially given rising rents and rising costs of living. Although Big Apple Connect will provide free service to New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) residents, Listening Session participants said that this program will not benefit surrounding communities. And while the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) has been vital to getting many NYC residents connected to the internet, many participants were still unfamiliar with the program; participants also said that undocumented communities are not able to access this resource.

Participants said that many New Yorkers do not have access to internet-enabled devices. Access to laptops among low-income youth was flagged as a particular challenge. Many low-income families share devices across households, with some sharing just a mobile device. This was reported to be especially common in Hispanic/Latino households. When these devices are in use, or when hotspots or mobile phones run out of data, households completely lose access to the internet. When older devices are no longer able to connect to new technology like 5G, households likewise lose service.

Participants said that quality and reliability of service is inconsistent throughout the city. For some, a lack of understanding of what speed constitutes high-quality service leaves residents unable to make choices about the right service options to purchase. Others lack fiber to the home and are unable to access high-speed service. In some cases, access is shared throughout multi-dwelling units (MDUs) in which some areas of the building experience slower speeds than others or in which service to the entire building slows down during periods of high demand. Participants were skeptical of the impact of Link5G on household internet access, saying it would not bring consistent high-quality, in-home service to New Yorkers.

Question 2: Beyond access, what other factors keep people from using the internet meaningfully in their lives?

Participants identified a variety of barriers at different scales—including barriers related to language ability, access to housing, insufficient educational resources, low levels of confidence and comfort, and low device availability.

Participants said that, for English language learners, it is difficult to navigate digital environments or online resources if there are limited translation services. It is also hard for these communities to learn new digital skills if the programs offered to improve digital and device literacy are taught in English.

Participants said that housing access can be a barrier to consistent internet access. If a person is experiencing housing insecurity or homelessness, they might not have stable internet connection or any internet connection.

Some participants said that there are barriers to accessing resources aimed at bridging the digital divide. Participants said that there are not enough instructors to teach digital literacy skills. Some participants were not sure if New Yorkers knew about the connectivity, device, and digital literacy programs provided by the city library systems, nor were they sure that those resources were reaching those most in need. Participants said that certain libraries can be largely "White" spaces and that people of color might not feel comfortable enough in those spaces to access the resources the institutions have to offer. Participants said that tech is a predominantly "White" industry and that certain types of new technology, including facial recognition, have been designed with biases that do not allow people of color equal access or that exert disparate impacts against people of color. Participants said that targeted and culturally competent outreach under the banner of digital equity is needed to ensure people of color have access to digital equity resources and feel comfortable in the spaces where they can access those resources.

Some participants said city residents are wary of the internet, due to either a lack of confidence in their ability to navigate the internet, a sense that they should not have to be online to go about life, or fear of scams and online safety.

Participants said that the cost of devices and lack of access to internet-enabled devices like laptops were barriers to accessing the internet. Residents said there are not enough free and long-term device access and device loan programs at libraries, which are limited by their open hours and rules around the length of use or device loans.

Question 3: When people and communities face challenges with access, devices, skills, or other digital equity issues, how does this affect their lives—education, work social services, health, relationships, community participation, etc.?

Participants said that barriers to digital equity and access impact almost every aspect of New Yorkers' lives. For participants at the listening session, inconsistent or limited access to the digital world entailed less access to resources including healthy food options, tele-health, social services, and education. Participants observed the large number and variety of opportunities that are now available online, ranging from grocery shopping to healthcare, which would be inaccessible or harder to access for those without the access and skills needed to navigate the internet.

Limited access entailed less opportunity for self-actualization or the ability to explore new interests and hobbies. Limited access limits New Yorkers' social and personal lives, reducing connection to friends and family who do not live locally, participation in faith-based communities that gather online, and access to online entertainment. Limited access was also noted as a significant barrier to employment, with respect to both finding and applying to new opportunities as well as sustaining jobs that may require remote work and reliable, high-quality internet at home.

Question 4: Are certain groups particularly impacted by the digital divide in NYC?

Participants identified immigrant New Yorkers and historically underrepresented communities of color as populations particularly impacted by the digital divide in New York City. Older adults, low-income individuals, and formerly incarcerated individuals were also singled out as often lacking the training and skills to participate in the digital world. Some participants said that neighbors living in public or affordable housing, in addition to those with language barriers, might be acutely impacted by the digital divide as well.

Questions 5 & 6: What standout digital equity programs and initiatives do you know of and who are the organizations and individuals that are involved in these efforts?

Participants identified the following high-quality programs and services in their community working to support improved internet access and digital equity:
- Office of the Aging
  - Digital Literacy
- Make the Road NY
  - Digital Literacy, Skills Training and Workforce Development, Information Sharing
- Stacks + Joules
  - Skills Training and Workforce Development
- Human-I-T
  - Device Access

- New York Public Library (NYPL) Tech Connect
  - Device Access, Digital Literacy, Skills Training and Workforce Development, Connectivity, Information Sharing
- Brooklyn Public Library (BPL)
  - Device Access, Digital Literacy, Skills Training, Connectivity, Information Sharing
- NYC Department of Education
  - Device Access, Information Sharing
- Big Apple Connect
  - Device Access, Connectivity
- LinkNYC
  - Device Access, Connectivity, Information Sharing
- Computers 4 People
  - Device Access
- NYC Coalition for Adult Literacy
  - Digital Literacy, Research and Reports, Information Sharing
- NYC Alliance for Digital Equity
  - Digital Literacy, Device Access, Research and Reports, Information Sharing
- Bronx Community Foundation
  - Digital Literacy, Device Access, Skills Training and Workforce Development, Information Sharing
- Knowledge House
  - Digital Literacy, Skills Training and Workforce Development
- West Farms Makers Space
  - Device Access
- Henry Street Settlement
  - Digital Literacy, Skills Training and Workforce Development
- Center on Race and Digital Justice
  - Digital Literacy, Skills Training and Workforce Development, Research and Reports
- Hispanic Federation
  - Skills Training and Workforce Development
- Silicon Harlem
  - Device Access, Digital Literacy, Skills Training, Connectivity
- Older Adults Technology Services (OATS)
  - Device Access, Digital Literacy, Skills Training, Connectivity
- City University of New York (CUNY)
  - Device Access, Digital Literacy, Skills Training, Connectivity, Research and Reports

- State University of New York (SUNY)
  - Device Access, Digital Literacy, Skills Training, Connectivity, Research and Reports
- We Build Black
  - Digital Literacy, Skills Training and Workforce Development
- BronxNet
  - Information Sharing
- Hunts Point CDC – The Point
  - Digital Literacy, Skills Training and Workforce Development, Information Sharing
- Harlem Emergency Network
  - Information Sharing

Question 7: In an ideal world, what kinds of solutions would work to advance digital equity in NYC?

Participants proposed a range of solutions that would expand quality and choice in the broadband market, improve digital literacy by building on existing efforts, and strengthen policy mandates that would broaden access to both high-quality internet and devices.

Many focused on the importance of encouraging a larger number of Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to operate statewide. This was proposed in the hopes that competition would reduce the cost of broadband while improving service. Others highlighted that in an expanded market, they would like to see different ownership structures for the new ISPs—including nonprofit-owned providers. Participants imagined that more competitive economic conditions combined with some technological improvements could improve the range of Wi-Fi service in homes or apartments.

Regarding digital literacy, participants identified valuable work that libraries, parks, and community-based organizations have done. These institutions have built trust within communities, participants said, and have used that trust to deliver robust digital literacy programming to those in need. Participants imagined a deeper investment in anchor institutions and organizations through increased and long-term government funding for their existing programs. Participants also raised other forms of government support including in kind donations of equipment and the presence of government officials at digital equity events. Participants also envisioned more robust, government-led community engagement that seeks out the voices of those institutions and actors already working in broadband access and digital equity in order to inform future actions and investments.

Many participants said they wished there was mandated universal access to both internet-connected devices and high-speed networks. Some participants focused especially on this need within affordable housing units.

Summary of Discussions

At the New York City Listening Session, participants discussed each way that a lack of reliable and high-quality broadband impacts the lives of those in their communities. The impact of unreliable, low-quality, or lacking internet is broad, entailing reduced access to interpersonal connection, government and social services, employment opportunities, healthcare, education, entertainment, and other benefits.

Participants identified immigrant New Yorkers and historically underrepresented communities of color as among those most impacted by the digital divide—other disparately impacted groups mentioned included older adults, low-income residents, and formerly incarcerated individuals. Participants said that the digital divide and inequitable access to the internet is intimately connected to other forms of inequity and structural racism. Participants linked progress in addressing the digital divide to progress in increasing access to housing, economic opportunity, and other resources.

To inform the state's approach to its digital equity plan, participants encouraged the State to consider ways to increase the variety of provider options across New York City. The goal of lowering the cost of high-quality connectivity featured prominently in visions of a better-connected future. In addition, participants advocated for culturally appropriate and accessible digital literacy programming mediated by increased access to affordable devices and designed in partnership with community groups and coalitions already involved in this work.