

Brooklyn Listening Session | Summary Notes

Introduction

On August 31, 2023, New York State's ConnectALL Office hosted a Broadband and Digital Equity Listening Session in partnership with El Puente. Approximately 24 residents convened virtually to listen to speakers and participate in interactive discussions.

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?

Individuals' homes were identified as the most important spaces for high quality connectivity. Residents estimated that 40 to 50% of their community had high-quality at-home internet access. For those that did not, they relied on their phones and wireless data plans to access the internet. Beyond the home, residents felt community spaces were critical points of access. Residents mentioned the tech center in Crown Heights as a notable resource for students who do not have at-home service. These community spaces for connectivity were said to be important for allowing young people to complete their homework. Residents also said that senior centers would be important spaces for connectivity, but that the current service is poor. Similarly, residents said it would be beneficial to have better connectivity at bus stops, on the subway, in parks and open spaces, and at the library.

Question 2: In your experience, which of the following factors make it hard for people in your community to access and use the internet?

Affordability of service, accessibility of training, and gaps in digital literacy all impact community access to the internet. Residents advocated for free universal broadband noting that existing interventions to support universal access are flawed. Residents noted that, while the ACP has been beneficial, undocumented people are not eligible for the benefit. Residents felt Big Apple Connect was beneficial in connecting NYCHA residents, but noted that some neighborhoods that struggle with connectivity, including Sunset Park, do not have this type of housing infrastructure. Similarly, LinkNYC has been prioritized in select neighborhoods and has left out others, including Sunset Park. Residents also noted that systemic racism has been a barrier to improved public infrastructure, including broadband access, in Brooklyn.

Regarding digital literacy and navigation, residents noted that this has been a particular barrier for those with limited English skills, as many training programs are only taught in English. The Technology Advocacy Group was mentioned as having held tech navigation events in different venues across Sunset Park, including at schools and a local bodega, where local nonprofit Sunset Spark offered technical assistance. There is a great need for culturally competent and language diverse digital navigation education.

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

Participants expressed that they and their community members used the internet for a variety of activities, including working, applying for jobs, taking classes/accessing education, accessing healthcare, socializing, engaging with neighborhood or local community organizations, and accessing government services. Participants raised the importance of the internet for accessing the news. Others raised needs for recreational uses, financial services like banking and taxes, and for healthcare.

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

Residents noted that broadband service itself can be a barrier to accessing public services, as speeds can be slow, especially for shared Wi-Fi, basement apartments, and families who share Wi-Fi. Many government websites do not save application progress, and if connection is lost mid-way through an application, residents are forced to start over. Many residents discussed accessibility for those with limited English as a barrier to

government services. Residents discussed that the government platforms are difficult to navigate, especially for the community members who are accessing these websites from mobile phones. Residents said that they often have to meet with Human Resources Administration representatives in person to navigate these sites as they are too difficult to navigate independently from home.

One resident noted that they struggled to get a new ID photo to access government services as the phone cameras were designed for lighter skin and their picture quality came out low and was not recognized by the system. This resident noted that technology has to be designed in an inclusive way without baked-in racial biases.

Residents noted that undocumented community members do not have access to public resources generally, and specifically highlighted their lack of access to the ACP.

Question 5: Online Privacy & Security: Open Discussion

Residents were especially concerned with the cybersecurity risks towards older adults. Residents noted that most navigation and use testing is done with younger individuals, and older adults are not often considered in design. If sites are difficult for older adults to navigate, they are more vulnerable when using the internet. Residents noted that there should be additional cybersecurity training for older adults. A representative from 5th Avenue Committee noted that they integrate some cybersecurity training into their digital literacy classes.

Residents were also concerned about the growing threat of artificial intelligence and its many applications to hacking and scams online.

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

Residents asked to prioritize interventions for improved cost of service in Brooklyn. One resident put this sentiment bluntly: "What is the point of having internet if you cannot afford it?" Residents suggested that increased provider options may help improve cost and quality of service. Residents also wanted improved speed and were frustrated by data limits that interrupt service quality. Residents also noted that speed should be symmetrical for both upload and download services so that residents can both consume and produce online media.

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:

- The Technology Advocacy Group
- 5th Avenue Committee
- Digital Girl Inc.

Summary Discussion

Language accessibility of services, digital literacy education, and universal access to reliable and affordable broadband services were brought up as core issues to address in Brooklyn. While tech centers and community spaces serve an important role in digital access, participants stressed that high-quality and affordable at-home service should be the State's priority.