

Staten Island Listening Session | Summary Notes

Introduction

On August 30, 2023, New York State's ConnectALL Office hosted a Broadband and Digital Equity Listening Session in partnership with La Colmena. Approximately 29 residents convened in person to listen to speakers and participate in breakout room 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?

Residents identified the home as the most important location for high-quality and reliable internet. Mobile service in addition to, or as a supplement for, high quality and reliable service in public spaces like libraries, parks, bus stops, and schools was described as important for meeting connectivity needs beyond the home.

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, limited device access, language accessibility, and fears around internet safety were all noted as barriers to access. Some residents noted that their access was specifically limited by the lack of a smartphone. Residents highlighted fears around data privacy as a deterrent to using the internet. Others noted particular barriers within the way public Wi-Fi is structured: residents noted that some public Wi-Fi systems require users to submit an email for access, and that users who do not have email addresses are barred from accessing the service.

Residents also said that a lack of digital and device literacy were barriers to access. Comfort with technology was not consistent across devices. Some residents expressed

that, while they were very comfortable with their smartphones, they struggled to navigate the internet on a laptop or desktop computer. Some residents expressed that their personal lack of digital literacy became a barrier to access for their children when their child faced a digital or device challenge and they were unable to help troubleshoot.

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 used the internet for a wide range of activities, from applying for jobs, to maintaining employment, participating in online classes, accessing medical care, operating a small business, keeping in touch with relatives, and more.

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

Residents reported that online public resources are challenging to access because of unintuitive website design, poor translation services, and limited site accessibility. Residents noted that government websites are often cluttered, and it can be hard to understand where to go to find necessary forms and information. Medicaid and other health-related services were cited as particularly challenging. Residents with more limited English skills noted that the majority of sites are in English and translation services are either non-existent, challenging to navigate, or provide inaccurate translations. For those with limited vision, much of the text on government websites is too small.

While these challenges do exist, residents said that the more often they accessed these sites, the easier the process became. Some residents utilized public forums on Facebook or other social media sites to source tips on navigating government websites.

Question 5: Online Privacy & Security: Open Discussion

While residents noted that the "Terms and Conditions" on most websites are in English and inaccessible to those with limited English skills, they were generally not concerned with general data privacy and feel that many websites do a good job of protecting users. Residents were instead concerned about targeted scams by malicious actors, or actively malicious sites designed to steal data. An example was given of websites that falsify job offers as a means of taking private information. Some residents were cautious about how and through what websites they make online purchases.

Residents said they had gained knowledge about online safety through Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, but would like further instruction on how to identify scams.

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

Residents said they would prioritize improved internet speed across all access points and greater accessibility in public spaces. Residents also said they would prioritize affordability. While promotions are helpful for temporarily lowering internet costs, when subsidies and discounts run out, it can become challenging for residents to afford the service in the long term.

Residents said they would like access to greater education around internet safety, specifically how to know when you can trust a given website.

Finally, residents wanted greater multilingual support services. While programs exist that offer information on how to use and navigate the internet, they are mainly in English and translation services that exist are often inadequate.

Summary Discussion

Language accessibility of services, digital literacy education, and internet safety were again raised as core issues to address on Staten Island. Residents with limited English skills and immigrant families often struggle to understand how to use their devices. Most participants with limited English skills have a hard time understanding promotions, ads, terms & conditions, digital literacy resources, government websites, and more, as translation services are often inaccessible. Residents of the borough generally were concerned about online scams and wanted access to better resources to understand digital safety.