

Digital Equity Task Force

Accessibility of Government Services Subcommittee Town Hall

Summary Notes

August 3, 2023

The Digital Equity Task Force Town Hall on Accessibility of Government Services served as an opportunity for ConnectALL to hear from experts, community leaders, and representatives of covered populations about what unified vision for digital equity, barriers and assets, implementation plans, and outcomes should be included in the State's Digital Equity Plan as it relates to achieving digital equity to improve accessibility and government services in New York. Access to the internet and digital skills have become increasingly essential for accessing government services, creating a growing divide for individuals lacking adequate support. Particularly for vulnerable populations heavily reliant on government assistance, numerous aspects of their well-being and daily lives are intertwined with access to such services. The challenges of navigating digital forms, applications, and eligibility criteria, as well as locating trustworthy sources of assistance, are well recognized. To bridge this gap, efforts should not only focus on comprehending these barriers but also on formulating solutions to promote digital equity in government services accessibility. Policy-level discussions are crucial for identifying successful strategies for specific populations and programs, with the aim of adapting and implementing effective policies across various domains.

Creating a Unified Vision of Digital Equity: Full participation of all New Yorkers in online civic and social spaces where citizens have ubiquitous access and digital fluency while government services have intuitive design and tailored programming.

- Envision a future where every New Yorker fully participates in online spaces.
- Ensure ubiquitous access to the internet for all communities.
- Design platforms with intuitive interfaces, catering to diverse needs.
- Promote digital fluency through education and training initiatives.
- Tailor programming to address unique challenges of different communities.
- Forge partnerships between government, nonprofits, and community groups.
- Implement consistent accessibility standards across digital services.
- Garner government involvement and funding for equitable digital transformation.

Breakout Session 1- Self Advocate Affinity Group:

- Participants discussed challenges such as navigating complex application processes, government bureaucracy, inadequate local services, and difficulties faced by specific populations like seniors, people with disabilities, non-English speakers, and those formerly incarcerated.
- Proposed solutions included user-friendly and ADA accessible platforms, simplified eligibility processes, and targeted outreach through community anchor institutions

(CAIs). Additional solutions included increased access to accessible technology at public computing centers.

- The role of CAIs in adoption, support, and access to government services was emphasized, along with the need for partnerships and collaborations to achieve digital equity.
- The session delved into effective programs and policies that enhance government service accessibility, focusing on eligibility transparency and adaptability.
- Participants shared experiences and models from other regions, advocating for clear communication, assistance for marginalized communities, and the importance of inclusive design.

Breakout Session 2 - Veterans:

- Participants discussed challenges veterans face in accessing services, particularly in rural areas. Participants highlighted lack of reliable internet, difficulties with online VA claims, and limited digital proficiency affecting telehealth services and benefits application.
- Discussants identified innovative solutions, including educational initiatives, partnerships with grassroots organizations, and tailored programming. Empathy and understanding for veterans' unique needs were underscored, along with the importance of user-friendly platforms, interactive videos, and multilingual support.
- Unique opportunity for digital literacy and training to become a new use for existing community centers, such as American Legion posts, that can support veterans.
- Participants explored collaboration between private organizations, government agencies, and community initiatives to create comprehensive solutions.
- Participants identified essential strategies, including leveraging existing resources, such as libraries, and engaging local communities.

Breakout Session 3

- This session explored how different communities engage with the internet, highlighting the importance of public services, Wi-Fi access, and digital literacy training. Participants shared efforts to set up temporary websites, connect individuals to free Wi-Fi, and provide training programs.
- Grassroots community connections are important to connect individuals who are new, for example refugees, if they do not trust people in their community or are not integrated, they will lack knowledge about services to access.
- Participants addressed barriers such as accessibility challenges for people with disabilities, language barriers, and lack of awareness. Solutions included promoting digital fluency, improving awareness of available resources, and simplifying complex websites.

- Providing more money specifically for governments to audit their websites and have vetted vendors perform audits.
- If the city provides a service online, they should also pay to have appropriate customer service available for when there is an issue with the tech or an issue with just moving the applicant forward.
- Services should be sure to be mobile friendly since that is where many people use and apply for services.
- Participants discussed models from other regions, such as Digital Access and Resilience in Texas and Raleigh, NC's Digital Inclusion Programs, as potential inspirations for New York's approach. Camden coalition is an example of health care-social service collaborations to better serve community members with high health care needs and is an ecosystem of care composed of interconnected programs and services designed to holistically address community members' complex health and social needs.

Breakout Session 4

- Discussants explored current efforts in overcoming barriers, such as public services, Wi-Fi access, and training programs. Identified the importance of communication, trust-building, and collaboration between government agencies and community organizations.
- Participants suggested immediate actions including awareness campaigns, verification services, and empathy-building initiatives.
- Highlighted the role of community organizations, libraries, digital navigators and accessible technology in supporting digital equity.
- Highlighted the importance of public space, programming tailored to fit the community, and digital fluency that goes beyond basic skills.
- Participants envisioned a future with standardized accessibility, widespread digital literacy, and government involvement.
- Shared resources from other states, like Digital Resilience in the American Workforce, were considered potential models for New York's digital equity efforts.

Implementation:

- Focus on clear communication, human interaction, and simplified design.
- Emphasis on digital literacy training, infrastructure, and government-community collaboration.
- Develop user-friendly online platforms for government services.
- Foster partnerships with community anchor institutions for outreach and support. Facilitate collaboration between government agencies and community organizations.
- Establish standardized accessibility guidelines for government websites.
- Prioritize digital literacy training programs for underserved communities.

- Invest in infrastructure development to ensure equitable internet access.