

Digital Equity Task Force Health Subcommittee Town Hall

Summary Notes

July 12, 2023

The Digital Equity Task Force Town Hall on Health 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 healthcare in New York. The meeting focused on telehealth, social isolation, rural health, and digital health literacy. Participants from diverse backgrounds shared insights and discussed challenges and potential solutions to ensure equitable access to digital health resources, devices, and information. The vision was to bridge the digital divide and create a more inclusive healthcare landscape.

Creating a Unified Vision of Digital Equity: New York can work towards a future where all residents have equal access to digital health resources, possess the necessary skills, and are empowered to make informed health decisions in an increasingly digital world.

- **Accessible Digital Health Resources:** All New Yorkers should have access to digital health resources, including reliable internet connectivity, devices, and online health platforms. These resources should be available regardless of age, income, location, or background.
- **Comprehensive Digital Health Literacy:** Individuals of all ages and demographics should possess the digital literacy skills necessary to navigate online health information, communicate with healthcare providers, and utilize telehealth services effectively.
- **Equitable Support for Vulnerable Populations:** Targeted support should be provided for populations facing additional barriers, such as individuals with disabilities, those without permanent housing, non-English speakers, and older adults. Customized training, language assistance, and accessibility features should be integrated.
- **Motivation and Empowerment:** The vision emphasizes fostering motivation and empowerment among community members to embrace digital health tools. Building trust, demonstrating the value of digital health resources, and highlighting their positive impact on health outcomes are key elements.
- **Collaboration and Partnerships:** Achieving digital equity requires collaboration among healthcare institutions, community organizations, government agencies, and technology providers. Partnerships should be forged to pool resources, share expertise, and collectively address barriers.
- **Cultural Sensitivity:** Recognize the diverse cultural backgrounds and language preferences of New Yorkers. Ensure that digital health resources and training materials are culturally sensitive, inclusive, and resonate with different communities.

- **Continued Learning and Adaptation:** The vision acknowledges that digital technology and healthcare are continuously evolving. As such, efforts should be ongoing, with a commitment to adapting strategies, embracing emerging technologies, and continuously improving digital health literacy programs.

Breakout Session #1 - Telehealth:

- Specific challenges related to access to telehealth services, for different vulnerable populations such as older adults, individuals with severe mental illness, unhoused individuals, and individuals with limited English
- Certain barriers that arose included:
 - Changing phone numbers/emails, especially for the unhoused – this results in the having to create new accounts for telehealth systems and the loss of prior patient information, etc.
 - Lack of quality internet to support video calling, making audio calls more popular for patients
 - Language barriers
- Importance of one-on-one training for optimal telehealth utilization, indicating the need for more culturally competent community health workers and/or more digital navigators with capabilities to assist with telehealth
- Patient privacy concerns in the use of telehealth, especially for vulnerable groups, along with the need for appropriate device selection and community support
- Need for more comprehensive, user-friendly patient portals that supports all functions of the telehealth experience and communication between patients and healthcare providers

Breakout Session #2 - Social Isolation & Health Implications:

- Technology's positive impact on emotional and social well-being, facilitating connections between distant friends and family members
- Concerns about cyberbullying, online harassment, and negative social media impacts, particularly on children and teenagers
- Social isolation's direct impact on health outcomes, including mental health issues
- COVID has caused more social isolation and pushed people to use technology and devices at higher rates, which contributes to loneliness, scams, and safety online

Breakout Session #3 - Health for Rural New Yorkers:

- Challenges of broadband access, affordability, and equipment access were addressed, with rural communities facing limited choices and unreliable service

- Strategies to improve access included using public spaces (libraries, community centers) for digital literacy training and creating centralized internet hubs
- Importance of digital health literacy for both patients and healthcare providers requires unique strategies in rural areas that leverage existing community resources such as post offices
- There is a question over how to advance hybrid modes of healthcare. Some people, despite having access to the internet, will still want to meet a provider in person.

Breakout Session #4 - Digital Health Literacy:

- Need for digital health literacy, highlighting the importance of providing devices, skills, and knowledge
- Motivation plays a key role in digital health adoption, and it's crucial to provide support for those who want to engage with digital health tools. Support is crucial to fully achieving the potential of device programs, since the impact of an affordable device is limited by the device owner's digital literacy
- Challenges of diverse communities acquiring digital skills, understanding health information online, and using digital resources
- Importance of avoiding stereotypes around which groups of people are digitally literate; for example, not all young people are comfortable navigating telehealth platforms

Implementation: Participants emphasized the importance of collaboration, community engagement, and leveraging existing resources. Several strategies were proposed:

- **Peer-to-Peer Training:** Establish peer-led digital literacy training programs, where individuals who are digitally proficient can educate and support others. Volunteers from within the community, including seniors and youth, can offer one-on-one guidance on using devices, navigating health portals, and understanding online health information.
- **Community Partnerships:** Forge partnerships with community institutions such as libraries, community centers, schools, and senior centers. These venues can serve as hubs for digital health literacy workshops, access points for devices, and spaces for individuals to connect and learn.
- **Digital Health Ambassadors:** Identify and train digital health ambassadors from diverse backgrounds who can serve as advocates and resources within their communities. These ambassadors can bridge the gap between technology and healthcare, providing guidance and support to those in need.
- **Mobile Digital Literacy Units:** Create mobile units equipped with devices and internet connectivity to reach underserved and rural areas. These units could offer on-site digital literacy training, telehealth demonstrations, and assistance in accessing health resources.

- **Culturally Relevant Resources:** Develop culturally tailored digital health resources, guides, and tutorials that resonate with different communities. Addressing language barriers and cultural sensitivities is essential to ensure equitable access and understanding.
- **Government Initiatives:** Advocate for policies that promote digital inclusion, such as designating internet as a utility or offering subsidies for broadband services. Collaborate with government agencies to allocate funds for digital health literacy programs.
- **Healthcare Provider Collaboration:** Work closely with healthcare providers to integrate digital health literacy training into patient care. Providers can educate patients about online health resources, offer workshops, and incorporate digital tools seamlessly into their practice.
- **Online Learning Platforms:** Create user-friendly online platforms that offer a variety of digital health literacy courses. These platforms could cover topics ranging from basic device usage to navigating telehealth appointments and managing health records.
- **Public Awareness Campaigns:** Launch campaigns to raise awareness about the importance of digital health literacy. Engage community influencers, use social media, and collaborate with local media to reach a wide audience.
- **Comprehensive, User-Friendly Patient Portals:** Create better patient portals that support all functions of the telehealth experience, providing a single access point for patients to schedule their appointments, communicate with their providers, access language interpretation, access clinical documentation, etc.