



TESTIMONY

Presented by

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Planning, Research, Evaluation and Training
on

Oversight:
Increasing Senior Access to Technology

before the

New York City Council
Committee on Aging and Committee on Technology

January 22, 2021
10am

Good morning. Thank you, Chairpersons Chin and Holden and the members of the Committee on Aging and Committee on Technology. I am Michael Bosnick, Deputy Commissioner of Planning, Research, Evaluation and Training at the New York City Department for the Aging (NYC Aging). I am joined today by Guillermo Cruz, Associate Commissioner of Community Services. I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today about increasing access to technology for older adults.

Background

In a 2017 Pew Research Center National Survey, 67% of adults ages 65 and older say they go online, up from 14% in 2000. But rates of internet and broadband adoption also differ considerably by household income and educational attainment. Of seniors whose annual household income is \$75,000 or more, 94% say they go online and 87% have high-speed internet at home. Those shares drop to 46% and 27%, respectively, among older adults living in households earning less than \$30,000 a year. According to the New York City Internet Plan issued in January 2020, only 40% of New Yorkers over the age of 65 and living alone have a broadband internet connection at home, a situation that has intensified the negative health risks of COVID-19 and social isolation.

Technology has become a literal lifeline, providing a link to government information, emergency notifications, access to benefits and financial management tools, delivery of food and household essentials, and connection to services such as telemedicine and online psychological counseling. Access to technology is not just the device itself, but access to reliable broadband internet as well. Older adults must be able to use online resources, especially during COVID-19, in order to stay safely at home and connected to their family, friends, and loved ones.

Social Isolation

Combatting social isolation has always been a top priority for the agency. Social isolation occurs when a person has little to no contact with anyone else. In older adults, it can be harmful to their wellbeing and lead to a variety of serious health problems, including depression, cognitive decline and heart disease.

During the pandemic, NYC Aging and our providers have also been doing case management calls and wellness check-in calls. These calls have an essential purpose. Not only to check in on the older adults, but to provide referrals to services – like food, Friendly Visiting, elder abuse programs, mental health, and other services the City has set up during COVID. To date, almost 2.9 million calls have been placed since March, with over 191,000 older adults reached.

COVID-19 has exacerbated social isolation. With older New Yorkers asked to stay indoors, many have been cut-off from friends and family. Technology access is a bridge to reducing this isolation. Not only does it enable older adults to connect to programs and vital resources such as the above, it allows older adults access to health care, information, programming, entertainment and engagement with family and friends.

NYC Connected Communities

NYC Aging is fortunate to receive funding for the NYC Connected Communities program first from the NYC Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications (DOITT) and

during this administration from the Mayor's Office of the Chief Technology Officer (MOCTO). The goal of this program is to promote digital literacy and provide seniors with internet access. Only 18% of older adults say they are comfortable learning new technologies on their own, presenting a major roadblock to digital inclusion efforts that focus only on devices and connectivity. This program provides the supports needed for older adults to safely learn new technology.

NYC Aging contracted with Older Adult Technology Services (OATS) to provide ongoing technology support and education. OATS maintains computer labs at older adult centers, provides center members with computer training, sustains a seniors-oriented website, and operates a technology center for older adults. OATS offers technology classes at 22 older adult centers and the Senior Planet Exploration technology center which they operate. Currently, virtual technology trainings are offered in five languages: English, Spanish, Bengali, Russian, and Mandarin/Cantonese. So far, in FY2021, OATS has facilitated almost 600 one-hour virtual training sessions that have included over 60,000 participants.

In addition to the technology center, OATS also operates the Senior Planet website that shares information and resources that support aging, with a particular focus on technology's role in helping older adults connect, stay healthy and enjoy life. In addition to articles written especially for Senior Planet, the site includes a calendar of local events of interest to seniors.

Tablet and Laptop Distributions

NYC Aging is also pleased to have facilitated tablet distribution for several groups of older adults including those living in New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) developments and those who are kinship caregivers.

Led by the Mayor's Office of the CTO, with support from NYCHA and NYC Aging, the City delivered 10,000 free Wi-Fi-equipped tablets to older NYCHA residents during the summer. NYC Aging again contracted with the NYC-based nonprofit Older Adults Technology Services to provide outreach, support and training focused on the use of tablet devices to combat social isolation, connect with family and friends, access critical health information, improve financial security, increase access to benefits programs, and engage effectively with government services and local community resources during the COVID emergency and its aftermath.

OATS launched a new, multilingual call center staffed by professional trainers, which has made thousands of phone calls to confirm device receipt and help recipients get acquainted with their tablet, create email addresses, access specific websites and resources, and log into Zoom in order to be able to take advantage of virtual programs. A collection of handouts and welcome videos designed to acclimate the NYCHA residents to basic functions of their new devices was also created. OATS also developed and implemented a new five-week course called "Android Essentials," complete with a printed and mailed course manual to walk seniors step-by-step through using email, taking photographs, accessing websites, and getting in touch with family and friends. Shorter one-time training sessions were also developed to engage those who may not want to commit to a 5-week course. To date, they have provided 630 hours of virtual training to tablet recipients.

Offering multimodal, high-touch support—through the mail, on the phone, and through virtual programs—has successfully empowered even total “technology novices” to be able to use their devices to stay connected to family and friends. OATS has conducted more than 47,000 phone calls with device recipients that range anywhere from 30-90 minutes long, helping them feel confident and comfortable enough to use their device to attend religious services, use telemedicine, and pursue further online resources.

Additionally, NYC Aging distributed more than 370 tablets to grandparent/relative kinship caregivers through our Grandparent Resource Center (GRC). This was funded through the Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice and the Foster Parent Grant. These tablets serve to connect GRC clients to virtual older adult programs, technology training, caregiver services, workshops, and support groups. In addition, NYC Aging surveyed foster grandparents to determine who needed a tablet in order to regularly participate in trainings and volunteer opportunities. As such, NYC Aging is in the process of providing tablets to an additional 270 foster grandparents to support virtual programming initiatives for both training and volunteer work with youth through the Foster Grandparent Program. This is funded through the Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice and the Foster Grandparent grant.

Virtual Programming

Since March, providers have had to transition many programs, which normally are offered in person, to virtual or telephone-based services. Our providers are now offering more than three times the virtual programs to older adults than before the start of the pandemic. Older adult centers, many of which offered some virtual programming, pivoted quickly in order to increase virtual program offerings in areas such as social engagement programs that help keep older adults active and socially connected. A total of 242 older adult centers in our network are now offering an array of free programs that include fitness classes, arts & crafts, music, and socialization programs online and via Zoom. About 3,000 virtual programming events were offered through October 2020, involving more than 78,000 attendees. As a result, older adults now have a wider range of options and fewer barriers to attend. Centers are providing virtual programming in English, Spanish, Chinese, Italian, Russian, French, Polish, Korean, Arabic, Albanian, German, Greek, Lithuanian, Tagalog, and Yiddish.

Over the last year, NYC Aging and our providers have also transitioned other programs and services to be virtual or telephone based. These include, Friendly Visiting, Geriatric Mental Health, Caregiver Support, Case Management, and HIICAP webinars and the development of new programming such as Fraud Prevention and Empowerment series through our Elder Justice group. Virtual programs provide older adults with flexibility to join when they can and not have it interfere with their schedules. It fosters community, connection, wellness, and intellectual, creative and physical engagement. We have increasingly seen the value in this delivery method and are working on ways to ensure that virtual programming continue post-COVID to provide older adults with more choices and flexibility.

Additionally, NYC Aging has long had a Friendly Visiting program in which volunteers visited older matches in their home. This program shifted to virtual check ins in March. In October, we launched Friendly VOICES (Virtual Opportunities Improving Connections with Elders), which is based on the Friendly Visiting program model; however, it is designed to be virtual, even after

the pandemic is over. Friendly VOICES is also available to all older adults who are socially isolated. Friendly VOICES offers the option to have a peer-to-peer match or the ability to join small virtual groups.

Conclusion

The pandemic has really highlighted the digital divide and the need for this work to be a continued priority. We have learned from providers' work that virtual programming can be used to convey important information to older adults about benefits critical to their well-being as well as other social services. Technology can be used to combat social isolation through friendly visiting and caregiver support and can be used to promote good mental health and stay engaged and connected. It can be leveraged for exercise and nutrition information to help achieve and maintain good physical health.

While many programs were offered virtually prior to the pandemic, we will continue to support increased options going forward and expect they will remain an integral part of programming even after the pandemic has ended. Through our work with Mayor's Office of the Chief Technology Officer, we are considering and identifying opportunities to expand on the resources already available to achieve the full potential of this remarkable pathway for communication information, and for engagement and support.

We look forward to continuing our partnerships to evaluate ways to increase access to devices, connectivity, and training for especially lower income older people to increase their ability to make use of such offerings.

As always, we are grateful to the Chairs and the Committees for your advocacy and continued partnership to support our older New Yorkers. Thank you.



Asian American Federation

Testimony to the New York City Council Committee on Aging and Committee on Technology

January 22, 2021

Written Testimony

Thank you to Council Member Margaret Chin and Council Member Robert Holden for holding this joint hearing.

A large barrier to meeting our community's basic needs is the digital divide. While the digital divide is nothing new, we have reached a point where technology is used for every service and basic need in order to reduce transmission of COVID-19. However, in our transition to online services, we have left entire communities behind. The digital divide, coupled with the impact of the ongoing pandemic, has and is continuing to compound the effects of inequity in every sphere, most recently with vaccine distribution. To that end, the City must plan around the needs and identities of our most vulnerable population and those most in need of the vaccine - our seniors. Technological solutions are only as powerful as the access they come with.

In order to grasp the urgency of the situation, it is vital for us to provide you with some context. The Asian senior population in the city nearly doubled between 2010 and 2019, a greater increase than all other major racial and ethnic groups. Based on the 2019 5-year data from the American Community Survey (ACS), 13% of the city's senior population is Asian. Among these seniors, 24% lived in poverty, compared to 18% of all seniors citywide. Poverty rates within our community reach as high as 35% for Bangladeshi seniors and 30% for Chinese seniors.

Furthermore, 72% of Asian seniors have limited English proficiency (LEP), making it harder for them to access services online, even for those with access to a device and WiFi. LEP seniors comprise more than two-thirds of the Asian senior population in many neighborhoods across Brooklyn and Queens.

Taking these statistics into account, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the effects of poverty, anti-Asian xenophobia, and language access challenges. The pandemic has resulted in a [35% increase in deaths compared to the five-year average](#) in Asian communities. Yet, Asians are frequently left out of the conversation when discussing the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on communities of color. And at a time when accurate information is required and

constantly changing, Asian seniors are facing countless barriers in trying to access vital, life-saving services and timely information.

While we move forward from the pandemic and begin vaccinating our city, there is great urgency in acknowledging the needs of our most vulnerable populations and addressing issues relating to the digital divide and its compounding effects.

Telehealth

As medical services have transitioned to virtual appointments, virtual charts, and online portals, our seniors are struggling to navigate a quickly-changing healthcare landscape. Furthermore, access to reliable virtual healthcare depends on a stable Internet connection, the ability to afford WiFi service, and, at the very least, access to a device. Telehealth may continue for some services even after the city opens up completely. Therefore, it is even more vital for the City to address the lack of infrastructure and access to resources that act as barriers for our seniors to get the treatment they need and to support community service providers who are obligated to shift to telehealth services for the sake of safety.

Vaccine

The needs of Asian seniors receiving the COVID-19 vaccination are two-fold: access to accurate and reliable information about the vaccine and updated eligibility requirements and vaccination locations. Given the low English language proficiency of the majority of our seniors and the circulation of misinformation, it is critical that our seniors are afforded equal access to information in their preferred spoken language and with an eye on how they consume information. Providing online access to information may be expedient, but it puts our most vulnerable at a grave disadvantage considering their limited English proficiency and the impacts of the digital divide.

Even with accurate information and knowledge about their eligibility, scheduling a vaccine appointment has proven especially difficult. We are hearing from members of our community and member agencies that navigating this process is stressful and complicated, even for native English speakers.

Select neighborhoods with high Asian senior populations will require targeted outreach efforts for vaccination. In Manhattan, this would be Community District 3, including Chinatown and the Lower East Side. In Brooklyn, Community Districts 7 and 11, which include Sunset Park and Bensonhurst. And, in Queens, the focus must be on Districts 4 and 7, which include Elmhurst, Flushing, and Murray Hill. Asian seniors comprise more than 25% of the senior population in these districts.

Senior Services

Although our community organizations are struggling to provide their usual services because of the increase in demand, out of necessity, they are taking the initiative in providing members with culturally-competent resources and services the City has been unable to provide. While our senior population is suffering from social isolation related to COVID-19, our community agencies are being overwhelmed by demand at the same time that services are needing to shift to technological alternatives. For most Asian seniors, a phone or video call remains the only social interaction they are able to receive. Additionally, for our immigrant seniors, ESL and citizenship classes have transitioned online and their lack of access to technology is isolating seniors from services they would otherwise be utilizing.

Language Access

On top of the burden of navigating technology, seniors have been especially constrained due to their limited English proficiency. Approximately 26% of LEP Asian seniors in the city do not have access to the Internet at home and 15% of LEP Asian seniors and LEP seniors citywide do not have broadband access at home. Access to government services such as unemployment benefits, food distribution, small business loans, rent relief, and rapidly changing governmental guidelines typically involve access to technology and English proficiency. Therefore, while online translations are a step in the right direction, Asian seniors are still consistently the last to be informed and the last to receive services.

Recommendations

- Telehealth
 - Our smaller community service providers are struggling to transition from in-person to telehealth service provisions without adequate funding or capacity. These service providers fill critical gaps in our health safety net when it comes to reaching our most vulnerable and isolated populations, and funding and capacity support must be made available to avoid interruptions in services deemed essential by our community members.
- Vaccine
 - The City's overreliance on online registration for vaccine appointments and digital outreach threatens to exclude Asian seniors, who are the least likely to have access to the devices and Internet services necessary to participate. Previous reliance on the library system to fill the digital divide is not an option during the pandemic. The City needs to utilize the existing communications channels that community-based organizations have built over the last year that allow them to

maintain contact with isolated seniors. The City needs to provide the right messaging and resources to these organizations to help Asian seniors get the vaccinations they need to get them out of their isolated existence.

- Senior Services
 - Our senior service providers are stretching every penny as far as it can go to provide services to our seniors, from culturally-competent meal delivery to mental health wellness checks and innovative senior programming. However, our partners need funding and in-kind technological assistance to help bridge the digital hardware and knowledge divide as social isolation continues for our senior populations. We need help getting devices and know-how to our seniors in culturally competent ways so they can receive services they need and are entitled to as seamlessly as the circumstances will permit. A telephone call should not be the only way they can connect to the outside world.
- Language Access
 - We urge funding for the full implementation of Local Law 30 across City agencies. We also must amend contracting processes to acknowledge the cultural and language expertise that Asian-led nonprofits bring when serving our community members.

We understand that the City and State are facing financial challenges of their own, but we have always gotten the most bang for our buck when we've looked to the expertise of community-based organizations for help. On behalf of the Asian American Federation, I want to thank you for giving us the chance to speak and we look forward to working with all of you to make sure we're up to this challenge, our seniors depend on it.



**Testimony of
Beth Finkel, AARP New York**

**New York City Council
Committees on Aging & Technology**

**Oversight –Increasing Senior Access to
Technology**

January 22, 2021

**Remote Hearing
New York, New York**

Contact: Beth Finkel (212) 407-3717 | bfinkel@aarp.org

Good morning Chairs Chin and Holden and members of the Committees on Aging and Technology. My name is Beth Finkel, and I am the State Director of AARP New York, which counts about 750,000 members age 50 and older in New York City. I want to thank you for the opportunity to testify today about increasing access to technology for our older family members, friends, and neighbors.

It goes without saying that the pandemic upended our lives and changed almost everything about our day-to-day routines.

One of the more significant changes has been our increased reliance on technology.

Today, we use our phones and computers to facilitate work meetings, see doctors, order groceries and medicine refills, zoom with family, pay our bills, bank, order take out, pay people, and even testify at City Council hearings. The list goes on and on.

For some of us, the transition was easy. Add another app. Add another meeting platform. Download another account link.

But not for many older New Yorkers.

Many of them still prefer to pay by check, not through Apple Pay. They have personal relationships with the local bank teller. If they get take-out, they go in person and pay in cash. When they want to see friends, they go to the building lobby or the senior center.

At least, that is what it was like until March 13, 2020.

Then, in quick succession, everything changed. Not only did seniors find themselves most at risk of dying from the pandemic, they quite frankly found themselves most impacted in every single way.

They were trapped in their apartments, isolated from the outside world. And the one thing that kept most of them disconnected was a lack of facility with technology.

This is a three-part problem. First, many older residents do not have devices that enable them to get online. Second, among those who do own internet enabled devices, many don't feel comfortable actually using them. And finally, we have a serious broadband access problem in New York City.

According to a recent national [AARP survey](#), 51 percent of older Americans say they bought at least one tech product in the past year, including smartphones, purchased by 23% of respondents, and a computer or laptop, purchased by 12% of respondents. But in many low-income, Black, Hispanic, and immigrant neighborhoods, a lack of access to devices is prevalent.

When the pandemic hit, many seniors had no way to get online. In the ensuing months, there was a concerted effort by the city, nonprofits and for profit companies to get devices into the hands of those who needed them. While we applaud these efforts they were not sufficient to meet the needs of all those who lacked these devices. It is vital we continue to invest in not only getting them into the hands of more New Yorkers, but also in programs that will train seniors in how to use them.

According to a 2017 [Pew Research study](#), three-quarters of those older than 65 said they needed someone else to set up their electronic devices. A third also said they were only a little or not at all confident in their ability to use electronics and to navigate the web.

In addition to accessing vital services, technology is key in combatting the social isolation caused by this deadly pandemic. According to a meta-analysis co-authored by Julianne Holt-Lunstad, PhD, a professor of psychology and neuroscience at Brigham Young University, lack of social connection heightens health risks as much as smoking 15 cigarettes a day or having alcohol use disorder.

But even with access to the needed devices, this isolation can not be overcome until we address the digital isolation caused by our city's inadequate broadband system.

According to a [2019 report by Comptroller Scott Stringer](#), 42% of New Yorkers age 65+ lack access to the internet, compared to 23% of 18 to 24-year-olds; and 30% of Black and Latino New Yorkers lack access compared to 20% of White New Yorkers.

The de Blasio administration has taken some important steps in addressing these disparities. Last February, the Mayor announced an "Internet Master Plan" to expand coverage in public housing and other areas with large gaps. In July he announced that the City would expand high speed internet to another 600,000 New Yorkers and close the divide in low-income communities of color.

But the problem persists.

When it comes to the pandemic, the devastating numbers have made it clear that older New Yorkers, particularly older New Yorkers of color, are among the most vulnerable. Social distancing is necessary to their safety, but without the ability to access and use high-speed internet they may be forced to choose between physical health, or mental and economic wellbeing. Without the ability to access and use high-speed internet they may not be able to see their doctor safely, buy groceries, pay bills, or find ways to stay connected through virtual volunteering and social activities.

The digital divide in our city has been a problem for a long time, but the COVID-19 pandemic has raised the stakes significantly. If there was ever a time to address the problem, that time is today.

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify today. I am happy to provide additional information.

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Testimony by Eric C. Henry, on behalf of Altice USA
Joint Hearing between the New York City Council Committee on Technology
& New York City Committee on Aging
January 22, 2021

Chair Chin, Chair Holden and members of the Committee on Aging and the Committee on Technology, thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony for today's joint hearing on increasing senior's access to technology. Altice has invested heavily to offer an advanced suite of Optimum broadband, video and voice services to residential households and small to medium sized businesses in its service footprint in the Bronx and Brooklyn. Altice values its relationship with the City, and we are grateful to discuss a few ways in which Altice has endeavored to connect Bronx and Brooklyn seniors to broadband, before and since the pandemic.

Since the local emergence of COVID-19 nearly one year ago, our City and its residents have had to adapt to constantly changing and increasingly turbulent times. Altice realizes the importance of connecting seniors to our low-cost broadband options; many of whom may rely on the internet to not only maintain interpersonal connection with their families and friends, but also with their doctors and health care providers and professionals.

Altice recognizes, as you do, that affordability, availability, and awareness are critical components of any technology adoption plan for New York City's seniors. We are proud that, years before the onset of COVID-19, we offered low-cost internet solutions, which have helped low-income communities and seniors stay connected. In September 2017, we launched the Altice Advantage Internet (AAI) program, a 30 Mbps broadband service for \$14.99/month for qualified low-income households, defined as those with a child eligible for the free lunch program or a senior citizen eligible for SSI. Since then, we have added low income Veterans to the qualifications.

To further streamline the AAI application process, especially for those with limited internet proficiency, we enabled likely eligible households to bypass the eligibility verification vendor and purchase Altice Advantage in real time with an Altice Sales Representative via telephone. In addition, Altice Advantage was offered with a low-cost internet-ready laptop, reduced installation fee of \$30, paid over 3 months, and no equipment fees.

In addition to our efforts to make technology affordable, we also know that it must be available where people live. We also recognize the important role our company plays to ensure equity in availability: high speed services shouldn't be reserved for high-income areas, and that is why Altice has invested heavily in every neighborhood we serve in the Bronx and Brooklyn to offer state of the art, high speed broadband to every household, NYCHA building, and business in our footprint.

While we have worked to ensure that broadband service is available and affordable for all seniors in the Optimum footprint in NYC, we have found that adoption is not

ubiquitous. In response, we have undertaken proactive marketing and communication efforts to increase product awareness so that seniors can take advantage of our low-cost internet solution. We understand that streamlined processes, as well as effective marketing and communication, are vital to ensuring that seniors are aware of programs such as AAI. To this end, the company has used direct mail to reach eligible households – both non-subscribers, as well as existing video-only customers. Each likely eligible household regularly received a marketing piece promoting AAI. Additionally, the company utilized digital advertising and paid search tactics to highlight our low-cost internet solution to targeted populations, such as seniors.

We have also expanded our partnerships with local, non-profit community-based organizations to provide internet access to seniors in their communities. We know that community-based organizations can act as centers for digital literacy, education and recreation, for example, as well as hubs where people can gain access to vital information and resources. Altice USA continues to partner with NYC non-profit organizations that directly serve the eligible senior population, such as BronxWorks and Brooklyn Community Services to provide AAI information to eligible households to promote adoption. We work with these organizations to solicit feedback and insight in order to make seniors aware of options for connecting with broadband over the Optimum network. In addition, the company partners with senior centers such as Bay Senior Center and RAIN, to provide free Internet for seniors to access when they visit.

Of additional benefit to seniors is the availability of Optimum Internet at all public libraries in our service area, and free Optimum Wi-Fi in City parks also within our footprint. Additionally, since the COVID-19 pandemic, we have made all outdoor Optimum Wi-Fi free for subscribers and non-subscribers alike.

We appreciate the City Council highlighting the shared goal of encouraging our City's senior population to adopt high-speed broadband internet. Altice will continue to strengthen existing collaborations and identify additional partnerships to broaden awareness of Altice Advantage in order to provide access to seniors where they live, and we look forward to working with the Council to build upon current strategies in order to encourage adoption.



**Testimony to the New York City Council
Joint Oversight Hearing on Seniors and Technology
Committee on Aging and Technology
January 21, 2021**

Good afternoon Chairpersons Chin and Holden, and members of the Committees on Aging and Technology. My name is Rodney Capel, and I am the Vice President for Government Affairs in New York City for Charter Communications (“Spectrum”). In response to your invitation to testify on the subject of Seniors and Technology, we are providing this submission which highlights a few of our programs and offerings that make it easier for seniors to use our services.

About Charter Communications (“Spectrum”)

By way of background, Charter Communications is a technology company providing broadband, video, mobile, and voice services to over 30 million customers in 41 states under the brand name Spectrum. Our 95,000 employees – including over 4,000 in New York City – work to expand broadband adoption to ensure our customers receive the information and entertainment to succeed in today’s hyper-connected world. Many of you know Spectrum best from our award-winning news channel, NY1 and NY1 Noticias, and their many distinguished journalists, that have provided essential information to the public during the COVID pandemic.

In New York City, Spectrum has franchises that enable our company to provide cable television, broadband and voice services to all of Manhattan, Queens and Staten Island. We service the westernmost portions of Brooklyn, from Williamsburg to Bay Ridge inclusive of Council districts 33-36, and 38, 39, 43 and 44. We do not have a franchise to service the Bronx. We have paid \$196 million in franchise fee payments to the City since 2016, provided free channels for public, educational and government (PEG) use and spent tens of millions in capital investments for nearly all of the City’s nonprofit public access channel partners – MNN, BRIC, QPTV, and Staten Island Access.

We are also doing our part to ensure connectivity during the COVID pandemic. We announced when the COVID pandemic began a remote education offer (REO) which provides 60 days of free high-speed broadband service with WiFi at speeds of up to 200 Mbps for households with K-12 or college students or educators without existing internet service from Spectrum. The first enrollment period ran from March 16th through June 30th during which 448,000 households nationwide were connected to home internet service with free 200 Mbps service, in-home WiFi and a free self-installation, including tens of thousands in New York State and New York City. On September 21st, the offer was relaunched to provide additional connectivity relief for new

subscribers without internet from Spectrum for the beginning of the fall 2020 academic year. If students or educators in your district need free internet and do not currently have our service, they can access free service now by calling 844-310-1198.

Charter's Programs and Offerings Benefiting Seniors

As referenced in the previous section, Charter's broadband internet, cable TV and phone service serve customers of all ages. However, we do have certain programs especially for seniors and additional offerings that seniors could greatly benefit from. These are briefly discussed below:

- 1. Spectrum offers [Spectrum Internet Assist \(SIA\)](#), high-speed discounted internet service for low-income seniors**, which we launched with then Public Advocate Tish James and Councilmember Ben Kallos in 2017 in New York City. This discounted service costs just \$14.99 per month in New York City (\$19.99 per month with a Wi-Fi service) while providing speeds of 30Mbps for downloading data and 4Mbps for uploads. Spectrum Internet Assist is available for all seniors 65 or older receiving Supplemental Social Security Income, which is a supplemental payment provided in addition to Social Security for low-income seniors. If low-income seniors in your district need discounted service, they can apply online through the link in this testimony or contact us for assistance.

- 2. Spectrum funds learning labs for seniors.** We partnered with nonprofits like the Police Athletic League, the Chinese-American Planning Council, the YWCA, Easter Seals of New York, the LGBT Center, the Hispanic Federation, National Action Network, Catholic Charities, Hudson Guild, and the Lower East Side Girls Club to build technology labs to reach economically challenged neighborhoods where not all families have in-home access to the internet. Each one of these learning labs costs roughly \$100,000 to equip and we maintain them with free broadband service for a total commitment of approximately \$4 million. These can be found in neighborhoods across the City in Spectrum service areas and is an initiative that is unique to Spectrum among all wireline and wireless broadband ISPs in New York City. Some examples of nonprofits we work with across the City to support senior connectivity include the following:
 - a. Spectrum provided \$45,661 along with 30 laptops and 15 tablets for the Central Life Center's Tech Savvy Seniors Program, which focuses on digital literacy training for older adults, equipping them with the skills and confidence to access information and services online.
 - b. For the Brooklyn Public Library branch in Bushwick, we awarded \$53,719 for a learning lab facility that features twice-weekly programs for older adults.

- c. The Hudson Guild received from Spectrum \$56,331 for the purchase of technology for their learning lab built within the Fulton Houses, a public housing facility in Chelsea, where they assist seniors with using email and social media to stay connected with family and friends, and conducting internet research.
 - d. Spectrum donated \$40,000 to the Brown Memorial Baptist Church in addition to 32 laptops for the creation of a state of the art learning lab. Programming for the lab includes sessions for elders to ensure they feel comfortable using technology.
- 3. Spectrum has offered low cost internet service to New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) households, [40 percent of which are led by seniors](#).** Spectrum dramatically lowers the price for New York City residents by offering discounted prices to residential buildings that purchase cable TV and broadband internet packages for every apartment unit. While we cannot discuss the specifics publicly, Spectrum recently offered a bulk rate program in response to a Request for Information (RFI) to serve every New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) building in our footprint, approximately 93,000 households.
- 4. Spectrum makes our services adaptable for seniors. [Spectrum adapts our services to make them accessible and user friendly for seniors](#).** For example, our digital cable TV program guide enables seniors and other users to change the size, type and color of the font. Other closed captioning features enable the hearing impaired to display the audio portion of a television program as text. Our Descriptive Video Services provides audio narration of what is happening on the screen during breaks in dialogue including scene changes, settings, actions, costumes and facial expressions to make programming accessible to the visually impaired.
- 5. Charter maintains Spectrum Digital Education, a program that offers grants to nonprofits to expand digital opportunities.** We doubled our original 2020 commitment to digital education to a total of \$1 million in grants to organizations providing broadband education, technology and training. We have awarded 48 Spectrum Digital Education grants to nonprofit organizations for programs such as teaching seniors digital skills, setting up technology labs, providing online classes for families that need homework and job support, and purchasing laptops for underserved groups. With this year's grants, Charter has surpassed its multiyear commitment to award \$6 million in cash and in-kind donations to support broadband education across the company's 41-state service area. From its launch in 2017 through July 2020, Spectrum Digital Education has benefitted 41,706 individuals in 17 states and Washington, D.C. Some examples locally included:

- a. Asian Americans for Equality received \$40,000 from Spectrum to open a Youth Center and Intergenerational Digital Lab. The Lab is outfitted with 30 laptop computers and provides innovative digital skills training program for low-income families and seniors. The lab serves families and seniors in the Flushing area, as well as other neighborhoods including Elmhurst, Corona and Jackson Heights.
 - b. Spectrum contributed \$5,000 to the First Corinthian Baptist Community Development Corporation's Dream Center, based in Harlem, to expand its Senior Connect program virtually (due to COVID) and upgrade its on-site equipment and software.
 - c. Stanley M. Isaac Neighborhood Center was awarded by Spectrum \$30,000 to create the Digital Interconnection Generational Integration (DIGI) Program. The Center's DIGI Program reduces the digital divide in the public housing development where it currently operates its programs. The program includes two mobile technology labs and provides digital literacy training to unemployed young adults. Once trained, these young adults serve as DIGI Educators, responsible for the training of local residents – including seniors - who are the least connected to digital resources, primarily children and older adults.
- 6. Spectrum also offers limited free WiFi in 66 parks in New York City. Spectrum spent \$6 million providing WiFi access to 66 city parks since 2011 (including 28 in Manhattan, 18 in Queens, 12 in Brooklyn, 7 in Staten Island, and 1 in the Bronx) for both Charter customers and the general public, including seniors.** Park visitors receive 30 minutes of free internet per month and can purchase a WiFi pass for 99 cents a day.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify as to how our services meet the needs of seniors. Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions or thoughts you may have regarding our testimony.



THE DREAM CENTER

203-205 W 119th St New York, New York 10027 www.dreamcenterharlem.org

A TRANSFORMATIVE SPACE DESIGNED TO AWAKEN DREAMS

January 21, 2021

New York City Council
250 Broadway
New York, NY 10007

To Whom It May Concern:

I am delighted to extend my support for Charter Communications and the Spectrum Digital Grant, in partnership with the FCBC Community Development Corporation (FCBC CDC) DBA The Dream Center (TDC). As a community organization with an emphasis on providing free transformative program to the Harlem community around creative arts, economic empowerment and leadership development, I wish to contribute my voice to the need of seniors being provided the technology necessary to thrive in the digital economy.

We were granted \$5,000 to support our Senior Connect (SC) program. SC helps close the digital divide and empower seniors who have been on the negative side of the digital divide. Social and economic status often limits technological knowledge and skills leaving many feeling disconnected. SC seeks to shape a new narrative about aging in society. Our goals are to: inspire seniors through the medium of technology; build community; reconnect families by providing generational accessibility to technology; enrich the lives of seniors by bringing technology to them; develop self-confidence and self-reliance in seniors through technology; and make the medium of technology less intimidating. Programming offerings include: internet basics; understanding your devices; social media and email set-up; and Google and Office 365 training.

Our first module had 56 sign-ups with our most seasoned senior being age 91. Those who have perfect attendance, complete all surveys, pre and post assessments receive tablets as part of the program. Programs like this are vital. Additionally, there are so many without access to technology and internet at home that additional support is needed to reach more. Especially during this time when we are practicing being safe at home.

I look forward to further collaboration with Charter Communications on more senior

programming. Sincerely,

Desiree Elder
Executive Visionary
The Dream Center Harlem

DREAM BIG. LIVE BOLD.



Central Family Life Center Inc.

59 Wright Street/Rev Calvin Rice Place
Staten Island, NY 10304
Telephone (718) 273-8414
Fax (718) 981-3740

Executive Director

Rev. Dr. Demetrius S. Carolina, Sr.

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January 20, 2021

To whom it may concern,

As the Executive Director of the Central Family Life Center, I am writing this letter to support Charter Communications in light of their endeavors and their efforts in our ongoing relationship.

The Central Family Life Center, Inc. (CFLC) is a 501© (3) non-profit organization that seeks to improve the lives and environment of Staten Island residents. We provide Staten Island individuals including children, seniors, at-risk youth and families of varying backgrounds with needed services, programs and opportunities to improve their overall well-being. Our goal is to promote self-reliant, emotionally, and physically balanced environments through programming focused on education, training, counseling, job placement, leadership, and much more.

Through *Spectrum Learning Labs*, we were awarded with state-of-the-art technology facilities, at 59 Wright St. Staten Island, NY 10304. Spectrum Learning Labs help residents and communities develop and improve their computer, internet, and communications skills, providing them with free workstations, computers, printers and other accessories that facilitate this growth in digital literacy and quality workspaces. Charter has contributed \$81,511.25 to pay for our computer equipment and software. Our Learning Lab includes computers, tablets, smartboards, and internet service and also serve the function of helping our community members participate in skills training programs, literacy programs and classes, college research and multimedia learning experiences. Our learning lab also includes programming such as the Central Life Center's Tech Savvy Seniors Program, which focuses on digital literacy training for older adults, equipping them with skills and confidence to access information and services online.

Spectrum has been a longtime supporter of CFLC and our mission and we look forward to building upon our partnership to continue to provide critical services and resources to our community. If you would like more information, please feel free to contact me at Drcarolina@centralfamilylifecenter.org or (718) 273-8414 ext. 251.

Best,

Dr. Demetrius Carolina

Executive Director



January 20, 2021

As VP of IT and Chief Information Officer of Brooklyn Public Library (BPL), I'm writing this letter to support Charter Communications in light of their endeavors and their efforts in our ongoing relationship.

As one of the largest library systems in the United States, BPL receives close to eight million annual visits and offers nearly 70,000 free programs for people of all ages and backgrounds. To further its mission and vision, BPL promotes a culture of lifelong learning and provides a safe and welcoming space in communities throughout Brooklyn. BPL provides thousands of children, families, students, adult learners, and older adults—especially those from economically disadvantaged communities—with free access to library materials and online resources, computers, homework help, workforce development programs, services to New Americans, and a diverse roster of educational and cultural programs. With free WiFi, 1,500 public computers, free laptop and tablet lending, and a robust schedule of public programs and courses, BPL is also the borough's largest provider of free technology.

Older adults face unique barriers and challenges that hinder their ability to access and use new technology. And as technology and internet access have become an increasingly integral and essential part of daily life, impacting academic achievement, job readiness and lifelong learning opportunities--as well as the ability to access government benefits and health, financial and transportation systems--advancing digital literacy, particularly among older adults, and engaging users across the spectrum of technology proficiency has become one of BPL's key strategic goals.

Through *Spectrum Learning Labs*, we were awarded state-of-the-art technology facilities at Bushwick and Greenpoint Libraries. Spectrum Learning Labs help bridge the digital divide by enabling residents of all ages to develop and improve their computer, internet and communications skills with free access to workstations, computers, printers and other accessories. Charter has contributed over \$100,000 to pay for our computer equipment and software, including computers, tablets, smartboards, and internet service, which enable community members participate in skills training programs, literacy programs and classes, computer basics and multimedia learning experiences.

Spectrum has been a longtime supporter of BPL and our mission and we look forward to building upon our partnership to continue to provide critical services and resources to our community. If you would like more information, please feel free to contact me at ssmith@bklynlibrary.org.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Selvon Smith".

Selvon Smith

10 Grand Army Plaza
Brooklyn, NY 11238-5619
bklynlibrary.org

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Founder

January 21, 2021

To Whom It May Concern:

This letter is to share information about the partnership between Charter Communications and Hudson Guild. Charter has been a dedicated collaborator of Hudson Guild's since 2017.

Hudson Guild is a community-based organization, headquartered in Chelsea, serving more than 14,000 people across six program areas each year. The dynamic programs we offer at the Guild are amplified through the support of our partners. Charter has been generous with grants, sponsorships, technology donations, and volunteerism for several years. David Ellen, Senior Executive Vice President at Charter, has been a member of the Board of Trustees for Hudson Guild for more than a decade and currently serves as Board President.

With the re-opening of our Fulton Community Center later this year, we are delighted to list Charter Communications among our supporters. The addition of a Learning Lab will improve our ability to offer classes and educational instruction to the entire community. The Center will primarily serve Hudson Guild participants, including adults over age 55 and youth ages 5-24. Further, the Learning Lab will offer our neighbors the ability to "drop in" and participate in formal classes as well as the use of technology equipment for things like job searches, college applications, and more. Having Charter Communications as a partner means we are able to better serve our community.

Hudson Guild is proud to have a friend in Charter Communications – they are a great addition to the neighborhood.

Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions or for more information at 212-367-2364 or jgarcia@hudsonguild.org.

Sincerely,



Jackie Garcia
Deputy Executive Director

VERIZON TESTIMONY

JOINT OVERSIGHT HEARING ON

“Increasing Senior Access to Technology”

HELD BY THE

COMMITTEE ON AGING

AND THE

COMMITTEE ON TECHNOLOGY

OF THE

COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK

ON

JANUARY 22, 2021

Verizon has longstanding and deep-rooted connections with New York City, and for more than a hundred years has played a substantial role in the life of our great city. With the help of the many thousands of New Yorkers who work for the company, we have built and maintained the best-in-class wireline and wireless networks that are the backbone of the 21st century economy — truly a network built *by* New Yorkers, *for* New Yorkers. We work on an ongoing basis, day after day, to maintain and upgrade those networks in order to meet the ever-increasing communication needs of the City and its people and businesses.

That work constitutes a substantial investment in, and contribution to, the future of New York City. Indeed, over the years Verizon has invested billions in its wireline and wireless infrastructure in New York. It is also one of the City's biggest taxpayers and private employers, with one of the City's largest unionized work forces.

Verizon recognizes the obligation of businesses to support the economic, environmental, and social development of the communities in which they live and work. Fulfilling that obligation is sound morality, and sound business. To that end, we have created an initiative known as Citizen Verizon, which builds on the company's long-standing commitment to corporate responsibility. Citizen Verizon is organized around three key pillars — Digital Inclusion, Climate Protection, and Human Prosperity. For more information on the overall initiative I would encourage interested individuals to visit www.verizon.com/about/responsibility

Verizon believes connectivity and technology should be available to all. By supporting digital inclusion initiatives, we enable individuals and communities to develop the knowledge and skills to thrive in the digital age. In the United States our senior community is rapidly growing, with estimates that adults 65 years of age or older will exceed 80 million by 2040. Ensuring this demographic has access to the resources they need to be successful is a key imperative for Verizon.

Broadband has shown to be a significant factor in improving the lives of adults 65 and older. Seniors who have adopted to broadband have an increased sense of community and social interaction; have greater involvement in their own health and wellness; are safer due to technology that allows for locations services and medical alerts to family

members; and greater accessibility embracing and utilizing services that allow for greater transportation alternatives. Verizon is proud of our past and current partnerships focused on educating and helping seniors adopt to broadband services. Some groups we have worked with include the National Council on Aging (Aging Mastery Program), the New York Academy of Medicine (Age Friendly Commission), Catholic Charities of Brooklyn & Queens (senior center technology), and Older Adults Technology Services (OATS volunteerism program).

To assist our consumers, Verizon offers a low cost broadband option through our FiOS Forward program, which offers low-cost broadband to low-income customers at prices as low as \$19.99 per month plus taxes and equipment charges, for blazing-fast speeds of 200 Mbps. Our wireless customers have available our Care Smart watch, which is a wearable designed for seniors to keep them connected while giving their loved ones peace of mind. The watch allows for emergency notification and SOS calling to caregivers and loved ones, assistance with one's own well-being with step counting and task reminders, and protection against fraud by limiting the number of contacts that can communicate with the device to only those the senior trust. As seniors age and become more vulnerable to the health impacts of social isolation solutions like the Care Smart watch provide seniors with an accessible way to stay connected with friends and family at an affordable price point Verizon also offers protections that assist older adults with service interruptions, repair priority, and third party notifications.

To ensure accessibility to these products and services, Verizon is actively engaged in deploying a City-wide fiber-optic telecommunications network and currently operates a robust wireless networking covering all parts of the City. However, to assure all customers can benefit from these networks and to help the City achieve its broadband goals, there continues to be a need for an active partnership with the City and with property owners to facilitate such deployment and necessary upgrades. Access to the public right of way and subsequently access to private property is the only way for broadband to be truly accessible to all citizens regardless of age.

The City of New York can and should encourage and support such private wireline and wireless investment by streamlining their policies to allow reasonable access to City-owned property and facilities in a timely fashion; enable

providers to obtain permits in an efficient manner; consolidate agency approvals; address the constraints of the design approval processes; and refrain from excessive fees and charges.

The City should also encourage property owners to work cooperatively with all providers in order to guarantee all tenants have access to this critical infrastructure. Property owners act as a substantial impediment to broadband deployment.

Thank you for the opportunity to share this information and we are more than happy to meet with you to discuss our plans and potential partnerships in greater detail.

Join Us in Aging with Attitude!



OATS

verizon

About OATS & Senior Planet

Founded in 2004, OATS (Older Adults Technology Services) is an award-winning social impact nonprofit that offers technology programs, community training, and strategic engagements to change the way we age. OATS applies a deep understanding of both aging and technology to engineer innovative solutions for government, foundation, corporate, and other partners, shifting the narratives around aging and addressing the vital needs of older adults.



OATS is also the creator and sponsor of Senior Planet, a national community of people 60 and older who are aging with attitude, with physical locations in 6 states. Senior Planet programs help thousands of older adults build technology skills to improve their social engagement, financial security, civic participation, health, and creativity. Since the start of COVID-19, its popular website seniorplanet.org, which receives more than one million visitors each year, has become home to 50+ virtual classes every week, connecting 100,000+ older adults with free social opportunities and essential information.

Verizon Volunteer Opportunities

In response to COVID-19, OATS is offering virtual volunteering opportunities with its local Senior Planet programs to help seniors during this period of social isolation. Programs include 1:1 tech support, open group discussions on various technology topics, wellness calls to seniors during isolating periods, and our fitness class tech-support! Volunteers will empower older adults to live successful, independent, more connected lives, as well as provide immediate company during a period of extended isolation.

Where You Fit In

A successful Verizon volunteer will be attuned to the OATS mission, curious about the older individuals supported by Senior Planet, and empathetic to the struggles of conducting life virtually. They will also recognize that technology is a tool for social engagement, financial security, civic participation, health, and creativity. Do you speak another language? Even better! We conduct Mandarin, Cantonese, Spanish, and Russian programming and could use your help.

Ready to make a difference? Contact us today!

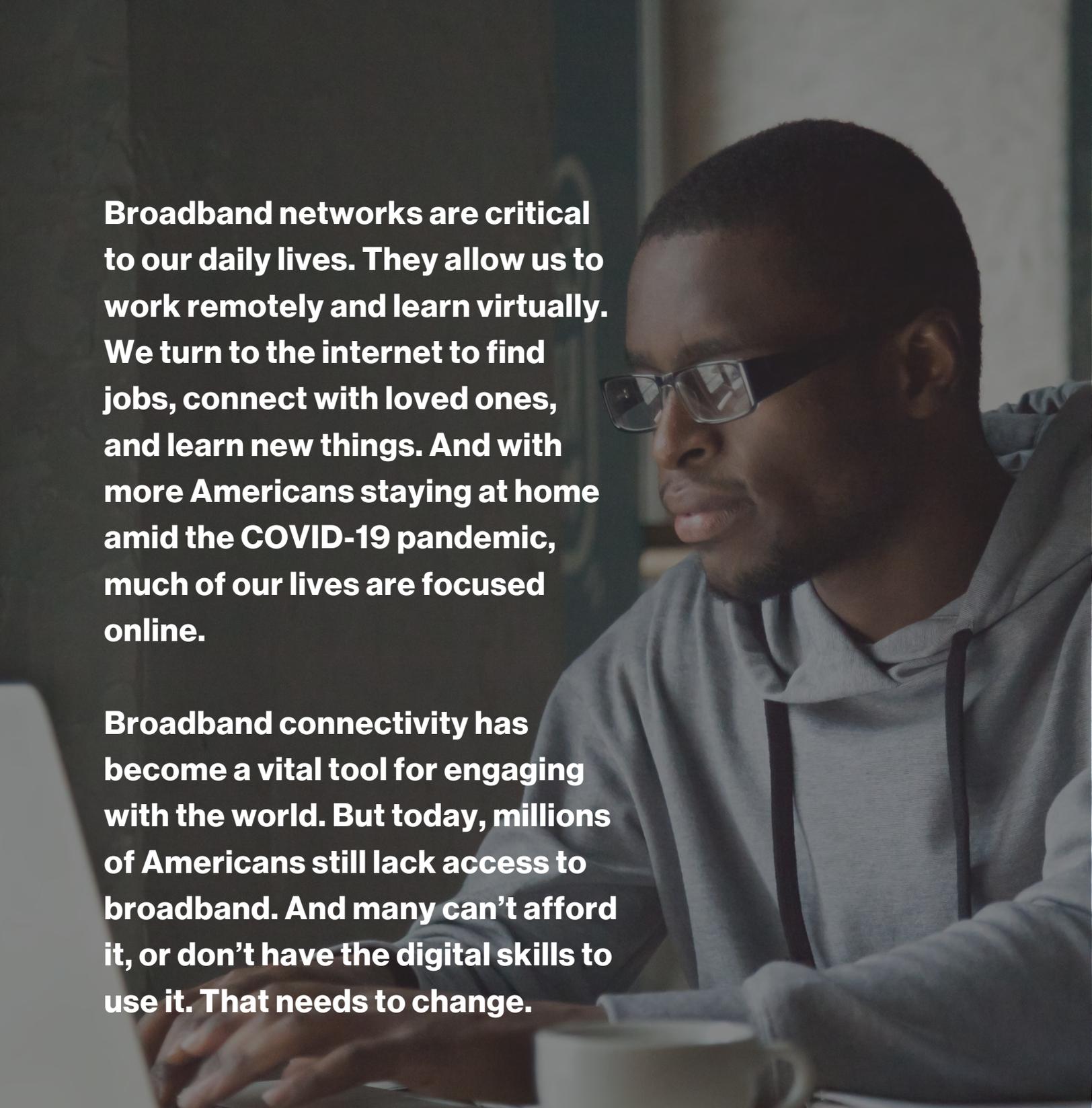
 info@oats.org

Accelerating America

AFFORDABILITY | ADOPTION | ACCESS



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Broadband networks are critical to our daily lives. They allow us to work remotely and learn virtually. We turn to the internet to find jobs, connect with loved ones, and learn new things. And with more Americans staying at home amid the COVID-19 pandemic, much of our lives are focused online.

Broadband connectivity has become a vital tool for engaging with the world. But today, millions of Americans still lack access to broadband. And many can't afford it, or don't have the digital skills to use it. That needs to change.

Our country can and should do better.



The public health crisis has underscored not only how important broadband connectivity is but also how lack of access can reinforce and widen educational and economic disparities. Low-income communities, rural populations, and working families who lack broadband risk falling further behind. As learning has shifted online, students without internet access at home may struggle to keep up. Adults in communities without internet access may not be able to search and apply for jobs; work remotely; start businesses; or access educational, social, and other resources needed to thrive in the digital economy.

Verizon is committed to ensuring that all Americans have access to affordable broadband and are equipped with the skills to use it.

We're proud to provide the connectivity that's keeping tens of millions of Americans educated, employed, and informed. From the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, we've supported unprecedented levels of demand as businesses, schools, and other organizations transitioned to remote work and schooling. We've worked with other companies and nonprofits to help support discounted broadband plans that cover 38 million students in 40 states and the District of Columbia. We also created a discount on Verizon's Fios home broadband service for customers qualifying for the FCC's Lifeline program that allows those customers to purchase a 200/200 Mbps fiber service with no data caps for just \$19.99/month. And we just announced that we will continue to offer this discount in 2021. We've also expanded our education initiative targeting Title I schools, Verizon Innovative Learning, to more than 260 under-resourced middle schools and high schools, providing free internet access and free STEM education tools.



But solving our nation's broadband challenges also requires a strong commitment from government. Congress has taken some important steps by passing the Emergency Broadband Benefit as part of its recent COVID Relief Package. As encouraging as that support is, it's a temporary program that is set to expire after the end of the public health emergency. That's why Verizon supports coordinated government and private sector action to create a modern and permanent broadband benefit. Programs like Lifeline and the Connect America Fund (CAF) have delivered tremendous benefits, greatly expanding public access to technologies. But these programs on their own do not do enough to close the broadband gap.

It's time to think differently. Verizon is proposing a new approach that we call "Accelerating America: Affordability - Adoption - Access."

Building on the work of many others in this space, the policies we propose will help ensure all Americans have access to affordable broadband. Congress and the administration can take important steps to address these challenges, working with state and local public officials, nonprofits, and industry.

Affordability

To make broadband more affordable, as an alternative to Lifeline, Congress should create a permanent broadband benefit program of \$20-\$50 per month for low-income recipients that will maximize people's ability to choose the services that work best for them.

Program Eligibility. People who are eligible for Lifeline can elect to receive the new monthly benefit (or they may choose to remain in the existing Lifeline program).

Broadband Benefit. Eligible households would receive \$20-\$50 per month on an electronic benefit transfer card that they could use toward any qualifying wireline or wireless service or split between both. Participants would also be eligible for a biannual equipment benefit.

Choice. Recipients could choose whatever plans, services, or equipment meets their needs and would not be limited to predetermined narrow offerings. Customers using their benefit would pay for services using their card, just like any other customer uses a debit or credit card.

Federal Funding. Benefits would be funded directly by appropriations and automatically placed onto electronic benefit transfer cards similar to those that people already may have access to as part of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or other government benefits.

Enrollment. Eligible participants who elect to use the new broadband benefit instead of the traditional Lifeline program would be automatically enrolled once they complete a simple registration process and are verified using the National Verifier database. Government agencies should coordinate so that recipients of SNAP or other qualifying programs automatically receive information about the broadband benefit.

Maintaining Lifeline. Eligible customers who feel more comfortable using the existing Lifeline program could continue with Lifeline instead of selecting the new benefit.

Adoption

To encourage broadband adoption, the federal government should support digital literacy education. In addition, local and municipal governments should encourage greater broadband use by making it easier for people to access the government services they need online.

Digital Literacy. Even people who have access to broadband may not have the digital skills necessary to learn, work, and communicate effectively online. The federal government should support local, state, and nonprofit organizations that provide digital literacy training and education.

Modernizing Municipal Systems. Governments, particularly local and municipal ones, should update their systems and websites to enable constituents to access information online and via mobile devices. Federal funds may be critical to help states and localities modernize their systems and technologies to enable constituents to interact electronically (as opposed to hand-filing, faxing, or mailing documents or forms).

Access

To expand broadband deployment, Congress could provide new support to build broadband in areas where the economics fail to support private deployment.

New Allocations. Congress and possibly states should provide new appropriations to fund broadband expansion, particularly in rural or hard to reach areas.

Municipal Broadband. Municipalities should not be prohibited from building broadband in unserved and unlikely to be served areas. While it doesn't make sense for municipalities to overbuild areas where broadband providers are already offering or planning to offer service, there may be unserved areas where a targeted municipal approach is a useful tool. In some instances, public-private partnerships to build broadband facilities may also be a good option.



**It's time for
a national
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affordable
broadband
to all
Americans.**

Closing the digital divide will drive innovation and productivity, lift communities, and strengthen our nation.

Find out more at [Verizon.com/AcceleratingAmerica](https://www.verizon.com/acceleratingamerica)

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Accelerating America

AFFORDABILITY | ADOPTION | ACCESS

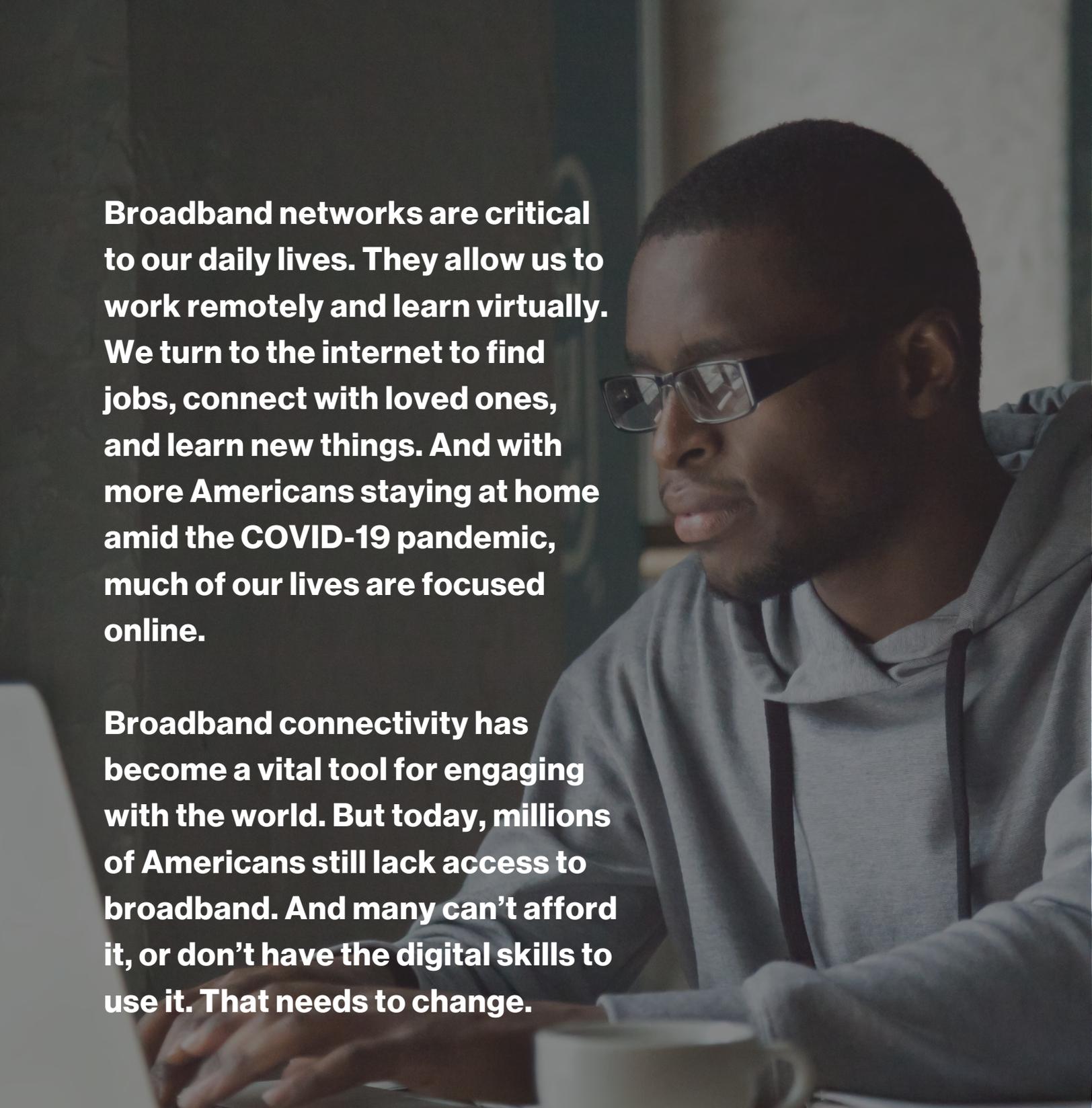


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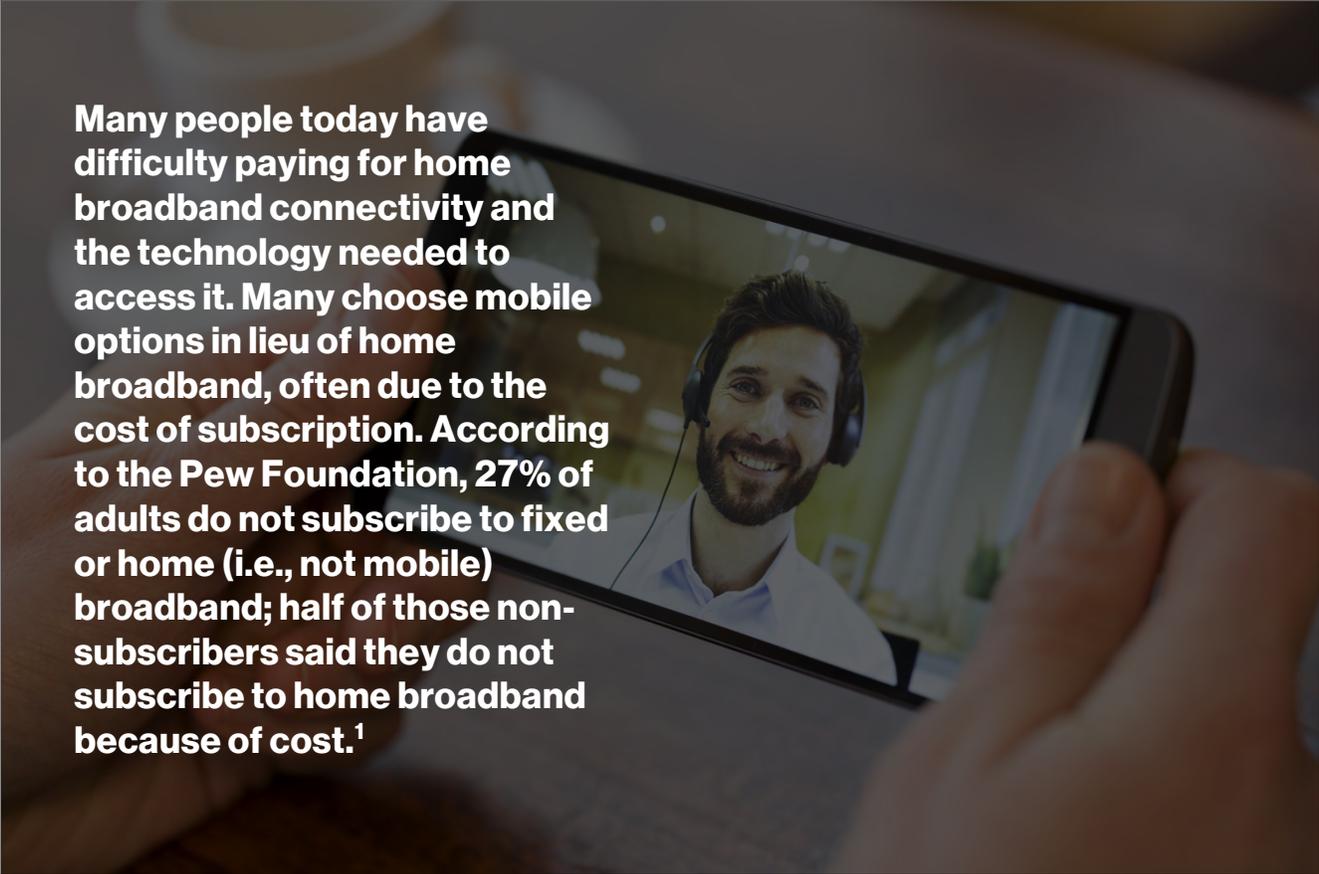
Closing the digital divide will drive innovation and productivity, lift communities, and strengthen our nation.

Find out more at [Verizon.com/AcceleratingAmerica](https://www.verizon.com/acceleratingamerica)

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Below we flesh out more of the details of this new framework to connect all Americans:

A Plan to Address Affordability



Many people today have difficulty paying for home broadband connectivity and the technology needed to access it. Many choose mobile options in lieu of home broadband, often due to the cost of subscription. According to the Pew Foundation, 27% of adults do not subscribe to fixed or home (i.e., not mobile) broadband; half of those non-subscribers said they do not subscribe to home broadband because of cost.¹

While Lifeline continues to serve an important role for many people, it can't be the only solution to ensure full digital empowerment in the long-term. Rooted in a decades-old funding framework, it simply can't be tweaked in enough ways to address the underlying issues comprehensively.

Instead, we propose supplementing Lifeline with a directly appropriated individual benefit as an alternative that eligible recipients can use to pay for broadband service.

Recipients of a government-funded broadband benefit should have maximum choice in how to use their broadband dollars, whether they want it for wireline or wireless service (or both). To provide that level of flexibility and choice, we propose a program framework that empowers people by directly giving them, rather than broadband providers, a new broadband benefit. Congress retained the traditional reimbursement structure, which gives broadband providers – not individuals – the broadband benefit in its recent emergency broadband benefit program. While that structure may make sense in the context of an emergency like COVID-19, a long term permanent program that provides benefits directly puts vulnerable citizens in the best position to select the services that meet their needs.

Lifeline's Historical Context

The federal government has long sought to ensure “universal service,” or the “idea that communication services should be available ‘so far as possible, to all the people of the United States.’”² To achieve that goal, Congress and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) have created several programs within the Universal Service Fund (USF). Of the USF programs, the Lifeline program most directly addresses the affordability of communications services. But Lifeline was not designed as a broadband program. The FCC created the Lifeline program as a voice program over thirty years ago, in the mid-1980s, as part of the complex regulatory changes that followed the AT&T divestiture. The Lifeline program was originally designed to offer limited relief to low-income customers so they could better afford “plain old telephone service” for voice communications. Although the FCC in 2016 added broadband to the program,³ Lifeline remains rooted in a now-outdated market and policy structure.

In particular, the federal Lifeline benefit amount, \$9.25 per month, was not set to ensure broadband affordability. Rather, the \$9.25 amount still reflects the original mid-1980s concept of the Lifeline benefit as an offset to a federal voice charge, the “subscriber line charge.”

The current Lifeline subsidy is insufficient. Lifeline households must use their limited benefit for either mobile or for a fixed connection. That limited benefit isn't enough for a family who needs both mobile access and a robust connection at home for kids' remote learning. Most Lifeline households use their Lifeline benefit for a mobile service that provides 4.5 gigabytes (GB) of usage per month.

Moreover, the structure of the Lifeline program does not do enough. People may face hurdles in getting signed up even if they are eligible, delays in receiving their benefit, or finding services that meet their needs. And they have only limited choices in providers. Today there are complicated regulations mandating record keeping and document productions, multiple annual audits, and more. Because of the complexity of the Lifeline rules, many of the largest broadband providers in the nation have declined to participate in the program.

Finally, the funding mechanism for the Lifeline program is unsustainable as the only program available for low-income recipients. The 1996 Act requires that the USF is to be funded by assessments on interstate and international telecommunications services.⁴ Each quarter, the FCC calculates a “contribution factor” based on the projected demands of the universal service programs and the projected contribution base. That contribution mechanism has become strained by changes in technology and demand. Usage of interstate telecommunications services has been in decline since the turn of the century as people move to alternative forms of communications, including texting, social media, and video calling apps. This decline requires the contribution factor to increase each year, as the GAO report on Lifeline explains:

“According to FCC’s 2012 Further Notice of Proposed Rulemaking regarding the assessment and recovery of USF contributions, an impetus for the increased USF contribution factor is the decrease in assessable revenues. For example, competition in the interstate long-distance market, growth of wireless service, and bundling of service packages has led to decreases in assessable revenues. As the pool of contributors and assessable revenues has declined over the years, the USF contribution requirements for those remaining contributors has increased to cover the costs of administering the universal service programs.”⁵



It's time for a new approach. Rather than tinker with Lifeline, which can continue as an alternative for low-income customers who prefer it, we should broadly rethink how to address broadband affordability to provide a much more useful option.

1 Eligibility

At a minimum, the new benefit must include those currently eligible for Lifeline benefits. Today, that includes people participating in any of the following programs: federal public housing program, Medicaid, Veteran's or Veterans Survivor's Pension, SNAP, Supplemental Security Income, or certain Tribal Programs (i.e., Bureau of Indian Affairs General Assistance, Head Start, Tribal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations).⁷ Additionally, people qualify for Lifeline if their household income is at 135% or less of the federal poverty guidelines, which includes those in school free lunch programs. Depending on the availability of funding and the demands of the COVID-19 pandemic, Congress may also consider extending broadband benefits to families with children who are eligible for reduced lunch (free lunch recipients already qualify under the income guidelines).

As noted below, Congress would permit the FCC to use the National Verifier database to determine whether a household is eligible. Congress should ensure that relevant state and federal agencies provide the National Verifier with automated access to eligibility information. The benefit would be provided automatically to an eligible household once the household is enrolled in SNAP or another qualifying social service program and fills out a simple registration. The benefit would stop being loaded on the Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) card when a household no longer qualifies as eligible under SNAP or another qualifying social service program.

2 Verification of Eligibility

The government, not individual carriers, should determine whether a household is eligible for the new program. Eligibility should be determined using the National Verifier, which is a centralized system that determines whether subscribers are eligible for Lifeline. Centralizing verification enables customers to have a single point of contact to confirm eligibility, rather than having to re-assess or re-qualify every time a customer wishes to change providers or shop for different options. It also simplifies the process for providers, allowing them to treat a subsidized customer just as they would any other customer. When accepting payment via a provided EBT card, a provider would not have any obligation to determine whether a household is or is not eligible.



3

Benefit Coverage

Monthly Service Benefit

The service benefit would be distributed monthly to help eligible households pay for the fixed or mobile broadband service of their choice, provided the service meets the FCC's Lifeline minimum service standards.

First, Congress would set the per-household service benefit amount at a much higher level than the current Lifeline amount, perhaps in the range of \$20-\$50 per month, which would be sufficient to cover all or most of the cost of a home broadband service that supports distance learning and working from home. And since the number of people covered and the total cost of the program may vary depending on what Congress ultimately decides, Congress should also explore whether the benefit amount should vary depending on such factors as household size, household income, or school-age children in the household.

Supported households that elect this program would be able to use their benefit for any qualifying service on the market, including unlimited broadband service, either fixed or mobile, and may even apportion their benefit between multiple services. If the price of the service(s) exceeds the amount paid by the program, the household would be responsible for paying the difference. Households could use their benefit for a broadband-only or bundled service (as long as the bundle includes a qualifying broadband service). Further, a benefit could be split between more than one service or service provider to account for situations where a household wants to use part of their benefit for mobile service from one provider and part of their benefit for fixed service from a different provider.

Providers may, but are not required to, create a new or separate low-income qualifying broadband plan targeted to eligible customers. Customers may choose such a targeted plan, if it exists with their chosen provider, or may select to direct their benefit to any other eligible plan. In both cases, customers would use the benefit amount to pay all or a portion of the total charges for service. Because the benefit is available for use on any plan that contains a qualifying broadband service, providers would not be required to apportion the benefit between various services on the plan. Instead, providers would apply the benefit as a credit to the bottom of the bill (inclusive of taxes). This means that people would quickly have more options from which to choose and would not be relegated to purchasing only a single, low-cost service offering with this new benefit.

To increase awareness of the new broadband benefit, the Food & Drug Administration (FDA), the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and FCC should adopt a memoranda of understanding that would provide recipients of SNAP/Medicaid (and, if expanded to include them, those with children eligible for reduced cost school lunch) with information about broadband benefits at the same time they learn about these other programs. Recipients need to be able to quickly and efficiently obtain information about how to sign up for and receive low-income broadband support, and verification for eligibility needs to be seamless.

Equipment Benefit

Congress should include as part of this program a separate benefit that covers equipment as well as services. That equipment benefit would help pay for a device necessary to access the network, such as a tablet or wireless device. The equipment benefit should be distributed as a lump sum once every two years, and should be in an amount sufficient to cover the cost of a basic wireless device or wireline router (which, based on current market data, would be about \$200). Households would be permitted to use the equipment benefit to purchase a device or, alternatively, use the benefit to pay monthly equipment charges such as wireless device payments or router rental charges.

4**Provider Participation and Obligations**

Our proposal contemplates participation by a large number and range of broadband providers (including both prepaid and postpaid providers) to encourage competition and enable people to comparison shop for plans and services that best meet their needs. Broadband providers shouldn't need to be an Eligible Telecommunications Carrier (ETC)⁸ to provide broadband service to benefit recipients. Because this proposal would permit providers to treat qualifying recipients just as they treat other customers, there is no need for the provider to meet ETC requirements so long as they are offering a qualifying service. As AT&T observes, grocery stores are authorized to participate in SNAP via an online application that demonstrates they sell the eligible food staples.⁹ There is no reason why participation as a broadband service provider needs to be any more complex.

Participation would be optional for all carriers, including those who are currently designated as ETCs. But the program should be designed to encourage provider participation. Providers would apply to the FCC to participate in the program. A provider would have to show in its application information that it has offered a qualifying broadband service for at least one year, e.g., FCC Form 477 filings. Both facilities-based providers and resellers would be eligible. To be eligible, fixed broadband service should meet the FCC's definition of broadband at 25/3.¹⁰ Because benefits would be provided directly to people (rather than to providers, as in the Lifeline or emergency broadband benefit programs), providers would treat supported customers the same as other customers.

Providers' primary obligation would be to ensure that the benefit is applied to eligible services and devices, including bundles that offer broadband or voice service. Providers would be permitted to apply the same terms and conditions to supported customers as to other customers, including credit and disconnection policies. However, providers may provide additional flexibility for customers with arrearages that pre-date the new program if they choose to do so.

Customers who choose services for which the total cost is greater than the amount of the benefit would pay for the difference, and all existing terms and conditions for any selected services will continue to apply. Providers may treat customers who do not pay any portion of the difference the same as they treat any other customer who does not pay part of their bill, including enrollment in payment plans, referral to collections, and possible termination. Providers may also choose to work with a customer to switch a customer to their lowest price broadband offering that is at or below the amount of the benefit, to the extent the provider offers such a service, and the customer agrees.

5

Amount and Application of Benefit

Congress should set the amount of the benefit significantly higher than the current \$9.25 per month and should provide substantially more flexibility. **Customers need the ability to choose which services best fit their needs.** Some people may have children who need higher speeds for remote learning; others may need additional wireless data. And some may need both mobile and fixed broadband and want to split their benefit between these services. The program would give recipients the flexibility to use the benefit for fixed broadband services, mobile broadband services, or a combination of the two. Individuals and households are best able to decide what services meet their needs, and the ability to shop between providers incentivizes providers to compete for their business.

To maximize people's ability to get connected, the new broadband benefit should be in the range of \$20-\$50 monthly per household, which is significantly more than the current Lifeline subsidy amount. The specific amount will depend on Congress' assessment of empirical data about what eligible low-income people may realistically be able to pay for broadband and its evaluation of how to allocate money between competing funding priorities. Congress could also consider applying a sliding scale to the benefit, adjusting the amount provided in accordance with income levels.

6

Distribution of Benefit

Broadband benefits need to be quickly and easily usable by recipients. And adoption will be faster if providers do not have to create new systems to verify eligibility of recipients or to process new types of payment. As noted above, any new or expanded broadband program should make use of the existing national verifier system.¹¹

Using the broadband benefit should be simple. The program should be based on an existing or a similar benefit card system, so that providers may process payments for broadband benefits just like they do other credit or debit cards. Today, persons who qualify for SNAP or cash benefits (Temporary Assistance) receive an Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) card, also known as a Common Benefit Identification Card (CBIC). The EBT card looks like a debit card and enables users to buy groceries and other items with their cash benefits at participating stores and other locations. Funding for broadband and for any associated transaction fees could be added to the card (or a parallel card issued) directly from the government, with funds transferred directly from the FCC to the cards every month. A debit or other electronic benefit card could also encode controls against fraud and abuse, and help streamline auditing and recordkeeping. Benefits would be reloaded automatically as long as the person remains eligible.

7

Funding Source

As discussed above, Lifeline is today funded by assessments on carriers that are ultimately paid by telecommunications customers. Today, the contribution factor is 31.8% of interstate and international telecommunications revenues, which are shrinking more and more every year.

This system is unsustainable as the primary low-income program; it cannot support a substantial increase in subsidies.

The solution is not just to change the way that universal service contributions are assessed, which is not only incredibly complex but will take years. How Lifeline is funded necessarily limits how much of a subsidy it can provide. The best solution is for Congress to appropriate the funding for the new benefit program directly – the way Congress funds most other social programs. This approach would solve the problem of a declining contribution base and allow the program to provide a more generous subsidy. Congress can appropriate the funds, which would then go into the FCC’s accounts for distribution.

8

Program Administration

The program would be administered by the FCC, with appropriations going to the FCC and processed through FCC and USAC. The FCC would be responsible for defining the broadband services eligible for support, approving providers to participate in the program, identifying eligible households, and managing the distribution of benefits. The FCC would also define rules governing implementation and the process by which customers who choose the new program phase out of Lifeline benefits (customers could elect to remain with Lifeline if they prefer).

The FCC would be permitted to enter into agreements with other agencies to potentially help distribute the benefit, e.g., via HHS or with the Department of Agriculture. For example, the FCC could partner with those agencies to possibly distribute the broadband benefit on the same EBT card used for SNAP benefits.

9

Transition

Congress should create the new benefit program as an alternative, and leave Lifeline in place as an option for low-income customers. If Congress does that, no transition period is necessary beyond what may be needed for customers to transfer to the new program. If Congress eventually decides to meld the programs, it should ensure a transition of at least a year or the expiration of any existing service contract, in which new potential recipients could be started under the new benefit while giving existing Lifeline subscribers time to sign up for the new benefit and transition to new plans and services. The transition would not penalize subscribers who relinquish their existing Lifeline benefit in lieu of the new one and would ask providers to waive any early termination fees if the subscriber transitioned to a new plan with their same provider in accordance with existing terms and conditions. Further, recipients could use the new equipment benefit either as a payment toward an existing device or toward a new one.

Affordable Broadband for Students

All students should have affordable access to devices and broadband outside of school, at home, and in other settings.

Even before the COVID-19 crisis caused schools to turn to distance learning, broadband access was important for students to complete their schoolwork; today many students cannot continue learning without it. As FCC Commissioner Rosenworcel has identified, there is still a Homework Gap in the United States: a disconnect that occurs when students are assigned homework that requires internet access, but do not have broadband at home.¹² And while providers like Verizon are working to deliver broadband to these students, federal funding must continue to play an important role in ensuring broadband access for all students.

Prior to the pandemic, Verizon had been working for a number of years to equip low-income students with the skills they need to compete in a digital economy. Through our Verizon Innovative Learning (VILS) program, we provide free technology, free internet access, teacher training, and a technology-infused learning curriculum to under-resourced Title I middle schools and high schools across the country.¹³ To date, close to 265 schools have joined the VILS program since 2014, and we plan to reach 350 schools by the end of 2021. When the pandemic hit in March, we tripled the data allowance for participants in VILS schools by upgrading their data plans from 10GB/month to 30GB/month to ensure that VILS students had the additional capacity to transition all of their school work to the home during quarantine.



10 million youths by 2030

Through Citizen Verizon, our plan for economic, environmental, and social advancement, we have committed to provide 10 million youths with digital access and skills training by 2030. To reach this goal, we are developing an online education platform for K-12 youth that will help address new hybrid (at home or in school) learning models and provide needed educational resources to district leaders, teachers, parents and students. Our future Teaching Training Pathways portal will feature credentialed courses for educators on remote learning and instructional technology coaching.

Further, recognizing the urgency for school districts to quickly and seamlessly secure connectivity for students, Verizon launched a new, national distance learning program that is now available to more than 38 million students across 40 states and the District of Columbia.

Under this new program, we have partnered with independent school districts and state departments of education to deliver 4G LTE wireless connectivity, devices, and other solutions to students nationwide. In particular, we are providing K-12 institutions with reliable connectivity, devices (hotspots/MiFi units), mobile device management, and other security/compliance apps that school districts rely on to support distance learning.



The FCC provides up to \$4 billion every year through the E-rate program for discounts to schools and libraries on telecommunications, internet access, managed internal broadband services, and basic maintenance of internal connections. While there may be future opportunities to modernize this program, Verizon is not urging specific changes here. However, in the interim, as part of the existing E-rate program, we support a broad interpretation of E-rate provisions of the Act, including the definition of “classroom.” Today, education is happening remotely, with “classrooms” outside of the traditional school building. Schools should be able to use their E-rate funding to help bring education to students, including for WiFi hubs, routers, and other technology to make it easier for kids to access educational content.

Adoption, Digital Inclusion, and Literacy

A significant segment of our society is not using broadband even when it's available. This is particularly true for low-income and older citizens. The World Economic Forum noted in a recent report that "Even as connectivity players continue to invest in necessary infrastructure to grow coverage in underserved areas, there remains a sizable population that does not use high-speed networks (fixed/wireless) despite living in areas covered by them."¹⁴ There is widespread agreement that the barriers to adoption include:

- 1 Lack of knowledge and experience:** People may not have the digital skills, experience, or training to interact online.
- 2 Lack of resources:** People cannot afford broadband or the equipment (computers, tablets, smartphones) to use it, and they may not be aware of Lifeline or other reduced cost broadband programs.
- 3 Lack of relevance:** People, particularly seniors, may not believe that broadband is important to their daily lives.

To address these issues and help ensure that the affordable broadband program is effective, federal, state, and local governments should provide additional funding to assist communities and individuals with increasing digital literacy education and encouraging adoption of broadband. Government agencies and community groups also can make it easier for constituents to access services online, including using mobile devices, thus creating additional incentives for broadband adoption.

Supporting Grants for Increased Digital Literacy Education

Over 50%

Last year, the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) reaffirmed its earlier finding that over half of those who do not have internet service at home assert they do not want or need it.¹⁵ This NTIA report notes that, as of 2017, 28 million households did not use the internet from home. The 2017 survey showed the top reason that households gave for not using the internet at home was that they did not need it or had no interest in going online (58% or 16.2 million).¹⁶ Lack of relevancy was the number one reason given in 2015 as well.¹⁷

Broadband adoption in lower income groups lags behind other individual users.

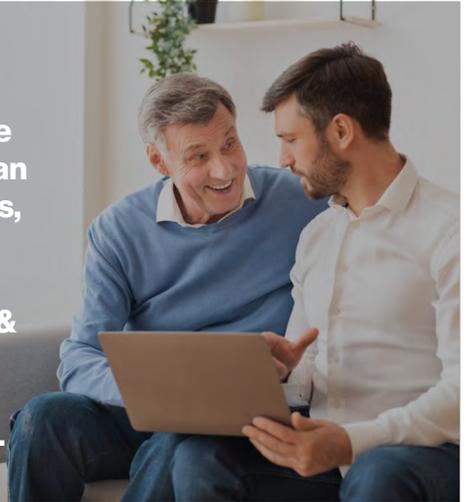
In 2019, the Pew Research Center released a study that examines home broadband and internet use across the U.S. and pinpoints adoption growth by income and age.¹⁸ The Pew study finds that internet usage in adults earning less than \$30,000 per year trails that of adults making \$75,000 or more by 16% (82% vs. 98%). While this gap has closed somewhat since 2000 (when there was a 66% difference in usage between the two groups), low-wage workers today are still significantly less likely than high-wage workers to use the internet. Indeed, these numbers show that low-wage workers are only now, twenty years later, reaching about the same level of adoption and use as did high-wage workers in 2000.

73% usage rate

Older people also are less likely to adopt broadband. While adults under 50 years old have adoption rates approaching or nearly 100%, usage rates drop to 88% for those aged 50 to 64, and are even lower at 73% for people over the age of 65.¹⁹ While seniors have increased their adoption significantly from the 14% of users in 2000, there are too many who still aren't online.

There are a number of steps the government can take to increase adoption.

First, the government can assist in improving and supporting digital literacy training. Digital literacy is an effective means for galvanizing digital participation, particularly among low-income communities and seniors. Someone who is “digitally literate” can use broadband and technology to connect with family members, communicate across digital platforms, collaborate with colleagues, and take part in the digital economy.²⁰ Advocacy groups such as NDIA²¹ and the Benton Institute for Broadband & Society make the case that more and consistent federal and state funding is needed to uplift digital literacy programs in the U.S. and increase digital participation for millions of Americans.



Further, adoption rates are driven by increasing opportunities for communities and individuals to understand the relevance of digital and online content to them.

Not only must people have access to relevant digital content and services that meet their needs, but they must see the internet as relevant and important to their daily lives. This requires the development of an ecosystem of apps, content, and services that address the needs, preferences, and capabilities of unconnected and under-connected people. Users also need training in digital skills sufficient to build the confidence necessary to engage meaningfully with the internet. Such skills training must adapt as technologies evolve.

To address these issues, the government should pass legislation establishing grants to support digital education, training, and digital inclusion, such as the \$1.25 billion five-year digital equity grant program contemplated in the Digital Equity Act and the Accessible, Affordable Internet For All Act.²² These grants would be administered by NTIA, and would allocate funding between grants intended to support state level digital equity plans and digital inclusion activities, as well as more targeted funding to organizations providing local or regional services, training programs, or other workforce development programs. They might also support development of public access computing centers, promote broadband adoption, implement training programs, and make available equipment, hardware, and software.

As laid out in these proposals, these types of grants also envision potential collaboration with community anchor institutions (public schools, libraries, medical or healthcare providers, community colleges or other higher education institutions, and other nonprofit or governmental community support organizations), local educational agencies, Native American tribes where applicable, county and municipal governments, nonprofit organizations, veterans, organizations that represent individuals with disabilities, the aging, or individuals with language barriers, individuals incarcerated in state facilities, civil rights organizations, entities that carry out workforce development programs, public housing groups, and state agencies responsible for administering or supervising adult education and literacy. Other grants should also be targeted at supporting education and digital literacy for households with an annual income up to 150% of the federal poverty line, the elderly, and people with disabilities.

Ensuring Government Services are Online and Mobile-Accessible

Providing training and encouragement to get online is critical. But it is also important to ensure that the government does not create disincentives for doing so. **Government services and information need to be available and accessible online, and optimized to permit citizens to access them using either a computer or a mobile device.**

Today, too many government services require outdated technologies or in-person visits to access or complete, which became starkly clear in the midst of the pandemic. For example, people in California hoping to apply to a state program providing unemployment benefits were required to fill out and mail paper applications, receive responses by mail, and process physical claim forms.²³ When the Alabama online systems froze or failed, hundreds of people drove to Montgomery and slept outside the unemployment claims center to try to receive their benefits.²⁴ People in Florida reported being locked out of the state's unemployment system and being required to use paper applications to file their claims.²⁵

Other state systems are technologically outdated or were unable to handle the increase in users related to the pandemic. For example, Californians trying to file unemployment insurance claims online “were greeted with error messages, frozen screens, and other glitches.”²⁶ Arizona's website for its unemployment system crashed.²⁷ Oregon processes unemployment filings “with obsolete computers running systems that date back to the Reagan administration.”²⁸ South Carolina residents were met with slow-loading pages and accessibility issues, as well as an online system that did not allow constituents to cite COVID-19 as the reason for their unemployment.²⁹ And in some instances, state and local systems that might have been able to handle pandemic related use were rendered unusable by hackers or subject to ransomware.³⁰

Governments shouldn't create barriers to being online. Instead, federal, state, and local systems need to incentivize online use. Whether it's information about Social Security, Medicare, telehealth, or vocational education training, making it easy for people to access these services using convenient and secure apps or websites could drive adoption and help improve efficiency of government services at the same time.³¹ State and federal governments are already making progress in digitizing their services, but accelerating those efforts in addition to providing digital literacy training could help make the internet relevant to those people who have access to broadband and can afford it but don't see the relevance.

But these transitions require technological training and systems updates, and likely federal funding. Congress should also provide grants to update local systems to better protect against cyber threats and hacking attempts,³² or to support transitioning to .gov websites (as opposed to .com, .us, or open domain sources).³³

Increasing Access to Broadband

Rural Broadband Funding

14.5 million

At least 14.5 million Americans live in census blocks wholly unserved by fixed broadband networks.

\$40 billion

The FCC has committed \$40 billion over the next decade to its existing USF rural broadband programs.

6-7 million

The planned deployments, which will cover about 6-7 million homes and small businesses.

2027

But while significant, the programs funded by this approach still will not reach all of the unserved homes (and, in some cases, will not be complete) until the end of 2027.

Today, many people in the U.S. have access to multiple fixed broadband offerings at speeds nearing 1 gigabit per second (Gbps) at their home, and multiple 4G LTE and/or 5G options for mobile wireless services. But there are still too many Americans who lack access to broadband, particularly in rural areas.

The FCC has tackled some of the more complex parts of solving the rural broadband problem. For example, the FCC is now working to implement a broadband mapping initiative to more accurately identify unserved areas, for which Congress has now provided funding. The FCC has also developed a fair and flexible process under the existing USF program for distributing government funding to targeted areas. Congress should match additional funding with the FCC's pre-existing program design to make broadband available to all Americans.

Despite this progress, the FCC reports at least 14.5 million Americans live in census blocks wholly unserved by fixed broadband networks offering download speeds of at least 25 Mbps and upload speeds of at least 3 Mbps.³⁸ And that figure may understate the number of unserved Americans. As the FCC has acknowledged, there are additional unserved Americans in partially served census blocks that cannot be identified using existing mapping data. Verizon supports ongoing initiatives to obtain more granular map data.

The FCC has committed \$40 billion over the next decade to its existing USF rural broadband programs, the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund (RDOF) and CAF. The planned deployments, which will cover about 6-7 million homes and small businesses at speeds up to 1 Gbps, will substantially reduce the size of the rural deployment gap. But while significant, the programs funded by this approach still will not reach all of the unserved homes (and, in some cases, will not be complete) until the end of 2027.

There are a number of policy proposals under discussion to support increased access to broadband, including bipartisan support for funding rural broadband.³⁹ As suggested by some of the proposals, we believe that to close the remaining rural deployment gap, Congress must provide additional financial support. There are many challenges to building out home broadband in rural America. The often rough terrain and low-density population levels are, and have been, formidable barriers to private investment.



Broadband providers want to serve more of rural America but, in many areas, the economics make doing so next to impossible. Given that, policymakers on both sides of the aisle have long-acknowledged it will take a combination of public and private funding to make universal broadband a reality.

The legacy USF programs that fund broadband deployment in high-cost areas cannot produce the amount of funding necessary to close the rural broadband gap once and for all, for many of the same reasons we discuss above related to the Lifeline program. The USF also requires broadband investment to be spread out over many years, delaying the timeline for connecting rural America years longer than residents in those areas should have to wait. The only way to reach all unserved households and to accelerate universal broadband expansion in the near term is through Congressional appropriation of new funds.

Rather than create a new rural broadband infrastructure program, Congress should appropriate supplemental support to the FCC’s existing RDOF program or at least leverage the RDOF framework.

By providing additional funding to the FCC, Congress can – relative to the deployment the FCC has already planned – extend broadband to more unserved homes, support faster speeds, and accelerate the deployment timeline. Building on the FCC’s existing programs would close the rural deployment gap faster than launching a new program from scratch. And, because the FCC already runs the largest federal broadband program, providing supplemental funding to the FCC would be more efficient than giving money to another agency (such as RUS or NTIA) that would then have to coordinate with the FCC.

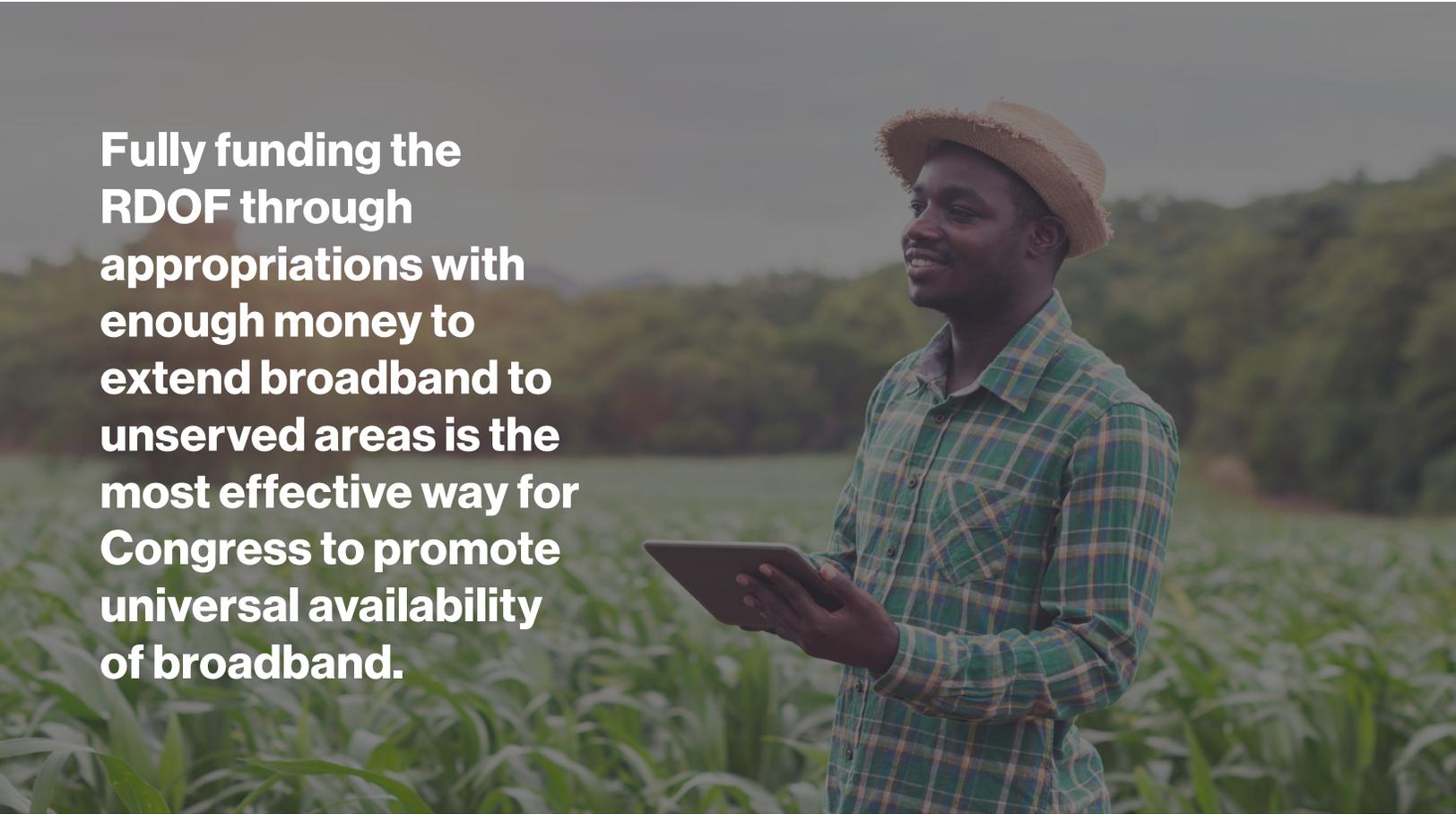
Expanding access to broadband services will require creative and flexible thinking to identify the right outcome for everyone, since deployment could cover a range of options from ensuring all households have at least 25/3 broadband service to wiring every household in America with fiber. But we urge a flexible approach that balances both costs and the need for access by acknowledging a variety of technologies may be appropriate, depending on the specific location. Indeed, an FCC study has shown that the most expensive 2% of homes to serve account for a disproportionate share of the cost.⁴⁰ So we propose that Congress include multiple types of technologies, including 5G, LTE, and satellite, as eligible for funding.

Fortunately, if Congress takes this on, it would be built on an established foundation, since the FCC has already done the hard and important work to establish standards and procedures to fairly and effectively distribute broadband subsidy money to connect unserved areas. The FCC’s recently-adopted RDOF provides a mechanism for ensuring that dollars appropriated by Congress are distributed in a flexible, efficient, and targeted manner. Building on years of precedent, the RDOF bridges ideas from past administrations from different political parties, and is already setup to fund \$20.4 billion in broadband investment over the next ten years.⁴¹

The structure of the RDOF funding mechanism gets a number of things right from a policy perspective:⁴²

- **It uses a transparent and efficient** competitive bidding process to distribute funding
- **It is technology neutral**, offering support for both wired and wireless technologies
- **It supports four different speed “tiers”** (25/3 Mbps, 50/5 Mbps, 100/20 Mbps, and 1 Gbps/500 Mbps), which allows bidders to propose the most cost-effective approach to address geographic differences and meet customer needs
- **It allows participation by almost any provider**, large or small, private or public
- **It avoids overbuilding** by targeting funding to unserved areas
- **It includes strong audit and compliance requirements**
- **It does not impose unnecessary and unrelated conditions** that discourage participation.

With sufficient new funds appropriated, the RDOF could replace or supplement the existing USF surcharge amounts. And this new lump sum of funding could be available for use right away, instead of continuing to rely on USF surcharge funds that will trickle in at a dwindling rate over a period of years.



Fully funding the RDOF through appropriations with enough money to extend broadband to unserved areas is the most effective way for Congress to promote universal availability of broadband.

Municipal Broadband

A number of parties have suggested that solutions to rural broadband availability should also contemplate permitting, encouraging, or funding municipalities and rural co-ops to build publicly-owned broadband.

While many of these municipal attempts have not been successful, there may be opportunities where they make economic and practical sense if municipalities are careful to identify locations that do not currently have or contemplate broadband coverage in any form, and/or in partnership with private entities. We agree that municipalities shouldn't be prohibited from efforts to step in to serve their constituents where other options are not available. But these entities should be aware that this is a risky and difficult proposition with an inconsistent track record. In more than a hundred attempts over the past twenty years, municipal networks have often been both costly to build and a number have failed.⁴³



Despite some of these difficulties, there may be unserved locations where a targeted, narrow municipal approach may be a useful tool to build or support broadband that will reach all citizens.

These are likely to be areas where it is impossible or impractical for private entities to build either wireless or home broadband, or where no existing or contemplated subsidies or assistance may create the necessary incentives. Identifying those discrete locations will most likely be a specific, granular process, looking for the areas where not only has there been no sustained private investment, but also where no entity has sought RDOF or other public funding to build.

Given the importance of broadband, we believe that it's not appropriate to prevent municipalities from even considering building in these unserved and unlikely to be served areas.

Thus, we do not support state laws or regulations that would block municipalities or rural co-ops from building publicly owned broadband networks in these locations. There may be unserved areas where municipalities or rural co-ops should at least have the ability to consider if funding all or part of a network from their own resources makes sense for their community.

Such proposals may make more sense in instances where municipalities can partner with existing nearby providers in public-private partnerships, or where a municipal network offers open access, reduced middle-mile expenses, or can provide lower rights of way and attachment costs to providers to spur continued growth and deployment.

Conclusion

It's time for a new national strategy to deliver affordable broadband to all Americans and to help them develop the skills to use it. The COVID-19 pandemic has made clear that broadband is integral to our daily lives, to working, learning and communicating in the world today. But not everyone has access to broadband. And many cannot afford it or lack the digital literacy skills to use it.

Over the years, Congress and the FCC have adopted policies to bridge the digital divide. They have implemented programs to make broadband more affordable for low-income Americans and have directed funds to expand broadband to unserved rural areas. Broadband providers, too, are trying to meet the challenge, offering discounted service plans for low-income people. While these efforts are making broadband more available to more Americans, they don't go far enough to close the gap.

Policymakers and many Americans agree that the government should help make broadband more affordable and accessible. The broadband gap is a persistent national problem. But it is solvable. Adopting the policies we've proposed to address affordability, adoption and access would significantly narrow the digital divide and empower more Americans to thrive in the internet age.

Through smart public policy and coordinated government and private sector action, we can make broadband available and affordable to all Americans.

verizon

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VERIZON TESTIMONY

JOINT OVERSIGHT HEARING ON

“Increasing Senior Access to Technology”

HELD BY THE

COMMITTEE ON AGING

AND THE

COMMITTEE ON TECHNOLOGY

OF THE

COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK

ON

JANUARY 22, 2021

Verizon has longstanding and deep-rooted connections with New York City, and for more than a hundred years has played a substantial role in the life of our great city. With the help of the many thousands of New Yorkers who work for the company, we have built and maintained the best-in-class wireline and wireless networks that are the backbone of the 21st century economy — truly a network built *by* New Yorkers, *for* New Yorkers. We work on an ongoing basis, day after day, to maintain and upgrade those networks in order to meet the ever-increasing communication needs of the City and its people and businesses.

That work constitutes a substantial investment in, and contribution to, the future of New York City. Indeed, over the years Verizon has invested billions in its wireline and wireless infrastructure in New York. It is also one of the City's biggest taxpayers and private employers, with one of the City's largest unionized work forces.

Verizon recognizes the obligation of businesses to support the economic, environmental, and social development of the communities in which they live and work. Fulfilling that obligation is sound morality, and sound business. To that end, we have created an initiative known as Citizen Verizon, which builds on the company's long-standing commitment to corporate responsibility. Citizen Verizon is organized around three key pillars — Digital Inclusion, Climate Protection, and Human Prosperity. For more information on the overall initiative I would encourage interested individuals to visit www.verizon.com/about/responsibility

Verizon believes connectivity and technology should be available to all. By supporting digital inclusion initiatives, we enable individuals and communities to develop the knowledge and skills to thrive in the digital age. In the United States our senior community is rapidly growing, with estimates that adults 65 years of age or older will exceed 80 million by 2040. Ensuring this demographic has access to the resources they need to be successful is a key imperative for Verizon.

Broadband has shown to be a significant factor in improving the lives of adults 65 and older. Seniors who have adopted to broadband have an increased sense of community and social interaction; have greater involvement in their own health and wellness; are safer due to technology that allows for locations services and medical alerts to family

members; and greater accessibility embracing and utilizing services that allow for greater transportation alternatives. Verizon is proud of our past and current partnerships focused on educating and helping seniors adopt to broadband services. Some groups we have worked with include the National Council on Aging (Aging Mastery Program), the New York Academy of Medicine (Age Friendly Commission), Catholic Charities of Brooklyn & Queens (senior center technology), and Older Adults Technology Services (OATS volunteerism program).

To assist our consumers, Verizon offers a low cost broadband option through our FiOS Forward program, which offers low-cost broadband to low-income customers at prices as low as \$19.99 per month plus taxes and equipment charges, for blazing-fast speeds of 200 Mbps. Our wireless customers have available our Care Smart watch, which is a wearable designed for seniors to keep them connected while giving their loved ones peace of mind. The watch allows for emergency notification and SOS calling to caregivers and loved ones, assistance with one's own well-being with step counting and task reminders, and protection against fraud by limiting the number of contacts that can communicate with the device to only those the senior trust. As seniors age and become more vulnerable to the health impacts of social isolation solutions like the Care Smart watch provide seniors with an accessible way to stay connected with friends and family at an affordable price point Verizon also offers protections that assist older adults with service interruptions, repair priority, and third party notifications.

To ensure accessibility to these products and services, Verizon is actively engaged in deploying a City-wide fiber-optic telecommunications network and currently operates a robust wireless networking covering all parts of the City. However, to assure all customers can benefit from these networks and to help the City achieve its broadband goals, there continues to be a need for an active partnership with the City and with property owners to facilitate such deployment and necessary upgrades. Access to the public right of way and subsequently access to private property is the only way for broadband to be truly accessible to all citizens regardless of age.

The City of New York can and should encourage and support such private wireline and wireless investment by streamlining their policies to allow reasonable access to City-owned property and facilities in a timely fashion; enable

providers to obtain permits in an efficient manner; consolidate agency approvals; address the constraints of the design approval processes; and refrain from excessive fees and charges.

The City should also encourage property owners to work cooperatively with all providers in order to guarantee all tenants have access to this critical infrastructure. Property owners act as a substantial impediment to broadband deployment.

Thank you for the opportunity to share this information and we are more than happy to meet with you to discuss our plans and potential partnerships in greater detail.



Commitment to Improve the Quality of Life

January 22, 2021

To: New York City Council Committee on Aging & Technology

Re: Increasing Senior Access to Technology

Thank you to the City Council committees on Aging & Technology for providing this opportunity for India Home to testify. India Home is the largest senior center program serving South Asian seniors in New York City. During this pandemic, we have continued to be dedicated to culturally competent programs through our home-delivered meals and groceries, Test & Trace outreach and vaccine awareness in partnership with H+H & DOHMH, and extensive virtual senior center programs.

Technology has allowed us to reach new heights during this time, and attract clients even beyond New York City, in other states and countries. We have been able to help ensure through our virtual exercise, yoga, meditation, health & nutrition education, civic engagement, ESL, arts, and dance classes, that seniors are able to be given enriching programs and are able to stay stimulated and engaged from the safety of their homes, as they are the highest risk age group in need of quarantining. We have also been educating our older adults on the latest health updates through virtual programs and wellness check up calls consistently over the past few months.

While technology has opened up our programs geographically during this pandemic, it has come with its challenges in issues of access, and especially for those who have the lowest tech literacy. 100% of our clients are immigrants, and the largest portion of our seniors face Low English proficiency, all factors which impact their ability to accessing and navigating technology. There are over 100 low-income seniors who take part in our home-delivered meal program and 500+ seniors who have taken part in our grocery programs regularly, but due to a number of barriers, including their lack of access to technological devices, they are unable to take part. There are clients who tend to face issues such as diabetes, high blood pressure & high cholesterol, who would benefit from taking part and continue to express interest in our virtual programs such as exercise, yoga, and low-impact dance, but they're unable to join because of the lack of an adequate smartphone or device. This also has especially been hard for seniors who live alone and do not have supports at home to be able to help them. Furthermore, for those living in family units that depend on their younger grandchildren for their technological devices, the children are oftentimes in school which gets prioritized over the seniors' needs and thus makes the devices unavailable to the seniors during prime hours of programming.

Our team has had to use our limited staff and capacity to train not only the older adults, but ourselves on new virtual platforms. This has taken a lot of resources to be able to provide the individualized assistance needed for each senior to start using the programs. We are grateful for the more than 21,000 units of virtual programming that we have been able to offer during this time. But we are under capacity to be able to support both training needs for clients and the demands for more of these programs. We have also tirelessly looked for different funding options to help our clients purchase technology, to no avail.

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Commitment to Improve the Quality of Life

As you all know, the public health crisis we are in is ever-evolving. However, the biggest guidance that we have been given is that it is especially important for our seniors to stay home. Technology is the one way that we can reach them beyond the baseline needs of meals & groceries. Social isolation has lethal consequences in old age, and technology is the primary way for us to be able to provide the social cohesion and resources necessary to be able to survive during this pandemic. Even beyond the pandemic, when senior centers open, we want to be able to continue these virtual programs so that a senior doesn't have to choose between their safety and social connectedness, and no senior is left behind.

In order for us to continue to serve in the new normal, we make the following recommendations.

- Direct service organizations like ours need more funding to support these programs and continue to provide virtual services to help ensure seniors stay at home and that we safely get through this pandemic
- We need funding to purchase technology (such as smartphones, tablets, etc.) for the most vulnerable seniors who are isolated and unable to access virtual programs to be able to take part
- We need IT support and training from DFTA or the recognition of a need to have this support in-house at our organization

Thank you for your time and consideration of our requests, and giving us the opportunity to testify once again. Please do not hesitate to contact us at info@indiahome.org should you have any questions.

Thank you,

Sincerely,

Vasundhara D. Kalasapudi, M.D.

Executive Director

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**New York City Council Committees on Aging and Technology
Oversight - Increasing Senior Access to Technology**

January 22, 2021

Thank you Chairs Chin, Holden and members of the Committees on Aging and Technology for the opportunity to submit testimony today on *Increasing Senior Access to Technology*. We welcome today's hearing as an opportunity to share our experience with the digital divide and particularly challenges and opportunities that have continued to emerge during the COVID-19 pandemic.

JASA is a not-for-profit agency that honors older New Yorkers as vital members of society, providing services that support aging with purpose and partnering to build strong communities. For over 50 years, JASA has served as one of New York's largest and most trusted agencies serving older adults in the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Queens. JASA has a comprehensive, integrated network of services that promotes independence, safety, wellness, community participation, and an enhanced quality of life for New York City's older adults. These programs reach over 40,000 clients and include home care, case management services, senior centers, NORC supportive services, home delivered meals, caregiver support, continuing education, licensed mental health, senior housing, advocacy, legal services, adult protective services, and guardianship services.

COVID-19 Highlighted the Digital Divide

Over the past ten months, the vital need for access to technology has never been more clear. The pandemic has highlighted the vast digital divide - between generations, economic classes, and communities. As the City and much of the world went remote, programs and services closed their physical doors, and many people, but particularly older adults, were left behind. To work, learn, engage with healthcare professionals,

socialize, or shop, requires access to technology and being comfortable utilizing it. Access to reliable internet connections and knowledge of how to navigate government websites, obtain critical information and resources is no longer a privilege, but is essential.

In July 2019, the New York City Comptroller's office released a report titled *Census and the City: Overcoming NYC's Digital Divide in the 2020 Census* in anticipation of challenges with the digital collection of information in the recent Census. According to the report, seniors were "much more likely to be without a broadband internet connection compared to the general population. Forty-two percent of New Yorkers 65 and above lacked broadband internet access, compared to twenty-three percent of 18 to 24 year olds."

Not only are older adults less likely to have broadband, but many lack the equipment (laptops, tablets and smartphones), or do not have the training needed to fully utilize it.

Shift to Virtual Programming

For years, JASA has offered computer classes at senior centers, NORC programs, Sundays at JASA and other programs. In order to support client and staff safety during the pandemic, JASA has pivoted to virtual programming and remote work in most programs (Adult Protective Services and Community Guardian receive face to face visits).

Despite the halt in congregate services and limiting on-site staff, JASA services have continued seamlessly, with program oversight and service delivery managed virtually. Individual assistance and wellness checks are primarily conducted by phone. JASA programs began offering more remote programs beginning in March and by June, nearly 1,700 senior center members had already participated in 270 virtual programs; and over 1,400 NORC members attended activities remotely. These numbers have continued to grow and programs have expanded to include exercise and art classes, holiday celebrations, musical concerts, tours, and more. JASA's elder abuse support groups meet regularly on zoom (with some participants calling in), as do caregiver support groups. JASA conducted numerous Census 2020 trainings for staff in order to reach members and assist remotely. Election day updates and voter registration events and information sessions were hosted throughout the summer and early fall in preparation for elections. JASA members participated in an Access-A-Ride presentation on zoom about changes taking place in paratransit in the City. NORC Advisory Committee members and senior center leadership committees continue to meet on zoom to discuss programming and concerns as they arise. Programs have met remotely with their NYC Council

Members and NYS representatives to share concerns in their communities. Workshops are currently being planned for members, clients and staff on Ranked Choice Voting.

In order to increase access, combat loneliness and ensure connection to needed resources, JASA secured private funding and piloted a technology project in our affordable senior housing in Brighton Beach. JASA successfully installed WiFi and purchased 100 Chromebooks for clients, adding special Russian-language capacity (the language spoken by the majority of the tenants in that building). WiFi installation consisted of adding four router units to each floor. JASA engaged a technology assistance firm that specializes in working with older adults to create training guides in English and Russian as well as provide individualized training via telephone.

JASA clients and program participants continue to provide encouraging feedback:

“JASA's virtual activities have been my lifeline, filling my need for human contact and normalcy. They've helped keep loneliness, fear, and depression at bay.” - Martin

“Before the virtual classes started, I was at a loss - a senior alone in my apartment with a compromised immune system. Thank you for giving me something to look forward to. It has made all the difference for me in these difficult times.” - Elsie.

“I felt so bewildered, frustrated, and frightened. Then we started all these zoom programs, and I was brave and got a webcam. And I have had a new life since then! JASA has been amazing because they have made all this available to us. The staff - no one could be better.” ~Ellen

JASA is also working to improve daily life for older adults who have specialized needs:

- JASA is partnering with a health care provider to help homecare clients use their smartphones to virtually monitor, communicate with professionals, and improve management of chronic health conditions such as high blood pressure and diabetes. There are currently 103 JASA clients enrolled in this pilot. JASA will soon begin offering a similar health monitoring initiative to case management clients.
- JASA helped develop and has implemented an elder abuse risk detector app to facilitate a legal response in elder abuse and exploitation situations. Social workers enter data that is immediately available to JASA's Legal Services for Elder Justice team.

Research confirms that stereotypes about older people and technology - part of today's agism - have the same negative effect as other 'isms' and undermine older adults'

confidence. Older adults are fully capable of learning new technologies, but investment is needed and currently there is a significant gap. Without thoughtful investment in technology and resources to fully engage, social isolation is a real threat.

Social Isolation and Technology

Social isolation was already a concern in the aging services community prior to the pandemic, but it has been exacerbated by the significant COVID-19 health concerns that overwhelmingly impact older adults and people with underlying conditions. Since mid-March, older adults were told to remain home and avoid unnecessary outings. Physical distancing became social distancing. Family and friends were encouraged to keep their distance, and refrain from indoor visits. All congregate activities and socializing came to a halt overnight. Nobody imagined we would still be self isolating ten months later.

Access to technology has enabled much of the general population to successfully get through this crisis. Social isolation, for example, can be addressed through video calls. Food can be ordered through the internet and basic needs ordered from any mega-store. Election ballots were (and are) available with a simple visit to the Board of Elections website, allowing people to avoid heading out to the polls on election day. People with access are still attending their religious services, choir practices, and family celebrations. Most recently, vaccine appointments are best accessed on-line.

Many older adults, and many of our clients, cannot access these social supports because they lack the needed basic technology or knowledge of how to navigate the internet, or cannot afford a data access plan. While many senior center clients are joining classes virtually, the vast majority lack the technology and skills to be able to participate. These seniors are isolated and are missing the connection they once had through attending in-person programs, family gatherings and visits with neighbors and friends. Technology is empowering and being confined without the tools is demoralizing and presents a significant health concern that must be addressed.

Policy Priority Recommendation

In planning for the future, the City should be focused on ensuring that older adults secure devices, internet access and technology instruction. Access to technology opens opportunities for socialization (virtual, email and text) with families and friends; participation in social, cultural, educational, exercise, and health related programming; accessing tele-health; participation in religious services; and translation services. Technology opens the door to home delivery of groceries, prepared food, and household

supplies, offering convenience in ordinary time and a safe alternative in times of crisis. Of course, greater access also requires heightened attention and support around financial management (for those not used to doing everything cashless) and protection from scams.

We are experiencing an extraordinary level of uncertainty related to the course of the pandemic, but our current experience also informs our vision about the needs and preferences of the City's older adults. The priority for senior services now is to ensure the safety of clients and provide them with the tools necessary for safe and appropriate housing, food security and social connectedness to the people and communities of importance to them. Contracts for senior services should include targeted funding for bridging the technological divide. At this time, we recommend that the City focus its efforts on the goal of increasing access to technology rather than on new contracting. Such efforts will provide a strong basis for future program procurements once the pandemic has transitioned to a more manageable level.

Beyond the funding for technology for older adults, agencies require full funding of their indirect costs. JASA had been approved for a new indirect rate. Like others in the sector, however, JASA received a significant reduction in FY20 and we still do not know what our indirect rate is for the current fiscal year, which directly impacts our ability to adequately support IT services.

Crossing the digital divide is truly essential as that is the key barrier in "our" control -- and sets up the population to be better prepared both for future emergencies, daily life in a post-Covid environment, as well as being able to access the vaccine when that is more realistic.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer this testimony.

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WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF THE SOCIAL WELFARE COMMITTEE

**NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEE ON AGING
AND COMMITTEE ON TECHNOLOGY**

**OVERSIGHT HEARING T2021-7028:
INCREASING SENIOR ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY**

January 22, 2021

The New York City Bar Association, through its Social Welfare Committee, submits this written testimony to highlight the impact of the digital divide on New York City’s homeless senior population.

New York City’s older adult population of over 1.7 million is rapidly growing.¹ Simultaneously, the City faces a severe shortage of subsidized senior housing. As a result, senior New Yorkers have been swept into the City’s homelessness crisis. The number of seniors sleeping in municipal shelters is markedly increasing as a percentage of the overall single adult shelter population. The number of homeless individuals in shelter age 55+ increased by about 250% from 2004 to 2017 and the number of homeless individuals age 65+ increased over 300% during the same time period.²

State regulations require that certain services be provided to shelter residents. However, while not currently mandated by law, municipal shelters overwhelmingly lack in one essential service which could reduce the length of residents’ stay and facilitate their exit to permanent housing -- access to technology. The City Bar documented this problem. In May 2020, the City Bar Justice Center (CBJC) released a report titled “Homeless Need Internet Access To Find a Home: How Access to Internet and Technology Resources can Support Homeless Families

¹ “Annual Plan Summary: Covering April 1, 2021 – March 31, 2022,” NYC Department for the Aging, Nov. 2020, 3, <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/dfta/downloads/pdf/reports/AnnualPlanSummary111820.pdf> (all websites last visited Feb. 26, 2020).

² “Aging Homeless Study,” NYC Center for Innovation through Data Intelligence, Jan. 2019, <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/cidi/projects/aging-homeless-study.page>.

About the Association

The mission of the New York City Bar Association, which was founded in 1870 and has 25,000 members, is to equip and mobilize a diverse legal profession to practice with excellence, promote reform of the law, and uphold the rule of law and access to justice in support of a fair society and the public interest in our community, our nation, and throughout the world.

Transition out of Homeless Shelters” (the Report). This report and its recommendations are endorsed by a wide range of organizations, including law firms, legal services providers, corporations, and community groups. A copy of the report and an endorsement list is annexed hereto.³ The Report lays bare the devastating consequences of New York City’s stark digital divide on the lives of our unhoused neighbors. Without reliable internet access, seniors in shelter are unable to search and apply for permanent housing, apply for government benefits, obtain necessary medical and mental health care, stay connected to friends and family, or even access basic entertainment. These access obstacles take a particular toll on seniors, compounding underlying health conditions and social isolation.

Allowing the lack of access to remain unaddressed is unacceptable. The pandemic has significantly exacerbated the barriers resulting from the City’s digital divide, raising the stakes to literally life-or-death. Access to everything from vaccine appointments, to real estate listings, and governmental offices is accessible online, and such online access is not just preferred, but essential, in order to reduce the risk of virus transmission amongst the City’s uniquely vulnerable senior residents.

RECOMMENDATIONS

New York City has long been a leader in ensuring that its homeless residents have access to shelter, and these times demand that the City now lead the way in providing technology access to its shelter residents, including its seniors. We are dealing with a public health emergency, and it is clear that the City must act quickly in order to meet its basic responsibilities to its unhoused seniors. The Mayor’s Office released an “Internet Master Plan,” a city-wide plan to increase the availability of Internet throughout its five boroughs. However, that plan did not include a single reference to shelters or the unique access needs of our City’s unhoused residents.⁴ Similarly, the New York City Department for the Aging issued its Annual Plan Summary in November 2020; however, the Plan fails to identify or address either the digital divide or the unique service needs of seniors residing in municipal shelters.⁵

In July, the City announced it would be accelerating broadband deployment in all five boroughs, prioritizing public housing communities, which have suffered disproportionately during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁶ That announcement also failed to explicitly indicate that City-funded properties serving as shelters would be included. While the City has made some additional

³ Report available at <https://www.citybarjusticecenter.org/news/homeless-need-internet-access-to-find-a-home-the-city-bar-justice-center-documents-lack-of-technology-in-nyc-homeless-shelters/>; list of endorsing organizations available at <http://documents.nycbar.org/files/CBJCInternetAccessHomelessSheltersEndorsingOrgs.pdf>.

⁴ The New York City Internet Master Plan, NYC Mayor’s Office for Technology, Jan. 2020, available at <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/cto/#/project/internet-master-plan>.

⁵ *Supra* note 1.

⁶ Mayor de Blasio and Taskforce on Racial Inclusion and Equity Announce Accelerated Internet Master Plan to Support Communities Hardest-Hit by COVID-19, July 7, 2020, available at <https://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/499-20/mayor-de-blasio-taskforce-racial-inclusion-equity-accelerated-internet-master>.

commitments in regards to increasing internet access for students residing in shelter,⁷ our seniors are being left behind.

We appreciate the extraordinary efforts the City is taking to respond to the current crisis - the pandemic has, and will continue to, expose the cracks in our systems that disadvantage our most vulnerable populations. It is vital that the City ensure that the thousands of New Yorkers who are homeless and residing in shelters are included in these plans, including seniors.⁸

We urge the City Council to help address this digital divide and work with the Mayor's Office and all related agencies to ensure that City-funded homeless shelters are prioritized in any plans to expand broadband and internet access.⁹ This includes providing access to the following in every City shelter:

- Reliable Wi-Fi connections for all shelter residents;
- Updated Internet-ready computers, tablets, or other devices;
- Wireless or Bluetooth printers with scanners, or printers that maintain connections with the shelter's computers, tablets or other word processing devices.
- Training on how to utilize the technology equipment and navigate the internet.

This must be a sustained commitment and we strongly urge the City Council to consult with all stake holders as it devises a plan to provide internet access in shelters.

Thank you for your service to New Yorkers during these challenging times. We look forward to working with you to help meet this moment.

Social Welfare Committee
Katharine Deabler-Meadows, Chair

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⁷ Reema Amin, "NYC's shelter Wi-Fi plan expected to wrap up after school year ends," Chalkbeat, Oct. 29, 2020, <https://ny.chalkbeat.org/2020/10/29/21540915/nycs-shelter-wi-fi-plan-expected-to-wrap-up-after-school-year-ends>.

⁸ This includes all properties and temporary housing facilities (including hotels) that are maintained by New York City agencies.

⁹ See "Close the Digital Divide! Help Ensure Internet Access for Homeless New Yorkers," New York City Bar Association, <https://www.nycbar.org/media-listing/media/detail/advocacy-alert-help-ensure-internet-access-in-homeless-shelters>.



CITY BAR
JUSTICE
CENTER

HOMELESS NEED INTERNET ACCESS TO FIND A HOME

How Access to Internet and Technology
Resources Can Support Homeless Families
Transition out of Homeless Shelters

MAY 2020



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ABOUT THE CITY BAR JUSTICE CENTER

The City Bar Justice Center (CBJC), the largest division of the City Bar Fund which is the nonprofit affiliate of the New York City Bar Association, increases access to justice for low-income and disadvantaged New Yorkers by leveraging the volunteered time and expertise of the New York City legal community through an effective pro bono model. CBJC responds to the emerging needs of underserved communities, assisting over 25,000 New Yorkers annually through limited and direct legal representation, community outreach, and education efforts on a wide range of civil-justice matters including: homelessness, immigration, veterans assistance, small business development, consumer issues, planning and estates, cancer advocacy, and elderlaw. A dozen core projects led by experts in the field, over 1,500 pro bono attorneys trained and mentored by staff, and the largest free civil legal hotline in New York enable the CBJC to protect the rights, safety, and security of people without the means or support necessary to navigate our justice system.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report is a project of the City Bar Justice Center's Legal Clinic for the Homeless ("LCH") which is responsible for its content. It represents a collective effort that would not have been possible but for the generous contributions of CBJC and LCH Leadership and Staff, as well the generous contributions of our volunteers, including several members of the Legal Department of BNY Mellon, listed below, who assisted significantly to the research and writing of the report. Below is a list of individuals who contributed to the content of the report:

- Lisa Pearlstein, Legal Clinic for the Homeless, Project Director
- Kyara Martinez, Legal Clinic for the Homeless, Project Coordinator
- Cheryl Lopez, City Bar Justice Center, Communications and Development Manager

Volunteers

- Kevin Baumann
- Deirdre Cunnane
- Jason Friedman
- Seema Phekoo
- Paul Winke
- Patricia Wong

This report was the basis for a citywide #Wifi4Homeless advocacy campaign, launched by the New York City Bar Association, urging the City to provide reliable Wi-Fi and internet ready devices to New Yorkers in homeless shelters. Click the following link to learn more: <https://bit.ly/2FFfGax>.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In New York City (“NYC”) during the 2018 fiscal year, 133,284 different homeless men, women, and children slept in the NYC municipal shelter system, including over 45,600 different homeless NYC children.[1] As recently as September 2019, an average of 62,391 homeless people, including 14,962 homeless families with 22,083 homeless children, slept each night in the NYC municipal shelter system. While NYC homeless shelters provide temporary housing for these individuals, the ultimate goal of the NYC Department of Homeless Services (“DHS”) is to prevent homelessness, to help residents regain permanent housing, and to reduce residents' lengths of stay in a shelter.[2]

However, NYC shelters are currently lacking one very basic and essential service that would help shelter residents to secure permanent housing and reduce their lengths of stay in a shelter: access to technology. Today, access to the Internet is considered a basic human right that includes the technology that will enable it.[3] Access to the Internet and the required technology to do so is critical for shelter residents to locate permanent housing and job opportunities, and to access applications for housing, government benefits[4] and other services.

In 2019, the City Bar Justice Center (“CBJC”) conducted a client survey of current and former NYC family-shelter residents in Manhattan and the Bronx. They found that if shelter residents had access to the Internet while in the shelter, they would use the Internet for the following purposes: finding permanent housing (70%), finding a job (60%), finding medical care (63%), accessing other benefits such as unemployment, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), food stamps, Medicaid (45%), access to email (67%) and social networking (74%). Survey respondents indicated that access to the Internet would positively impact their lives.

Respondents also confirmed that the lack of Internet access led to further isolation and frustrated attempts to search for permanent housing, jobs, and other essential benefits.

Cities across the United States have recognized that Internet access is critical for shelter residents. A synopsis of their efforts and how it can be applied in NYC is discussed below. An investment by NYC and DHS in enhancing access to technology (including Wi-Fi, Internet-ready devices and printers) in NYC shelters could lead to a reduction in the overall homeless population and a reduction in other costs associated with housing NYC's homeless population. This report outlines the ways in which DHS's mission can be better achieved.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

The City Bar Justice Center recommends that New York City provide access to the following in every City shelter: (1) reliable Wi-Fi connections, (2) updated Internet-ready computers, tablets, or other word processing devices, and (3) Wireless or Bluetooth printers, or printers that maintain connection with the shelter's computers, tablets or other word processing devices. Access means that the Wi-Fi and devices must be made available to residents and in working order. Access also includes availability for individuals with both traditional and non-traditional school or work schedules, as well as all tools that are essential for use, such as paper and ink for printers, adequate charging facilities for Internet-ready devices, and word processing software.



IMPORTANCE OF ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY FOR HOMELESS SHELTER RESIDENTS

DHS oversees approximately 580 shelter facilities across the five boroughs.[5] On each night in December 2019, these shelters housed an average of 62,590 homeless people. [6] In 2017, NYC spent \$1.3 billion on family and single adult shelter services, a sum larger than outlays on libraries and parks combined.[7] This amount excludes hundreds of millions of additional dollars spent on homeless prevention efforts aimed at reducing the number of people entering shelters and rental-subsidy programs to facilitate exits from shelters.[8] In total, it is estimated that NYC is currently spending in excess of \$2 billion on these services.[9]

While NYC homeless shelters provide temporary housing for individuals, the mission of DHS is to prevent homelessness and to help NYC residents regain independent living in the community.[10] In a recent “Mayor’s Management Report,” DHS stated that one of its overarching goals is to “help individuals and families transition to permanent housing and self-sufficiency.”[11] This means that the agency must not only ensure that “all temporary shelters for homeless individuals and families are clean, safe,

“and well-run,” but also that it “[f]acilitate exits and minimize clients’ length of stay in shelters.”[12]

Despite that goal, statistics show that between December 2017 and September 2019, the number of adults and children in shelters increased by 2,458, or 4.1%.[13] In addition, as of December 2017, single adults were staying in a shelter approximately 100 days longer than they were, on average, in January 2014; and 37 days in the case of adult families (couples without children).[14]

Both family and single adult shelter clients must develop, with the provider staff, an Independent Living Plan (ILP). [15] The ILP forms are the core of a client’s “[shelter] exit plan and an individualized pathway towards sustainable permanency.”[16] But while state regulations require that certain services be provided to shelter clients, shelters are overwhelmingly lacking in one essential service for shelter residents which could reduce the length of residents’ stay and facilitate their exit: access to technology.

A vital component to independent living in today’s world is the Internet,

and NYC and DHS should strive to provide resources to homeless shelters to ensure that homeless men, women, and children in NYC are able to access the Internet. Internet access should be provided through Internet-ready mobile devices, computers and printers, as well as through shelter-based publicly available Wi-Fi, at no extra cost to maximize opportunities for the homeless population to regain independence.

NYC residents now use the Internet for almost every aspect of their daily life—to communicate with others (whether family or friends, or for educational or work purposes), to search for jobs, to create resumes for jobs, to apply for jobs, to search for housing, to apply for housing, to access government benefits and services, to search for educational opportunities, to complete applications for schools, to perform school work, to find medical providers, to access banking services, and much more. Widespread Internet use pervades all social and income classes and is particularly needed by the homeless, who lack a permanent address and landline telephone and require, perhaps more than others, the stability that is provided by Internet access.

Shelter residents need to be able to access the Internet to search for jobs, housing, medical care, and other benefits.

Shelter residents with children, who are a large percentage of the overall homeless population, need the Internet to help their children enroll and remain in school and perform schoolwork. In March 2020, the impact that lack of Internet access has on children in homeless shelters was further evidenced and exacerbated when, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, NYC public schools implemented remote learning. Unfortunately, over 100,000 students living in shelters or unstable housing in NYC were not able to benefit from this set up due to limited access to technology.[17] While the Department of Education is working to provide Internet – enabled devices with cellular technology, such as iPads, students have lost weeks of remote learning time waiting for such a device. [18]

The Internet is an invaluable resource for helping homeless residents return to self-sufficiency. Its potential uses and benefits are innumerable. A modest investment by NYC in enhanced Internet access could lead to a reduction in the overall homeless population and a reduction in other costs associated with housing NYC's homeless population. NYC needs to provide more resources to homeless shelter residents to access technology by providing access to Internet-ready mobile devices, computers and printers, and shelter-based publicly available Wi-Fi.

We propose that NYC set aside funds for enhanced technology access for shelter residents to facilitate the overarching goal of NYC homeless shelters—that they provide a temporary stopping point on a path toward self-sufficiency and independence.

SURVEY RESULTS

During the summer of 2019, the CBJC conducted a survey of current and former NYC homeless shelter residents to obtain information about their access to and use of Internet-ready devices and Wi-Fi while living in NYC shelters (“2019 CBJC Survey”). The results of the 2019 CBJC Survey are summarized below and confirm, among other things, that (1) NYC shelters do not currently provide adequate access to the Internet (in fact, the majority do not provide any access to either Internet-ready devices or Wi-Fi), (2) most shelter residents are not able to otherwise regularly access the Internet on their own and when they do, it requires them to self-fund costly cellular plans with funds that could be put to better use elsewhere, and (3) all shelter residents confirmed that improved access to the Internet would enable them to improve their living conditions and return to self-sufficiency.

In total, CBJC surveyed 84 current and former NYC family-shelter residents in Manhattan and the Bronx. The surveyed residents had the following to say:

67%

**WANTED TO
BUT HAD NO
REGULAR
ACCESS TO
INTERNET**

56 survey respondents (67% of those surveyed) indicated that there were times when they wanted to access the Internet while in shelters, but were unable to do so, because the shelters did not provide Internet access and the residents were not able to get access via other means. Only 10 respondents reported having regular (i.e., daily) access to the Internet while staying in the shelter.

6%

**WERE ABLE TO
ACCESS THE
INTERNET
THROUGH
THEIR
SHELTER**

Only 5 respondents (6% of those surveyed) reported being able to access the Internet through the NYC homeless shelter(s) in which they stayed. In contrast, to the extent that respondents were able to access Internet at certain points, the majority did so through a self-paid cellular plan (64 respondents, or 76% of those surveyed, reported having such a plan at some point or another) or through publicly available Wi-Fi, e.g., Wi-Fi available in NYC public spaces, libraries, or restaurants like McDonald’s and Starbucks. For those residents with smart phones and self-paid cellular plans, 18% of those surveyed reported having limits on minutes or data for those plans that sometimes restricted their ability to access the Internet, despite having an Internet-ready device.

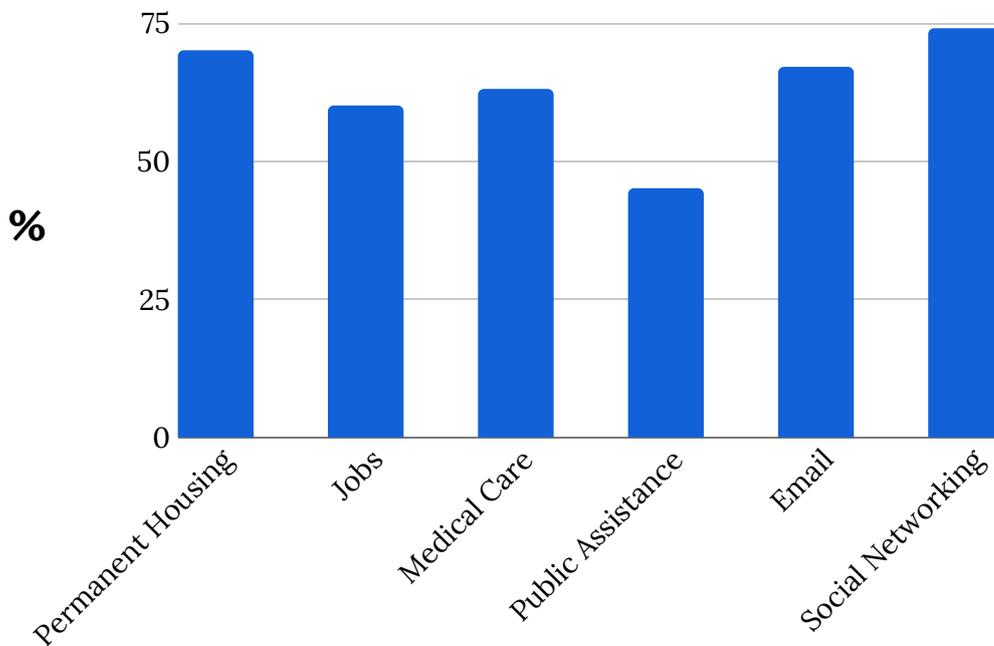
75%

**AGREED
INTERNET ACCESS
WOULD IMPROVE
THEIR
CIRCUMSTANCES**

The overwhelming majority of survey respondents (63 respondents, or 75% of those surveyed) agreed that regular or otherwise improved access to the Internet for shelter residents would enable shelter residents to improve their circumstances, assisting in their efforts to find permanent housing, jobs, and other benefits (discussed further below). The CBJC Survey established that an overwhelming majority of respondents indicated that they were comfortable using the Internet, affirming its relevance in their daily lives.

Based on their familiarity with the Internet, respondents said that if they had access to the Internet while in NYC shelters, they would use the Internet for the following purposes:

What Respondents Would Use Internet For



The 2019 CBJC Survey results present a clear picture of the current state of technology access at NYC homeless shelters: NYC shelters do not provide adequate (and in most cases, any) access to the Internet for NYC shelter residents. NYC shelter residents are in a constant struggle to find ways to access the Internet through other means, including spending what little funds they do have on Internet access. This lack of Internet access denies shelter residents of the many benefits that Internet access could bring, including resources that could help residents on the road to self-sufficiency and independence and to help residents retain some sense of normalcy and permanence in the midst of what is a very stressful experience.

As part of the 2019 CBJC Survey, CBJC also solicited personal anecdotes from the respondents describing how regular and improved access to the Internet would positively impact their lives. Respondents confirmed that the lack of Internet led to further isolation and frustrated their attempts to search for permanent housing, jobs, and other benefits. One respondent noted that “the Internet is no longer a luxury; it is a necessity.” Respondents noted that shelter residents “need the Internet in order to search for apartments” and “need the Internet to find a job.” Residents indicated that with Internet access, they “might have been living in an apartment sooner,” and “having Internet service would have helped [them] get access to a better job.” One respondent actually noted that “the only reason [they] got out of shelter was because [a self-funded Wi-Fi] HotSpot let [them] find out about Housing Connect [19], [but] a lot of shelter residents don’t even know that exists.”

In contrast, the lack of Internet limits those opportunities. One resident noted that the lack of Internet potentially cost them a job, stating, “It’s like living in the dark ages here. I had interviews at [a company] and they were saying I was unresponsive but I wasn’t. The issue was that I did not have Internet.” As one resident put it, Internet access would provide a round-the-clock resource for information and assistance:

“Internet would give you access to everything you need whenever you want. Some case workers only work 9 to 5 so if I needed to search stuff at night to ask them about I could not. I learned how to get out of my situation by reading blogs and joining forums after I got [out]of the shelter. Unfortunately, people in shelter don't have access to that and it's sad.”

Some residents reported being unable to pay for their own Internet service, meaning that without the assistance of the shelter or finding a place with publicly available Wi-Fi, it would be impossible for them to access the Internet. But even for those residents who could afford to pay for Internet access, the need to pay for Internet on their own deprived them of valuable funds that they could have put to other vital uses, like housing. Respondents reported using their very limited public assistance benefits intended for food and other essential items to pay for internet-enabled phones. Respondents noted that “it would be nice to get free Internet so [they] wouldn’t have to use the little funds [they] have” on Internet access,” and “access to Internet at the shelter would have saved [them] money because then [they] would not need to pay for a data plan.” Because money is always a struggle for shelter residents, there are inevitably times when they cannot pay for Internet access and, as a result, cannot access

the Internet. One respondent noted, “I would run out of funds to pay my phone bill so I would not have Internet.”

Beyond the benefits in terms of exit strategy and financial savings, residents also commented on the inability of their children to complete homework assignments while in the shelters due to the lack of adequate technology access, including Internet and printers that are needed for schoolwork. For example, one resident noted:

“Internet in shelter would help me do homework with my child. And it would also help because sometimes I need to print out forms but I can't do that and the case workers are not always available.”

Another respondent said something similar:

“My husband and I were discussing Internet service in the shelter a few days ago and wondered if the social worker would be kind enough to give us the Wi-Fi password so we could help our kids do homework.”

Based on the survey results and sample anecdotes summarized above, it is clear that more must be done in terms of technology access at NYC's homeless shelters. As discussed further below, we believe that NYC and DHS should enhance access to technology at NYC homeless shelters through both Internet-ready devices and publicly available Wi-Fi, as well as access to wireless or Bluetooth printers, or those that are connected to the shelter's functioning and accessible computers.

WHAT OTHER CITIES ARE DOING

NYC has long been a leader in providing temporary shelter to homeless residents. NYC now has an opportunity to lead the way in modernizing those efforts by providing technology access to its residents through the provision of Internet-ready devices and Wi-Fi to all municipal shelter residents. Similar efforts have begun in a limited number of cities across the United States, which recognize that technology access can be a turning point for homeless residents and which can serve as a start for efforts in the five boroughs. Below are a few examples of what other cities have done. More is needed and NYC can be a leader in these efforts.

In other U.S. cities, the views of homeless shelter residents with respect to technology access largely mirror the results of the 2019 CBJC Survey.

San Francisco

Shelter residents in San Francisco, particularly younger shelter residents, for example, cite smartphones and Internet access as the reason for shortened periods of homelessness.[20] Technology is used for connecting with social services, job searches, and finding permanent housing. One non-profit shelter, NextDoor, was able to get online for only \$6,000 (approximately) of equipment supplied by a local Internet provider.[21] In 2016, a former NextDoor resident who spearheaded the initiative to get the shelter online co-founded a nonprofit, ShelterTech, to further help underserved communities get technology access and accelerate out of homelessness.[22] In 2017, ShelterTech received a grant of \$97,454 for three years from the San Francisco government. ShelterTech is using the funds to provide various technology services to shelters and single room occupancy hotels.

ShelterTech focuses on three programs: (1) Shelter Connect, a program that works with Internet service providers to provide free Wi-Fi in shelters and transitional housing facilities, (2) an online housing and human services directory, and (3) step-by-step guides addressing common issues faced by homeless or at-risk individuals. [23]

ShelterTech expanded its Wi-Fi installations by 228% in 2018 and provided Wi-Fi access to 3,000 people through 7 Wi-Fi installations (including at 3 emergency shelters) and 200 portable chargers. ShelterTech's website indicated costs of only \$50 per month to provide Wi-Fi to one shelter and \$0.02 for Wi-Fi for one person for one night.[24]

Some residents of Wi-Fi connected shelters in San Francisco have credited their ability to find and obtain jobs online to simply having access to websites like Indeed.com and Craigslist.com.[25] Residents would not have known that some of these jobs existed without the Internet, as many jobs are posted solely online.[26]

Austin

Austin is another city that has sought to expand the services that it provides to its homeless population through the use of technology. According to the Ending Community Homeless Coalition ("ECHO"), a non-profit organization that plans and implements strategies to end homelessness in Austin and surrounding Travis County, over 7,000 individuals experienced homelessness in Travis County in 2018.[27]

In an effort to improve the lives of its homeless residents, the City of Austin's Office of Design, Technology, and Innovation Projects (the "Innovation Office") developed the MyPass Platform ("MyPass").[28] The project utilizes blockchain in order to give homeless people the ability to digitally store their vital documents, such as social security cards, health data and driver licenses, which "will positively impact homelessness services by helping them gain efficiency".[29] The Innovation Office's website states that its parameters of success for MyPass are efficiency of social service delivery, increased control and agency for homeless people, and to assist with benefit eligibility determinations for homeless residents.[30] The Innovation Office received a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation in June 2019 to develop MyPass over the course of one year.[31] Though MyPass undoubtedly will provide essential autonomy over to Austin's homeless residents, it is important to recognize that the use of this service assumes that its users already have access to Internet.

What NYC is Currently Doing

NYC has made a city-wide plan to increase the availability of Internet throughout its five boroughs, though this effort was not directed toward its homeless population. There is no current requirement for NYC homeless shelters, or for NYC itself, to provide access to technology to its homeless residents. In 2016, Mayor de Blasio announced the public launch of LinkNYC, which would transform the thousands of old payphones in NYC into hubs for free public Wi-Fi, phone calls, and device charging as well as tablet access to city services, maps and directions.[32] Though the stated goal of LinkNYC is "leveling the playing field and providing every New Yorker with access to the most important tool of the 21st century,"[33] within months after launch, "repeated complaints"[34] arose from NYC's sheltered residents because "some users"(35) were "monopolizing" the LinkNYC browsers for their personal use. The web browsers that were initially installed on the LinkNYC kiosks were subsequently disabled, and the extent of LinkNYC's permissible browsing currently is for "maps and city services".[36]

As the LinkNYC website describes, "[t]here are millions of people in New York City who don't have access to high-speed internet... LinkNYC's advertising platform also generates millions of dollars in revenue for New York City." [37] Providing a most basic service, access to technology, to homeless shelters would not generate millions of dollars in revenue for NYC, but it would give NYC's homeless population a chance to maintain autonomy over their lives. Moreover, the ability to use the provided technology to search and apply for housing, employment and government benefits would reduce these residents' stay in homeless shelters over time.

Perhaps then Mayor de Blasio's goal of "leveling the playing field"[38] could be achieved.

Additionally, as discussed below, free public Wi-Fi alone, while helpful, is not sufficient. The cost of providing NYC homeless shelters with up-to-date technology available to all residents is greatly outweighed by the benefits and can often be the key difference in a person's path out of homelessness.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To enable homeless shelter residents to secure permanent housing and significantly reduce the length of stay in a shelter, NYC should supply every shelter with reliable Wi-Fi, modern and accessible Internet-ready devices, and wireless, Bluetooth or otherwise connected printers. Access to technology means that Wi-Fi and the devices must be available to residents and in working order. Access also includes availability for individuals with both traditional and non-traditional school or work schedules, as well as all tools that are essential for use, such as paper and ink for printers, adequate charging facilities for Internet-ready devices, and word processing software.

Access to technology furthers the goals of NYC and DHS:

- 01 BASIC NEEDS**
Including food, shower, safety, Internet
- 02 HOUSING**
Ultimate goal is to find permanent accommodations
- 03 JOB**
A job and access to financial resources ensures they won't lose permanent accommodations once they find it [36]
- 04 WELL-BEING (PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH):**
Use of Internet for social interaction and entertainment (for parents, entertained children enables them to look for housing/jobs)

Access to technology cannot be limited only to Wi-Fi, onsite Internet-ready devices or printers, as each prong alone is not sufficient. As outlined in the 2019 CBJC Survey, while many shelter residents have smartphones through savings, phone-sharing, and programs like Lifeline[40], they often do not have access to sufficient data plans.[41] Without adequate data plans, users are unable to fully leverage the Internet and Internet-based applications.

Smartphones and Wi-Fi availability are not sufficient for many homeless shelter residents. Residents experience difficulty in completing applications on handheld devices and certain websites are not fully available on mobile devices. Furthermore, smartphones offer limited options to word processing applications needed to create resumes or complete homework assignments. Shelter residents also lack the ability to print applications that cannot be submitted online and

homework to submit to school where Internet-ready devices, Wi-Fi and printers are unavailable.

CONCLUSION

As homelessness has continued to grow in the past decade, NYC and DHS can no longer focus only on temporary housing. Efforts must be made to reduce the time spent in shelters and the costs associated with longer periods of homelessness. Our recommendation that NYC should provide access day and evening hours to (1) reliable Wi-Fi, (2) updated Internet-ready devices, and (3) wireless or Bluetooth printers, or printers that are otherwise connected to Internet-ready devices, in every shelter is in line with the goals of NYC and DHS and the needs voiced by shelter residents. This is an opportunity for NYC to tackle the homeless epidemic in a non-traditional way and be a leader on this frontier.



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[2] “Inside DHS.” NYC *Department of Homeless Services*, <https://www1.nyc.gov/site/dhs/about/inside-dhs.page>

[3] “Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, Frank La Rue.”, *United Nations*, 16 May. 2011, https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/17session/A.HRC.17.27_en.pdf

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[22, 25-26] Couch, Robbie. “Homeless Man Helps Shelter Get Internet So Others Can Find Jobs.” *Huffpost*, 6 Dec. 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/homeless-wifi_n_7343152

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[24] “2018 ShelterTech Annual Report.” *Shelter Tech*, 2019, <https://www.sheltech.org/annual-report-2018>

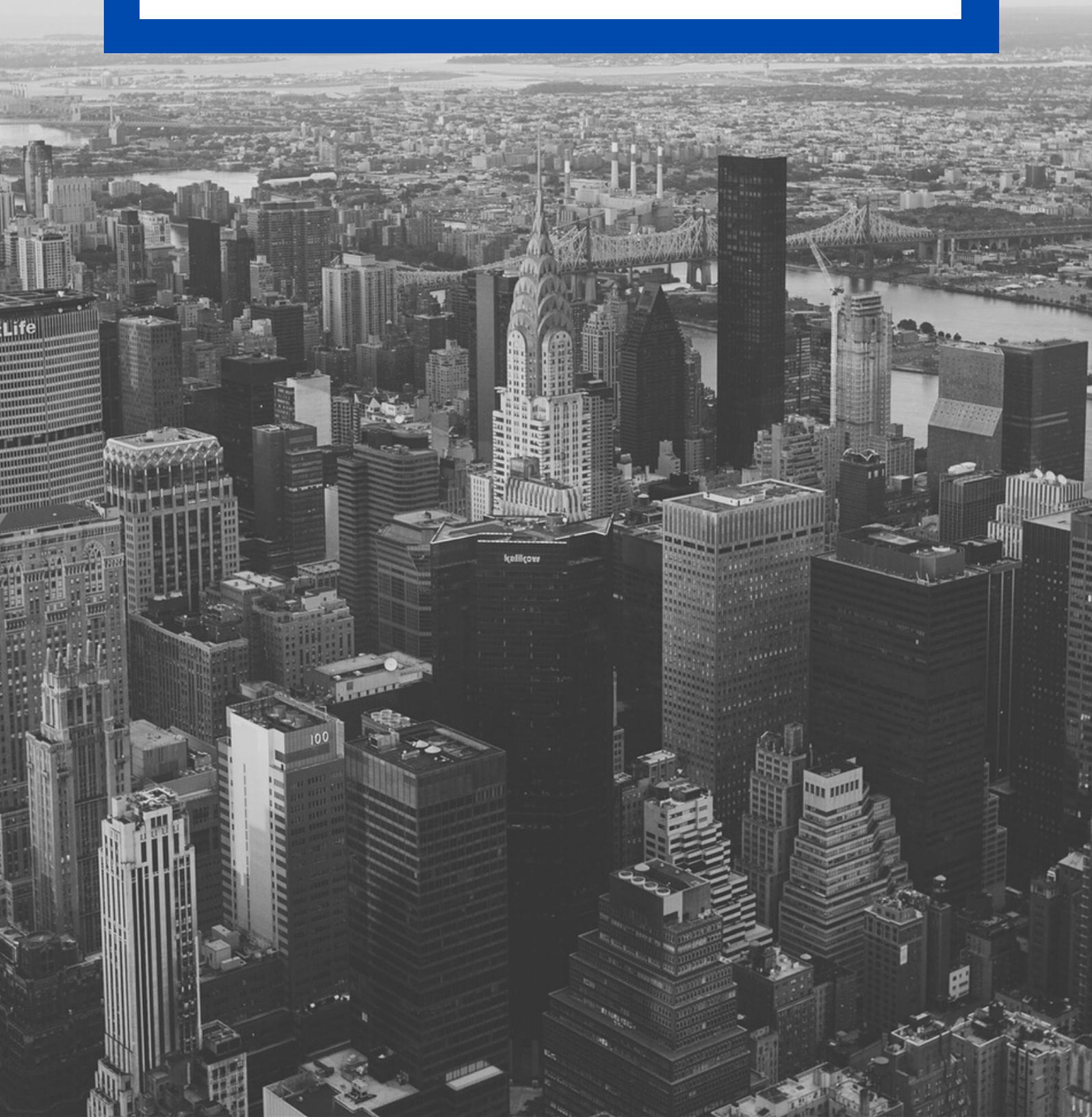
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To learn more about the City Bar Justice Center, visit us at:

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HOMELESS NEED INTERNET ACCESS TO FIND A HOME

A Report from the City Bar Justice Center | May 2020

How Access to Internet and Technology Resources Can Support Homeless Families Transition out of Homeless Shelters

Endorsing Organizations

- Advocates for Children of New York
- The Bronx Defenders
- Brooklyn Defender Services
- Capital One
- Citi
- Citizens' Committee for Children of New York
- Coalition for Homeless Youth
- Coalition for the Homeless
- Community Service Society of New York
- Covenant House
- Davis Wright Tremaine LLP
- Federation of Protestant Welfare Agencies
- Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer US LLP
- Herrick, Feinstein, LLP
- Hunton Andrews Kurth
- Katten Muchin Rosenman LLP
- Kramer Levin Naftalis & Frankel LLP
- The Legal Aid Society
- Legal Services NYC
- Mobilization for Justice
- Morrison & Foerster LLP
- Neighbors Together
- New Destiny Housing
- New York City Bar Association
- New York Legal Assistance Group
- Pillsbury Winthrop Shaw Pittman LLP, New York Office
- Reed Smith
- Riders Alliance
- Safety Net Activists at the Urban Justice Center
- Sheltering Arms Children and Family Services
- Sidley Austin, LLP
- VOCAL-NY Homelessness Union
- Willkie Farr & Gallagher LLP
- Win
- Withers Bergman LLP

Testimony by the New York Legal Assistance Group (NYLAG)

Oversight – Increasing Senior Access to Technology Before the New York City Council

Committee on Technology and the Committee on Aging

January 22, 2021

Chairs Holden and Chin, Council Members, and staff, thank you for the opportunity to testify to the Committee on Technology and the Committee on Aging about increasing senior access to technology. My name is Deborah Berkman, and I am a Coordinating Attorney in the Public Benefits Unit and Shelter Advocacy Initiative at the New York Legal Assistance Group (NYLAG). Founded in 1990, NYLAG is a leading civil legal services organization combatting economic, racial, and social injustice by advocating for people experiencing poverty or in crisis. Our services include free and comprehensive civil legal services, financial empowerment, impact litigation, policy advocacy, and community partnerships. NYLAG exists because wealth should not determine who has access to justice. We aim to disrupt systemic racism by serving individuals and families whose legal and financial crises are often rooted in racial inequality. NYLAG goes to where the need is, providing services in more than 150 community sites (e.g. courts, hospitals, libraries) and on our Mobile Legal Help Center. During COVID-19, most of our services are virtual to keep our community safe. NYLAG's staff of 300 impacted the lives of nearly 90,000 people last year, including 12,200 older adults over the age of 65.

The Shelter Advocacy Initiative provides legal services and advocacy to low-income people in and trying to access the shelter system, and advocates for those

experiencing street homelessness. We work to ensure that every New Yorker has a safe place to sleep by offering legal advice and representation throughout each step of the shelter application process. Additionally, we assist and advocate for clients who are already in shelter as they navigate the transfer process, seek adequate facility conditions and resources for their needs, and we offer representation at fair hearings. I also work in the Public Assistance and SNAP Practice, which provides advocacy and legal representation to those on or trying to access cash public assistance or SNAP. Many of my clients are seniors who are reliant on public benefits and/or are experiencing homelessness.

Prior to founding NYLAG's Shelter Advocacy Initiative, I was part of NYLAG's dedicated Elder Law Practice. The Elder Law Practice provides civil legal services tailored to the needs of low-income, vulnerable seniors, with an emphasis on advance planning, access to benefits, including health and home care, pooled supplemental needs trusts, and addressing elder abuse.

Increased access to technology is vital for our elderly clients to maintain public benefits, and obtain life-saving medical care and legal assistance. We urge this Council to prioritize providing seniors with internet-ready devices, ensuring that these seniors have internet available to actually use those devices, and provide trainings so that seniors may be successful at what, for some of them, is a new interface.

I- Seniors Need Access to Technology to Maintain Their Public Benefits

Many of our senior clients rely on public benefits for survival. Technology access is vital to apply for and maintain public benefits administered by New York City's Human Resources Administration (HRA), particularly during the current pandemic. At the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, HRA closed almost all of its Job and SNAP Centers. Most

centers still remain closed with no plans to reopen, and HRA has indicated that it will keep many of these centers closed permanently.

Thus, the primary way to apply for, maintain, and recertify these public benefits is through AccessHRA, the online public benefits management portal. Unfortunately, AccessHRA can only be accessed via the internet or a smart phone, so many seniors who would have pre-COVID walked over to their local center now have no choice but to submit information via a computer or other device. But many seniors do not have the necessary technological access. NYLAG's senior clients without internet access struggle to understand and maintain their public benefit cases and often do not receive the benefits they need and are entitled to receive. This is particularly problematic for our senior clients who live in Department of Homeless Services' single adult shelters, many of which do not have internet access. There, the lack of technology not only prevents clients from obtaining or maintaining public benefits, it also prevents these seniors from finding and transitioning to permanent housing.

II- Seniors Without Access to Technology Cannot Receive Life-Saving Telehealth Services

Lack of devices and internet access also prevents seniors from accessing life-saving medical care and critical mental health treatments during the pandemic. Without online access, seniors have not been able to participate in tele-health appointments and have had to let preventative, acute and mental health care go by the wayside. As important as internet access was prior to the pandemic, now it is even more vital. One study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Informatics Association* found that the biggest obstacle to providing high-quality tele-health services during COVID-19 has been the lack

of access to high-speed internet for many patients.¹ The authors cited research showing that areas with limited broadband access also had higher rates of chronic diseases such as obesity and diabetes, resulting in "a double burden where those with the lowest connectivity have the highest need."² They also suggested that limited internet access could prevent individuals from connecting online with family and friends, which could contribute to other adverse health outcomes.³ This is consistent with my senior clients' experiences. Many of these seniors have become exceptionally lonely and isolated. Moreover, many of who have not been able to harness tele-health opportunities have missed preventative health appointments and have been forced to receive most of their health care from emergency room visits. Some senior clients with mental health challenges have not been able to access help because it is primarily offered on Zoom or other online platforms. The inability to connect with family and friends online has also exacerbated the mental health struggles many of our senior clients experience. Now more than ever, the inability to access technology has caused untold suffering and been extremely destabilizing for countless seniors.

III- Seniors Without Access To Technology Cannot Access Legal Services

Access to internet and related technology is critical to accessing legal services. The need for free legal assistance has increased for seniors during the COVID-19 pandemic. NYLAG has seen an increase in seniors seeking medical and financial advance directives, increases in issues related to health care and elder abuse and increased difficulty accessing Medicaid, SNAP, and SSI. This is due to both the physical closure of community senior

¹ <https://academic.oup.com/jamia/advance-article/doi/10.1093/jamia/ocaa156/5863253>.

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

centers, where seniors previously received hands-on assistance with benefits, and the current agency office closures. Seniors who are recovering from COVID-19 often need higher levels of medical care and need assistance with appealing of denials of care. Addressing these legal needs requires sharing documents between the legal services provider and client. For example, an older adult appealing a denial of Medicaid funded home-care would need to sign a HIPAA release, in addition to other authorizations, and send any relevant denial notices and medical records to their attorney. Without the ability to meet in person, the exchange of documents can either be done through email, texting images through smart phones, or by mailing documents back and forth. Relying on mail alone causes significant delays and is not a viable option to address some legal needs. As an example, creating a Power of Attorney, Health Care Proxy, Living Will, Last Will and Testament, or any type of trust document requires witnessing or notarization, and sometimes both. While remote notarization and remote witnessing are permitted during COVID-19 (pursuant to the Governor's executive orders), both require a live video connection and for the signed documents to be transmitted on the same day (by email, texting or faxing).⁴⁵ Clients who do not have access to the internet, either through computer or smart phone, are unable to create any of these important documents without an in-person meeting with the witnesses and the notary, and such visits are impossible to arrange with most service providers working primarily remotely.

⁴ <https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/no-2027-continuing-temporary-suspension-and-modification-laws-relating-disaster-emergency>

⁵ <https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/no-20214-continuing-temporary-suspension-and-modification-laws-relating-disaster-emergency>

For all of the above reasons, we urge this Council to prioritize providing seniors with internet ready devices, ensuring that these seniors have internet available to actually use those devices, and provide seniors with sufficient trainings on how to use this technology.

We thank the Committee on Technology and the Committee on Aging for the work you have done to assist vulnerable New Yorkers, and we hope we can be a resource for you going forward.

Respectfully submitted,

New York Legal Assistance Group

Testimony

City Council Committees on Aging and Technology

1/22/2021

**Thomas Kamber, PhD
Executive Director,
Older Adults Technology Services (OATS)**

Good Morning,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. In preparing my remarks, I came across a briefing paper from a long-ago City Council hearing—it was the first time I ever provided testimony before the Council—October 28, 2005. “Circuits and Seniors: Assessing the Technology Needs of Senior Citizens.”

Here are a few quotes:

“Technology is quickly being seen not only as a vital outlet for pertinent information but also as a portal through which seniors can get in touch with loved ones or plug into online communities.”

“There is a growing gap between seniors and technology.”

“There are a number of successful initiatives presently active in the city...and the feedback has been very positive.” [Cites OATS specifically].

“The city should consider:...allocating funds for programs that train seniors to use technology...working with the nonprofit sector to decide what needs to be done...gathering relevant data.”

Sixteen years later, the situation hasn't changed and we're observing many of the same alarming facts and trends, except that today approximately 21,000 older New Yorkers have died from the Coronavirus. OATS research shows that 40 percent of New Yorkers over the age of 65 lack wireline internet at home. So 8,400 senior citizens died this year in New York City with no reliable home broadband, no way to participate on Zoom calls with family, no way to order food or supplies online, no way to manage their finances safely, and no way to go online for reliable, up-to-date information about how to stay safe from the virus. While the rest of us were home using every technology tool available to avoid getting sick, these individuals were forced to make life-and-death decisions about exposing themselves to a deadly pathogen just to carry out daily activities. How many died because they had to do something in person that could have been done online if they only had a simple internet connection?

We recently asked older adults who participate in our online Senior Planet technology programs to let us know if they found having internet helped them stay safe during Covid, and in a single day we received 196 responses, every single one making the case that technology was an essential ingredient for survival during Covid. People referred to it as a “God-send,” “essential,” and a “life-saver,” and commenting on how it helped them maintain social connections, manage finances, order food, and connect to fitness programs online.

Since 2005, OATS has taught over 30,000 technology classes free-of-charge to older New Yorkers, working with over 100 nonprofit partners and helping over 50,000 seniors get online. We launched the

Senior Planet Exploration Center in 2013—the country’s first technology-themed community centers for older adults, and have worked closely with the departments for the aging and technology on programming over the past dozen years. We’ve built 34 free technology centers, helped distribute over 11,000 computers, provided capacity training for senior centers all across New York City, and created 3,000 pages of curriculum, with classes in English, Spanish, Chinese, Russian, and Bengali. We’ve launched the country’s most successful online community for older adults at SeniorPlanet.org, and raised over 15 million dollars in funding to support our efforts. We have won dozens of awards for our programs and been featured regularly on national media (including the Today show, coming up this weekend!), and we have been invited to share our successful model on five continents. We have participated in the mayor’s broadband advisory council, on the Age-Friendly New York Commission, and on the governor’s broadband commission. And we have expanded our programs to have staff and operations in five states.

We applaud the efforts of city leaders—Mayor De Blasio, Commissioner Cortés-Vázquez, and CTO Farmer—to help bring seniors online and to promote innovation in City contracts and services. At the same time, funding remains severely inadequate to meet the scale of the problem. Support for technology programs comprises less than one percent of funding allocations from NYC Aging—a level of support that is simply not sufficient to achieve large-scale change that is needed. More specifically, OATS as an organization has more than doubled in size in the past five years, but our funding from New York City public sources has actually gone down—virtually all of our new resources have come from private and corporate supporters, and from states other than New York. We have submitted dozens of proposals over the past decade to grow our initiatives to reach more sites and more seniors, but overall, no increases in funding have been forthcoming.

We support the programs to deliver free tablets and connectivity to NYCHA residents over 60, and we believe New York City has extraordinary assets to solve this problem—agency leadership, telecommunications companies, nonprofit activists and providers. At the same time, it is remarkable that after 16 years of recognizing the priority and urgency of this issue, we are still failing to commit the adequate resources to solve the problem.

We look forward to working with the City Council, NYC Aging, MOCTO and other collaborating organizations to address this critical issue.

Thank you for your attention, and for the opportunity to testify.



New York City Council Hearing

Committee on Aging, Committee on Technology

January 22, 2021

Subject: Access to Technology for Seniors with Limited Capacity

Testimony: Beth L. Williams, Esq., Project Guardianship

I am Beth Williams, the Deputy Director of Legal Services for Project Guardianship, formerly a demonstration project of the Vera Institute of Justice. Project Guardianship is a non-profit agency that serves as court-appointed guardian pursuant to Article 81 of the New York State Mental Hygiene Law. In our 15 years of operation, we have served over 500 individuals in New York City for whom a judge has determined their functional limitations necessitate the assistance of a guardian of either person, property, or both.

The overwhelming majority of our clients are seniors. They reside across all five boroughs of New York City. Generally, they live in one of two places – a nursing facility or at their home in the community. Before the pandemic, we were able visit with each of our clients on a monthly basis regardless of their location. This enabled us to visibly assess their health, affect, social relationships, and environment, and make fully informed decisions about their course of care. With

the onset of the pandemic in March 2020, the visitation restrictions in facilities have prevented us, as well as judges, court-appointed counsel, and evaluators, from having hands-on access to our senior clients with limited capacity.

It is very difficult to holistically monitor the condition of our seniors and to advocate for adjustments to their care when we are unable to see them in person. Due to their functional limitations, many of our clients are unable to use technology to connect with us, and the nature of the communications with those who can do not lend themselves towards monitoring changes in their physical and mental condition. Because we cannot enter a facility, we are unable to observe the environment in which care is being provided and be watchful for indicators of substandard treatment.

It has been our experience that nursing facilities are poorly equipped to provide our clients with access to technology that would enable us to “visit” them via videoconferencing. As such, access to our senior clients living in facilities has mostly been via telephone and, for our clients who are unable to use a telephone, the best we can do is have a conversation with care staff about their oftentimes biased perceptions of our clients’ well-being. So long as COVID-19 continues to spread and access to nursing facilities is denied, we urgently need policies that mandate nursing facilities provide access through technology to persons under guardianship so we can ensure they receive the care they need and that we are in the best possible position to make decisions on their behalf.

For our senior clients who reside in the community, of whom many are homebound, we have limited in-person visitation to all but the most necessary of circumstances to help prevent the spread of COVID-19 to these most fragile residents of our city. In most instances, our clients who reside in the community have either full-time or part-time home health aides. While we have had much better success working with aides to access our clients at home via videoconferencing technology, there are still barriers such as (i) availability of inexpensive broadband and affordable mobile phones or laptops for our senior clients who are poor and live on fixed incomes, (ii) lack of training of home health aides on how to use the technology, and (iii) lack of technical support to troubleshoot issues. We need funding for broadband and devices for low income seniors, and training for home health care providers on how to use technology like videoconferencing.

While we understand the complexity and unprecedented nature of the present public health emergency, protecting our seniors who have disproportionately lost their lives due to COVID-19 should be made a priority. Quick action to ensure they have meaningful access to technology will help assure that our effectiveness as their guardian will not be curtailed precisely when they need it most.

Thank you to the Councilmembers and the Committees for inviting me to testify in this hearing.



Testimony to the New York City Council on Increasing Senior Access to Technology

Delivered on January 22, 2021

by Melissa Sklarz, Senior Government Relations Strategist

My name is Melissa Sklarz and I am the Senior Government Relations Strategist for SAGE. On behalf of SAGE and the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) elders we serve, thank you for holding this hearing today on increasing our city's elders' access to technology during the COVID-19 pandemic and into the future.

Founded in 1978, SAGE is the country's first and largest organization dedicated to improving the lives of LGBT older people. SAGE is the leading provider of services and supports to LGBT older people in New York City.

LGBT elders are living at the epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic. This is not only because of their age, but also because of: (1) disproportionately high levels of underlying health conditions like HIV and diabetes; (2) higher levels of poverty and food and housing insecurity; (3) lower access to health care and supportive services; (4) social isolation and thin support networks; and (5) mistrust of government and other institutions based on historical and current discrimination and mistreatment. All of these challenges are even further exacerbated for transgender elders and LGBT older people of color. The cessation of in-person services and programs for older adults has made access to technology crucial, if not life-saving.

We know how deeply our City's LGBT elders rely on SAGE for support, community and connection. SAGE is a cornerstone of New York City's LGBT community, providing vital services to LGBT elders and older people living with HIV for 43 years. SAGE oversees a growing network of five SAGE Centers across the City and continues to modernize both quantity and quality of services to LGBT elders and allies. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, SAGE has shifted considerable capacity, energy and resources to adapt to the new reality and reimagine our programs and services for virtual and telephonic delivery.

Like all older adult centers in the City, SAGE has not offered in person congregate programming at our five SAGE Centers since mid-March. To ensure that the LGBT elders who we serve have access to community and connection, we have doubled down on reinventing and reimagining our programming to meet the demand among LGBT elders. We have pivoted our programs and services to telephonic and virtual formats to ensure that the thousands of LGBT elders who rely on SAGE continue to be engaged and stay connected. From yoga and Spanish classes to discussion groups, SAGE is offering more than 100 virtual SAGE Center programs a week, attracting hundreds of LGBT elders and allies.

In addition to our SAGE Centers' virtual programming, SAGE is offering ongoing virtual and telephonic meetings, support groups, financial support services, and programs through our SAGE Positive and SAGEVets initiatives.



SAGE's work with our LGBT elders and older people living with HIV has never been more crucial. So many LGBT elders already have nobody to watch out for them – to ensure that they have essential food and medicine, to make sure they can access life-saving benefits and financial support, and to offer a modicum of social contact – other than SAGE.

SAGE has also launched brand new virtual programs and initiatives. One of our new programs is SAGECents, a financial wellness app developed specifically for LGBT elders, to improve LGBT elders' financial stability and reduce economic stress, in these uncertain times. SAGE also launched SAGEConnect, a national virtual program that matches volunteers with LGBT elders to combat social isolation. To date, we've connected nearly 500 LGBT older people from across the country—including hundreds from across New York State—with volunteers.

All of these virtual initiatives are only effective if LGBT older people have the technology to access them. Older adult centers need funding to purchase and distribute technology to older New Yorkers so they can remain at home with the necessary technology and internet speed to participate in virtual programs and services.

SAGE is hopeful that the Department of the Aging will partner with providers to help increase access to technology among our City's older people. One potential bridge for the digital divide is the bulk purchase of technology for our city's elders, ensuring access and connection for older people including those most marginalized like LGBTQ elders. Although New York City benefits from many standout programs and services for older adults, too many of the programs funded by the city do not adequately address what older New Yorkers want and need today. Changing this needs to be a key a priority for the City, which can do so by allowing flexibility and encouraging service providers to experiment with new models and approaches, including virtual program and service delivery, in procurement processes.

Further, New York needs better broadband and wifi access in public housing. In fact, last year, the Mayor committed to spending \$157 million in ending digital redlining and providing high-speed internet to those who need it most. This investment will extend new internet service options to 600,000 underserved New Yorkers, including 200,000 NYCHA residents over the next 18 months. This approach will create a path to universal broadband across New York City. Older adult centers must be included in this plan to distribute this technology to its clients safely.

And we support Governor Cuomo's proposal to improve access to telehealth, and allow for greater flexibility in where and how patient use telehealth, offer new requirements for insurers regarding telehealth coverage, providing technology expansions that would further enable virtual care, and encouraging professional development and education to facilitate the use of telemedicine among patients and providers.

SAGE is grateful for the partnership that we have with the New York City Council, which has been instrumental in ensuring that our LGBT elders can age with dignity and respect. Thank you for holding this hearing and for the opportunity to testify.



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**Testimony from Selfhelp Community Services
New York City Council
FY21 Aging Committee and Technology Committee Hearing Public Testimony
January 22, 2021**

My name is Katie Foley and I am the Managing Director of External Affairs and Communications at Selfhelp Community Services. Thank you to Aging Committee Chair Margaret Chin and Technology Committee Chair Bob Holden, and the members of the committees for the opportunity to testify today.

Selfhelp was founded in 1936 to help those fleeing Nazi Germany maintain their independence and dignity as they struggled to forge new lives in America. Today, Selfhelp has grown into one of the largest and most respected not-for-profit human service agencies in the New York metropolitan area, with 46 program locations throughout Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx, and Nassau County. We provide a broad set of services to more than 20,000 elderly, frail, and vulnerable New Yorkers each year, while remaining the largest provider of comprehensive services to Holocaust survivors in North America. Selfhelp offers a complete network of community-based home care, social service, and senior housing programs with the overarching goal of helping clients to live with dignity and independence and avoid institutional care.

Our services are extensive and include: specialized programs for Holocaust Survivors; eleven affordable senior housing complexes; four Naturally Occurring Retirement Community (NORC) programs; three intensive case management programs; five senior centers including one of New York City's first Innovative Senior Centers; home health care; client centered technology programs including the Virtual Senior Center; court-appointed guardianship; the Selfhelp Alzheimer's Resource Program (SHARP); and New York Connects, which provides seniors and people with disabilities with the information and support they need to remain living independently in their own homes.

We are grateful for the Council's long standing and ongoing support for so many important senior programs and for always emphasizing the needs of older adults in policy decisions and budget allocations. With strong community-based programs, we are confident that older New Yorkers will be able to access the care and support they deserve and need to be able to age in their own homes and communities.



Claims Conference ועידת התביעות
The Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany

COVID Response

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Selfhelp has continued to serve our 20,000 elderly and vulnerable clients through our range of home and community-based programs. Our home health aides have provided much needed at-home care, our frontline staff have been caring for individuals in the Community Guardian Program, and all of our social workers from our community-based programs have been checking on their clients by phone or Zoom to ensure access to food, safe shelter, medical care, and more. We have expanded and enhanced our Virtual Senior Center to include members of Selfhelp's community-based programs and Holocaust Survivor Program in order to reduce social isolation among our clients. Now that we are in the vaccine distribution phase of the pandemic, the importance of access to technology is a necessity. When a client doesn't have internet access, it's often our social workers or the client's family who are working with the client by phone to schedule an appointment. Our team is working every day to ensure our clients continue to live with dignity through this challenging time.

Access to Technology

As we have adapted our programs to be virtual we can starkly see the technology disparity among seniors in terms of access to devices, Wi-Fi, and technology skills. We need a comprehensive plan to address this divide as we look at the future of services to older adults.

The COVID pandemic has widened the technology gap among our clients. Thousands of older New Yorkers need access to stable and affordable internet, computers or laptops, and computer skills classes. While social isolation used to be something we associate with old age, it's now something affects everyone – and we all know how it feels. We have a new appreciation for the importance of virtual programming and related technology needed to stay connected.

We strongly support closing the technology gap among older adults. Older adults deserve access to the same technology that many of us take for granted. They need smart phones to plan their safe and reliable transportation around the city, to communicate with health care workers and social workers, and more recently to navigate the COVID vaccine system with QR codes.

As our staff began remote work at the start of the COVID pandemic, we could see how the technology gap was often the most visible for the clients who needed the most help. Those without family or neighbor support, those who are low income, non-English speakers who needed to navigate English-only websites, and the frail elderly in need of extra services to live safely at home during quarantine. When possible, our workers creatively helped our clients learn how to use zoom or Facetime on their smart phones and how to take photos of important documents needed to sign up for services that allowed them to stay safely at home while the pandemic continued.

Sometimes we hear the myth that older adults are not interested or capable of using current technology. We know this is false from many years of experience with our Virtual Senior Center. With hundreds of older participants over ten years, we've seen participants from 60-101 years old learn to use the computer, access email, join video chats, and become active members of an online community. We know that access to interactive virtual programming reduces social isolation and helps people feel better, but the



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programming needs to be coupled with skills classes for older adult learners and computer technical support.

Reducing Social Isolation: Virtual Senior Center

For seniors who are homebound—particularly during the current global health pandemic—Selfhelp’s Virtual Senior Center (VSC) is a vital source of face-to-face social interaction by allowing participants to join interactive live classes and peer-to-peer chats. With the ongoing recommendation for older adults to remain at home except for essential errands, many seniors have a new interest in virtual social interaction and community and we believe the VSC should become a permanent part of the city’s infrastructure to support older adults.

Developed ten years ago, the Virtual Senior Center (VSC) has been a trailblazer in meeting the needs of homebound older adults in NYC while combating social isolation. We believe that the Virtual Senior Center can become a lifeline for the thousands of vulnerable older New Yorkers both during and after the COVID pandemic.

Selfhelp considers it vital to address social isolation – not only because it has a dramatic impact on quality of life in older adults, but also because isolation has been linked to poorer health outcomes including higher blood pressure, greater susceptibility to the flu and other infectious diseases, earlier onset of dementia, and shorter life span.

While the Virtual Senior Center was designed with homebound seniors in mind, suddenly we are all have a new understanding of what it means to be isolated from friends and family and only connected through a screen. Those once able to travel to their local Selfhelp senior center or participate in activities are now unable to do so. Our Virtual Senior Center (VSC) has truly become a lifeline. Older adults are able to log on to the Virtual Senior Center for lessons, discussions, and socializing, all from the safety of their homes. Margo’s story explains the importance of the VSC:

Margo is a member of our Benjamin Rosenthal Prince Street Innovative Senior Center, who is now participating in the VSC. Though she misses her Senior Center friends and the activities she enjoyed there, including ping pong, fitness classes, and tai chi, she is grateful to be able to fill her schedule with programming from our Virtual Senior Center. Margo shared, “I look at the [VSC] calendar every day to see what’s going on...I appreciate everything Selfhelp has been doing.”

Participants use a personal computer or tablet to log into the VSC where they review the weekly class calendar. In each class, all participants can see, hear and speak to each other in real time. Classes are offered in English, Mandarin Chinese, Russian, Spanish, and Korean. The VSC platform has the ability to engage homebound older adults at home while increasing their social network.

Conclusion

Selfhelp is grateful to the City Council for always emphasizing the needs of older adults in policy decisions and budget allocations. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. On behalf of the 20,000 clients we serve, I am grateful for the Council’s support on so many important programs.



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Testimony of The Legal Aid Society on
Oversight: Increasing Seniors' Access to Technology

presented before

The New York City Council's Committees on Aging and Technology

Alex Ryley
Director of Elder Law, Civil Practice
January 22, 2021

The Legal Aid Society thanks the Aging and Technology Committees for convening this hearing and appreciates the opportunity to contribute our testimony on the subject of older adults' access to technology in the context of remote legal proceedings.

WHO WE ARE

The Legal Aid Society, the nation's oldest and largest not-for-profit legal services organization, is more than a law firm for clients who cannot afford to pay for counsel. It is an indispensable component of the legal, social, and economic fabric of New York City – passionately advocating for low-income individuals and families across a variety of civil, criminal, and juvenile rights matters, while also fighting for legal reform. This dedication to justice for all New Yorkers continues during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Legal Aid Society's Civil Practice provides comprehensive legal assistance on a vast array of legal matters involving housing, foreclosure and homelessness; family law and domestic violence; income and economic security assistance (such as unemployment insurance benefits, federal disability benefits, food stamps, and public assistance); health law; immigration; HIV/AIDS and chronic diseases; elder law; low-wage worker problems; tax law; consumer law; education law; and community development opportunities to help clients move out of poverty. Last year our Civil Practice worked on more than 40,000 individual case and legal matters, benefiting more than 103,000 low-income children and adults.

SENIORS' PARTICIPATION IN REMOTE LEGAL PROCEEDINGS: OBSTACLES AND SOLUTIONS

It has long been a commonplace that older New Yorkers need much better access to technology. But this need is more urgent now than ever, as Covid-19 precautions have literally increased the distance between socially-isolated seniors and the rest of the world. The Legal Aid Society's purpose in testifying today is to highlight the enormous challenges that seniors' lack of access to technology causes in the legal arena.

1. Remote hearings profoundly disadvantage older litigants

To the extent that court proceedings in New York City have moved forward during the pandemic, these hearings have occurred mostly remotely, via the Zoom and Microsoft Teams platforms. Remote proceedings suffer from limitations that can disadvantage even the most technologically savvy and well-equipped litigants. The limitations of remote proceedings that implicate litigants' due process rights include the following:

- A judge conducting a remote hearing is less able to assess a witness's credibility, because the judge cannot perceive non-verbal cues, or may misinterpret them (for instance, a witness may appear as if she is looking away when she actually believes she is looking at the camera);
- A judge conducting a virtual proceeding faces similar challenges evaluating a witness's well-being and level of understanding, as well as the voluntariness of the witness's waiver of any rights;

- The technology does not always work properly, leading to distortions or omissions that can affect a judge’s credibility determinations;
- Litigants who do not understand and speak English face a further level of “remoteness” from the judge due to their reliance on an interpreter with whom they cannot physically interact; and
- An attorney cannot confer confidentially with her client during the proceeding as quickly and easily as she can when the two are side-by-side in a courtroom.

The limitations just mentioned affect *all* remote proceedings, even those in which all litigants are represented by counsel and in which all witnesses are both very competent and highly technologically equipped. But many older litigants lack access to, and even the most elementary understanding of, the technology needed to participate in a remote proceeding – a phenomenon that has been termed the “access and skills divide”. Litigants who are older, are of modest means, and who are members of marginalized groups are the most likely to lack technological literacy and access to reliable – if any – devices and connectivity. Such litigants who are isolated, with no social or family support, are at an even greater disadvantage.

Given these fundamental realities, The Legal Aid Society believes that older New Yorkers should not be forced to defend themselves in legal proceedings until courthouses have fully and safely reopened. But because the courts are clearly determined to move forward remotely to the extent that the government will allow, we urge the City to furnish devices and training and ongoing support to seniors as soon as possible.

2. The City must provide technology access to older New Yorkers now

Imagine being one of the many elderly low-income tenants who have never touched, let alone operated, a smart phone or a computer. But you receive court papers that say not only that you have been sued for eviction, but also that you should appear remotely in court. Even if you are able to retain a free lawyer from one of the non-profit legal services providers, will you be able to participate in the hearing that will decide whether you will be allowed to retain your housing? And if so, how difficult will that experience be? In a moment we will answer these questions by way of an actual case example.

a. How many tablets has the City distributed to older NYCHA tenants?

But first, we note that several Housing Court judges began telling us several months ago that the NYC Department for the Aging was going to provide technology and related support to older litigants that would allow them to participate in their cases remotely. We do not know where the judges obtained this notion, but it has proved to be incorrect. The only tech-provision plan of the City’s of which we are aware purports to distribute 10,000 tablet computers and related education to older residents of NYCHA developments.¹ But we do not know how many of these tablets have actually been acquired and distributed, what the equipment specs are, how the devices have been used, and the recipients’

¹ See <http://nychanow.nyc/nycha-seniors-become-technology-pros/>.

experience of the project.² We understand that the NYC Department for the Aging has been tasked with implementing the program's rollout. We encourage the Council to request of DFTA the following information:

- What type of tablets did the City purchase?
- What applications were loaded onto the tablets?
- If the tablets employ a data plan, what are the specs of that plan?
- How did the City go about identifying and communicating with potential recipients of the tablets, including those who do not communicate in English?
- How many tablets has the City distributed?
- What steps has the City taken to understand the subjective experience of the seniors who have received the tablets? And what ongoing support is the City offering to them?

b. We are working with Columbia Law School to optimize our older clients' tech access and experience

But meanwhile, The Legal Aid Society has partnered with the Law and Technology Clinic at Columbia Law School to design the optimal device to provide to litigants to enable them to participate in remote legal proceedings. To that end, Sharone Miodovsky, a Staff Attorney in our Brooklyn Neighborhood Office, recently worked with the Columbia Clinic while preparing her elderly client, Ms. W, for participation in the remote trial of the eviction case that her landlord had filed against her. In the lawsuit, the landlord alleged that our client had not been using her apartment as her primary residence, and defending the case at the remote trial required a substantial investment of time and other resources leading up to the proceeding.

i. A case study demonstrates the resources required to allow just one older client to defend herself in a remote trial

While Ms. W's trial had actually started before the pandemic shut down New York City, there was no urgent reason why Housing Court had to proceed with her trial during the pandemic. Ms. W was up to date on her rent, there was no allegation that she was creating a nuisance that would require the immediate resolution of her case, and the landlord's lawyer was willing to postpone the trial until it was safe to conduct it in person. However, the Court insisted that the trial take place, and a virtual – as opposed to in-person – proceeding was permitted only after we filed a motion asking for such an accommodation based on Ms. W's age and underlying health conditions that made her more susceptible to serious COVID-19-related illness.

Defending Ms. W at a virtual trial required many considerations and many resources. As an initial matter, Ms. W, age 81 and living alone, did not have the technology or the skills

² Last week we reached out to Older Adults Technology Services ("OATS"), which we understand was tasked with providing training and support for the tablets, in hopes of obtaining some of this information, but we have received no response.

necessary to connect virtually from her home. While she did have a wifi connection at her apartment, she did not have a tablet or laptop and her cell phone, commonly known as a jitterbug phone, was not capable of supporting a streaming platform such as Zoom or MS Teams. We were able to lend Ms. W a laptop that we delivered to her apartment, where the attorney (who is not a trained instructor) spent hours teaching her the most basic of computer skills – how to turn on the laptop, how to manipulate a mouse, how to open an internet browser, how to log into her email account, and how to navigate MS Teams. To assist her further, the attorney created a picture manual for Ms. W to reference so that she could replicate the same steps when alone. After that initial meeting, Ms. W and the attorney met several more times virtually before her trial. While ultimately Ms. W was able to successfully connect with us virtually for all of the meetings, it was not without stress or struggle. Sometimes the meetings were delayed for a half hour or more as the attorney provided her with technical support over the phone while she struggled with the laptop.

Trials are stressful events and the stakes in a housing court trial are high. Preparing Ms. W for her virtual trial put as much or more emphasis on the virtual aspect than on the substantive. The focus of the preparatory meetings became just as much about how to navigate the technology as it was to present the best defense possible.

Ultimately we concluded that Ms. W needed someone to be with her, at her home, during the day of the trial. Unlike many of our older clients, Ms. W had a family member, a grandson, who was able to travel from out of state to be on hand for the two-day trial to provide technical support so that she could focus less on the technology and more on her testimony.

Thanks to our deliberate preparations, the trial proceeded without a technological glitch. Ms. W was ultimately happy to have had her day in court in a manner that kept her safe from the pandemic and to have found a new interest in using technology to connect with the outside world. But this happy technological outcome occurred only because The Legal Aid Society expended enormous resources in terms of equipment and time – with no assistance from the court nor from any City agency – and because the client was fortunate enough to possess sufficient aptitude and a competent family member who was willing to assist on the day of trial. But there is no way that non-profit legal services providers can provide this level of technical assistance to every older client.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is certain that tribunals will continue to require older New Yorkers to participate in legal proceedings before court buildings have fully and safely re-opened. Yet free legal services providers cannot be expected to provide these vulnerable litigants with all of the equipment, training, and support that they need in order to participate meaningfully in these remote proceedings. Therefore, we recommend that the City work with legal services providers and the courts to:

- Identify the optimal equipment that seniors need in order to participate in remote proceedings;

- Provide older litigants with necessary devices, training, and ongoing support – including real-time support during all remote appearances; and
- Undertake outreach to older litigants to educate them about remote appearances and the support that the City will offer them.

The Legal Aid Society would be pleased to share its experience and expertise with the NYC Department for the Aging or any other agency tasked with achieving the goals outlined above.

For further information, please contact Alex Ryley, Director of Elder Law, Civil Practice, at 646-284-5194 or AHRyley@Legal-Aid.org.



South Asian Council
For Social Services

South Asian Council for Social Services – Testimony – Committee on Aging and
Committee on Technology

Date: 1/22/2021

Good Afternoon Council Member Chin, Council Member Holden and other members of the committees on aging and technology. I am Mary Archana Fernandez, Director: Family Support Services at South Asian Council for Social Services (SACSS). Thank you for giving me the opportunity to talk with you today about how lack of access to technology has created a barrier for Asian seniors here in Flushing, Queens.

SACSS is a non-profit community- based organization that works to empower immigrant communities through services in the areas of healthcare access and education, senior support services and food security. We also provide basic and advanced English and computer courses and a Summer Youth Program. All our services are free and provided by culturally competent staff members who speak 15 different Asian languages and Spanish and Creole. Each year we serve over 25,000 clients through all our services.

As the COVID-19 pandemic spread rampantly through Queens we were worried about our seniors. Many of whom were isolated even before the pandemic and depended upon community organizations like ours to socialize and engage with their peers. Given their limited English proficiency, our seniors depended upon our case workers for assistance with benefits. Some stopping by the office every other day with a document that they needed translation with or for help with writing a check to Medicaid.

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They looked forward to sharing their problems and finding solutions in our weekly Hindi and Bengali support groups, playing Antakshari with friends, watching Bollywood movies and sharing a meal with other seniors with whom they shared a common social and cultural heritage.

While we moved our programming to a virtual platform, we soon realized that this was a new world for many of our seniors. Especially for those seniors who had never had any form of formal education – had never attended school and did not know to read or write even in their own primary language. One of our seniors mentioned ***“I feel like I am not a part of this world anymore...Everything is new and I don’t know if I can catch up...”*** This was a common sentiment shared by many.

Caseworkers and counselors worked with seniors to teach them to use web-based platforms such as zoom or google hangouts. While some, especially those with family members to help them out had a much easier time getting used to new technology, many struggled. In our conversation with seniors we found that many of them expressed a disinterest in using technology because of an underlying fear of technology and lack of skills. From our work we have learned that just providing seniors with the technology is not going to help, one has to invest in teaching them to use this technology. We have to empower them to feel confident and comfortable to use this technology. And while we take on this endeavor it is important to recognize that some of them might be experiencing cognitive delays and having language delays. Moreover, the lack of ability to learn a new skill also impacts their self-esteem and increases depression and mood swings.

Appropriate training can help to quell those fears and generate interest among seniors. In particular, great care must be paid to online safety training. Additionally, we have to make the technology user-friendly for our seniors, especially to those don’t speak, read

or write English. We have to keep in mind that our older adults are easy victims to online scams, putting their personal information at risk. We feel that with tailored digital literacy training that is individualized and takes into consideration the unique needs of our diverse clientele, seniors can learn to navigate the internet safely, securely and confidently.

Presently we have a weekly virtual senior support group and a culturally relevant activity group (Antakshari). Many seniors participate in these groups. However, there are many more who want to participate but are not able to because they either lack the access to technology or because they are challenged to use the technology. As CBO's for many of our clients we are the first point of contact for information. We are the people that they trust and confide in. This became evident when seniors called us to help them with registering for the vaccines, for many of them navigating the websites and calling the hotlines was a futile experience.

We strongly urge the city council to not only invest in the technology but also provide CBO's with capacity building and technical expertise to provide seniors with the knowledge and skills to make optimum use of this technology. I once again thank you for your time.



**TESTIMONY OF CHRISTIAN GONZÁLEZ-RIVERA
OF THE BROOKDALE CENTER FOR HEALTHY AGING, HUNTER COLLEGE
BEFORE THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEES ON AGING AND TECHNOLOGY**

**OVERSIGHT HEARING
"INCREASING SENIOR ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY"**

JANUARY 22, 2021

My name is Christian González-Rivera and I'm the director of strategic policy initiatives at the Brookdale Center for Healthy Aging. We are CUNY's aging research and policy center and a part of Hunter College. We are changing the future of aging by supporting innovative research and developing policies and practices for New York that will become models used around the world. Through this work, we strive to create opportunities for *everyone* to age as well as *anyone* can.

Thank you, Chairpersons Chin and Holden and members of the committees for holding this oversight hearing to draw attention to one of the most important lessons our city must learn from the COVID-19 pandemic: the vital necessity to protect the health and safety of older New Yorkers by ensuring that they have access to technology.

The Brookdale Center for Healthy Aging released just this morning a report on how to ensure that older New Yorkers can age well by providing meaningful access to technology. This report draws on months of research, including dozens of conversations with providers of services to older adults and experts to document the evolving challenges they faced starting at the beginning of the pandemic until now. It also includes a demographic analysis of unconnected older adults that shows how deeply lack of connectivity among older adults is related to socioeconomic disadvantage.

The report is available on our website, www.brookdale.org, and I'll discuss some highlights right now.

The most important takeaway from this research is that technology access is an essential part of aging well and in particular, to ensuring the health and safety of older New Yorkers. For instance, internet access can connect older adults to the boom in telehealth services. It can reduce social isolation by enabling them to communicate with friends and family and participate in group activities from the safety of their homes. It also allows homebound older adults—and those rendered homebound by the pandemic—to meet basic needs like purchasing groceries and other needed goods and services.

Lacking access to the internet is nothing less than a disability in today's age. People often think of an 'able-bodied' adults as being those who can take care of their basic needs independently. But the COVID-19 pandemic has turned the idea of what it means independent on its head. Thousands of older New Yorkers who had previously lived independent lives suddenly found themselves effectively homebound by fear of a contagious disease that is especially deadly to them. Meanwhile, institutions that older adults depended on like senior centers, libraries, museums, restaurants, and others remained closed or operated with restrictions.

The luckiest among them already used the internet and were able to shift more of their in-person activities to online. And in fact, most older New Yorkers do have internet access at home and use it to varying degrees. But the one out of every three New Yorkers age 60 and above who lack internet access at home—that's 474,000 people—face very significant barriers to connecting.

The first of those barriers is low income; 69 percent of unconnected older New Yorkers earn less than \$40,000 per year, meaning that the \$65 per month that it costs—on average—to get decent internet service would be a burden for them. The cost of devices is also a burden. And unfortunately, there are few programs that can help them. While the partnership between T-Mobile and the nonprofit Older Adult Technology Services to provide NYCHA residents with devices and tech support is a great start, the 10,000 people helped by the program barely make a dent in a 474,000 person problem. Moreover, the federal Lifeline program, which subsidizes the cost of getting online for low income households, is insufficient. Beneficiaries' internet speeds are too low for modern uses like virtual conferencing and streaming entertainment and monthly data use allotments are barely enough to stream a movie and a half a month. Not surprisingly, while online offerings from senior centers and many other organizations have really taken off during the pandemic, Lifeline customers have been left behind.

Besides affordability, the two biggest challenges for older adults *in particular* are finding the motivation to get online and then getting the skills and support they need to do so. And these challenges are strongly correlated with levels of formal education. Among older adults with a Bachelor's degree or higher, 85 percent have internet access at home, while just 57 percent of those with less than a high school degree do. Among older New Yorkers who live alone or with just their spouse, which is more than half of them, 82 percent of those with a Bachelor's degree or higher have connectivity at home, compared to just 36 percent of those with less than a high school degree. In addition, fully 62 percent of unconnected older New Yorkers with the lowest levels of formal education are immigrants with limited proficiency in English. These are staggering disparities.

Closing the digital divide for older adults in particular is going to take specialized programming. It's not enough to just connect them to general resources for getting online. Our review of the academic research literature on technology adoption clearly shows that for older adults in particular, how useful a technology is perceived to be is a stronger predictor of adoption than it is for younger people. That means that it is not enough to point out all the ways that people in general are using the internet. Getting older adults in particular to use the internet is a much more hands-on effort. This research finding is something the aging services network has learned the hard way throughout this almost year-long pandemic. It involves identifying the needs of individual older adults and showing them how technology can help them meet their needs better than how they have already been doing it.

Unfortunately, there is significant disparity among aging services organizations and programs outside the aging services network in terms of their ability to provide remote services through the internet. When the pandemic hit, providers with more resources either already had devices and tech-based programs or were able to get the resources they needed to build them. But others lacked staff capacity and even devices appropriate to run virtual programming. This is a problem across the aging services system and resources are needed to address it. In addition, organizations that provide public programs that touch the lives of older adults, like museums, theaters, and other institutions should also focus more on how older adults are accessing their online content,

especially if they receive public funding. The public libraries are already doing this through programs specifically tailored to older adults.

Building technology on-ramps for older adults is especially critical for telehealth. Rapid advances in telehealth have shown great promise as a way to more effectively help older adults manage chronic conditions and access preventative health. Regulatory changes at the federal and state levels and private investment fueled a boom in telehealth during the pandemic. Telehealth is not going away after every last person gets a vaccine. It's fast becoming one of the critical underpinnings of a value-based medical services system. This means that unconnected older adults—which are among the city's most disadvantaged—will miss out if they don't have meaningful access to the internet.

The bottom line is that meaningful access to technology for older adults is a three legged stool that includes access to appropriate devices, access to an internet connection, and the skills and tech support to thrive online. Many digital divide interventions focus on devices and connectivity, but without the skills part, most unconnected older adults would still not get online.

I would like to thank Chairpersons Chin and Holden for teaming up to take a close look at this important issue. At Brookdale we think that one of the great things that can come out of this partnership between the aging and technology committees is pushing for investments in programs that provide a safe environment for older adults to get educated about technology and gain the skills they need to thrive using technology. Another good thing that can come out of this partnership is holding any programs that the city invests in to address the digital divide accountable to the needs of older adults to ensure that they are investing in all three legs of the meaningful access stool: devices and connection, but also skills and tech support.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. And, we remain, as always available to you as you think about how New York City can become an even better place to grow older.