



**New York City Council  
Committee on Technology  
Chair, Council Member Holden  
Subcommittee on Zoning and Franchises  
Chair, Council Member Moya  
October 13, 2020  
Oversight - Broadband and the Digital Divide**

**ORAL TESTIMONY**

**Plus additional documents submitted to Committee**

Hello and thank you for the opportunity to testify on the importance of low-cost high-speed connectivity and bridging the digital divide. I'm David Dring, Director of Innovative Programs for Older Adults, at Bay Ridge Center. We serve over 1,000 older New Yorkers in the Southwestern corner of Brooklyn through home delivered meals, senior center activities, and operating a neighborhood naturally occurring retirement community.

When the pandemic halted in-person programming at our center, we acted quickly to launch virtual programs and have done 670 through September 30, 2020 to over 5,700 older adults. We estimate there are still 3,000 older adults that may like to participate if they had the technology or were properly trained and supported.

We witnessed the impact of our virtual programs on our clients in many ways. There were clients who said they were going stir crazy and these classes helped them manage their isolation better. There were clients who lost loved ones and these classes were a lifeline in managing their grief. Our meditation and exercise classes are popular with our clients whom have told us they want to keep their bodies as well as minds flexible and open so that they can adapt and handle these challenging times.

I want to praise the State for the "Comprehensive Broadband Connectivity Act" (A.6679C Ryan/S.8805 Metzger). It states "the legislature hereby finds and declares that access to high-speed Internet is a fundamental right and it is incumbent upon the State to ensure provision of this right to every New Yorker." I would encourage the City Council to call upon Governor Cuomo to seriously considering signing it into law.



It's terrific to hear that "access to high-speed Internet is a fundamental right." Unfortunately, it does not read access to affordable high-speed Internet connectivity.

We surveyed our members in March and discovered that 40% are without connectivity. For too many older adults, the cost of connectivity is more than they can bear on their fixed income. After all, this was never a cost that they anticipated in their financial planning.

In order for connectivity to be a fundamental right for all, it must be affordable for all (the 3<sup>rd</sup> principle of the Mayor's Internet Master Plan). While there are low-income programs from Spectrum and Verizon, their eligibility and monthly charges do not make them accessible.

For example, Spectrum's Internet Assist program requires the income to be at or below Supplemental Security Income (only \$803) per month. Even the poverty level for one person is greater than that (\$1,063). Still both are too low for the near poverty seniors to participate. Additionally, Spectrum denies anyone who is a current customer. Many older adults have cable provided for them by their family. This further and unnecessarily complicates access.

Bay Ridge Center would be delighted to partner with City Council, and the Mayor's Office among others to pilot new low-cost Internet connectivity options for older adults. Then we can ensure connectivity is a fundamental right. After all, connectivity is an essential ingredient to bridging the digital divide.

*Bay Ridge Center is a 501c3 nonprofit organization funded by the NYC Department for the Aging, the NY State Office for the Aging and by philanthropic donors to ensure the safety and wellbeing of older New Yorkers in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, NY. Marianne Nicolosi (email: [mnicolosi@bayridgecenter.org](mailto:mnicolosi@bayridgecenter.org)) is the Executive Director. For more information, please contact 718.748.0650 or visit [www.BayRidgeCenter.org](http://www.BayRidgeCenter.org).*



## ADDITIONAL TESTIMONY

This document elaborates on the challenges of older adults use of technology. We believe it is divided into three categories: devices, affordable connectivity, and support/training. Below is our informed opinion on these areas based upon our work with seniors and technology at the ground level.

### Devices

First, we want to praise the City for 10,000 tablets to NYCHA residents. It's an awesome step towards digital inclusion.

While AARP's 2020 *Tech And the 50+ Survey*<sup>1</sup>, report that 90% of the respondents have computers and 2017 *Pew Research Center Tech Adoption Climbs Among Older Adults*<sup>2</sup> report that 78% percent have computers, a survey that we did in March 2020. We were pleased to learn that 64% have a cell phone with 91% of them reported being able to receive a text on that device. However, that 40% of our members are without a computer or a tablet.

We have conducted Zoom virtual activities since March 2020. Through September 30, 2020 we conducted 668 virtual programs to over 5,700 older adults. A three-month analysis discovered 45% participate with a computer, 33% with a tablet, 19% with a smartphone and the balance participate using their landline phone. This is not surprising given the screen size of a computer is larger than a tablet. Tablet's screen is larger than a smartphone.

While the cost of the device is important, it is a one-time cost. It varies significantly from a \$200 Android tablet to very expensive (\$14k) gaming desktop computers. Smartphones can be free with some carrier plans or purchased for approximately \$1,000. Our experience is that seniors would use the devices for 4-7 years, if not longer, before replacement. For analysis purpose, say a five year (60 month) plan that ranges

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/research/surveys\\_statistics/technology/2019/2020-tech-trends-survey.doi.10.26419-2Fres.00329.001.pdf](https://www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/research/surveys_statistics/technology/2019/2020-tech-trends-survey.doi.10.26419-2Fres.00329.001.pdf) accessed on 10/12/2020.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2017/05/17/tech-adoption-climbs-among-older-adults/> accessed on 10/12/2020.



from \$3 (for \$200 tablet) to \$17 (for a smartphone) or \$45 (\$2,700 MacBook Pro 16"), not including any financing charges.

### **Affordable Connectivity**

Virtual programs are not possible without high-speed Internet connectivity. However, the pricing for broadband makes it prohibitive for many older adults. Other areas of our country have reasonable low-cost options, such as Cox's Connect2Compete<sup>3</sup> program at \$9.95 a month. Spectrum's<sup>4</sup> and Verizon's<sup>5</sup> are twice that amount. That difference is significant to someone on a fixed income that never anticipated such a cost.

As an example, paying for Internet Only through Verizon is \$39.99<sup>6</sup> for sixty months would be \$2,399. At this rate, a person could nearly have paid for a top of the line Apple MacBook Pro.

The real challenge isn't buying a device or subscribing to connectivity. The challenge is having to do both! These charges quickly add up, but are required to access the digital economy.

### **Support and Training**

It's one thing to have a technological device or an Internet connection. It's an entirely different thing to know how to use them effectively. We consider learning technology to that of learning the culture of another country. There are many facets that make up that culture. It's not just the language or currency or transportation system or cultural etiquette. It's everything wrapped up together. With technology it's the same. A tablet doesn't go anywhere unless it's connected to the Internet. It's a multifaceted experience. One practically needs to know networking, hardware, and applications. That's a lot, which is why it's very important to provide a lot of technology training and support to older adults so that they can join the digital economy and not be left behind.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cox.com/residential/internet/connect2compete.html> accessed on 10/12/20

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.spectrum.com/browse/content/spectrum-internet-assist> accessed on 10/12/20

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.verizon.com/info/low-income-internet/> accessed on 10/12/2020

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.verizon.com/home/rb/plans> accessed on 10/12/2020



I further believe that technology support and training must follow the adult learning theory<sup>7</sup> that efficient learning happens when the adult can “draw on their accumulated reservoir of life experiences.” Too often elements of today’s technology are counter-intuitive to an older adult’s previous life experience. Figuring out strategies and techniques to match their experience with technological functions are when the light bulbs go off and shouts of “Eureka” are heard.

Even though we offer our own technology classes and coordinate peer support and technology assistance, we cannot meet the need. We also work with OATS. There are other for-profit organizations that provide technical support to seniors, such as Candoo ([www.candootech.com](http://www.candootech.com)) with fees from \$50/hr to some fixed prices such as \$180 to set-up a new computer. Best Buy has their Geek Squad membership program<sup>8</sup> but it is not older adult specific. While it has an 24/7 online chat functionality, several things still cost an additional \$49 when work is done in the home.

Bay Ridge Center has worked with students in the past to provide support to its members. We are open to a variety of ways to help make access more manageable.

### **Bridging the Digital Divide**

It’s important to recognize that accessing the digital economy is more than a single step, it’s a journey. There are resources required for that journey, similar to a family trip... car, gas, and maps. In this analogy the car is a device, gas is connectivity and the maps are the support and training needed to arrive at one’s anticipated destination.

We believe if there is coordination among the city agencies and its providers, we can collectively create the three-legged stool that will assist people onto the information super highway. The benefits will be dramatic. As the City disseminates more information electronically or through apps, seniors will be able to keep up. The redundant efforts will be minimized and efficiencies will accrue to all stakeholders.

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<sup>7</sup> [https://lincs.ed.gov/sites/default/files/11\\_%20TEAL\\_Adult\\_Learning\\_Theory.pdf](https://lincs.ed.gov/sites/default/files/11_%20TEAL_Adult_Learning_Theory.pdf) accessed on 10/12/2020.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.bestbuy.com/services/totaltechsupport/pricing> accessed on 10/12/2020



We learned this emphatically during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. When information was so fluid, it was difficult to keep our members informed of the facts. While we could email some of them, the majority required labor intensive phone calls.

We have a lot of work to do, but we are excited to partner, collaborate and pilot initiatives that will empower older adult lives.

Though older adults are not digitally native, they could, with our help, become naturalized citizens of the digital ecosystem that is transforming every aspect of our lives.

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