



**TESTIMONY OF CHRISTIAN GONZÁLEZ-RIVERA
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BEFORE THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL COMMITTEES ON AGING AND TECHNOLOGY**

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

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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.