



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

**OVERSIGHT HEARING  
"OLDER ADULT IMMIGRANT POPULATION"**

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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 Menchaca and members of the committees for holding this oversight hearing to draw attention to the specific needs of the 51 percent of older New Yorkers who are immigrants.

Older immigrants, compared to U.S.-born older adults, on average, are more likely to have lower incomes, face language and cultural barriers, and have lower levels of formal education. In this testimony I would like to draw the Council's attention to a problem that has been particularly salient during this pandemic: the fact that lower-income immigrants with less than a high school education represent the single largest group of older New Yorkers without access to the internet at home. This information is drawn from a report that we published two weeks ago on how to ensure that older New Yorkers can age well by providing meaningful access to technology. Chair Chin and the members of the aging committee may recall that we presented this report at the joint oversight hearing with the Committee on Technology on the day of its release.

Out of the 1.7 million New Yorkers age 60 and above, one out of every three does not have internet access at home. That's 474,000 people. Our research, which was focused on New York City, found that lower levels of formal education were the single biggest predictor of lack of home internet access. Fully 40 percent of unconnected older New Yorkers have less than a high school education and an additional 32 percent have just a high school education.

Many of these are immigrants; fully 62 percent of unconnected older New Yorkers with less than a high school degree are foreign-born. This group alone represents about 120,000 people. The vast majority of these also have limited proficiency in English. Half of them are Spanish speakers, 18 percent are Chinese-language speakers, 11 percent speak Russian, and the remainder speak a variety of other languages.

This means that bridging the digital divide for older New Yorkers cannot be done without a strategy to reach older immigrants, especially those whose primary language is not English. Our review of the research 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. In other words, older adults are more likely to adopt the internet or other technology if they see it as a tool to help meet their needs. And how a person would use a tool such as the internet has a lot to do with their level of formal education, the language they speak, whether they live alone or with family, and many other factors.

Thousands of immigrants without meaningful access to the internet have become even more dependent on others to meet basic needs. For instance, accessing information about the COVID-19 vaccine and getting an appointment are even more difficult for people who do not speak or understand English well, and they also have fewer options for obtaining information.

Providers of telemedicine services have so far reported difficulty adapting existing translation services to internet-based telehealth software. This has represented an interruption in access to care for thousands of older immigrants as medical services providers around the country report a drop in the share of their patients who do not speak English well, compared to pre-pandemic levels. Furthermore, the additional documentation requirements for accessing telehealth can be a barrier for access for immigrants—particularly those who are undocumented—who may have just gone to the emergency department for care before the pandemic.

Furthermore, while English speakers with credit cards may take for granted the ability to find online marketplaces for groceries, medicine, and other basic needs, non-English speakers have had a more difficult time finding replacements for the places where they once had their needs met in person.

Senior centers can be important assets in helping older adults to use technology as a tool to help them meet their needs. But there exists no citywide capacity-building services to help them function as tech ambassadors for unconnected older adults. In our research we looked at how senior centers adapted to being closed during the pandemic. When the pandemic lockdowns were put in place, few senior centers had the infrastructure to run remote programming. Today, slightly more than half run virtual programs, though there is significant disparity among aging services organizations in terms of their ability to provide remote services through the internet. Many of these programs do offer programming in other languages, though several have reported that the number of non-English speakers has dropped off.

Organizations outside the aging services network, such as museums, theaters, and public libraries can also be effective tech ambassadors to older adults if they receive specialized investment in reaching older adults. The public libraries are already doing this through programs specifically tailored to older adults. For instance, immigrant-serving organizations from outside the aging services network, such as cultural institutions may be producing content and programming of interest to older immigrants, but may not reaching out to older adults as an audience or making their programming accessible to them.

Of course, for many older immigrants, the cost of home internet is the first and most important barrier. The average home internet connection costs \$65 per month, which presents a cost burden for people earning less than \$40,000 per year. And yet, 69 percent of unconnected older New Yorkers earn less than that amount. While programs that subsidize the cost of a connection do exist, such as the federal Lifeline program and a few run by private internet service providers, few older immigrants know they qualify. And even if you do sign up and qualify, your internet speeds are barely enough 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.

Closing the digital divide for New York's 474,000 unconnected older adults means having meaningful access to technology. For older adults, this 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. And generalized technology education that does not focus on the specific needs of older immigrants will miss a large portion of the unconnected.

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.