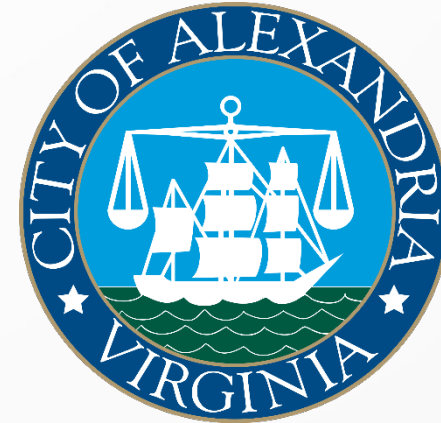# City of Alexandria Digital Equity Plan

Survey and Focus Group Research

March 2023

PRR

Background and Purpose

Background

- Digital connectivity, particularly access to high-speed or broadband internet, is essential to success in the 21st century. By being connected to the internet, residents have access to a wide range of resources, services, and products.

- Digital inequity is usually more prevalent among older generations and people with low incomes. For households without access or poor-quality access to the internet and/or a computer-connected device, their chance for success in the 21st century is diminished.

Purpose

- The City of Alexandria Digital Equity Plan research aimed to engage residents of Alexandria to uncover what digital equity means in Alexandria and what actions can be taken to address the gaps.

- PRR supported the development of the digital equity plan by designing, executing, and analyzing quantitative and qualitative research with priority populations. This research focused on their experience accessing and using the internet, as well as how that experience could be improved.

Survey

- Paper and online survey with a sample of people who live in Alexandria. The survey was available in English, Spanish, Amharic, and Arabic.

- Conducted survey outreach in ways designed to reach those with limited internet access. Outreach included:
  - Engaging with local community-based organizations to assist with survey promotion and distribution.
  - Distributing paper surveys at all City of Alexandria recreation centers and libraries
  - Distributing information via Parent Square for identified families in Alexandria City Public Schools
  - Hosting seven pop-up events to distribute paper surveys and survey flyers that listed a QR code to access the survey online.

Survey Period
11/28/22
to
1/15/23

358
Qualified
respondents

82% - online
18% - paper
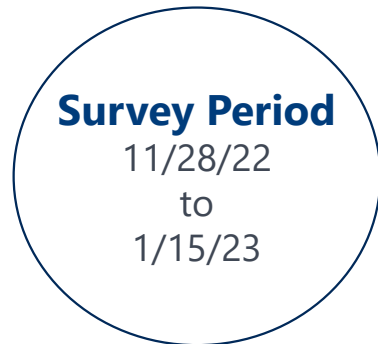
Languages:
- English – 80%
- Spanish – 19%
- Amharic – 0.8%
- Arabic – 0.3%

+/- 5.2%
margin
of error

Focus Groups

- A series of five focus groups conducted at local public facilities such as library or recreation center conference rooms:
  - 2/7/23 – English language group 1 (9 participants)
  - 2/8/23 – English language group 2 [60+ group] (10 participants)
  - 2/9/23 – Spanish language group (11 participants)
  - 2/13/23 – Amharic language group (10 participants)
  - 2/15/23 – Arabic language group (9 participants)

- All the groups included experienced moderators, observers from the City, as well as in-language interpreters and note takers. The moderators not only spoke the language but also understood the culture. For example, the Spanish-language moderator let the participants feel like they were in a Latino living room, which gave them ease of speaking freely.

Key Takeaways – Internet Access

- Alexandria residents are **accessing the internet through a variety of devices and places**, with those who speak Spanish, Amharic, or Arabic more reliant on access via smart phones.

- Residents want the city to provide **broader access to more affordable, reliable high-speed internet connections.**

- Those who speak **Amharic or Arabic are at greater risk for their current internet access not meeting their needs** and being more reliant on other family members to assist them with access and usage.

- **Improve ease of internet connection and connection reliability at public settings** such as libraries and recreation centers.

- **Improve transportation to travel to libraries and recreation centers** for people who depend on this public internet source, especially for elderly and/or disabled residents.

"I live in an old building. Our entire area experiences outages sometimes, most often during the early morning and late afternoon is when we experience this most."

"You have to manage whose on or not, to determine the speed of the wi-fi, mobile data is also not very reliable"

"Sometimes I have to call [my provider] when I have an outage and getting in touch with someone is difficult. Customer service isn't reliable."

"I go to public library or friends house/or cell phone for important matters."

Key Takeaways – Digital Literacy

- Those who speak Spanish, Amharic, and Arabic emphasized the importance for the city to **provide training and educational resources in languages other than English**. These resources should be accessible to low-income residents and translated into multiple languages.

- **Increase availability and awareness of training/education programs** (including those that address internet security concerns) for lower income families, seniors, African-Americans, and non-English speakers who may be unaware of the type and cost of classes.

"There is ageism when it comes to talking about technology. There is a stereotype that old people don't use tech. Seniors need what the rest of the population needs."

"I'm basic with computer skills, but I'm learning- I'd love to teach my kids as well."

"People need to know what software to buy to protect their systems."

"People need to know more about how to dispose of electronics, so your information isn't leaked (wiping)."

Key Takeaways – Reliability and Speed

- **More transparency and information about current internet services and reasons for inconsistent coverage and slower speeds**. Residents want to know more about what causes these problems (slow connection, unreliable) and whether it has to do with the internet provider company, the location of their residence, or the service plan they chose.

- Those who receive discounted internet service from their children's school find the internet is not always reliable and often has slow speeds. The city should **improve internet speeds at all service price points; specifically improving the low-cost internet service provided by schools to ensure fast and reliable service for all users.**

"Cable internet is constantly going out or slower than expected."

"Since our internet is exclusively Wi-Fi, it doesn't broadcast equally to all parts of the house. There are some dead spots where we can't use our electronics."

"My main challenge is that the bandwidth is not reliable. I work from home and depend heavily on video streaming, but sometimes my cable internet's bandwidth will dip, and my video starts freezing or dropping frames."
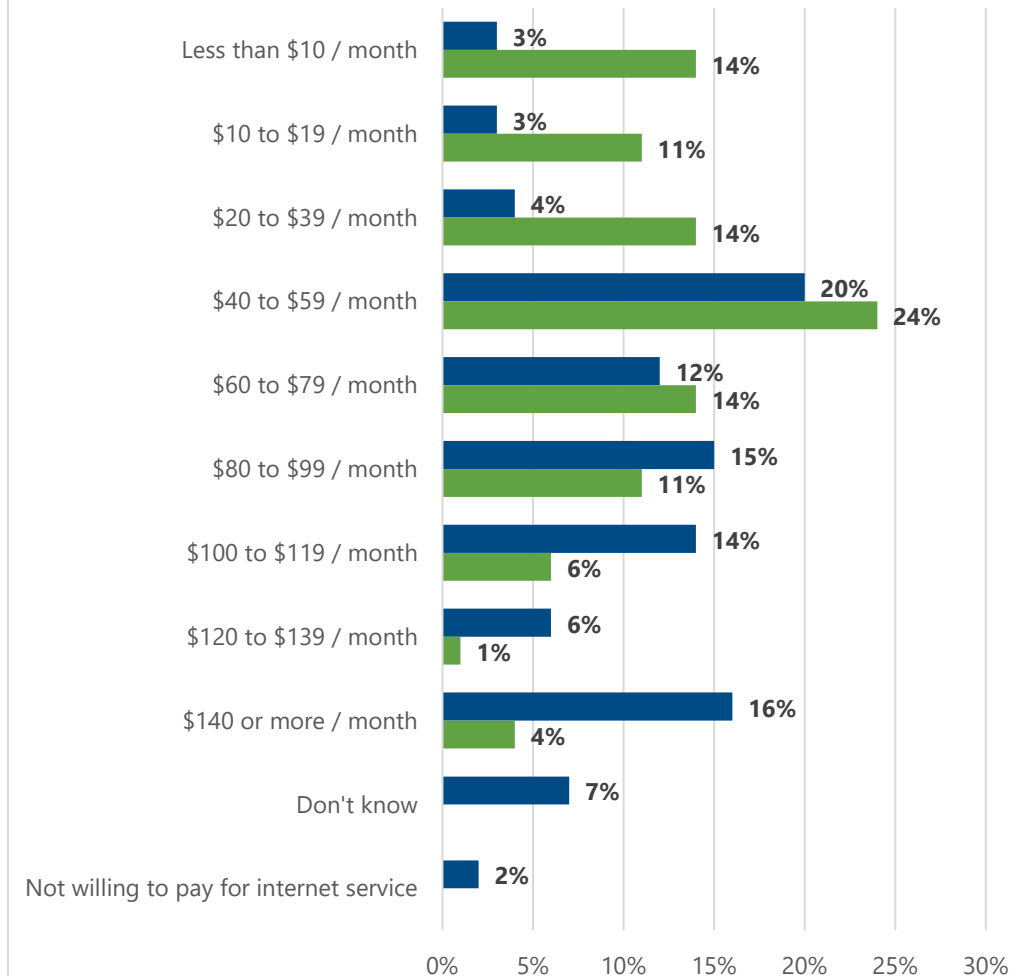
Key Takeaways – Affordability

- **Increase the competition of internet providers to allow for more offerings and lower costs.** In addition, **create price control programs** for areas that are only serviced by one internet provider, and/or create shared pricing structures in multiple household dwellings (e.g., townhouses, apartments, etc.)

- Provide increased access to **low-cost equipment/devices to access the internet**.

> "My internet-only service is very expensive. As a retiree on a fixed income, I can barely afford it. Internet access isn't a luxury these days - it's a necessity. Please break the monopoly and allow competition."

"How much is your household's monthly cost for internet service" compared to "How much would you be willing to pay per month for internet service?"
(Base = all respondents who have an at-home internet connection.)

- Currently Pay for Internet (n = 230)
- Willing to Pay for Internet (n = 268)

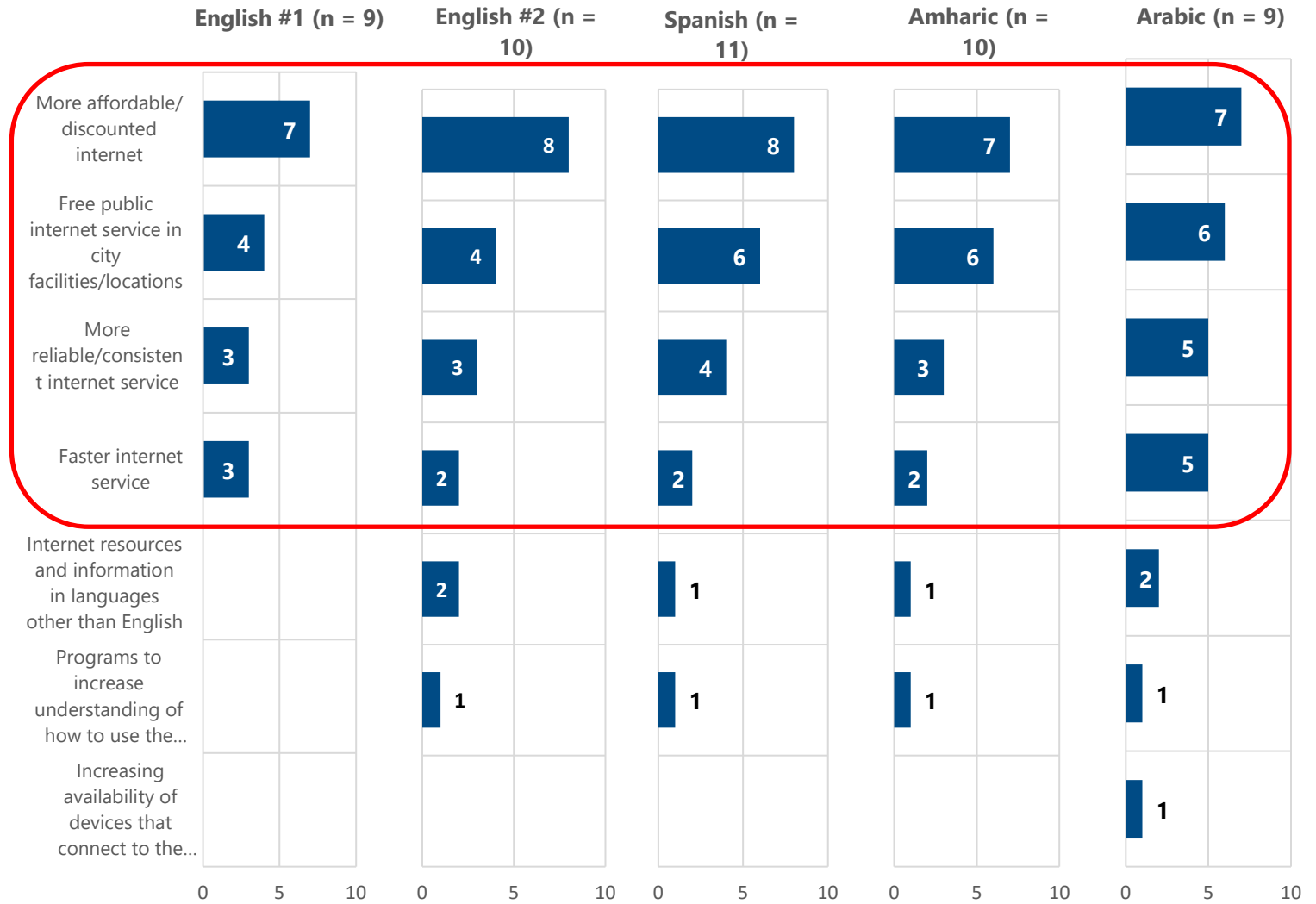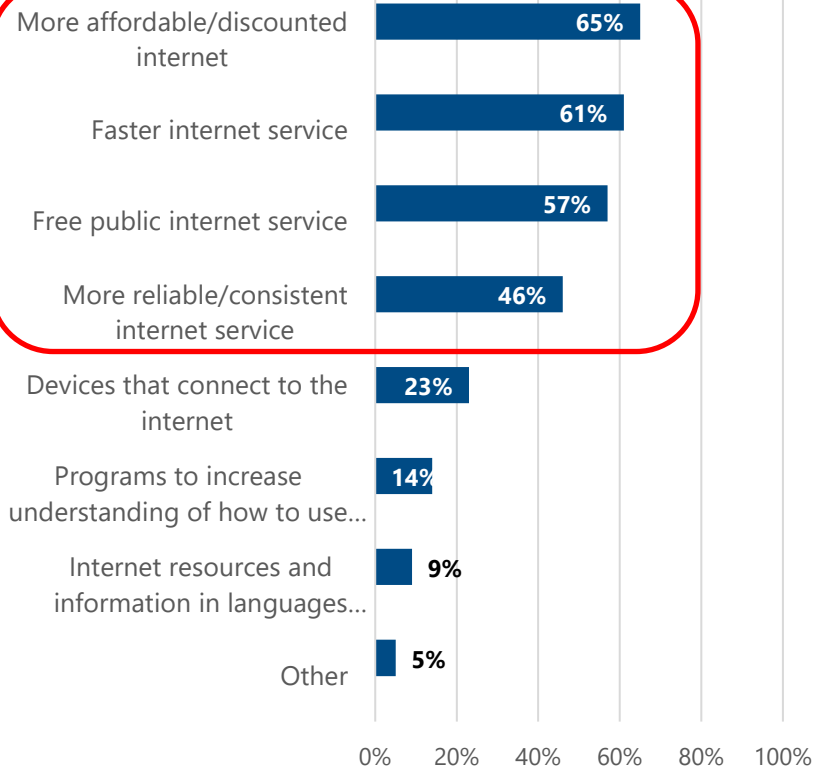| Monthly cost	Currently Pay	Willing to Pay
Less than $10 / month	3%	14%
$10 to $19 / month	3%	11%
$20 to $39 / month	4%	14%
$40 to $59 / month	20%	24%
$60 to $79 / month	12%	14%
$80 to $99 / month	15%	11%
$100 to $119 / month	14%	6%
$120 to $139 / month	6%	1%
$140 or more / month	16%	4%
Don't know	7%	
Not willing to pay for internet service	2%	

Most survey respondents and focus group participants want more affordable, faster, and reliable internet service.
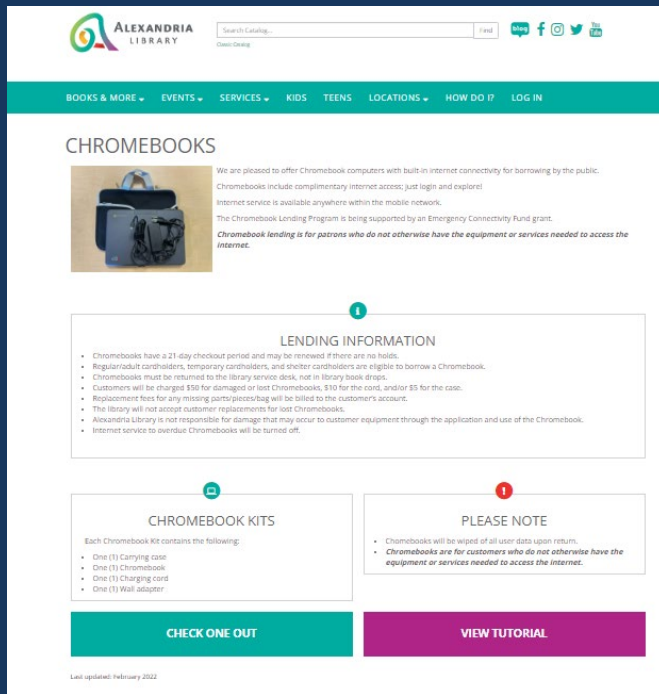
Which of the following would be helpful in the future for your household?

(Base = all respondents, n = 269)
Multiple response categories for some participants, percentages may not sum to 100%.

Category	Percentage
More affordable/discounted internet	65%
Faster internet service	61%
Free public internet service	57%
More reliable/consistent internet service	46%
Devices that connect to the internet	23%
Programs to increase understanding of how to use…	14%
Internet resources and information in languages…	9%
Other	5%

Category	English #1 (n = 9)	English #2 (n = 10)	Spanish (n = 11)	Amharic (n = 10)	Arabic (n = 9)
More affordable/discounted internet	7	8	8	7	7
Free public internet service in city facilities/locations	4	4	6	6	6
More reliable/consistent internet service	3	3	4	3	5
Faster internet service	3	2	2	2	5
Internet resources and information in languages other than English		2	1	1	2
Programs to increase understanding of how to use the…		1	1	1	1
Increasing availability of devices that connect to the…					1

What can we do?

- For City Facilities, other than libraries, the log-in is wireless.alexandria and then requires a registration, including a phone number, carrier service, and e-mail. The registration lasts for 24 hours.

  - ITS Security will consider changes to the log-in at city facilities, while ensuring a safe environment; ITS is currently developing log-in instructions in other languages and ensuring they are easily understood.

- Build upon a map that shows the public facilities to include WiFi and conduct outreach, particularly with immigrant communities. It may also be available as part of newcomer health screenings to drive additional collaboration about facilities and awareness of city services.

- 20 Chromebrooks are available at the Workforce Development Center and the Library has 107 Chromebrooks and 46 Hotspots for checkout – at almost any given time all of the Hotspots are checked out.

  - Increase # of chromebooks/hotspots for library check-out. May also connect individuals checking out laptops to Computer CORE.

Partnerships

- Continue partnerships for expansion of internet access in affordable housing and with Community Based Organizations

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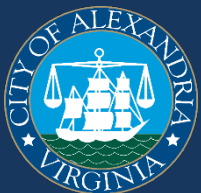
What can we do?

Increase competition amongst providers in order to provide greater reliability & affordability, and include digital equity as part of franchise agreements. Current agreements include:

TING Broadband Franchise Agreement (No cable television)

- 20 years 5/2022-5/2042 with 3 consecutive 5-year renewals
- Ting and the City will develop a list of non-profit organizations operating in the City that may be eligible to receive subsidized broadband services from Ting (Section 4.4)
- Ting will build out its network to multi-dwelling unit properties identified by the City as containing eligible affordable housing units (Section 4.5)
- Ting will offer eligible subscribers residing in eligible properties a home internet service plan at no cost through a combination of credits from Ting and subsidy programs for 5 years.

COMCAST Cable Television Franchise Agreement

- Initial term 5 years with 2 five-year extensions (total 15 years), October 25, 2011- October 2026
- Provides basic service tier service to each school and other educational facility, and facility occupied by City office or agency, including City owned/leased residential facilities.

VERIZON Telecommunications Franchise (not cable television)

- 25 years (July 2009 -June 2034) with 3 – 5-year renewal terms
- Pays City to occupy its rights of ways – State public right of way use fee

What can we do?

Digital Literacy Programs

- Increase partnership with Computer CORE through the Workforce Development Center, Libraries, and RPCA.
  - Currently, libraries only offer digital literacy classes in English. A partnership with Computer CORE could allow for multiple languages.
- Increase partnership opportunities between Computer CORE and ARHA and other tenant organizations through the City's Office of Housing.
- Assist with grant identification and application for marketing of Computer CORE digital literacy programs
- As part of its franchise agreement, Ting must engage in digital inclusion initiative to benefit City residents. These initiatives may focus on increasing access to broadband services, improving digital literacy and bridging the digital divide. (Section 4.1)

Safety and Security Trainings

- ACPS is working on a 2023-2028 technology plan
  - Through the plan, parents have identified that they have a need for security trainings, these could perhaps be offered through its Family and Community Engagement Center (FACE)
- ITS will look at its contract with "KnowBe4," the City Government security training for employees, to understand if there is potential for it to be offered at a community level through Libraries, the Workforce Development Center, and/or in partnership with Computer CORE
- Be clear in signage to users that RPCA and Libraries "wipe" computers between each use

What can we do?

o Computer CORE can offer classes to help people understand internet basics, to help "know your rights" to have advocacy.

o Connect Computer CORE with FACE to ensure assistance for families applying for the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP).

o Libraries can partner with organizations to provide information to individuals taking basic skills classes and checking out hotspots on how to access more affordable internet, including ACP.

    o Example: National digital inclusion alliance has flyers on affordability options and can provide this to libraries

Questions