



Committee on Technology in Government

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COMMITTEE ON TECHNOLOGY IN GOVERNMENT

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**Oversight: Circuits and Seniors: Assessing the Technology
Needs of Senior Citizens**

Introduction

On Friday, October 28, 2005, at 1 P.M. in the Council Chambers at City Hall, the Committee on Technology in Government will hold a hearing entitled, "Oversight: Circuits and Seniors: Assessing the Technology Needs of Senior Citizens." Invited guests include Department for the Aging Deputy Commissioner Caryn Resnick, members of the New York City nonprofit community who are dedicated to educating senior citizens about using technologies to improve their quality of their lives, professionals interested in designing and implementing such technologies, and advocates for senior citizens. The

goal of this hearing is to bring attention to this other, often overlooked digital divide and seek advice, commentary and suggestions on such questions as:

- What is the City, specifically the Department for the Aging (DFTA), doing to address the technology needs of seniors? What more can the City do?
- What are the needs of the nonprofit and for-profit organizations that already offer, or seek to offer, such programs?
- How can seniors use the Internet to access helpful healthcare and medical information? How can we educate them to target accurate and up-to-date information so they can make better healthcare decisions?
- How can seniors use technology to access government benefits?

Seniors and Technology

The New York City Senior Citizen Demographic – An Overview

Presently, there are more than 1.2 million residents of New York City over the age of 60.¹ Nearly two-thirds of this population is over 65, with a quarter ranging from 60 to 64, forty percent from 65 to 74, twenty-five percent from 75 to 84, and nearly ten percent are 85 and over.² The highest concentration of seniors is in Brooklyn and Queens, where 30 percent reside.³ Twenty percent reside in Manhattan, fourteen percent in the

¹ New York City Department For The Aging (DFTA) Quick Facts on the Elderly in New York City at 1, available at <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dfta/pdf/quickfacts.pdf> (hereinafter Quick Facts).

² Id. at 2.

³ Id. at 1.

Bronx and five percent in Staten Island.⁴ The majority is non-Hispanic white, although the populations are evening out.⁵

Nearly one-third of seniors over the age of 65 live alone and five percent live in group quarters.⁶ The poverty rate for seniors⁷ over 65 is nearly 18 percent, a figure that has grown considerably over the past decade.⁸ Those seniors who live alone have the highest poverty rate of all elderly households – 28%.⁹ Over two-thirds of this group receives Social Security benefits, the total of which varies depending on an individual's marital status.¹⁰ All senior citizens are enrolled in Medicare and one-quarter is eligible for Medicaid.¹¹

Some general trends in the senior citizen population appear in this statistical data. While the senior population in New York City has decreased slightly¹², such will likely be corrected once the current generation of “baby boomers” begins to retire.¹³ However, on a larger scale, the general senior population is becoming more diverse but poorer, with more senior citizens relying just on government benefits to get by.¹⁴ There is also a

⁴ Id.

⁵ Id. at 2. According to Quick Facts, the non-Hispanic white senior population fell from 65% in 1990 to 57% in 2000.

⁶ Id. at 3.

⁷ The 2003 Poverty Guidelines for Person Aged 65 and over: \$8,980 for a single person and \$12,120 for a couple. Id at 5.

⁸ Id. The poverty rate of seniors over 65 grew from 16.5% in 1990 to 17.8% in 2000.

⁹ Id.

¹⁰ An aged couple can expect around \$17,000 annually in social security payments while a single retired worker gets around \$10,000. Quick Facts at 7.

¹¹ Id. at 8.

¹² Id. at 1. The population of seniors over 65 in New York City decreased nearly 2.5% between 1990 and 2000. This is in direct contrast to the national trend, which saw this population grow by about 10%.

¹³ “Baby boomers”, those born between 1946 and 1964, account for nearly 28% of the United States population, or approximately 78 million residents. Roughly 6% of the “baby boomer” population lives in New York State. For an in-depth study regarding this population, please see <http://www.metlife.com/WPSAssets/19506845461045242298V1FBoomer%20Profile%202003.pdf>. For more information on New York State demographics, see <http://aging.state.ny.us/explore/project2015/report02/introduction.htm>.

¹⁴ According to a 2004 article, senior citizens are the fastest growing age group headed into bankruptcy court. See <http://www.seniorjournal.com/NEWS/Money/4-03-29Retiringinred.htm/>.

growing sense of isolation among this group, a sentiment that pervades all those who live alone, in group quarters or who feel as though they are losing the ability to perform tasks on their own.¹⁵ Traditional senior centers have been long the bastion where seniors go to mingle and establish a sense of community.¹⁶ A growing number of these centers are now offering new services that focus on teaching seniors how to use technology, specifically computers and the Internet.¹⁷ Thus, 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 tailored for their unique needs.¹⁸

“Wiring” Seniors – A Growing Trend

According to a recent study by the Pew Center, the percentage of seniors who go online has substantially increased over the last four years, jumping up nearly 50 percent.¹⁹ Nationally, 22 percent of seniors (those aged over 65) use the Internet. However, avid usage seems tied to higher education and income levels: 62% of wired seniors have at least some college education and one-quarter of them live in a household with an average income over \$75,000.²⁰ Furthermore, seniors who go online are more likely than not to check their email and keep in contact with distant family members.²¹

¹⁵ From a conversation with Tom Kamber, CEO of Older Adults Technology Services, which provides computer training www.oatsny.org.

¹⁶ The DFTA funds nearly 700 senior centers in New York City. The New York City Housing Authority, another agency that oversees senior centers, maintains 130 centers at their developments around the City.

¹⁷ A good example of this is the efforts of Committee on Technology in Government Chair Gale Brewer, in collaboration with OATSNY, to put on Senior “Touch Tanks” where a specialist comes in to introduce seniors to technologies like digital cameras, DVD players and, eventually, the Internet.

¹⁸ There a number of websites dedicated solely to seniors. Some of these include: www.seniorjournal.com, www.seniornet.org, and www.seniorplanet.org.

¹⁹ The Pew Internet and American Life project report, entitled “Older Americans and the Internet” (hereinafter Pew Study), at 1, available at http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Seniors_Online_2004.pdf.

²⁰ Id. at 2. This is a startling statistic when one realizes that only 35% of all seniors over 65 have a college education and only 8% live in households with an annual income over \$75,000.

²¹ Id. at 4. See also, “Wired Generations,” a report issued by the AARP on July 18, 2003 at 3, available at www.aarp.org/olderwiserwired (hereinafter AARP Study) [note, however, that the AARP represents people

This enthusiasm matches that of younger counterparts over the entire demographic spectrum. However, as usage increases, seniors are branching off and exploring the web in a diverse number of ways. Fifty-five percent of wired seniors go online to get the news while 66% have looked for health or medical information.²² Nineteen percent have looked for information about Medicare or Medicaid.²³

Of growing importance to seniors has been use of the Internet as research tool. The biggest jumps in usage have come in this area. For instance, between 2000 and 2003, use for online banking purposes has grown 150%.²⁴ Wired seniors are also becoming more adept with online financial research; more seniors are trading stocks and managing portfolios than ever before.

The Digital Divide between Seniors and Technology

Despite the promising statistics set forth above, there is a growing gap between seniors and technology. Eight in ten seniors who do not presently use the Internet do not think they will ever go online.²⁵ For this group, the use of computers and technology remain elusive, perhaps due to a dislike of new technologies or, perhaps, from a lack of familiarity with them. Only 29% of those aged over 65 use a computer on at least an occasional basis while the majority of wired seniors got online because of family encouragement.²⁶ This does not bode well for poorer and more solitary seniors who do not have the resources or family to put them online. A similar corollary can be drawn

aged 50 and over, meaning that some of their data may be more skewed in favor of technology as baby-boomers who work are much more likely than a retired senior over 65 to be familiar with technology.].

²² Pew Study at 5.

²³ Id. at 7.

²⁴ Id. at 9.

²⁵ Id. at 11.

²⁶ Id. See also the AARP study, *supra* n. 20.

between seniors and their lack of familiarity with other technologies like digital cameras and DVD players; without some sort of push, seniors may very well pass them over completely. Moreover, for those seniors who do wish to get online or use technology to improve their quality of life, there seems to be a gap between what seniors want and what they are being offered.²⁷ It should be noted that the Pew Study was national in scope. Unfortunately, similar data for New York City seniors is nonexistent. Such an undertaking would be worthwhile in order to further grasp this growing trend, that regardless of what situation a senior finds him or herself in, there is a lag in getting seniors access to technology.

The Current Problem and Future Implications

As assistive technologies continue to evolve, their worth to seniors will continue to increase to the point where some technologies may become indispensable. While some seniors may view the Internet as a diversion, vital information and applications continue to be developed and placed online to help improve the quality of life of this demographic. Some examples include:

- Health information is available in large quantities in a variety of formats²⁸;
- Government benefit programs, and nonprofits dedicated to overseeing them, are continually using websites to update and supplement plans²⁹;

²⁷ See, e.g. <http://www.eweek.com/article2/0,1895,1872349,00.asp>, describing a recent conference at Bentley College in Massachusetts that focused solely on designing appropriate technologies for seniors.

²⁸ See, e.g., www.webmd.com; www.medicinenet.com; www.emedicine.com.

²⁹ See, e.g., <http://www.benefitscheckup.org>; www.medicareinteractive.org;

- Information about types of prescription drugs and purchasing them is available online at competitive prices and can be delivered to the home³⁰;
- Groceries are just a click away³¹;
- Phone conversations can now be transmitted via computer³².

Non-computer related technologies are also beginning to populate the marketplace, like Phones for Life³³, which provides seniors with lifesaving E911 technology, and other assistive technologies.³⁴ Thus, different technologies need to be made available to seniors and seniors must be given the opportunity to learn how to use them. What is done now will set the groundwork for when the more technically-minded generation of “baby boomers” retires with the expectation that their technology needs will be satisfied.

Assessing What is Being Done

Currently, the City of New York, through its Department for the Aging, does offer some programs addressing these needs.³⁵ One of the DFTA’s more successful programs has been its Age Works Computer Training Center. This 12-week program “provides a comprehensive overview and instructions in MS Office Suite, Word, Excel and Powerpoint. It is aimed at workers with office skills who have found themselves either left behind by the computer revolution or who simply need to upgrade their skill of

³⁰ See, e.g., <http://www.fda.gov/oc/buyonline/default.htm>; <http://www.drugs.com/>;

³¹ See, e.g., www.freshdirect.com; many food store chains now accept online orders.

³² Voice over Internet Protocol is a fast-growing industry that offers very competitive prices in the form of flat fees for all types of phone calls. See, e.g., www.vonage.com; www.skype.com.

³³ www.phones4life.org.

³⁴ Congress has recently become involved, too: <http://www.seniorjournal.com/NEWS/Eldercare/4-04-28Hi-Tech.htm>.

³⁵ The New York City DFTA’s homepage is available at <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dfta/home.html>.

business applications.”³⁶ It is a great program for those seniors who have to go back to work and earn money to support themselves. However, the prerequisites for admission presume some familiarity with technology, some high school education and a proven interest in reentering the workforce.³⁷ Those seniors who have never typed before or did not have the chance to finish high school will not qualify for this program. Another drawback is that the courses are offered at a central location, meaning that seniors will most likely have to travel to get there. All other non-technology related programs are posted on the DFTA’s website, again presuming that seniors are already capable of going online to retrieve information.³⁸ In addition to finding out the demographic of the average DFTA website user, it would also be interesting to see whether, and to what extent, the DFTA’s website is usable by the general senior population.³⁹

The other agency that oversees city-funded senior centers is the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA).⁴⁰ However, most of the programming offered at these centers is administered by a number of community-based organizations.⁴¹ It remains to be seen, however, if there is any synergy between NYCHA and DFTA regarding advice and comment on senior services being offered or between NYCHA and the various

³⁶ Available at: <http://www.nyc.gov/html/dfta/html/employ.html>.

³⁷ The exact requirements are: ability to type 35+ words a minute (tested on a computer keyboard), have a 9th grade reading and math skills (tested), have a 5 years work history (voluntary/temporary work acceptable) and be interested in returning to the workforce full-or part-time. Id.

³⁸ The DFTA’s web interface outlining its services is found at https://a069-webapps1.nyc.gov/egovt/services/service_query.cfm.

³⁹ There is a growing industry dedicated to assessing usability of websites for seniors. See, e.g., “Making Your Website Senior Friendly,” published by the National Institute on Aging and the National Library of Medicine, available at <http://usability.gov/checklist.pdf>; “Creating Senior Friendly Websites”, published by the Center for Medicare Information, available at <http://www.futureofaging.org/PublicationFiles/V1N4.pdf>; “Web Usability for Senior Citizens”, published by Nielsen Norman group, available at <http://www.nngroup.com/reports/seniors/> (summary of a much larger report on web usability standards for seniors; full report available for purchase)

⁴⁰ NYCHA’s homepage is available at <http://www.nyc.gov/html/nycha/home.html>.

⁴¹ See NYCHA’s brochure outlining the services it offers to seniors at http://www.nyc.gov/html/nycha/html/senior_services.html.

community-based organizations regarding requirements for types of programs to be offered.

DFTA and NYCHA's Plan of Action Regarding Technology

In its most recent annual plan (effective through March 2006), the DFTA has acknowledged that one of “the needs of the elderly” is technology.⁴² The DFTA cites technology as a “critical” need and outlines the many benefits of exposure to and use of computers and the Internet.⁴³ The ultimate conclusion that the DFTA comes to is that “[k]eeping up with changes in technological developments is essential to build increasing access and link senior services to help support and enhance the lives of older adults.”⁴⁴ To support this conclusion, the DFTA cites some of its current efforts: a collaborative project with the New York City Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications and local cable companies to wire over 200 senior centers for Internet access⁴⁵; updates and a redesign of its web portal⁴⁶; and a furtherance of its educational offerings.⁴⁷ The DFTA, however, does not lay out specific plans for funding or providing training courses for seniors in the basic use of technology.

Similarly, in NYCHA's 2006 fiscal year plan, technology is mentioned as a need of all its residents, both young and old.⁴⁸ However, the technology focus of NYCHA is on education to increase employment of residents and the integration of modern systems

⁴² This annual plan can be found at http://www.nyc.gov/html/dfta/pdf/publichear_annualplan9-04.pdf.

⁴³ Id. at 19-20.

⁴⁴ Id.

⁴⁵ Id. at 28.

⁴⁶ Id.

⁴⁷ Id. at 31-32.

⁴⁸ NYCHA's Agency Plan for FY 2006 can be found at <http://www.nyc.gov/html/nycha/pdf/Final2006Annual%20Plan.pdf>.

to make their buildings more efficient.⁴⁹ NYCHA does not provide a plan for its buildings or recommendations to the community-based organizations that run programs at the senior centers in the buildings. These organizations might only provide what seniors demand, but such a policy only further widens the gap between seniors and technology. The first step in correcting this lag is to make technology available and then evaluate demand.

Models to be Followed

The nonprofit community of New York City has tried to fill the gap left between what the City offers and what seniors need. There are a number of successful initiatives presently active in the City that demonstrate what can be done within the senior community. These programs range from providing access to technology, training seniors how to use technology and teaching them how to be smarter users (especially online, where filtering information becomes important). Some examples include⁵⁰:

- The Urban Homesteading Assistance Board's (UHAB) Connecting Communities Program: This program wires UHAB co-ops, trains building leaders (some of whom are seniors) to use this technology and makes software and other training materials available online;
- Older Adults Technology Services of New York (OATSNY): this nonprofit offers programs that train seniors directly and trains teenagers to assist seniors in similar programs; and,

⁴⁹ Id. at 5-6 and 119.

⁵⁰ Please see Appendices A and B for a listing of the relevant websites.

- New York Academy of Medicine’s Information Management Initiative: one of the programs focuses on increasing inner-city access to health information.

There are many more programs like these offered around the city and the feedback has been very positive.⁵¹

Policy Suggestions

The City should consider:

- Allocating funds for programs that train seniors to use technology or that provide seniors access to technology;
- Working with the nonprofit sector, the City Council, representatives of the DFTA, and senior citizens to decide what needs to be done now and what more can be done in the future;
- Gathering relevant data on what seniors know about technology, their comfort level with it, their use of and access to technology, and their interest in training and education.

This list is by no means exhaustive and needs to be added to as the conversation on the digital divide between senior citizens and technology continues.

Conclusion

The senior citizen community of New York City is presently underserved and unconnected to technology. New York City offers some programs that address these

⁵¹ <http://ny1.com/ny1/content/index.jsp?stid=101&aid=54139>, detailing the positive response to Council Member Gale Brewer and OATSNY’s “Senior Touch Tank.”

needs but more needs to be done. There needs to be synergy between the DFTA and all city-funded senior centers regarding an overarching technology policy with sets of goals that need to be met. This is especially relevant as “baby boomers” begin to retire and will have more specific technology needs. The City needs to follow the nonprofit lead and work together with this very active community in making training programs available citywide. Seniors cannot demand that which they are unfamiliar with. The success of recent efforts to put seniors in touch with technology demonstrates that a digital divide does indeed exist and that more needs to be done.

Appendix A: Web Content for Seniors

The following is a list (by no means exhaustive) of websites with content especially designed and suited for seniors:

www.seniorjournal.com

www.seniornet.org

www.seniorplanet.org

www.aarp.org/learntech

www.seniors-site.com/

Appendix B: Web Resources for Seniors

The following is a list (again, by no means exhaustive) of nonprofits and for-profit companies dedicated to training seniors in the use of technology or in offering assistive services:

<http://www.uhab.org/whatwedo/digital.htm>: UHAB’s Connecting Communities Program

<http://www.nyam.org/initiatives/im.shtml>: New York Academy of Medicine’s Information Management Initiative to train in using pertinent and accurate medical and healthcare information

www.phone4life.org: provides seniors with cell phones to call 911

www.oatsny.org: Older Adults Technology Services of New York provides an array of training courses

<http://www.generationsonline.org/>: software tailored to seniors that teach them how to use the Internet.

<http://www.csuchico.edu/~csu/seniors/computing2.html>: computers made easy for senior citizens

<http://www.nphd.org/workshops.htm>: Nonprofit Helpdesk assists nonprofits in targeting and correcting flaws in technology use and proficiency