

Action Plan for a Reimagined New York
Final Report of the Reimagine New York Commission

March 31, 2021

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Letter from the Chair

The Honorable Andrew M. Cuomo
Governor of New York State
New York State Capitol Building
Albany, NY 12224

Dear Governor Cuomo:

In May, you formed this Commission to recommend how New York could build back better and more equitably in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis. At the time, the state was already transforming itself to confront the worst pandemic in over a century, and enormous challenges continued.

Throughout our work, I watched New Yorkers weather the crisis with agility, resilience, and kindness in the midst of immense loss, even as recovery seemed a distant possibility. COVID-19 magnified problems known to New Yorkers, and at the same time brought about new and complex challenges. In responding, New York and the country faced a daunting task: to build back. You charged this Commission to meet and to exceed this moment by pushing New York to reimagine itself.

It is our capacity for imagination that will determine how we build back, and it is the reach of our reimagination that will enable New York, a global leader in confronting this and other crises, to continue to set an example for innovation. Motivated by these goals, 16 Commissioners and over 30 staff members engaged thousands of New Yorkers to develop an action plan for connectivity, telehealth, and work, to help the state emerge from this crisis renewed and reinvigorated. Our most important recommendation is this: for New York to lead the nation in both prosperity and equity, universal connectivity is a prerequisite. Affordable broadband is essential to New York's future—to advance education, secure the economic success of its residents and businesses, provide healthcare, and enable all New Yorkers to thrive.

This work is just the start of reimagining New York. We are more inspired by the strength and ingenuity of New Yorkers than we are daunted by the challenge posed by the pandemic. We look to New York State government, private organizations, and all New Yorkers to take up the mantle of this work to realize a state that is more equitable and prosperous than ever before.

Thank you for the opportunity to serve our fellow citizens as we reimagine New York.

Sincerely,
Eric Schmidt
Chair, Reimagine New York Commission

Commission Members

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Summary

Building back a better and more resilient New York, with greater opportunity for all

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed not only how technology is transforming work, school, healthcare, and interpersonal connection—but also the opportunity to harness those changes to improve the lives of all New Yorkers. The Reimagine New York Commission launched in May 2020 to determine how we can best leverage technology to build back a better and more resilient New York, with greater opportunity for all.

Commitment to Universal Connectivity

“Equal access to high-quality, affordable internet connectivity is a prerequisite to making the many other hard and essential changes necessary for New York to build back better and more equitably.” — *from the Commission’s statement on universal connectivity*

Insights Developed Alongside New Yorkers

- 40+ listening sessions, community conversations, and roundtables to understand challenges and source ideas for solutions
- Hundreds of interviews with community leaders, advocates, and experts across New York and the country to identify and refine initiatives
- 3 surveys that engaged thousands of New Yorkers to source ideas and feedback

Action Plan for a Reimagined New York

Focused on three critical areas—connectivity, telehealth, and work—the Commission is advancing 21 actionable recommendations, the majority of which are already being implemented by the State and external partners.

Focus	Objectives	Initiatives
Connectivity and Closing the Digital Divide	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure affordability • Support digital inclusion • Foster competition and consumer choice • Build equitable and universal digital infrastructure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Affordable access program expansion • K-12 connectivity emergency fund • Wireless network pilots • Digital inclusion coalition • Consumer empowerment and competition policies • State champion for connectivity • Coverage, performance, and infrastructure mapping • Equitable infrastructure strategy

<p>Telehealth and Improving Access to Quality Healthcare</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Enact comprehensive telehealth policy reform ● Empower patients to access telehealth ● Equip providers to deliver telehealth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Comprehensive telehealth policy reform NYS ● Telehealth Training Portal ● Telehealth facilitator pilot ● Telehealth community access initiative Reimagine ● NY Mental Health ● Campaign Telehealth data dashboard
<p>Work and Expanding Opportunity in a Digital Economy</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Expand pathways to good careers ● Serve as a magnet and accelerator for small businesses ● lift up artists and cultural institutions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Pathways Pledge ● NY Training Map ● Workforce access and quality initiative Empire State Digital ● Innovation Hub ● Small Business Wizard ● Creatives Rebuild NY

Introduction

New York State has been battling a crisis on an immense scale. The pandemic forced the State to shut down schools, businesses, and community gatherings to stop the spread of the virus and save lives. When the virus reached the State in early 2020, New Yorkers stepped up and bent the curve. The communal cheers and rattling of pots and pans at 7 p.m. soon became a reminder of the heroic efforts of our healthcare workers. But COVID-19 was not just a public health challenge. The pandemic created economic and social challenges that upended the lives of all New Yorkers. The vaccine has given us a path out of the health crisis, but the enormity of these other crises requires ambitious, forward-thinking solutions.

Governor Andrew M. Cuomo created the Reimagine New York Commission in May 2020 to develop such solutions—to ensure that after the pandemic ends we do not revert back to the status quo, but instead build back a better and more resilient New York, with greater opportunity for all. The pandemic has shown that technology, now more than ever, is transforming how we work, learn, connect with loved ones—even receive medical care—and that we can harness these changes to improve the lives of all New Yorkers.

Key Recommendations of the Commission

The Commission, chaired by Eric Schmidt, focused on three critical areas that have the potential to improve the lives of all New Yorkers post-pandemic:

- **Connectivity and Closing the Digital Divide:** Enable internet access for all New Yorkers by identifying barriers to access, including cost, coverage, speeds, choice, and digital skills, and by overcoming those barriers to ensure that the next wave of technological innovation advances equity.
- **Telehealth and Improving Access to Quality Healthcare:** Enable all New Yorkers to take advantage of telehealth, to realize a more accessible, equitable, effective, and efficient healthcare system.
- **Work and Expanding Opportunity in a Digital Economy:** Empower New York’s workforce to succeed in an increasingly digital economy through skill-building and public-private partnerships; identify and accelerate tech-enabled approaches to better serve small businesses and entrepreneurs; and reinvigorate arts and cultural institutions.

As Governor Cuomo often remarks, “life is in the doing.” When the Governor convened this blue-ribbon commission, he asked its members for more than a report. He asked for actionable ideas that would make a difference for New Yorkers immediately.

Across these areas, the Reimagine New York Commission is advancing actionable recommendations and working with the State to enable implementation. These ideas are informed by input from thousands of New Yorkers and hundreds of experts and leaders of communities across all parts of the state, from the most rural regions to the densest urban centers. We spoke with patients, hospital leaders, community health providers, small business owners, economists, community organizers, artists, workforce development providers, technologists, non-profits, educators, and librarians, among many others.

This report is not just a list of recommendations for consideration. It is an action plan that is already showing results. The Commission has already collaborated with the Governor to implement many of these recommendations, including:

- **The Pathways Pledge**, signed by 17 leading New York employers representing more than 120,000 employees in New York State, to create more inclusive workforces and provide more workforce development opportunities. The Governor's Office aims to triple employer commitments by early 2022.
- A **K-12 connectivity emergency fund** to provide low-income students with at-home internet access during the COVID-19 pandemic. In partnership with the Reimagine Commission, Schmidt Futures and the Ford Foundation launched ConnectED NY in March 2021 to provide at-home internet to approximately 50,000 K-12 students who cannot otherwise afford it. School districts must ensure that these students also have access to laptop and tablet devices for remote learning. To help districts meet outstanding device needs, the State is expediting the process for submission, review, and approval of Smart Schools Bond Act plans for devices.
- A **telehealth facilitator pilot**, conducted by AIRnyc and Mt. Sinai Health Partners with support from Schmidt Futures. The program aims to improve comfort with and access to telehealth for New Yorkers facing barriers to telehealth, including providing hands-on support for intake and onboarding. Patient difficulty accessing and navigating technology is a significant barrier to telehealth use, and this program will help inform how New York can best assist people in learning to use telehealth tools and lay the groundwork for future expansion.
- A **Telehealth Training Portal**, designed by the Northeast Telehealth Resource Center and Stony Brook Medicine in collaboration with the New York State Department of Health, to provide open access telehealth training, guidelines, and best practices to health and behavioral health providers across New York.
- **Empire State Digital**, a partnership between New York State and leading global e-commerce and e-payment providers, connects New York-based small businesses with the education, access, and resources they need to digitize, expand, and adapt to the digital economy.

Governor Cuomo's 2021 legislative agenda and complementary private initiatives take action on additional recommendations. Inspired by the Commission's work, Governor Cuomo has proposed in his Executive Budget:

- **First-in-the nation \$15/month broadband affordability legislation**, requiring internet service providers to offer all-in affordable high-speed internet connectivity to at-need households. Internet providers would also be required to affirmatively advertise these offerings.
- **Comprehensive telehealth policy reform** that supports efforts to build a more accessible, equitable, effective, and efficient healthcare system. Legislation tackles key issues such as adjusting reimbursement incentives to encourage telehealth, eliminating outdated regulatory prohibitions on the delivery of telehealth, removing outdated location requirements, and further integrating telehealth into the healthcare system.

- **A workforce scholarship program** to allow low-income New Yorkers to attend high-quality training programs free of cost. Allowing New Yorkers to gain skills through non-college pathways is vital and creates more paths to move up the ladder into well-paid jobs, especially at a time when COVID-19 has displaced many workers and sectors. This program will be complemented by a proposed \$50 million in new workforce programs and the expansion of SUNY’s free online learning programs to residents across the state.

New Yorkers made these results possible. Across our community, individuals stepped up to help and showed remarkable creativity in charting a path to an even better future. We were sobered by the fact that COVID-19 deepened and worsened pre-existing inequities, and pledged ourselves to look at every problem through a race and equity lens. We were also inspired and heartened by the resilience shown by so many, from librarians and educators working relentlessly to get low-income New Yorkers online, to healthcare providers and payors rapidly adapting their practices to serve patients in need, to small businesses nimbly moving offerings online to enable distancing. Thanks to the dedication and heart of the New Yorkers, we feel more confident than ever in New York’s ability to emerge stronger from COVID-19. With this, we offer a roadmap to move New York forward and provide a model for the entire nation.

Connectivity as a Foundation for a Reimagined New York

Over the course of our work, it became clear that ensuring universal connectivity is a prerequisite for most of the Commission’s policy objectives. Without internet access, New Yorkers may face difficulty preparing online job applications, participating in education and learning, accessing care and social service benefits, filing taxes, and engaging in a fulfilling and secure digital life.

The Commission focused on engaging individuals who could benefit most from its work, including those without connectivity. However, the pandemic made it harder than ever to reach those most impacted by the digital divide. Our efforts to connect with these individuals and the dedicated organizations who advocate on their behalf reinforced for us how critical universal connectivity is for the future of the state. We therefore agreed on the following statement:

Commission Statement on Universal Connectivity

“Our work as a Commission has revealed that equal access to high-quality, affordable internet connectivity is a prerequisite to making the many other hard and essential changes necessary for New York to build back better and more equitably. Internet connection today is a necessity. It is as critical to the future of our economy, education, safety, and prosperity as running water and electricity are to New York’s communities. Broadband internet is comparable to a basic utility, even if it is not fully recognized as one by law.

“The COVID-19 pandemic has shown the systematic underinvestment in broadband access and affordability in historically marginalized communities, including communities of color, low-income communities, tribal lands, and the most rural communities. Achieving full digital equity means all New Yorkers have affordable, high-speed internet with the knowledge, equipment, and support needed to use the internet for their individual needs.”

Governor Cuomo likewise acknowledged the essentiality of internet access in his 2021 State of the State address: "Now more than ever, high-speed internet has become essential in every household. You can't go to school, work from home, or visit your doctor by telehealth without it. New York has led the way in building out broadband infrastructure, and now we must ensure that internet service is affordable to give every family and community the connectivity tools they need to succeed."

Guided by the Commission's statement on universal connectivity, and bolstered by the State's leadership, we present the following action plan to push New York towards equity and renewal. The action plan is divided into three main sections reflecting our areas of focus: connectivity, telehealth, and work.

Action Plan for a Reimagined New York

Connectivity and Closing the Digital Divide

This section opens with our vision for a better-connected New York. We then describe the current state of connectivity before outlining the key policy objectives in this space. Our recommendations support each of those policy objectives.

Vision for a Better-Connected New York

We envision a future in which access to the internet in New York is universal, equitable, affordable, and rewarding. Imagine a New York in which:

- Broadband is treated as an essential service
- Every New Yorker has access to high-speed fixed and mobile broadband at home and in their everyday lives in order to learn, work, search for jobs, and access critical information, healthcare, and government services
- Every New Yorker can afford high-quality internet access without putting undue strain on their family budget
- Every K-12 student across the state has access to the device and high-speed internet service needed to complete homework and learn from home, such that all students have an equal opportunity to learn and succeed in and out of the classroom
- Consumers across New York can choose from multiple service providers who compete with each other on quality and price
- Every community, regardless of socioeconomic status, has equal access to the last-mile fiber infrastructure that underpins high-speed broadband networks and smart capabilities
- The markets for digital infrastructure underlying future generations of communications technologies are competitive and innovative
- Communities are well-positioned to adopt smart technologies in an equitable manner, enhancing public life through autonomous transport, remote healthcare, and connected services, while protecting individual data and privacy

We believe the initiatives in this action plan are a first step towards making this vision a reality. They position New York to lead the nation in achieving universal connectivity and enabling residents to thrive online over the next century.

The State of Connectivity

New York has one of the most robust broadband networks in the nation largely due to the success of the State's efforts to increase broadband coverage statewide. In 2015, the Governor launched the \$500 million [New NY Broadband Program](#), the nation's most ambitious broadband initiative to date. The program set aggressive standards for participating service providers: download speeds of 100 megabits per second (Mbps) in most places and 25 Mbps – the FCC standard for “covered” – in the most remote areas. Cable merger orders also compelled hundreds of millions in private-at-risk investment in rural deployment and speed upgrades statewide that have created one of the nation's most robust broadband ecosystems. Further, the \$2 billion [Smart](#)

[Schools Bond Act](#), authorized by New York voters, provides critical technology and devices for students statewide.

These efforts have catalyzed nearly \$1 billion in private and federal investment and brought reliable high-speed internet to millions of households at the New York State high speed broadband standard of 100 Mbps or more, with a goal to guarantee every household, including those in the most rural, hard-to-serve areas, has access to a high-speed broadband connection at least meeting the FCC standard (25 Mbps).

As a result, 2.4 million more New Yorkers now have access to high -speed broadband. More than 98% percent of New Yorkers have access to robust high-speed broadband at speeds of 100 Mbps or more, and 70 percent of households can choose from two or more providers.

Although New York has made progress on broadband access, work remains to realize the Commission's vision of universal connectivity. The challenges posed by COVID-19 have reinforced our understanding that equal access to high-quality, affordable internet connectivity is necessary for New York to build back better and more equitably.

During the pandemic, students have grappled with staying engaged in learning without at-home internet, leading to significant learning loss with long-term implications. Without internet access, people navigating the criminal legal system struggled to participate in virtual court appearances, communicate with lawyers and advocates, or receive information about their cases.¹ Job applications and government services are increasingly administered online, making it even more critical for residents to have high-quality at-home internet access. Older residents have struggled to connect virtually with loved ones and access critical services, including signing up to receive COVID-19 vaccinations.² For people with disabilities, the economic, social, and physical impact of limited broadband access has been further compounded by website accessibility challenges.³ Achieving full digital equity means that *all* New Yorkers must have affordable, high-speed internet access along with the knowledge, equipment, and technical support to use the internet for their individual needs.

Across the country, the digital divide persists across axes of population density, income, race, and other socioeconomic factors. Universal connectivity must include older adults, people with disabilities, people experiencing housing insecurity and/or living in congregate settings, and individuals with undocumented immigration status, among others, who today face structural barriers in their efforts to use the internet. By contrast, the current broadband market has tended towards local concentration, limited consumer choice, and supracompetitive* prices. These are the next big challenges in the fight for universal and equitable connectivity.

* Pricing above that which would persist in a competitive market due to limited competition between market participants

Spotlight on New Yorkers

“One of the most glaring gaps is our clients’ inability to access affordable cell phones, internet-connected devices, and data plans. . . These technology gaps present incredibly high stakes for our clients, who already live in under-resourced communities dealing with the consequences of deep structural racism. . . People navigating the criminal legal system need access to technology in order to access virtual court appearances, engage in social services programming (including mandatory services), communicate with their advocates outside of court appearances, and receive crucial information about their ongoing cases. Indeed, access to cell phones and data plans can be the difference between a judge releasing a person pre-trial or that person spending the duration of their case on Rikers Island.”

- *Bronx Defenders Memorandum to the Reimagine New York Commission*

Four Objectives for a Better-Connected New York

The Commission identified four critical objectives to realize its vision of universal internet connectivity: (1) ensure affordability, (2) support digital inclusion, (3) foster competition and consumer choice, and (4) build equitable and universal digital infrastructure. Below, we describe each objective in greater detail and recommend initiatives to make progress toward these four objectives. We also provide an update on initiatives that are already underway.

1. Ensure that internet is affordable for all.

We must take deliberate action to ensure that all New Yorkers can afford the internet access required to meet their individual needs. There are two critical elements to making the internet affordable: (a) ensuring broadband markets are competitive, such that consumers benefit from price competition among providers, and (b) providing subsidized access for those New Yorkers most in need. This section focuses on subsidizing access, recommending that New York:

Increase the scale and adoption of affordable access programs. Affordability is a major barrier to internet access and adoption. It is critical that internet service providers (ISPs) create or expand affordable access programs, including free or low-cost cellular usage for telehealth. Further, the State should increase the percentage of eligible New Yorkers enrolled in affordable access programs by raising awareness, streamlining enrollment, and increasing access points to such programs. This low-cost, high-reward initiative ensures that New Yorkers can take advantage of investments by the federal government and ISPs that are currently underutilized. Further, it leverages private sector commitments and partnerships to help underserved New Yorkers afford broadband service.

Update: In January, the Governor announced a \$15 / month affordable access mandate for consideration by the New York State Legislature in 2021, and in March the State [launched](#) a website that helps New Yorkers to find available, affordable offerings in their area. These actions build on the Commission’s recommendation to expand affordable access programs for low-income New Yorkers.

Create a public-private partnership to provide broadband access and remote-learning devices to K-12 students in qualifying economically disadvantaged districts, increasing access through the use of philanthropic funds for internet service and Smart Schools Bond Act and other available public funds for the purchase of laptops and tablets. Pre-pandemic estimates suggested that 17 percent of teenagers nationwide could often or sometimes not complete homework due to lack of a reliable connection;⁴ that number is even higher for Black students (25 percent) and those in lower-income households (24 percent). Many K-12 students in low-income households statewide lack the devices and/or internet connectivity necessary to fully participate in remote learning. This school year, COVID-19 forced periods of fully remote learning, exacerbating the problems of internet and device access and leading to long-term learning loss. The emergency fund effort represents a true partnership between the State, school districts, philanthropic partners, and ISPs to address the “homework gap.”

Update: In March 2021, Schmidt Futures and the Ford Foundation launched [ConnectED NY](#), an emergency fund to provide free internet access for approximately 50,000 K-12 students across New York through the 2021-2022 school year.

Explore sustainable, long-term solutions that leverage wireless technologies to provide free or low-cost access to individuals who need it, including K-12 students with the greatest connectivity needs. While emergency funding addresses critical near-term needs, we must also explore more sustainable, long-term solutions to connect high-need populations who remain without affordable access today. As such, the Commission recommends:

- **Supporting the development of next-generation networks that expand institutional internet access from civic anchor institutions to surrounding communities.** School districts and libraries around the country are successfully extending local networks into their communities through the innovative use of wireless technologies. Such networks may be a sustainable, long-term solution to the "homework gap" and can lay the foundation for equitable 5G-network deployment.
- **Expanding secure wireless access to higher education campuses and K-12 schools across New York** through partnerships with authentication services. Through these services, participants can access institutional internet securely and free of charge whenever they are near a hotspot, which can be installed in libraries, parking lots, and potentially at housing complexes.

Update: Schmidt Futures is supporting a cohort of wireless network pilots across New York State. For example, through its Bklyn REACH program, the Brooklyn Public Library is partnering with Sky Packets to extend free WiFi at the majority of its branches ~300 feet into the surrounding communities.

Wireless Pilots to Watch

In New York State

Kingston Equitable Internet Initiative (KEII)

Radio Kingston partnered with The Equitable Internet Initiative and Community Tech New York (CTNY) to provide low-cost internet service to nearby residents through wireless antennae installed atop a 300ft tower. Residents will be trained as Digital Stewards to gain the skills needed to build and maintain this community network.

THE POINT CDC's Hunts Point Community Network (HPCN)

THE POINT Community Development Corporation developed a robust wireless community mesh network to provide free WiFi to 600+ residents of Hunts Point in The Bronx through 14 nodes installed atop local buildings. The network was built by and is maintained by community members trained as Digital Stewards.

Across the US

Murray City, Utah

Utah's Murray City School District, in partnership with the Utah Education Technology Network, is expanding educational internet access from school campuses into user homes in adjacent communities, leveraging Citizen Broadband Radio Service (CBRS) spectrum.

2. Bolster digital skills and digital inclusion by amplifying existing programs and partnerships.

A host of structural barriers beyond coverage and affordability prevent New Yorkers from accessing the internet, including lack of digital skills, underbanking and lack of access to lines of credit, a deficit of community assistance resources, and privacy and personal data concerns. The State must ensure that all New Yorkers can access the internet confidently and securely to meet their individual needs. To achieve this objective, we recommend that New York:

Build a Coalition for Digital Inclusion. Throughout our work, we heard from advocates and community members involved in high-impact digital inclusion initiatives; these included efforts in communities facing added barriers to digital opportunities, such as formerly incarcerated individuals, people with disabilities, older adults, and individuals for whom English is a second language. The efforts of digital inclusion and community-based organizations can be amplified through both increased funding and intentional network-building. State government can be a central entity that brings together digital inclusion stakeholders including libraries, community-based organizations, technology platforms, and internet service providers.

In particular, a critical element of digital inclusion is digital skills training. Digital skills deficits are distributed unequally throughout the population. Nationwide, 32 percent of Latinx workers and 17 percent of Black workers have no digital skills, compared to 9 percent of their White counterparts;⁵ these individuals may have never used a computer before or may be unable to perform basic computer tasks (e.g., using a mouse). The State should prioritize supporting workers who lack digital skills. Further, the State should support local and national efforts to develop standardized definitions and rubrics for digital proficiency to better assess and meet digital skills needs. Such a framework would enable digital skills programs to consistently evaluate impact and enable measurement of statewide progress towards digital proficiency goals.

Spotlight on New Yorkers

“Before I began digital training classes through Older Adults Technology Services, I would call myself a dinosaur because I did not know how to do anything online! I had a hard time getting connected to MyChart to connect with my doctors. My mother recently passed away and my family is on the west coast. If I didn't know how to use Zoom I would not have been able to participate.”

- Beverly B., Participant in Older Adults Technology Services (OATS) Senior Planet Initiative, New York, NY

3. Ensure that broadband markets are competitive, prices are transparent, and consumers are empowered. To achieve this, we recommend that the State:

Enact policies to empower consumers and foster competition. As in any well-functioning market, private service providers should compete to maximize profits while government intervenes when necessary to protect the public interest. As broadband increasingly takes the role of an essential utility, policy changes are necessary to meet modern needs.

FCC Form 477 data indicates that 70% of New York households have two or more offerings – including 20% of households with three or more connections⁶ – but more can be done to expand optionality particularly for consumers with two or fewer connections, who may face supracompetitive prices.

In the near term, New York should consider policies that enable customers to make informed purchasing decisions through a standardized Broadband Disclosure Label detailing speeds, performance, pricing, and additional fees. In the medium term, the State should consider additional consumer empowerment measures for service to multi-tenant housing. Among such measures are policies curtailing landlords' ability to restrict in-building access through revenue sharing agreements or exclusive marketing contracts with ISPs. The State should permanently bar anti-competitive uses of blocking, throttling, and paid prioritization by any internet service provider.

Update: In January 2021, the Governor announced a proposal to enact a broadband disclosure label, for consideration by the New York State Legislature, to ensure that consumers can make informed decisions when purchasing broadband services. This action builds on Commission recommendations to enact policies that empower consumers and foster competition.

Spotlight on New Yorkers

“Due to the way [federal] grants are allocated, my road is not eligible for broadband grants but my neighbor’s road is.”

- *Eliza B., Tompkins County*

“I do not have access to internet at my house. Without internet . . . How are my kids supposed to participate in remote learning? How are we supposed to work from home? How are we supposed to take advantage of virtual medical appointments? How is my son supposed to zoom with his psychiatrist or counselor when we cannot connect to Zoom from our house? If this is the way of the future, internet must be available and affordable in rural areas, too.”

- *A New Yorker, Cattaraugus County*

“I am a 73-year-old widow on social security. I pay \$85 per month for just 5 network stations, a landline that I do not use and do not want, and WiFi that is frequently undependable. Every year this cost goes up.”

- *Arlene R., Bronx County*

“It would be great to have more than one provider to choose from. Competition helps to keep prices down and service optimal.”

- *A New Yorker, Orange County*

4. Build the state-level institutions and digital infrastructure necessary to realize New York’s ambition of universal, affordable broadband for all.

New York should both address remaining gaps in rural coverage and ensure that infrastructure is competitive and equitably distributed. For fixed infrastructure to be both competitive and equitable, all New Yorkers should have the ability to choose from multiple, high-speed broadband offerings who compete on price and service quality. The quantity and quality of offerings should not differ based on an area’s socioeconomic characteristics. To achieve this objective, we recommend that New York:

Appoint a State Champion for Connectivity. New York State’s Broadband Program Office (BPO) was established in 2015 and tasked with allocating \$500 million in grants for rural broadband deployment. The BPO made great strides in expanding fixed, residential broadband coverage. Currently, New NY Broadband Program funds have been allocated, concluding BPO’s work for the foreseeable future.

We believe that Governor-led leadership, with dedicated staff support, is critical to ensuring that equitable connectivity remains a priority beyond the New NY Broadband Program and receives the investment needed to close the digital divide. In the near term, even amid the current fiscal environment, the State can enact budget-neutral policies and foster coalitions among private partners and non-profits to begin closing the digital divide. Looking ahead, the State should create a permanent office that seeks to close remaining gaps in affordability, coverage, consumer choice, and digital inclusion.

Deepen coverage, performance, and infrastructure data across the State, using cost-effective surveys and new datasets to pressure test Federal Communications Commission (FCC) maps and increase accountability among providers.

At present, FCC coverage data systematically undercounts the number of uncovered households, leaving some rural communities in New York without internet and ineligible for federal funding for internet deployment. Further, maps of existing underground fiber and conduit are often non-existent or inaccurate. Accurate maps are critical to equitable infrastructure deployment and can help to ensure that New York receives its fair share of federal funding for rural deployment.

In December 2020, Congress appropriated funds to support the FCC’s Digital Opportunity Data Collection (DODC) efforts, through which the FCC will develop more granular coverage maps across the United States. These updated maps will inform future federal funding for infrastructure deployment in unserved rural communities, including Phase II of the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund (RDOF). New York should be prepared to work with the FCC to expedite its DODC efforts, providing existing mapping resources (e.g., lot-level spatial data, survey data) if available.

Further, constituent input is critical to evaluating the state of broadband access today. To augment ongoing federal mapping initiatives, the State should collect information from New Yorkers on broadband availability, pricing, user experience, and experienced speeds to pressure test revised FCC maps once they are made available.

Update: To better understand geographic distribution of barriers to access, the Commission sponsored a capstone project at New York University’s Center for Urban Science and Progress. Furthermore, in March 2021 the State [launched](#) a website allowing New Yorkers to report on coverage gaps and consumer experiences with broadband providers.

Develop and implement a State strategy for equitable and universal deployment of affordable and competitive broadband infrastructure. In particular, the State should develop a statewide fiber strategy and investigate mechanisms to catalyze and orient private investment in broadband infrastructure, with a focus on challenger providers including open-access networks, locally-owned ISPs, minority and women-owned business enterprises (MWBEs), and rural cooperatives. These policies would drive a measurable increase in the number of providers available by census block and the availability of fiber in low-income census blocks where it does not exist today.

In the near term, the State should focus on low-cost solutions, including developing a forward-looking strategy for State-owned conduit, fiber, and wireless assets, increasing coordination across agencies, and implementing a “dig-once” policy to encourage conduit to be laid during construction in public rights-of-way. The State should act quickly to maximize the impact of new federal funding. Such actions could include launching feasibility studies for local projects and waiving certain fees for federally funded projects, as the State did for its 2015 Broadband Program.

Update: In January 2021, the Governor announced a dig-once policy for consideration by the New York State Legislature, building on the Commission’s recommendation. The State is also committed to increasing State agency coordination on fiber and wireless projects.

In the long term, the State should utilize its assets to support competitive and equitable next-generation networks. The State could consider, subject to further exploration and evaluation, leasing State-owned conduit and/or fiber to reduce market bottlenecks, drive competition, and generate revenue, investigating the use of low-interest rate loans and first-loss capital to support broadband projects in low-income communities where providers might not otherwise choose to build, working in partnership with the federal government to provide incentives for deploying networks in underserved rural and urban areas, and implementing policies to ensure fiber is deployed in low-income communities at the same time that it is deployed in more affluent communities.

New York can encourage investment in technologies and private market solutions that disrupt the dynamics leading to market concentration. As additional federal funding becomes available, New York should proactively ensure that funding is deployed efficiently and equitably, replicating successful elements of its 2015 Broadband Program and integrating challenger ISPs (e.g., rural co-ops, local fiber providers, open-access networks, MWBEs) into the process. The State could also encourage infrastructure sharing in both wireless and fixed markets to reduce redundant infrastructure and drive competition.

Furthermore, systemic change at the federal, state, and local levels is required to shift the dynamics that result in these concentrated market outcomes. New York State’s leadership on these issues can be a model for other states.

Telehealth and Improving Access to Quality Healthcare

This section shares our vision for telehealth in New York. We then describe the current state of play for telehealth before outlining three policy objectives. Our six recommendations are organized to support each of those objectives for telehealth.

Vision for Telehealth in a Reimagined New York

We envision a future in which all New Yorkers—regardless of income, geography, race, ethnicity, age, or technical literacy—have the means, access, and ability to use telehealth to improve the quality and convenience of their healthcare. Imagine a New York in which:

- Every New Yorker is able to access a virtual visit, whenever they need care, that feels just as smooth, personal, and effective as an in-person visit
- Patients and providers seamlessly alternate between in-person and virtual visits
- Every New Yorker has access to the best providers for their physical and behavioral health needs, regardless of their physical location
- Trusted community members—librarians, community center staff—are equipped to provide telehealth support and resources to anyone in need
- Every New Yorker is able to access telehealth without worrying about unaffordable co-pays, cellular costs, or other expenses
- Advanced remote monitoring devices are seamlessly built into everyday life and monitor the health of New Yorkers, enabling comprehensive, proactive care
- Patients are able to see different providers with perfect continuity of care facilitated by interoperable electronic systems
- Every New Yorker has true flexibility to use telehealth as much or as little as works for them

The initiatives in this action plan are a first step towards making this vision a reality, positioning New York State as a champion of the health and well-being of its people.

The State of Telehealth

Telehealth became an increasingly essential component of the healthcare system during the COVID-19 crisis, and New York still has significant work to do to realize the Commission's vision for reimagined telehealth access and use.

The COVID-19 pandemic both underscored grave inequities in our healthcare system and revealed telehealth's potential to expand access to and quality of care. During the crisis, New York saw an approximately 130-fold increase in telehealth usage.*

* From January to April of 2020, telehealth increased as a percentage of all commercial insurance medical claims in New York from ~0.13 percent to ~16.8 percent. Research is based on claims data compiled and maintained by FAIR Health, Inc. The Commission to Reimagine New York is solely responsible for the conclusions reflected herein. FAIR Health is not responsible for any of the opinions expressed herein.

The Commission’s public engagement efforts revealed many New Yorkers’ positive experiences with telehealth. Academic research also suggests that telehealth can have many positive benefits, such as expanding access to healthcare, improving patient health outcomes and satisfaction, and increasing the convenience of accessing care. Some of these benefits assume particular importance during the COVID-19 pandemic, allowing patients to access care without traveling and so reducing risk of exposure to COVID-19 and other secondary infections. Increased telehealth usage may also lower healthcare costs by helping patients to get the preventative and regular care they need to avoid more expensive forms of emergency and inpatient care in the future.

While telehealth usage is expanding and presents various potential benefits, telehealth adoption is uneven across the state. Telehealth is underutilized by rural populations, those over 60 years old, low-income communities, racial and ethnic minorities, and groups with limited English proficiency, among others, as compared to their counterparts. These groups often face a number of barriers to accessing telehealth, such as limited technical and general health literacy, and a lack of access to internet connectivity, technology, health insurance, and healthcare providers. Preliminary evidence suggests that many of these disparities in telehealth usage and access have worsened due to the COVID-19 crisis.

Going forward, New York has an opportunity to make greater use of telehealth, supporting efforts to build a more accessible, equitable, effective, and efficient healthcare system. To achieve this goal, the State should take action to improve access for underserved communities and increase the effectiveness and efficiency of telehealth.

Three Objectives for Improving Telehealth Use and Access in New York

For New York to realize the potential of telehealth, the Commission identified three critical objectives: (1) enact comprehensive telehealth policy reform, (2) empower patients to access telehealth, and (3) equip providers to deliver telehealth. We see these objectives, and the recommended initiatives to realize them, as a starting point, and call on the State and other actors to continue pursuing opportunities to support telehealth as technology evolves. Below, we describe each objective in greater detail, and put forth initiatives to make progress toward each one. We also provide an update on initiatives that are already under way.

1. Enact policy reform and encourage payors to develop more extensive coverage and reimbursement policies for telehealth across insurance types.

Without these policies, both patients and healthcare providers face a challenging and often insurmountable financial barrier to using telehealth. In order to achieve this, our first and most important recommendation to the State on telehealth is:

Enact comprehensive policy reform to expand telehealth use. COVID-19 has led to more flexible and expansive use of telehealth, providing a strong foundation for broader policy change. More than 11 million New Yorkers who rely on Medicaid and commercial health insurance have benefited from the telehealth flexibilities enacted by New York State in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We strongly support the continuation of these flexibilities, and

believe that the State and private insurers should go further by enacting a comprehensive set of permanent policy changes in 2021. Such policies should cover three areas:

1. Improve coverage and reimbursement for telehealth
 - Expand coverage for telehealth, including alternate telehealth modalities (such as telephonic), as well as additional provider types and services (especially for behavioral health).
 - Ensure adequate telehealth reimbursement (especially for behavioral health), including continuing the shift towards value-based care and creating incentives for longitudinal care.
 - Require all insurers to cover telehealth services offered by any provider otherwise covered for in-person care, and to include telehealth offerings in their provider directories.
 - Prevent onerous or disproportionate cost-sharing.
 - Allow for reimbursement of necessary cellular and connectivity-related expenses for telehealth for medically underserved patients.
2. Modernize outdated regulatory restrictions
 - Eliminate restrictions that limit the locations from which patients and providers can participate in telehealth.
 - Permit electronic and verbal consent.
 - Develop interstate licensure flexibilities.
 - Minimize additional restrictions on telehealth usage (e.g., existing relationship requirements).
 - Streamline telehealth policies across regulatory agencies.
3. Further integrate telehealth into the healthcare system
 - Encourage and require greater interoperability, leveraging the Statewide Health Information Network for New York.
 - Support provider-to-provider eConsults to expand access to specialty care.
 - Support telehealth-enabled community paramedicine, and encourage telehealth facilitation and support services.

Additionally, the Commission calls on the federal government to further enable and expand these policy recommendations.* We also call for self-insured plans, which are not regulated by the State, and fully insured plans to commit to similar expansions in telehealth coverage. Finally, we encourage State and federal policymakers to ensure that telehealth is well-integrated with existing health and social services.

Update: In January 2021, at the Commission’s recommendation, the Governor announced a comprehensive telehealth policy proposal for consideration by the New York State Legislature. The bill included many of the critical reforms referenced in this document.

* *This includes both providing the State with the flexibility to pursue telehealth expansions within its Medicaid program, and taking steps to pursue similar expansions within the federally managed Medicare program. The federal government should also allow the Medicaid program to offer reimbursement for wraparound services such as internet expenses for low-income patients.*

Spotlight on New Yorkers

“If insurance pays less for a telehealth visit, it would not make sense for my office to offer telehealth on an equal footing with in-person visits in the office. Talking is sometimes the most important part of the visit, so telehealth is the most efficient way to serve the patient. I would trust the provider to recognize when an in-person visit was necessary.”

- Dr. Jamie Loehr, Ithaca, NY

2. Empower patients with the connectivity, devices, private spaces, and familiarity to take full advantage of telehealth.

Approximately 20 percent of New Yorkers lack any at-home internet connection (including broadband, satellite, or cellular connection),⁷ and many more are unable to benefit from telehealth due to lack of appropriate audiovisual or medical devices or private spaces, and limited digital literacy. These barriers disproportionately affect New Yorkers who are working hard to make ends meet, people of color, rural New Yorkers, and older adults.⁸ To address the barriers that these and other New Yorkers face, and to build on our Connectivity recommendations, we further recommend that New York:

Pilot a program to provide telehealth facilitation to New Yorkers in need. Some New Yorkers cannot use telehealth due to discomfort with and/or lack of access to technology. Yet the community health worker model has shown that lay healthcare workers trained to provide the right support can empower patients and significantly improve their health outcomes. We recommend piloting a novel “facilitator” program. Such a program could test the efficacy and feasibility of using facilitators to guide New Yorkers in need through the telehealth process. If successful, the program could be scaled to meet the specific needs of New Yorkers facing barriers to telehealth and potentially result in new job opportunities.

Update: AIRnyc and Mount Sinai Health Partners received funding from Schmidt Futures to implement this pilot, for completion in April 2021. The pilot, on track to engage more than 250 Mount Sinai patients, will provide insights into the efficacy and feasibility of Community Health Worker-facilitated interventions to identify and mitigate barriers to telehealth connection.

Fund community organizations to create new ways for New Yorkers to access telehealth. New Yorkers who lack the right technology or privacy at home may be unable to participate in telehealth. Many of these New Yorkers could benefit significantly from support by trusted community institutions—such as libraries, pharmacies, and community centers—to access telehealth. New York State should stand up a program to provide guidance and grant funding to institutions that wish to invest in innovative and community-oriented ways to expand telehealth access. Grants could be used towards purchase of audiovisual devices, remote monitoring devices, private spaces, and other means to help connect underserved communities.

Update: On the Commission’s recommendation, Governor Cuomo announced plans to launch this program in 2021 in partnership with Schmidt Futures and other private funders. Eligible institutions will be able to submit proposals for grants to meaningfully expand telehealth access to New Yorkers.

Launch a mental health campaign to support New Yorkers. The stress and trauma of COVID-19 highlighted many New Yorkers’ struggles with mental illness. But the crisis has also illustrated the willingness of New Yorkers to take advantage of mental health resources when aware of them, including tele-services. We recommend that New York State’s Office of Mental Health partner with private organizations across the state to launch a mental health awareness campaign. Such a campaign will encourage open conversations about mental health and spread awareness of services such as the State’s Emotional Support Helpline and Crisis Text Line. This campaign should focus specifically on strengthening communities that disproportionately face unmet mental health needs, including low-income, older, rural, and immigrant communities and communities of color.

Update: In March 2021, the Governor’s Office announced that the State Office of Mental Health will partner with private organizations across the state to launch the [Reimagine New York Mental Health Outreach Campaign](#). 10 partners have committed to the campaign to increase its reach to over 100,000 New Yorkers.

Further actions can be taken to empower patients and meaningfully improve access to telehealth services. Cellular providers can limit costs for cellular telehealth usage to ensure that no New Yorker must skip a virtual visit due to a data limit. Healthcare providers, insurers, and philanthropists can distribute remote monitoring devices to allow New Yorkers with the greatest needs to receive care from their own homes. Medical technology companies can continue to innovate, including by developing lower cost telehealth devices and tools, to increase access for all New Yorkers. Public and private organizations can launch digital literacy and awareness campaigns to make sure every New Yorker understands how to take advantage of telehealth.

Spotlight on New Yorkers

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased pressure to improve access to telehealth care for seniors in my community. As a volunteer Community Nurse I am making an effort to increase intergenerational communication to help seniors navigate technology so they can better meet their health needs.

- Carolyn English, New York, NY

3. Equip health and behavioral health providers with the appropriate training, resources, and tools to deliver high-quality healthcare.

With the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, health and behavioral healthcare providers were forced to adapt to remote care overnight, although many lacked adequate training, resources, and tools to support the transition. We should ensure that these providers receive support to develop permanent telehealth offerings of equal quality to in-person care. To achieve this end, we recommend that New York:

Provide free telehealth training to health and behavioral healthcare providers. Delivering effective virtual care is different from in-person care delivery. Providers across the state, and, in particular, community and independent providers serving New Yorkers with the greatest needs, often lack access to robust telehealth training resources. Enhancing provider knowledge and skills will improve quality of care and encourage providers to expand telehealth services. We recommend the formation of a Telehealth Education Initiative to offer open access training and continuing professional education, ensuring that healthcare and behavioral health professionals can access the best, most relevant resources needed to deliver high quality virtual care.

Update: The Northeast Telehealth Resource Center, with Stony Brook Medicine and the NYS Department of Health, launched the [Telehealth Training Portal](#). Four training modules are currently available. An advisory group of experts and practitioners will continuously create and evaluate training resources on the site.

Enable better research on telehealth through new data resources. While existing research points to the benefits of telehealth, much remains to be learned about the most effective clinical applications of telehealth and about disparities in telehealth usage. New York should study the surge in telehealth adoption over the past year to ensure telehealth is being used effectively and equitably. New York State should take advantage of its unique ability to gather and open data across public and private insurance to aggregate and share telehealth data with the public. Doing so will enable researchers, policymakers, and insurers to learn and innovate more rapidly, to ultimately ensure providers are equipped with the knowledge to deliver excellent remote care. To this end, the State and private organizations should explore:

- Launching a data dashboard to track telehealth usage across the state.
- Streamlining the process by which researchers can request telehealth data from the State.
- Offering opportunities for providers serving high needs or rural populations to invest in telehealth infrastructure.
- Establishing a consumer report to evaluate telehealth platforms on accessibility and other dimensions.
- Convening providers to advocate on behalf of further telehealth policy changes, share best practices, and provide guidance on further ways to advance telehealth.
- Supporting further research to develop clear clinical pathways that effectively integrate remote and in-person care.

Spotlight on New Yorkers

The healthcare community has been working day and night to use virtual care to keep patients and providers safe. We must now stop recreating the wheel and come together to make sure all of New York's providers have the best training and tools to achieve telehealth's full potential.

- Dr. Kimberly Noël, Stony Brook Medicine

Work and Expanding Opportunity in a Digital Economy

This section outlines our vision for working in a reimagined New York. We then review the state of play before outlining the key policy objectives and supporting recommendations to achieve our vision.

Vision for Working in a Reimagined New York

We envision a future in which New York's residents, businesses, and communities are empowered to reach their full potential. Imagine a New York in which:

- Every New Yorker working one full-time job is able to afford to support their family
- Every working parent is able to access childcare services
- Every New Yorker is able to access and afford high-quality job training
- Every New Yorker is able to access the technology they need to work from a safe location
- Best-in-class employee benefits are portable from job to job
- Every New York-based company can find the skilled labor it seeks within the New York State labor force
- Small businesses can access all government resources from a single, easy-to-use portal
- Small businesses are not forced to shut down solely due to short-term economic downturns
- New Yorkers shop at local small businesses both online and in-person because of their unique position in the community
- Arts and cultural institutions have diverse and sustainable revenue streams across vibrant online and in-person experiences

We believe the initiatives in this action plan are a first step towards making this vision a reality in New York, enriching prosperity, creativity, and opportunity across the state.

The State of Work

The economic fallout caused by the COVID-19 crisis created unprecedented hardship for New York's workers and businesses. In April 2020, New York's unemployment rate reached a peak of 16.2 percent, the highest rate in the state since the Great Depression.⁹ Nearly one year into the pandemic, New York's unemployment rate remains more than double pre-pandemic lows.¹⁰

The pandemic touched all of our lives, but it has not impacted every community equally. Workers in lower wage sectors have been hit especially hard, with those across the hospitality, transportation, and social services sectors facing acute hardship. Small businesses have been significantly impacted by the pandemic.¹¹ Both workers and businesses in the vital arts and culture sector have been uniquely vulnerable to the financial pressures wrought by the pandemic due to the decrease in domestic and international tourism and the obstacles posed by social distancing.¹² For these people and beyond, the full extent of the economic downturn remains to be seen.

The COVID-19 crisis has also been especially difficult for New York’s workers and businesses who were not fully prepared for the shift to digital. While the long-term impacts of the COVID-19 crisis are unclear, early data suggested that two years of digital transformation occurred during just the first two months of the crisis.¹³ Crucially, in this environment of rapid digital change, nearly one-third of the United States workforce possesses limited or no digital skills.¹⁴ The time is now to ensure that New York’s workforce possesses necessary skills and to enable New York’s small businesses to participate in the digital economy.

Disruptions wrought by COVID-19 may create opportunities to fix structural failures and inequities, including worker health and safety and affordable childcare. By building on Governor Cuomo’s initiatives to raise the minimum wage to \$15/hour, launch the \$175 million Workforce Development Initiative, and invest in childcare affordability, New York has a chance to rebuild an economy that is stronger and more durable than ever before. With thoughtful use of new technologies and innovative tools, the State can rethink assumptions about workforces and workplaces, and help New Yorkers to build back better.

Three Objectives for Improving Economic Opportunities in New York

For New York’s workforce and business community to achieve their potential, the Commission has identified three objectives: (1) expand pathways to good careers, (2) serve as a magnet and accelerator for small businesses, and (3) lift up artists and cultural institutions. We see these objectives and the recommended initiatives to realize them as a starting point, and call on the State and other actors to evaluate further opportunities to support workers and business owners going forward. Below, we describe each objective in greater detail, and put forth recommendations to make progress against each. We also provide an update on initiatives that are already under way.

1. Expand pathways to good careers to all New Yorkers.

The COVID-19 crisis disrupted the career trajectories of an untold number of New Yorkers, but it also presents a rare moment to evolve support for our workforce so that we can thrive in the workplace. In order to begin providing more opportunities for New Yorkers, we recommend the following:

Encourage New York’s employers to open career pathways to more New Yorkers. New Yorkers without four-year degrees comprised nearly 60 percent of those who were laid off at the initial peak of the pandemic in April.¹⁵ Employer-based pathways for social mobility are critical to address the shifting demands across sectors and occupations—trends that have been accelerated by COVID-19—and to ensure that the skills of the workforce evolve in tandem. Given the trends we have highlighted, we recommend a Pathways Pledge that New York employers may join to commit to more equitable hiring, worker retraining, and helping low-income workers access higher education. Employers that take the Pathways Pledge can sign on to actions that include: creating new apprenticeship programs, hiring based on skills rather than credentials, and investing in employee retraining. By focusing on the “demand,” or employer, side of the hiring equation, the Pathways Pledge will help to create more good jobs for all New Yorkers.

Update: The Commission worked alongside the State’s Office of Workforce Development to build a coalition of New York employers committed to the Pledge. Governor Cuomo officially [announced this endeavor](#) in January 2021. To date, 17 companies have made the pledge, impacting over 120,000 workers across New York. New York employers interested in joining the pledge can find more information [here](#).

Pathways Pledge Employers

- AIG
- Athenex
- Berkeley College
- Broccolo Tree & Lawn Care
- Chobani
- Clarkson University
- Cognizant
- Con Edison
- Globalfoundries
- Google
- IBM
- JPMorgan Chase
- Loretto
- Mastercard
- Memorial Sloan Kettering
- Montefiore
- TEKsystems

Increase access to job training and improve training quality. At the height of the first wave of the COVID-19 crisis, nearly 400,000 New Yorkers filed initial unemployment claims in a single week.¹⁶ Although many New Yorkers have since found new jobs, by December 2020 the state unemployment rate remained elevated at over eight percent and more than 50,000 New Yorkers continued to file initial unemployment claims each week into January 2021.¹⁷

To help these New Yorkers recover from the pandemic, we should ensure that they are equipped to meet the evolving demands of the labor market. Put simply, we need to make it easier for New Yorkers to acquire new skills. We recommend that New York State and philanthropic actors increase funding, in the form of grants and loans with generous repayment terms, to enable New Yorkers to attend high-quality training programs aligned to in-demand jobs. In addition, we recommend that New York State improves its ability to assess training program quality by investing in an integrated data system across all workforce training and non-degree education programs. Finally, in order to help New Yorkers access training for enhanced employment opportunities, we recommend that New York State ensure access to broadband internet and devices that job-seekers require to attend training and look for jobs remotely.

Update: The Commission ratified an omnibus initiative to increase access to and quality of workforce training, including recommending the creation of a “Pell for Workforce”-style program. In January 2021, Governor Cuomo [announced such a new workforce training scholarship program](#) to increase training access to more New Yorkers.

Make it easier for New Yorkers to find high-quality job training programs. Today, job training programs and higher-education institutions are often unable to reach, recruit, and enroll a diverse group of candidates because there is no comprehensive system to help programs identify qualified candidates from nontraditional pipelines. Similarly, jobseekers need more guidance to navigate the multitude of workforce development programs—more than 180 in New York City alone—and identify high-quality training providers. In order to empower job seekers with new tools to navigate the complex landscape of training providers, we recommend the creation of a dynamic online platform for jobseekers and candidates for retraining programs. This New York Training Map would enable New Yorkers seeking training to search for a high-quality training program that is suited to their current skills and can help them achieve their future goals. The Training Map should include targeted mapping to categorize workforce development providers by industry and other searchable criteria, lead trainees to the most-appropriate programs, and connect companies with graduates.

In addition to the initiatives just described, the State and employers should explore how to remove outside-of-work obstacles that New Yorkers face when trying to seek and keep meaningful jobs, such as access to childcare and transportation. Furthermore, promoting access to high-quality degree-oriented higher education programs—in addition to non-degree training programs—should remain a key priority for New York State in order to enable more New Yorkers to pursue jobs that require college degrees.

Spotlight on New Yorkers

“In today’s rapidly expanding online and on-demand world — and amid its growing impact on nearly every aspect of society, from education and the economy to workforce development and community engagement — building a digital and data literate workforce is an imperative. There is immense talent, aptitude and potential hidden in underserved individuals throughout our communities, and by helping more people prepare for jobs in high tech, we can shift the mindset about who can work in technology, open the doors to lucrative career opportunities, and truly change lives.”

- Annmarie Lanese, Founder and CEO, Albany Can Code, Albany, NY

2. Serve as a magnet and accelerator for small business owners and entrepreneurs.

In conversations with the Reimagine New York Commission, small businesses across the state shared that they face multiple kinds of challenges.* In order to enable New York’s small businesses to thrive in the future, we recommend the following:

* *Those challenges include a lack of access to financial resources, including grants and loans; difficulties operating and reopening in the midst of the public health crisis; lack of awareness of existing State resources; and difficulties adapting to digital sales and learning how to increase online discoverability and customer acquisition. In addition, pre-existing inequities have meant that minority and women-led businesses are disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 crisis. For more details on the difficulties that New York’s small businesses have faced during the crisis, see the Commission’s Background Research, [available here](#).*

Expand, simplify, and market the State’s resources for small business owners. Many small business owners lack the time, resources, or ability to identify opportunities for funding or technical assistance that can advance their enterprise. To make it easier for small businesses to locate the resources that they need, we recommend that the State invests in increasing the visibility and accessibility of existing programs such as Business Express. As part of this effort, the State should reduce fragmentation of information across agencies, making it simpler for business owners to find programs that can help them.

Amplify digital tools to help small businesses transition to e-commerce. The COVID-19 crisis forced many small businesses to move online. With this sudden shift, many small businesses lack the skills to effectively route former in-person foot traffic to their online storefronts. We therefore recommend that the State establish an Empire State Digital program to provide small businesses with training and resources to digitize their business operations, increase traffic to online storefronts, expand to new markets, and learn how to connect with digital payment platforms, bank accounts, and other financial resources.

Update: After hosting listening sessions with small business owners across New York State, the Commission ratified the Empire State Digital initiative in Fall 2020. In October 2020, Empire State Development (ESD) launched the program, training and bringing businesses onto e-commerce platforms. Nearly 2,700 small businesses have participated as of February 2021.

Launch an innovation hub for minority and women-owned businesses. Entrepreneurship and ownership represent a key pathway to narrowing the racial wealth gap. At the same time, the pandemic’s hardships have not been distributed equally, causing minority and women-owned business enterprises (MWBEs) to suffer disproportionately. We recommend that the State establish a new virtual Innovation Hub for women and New Yorkers of color who own businesses. This Hub would provide support for entrepreneurs, in the forms of running educational programming, providing connections to mentors, and helping to establish strategic partnerships with new suppliers and markets.* Ultimately, we believe that this effort would help more New Yorkers achieve their ambitions and serve to build a pipeline of innovative and investable companies.

Update: The COVID-19 crisis reinforced the need to improve pathways to business formation for historically underrepresented populations, who face added challenges to doing so. The Commission ratified the Innovation Hub initiative in Fall 2020. The Hub—now officially called the Entrepreneurship Navigator—was launched and staffed with a director in November 2020, and the Invest NY pitch competition was run using existing federal funds. As of March 2021, the Hub has distributed \$150,000 in funding and directly supported nineteen underrepresented founders.

* The program would leverage tested approaches used in several Empire State Development programs including the Centers for Advanced Technology, Centers of Excellence, Manufacturing Extension Partnerships, Innovation Hot Spots, and certified incubator networks.

Spotlight on New Yorkers

“Small business owners are facing myriad challenges right now. First the basics—meeting rent, salaries, utilities, taxes, insurance and vendor demands—and then navigating everything else. And on top of that, because of COVID, everything costs more, especially PPE. The small business community needs the State to build public private partnerships and innovative concepts to provide safety nets for small business owners. We would also benefit from a NYS entrepreneur/small business-owner community where proprietors could engage each other and share best concepts and practices. There's so much support that we need right now.”

- Dawn Kelly, Founder & CEO, *The Nourish Spot*, Jamaica, Queens, NY

3. Lift up arts and cultural workers and institutions to strengthen our communities and drive economic growth.

While arts organizations and workers have always faced economic challenges, their financial hardships worsened as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. In order to save New York's arts sector, we recommend the following:

Support New York's artists to inspire our communities during this difficult time. New York's artists and cultural workers have faced acute hardship during the COVID-19 crisis. Difficulty finding work in the short-term results in immediate financial strain for creative workers. In the long-term, persistent underemployment threatens to divert a generation of artists to non-creative fields in order to make ends meet. When this happens, our entire community suffers, as we lose the dynamism and social cohesion that is inspired by culture. To relieve immediate hardship and enable creative workers to remain in their chosen fields, we recommend launching a Creatives Rebuild New York program. This program would support dozens of small- to mid-sized community arts organizations and more than 1,000 individual artists over the next two years, acknowledging the role of artists in invigorating local economies, providing insights, and helping find inspiration as we navigate the challenging events of our time.

In order to further support the creative sector in the long term, the State should also explore opportunities to repurpose underutilized spaces to promote creative hubs across New York, and examine tax-based reforms to promote the arts.

Update: Governor Cuomo announced that the Mellon Foundation would launch [Creatives Rebuild New York](#). The program will support artists and community arts institutions, helping them endure the pandemic and their communities to recover from it.

Spotlight on New Yorkers

“During the pandemic, many jazz musicians have started coming up with creative ways to earn a living virtually, like giving online lessons. But it is a challenge to see where the light is at the end of the tunnel. Even when venues open again, we'll need support and training to make sure our industry can thrive in the digital age. One thing is certain: jazz artists will continue to do what we do, which is improvise.”

- *Christian McBride, National Jazz Museum, Harlem, New York, NY*

Realizing a Reimagined New York

The Commission's work is not done. Helping New York to build back better and more equitably will require the Governor, government agencies, private entities, and philanthropic institutions each to do their part.

Over the coming months, the Commission will convene to assess our progress. We are grateful to the Governor for the opportunity to serve and stand ready to help all New Yorkers to thrive as never before.

Appendices

Appendix I: How We Worked

Organization. The Commission met regularly following its formation in May, including monthly meetings of all members and more frequent meetings of its three subgroups (connectivity, telehealth and work). Each subgroup established the core issues on which it would focus, conducted fact-gathering to understand needs and opportunities in those areas, and identified both short- and medium-term opportunities to address those needs. The Commission reviewed and approved each subgroup’s areas of focus, key findings, and recommendations. Staff from the Executive Chamber and Commissioners’ teams provided support, alongside Schmidt Futures, in fact gathering, idea generation, and meeting facilitation. Additional information about the Commission’s engagement and research efforts are provided below.

Engagement. To understand the challenges and opportunities in connectivity, telehealth, and work, Commissioners and staff spoke with individuals from across the state, country, and world. These consultations took multiple forms and enabled us to reach more than 6,000 New Yorkers and other stakeholders. The Commission organized more than 40 listening sessions and panel discussions, and staff held several hundred additional conversations. The Commission used other mechanisms to reach New Yorkers as well, including surveys and solicitation of expert memos.

The Commission spoke with individuals and organizations who represent New York’s enormous racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and geographic diversity, among many other forms of diversity across the state. Some of the groups engaged for each focus area included:

- **Connectivity:** Libraries, local community-based organizations, digital inclusion organizations, internet providers, academic researchers, policy experts, digital platforms, and representatives from state broadband offices
- **Telehealth:** Patients from rural and urban areas, hospitals, community healthcare providers, organizations representing older, low-income New Yorkers, New Yorkers with unique health needs, policy experts, technologists, and health insurers
- **Work:** Entrepreneurs and small business owners from across industries and geographies, graduates of workforce training programs, training providers, cultural leaders and arts workers, and employment coalitions

Background Research. Further details on stakeholders with whom the Commission spoke on each topic area are outlined in background research documents for connectivity, telehealth, and work.

The Commissioners and staff did extensive research across its three focus areas. This research ensured that the Commission's work was grounded in the best available information, including input from stakeholders from across New York. The Commission’s background research provides additional context for its recommendations and priorities, and is [available here](#).

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Endnotes

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