

To: NYC Council – Committee on Technology
From: Noel Hidalgo, Executive Director of BetaNYC



Re: Internet Master Plan Hearing¹

Tuesday, 29 April 2025

Dear Chair Gutiérrez, fellow Council Members, and Staff,

Digital literacy must be viewed as critical infrastructure.

Introduction

BetaNYC is a public interest technology non-profit dedicated to helping New Yorkers access information and use technology.

Since 2008, we have brought diverse groups of people to learn, earn, and grow their networks. We have trained and employed this committee's staff. We have taught over 50,000 New Yorkers how to use their data and mentored a new generation of civil servants on whom we depend. Our work has equipped New Yorkers with digital and data literacy tools to hold the government accountable.

For transparency, we are recipients of the State's Digital Equity Technical Assistance Grant.

Additionally, I am a father to a brilliant 33-month-old boy who was born with profound hearing loss and many medical complications. We have been dependent on telehealth and virtual therapists since his birth. Twice a week, my wife, son, and I leverage virtual meeting tools to meet with his teacher at Lexington School for the Deaf in Queens. We use the same technology to meet with representatives from the Department of Education and Early Intervention, who are scattered across the City. Every day, we use Signing Time, Signing Savvy, PBS Kids, YouTube, and a handful of digital media tools to entertain and learn American Sign Language.

The highlight of our week is when two aunties, Lauren and I, meet with our American Sign Language instructor, a Lexington graduate, to teach us ASL via Zoom.

At home, I have used every conceivable network connection—cable, DSL, and cell modem—and it took 10 years for FIOS to come to my small Greenpoint apartment. By the way, I'm delighted with FIOS, but I wish there were some competition.

¹

<https://nyc.legistar.com/MeetingDetail.aspx?LEGID=21519&GID=61&G=2FD004F1-D85B-4588-A648-0A736C77D6E3>

Your Internet Master Plan would ensure fast, bi-directional, high-speed internet connections, fueling my work, education, and my son's future.

About the Bills today

BetaNYC supports the Council's efforts to revive the Internet Master Plan. After a thorough read, we feel every bill should have a few additions.

- **Int 0198-2024²** - should ensure the data is publicly available on the City's open data portal.
- **Int 0481-2024³ & Int 0486-2024⁴** - promotional materials should also be recorded in video with native American Sign Language (ASL) users, and there should be appropriate promotional materials in audio. Many of the City's materials are not designed for the City's D/deaf and blind communities.
- **Int 0483-2024⁵** - should prioritize all government buildings hosting public meetings. For example, every Borough Hall, School gymnasium, theater, DCAS-controlled conference space, every agency headquarters conference room, every, all Park or Library facilities with meeting rooms, etc.—*every government meeting room should have a secure, publicly accessible internet, period.*
- **Int 0878-2024⁶** - Historical rate data should be kept and published to the open data portal. There should be absolute transparency on speed, connectivity rates, and locations.
- **Int 1122-2024⁷** - We love that this bill has an advisory board. We propose leveraging this bill to help OTI execute its digital equity roadmap while ensuring that digital literacy is as critical as infrastructure.

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<https://nyc.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=6557530&GUID=6EE3C2FB-1FC6-4561-857A-4E9067A1363D&G=2FD004F1-D85B-4588-A648-0A736C77D6E3&Options=&Search=>

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<https://nyc.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=6558149&GUID=D16CB902-E069-4898-996C-9A3FE6F9C530&G=2FD004F1-D85B-4588-A648-0A736C77D6E3&Options=&Search=>

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<https://nyc.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=6558147&GUID=47E5DCDD-224C-4270-A0D7-744CD C049986&G=2FD004F1-D85B-4588-A648-0A736C77D6E3&Options=&Search=>

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<https://nyc.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=6558143&GUID=FAA1821D-1A8A-4687-A03F-B8098728B1FD&G=2FD004F1-D85B-4588-A648-0A736C77D6E3&Options=&Search=>

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<https://nyc.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=6695208&GUID=560055CA-DC10-49B4-9073-476AC5B160A5&G=2FD004F1-D85B-4588-A648-0A736C77D6E3&Options=&Search=>

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<https://nyc.legistar.com/LegislationDetail.aspx?ID=7029043&GUID=1796A95A-4157-4070-A45C-3281D9637135&G=2FD004F1-D85B-4588-A648-0A736C77D6E3&Options=&Search=>

Linking Digital Equity and Infrastructure

In 2021, the Biden Administration set out to link investments in infrastructure with economic recovery.⁸ This led to digital equity being baked into a national strategy that fundamentally linked access to networks with literacy.⁹ This is something that the state wrote extensively about in its 2024 plan, and the City has echoed again in its research with Section 8 recipients.¹⁰¹¹¹² Digital literacy is as critical as infrastructure.

Ironically, the current Mayor entered office with a comprehensive digital equity strategy drafted, but it was built on top of the Internet Master Plan.¹³ This former strategy would have placed NYC in a premier position to access federal funding.

Unfortunately, that plan was scrapped, and the city's digital equity plan would launch under a new federal administration. In March 2025, OTI released a digital equity roadmap that placed its focus on network access, not literacy.¹⁴

It is up to the Council to ensure that digital literacy is as critical as infrastructure. New York City needs digital equity goals and an Internet Master Plan that are not at the whims of corporations or administrations.

The City's plan calls for a Digital Equity Officer, which should be written into the Internet Master Plan while adopting digital literacy and digital equity, as defined by the NDIA, the State's Digital Equity Plan¹⁵ and the Federal Digital Equity Act¹⁶, so we're all working off of the same set of goals. (Digital Equity Act of 2021, Sec. 60301; NYC Digital Equity Roadmap, p 25.)

Second, the Mayor's plan calls for an advisory board. **We want the Council to provide guidelines and ensure that a revived internet master plan and all digital equity plans have the same advisory board;** these efforts must be unified. (NYC Digital Equity Roadmap, p 24)

Next, **we want every City-controlled conference room, theater, gymnasium, or public meeting room to have a secure, publicly accessible internet connection.** Additionally, if the City is going to invest in public institutions, like libraries, parks, and gigabit centers, they need to

⁸ <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/3684>

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<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-american-rescue-plan-is-the-broadband-down-payment-the-country-needs/>

¹⁰ <https://broadband.ny.gov/digital-equity>

¹¹ <https://www.nyc.gov/content/oti/pages/digital-equity>

¹²

<https://www.nyc.gov/site/hpd/news/015-25/city-launches-neighborhood-tech-help-bridge-digital-divide-across-boroughs>

¹³ <https://nextcity.org/features/what-happened-to-new-york-citys-internet-master-plan>

¹⁴ <https://www.nyc.gov/content/oti/pages/digital-equity>

¹⁵ <https://www.digitalinclusion.org/definitions/>

¹⁶ <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/3684>

be open when people need them. So, those locations need to be accessible when people need them.

Furthermore, **we need the City to invest in digital literacy for English language learners and language minorities, including users of American Sign Language.** (NYS Digital Equity Plan, p 100)

Next, **we need the IMP's Digital Equity to focus on easy-to-access NYC government information systems.** This is a noted challenge in the State's Digital Equity Plan. (NYS Digital Equity Plan, p 100)

Lastly, with significant federal funding cuts in education, research, and literacy, every digital literacy program that isn't bankrolled by big tech faces an uncertain future. With the federal government threatening free speech and equity programs, the City's underresourced communities are at a further disadvantage. **The City must baseline digital equity funding, or let big tech dictate our digital future.**

This is why digital literacy is as critical as infrastructure.

Thank you for giving us this opportunity, and I look forward to meeting with you about these details.

Noel Hidalgo
Father
Executive Director