Tech Executive Leadership Initiative

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THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

Preferred Vendor Certification Program

Incentivizing providers of quality, affordable internet through a voluntary certification program

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BACKGROUND

As part of their 10-week policy training, the leaders of the Tech Executive Leadership Initiative spent 6 weeks working on a real-world government challenge. In teams of 4–5, the leaders proposed ideas to help the City of New York ensure that vendors awarded contracts through its record-setting investments in broadband infrastructure – which are further detailed in the City's Internet Master Plan (IMP) and request for proposals for broadband expansion – go beyond lip service and adhere to City's digital inclusion principles to meaningfully close the digital divide. Each team narrowed its focus to a specific part of the problem, conducted research, and developed solutions. Below is an overview of one team's solution: incentivizing vendors to provide higher quality and more affordable internet through a voluntary certification program.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The New York City Mayor's Office of the Chief Technology Officer (MOCTO) should establish a certification program to incentivize broadband vendors in providing more affordable internet services. Vendors who meet certain performance and affordability criteria would be assigned higher certification levels that unlock access to further business opportunities. The certification program should be piloted with a small group of vendors, and eventually expanded City-wide.

PROBLEM

Disparities in residents' broadband access present an urgent chal-

lenge to the City of New York. [Forty percent of households lack access to broadband](), a disproportionate number of which are low income. This gap is largely [due to an unaffordable cost of service](). The City is dominated by a short list of internet service providers (ISPs) who are not currently incentivized to provide affordable broadband services to low-income communities, [as evidenced by recent lawsuits with major providers]().

RECOMMENDATIONS

MOCTO should establish an ISP Preferred Vendor Certification Program that provides enticements to vendors who meet certain performance and affordability criteria. Establishing a voluntary certification program would incentivize vendors to provide more affordable internet services without the City having to engage in [the costly and litigious process of enforcing affordability and access provisions in contracts]().

The program should be split into 3 phases focused on creating awareness, piloting, and fully implementing and scaling the program. The 3 phases include:

- **Phase 0, a public relations and pledge campaign** to generate awareness and excitement among interested ISPs around the City's commitment to equitable broadband access. ISPs should sign the pledge as a first step in applying for certification.

- **Phase 1, a pilot of the multi-level certification program.** This phase would require a small group of participating ISPs to report affordability metrics and reach a set of standards to qualify for specific levels of certification.

- **Phase 2, a public launch of the Certification Program** at scale across New York's ISPs based on learnings from the Phase 1 pilot.

The pledge and incentives that accompany certification would motivate participating ISPs to share data around performance and affordability, and could ultimately be used to hold them accountable for their costs of service.

For more information about this proposal, please see: (1) [a vendor certification playbook](), which describes the certification program in further detail; (2) [a sample digital equity pledge]() for Phase 1 of the program; and (3) a [sample ISP reporting form](), where ISP providers would be asked to report key metrics as part of certification.