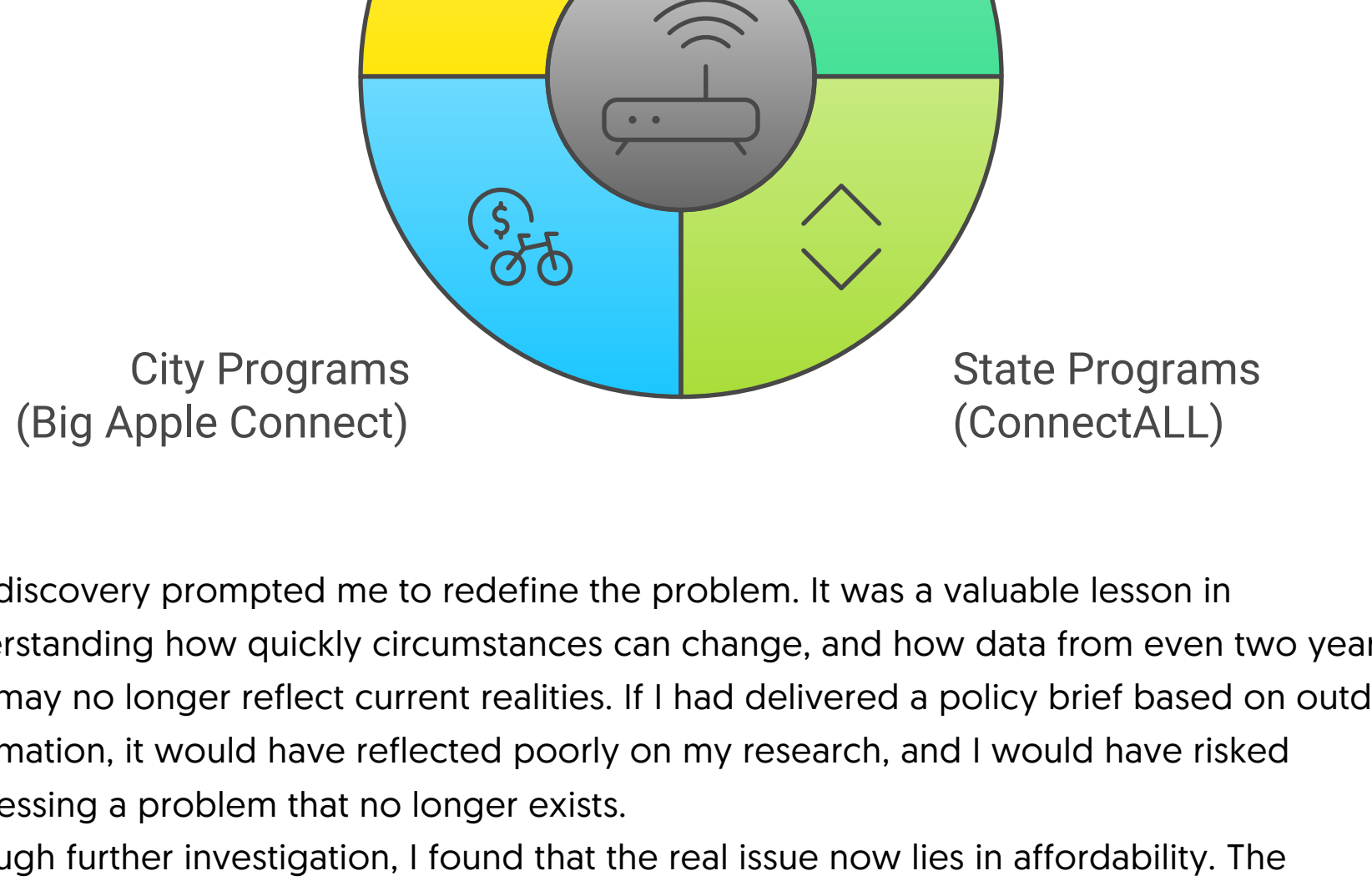


September, 2024

**Introduction:**

Having worked in the South and Central Bronx since 1993, I have witnessed firsthand the numerous challenges faced by this community. The digital divide became especially evident during the pandemic. With over 40% of residents lacking broadband infrastructure, many people could not work remotely and lost their jobs. Similarly, students fell behind as they were unable to attend remote classes. In response, federal, state, and city programs were implemented to build the necessary broadband infrastructure. Although recent reports indicated that many states overstated their progress, my research showed that the Bronx had actually achieved nearly full broadband development.

**Broadband Development Overview**

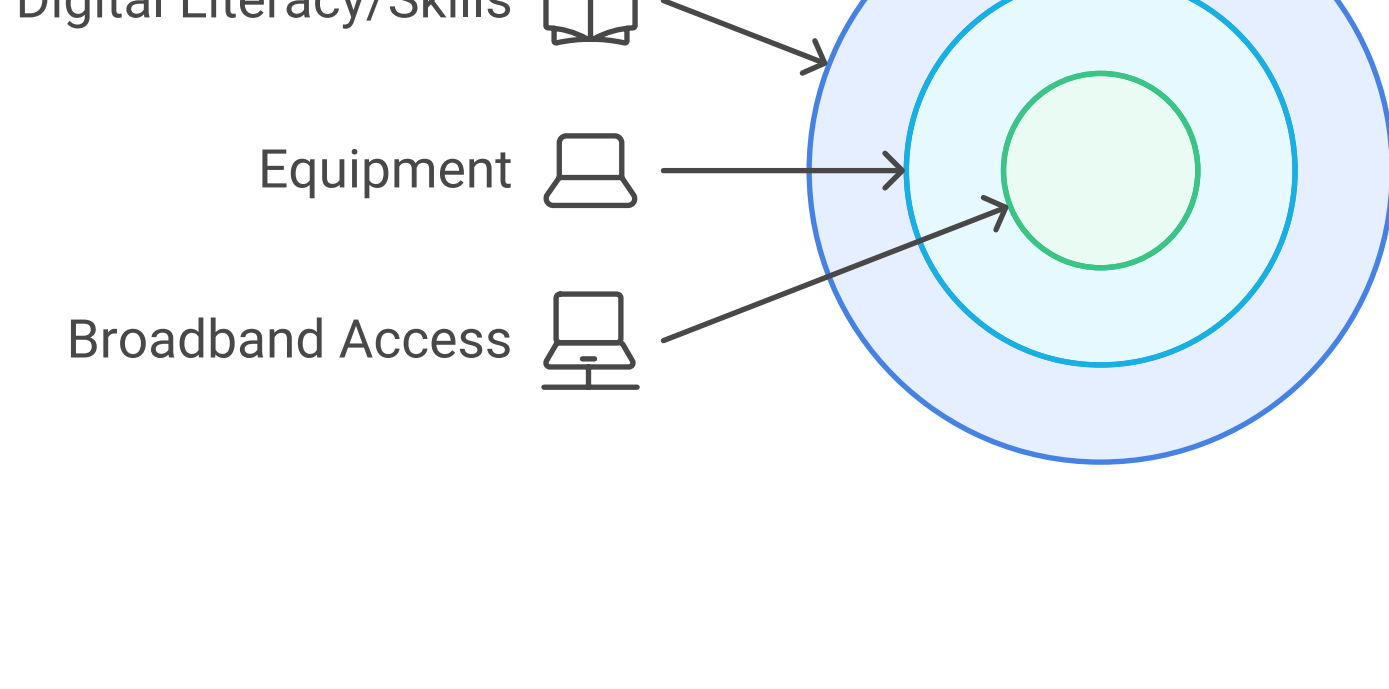


This discovery prompted me to redefine the problem. It was a valuable lesson in understanding how quickly circumstances can change, and how data from even two years ago may no longer reflect current realities. If I had delivered a policy brief based on outdated information, it would have reflected poorly on my research, and I would have risked addressing a problem that no longer exists.

Through further investigation, I found that the real issue now lies in affordability. The Affordable Connectivity Program [ACP], which provided up to a \$30 monthly subsidy for broadband access, expired in April 2024. The only remaining program, Lifeline, offers just \$9.25 per month. With basic broadband packages in the South Bronx starting at \$35, before additional surcharges, this leaves many low-income families unable to afford internet access. It is ironic that just as the long-awaited broadband infrastructure was completed, a new affordability barrier emerged. While some residents rely on government-issued cell phones, these devices often lack the bandwidth necessary for remote work or study and are capped with limited data plans.

The policy brief I developed was to serve as a companion to my earlier work on digital literacy. **Digital equity**, a key social determinant of health, encompasses three main components: access, equipment, and literacy. Having previously advocated for literacy outreach, it is now essential to focus on ensuring equitable access.

**Digital Equity Framework**

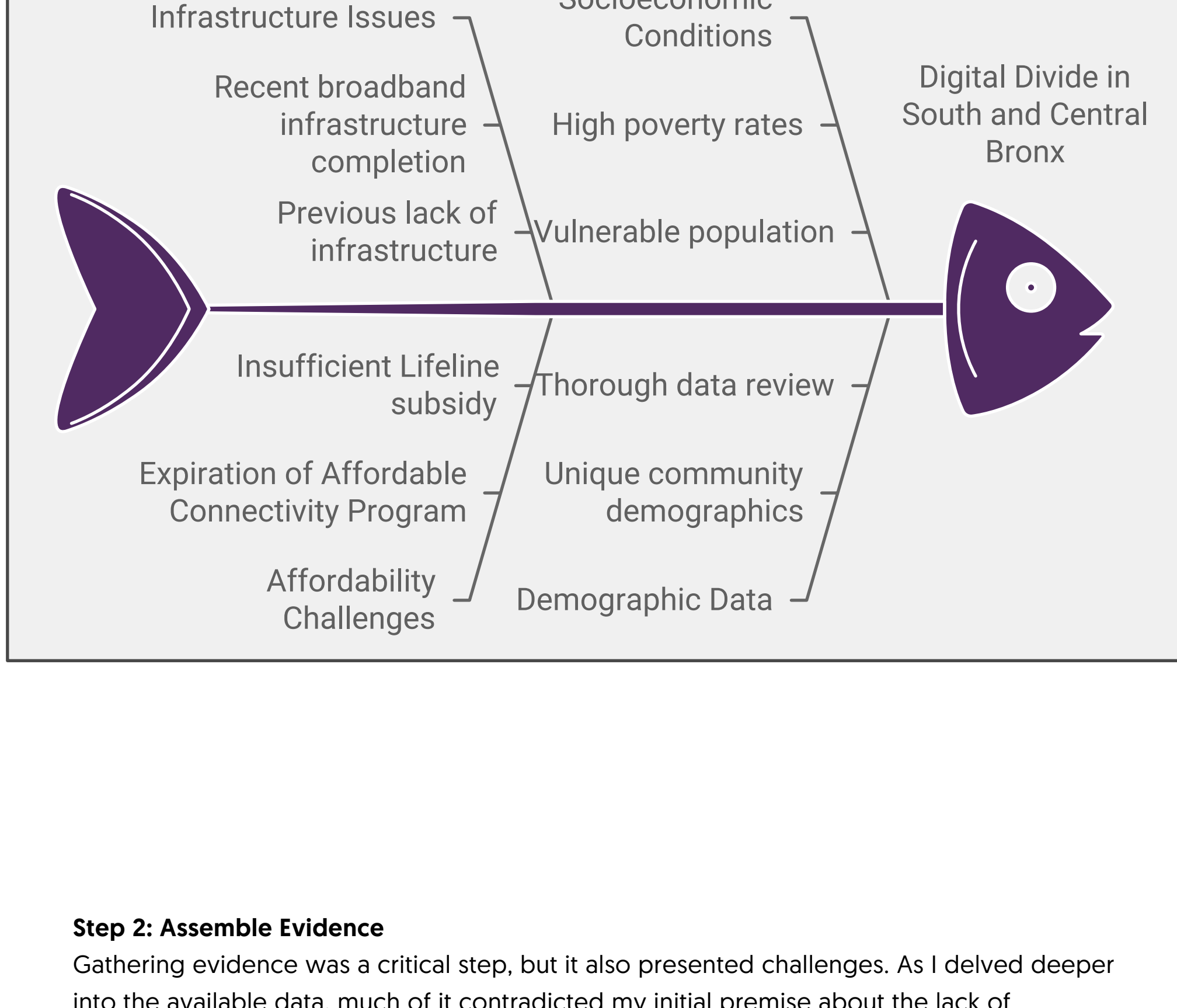


**Step 1: Define the Problem**

Through my initial research, I assumed that the digital divide in the South and Central Bronx was primarily due to a lack of broadband infrastructure, as seen during the pandemic when many residents were unable to work remotely or attend online classes. However, as I delved deeper into the unique demographics of this community, I developed a more nuanced understanding of the challenges they face.

The South and Central Bronx, with one of the highest poverty rates in the country, represent a vulnerable population that would benefit greatly from digital equity, particularly in accessing education, healthcare, and employment opportunities. Despite the recent completion of broadband infrastructure in these areas, new challenges have emerged, particularly related to affordability. The expiration of the Affordable Connectivity Program [ACP] in April 2024, and the insufficient Lifeline subsidy, have left many low-income families unable to afford basic internet services.

This shift in focus from infrastructure to affordability was informed by a thorough review of the demographic data and socioeconomic conditions specific to the Bronx, which was documented in a well-developed annotated bibliography. These insights revealed that while infrastructure may now be in place, without affordable access, the community remains disconnected from the opportunities that broadband can provide.



**Step 2: Assemble Evidence**

Gathering evidence was a critical step, but it also presented challenges. As I delved deeper into the available data, much of it contradicted my initial premise about the lack of broadband infrastructure. This required discarding outdated assumptions and reframing the problem based on what was currently true. I also found it difficult to obtain up-to-date information, as many sources were from 2020 through 2022. These were years of great upheaval due to the pandemic and still-limited infrastructure, so finding recent data was a challenge. However, even as conditions improved, such as the poverty rate decreasing from over 40% to around 32%, the core issue of affordability remained valid. This process emphasized how critical it is to rely on current and relevant data when shaping policy, and how evidence can force a reevaluation of the problem.

**Step 3: Constructing Alternatives**

With a clearer understanding of the current situation, I was able to shift focus and construct alternatives to address the real barrier, which was affordability rather than infrastructure. While there were numerous potential solutions, such as saturating entire communities with public Wi-Fi or expanding existing outdoor public Wi-Fi kiosks (like LinkNYC), two realistic alternatives emerged.

The first was to provide broadband vouchers for low-income households to replace the now expired federal ACP program. The second was to offer cell phones with unlimited data plans and hotspot capabilities, allowing other devices to connect through them. At this stage, I learned that alternatives need to not only solve the core problem but also be adaptable enough to meet the diverse needs of the community. It was essential to evaluate how each solution would function practically in the everyday lives of residents, not just in theory.

**Step 4: Selecting Criteria**

When selecting criteria to evaluate the alternatives, it became clear that the most important factors were affordability, feasibility, sustainability, and quality of service. Affordability was critical in determining how well the solution would remove financial barriers for low-income families. For example, simply adding \$5 to the current Lifeline subsidy of \$9.25 off a \$35 monthly subscription fee would not result in a meaningful impact. A solution would need to lower this barrier significantly, if not remove it entirely, to be effective.

Feasibility required evaluating whether the solution could be realistically implemented using the existing infrastructure and through partnerships with internet service providers or other relevant stakeholders. Sustainability involved considering the long-term viability of the solution, particularly its role in supporting ongoing needs such as telehealth, education, and employment. Finally, quality of service assessed how reliable the internet connection would be, especially for bandwidth-intensive activities like remote work, telehealth, or online learning.

This step taught me the importance of defining clear, relevant criteria in evaluating the proposed solutions. It forced me to think beyond what would be easy to implement, ensuring that the chosen solution would make a meaningful and lasting impact on the community.

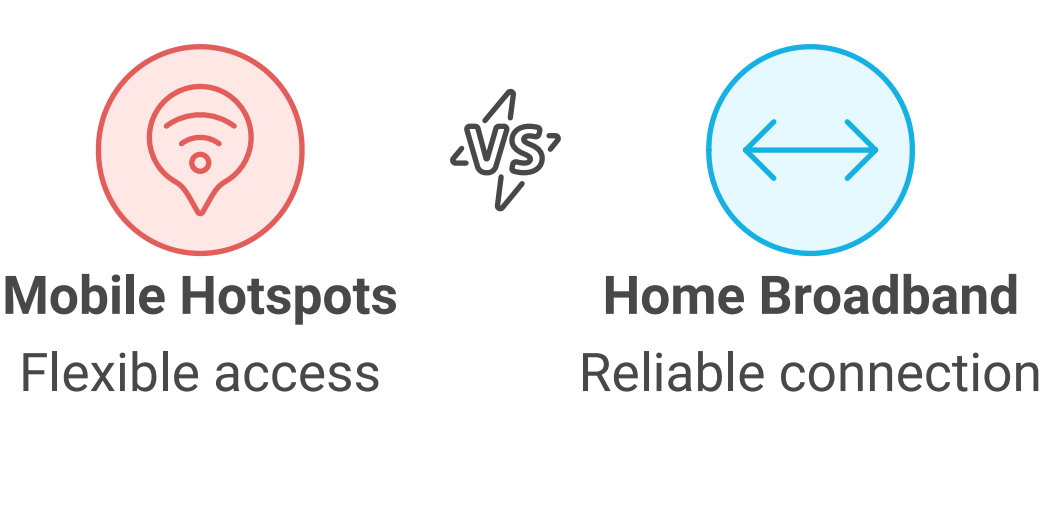
**Step 5: Project the Outcomes**

Projecting the outcomes involved taking the evidence gathered in Step 2 and aligning it with the criteria established in Step 4. At this stage, it became evident that the broadband voucher program provided a more reliable and stable solution, as it leveraged the robust broadband infrastructure installed under recent federal and state initiatives like the BEAD program.

In contrast, the mobile hotspot solution, while offering flexibility, did not provide the necessary bandwidth and consistency for long-term activities such as remote work, telehealth, and online education. This step reinforced the need to assess how each alternative would perform over time, beyond its immediate benefits. I realized that even seemingly minor differences between options—like the stability of a connection—can have significant long-term impacts on the quality of life and productivity of the community.

**Step 6: Confront the Trade-offs**

The primary trade-off was balancing flexibility with stability. While mobile hotspots offered flexibility for those without permanent housing, the reliability and speed of home broadband made it a better long-term solution. As noted, the infrastructure for broadband was already in place, making it more cost-effective to support through vouchers than to expand mobile data networks.



**Step 7: Decide**

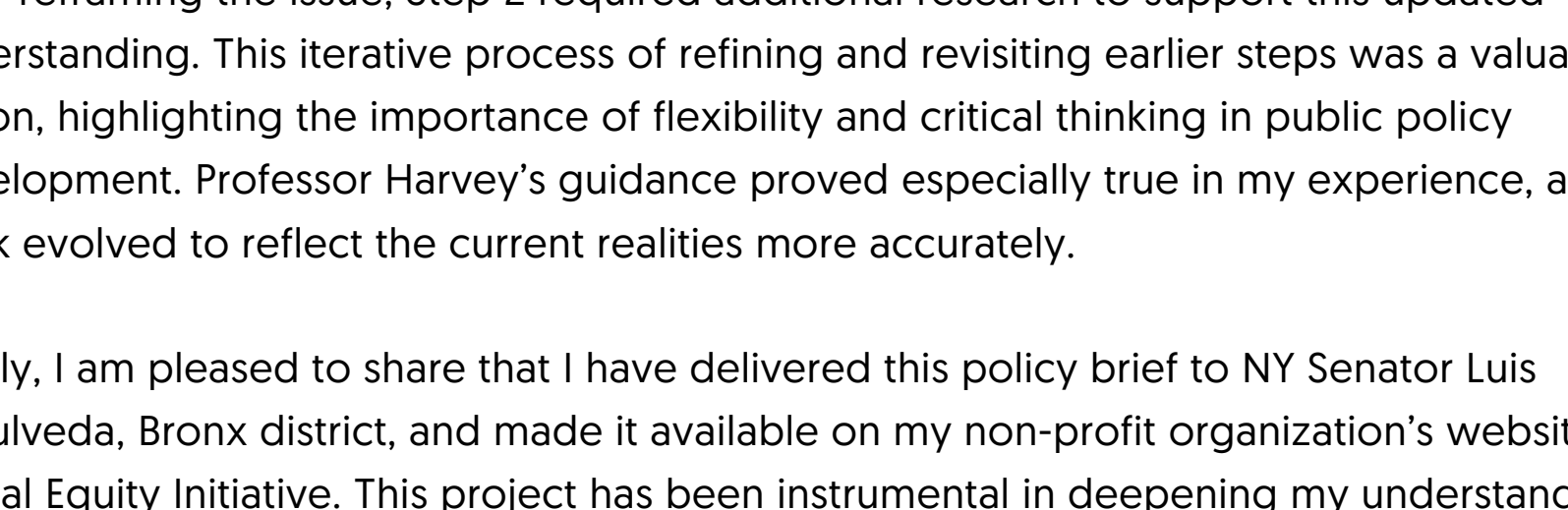
Finally, after weighing the options and the trade-offs, I decided that the broadband voucher program was the most sustainable and impactful solution. This step reinforced the value of following a structured process, since I had followed the steps diligently and felt I could fall back on a good foundation in making a decision. This was where all the previous steps came together.

After evaluating both alternatives, the broadband voucher program was recommended as the preferred solution. It offered the best balance between affordability, sustainability, and quality of service. The infrastructure was already in place, and the solution directly addressed the affordability issue that emerged after the expiration of the ACP.

**Step 8: Telling the Story**

In this final step, I learned the importance of clearly connecting the identification of the problem to proposing a viable solution through an arc that is logical and compelling. The brief began with the assumption that a lack of broadband infrastructure was the primary issue in the South Bronx, only to discover through deeper research that affordability was the real barrier. Telling the story meant crafting a narrative that not only highlighted the urgency of the problem but also made a compelling case for the recommended solution, broadband vouchers. The story also needed to convey that despite improvements in infrastructure, the community remained disconnected due to financial barriers, and that a targeted, sustainable solution was not only necessary, but feasible.

This step reinforced the idea that a policy brief is not just about facts and figures, but about weaving all elements together to create a coherent, persuasive narrative. The story must connect with stakeholders emotionally and intellectually, demonstrating why the issue matters and how the recommended solution can make a difference in the lives of those affected.



**Conclusion: Reflection on Bardach's Eightfold Path**

Throughout the development of this policy brief, I came to realize the truth in what Professor Michael Harvey taught us in Policy and Systems class: Bardach's Eightfold Path is not a simple, step-by-step process but rather an iterative one. In my case, deeper research in Step 2 disproved the problem I had initially defined in Step 1. What I once believed to be an issue of infrastructure turned out to be a problem of affordability, forcing me to return to Step 1 and redefine the problem based on new information.

After reframing the issue, Step 2 required additional research to support this updated understanding. This iterative process of refining and revisiting earlier steps was a valuable lesson, highlighting the importance of flexibility and critical thinking in public policy development. Professor Harvey's guidance proved especially true in my case, as my work evolved to reflect the current realities more accurately.

Finally, I am pleased to share that I have delivered this policy brief to NY Senator Luis Sepulveda, Bronx district, and made it available on my non-profit organization's website, The Digital Equity Initiative. This project has been instrumental in deepening my understanding of the unique challenges faced by residents of the South and Central Bronx. The Digital Equity Initiative, a non-profit in the public interest, <http://www.digital-equity.org>