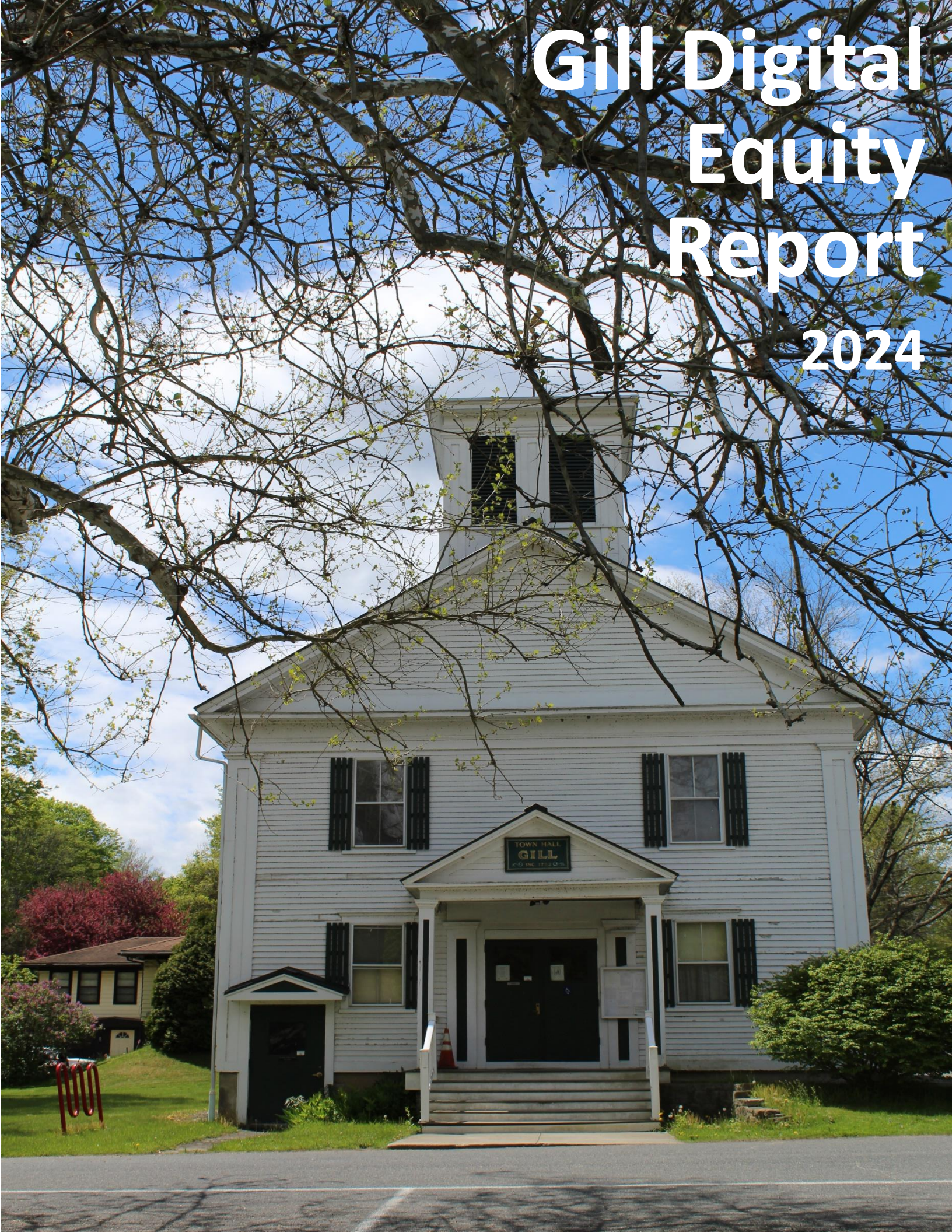# Gill Digital Equity Report

2024

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Gill Digital Equity Report

2024

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I. Introduction

Purpose of the Report

As the most rural region in the Commonwealth, with approximately 71,000 people in its 26 communities, Franklin County has unique challenges when it comes to internet connection and service. After significant effort from municipalities, residents, and regional organizations over the past several decades, broadband internet service finally became available for many residents through the Middle Mile and Last Mile programs. While many Franklin County residents now have access to the internet at home, work, school and throughout their communities, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the digital divide that continues to persist. As schools closed for in-person instruction and businesses moved employees to work-at-home models in March 2020, the awareness and consequences of this disparity became more evident.

As with utilities like heat, electricity and water, broadband must be available for students to learn and thrive, many adults to do their jobs effectively, businesses to remain nimble and competitive, seniors to take advantage of telehealth options, and numerous other applications. In other words, affordable and reliable broadband access is a necessary component of life in the modern world.

The Gill Digital Equity Report will help guide municipal decision-making and investments related to increasing access, adoption and usage of the internet for the populations most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This Report will help prepare the Town to submit grant proposals to existing or forthcoming state or federal programs to support digital equity activities.

II. Digital Equity

Digital Divide

The National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA) has defined the digital divide as "the gap between those who have affordable access, skills, and support to effectively engage online and those who do not." Further, as technology evolves and becomes increasingly ubiquitous for individuals and communities to participate in everyday life, "the digital divide prevents equal participation and opportunity in all parts of life, disproportionately affecting people of color, Indigenous peoples, households with low incomes, people with disabilities, people in rural areas, and older adults."[1]

Digital Inclusion

To bridge the digital divide, communities, organizations, governments and individuals must develop and implement programs that will ensure all residents within communities, particularly the most disadvantaged, have access to the appropriate technology as well as the tools necessary to use that technology to thrive in the 21st century.

According to the NDIA, digital inclusion includes five elements:

1. Affordable, robust broadband internet service.
2. Internet-enabled devices that meet the needs of the user.
3. Access to digital literacy training.
4. Quality technical support.
5. Applications and online content designed to enable and encourage self-sufficiency, participation and collaboration.[2]

Digital inclusion requires robust and sustainable strategies and investments to reduce and eliminate historical, institutional and structural barriers to access and use technology. Implementing the five elements of digital inclusion will eliminate or mitigate the digital divide and provide equity for all residents.

Digital Equity

Digital equity is a condition in which all individuals and communities have the information technology capacity needed for full participation in our society, democracy, and economy. Digital equity is necessary for civic and cultural participation, employment, lifelong learning, and access to essential services.[3]

There are three broad components of digital equity.

1. ***Affordable Connection:*** whether the internet connection is fast, reliable, and affordable.
2. ***Adequate Device:*** whether an individual or household has the necessary and needed digital device, such as a desktop, laptop, or tablet, and supporting networking components (routers, WIFI extenders, etc.).

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[1] National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA) Definitions (https://www.digitalinclusion.org/definitions/)
[2] NDIA Definitions
[3] NDIA Definitions

3. ***Digital Literacy:*** whether residents know how to use technology properly and successfully for their needs, and whether they are receiving quality information and can assess their privacy risks.

In addition, based on the Franklin County North Quabbin Student Health Survey[4] conducted annually with 8th, 10th, and 12th grade students in all local public schools, a fourth component of digital equity has been proposed by Franklin County youth health advocates, which is:

4. ***Digital Protections:*** whether federal, state, local, and school regulations support parents and caregivers in protecting children, youth, and other vulnerable residents from exploitation that harms their mental and physical health.

Along with broadband adoption, many residents need devices, technical support and technology training to fully access internet services, educational resources, employment and the social aspects of the digital world. While there has been significant investment over the past decade, towns are not yet meeting the 21st century expectations of a robust and thriving community as residents continue to face a disparity in reliable access, affordability, and digital literacy.

While definitions of digital equity and the digital divide hold true for all communities and all residents, the specifics of what the digital divide looks like, and the methods to promote digital equity, can vary greatly across regions. This Digital Equity Report helps tackle internet disparities exposed by COVID-19 by examining current conditions specific to the town of Gill and will help guide investments to bridge the digital divide. This Report will also help prepare the community to submit grant proposals to existing or forthcoming state and federal programs to support digital equity activities.

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[4] Communities that Care Coalition: Student Health Surveys (https://communitiesthatcarecoalition.com/surveys/)

III. Planning Process

Overview of Planning Process:

This project is funded by the Massachusetts Broadband Institute (MBI) at the Mass Tech Collaborative under the Municipal Digital Equity Planning Program. Funding was provided by the Massachusetts ARPA State Fiscal Recovery Funds.

The Town of Gill applied to the MBI to receive technical assistance to create a Digital Equity Report in 2024. The Franklin Regional Council of Governments (FRCOG) applied to and was approved by the MBI to be a prequalified consultant for this program and was selected by Gill as the consultant for this project.

FRCOG developed a draft Report, based on input from surveys, meetings, and public engagement, then presented the Report to the stakeholders and Town officials. Following a public comment period, the Report was finalized and presented to the Select Board at a Public Meeting on January XX, 2025. The final, approved Report was submitted to the MBI on January XX, 2025.

Charrette

A Digital Equity Charrette was held at the Slate Memorial Library on Wednesday, October 30, 2024. For clarity sake, the Charrette was advertised as the "Gill Digital Equity Open-House", since it was determined many people would not necessarily know what a Charrette entailed. The goal of naming the event an "Open-House" rather than a Charrette was to encourage more community participation.

Five people attended the Charrette. While this was a very low turnout, participation was in-line with experiences with other communities in Franklin County, as well as anecdotal reports from across Massachusetts. While the Charrette (or "Open-House") was the main information gathering mechanism, subsequent outreach was also conducted to potential stakeholders, like the Gill-Montague Regional School District, Gill-Montague Senior Center, and the Gill-Montague Council on Aging.

IV. Existing Conditions[5]

Over the past several decades, communities in Franklin County have placed a high-priority on making sure all residents have access to broadband. Broadband connections have expanded through the MBI-supported Middle-Mile and Last-Mile programs, helping to bring high-speed broadband connection to communities in Franklin County.

Although broadband connection has expanded in Franklin County, including in Gill, the digital divide continues to be a challenge for these rural communities. Analysis of local and regional trends reveal several barriers to digital equity in Gill, including limited access to training on successfully using the internet, providing robust digital town services, and cost concerns regarding reliable internet. This section examines the populations most vulnerable to the digital divide as a direct result of these barriers, providing a baseline understanding of the current conditions of Gill as related to digital inequity.

Gill's Demographics

Gill is a small, rural town, located in Franklin County, Massachusetts. Gill has a population of 1,747 with 627 households[6]. Like many communities in Franklin County, Gill has a high percentage of older adults. A demographic snapshot for the town is included here.[7]

Table 1: Demographic Snapshot

POPULATION	
Population	1,747
Population density per square mile	127
% Children Age 18 and under	18%
% Older Adults Age 65 and over	21%
Median age	44
% Black, Indigenous, People of Color	11%
% who are Veterans	8%
% with disabilities (physical, mental, intellectual, and developmental)	12%
% Language other than English	7%

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[5] See Appendix for full list of sources
[6] U.S. Census Bureau, 2022 American Community Survey (ACS) 5-Year Estimates
[7] Source: *U.S. Census Bureau, 2022 ACS 5-Year Estimates*. A household consists of all the people who occupy a housing unit. A household includes the related family members and all the unrelated people, if any, such as lodgers, foster children, wards, or employees who share the housing unit.

Median household income	$79,135
Poverty Rate	9%
HOUSING	
Total housing units	647
% Occupied housing	97%
% Owner-occupied	81%
% Renter-occupied	19%
% Households with no computing device *(Desktop, laptop, tablet, or phone)*	4%
% Households without an internet subscription	5%
Primary service type	Cable
Primary provider	Comcast

Source: 2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.

Compared with the State, both Gill and Franklin County have a significantly fewer percentage of residents who speak a language besides English at home or are People of Color. Gill has a higher percentage of both civilian veterans and residents with a disability compared to the State.

Table 2: Income and Poverty Rate

Municipality	Median Household Income	Poverty Rate
Gill	$79,135	9%
Franklin County	$70,383	12%
Massachusetts	$96,505	10%

Data source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2022 American Community Survey (ACS) 5-Year Estimates

Impacted Populations

The digital divide impacts the most vulnerable populations in a community. Identifying these vulnerable populations, and focusing on their specific digital needs, helps to ensure the entire community has equitable access to services, educational opportunities, and economic resources, many of which are now available exclusively online. Addressing the digital needs of vulnerable populations enhances a community's social cohesion and creates a more equitable, inviting and inclusive community. In rural communities like Gill, digital equity will sustain and increase the resilience and viability of the town, helping it thrive in the 21st century and beyond.

Image via FreePik.

The Digital Equity Act of 2021[8] identified eight "covered populations" that are historically more likely to experience digital inequity because of certain demographic and economic characteristics. These eight categories are:
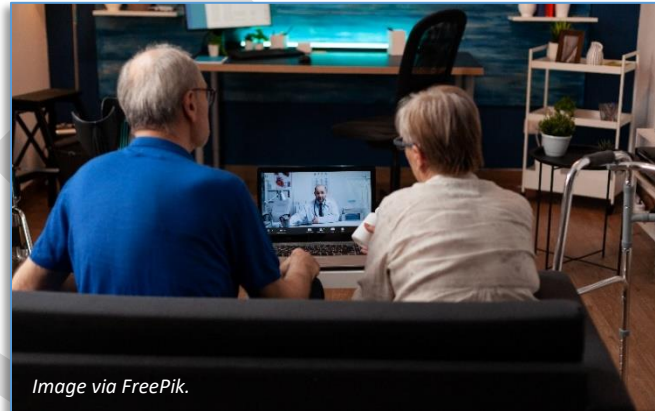
- Veterans
- Individuals with disabilities
- Individuals with a language barrier
- Individuals who are members of a racial or ethnic minority group
- Aging individuals (60+)
- Individuals who live in low-income households
- Incarcerated individuals
- Individuals who primarily reside in a rural area

Table 3: Impacted Populations

Region	Civilian veterans	Population with a disability	Speak a language besides English at home	People of Color	Households with Children	Residents 60+
Gill	8%	12%	7%	11%	19%	28%
Franklin County	8%	17%	7%	11%	14%	32%
Massachusetts	5%	12%	25%	31%	23%	24%

Data source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2022 ACS 5-Year Estimates

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[8] Information on the Digital Equity Act, as well as related programs, is available through the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (https://broadbandusa.ntia.gov/funding-programs/digital-equity-act-programs).

The data reveals several unique challenges the towns in this region face in achieving digital equity, and affordability is a key concern regarding covered populations.

Veterans: The veteran population faces a potential overlap with the low-income bracket. Similar to seniors, veterans on fixed incomes might struggle to afford internet services. As these veterans live in rural communities, this adds further burden when it comes to accessing needed assistance like healthcare.

Disabilities: Although lower than Franklin County as a whole, Gill, at 12%, has a significant population with disabilities. This group might have specific needs when it comes to digital access, requiring specialized equipment or software that could add to the overall cost.

Age: The population 60 and over in Gill is significantly higher than the state, providing unique challenges to fully realize digital equity within this community. Simply affording high-speed internet, as well as the devices and training needed to access the internet, stands as a barrier to older adults as many are living on fixed incomes. Lack of digital literacy also provides a significant challenge for older adults as they can struggle to access essential services (like healthcare or other government benefits) and social connections that may only be available online. Lack of digital literacy can lead older adults to rely on others to help them access information online. Often this assistance comes from a family member or trusted member of the community, like a librarian or senior center employee.

Households with Children: Since COVID-19, the reliance on the internet and digital devices to provide education to school-age children has only grown. Families unable to afford high-speed internet, and/or adequate devices, are at a significant disadvantage when it comes to making sure their children are receiving the best education possible. The reliance on technology and internet access, both within the school building, but more and more at home during off-school hours, is increasing. Educators expressed the need for equity in access to digital education tools both in school and at home. In addition, families unable to afford childcare are at a significant disadvantage when it comes to making sure their children are safe and healthy online, protected from the harms and lures of pornography and sexual exploitation, radical extremism and hate, social media comparisons, online bullying, sleep displacement, etc.
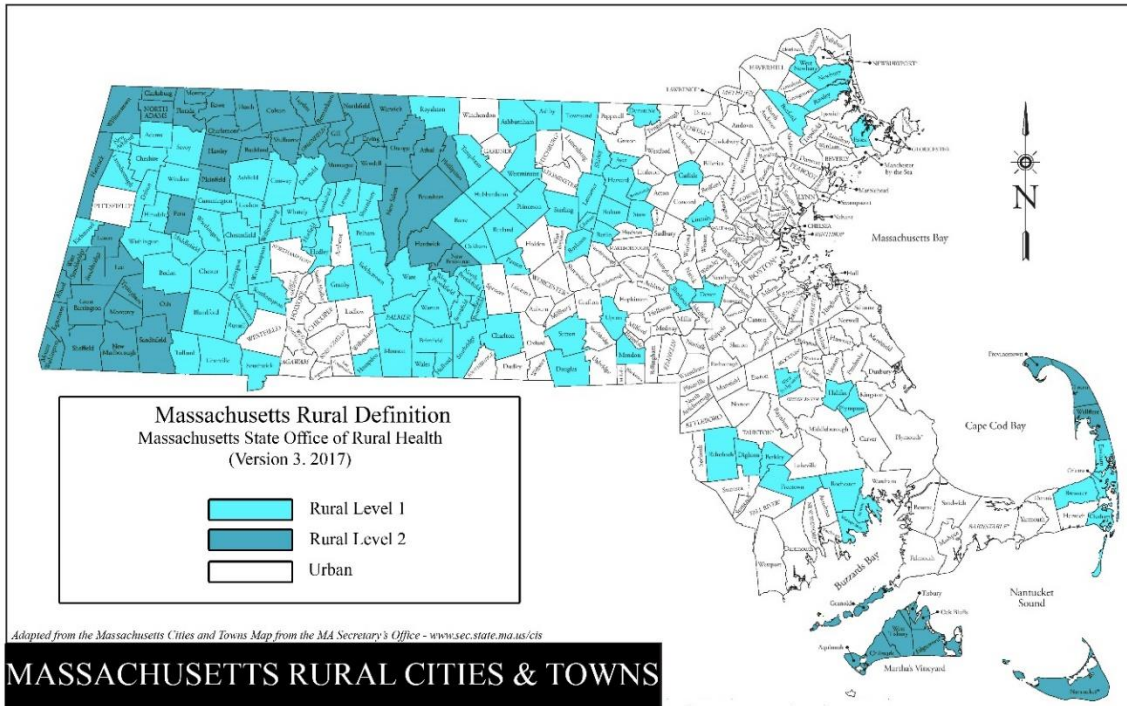
Rural: Gill is considered rural. This Report uses the MBI definition of Rural, based on the Massachusetts State Office of Rural Health definition, which considers a municipality to be rural if it meets one of the following criteria:

- Meets at least one of three federal rural definitions at the sub-county level (Census Bureau, Office of Management and Budget, or Rural-Urban Commuting Area Codes), and/or
- has a population less than 10,000 people and a population density below 500 people per square mile, and/or
- has an acute care hospital in the town that meets the state hospital licensure definition of a small rural hospital, or is a certified Critical Access Hospital.

Rural towns are classified into two categories: Rural Level 1 towns meet fewer rural criteria than towns considered Rural Level 2. Towns in Level 2 are less densely populated and more remote and isolated from urban core areas. Gill is considered Rural Level 2.

Rural residents and communities face unique barriers to digital equity due to lack of available connection and affordability. Although broadband availability has improved in rural communities over the past decade, connection costs continue to plague rural residents.[9] Across the country, rural communities and their residents face a growing risk of being left-behind in a world and an economy that are increasingly becoming more digital. The digital divide exacerbates the many issues facing rural residents including economic, social, and political isolation and marginalization.

Figure 1: Massachusetts Rural Cities and Towns

Source: Massachusetts State Office of Rural Health

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[9] "As Broadband Deserts Recede, Cost of Service Still a Question" (https://www.govtech.com/network/as-broadband-deserts-recede-cost-of-service-still-a-question)

Labor Force & Economy

Inability to connect to high-speed internet, lack of access to digital devices, and lack of digital literacy, negatively impacts the economic vitality of a municipality.

Table 4. Labor Force

Region	Unemployment Rate	Labor Force Participation Rate	Working from home
Gill	4.9%	69%	20%
Franklin County	5.7%	63.1%	13.7%
Massachusetts	5.3%	67.1%	14.6%

Data source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2022 American Community Survey (ACS) 5-Year Estimates

The unemployment rate in Gill is slightly lower than both the county and the state rates. The percentage of employees working from home is also significantly higher than those of the county and the state, suggesting this is a potential economic driver for Gill, and something that should continue to be supported and enhanced through affordable, robust broadband connections.

Internet Connection

Having the option to connect to the internet is only a first step in realizing digital equity. To be truly accessible, internet needs to meet broadband speeds and also be affordable. According to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), "broadband," while used generally to mean "high-speed internet", has a specific definition of a minimum of 100 megabits per second (Mbps) download speed and 20 megabits per second (Mbps) upload speed. In March 2024, the FCC updated this from 25/3 Mbps to 100/20 Mbps.

A Broadband Serviceable Location (BSL) is defined as "a business or residential location in the United States at which mass-market fixed broadband Internet access service is, or can be, installed." In other words, these are the locations that fixed broadband is already available or *could be* installed. The FCC has recently changed the definition of "broadband" to mean internet speeds of 100Mbps/20Mbps or more. Further, the FCC defines the different levels of connection: whether a location is *Served* (has a broadband connection), *Underserved* (has an internet connection, but with speeds of less than 100 Mbps/20Mbps), or *Unserved* (internet connection is 25Mbps/10Mbp or less). [10]

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[10] Retrieved from the BEAD Challenge Process webpage on the MBI website (https://broadband.masstech.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/FCC%20Broadband%20Serviceable%20Locations%20By%20MA%20Municipality%20%281%29.pdf)

Table 5: Number of Underserved and Unserved Locations by Municipality

Municipality	Number of Underserved Broadband Serviceable Locations	Number of Unserved Broadband Serviceable Locations	Total Broadband Serviceable Locations: (BSL's)
Gill	1.1%	2.0%	710

Source: FCC National Broadband Map, June 2023[11]

Table 5 shows there are few underserved or unserved BSLs in Gill. Although this suggests the majority of the town is being served by broadband speed internet service, this does not take into account costs and affordability.

Internet Speeds

Table 6: Speed Test Data

Speed Ranges	Gill	
	# **(50 tests)**	**%**
Speeds < 25/3 Mbps	1	2.0%
Speeds < 50/10 Mbps	7	14%
Speeds < 100/20 Mbps	18	36%
Speeds at least 25/3 Mbps	42	84%
Speeds at least 50/10 Mbps	30	60%
Speeds at least 100/20 Mbps	15	30%
Speeds at least 100/100 Mbps	0	0%

Data source: Ookla Speed Test (https://www.speedtest.net/), 2022

Internet speeds can be difficult to properly measure due to various factors (time of day, how many users are currently on-line, how close a user is to a router, etc.) In addition, data on user-initiated speed tests is often biased because people tend to run speed tests when they are having problems. However, speed test data can provide a general understanding of how well a community is reaching broadband speeds. Overall, the data for Gill suggests that the majority of households are not receiving broadband speeds of at least 100/20 Mbps. It is also important to note that this data is at least two years old.

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[11] Retrieved from the BEAD Challenge Process webpage on the MBI website (https://broadband.masstech.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/FCC%20Broadband%20Serviceable%20Locations%20By%20MA%20Municipality%20%281%29.pdf)

Internet Providers & Associated Costs

Like actual speeds, broadband costs can be difficult to comprehensively measure due to various factors, including levels of speed, discounts, and bundling options. However, nationwide, one study found that the median cost of high-speed internet was $74.99 per month.[12]

Table 7: Broadband advertised speeds and costs for Gill (through Comcast)

Comcast Plans	Monthly Cost*	Max Advertised Speeds (Mbps)
Connect	$71.00	150/10
Connect More	$93.00	300/10
Fast	$108.00	500/10
Super Fast	$113.00	800/15
Gigabit	$118.00	1000/20
Gigabit Extra	$123.00	1200/35
Gigabit x10	$300.00	10,000/10,000
*Standard rate after promotional period. Does not include costs from bundling with TV or other services; does not include setup or installation fees, or fees for purchase of any needed equipment. Comcast also offers Internet Essentials (75/10 Mbps) and Internet Essentials Plus (100/10 Mbps) for $9.95 and $29.95 per month respectively. Qualifications include: • Live in an area where Xfinity Internet service is available • Qualify for programs like the National School Lunch Program, housing assistance, Medicaid, SNAP, and others, or were enrolled in the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) with Xfinity • Have not had Xfinity Internet within the last 90 days • Have no outstanding debt to Comcast that is less than one year old		

Source: Comcast rate sheet

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[12] Broadband Pricing: What Consumer Reports Learned from 22,000 Internet Bills (https://advocacy.consumerreports.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/FINAL.report-broadband.november-17-2022-2.pdf)

Digital Equity Assets and Strengths

The Town of Gill, as well as local and regional organizations, provide numerous assets that promote digital equity.

Public Libraries

Public libraries are an important source for digital equity, especially in rural communities. They can provide free onsite device usage, technical assistance, and free Wi-Fi. These include one-on-one technology assistance, the ability to rent out mobile Wi-Fi hotspots, and numerous e-resources (like Kanopy and Libby). One of the main issues in rural communities like Gill is their limited capacity, including limited staff time and hours when open. For example, Gill's Slate Memorial Library is only open Tuesday (2 – 6 PM), Wednesday (3:30 – 7:30 PM), Thursday (2 – 8 PM), and Saturday (10 AM – 2 PM) for limited hours.

Serving Western Massachusetts, The Alliance for Digital Equity is a coalition of community-focused organizations working toward digital equity for all people. The goal of the Alliance is to get people the access they need—to the equipment, to the infrastructure, and to the knowledge and skills—and that will allow them to fully participate in the digital world.

(https://alliancefordigitalequity.org/)

Even with limited hours, the library provides a wealth of digital assistance to their patrons, offering one-on-one technology assistance, including how to set up an account, searching the library and internet, placing holds, and create email accounts. On a limited basis, staff also assist patrons with their personal devices that they bring to the library as well as with the library printer and how to access the free Wi-Fi. The library also has in its "Library of Things" Chromebooks that patrons can sign out and take home, much like they would borrow a library book.

Education

In response to COVID-19, classroom technology use has become more extensive in the Gill-Montague School District. According to the IT Director, the pandemic was "an eye-opener" when it came to digital needs and access. The district is currently a one-to-one district, with each student having access to a device (i.e. a laptop). Students in grades 7-12 are able to bring their laptops home. Staff noted they have run into issues of access, particularly with internet connection and device access at home.

Within the current curriculum, the school district works to integrate technology training into the classroom. The school district currently has a web portal where all academic information for students is available for parents, allowing them to be fully engaged in their children's academic life. One of the biggest issues centered on technology lies with both students' and their families' lack of awareness of potential online issues (anything from cyberbullying to fraud and scams), suggesting the need for further and continuous training for both students and their families.

Greenfield Community College (GCC)
(Cyber Seniors)

Greenfield Community College established a program to address the digital equity challenge faced by older adults, modeled after the international program, "Cyber Seniors" https://cyberseniors.org/. The program is structured so that younger residents (who are digital natives) meet one-on-one with older adults to assist them with laptops, phones, tablets and questions related to technology. In the summer of 2023, the Greenfield Senior Center received a grant from the Executive Office of Elder Affairs, and partnered with GCC for expansion of this program. The program is currently funded through December 2024; GCC is working to continue the program beyond the end of the grant. More information is available on their website: https://engage.gcc.mass.edu/seniors/cyber-seniors/

Overall, staff noted four main areas of concern and need for further investment:

- Making sure each household with a student in school has an accessible device at home (so a student would not have to bring the device back and forth from school).
- Expand digital literacy for both students and parents. This might include training on online privacy, awareness of scams, or less nefarious issues, like how to access educational content.
- While broadband connectivity is much better, there are still problem spots, which became more obvious during the pandemic.
- Digital safety and cyber security is as important for parents as it is for students.

Senior Centers and Councils on Aging

Older adults often feel the impacts of the digital divide and digital inequity most acutely. Issues can range from inability to afford the monthly broadband costs or affording an appropriate device, to understanding how to access medical records, or fears of fraud. Senior centers and councils on aging can provide resources to older adults to help address many of these issues. Gill is part of the Gill-Montague Council on Aging, which has a strong history of working to improving digital equity in both Gill and Montague. The Council on Aging operates the Gill-Montague Senior Center.

Funded by a grant from the Massachusetts Executive Office of Elder Affairs and the FRCOG Mass in Motion program, the Gill-Montague Senior Center developed two programs in the winter of 2024. The Tech Tuesday drop-in program was held once weekly for residents to bring in their laptops, phones or tablets with technical questions (issues that cannot be resolved will be referred to Staples for discounted assistance). Of the 100 Tech Tuesday appointments, 25 have been Gill residents. The second program was a six-week class for senior residents to learn computer basics. Of the 12 senior students who took this class, two were Gill residents. Residents have expressed strong interest in having both of these programs continue in the future.

Digital Equity Needs

Affordable Access

There are few programs available to assist with broadband affordability, although it is one of the primary areas of digital inequity. One program was the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP), a benefit program run by the Federal Communications Commission. The goal of the program was to help make broadband affordable for all households. The ACP provided a discount of up to $30 per month for internet services of eligible households. The FCC collected data on which households are eligible and how many are enrolled in the program. In Gill, 27 subscribers took advantage of the ACP, suggesting this program was severely underutilized.[13]

Unfortunately, due to a lack of additional funding from Congress, the Affordable Connectivity Program ceased to accept new applications after February 7, 2024. Funding for the program ended in May 2024.

One option currently available for some residents is the Lifeline program. Lifeline is an FCC program that helps make communications services more affordable for low-income consumers. Lifeline provides subscribers a discount on qualifying monthly telephone service, broadband Internet service, or bundled voice-broadband packages purchased from participating wireline or wireless providers. Lifeline provides up to a $9.25 monthly discount on service for eligible low-income subscribers.

The State Digital Equity Report provides few options regarding affordability. According to the section on Strategy and Program Details, addressing affordability falls primarily under the section "DNP5. Ongoing Affordable Connectivity Options and Enrollment." The primary focus at the state level is to continue supporting "access to affordable connectivity options through the ACP and/or other solutions." While not providing specifics, the Report does note the impending end of the ACP and indicates that the MBI "will establish state-based alternatives to ensure that changes to ACP availability will not impact Massachusetts residents."[14]

Providing free public Wi-Fi in rural communities like Gill, can be a valuable tool in bridging the digital divide. Public Wi-Fi expands the access residents have to the internet, particularly for those who have limited or no access in their home. Similarly to other forms of public broadband access, public Wi-Fi

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[13] ACP Enrollment & Claims Tracker (https://www.usac.org/about/affordable-connectivity-program/acp-enrollment-and-claims-tracker/)

[14] Massachusetts State Digital Equity Plan. Accessed at https://broadband.masstech.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/MA%20SDEP%20FINAL_3.26.24.pdf.

increases availability of educational, health and services, and job resources. It also removes the barrier of limited availability of public spaces like the library or town hall (which are not open at all hours of the day, or even all days of the week).

Device Access

Not having a reliable desktop or laptop computer can negatively impact a household, preventing the ability to work remotely, access government services, and access educational material for students of all ages. If access through personal devices is unavailable, having public device access through a place like the library, is important. The Slate Memorial Library provides lending access to Chromebooks and has a patron-accessible printer at the library. Purchasing a new printer for the library that is compatible with Chromebooks, and getting new Chromebooks for the library, were both seen as important actions to take towards greater digital equity.

Digital Literacy

While there are different needs for both level of internet speed needed and type of device needed, the range of digital literacy is vast from knowing how to turn on a computer to learning how to code. Digital literacy needs are often age-dependent as well as language dependent. As mentioned above, the Gill-Montague Council on Aging has provided tech trainings, as has GCC.

V. Strategic Actions and Recommendations

The following section provides a Report of action for Gill to work towards addressing the digital divide in their community. These strategic actions were developed based on feedback during the Charrette and from conversations with stakeholders. Certain strategies and actions were influenced by current projects and programs, (like the work being done through Council on Aging, town library, and public school).

This section includes the following: lead organization (in many cases this is the Town – generally the lead will be town administration), as well as the department or board/committee that could be responsible for implementation; supporting partners; potential funding sources; targeted timeframe for completion of a given strategy, defined as "Short-term" (less than 2 years), "Medium-term" (2–5 years), "Long-term" (more than 5 years).

Recommendation	Lead Organization	Supporting Partners	Potential Funding Sources	Implementation Target
1. Purchase new Chromebooks for the library	Town library	Town administration; Alliance for Digital Equity	Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Program	Short-Term
2. Purchase new public printer for the library	Town library	None	Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Program; municipal budget	Short-Term
3. Review need for public hotspots. Purchase hotspots for distribution through a local entity like the library	Town administration	Alliance for Digital Equity	Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Program;	Short-Term
4. Expand outreach to Gill residents regarding the Tech Tuesday program at the Gill-Montague Senior Center	Gill-Montague Council on Aging	Town administration	None (using current funding)	Short-Term
5. Extend and expand digital literacy classes and free laptops through the Digital Equity for Seniors program at the Gill-Montague Senior Center.	Gill-Montague Council on Aging	Town administration	Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Program; future EOEA grant funds (none currently available); Age & Dementia Friendly Community Grants through LifePath	Short-Term (ongoing)
6. Explore options to extend public Wi-Fi (for example, around the library, at Town Hall)	Town administration	Alliance for Digital Equity; Library	Community Space Public Wi-Fi Program; Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Program; T-Mobile Hometown Grant	Short-Term
7. Locate and map cell-phone "dead zones"	Town administration	FRCOG	District Local Technical Assistance	Short-Term
8. Expand access to broadband for residents who are not able to connect to cable	Town administration	FRCOG; Massachusetts Broadband Institute; Alliance for Digital Equity	BEAD Program Funding; GAP network	Short-Medium Term
9. Explore local and regional options to reduce cost-burden of internet	Town administration	FRCOG; Alliance for Digital Equity; Massachusetts Broadband Institute	District Local Technical Assistance; future BEAD grant funding; Efficiency & Regionalization Grant	Medium-Long Term

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VI. Appendices

Appendix A: Acknowledgements

The contributions of the town staff and stakeholders join the comments of residents who participated in the Digital Equity Charrette.

Town Staff

      Ray Purington, Town Administrator

Digital Equity Stakeholders

      Jocelyn Castro-Santos, Library Director
      Janet Masucci, Cable Advisory Committee Member
      Ray Purington, Town Administrator
      Tina Mahaney, Director of Information Technology and Educational Data Services
      Roberta Potter, Director, Gill-Montague Senior Center

Appendix B: Digital Equity Assets

Organization Name	Area	Website
Slate Memorial Library	Municipal	https://gillmass.org/p/31/Library
Gill-Montague Senior Center	Municipal/ Regional	https://gillmontaguecouncilonaging.org/
Alliance for Digital Equity	Regional	https://alliancefordigitalequity.org/
Big Brothers Big Sisters of Western MA	Regional	https://www.bbbswm.org/
Center for New Americans	Regional	https://cnam.org/
Clinical Support Options	Regional	https://www.csoinc.org/
Community Action Pioneer Valley	Regional	https://www.communityaction.us/
Community Foundation of Western Massachusetts	Regional	https://communityfoundation.org/
Community Health Center of Franklin County	Regional	https://www.chcfc.org/
Franklin County Sheriff's Office	Regional	https://www.fcso-ma.us/
Franklin County Technical School	Regional	https://www.fcts.us/
Franklin Regional Council of Governments	Regional	https://frcog.org/
Greenfield Community College	Regional	https://www.gcc.mass.edu/
LifePath	Regional	https://lifepathma.org/
Salasin Project	Regional	https://salasinproject.org/
The Literacy Project	Regional	https://www.literacyproject.org/
Three County Continuum of Care (a project of Community Action Pioneer Valley via HUD)	Regional	https://www.threecountycoc.communityaction.us/
United Way of the Franklin and Hampshire Region	Regional	https://uw-fh.org/
Whip City Fiber	Regional	https://www.whipcityfiber.com/
Community Compact Cabinet	State	https://www.mass.gov/orgs/community-compact-cabinet
CSforMA, Inc.	State	https://www.csforma.org/
Executive Office of Elder Affairs (EOEA)	State	https://www.mass.gov/orgs/executive-office-of-elder-affairs
MA Association for Community Action	State	https://www.masscap.org/
MA Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired	State	https://www.mabvi.org/
MA Board of Library Commissioners	State	https://mblc.state.ma.us/
MA Business Alliance for Education	State	https://www.mbae.org/
MA Department of Elementary & Secondary Education	State	https://www.doe.mass.edu/
MA Education and Career Opportunities, Inc. (MassEdCO)	State	https://www.massedco.org/
MA Healthy Aging Collaborative	State	https://mahealthyagingcollaborative.org/
MA League of Community Health Centers (CHC)	State	https://www.massleague.org/
Mass Computer Using Educators (MassCUE)	State	https://www.masscue.org/
New England Cable & Telecommunications Association	State	https://connectingne.com/
Black Economic Alliance Foundation	National	https://foundation.blackeconomicalliance.org/
T-Mobile	National	https://www.t-mobile.com/
Verizon	National	https://www.verizon.com/
Xfinity/Comcast	National	https://www.xfinity.com/overview

Appendix C: Funding Resources

Program	Type of Assistance
State Digital Equity Capacity Grant Program https://www.internetforall.gov/program/digital-equity-act-programs#	A $1.44 billion formula grant program for states, territories, and tribal governments. Funds an annual grant program for five years in support of digital equity (DE) projects and the implementation of digital equity plans: 1. Develop, implement, and oversee DE plans & make awards to other entities to help develop DE plans. 2. Improve online accessibility & inclusivity of public resources. 3. Implement DE plans and digital inclusion activities. 4. Provide digital literacy and skills education to covered populations. 5. Facilitate adoption of high-speed internet by covered populations. 6. Fund annual grant programs for five years to implement digital equity projects.
State Digital Equity Competitive Grant Program https://www.internetforall.gov/program/digital-equity-act-programs#	A $1.25 billion competitive grant program to fund annual grant programs for five years to implement digital equity projects. Several types of entities can apply for these funds.
Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Program https://broadband.masstech.org/digital-equity-implementation	Funding to mobilize, start-up, and implement digital equity activities locally to access a one-time grant up to $100,000 per municipality to execute a project (or projects) defined in their local digital equity plan or related document that MBI deems of sufficient standard. Project implementation will increase access and usage of the internet for the populations most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.
Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program https://broadbandusa.ntia.doc.gov/funding-programs/broadband-equity-access-and-deployment-bead-program	Expand high-speed internet access by funding planning, infrastructure deployment and adoption programs. This program builds high-speed internet infrastructure where needed. It also supports efforts to teach the skills and provide the equipment needed so everyone can use the internet.
Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) Apartment Wi-Fi Program https://www.mapc.org/our-work/expertise/digital-equity/apartment-wi-fi/	Statewide program that aims to increase access to affordable and reliable high-speed internet for residents in communities that face barriers to connectivity and to increase sustainable internet access for individuals and families. Funded by a grant from the MBI's Digital Equity Partnerships program.

Program	Type of Assistance
Community Compact Municipal Fiber Program https://www.mass.gov/municipal-fiber-grant-program	1. Implementation of fiber optic networks that connect remote municipal assets to improve municipal operations and/or improve disaster recovery and resiliency. 2. One time capital needs- fiber optic cabling, hardware, software and implementation services. 3. (Centralized management of IT infrastructure, enterprise approach to network monitoring, cybersecurity, records management, and backup and recovery.)
GAP Networks Grant Program https://broadband.masstech.org/gap-networks-grant-program	The $145 million Gap Networks Grant Program will fund the deployment of broadband infrastructure in areas that currently lack broadband service. The Program aims to expand access and connectivity in unserved and underserved locations throughout the Commonwealth to bridge the digital divide.
E-rate: Universal Service Program for Schools and Libraries https://www.fcc.gov/general/e-rate-schools-libraries-usf-program	The schools and libraries universal service support program, commonly known as the E-rate program, helps schools and libraries to obtain affordable broadband.
Lifeline program for Low-income consumers https://www.fcc.gov/lifeline-consumers	1. Discount on phone or broadband service for qualifying low-income consumers. 2. Promote access to Wi-Fi enabled devices and hotspot functionality to close the homework gap
Community Compact IT Grant Program https://www.mass.gov/community-compact-it-grant-program	1. This is a competitive grant program focused on driving innovation and transformation at the local level via investments in technology. 2. Grant to support implementation of innovative and transformative IT projects by funding one-time capital needs-tech infrastructure and/or purchases of equipment/ software. 3. One-time planning, design, installation, implementation, and initial training
Efficiency and Regionalization (E&R) Grant Program https://www.mass.gov/efficiency-regionalization-grant-program	Provide financial support for governmental entities (planning and implementation activities are eligible).
Telecommunications Industry Registered Apprenticeship Program (TIRAP) https://www.tirap.org/	A competency-based apprenticeship aimed at growing the productivity of the workforce as directly as possible. 1. Career development of telecommunications workforce through cash and in-kind support. 2. Funding to design curricula and deliver training to develop qualified applicants for placement in middle- to high-skilled jobs 3. To target veterans, transitioning service members, military spouses, women, people of color, unemployed, underemployed, incumbent workers, and underrepresented populations.

Program	Type of Assistance
Economic Adjustment Assistance Grant https://www.eda.gov/economic-adjustment-assistance	EAA provides a wide range of technical, planning, and public works and infrastructure assistance in regions experiencing adverse economic changes that may occur suddenly or over time.
Local Planning and Technical Assistance Programs https://www.eda.gov/sites/default/files/filebase/files/programs/eda-programs/FY21-23-Planning-and-LTA-NOFO_FINAL.pdf	Planning and local technical assistance investments to support economic development, foster job creation, and attract private investment in economically distressed areas.
Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) https://www.mass.gov/info-details/community-development-block-grant-cdbg#how-to-apply-	1. Conduct broadband needs assessment. 2. Install wiring, fiber optic cables, and permanently affixed equipment. 3. Provide digital literacy classes.
Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/grants/apply	Digital literacy- use of technology to improve teaching, learning, professional development, skill development and abilities, career guidance, supportive services, job search workshop, referral to jobs or training, workers' rights and complaint system information.
English Language Acquisition State Grants https://www.ed.gov/grants-and-programs/formula-grants/formula-grants-special-populations/english-language-acquisition-state-grants-mdash-title-iii-part-a	Enhance instruction for English learners with digital resources
CommCorps YouthWorks Funding https://commcorp.org/program/youthworks/	YouthWorks is a state-funded youth employment program that helps teens and young adults develop the skills and experience needed to find and keep jobs. YouthWorks supports skills training for youth up to age 25 from households earning less than 200% of the federal poverty rate.
Determination of Need (DoN) https://www.mass.gov/determination-of-need-don	The goal of DoN and the framework for analysis by the Department of Public Health is to promote population health and increased public health value.
USDA Community Connect Program https://www.rd.usda.gov/community-connect	The purpose of the Community Connect Program is to provide financial assistance in the form of grants to eligible applicants that will provide, on a "community-oriented connectivity" basis, broadband service that fosters economic growth and delivers enhanced educational, health care, and
USDA Telecommunications Infrastructure Loans & Loan Guarantees https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/telecommunications-programs/telecommunications-infrastructure-loans-loan-guarantees	This program provides financing for the construction, maintenance, improvement and expansion of telephone service and broadband in rural areas.

Program	Type of Assistance
High Cost Program (including Connect America Fund, Rural Digital Opportunity Fund and 5G Fund) https://www.usac.org/high-cost/	The federal universal service high-cost program is designed to ensure that consumers in rural, insular, and high-cost areas have access to modern communications networks capable of providing voice and broadband service, both fixed and mobile, at rates that are reasonably comparable to those in urban areas.
USDA Distance Learning & Telemedicine Grants https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/telecommunications-programs/distance-learning-telemedicine-grants	DLT program helps fund distance learning and telemedicine services in rural areas to increase access to education, training, and health care resources that are otherwise limited or unavailable.
Massachusetts Community Health and Healthy Aging Funds - Determination of Need (DoN) https://mahealthfunds.org/	This program aims to enhance the capacity of multi-sector collaboratives to authentically engage residents and work together to remove barriers to health. Funding can establish training opportunities for local consumers regarding tracking medical records
Residential Internet Retrofit Program https://broadband.masstech.org/retrofit	Initiative to equip public and affordable-housing units across the state with high-speed internet for current and future residents by upgrading in-building telecommunications wiring, equipment, and infrastructure within older housing developments.
Lead for America - America Connection Corps https://www.americanconnectioncorps.org/	The nation's premier AmeriCorps service experience, advancing economic prosperity in rural and emerging communities. 15 American Connection Core Members are being recruited and placed in full-time, year-long fellowships to serve as Massachusetts-based, "boots on the ground" support at local host site organizations to help with expanding broadband awareness and digital adoption.
Connect Humanity https://connecthumanity.fund/	Digital equity connectivity plan 1. Community engagement, survey work and mapping, technical design, and financial modeling. 2. Support community connectivity providers to get "investment ready". 3. Grants for enabling solutions, digital skills, relevant content, workforce
Centri-Tech Foundation Digital Integrators Pilot Program https://www.digitalintegrators.org/	CBOs can use the funding to apply the Community Development Framework for Digital Advancement to local digital equity and inclusion efforts. Organizations can use the tool for program design, implementation, and evaluation.

Program	Type of Assistance
AARP Community Challenge Grants https://www.aarp.org/livable-communities/community-challenge/	The AARP Community Challenge provides small grants to fund quick-action projects that can help communities become more livable for people of all ages.
Massachusetts Councils on Aging (MCOA) Service Incentive Grant https://mcoaonline.org/fy25-fdp-grants/	Provides direct funds to local Councils on Aging under various categories such as Capacity Building, Innovations, Improving Access and Inclusion, and more.
Point 32Health Foundation Grants https://www.point32healthfoundation.org/funding-grants/how-we-fund/	Point32Health Foundation supports work to advance equity in aging. Grants are available to nonprofits doing work in aging that addresses equity, especially in communities most affected by systemic barriers.
Bank foundations https://www.digitalequity.us/resources/cra-funding-guide-for-digital-equity/	Bank foundations can provide funding for the following digital equity-related programs and services: broadband, hardware/ devices, tech support, librarian assistance, digital skills.
Patrick J. McGovern Foundation https://www.mcgovern.org/grants/?exposed_mf_search&exposed_taxonomy_focusarea%5B0%5D=22&exposed_grant_approval_date_sort=date_desc&FZEWGNafigRBuoy=0dfbn.rMQwW&iwNIhrR=VSjdZGl9sn5FUH&m	This foundation has awarded new grants for innovative data- and AI-driven approaches that support digital transformation of health systems and healthcare across the globe.
Project UP by Comcast https://corporate.comcast.com/impact/project-up	Connectivity & adoption: Connecting people to the internet, technology, and resources needed to succeed in a digital world. Skills & creativity: Creating opportunities and new career pathways in media and technology and opening doors for new voices to be heard and stories to be shared. Entrepreneurism: Equipping entrepreneurs and small business owners with the skills, digital resources, and opportunities they need to thrive.
Tech Goes Home https://www.techgoeshome.org/	Programs for adults, families- Partner with social service org to deliver courses focused on fundamental digital skills. Offered in libraries, community centers, public housing, and other nonprofit org. TGH Connect- partner with cities, libraries, CBOs, schools, health care centers, and faith-based org to disseminate critical info and help community access online resources.
District Local Technical Assistance (contact your Regional Planning Agency for more information: https://massmarpa.org/)	Grant funding available to municipalities for technical assistance from the local Regional Planning Agency. Funding is provided by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts through the annual budget.

Program	Type of Assistance
T-Mobile Hometown Grant https://www.t-mobile.com/brand/hometown-grants	T-Mobile is committing up to $25 million through 2026 to support small towns, villages, and territories across America by funding community projects.
Age & Dementia Friendly Community Grants through LifePath https://lifepathma.org/what-we-offer/health-and-wellness/age-and-dementia-friendly-program/	One-time grants of up to $3,000 aim to make our communities welcoming and accessible for all ages. Franklin County and North Quabbin-based towns, libraries, Councils on Aging, Senior Centers, Village model organizations, businesses and other for-profit and non-profit organizations are encouraged to apply. This funding will support projects that foster progress in the set of 8 domains detailed in the Regional Action Plan. LifePath is a private, non-profit corporation, and the Area Agency on