Digital Equity Plan

SERVING THE TOWNS OF:

Leverett

Shutesbury

Prepared by the Franklin Regional Council of Governments

Contents

I. Introduction

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 Franklin County towns of Leverett and Shutesbury chose to work together to produce a shared digital equity plan. These small, rural communities have a strong history of supporting digital equity, particularly most recently in providing affordable access to broadband service through their municipal fiber programs. There are also unique challenges in both communities, including continued affordability, digital literacy, and administrative capacity at the municipal level. This digital equity plan examines the strengths as well as areas of the digital divide in these two communities and explores options to continue and expand digital equity for all residents.

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 the 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.

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

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.).
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.

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

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 Plan helps tackle internet disparities exposed by COVID by examining current conditions specific to the towns of Leverett and Shutesbury and will help guide investments to bridge the digital divide. This plan will also help prepare the communities to submit grant proposals to existing or forthcoming state and federal programs to support digital equity activities.

III.   Vision & Goals

Vision

During the planning process (outlined in the following section), the Steering Committee established a Vision to work towards crossing the digital divide and providing digital equity for all communities. There are four broad goals to guide the towns in support of the Vision. Both the Vision and the Goals were developed through the steering committee meetings, feedback during community meetings, and focus groups.

"Our vision is for the residents of our towns to have access to: affordable, high-speed internet; appropriate devices; access to robust town services; and support to understand the use of digital technology. Our vision recognizes that access, which includes cost, speed, devices and knowledge, is not a privilege for those who can afford it, but a right for residents. This Digital Equity Plan lays the groundwork for investing in our communities to achieve digital equity for all residents, allowing for better quality of life and greater opportunities for all."

Goals

Goal 1: Provide all Residents with Affordable Connectivity

Support residents' access affordable and reliable internet connectivity to meet their needs.

Goal 2: Promote Digital Literacy

Ensure every resident in the two towns has the opportunity to learn the skills needed for effective use of digital technology, including safety.

Goal 3: Ensure Equitable Access to Town Services

Provide digital options to ensure every resident has access to town services.

Goal 4: Framework for Promoting and Supporting Digital Equity

Develop and maintain a framework to continue promoting and supporting digital equity for all residents.

IV. Planning Process

Digital Equity Steering Committee

The Digital Equity Steering Committee (Steering Committee) consists of one representative from each of the two towns, the Town Administrator/Municipal Light Plant Manager in Leverett and the Municipal Light Plant Manager in Shutesbury. In collaboration with the contracted consultant, the Steering Committee met four times over the course of the planning process and provided guidance and oversight on developing this Plan, facilitated public engagement opportunities, and liaised with the community.

Community Outreach and Engagement

Robust community outreach and engagement provided insights into both the needs of residents and the available digital equity assets. The Steering Committee and consultant pursued multiple avenues of outreach and engagement to better understand the current conditions relating to digital equity. Targeted conversations with multiple groups of service providers (senior centers, school districts, municipal light plants, and libraries) provided additional information on specific issues of digital equity, current projects, and ideas for future projects. Consultant staff also facilitated a community meeting held at the Leverett town hall and on Zoom on June 29, 2024. The outreach provided valuable insights on specific issues of digital equity, current projects, and ideas for future projects. This meeting, along with the town survey (see below) allowed residents to provide direct feedback on the issues they are facing with regards to digital inequity.

While affordable connection and access to devices were generally seen as strengths in both towns, feedback focused on the need for continued assistance with digital literacy for all residents, as well as assistance with keeping broadband access affordable. The types of digital literacy ranged from working in the schools, to working with older adults on accessing healthcare, to cybersecurity concerns, to providing equitable access to town services. These equity issues are explored more throughout this report. Following data collection, a draft plan was posted on each town website for a ten-day public comment period (September 3 – September 13, 2024).

Digital Equity Surveys

The Massachusetts Broadband Institute (MBI)[5] created a statewide Digital Equity Survey to gather information about needs, barriers, and opportunities from Massachusetts residents. The survey was available online and in print, provided in nine languages (English, Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese, Haitian Creole, Vietnamese, Russian, Arabic, and Khmer). Copies of the survey were brought to the senior centers or Councils on Aging and libraries in both towns. The online survey was promoted on the Town websites, the Franklin Regional Council of Governments' website & social media, and sent out via the Franklin County Resource Network. Paper surveys were distributed at all libraries and senior centers or Councils on Aging. There were 227 responses from residents in Shutesbury and five responses from the residents in Leverett.

As part of the outreach and engagement process, both Leverett and Shutesbury were interested in getting a more nuanced understanding of the current conditions and needs of their residents regarding digital equity. The Steering Committee and consultant developed a town-specific digital equity survey that was distributed to residents through town email distribution lists as well as a paper survey to households that were not connected through either ShutesburyNet or LeverettNet. There were 468 responses through the online survey (360 from Shutesbury, 104 from Leverett, and four who indicated they did not have either internet service.) Four paper surveys were also returned.

The data provided through these surveys has been incorporated into the Existing Conditions section. Full results from the town surveys are included in the Appendix.

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[5] The Massachusetts Broadband Institute (MBI) is a division within the quasi-governmental organization the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative (MTC). The MBI was created in 2008 with the purpose of making affordable high-speed Internet available to all homes, businesses, schools, libraries, medical facilities, government offices, and other public places in Massachusetts.

V. Existing Conditions

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, including Leverett and Shutesbury. Both towns have successfully implemented municipal fiber networks in their communities. ShutesburyNet and LeverettNet are Fiber-optic-To-The-Home (FTTH) broadband networks owned by the Town of Shutesbury and the Town of Leverett, respectively. Both are operated under the telecom authority of the town Municipal Light Plant, both which contract with the South Hadley Electric Light Department for Internet Services Provider (ISP) functions.

While there have been many successes in bringing broadband to the residents of both towns, 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 Leverett and Shutesbury, including limited access to training on successfully using the internet, providing robust digital town services, and cost concerns. 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 municipalities as related to digital inequity.

Demographics

Both Leverett and Shutesbury are small, rural towns, located in Franklin County, Massachusetts. Leverett has a population of 1,851 and Shutesbury's population is 1,771. The towns are situated adjacent to each other in the south-eastern section of the county. Leverett and Shutesbury are both generally affluent towns with high median incomes and a high percentage of occupied housing. Both towns also have a high percentage of older adults. A demographic snapshot for each town is included here.[6]

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[6] 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.

Leverett

POPULATION	
Population	1,064
Population density Per square mile	78.6
% Children Age 18 and under	17.5%
% Older Adults Age 65 and over	30.1%
Median age	49
% Black, Indigenous, people of color	10.4%
% who are Veterans	5.5%
% with disabilities (Physical, mental, intellectual, and developmental)	12.8%
% Language other than English	5.4%
INCOME	
Median household income	$105,833
Poverty Rate	9.3%
HOUSING	
Total housing units	813
% Occupied housing	90.8%
% Owner-occupied	88.3%
% Renter-occupied	11.7%
COMPUTERS	
% Households with no computing device *(Desktop, laptop, tablet, or phone)*	1.8%
BROADBAND	
% Households without an internet subscription	5.0%
Primary service type	Fiber connection
Primary provider	Leverett Net *(South Hadley Electric Light Department)*

Source: 2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. American Community Survey responses were collected from 2018-2022. Town had a change in internet access during period.

Shutesbury

POPULATION	
Population	1,754
Population density Per square mile	65.9
% Children Age 18 and under	13.5%
% Older Adults Age 65 and over	25.7%
Median age	53.9
% Black, Indigenous, people of color	11.4%
% who are Veterans	3.0%
% with disabilities (Physical, mental, intellectual, and developmental)	12.1%
% Language other than English	9.7%
INCOME	
Median household income	$101,458
Poverty Rate	5.2%
HOUSING	
Total housing units	870
% Occupied housing	86.7%
% Owner-occupied	91.3%
% Renter-occupied	8.9%
COMPUTERS	
% Households with no computing device *(Desktop, laptop, tablet, or phone)*	3.8%
BROADBAND	
% Households without an internet subscription	4.0%
Primary service type	Fiber connection
Primary provider	Shutesbury Net *(South Hadley Electric Light Department)*

Source: 2022 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates. American Community Survey responses were collected from 2018-2022. Town had a change in internet access during period.

Table 1: Community Profile[7]

Municipality	Population	Median Household Income	Poverty Rate
Leverett	1,793	$105,833	9.3%
Shutesbury	1,754	$101,458	5.2%
Franklin County	70,980	70,383	12.0%
Massachusetts	6,984,205	96,505	9.9%

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 that 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 Leverett and Shutesbury, digital equity will sustain and increase the resilience and viability of these towns, helping them 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:

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[7] Individual community profiles are included in the Appendix.
[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).

- Individuals who live in low-income households
- Aging individuals (60+)
- Incarcerated individuals
- Veterans
- Individuals with disabilities
- Individuals with a language barrier
- Individuals who are members of a racial or ethnic minority group
- Individuals who primarily reside in a rural area

Table 2: Impacted Populations

Region	Civilian veterans	Population with a disability	Speak a language besides English at home	People of Color	Households with Children	Residents 60+
Leverett	5.5%	12.8%	6.7%	10.5%	17.5%	39.2%
Shutesbury	3.0%	12.1%	9.7%	11.4	13.5%	36.5%
Franklin County	7.5%	16.8%	6.54%	11.1%	23%	32%
Massachusetts	4.7%	11.9%	24.54%	31.1%	19.6%	23.8%

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

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.

Age: The population 60 and over in both communities is significantly higher than either the county or the state, providing unique challenges to fully realize digital equity within these communities. 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.

Disabilities: The two towns have significant populations 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.

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.

Rural: Both Leverett and Shutesbury are considered rural. This Plan 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. Both Leverett and Shutesbury are considered Rural Level 1.

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
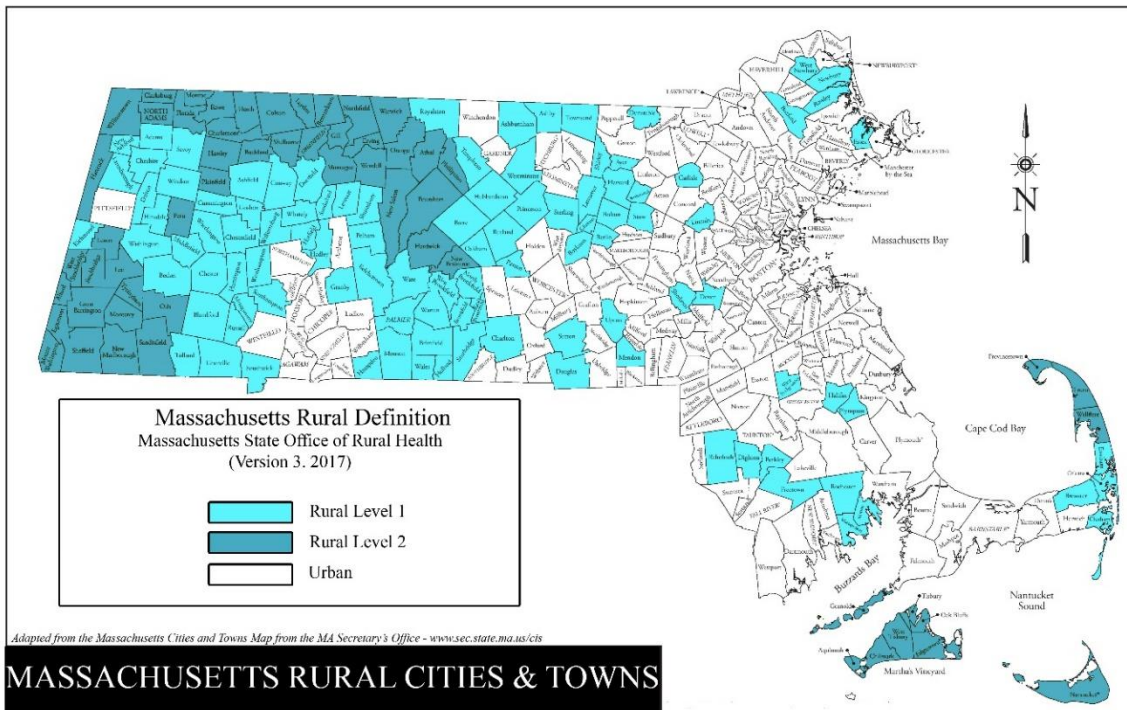
Source: Massachusetts State Office of Rural Health

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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

Table 3: Labor Force & Economy

Region	Unemployment Rate	Labor Force Participation Rate	Working from home
Leverett	6.5%	66.4%	24.2%
Shutesbury	9.2%	65.9%	23.1%
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

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.

The unemployment rates in both towns are higher than both the state and the county. The percentage of employees working from home is also significantly higher than the rest of the county and the state, suggesting this is a potential economic driver for both towns, and something that should continue to be supported and enhanced.

VI. Broadband Access

The factors in determining digital equity include *Connection* (ability to connect to broadband service), *Access to Devices* (i.e. computers or tablets), and *Digital Literacy* (ability to navigate the internet safely and effectively). Lack of affordable connection, access to devices, and limited digital literacy, lead to digital inequity and exacerbate the digital divide. Both Leverett and Shutesbury have taken great strides to provide all three elements to their residents particularly through providing connection. However, the data shows there remains work to do, particularly regarding affordability and robust digital literacy.

Internet Connection

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]

Table 4: 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)
Leverett	0.0%	0.0%	852
Shutesbury	0.0%	0.8%	859

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

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[10]

[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)

Table 4 shows that there are no underserved BSLs and very few unserved BSLs in the two towns. However, data from the town indicates there are 77 households in Shutesbury and 109 households in Leverett that were not connected to either ShutesburyNet or LeverettNet.[12] Data from the surveys, although limited, indicates that cost concerns remain a concern for residents, even for those who are currently paying for internet service. The four paper survey responses noted they simply did not want the internet in their home.[13]

Figure 2: Internet Reliability
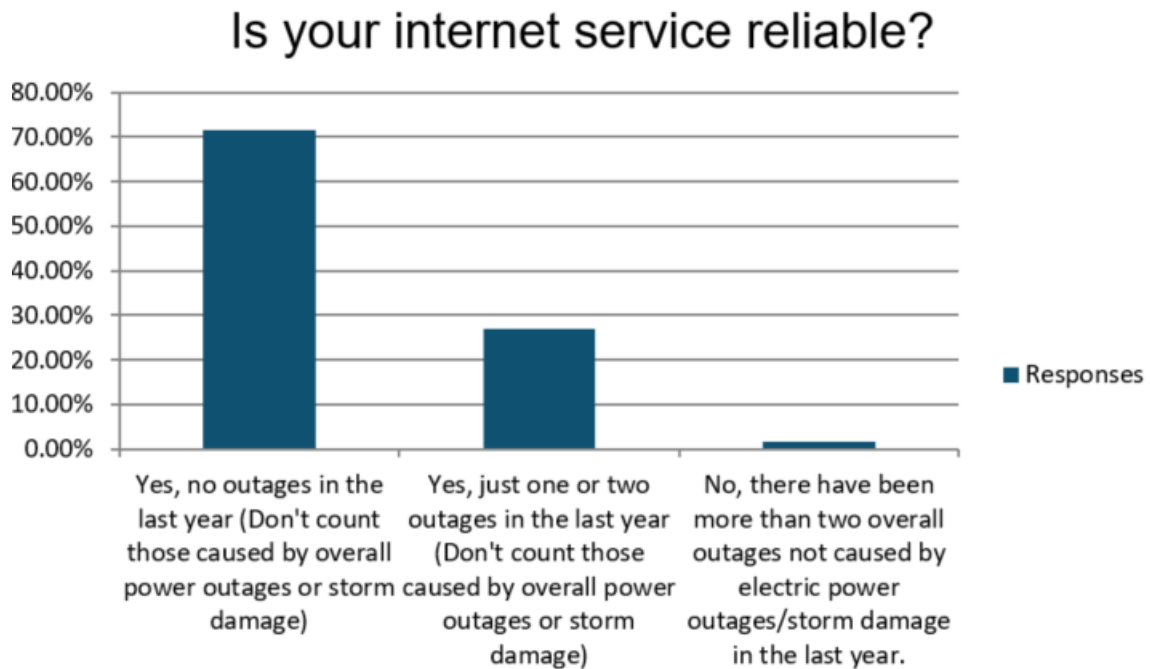
Source: Leverett and Shutesbury Digital Equity Survey

When asked whether their internet service was reliable, almost 73% across both towns indicated it was, with no outages in the last year. Another 26% noted their service was reliable with only one or two outages in the past year.

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[12] Data retrieved from LeverettNet and ShutesburyNet and compared with each municipal assessor database.
[13] Paper surveys were sent to households that are currently not connected to either ShutesburyNet or LeverettNet.

Internet Speeds

Table 4: Speed Test Data

Speed Ranges	Leverett			Shutesbury	
	# (9 tests)	%		# (617 tests)	%
Speeds < 25 x 3 Mbps	0	0.0%		3	0.5%
Speeds < 50 x 10 Mbps	0	0.0%		12	1.9%
Speeds < 100 x 20 Mbps	0	0.0%		48	7.8%
Speeds at least 25 x 3 Mbps	9	100.0%		581	94.2%
Speeds at least 50 x 10 Mbps	9	100.0%		528	85.6%
Speeds at least 100 x 20 Mbps	8	88.9%		431	69.9%
Speeds at least 100 x 100 Mbps	0	0.0%		413	66.9%

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

Disclaimer: ShutesburyNET and LeverettNET both provide gigabit service to all subscribers. When individuals use speedtest.net it includes all tests used by different services, such as those done over the limited cellular data connections. This means that the collective results of speed tests in an area may not be an accurate reflection of the service available.

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.

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 both towns suggests that the majority of households are receiving broadband speeds of at least 100/20 Mbps. It is also important to note that this data is at least two years old.

Figure 3: Internet Speed

Is the speed of your internet adequate?
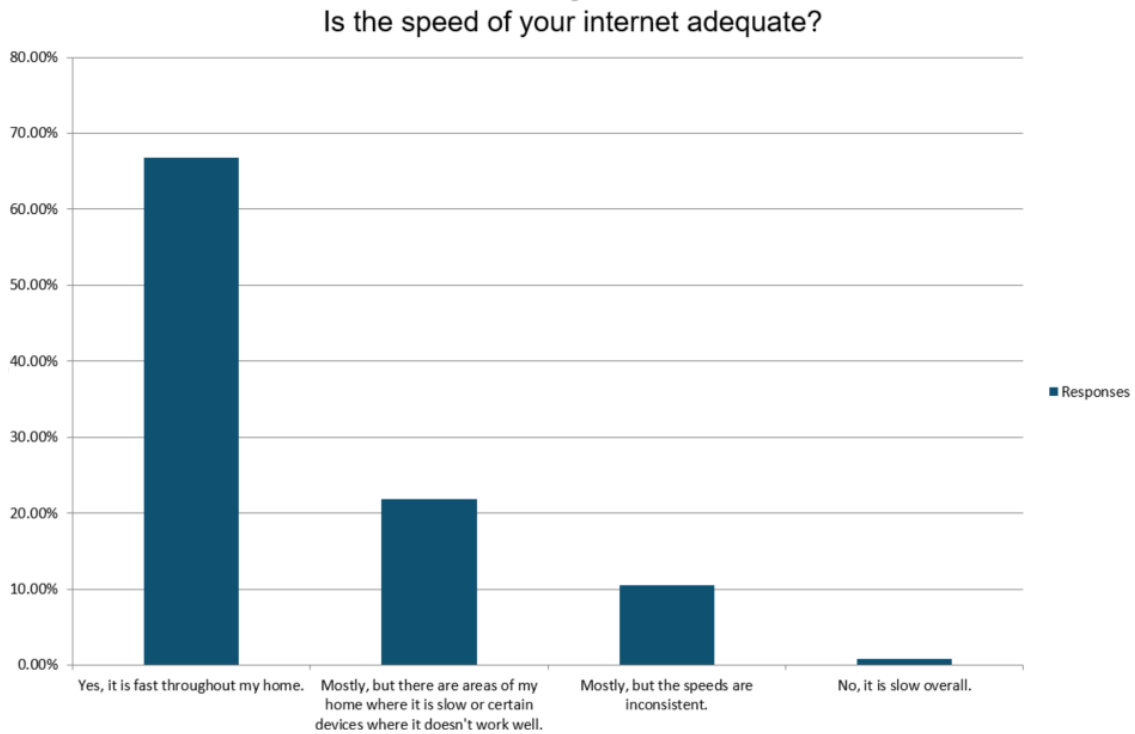
Source: Leverett and Shutesbury Digital Equity Survey

Based on the data from the town survey, a majority (67%) of respondents said the internet is fast throughout their home. Less than 1% said the internet was slow overall, while just over 10% indicated speeds are good but inconsistent.

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.[14] Further, around half of households were paying between $60 and $90 per

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[14] 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)

month. LeverettNet and ShutesburyNet offer fixed costs for internet and phone, which were generally in-line with, or slightly below, the average national cost.

Table 4: Broadband advertised speeds and costs for Leverett and Shutesbury

Cable Providers

Spectrum	Cost*	Max Speeds
Residential Internet	$72.40	1 Gbps/1 Gbps
Phone service only	$72.40	
Internet and phone	$87.40	
The current LMLP monthly charge is $51.00, which is added to the ISP cost.		
ShutesburyNet	**Cost**	**Max Speeds**
Residential Internet	$60.00	1 Gbps/1 Gbps
Phone service only	$60.00	
Internet and phone	$73.00	

Source: Municipal Light Plants

Affordability

In response to the Leverett-Shutesbury survey, 420 households responded to the question about how difficult it is to afford their internet bill each month. While just over 60% said it was Very Easy or Easy, almost 7% said it was either Difficult or Very Difficult. Another 31% indicated "Neither easy nor difficult," the middle option for choices. Overall, broadband is generally affordable for households who have internet in Leverett and Shutesbury, but costs remain an issue for a number of households in the towns. 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

Figure 4: Internet Affordability
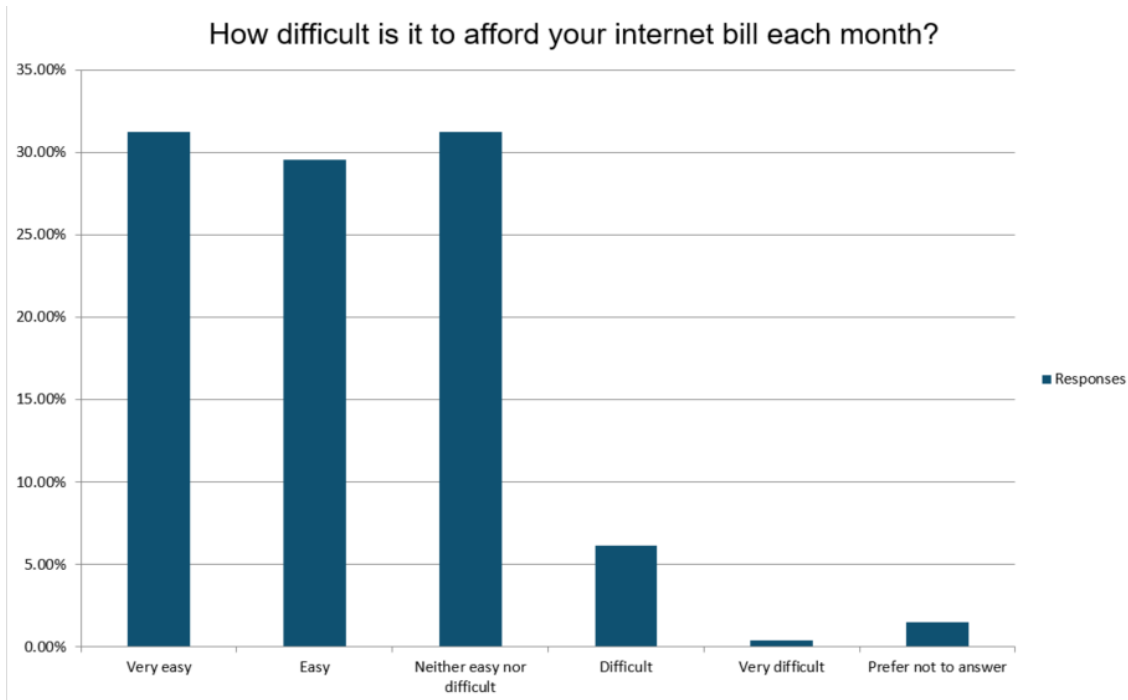
Source: Leverett and Shutesbury Digital Equity Survey

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.[15] The FCC collected data on which households are eligible and how many are enrolled in the program. In Leverett, almost 45% of households were eligible for ACP, while in Shutesbury, almost 24% of households were eligible. Only 5% of eligible households took advantage of the ACP, indicating this program was severely underutilized.[16]

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

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[15] For more information on qualification, see https://www.affordableconnectivity.gov/do-i-qualify/.

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

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. ShutesburyNet has begun to offer a $20 subsidy for residents who qualify for LifeLine. Coupled with the Lifeline discount, these residents are able to qualify for up to almost $30 in subsidy. The eligibility requirements for Lifeline are stricter than for the ACP, so it is likely fewer households will be able to take advantage of Lifeline and the discount in Shutesbury. However, the Shutesbury MLP has indicated they will continue to monitor the affordability situation and examine potential changes if needed. Leverett's ISP handles affordability programs.

The State Digital Equity Plan 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 plan 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."[17]

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. Over 96% of households in Leverett and 88% of households in Shutesbury have a desktop or laptop, while 84% in Leverett and 89% in Shutesbury have a smartphone. These are extremely positive numbers, suggesting there is significant access to digital devices.

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

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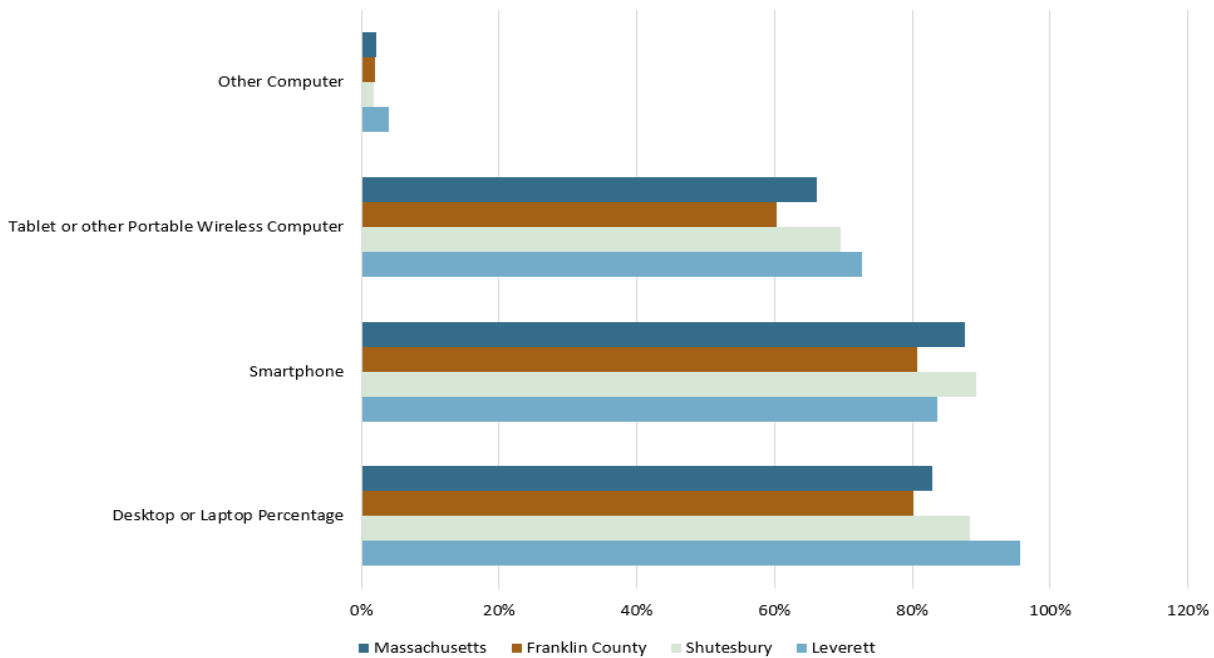
Data source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2022 American Community Survey (ACS) 5-Year Estimates

The majority of respondents indicated that their household has access to the computer devices they need to meet their everyday needs. For those who indicated they did not, the majority said that cost was the main barrier to getting a device. A similar question was asked about whether households had access to the devices and services they need to access entertainment and support cultural literacy. While a large majority indicated they did have access to these devices, almost 5% of respondents indicated they did not. When asked to list any devices or services they wished they had, items such as e-book readers and IPads, as well as devices that support streaming services, were most listed.

Figure 6: Computer Devices

Does everyone in your household have access to the computer devices they need to meet their everyday needs for internet use?
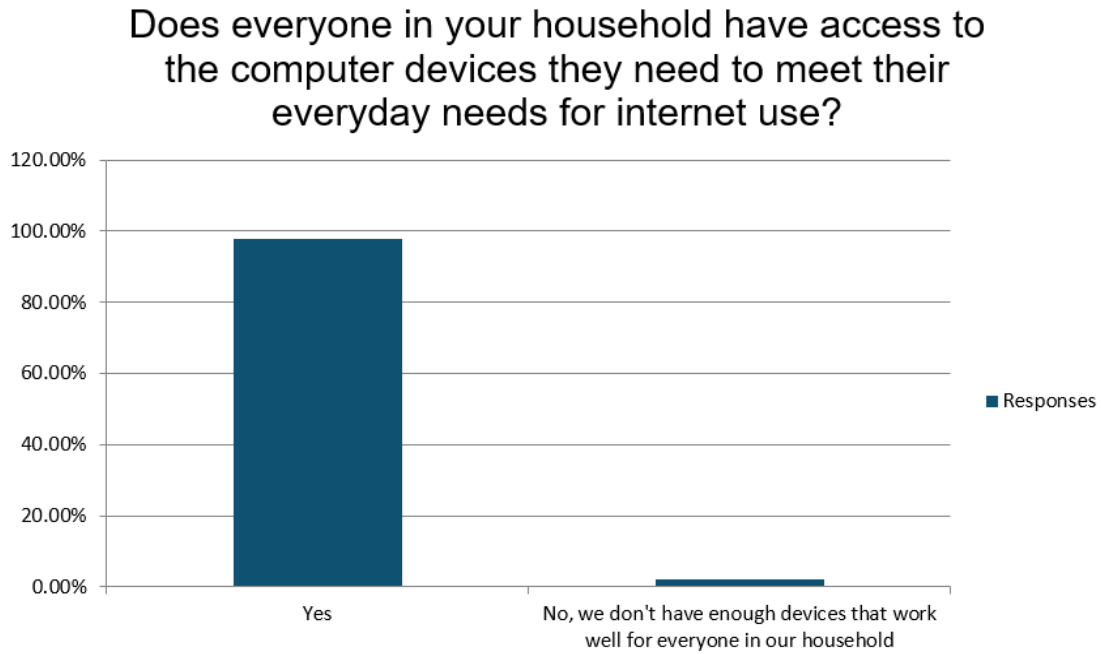
Source: Leverett and Shutesbury Digital Equity Survey

Figure 7: Entertainment Devices

Does everyone in your household have access to the devices and services they need to access entertainment and support cultural literacy? (i.e. access to streaming services for movies, videos, and how-to's like Hoopla, Roku, Fire Sticks, portable DVD playe

Source: Leverett and Shutesbury Digital Equity Survey

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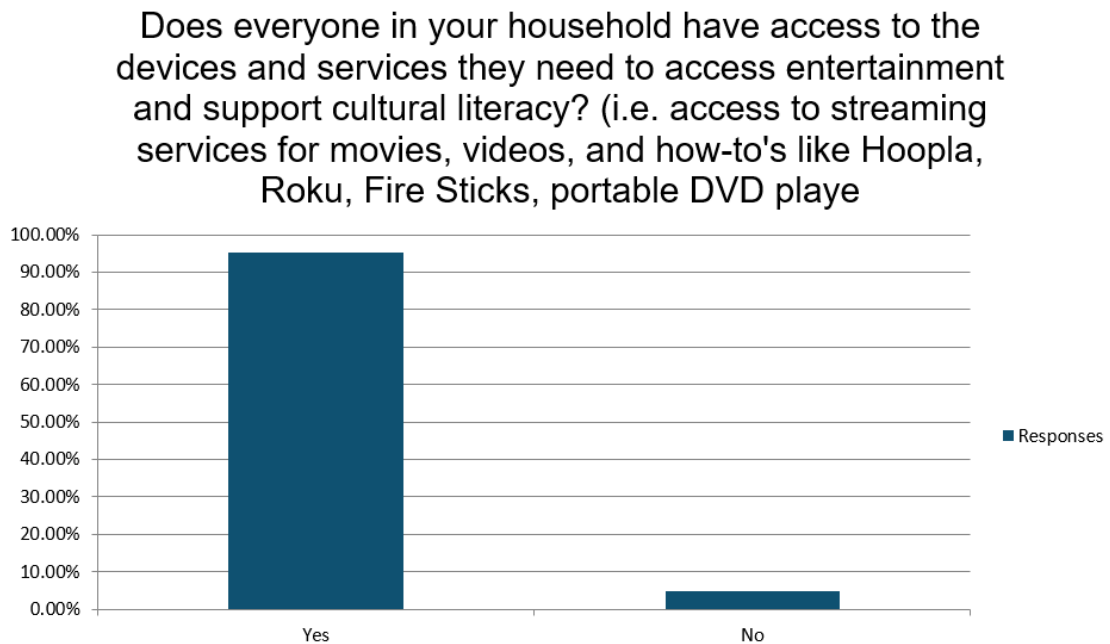
Digital Literacy

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.

Figure 5: Level of Difficulty Using the Internet (Shutesbury only)

Level of Difficulty Using the Internet

Task	Easy	Not Easy	Hard
Searching and/or applying for benefits or resources for you or your family	71%	26%	3%
Transportation information	86%	12%	2%
General internet searching	98%	2%	0%
Participating in your local community	89%	9%	2%
Health care or telehealth services	83%	15%	2%
Searching and applying for a job	82%	15%	3%

Legend: ■ Easy ■ Not Easy ■ Hard
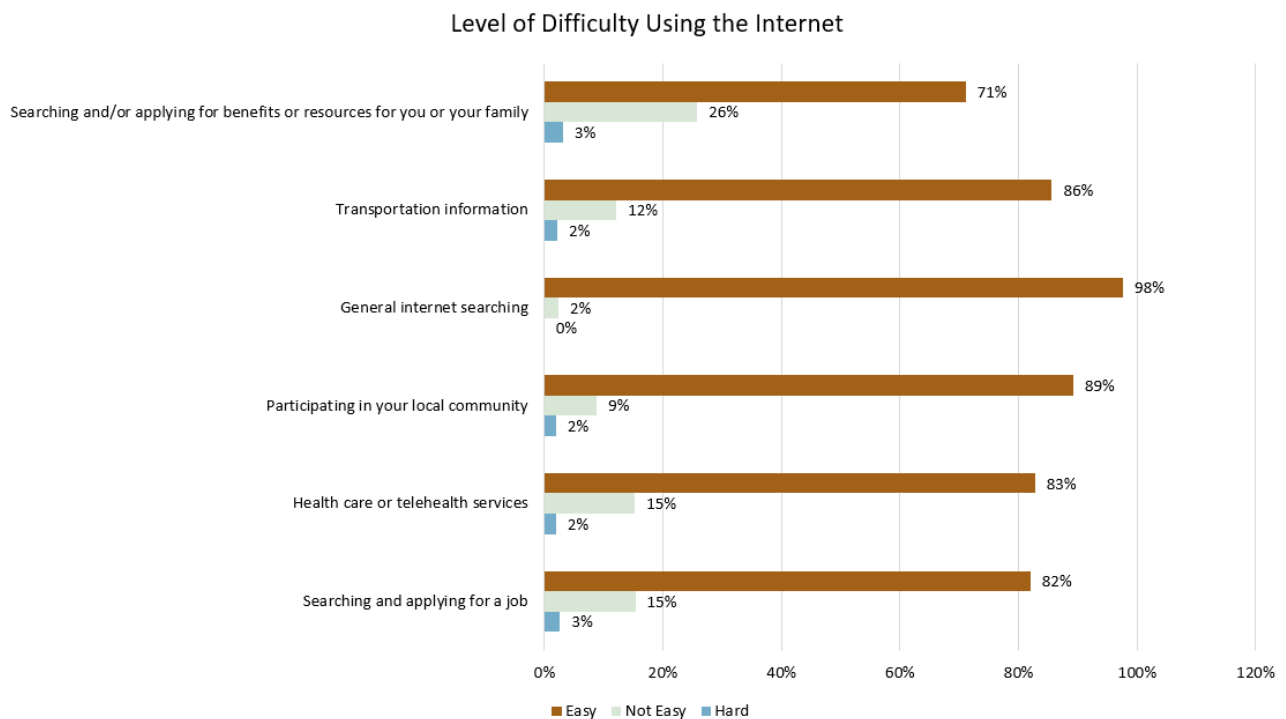
Source: Massachusetts Statewide Digital Equity Survey

When asked to rank the difficulty of using the internet for various tasks (i.e. job search, healthcare or telehealth services, etc.) a majority of respondents indicated *Easy* for all tasks. However, some tasks were more challenging than others. For example, 29% of respondents in Shutesbury indicated it was either *Hard* or *Not Easy* to "search and/or apply for benefits or resources for you or your family." "Searching for a job" and accessing health care or telehealth services also ranked as more difficult. The majority of the respondents indicated that general internet searching was easy. The data suggests areas where more specific digital literacy skills may be needed. When asked their

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preferred method of training, 68% said a do-it-yourself training module, 23% said an online class, and 9% said in-person training.[18]

The town survey asked about residents' level of knowledge regarding their routers. Almost 55% said they did not access the router's software or did not know what a router was. Over 40% said they wanted to receive remote assistance from either LeverettNet or ShutesburyNet.

Cyber Security

One growing issue within digital literacy is cyber security and the continuous need for protecting systems, networks, and programs from digital attacks, as well as educating users on how best to achieve this. Based on the Leverett-Shutesbury survey, almost 89% indicted their main concern regarding internet safety was their personal accounts being hacked. Being caught up in an internet scam was second at almost 43%. However, only 9.5% of respondents indicated they would be interested in a 45-minute online class to learn more about to stay safe on the internet at no cost. Another 22% said they would probably be interested.

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[18] *Massachusetts Statewide Digital Equity Survey* – data was included for Shutesbury only since there were only 5 response from Leverett for the Statewide survey.

VII. Digital Assets

Both the towns of Leverett and Shutesbury, 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.

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://sites.google.com/view/alliancefordigitalequity/home)

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 Leverett and Shutesbury, is the limited capacity of these town libraries, including limited staff time and hours when open. For example, the Leverett Library is only open Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday for limited hours, while the M.N. Spear Memorial Library in Shutesbury is open each day of the week, but only 3-5 hours each day.

Even with limited hours, both libraries provide a wealth of digital assistance to their patrons, offering one-on-one technology assistance, including how to set up an account, search the library and internet, place holds, and create email accounts. Staff also assist patrons with their personal devices that they bring to the library as well as with the library printer, scanner, photocopier, as well as how to access the free Wi-Fi. The libraries offer public computers, scanners, a public printer and photocopier. Both libraries offer 24/7 Wi-Fi in and around the library buildings. Free streaming services for entertainment and education, and free eBook and audiobook downloads are available.

Town Services

Accessing town services and meetings online, is an important element of equity in municipalities. Town websites should provide residents with up-to-date and useful

information that is easily accessible for all people. Online and hybrid meetings provide an opportunity for increased engagement and greater equity within a community.

In both Leverett and Shutesbury, 94% of respondents (almost 92% in Leverett and 94% in Shutesbury) use the town website. Most respondents said they used the website to find contact information for different town departments. The town websites were also used to review committee meeting agendas and minutes, as well as for event information. While the majority of respondents said the websites were easy to use, 10% in Shutesbury did not find the town website user-friendly, and over 20% in Leverett said the same of their town website.

Although a majority of respondents said they did not participate in municipal meetings remotely, over 30% in Leverett did participate remotely and 40% did so in Shutesbury. This suggests that, while not a majority, there is a large percentage of residents in both towns who do participate in meetings remotely, increasing the equity of access. When asked what prevents them from participating remotely, approximately 20% in both towns said it was because they did not know how to access the meeting. Direct tech assistance is limited within both towns due to staff capacity, although the Municipal Light Plant Committees in both towns are very active.

> **Greenfield Community College (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/

Municipal Light Plants

In Massachusetts, municipalities may own, maintain and operate a municipal light plant (MLP) in order to provide electric and/or gas services to their citizens. Both towns have

local MLPs. These are run by municipal light boards, and provide a valuable resource to the towns and residents. The MLPs have been advocates for their residents, particularly around affordability. MLPs can also provide information for residents currently not connected to the fiber network on how best to connect, as well as resources around affording the installation. The Shutesbury MLP is currently offering a $20 subsidy for residents who qualify for LifeLine. The eligibility requirements for Lifeline are stricter than for the ACP. However, the Shutesbury MLP has indicated they will continue to monitor the affordability situation and examine potential changes if needed. The Leverett MLP handles affordability programs and is looking at options for a subsidy program.

Education

Leverett and Shutesbury are both members of the Union 28 School District and the Amherst/Pelham Region School District. Each town has one elementary school. Like schools throughout the Commonwealth, classroom technology use has become more extensive in at both the Leverett and Shutesbury Elementary Schools in response to the

COVID-19 pandemic. Federal funds provided during the pandemic, allowed both the Leverett Elementary School and Shutesbury Elementary School to move to a 1:1 device. Grades PreK through 2nd use iPads and Grades 3-6 use Chromebooks. The Leverett Elementary currently does not have a technology teacher so any instruction happens with classroom teachers as needed through their regular curriculum and through the librarian using databases and their digital library catalog. Shutesbury Elementary attend computer classes in a shared Mac lab.
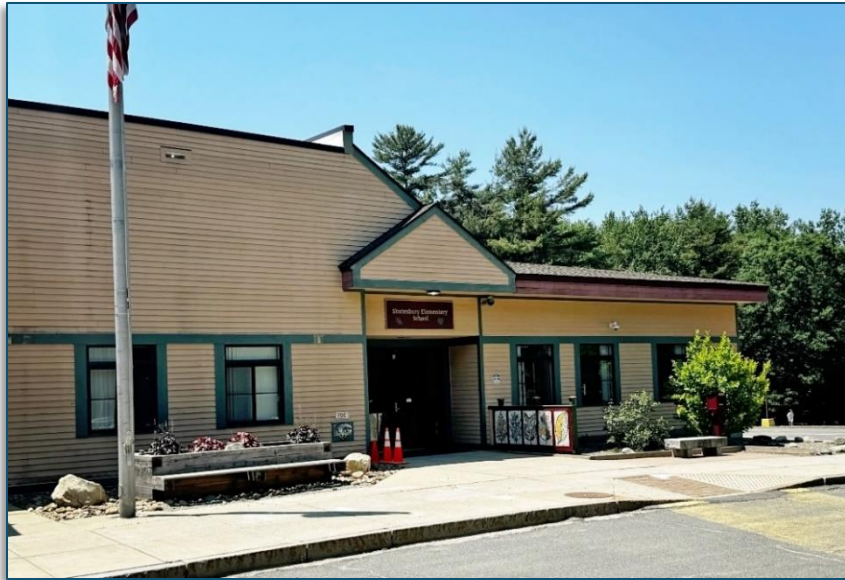
Senior Centers and Councils on Aging

As this report has discussed, 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. Each town represented in this plan has a municipal senior center/council on aging, many of which are already contributing to improving digital equity in the communities. The Shutesbury COA has offered classes to assist seniors to better utilize their cell phones for IPhone and Android styles. The greatest needs they see are affording internet access and education on how to use devices and the internet.

Digital Equity Assets and Services in Franklin County

A more comprehensive list of regional digital assets is included in the Appendix. It would be in the best interest of the towns to maintain an up-to-date list of resources for residents to access via the town websites.

Assets and Strengths	Needs and Challenges
• Local services like free Wi-Fi available at the libraries that extends out to the parking lot, including off hours. • Regional services like the on-demand devices available at the senior centers and libraries • Regional networks and support services like the Franklin County Resource Network, administered by Community Action Pioneer Valley. • Regional services through the 413Cares.org/Digital Equity (working with the Alliance for Digital Equity) • Digital literacy programs for seniors, including the Cyber Senior Program through the Greenfield Community College (GCC). • Availability of broadband in most communities in Franklin County through the MBI Last Mile program. • MBI, as the State Broadband Office, works with state agencies and departments to optimize funding sources and statewide coordination (for example, coordinating digital literacy programs between libraries). • Regional organizations that provide opportunity for coordination like the Central and Western Massachusetts Automated Resource Sharing (CW MARS) library consortium.	• Staff and programs are heavily grant dependent. Lack staff and resources to provide services or other programs • One time funding • Reliance on volunteers • Difference in bandwidth quality • Internet cost disparity for more remote residents • Gaps in cell service due to varied geography • Reliance on federal and state funding due to the COVID pandemic to purchase devices and provide digital equity services. • Reliance on external funding sources • Need for staff/capacity • Need for an asset map so people know where to go for services (ex. Seattle-King County Digital Equity Asset Map) • Need for an individual or organization to coordinate between organizations

VIII. Recommendations and Action Plan

The following section provides a plan of action for Leverett and Shutesbury to work towards addressing the digital divide in their communities, and achieving the digital equity goals outlined above. These strategies, and accompanying actions, were developed by the Steering Committee, with input from the community. Certain strategies and actions were influenced by current projects and programs, (like the work being done through Councils on Aging and Senior Centers, town libraries, public schools, and through Municipal Light Plants), while others are based on community feedback, best practices, and evolving technology trends. Each town has a similar but separate Recommendation and Action Plan.

The Recommendations and Action Plan includes the following: lead organization (in many cases this is the Town – generally the lead will be town administration, although in some cases it might be the Municipal Light Plant or designated by the town administration to a different department), 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).

Town of Leverett Action Plan

1. Affordable Connectivity

Strategy	Lead Organization	Supporting Partners	Potential Funding Sources	Implementation Target
Connect households not currently able to access fiber network	Municipal Light Plants	Town administration	BEAD Program Funding	Short-Medium Term
Explore possibility of implementing a cell tower to improve safety	Town Administration	Municipal Light Plant	Municipal budget	Medium Term
Explore public Wi-Fi locations and implementation	Municipal Light Plants	Alliance for Digital Equity	Community Space Public Wi-Fi Program; Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Program	Short-Medium Term
Distribute digital devices (i.e. laptops or tablets; gaming systems at the library)	Alliance for Digital Equity	Towns; Senior Center; Public Libraries	Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Program; Executive Office of Elder Affairs Grant Funding; STEM grants through Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education	Short Term

Review possibility of a cost subsidy program in place of the ACP.	Municipal Light Plants	Town administration	None	Short-Medium Term
Explore and promote options for affordable, quality data plans for mobile phones and more robust and reliable cell service	Town staff	Alliance for Digital Equity	None	Medium-Term

2. Digital Literacy & Navigation

Strategy	Lead Organization	Supporting Partners	Potential Funding Sources	Implementation Target
Support and promote current digital literacy programs	Town staff	Library, Senior Center, GCC	Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Program	Short-Term
Develop digital literacy classes/workshop programs (priority populations: older adults and low-income residents)	Alliance for Digital Equity; GCC – Cyber Seniors; Village Neighbors	Town administration	Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Program	Short-term
Support cyber security/safety policies, enforcement, and training for all students and families in school districts	Various School Districts (IT departments)	Northwestern DA Office (potential), Communities That Care Coalition	Municipal Cyber Security Awareness Grant Program; STEM grants through Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education	Short-Medium Term
Secure private spaces for assisted internet access and provide one-on-one digital literacy consulting	Town staff (senior centers/ Councils on Aging; libraries)	Towns (administration); FRCOG; Alliance for Digital Equity	Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Program	Short-Medium Term

Provide in-home technology assistance for residents who may be unable to travel to more central locations	Alliance for Digital Equity	Town libraries and COAs	Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Program; Executive Office of Elder Affairs Grant Funding	Short Term

3. Ensure Equitable Access to Town Services

Strategy	Lead Organization	Supporting Partners	Potential Funding Sources	Implementation Target
Evaluate town websites and communication materials to ensure they are universally accessible and usable on all internet devices	Town staff	FRCOG; Alliance for Digital Equity	Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Program	Short-term
Inventory of municipal devices to determine needs in order to provide online services; purchase appropriate equipment	Town administration; MLPs	Town committees	Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Program	Short-term
Provide up-to-date equipment in both town halls and in both libraries in order to host hybrid meetings and programing	Town administration; libraries	MLPs	Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Program; Community Compact IT Grant	Short-term
Provide staff capacity to administer and troubleshoot remote municipal meetings to encourage greater community engagement and participation	Town administration	None	Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Program; municipal budget	Short-term

4. Framework for Promoting and Supporting People-Centered Digital Equity

Strategy	Lead Organization	Supporting Partners	Potential Funding Sources	Implementation Target
Support and enhance current digital equity partnerships (for example, actively engage with the Alliance for Digital Equity and other local and regional organizations)	Town staff	FRCOG; Alliance for Digital Equity; Clinical & Support Options (CSO); School Districts; Greenfield Community College; local businesses	Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Program; AARP Community Challenge grants; Massachusetts Councils on Aging (MCOA) Service Incentive Grant; Point 32Health Foundation	Short-Long Term
Work with other Franklin County towns (especially those who have completed Digital Equity Plans) to promote and implement digital equity regionally.	Town staff	Other Franklin County towns; FRCOG; Alliance for Digital Equity; Other digital equity asset partners (as listed in plan)	Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Program; Executive Office of Elder Affairs grants, or funding through the Massachusetts Libraries Board of Library Commissions	Short-Long Term
Promote and support local and regional organizations providing digital equity (i.e. libraries, senior centers, Alliance for Digital Equity, etc.)	Town staff	Libraries; senior centers/COAs; Alliance for Digital Equity; FRCOG	Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Program, Executive Office of Elder Affairs grants, funding through the Massachusetts Libraries Board of Library Commissions	Short-Long Term

Town of Shutesbury Action Plan

1. Affordable Connectivity

Strategy	Lead Organization	Supporting Partners	Potential Funding Sources	Implementation Target
Connect remaining 9% households not currently using ShutesburyNet	Municipal Light Plant	Town administration	BEAD Challenge Funding	Short-Medium Term
Implement robust public Wi-Fi at the Elementary School and new Library site	Municipal Light Plant	Town library; town administration; public school; Alliance for Digital Equity	Community Space Public Wi-Fi Program; Municipal Digital Equity Implementation	Short-Medium Term
Distribute digital devices (i.e. laptops or tablets; gaming systems at the library)	Alliance for Digital Equity	Towns; Senior Center; Public Libraries	Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Program; Executive Office of Elder Affairs Grant Funding; STEM grants through Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education	Short Term

Continue cost subsidy program in place of the ACP.	Municipal Light Plant	Town administration	Ongoing town budget item	Short-Medium Term
Explore possibility of implementing a cell tower to improve safety	Town Administration	Municipal Light Plant	Efficiency & Regionalization Grant; Community OneStop for Growth	Medium Term

2. Digital Literacy & Navigation

Strategy	Lead Organization	Supporting Partners	Potential Funding Sources	Implementation Target
Support and promote current digital literacy programs	Municipal Light Plant and ISP	Library, Senior Center, GCC	Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Program	Short-Term
Develop digital literacy classes/workshop programs (priority populations: older adults and low-income residents)	Alliance for Digital Equity; GCC – Cyber Seniors; Village Neighbors	Town administration	Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Program	Short-term
Support cyber security/safety policies, enforcement, and training for all students and families in school districts	Various School Districts (IT departments)	Northwestern DA Office (potential), Communities That Care Coalition	Municipal Cyber Security Awareness Grant Program; STEM grants through Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education	Short-Medium Term
Secure private spaces for assisted internet access and provide one-on-one digital literacy consulting	Town staff (senior centers/ Councils on Aging; libraries)	Towns (administration); FRCOG; Alliance for Digital Equity	Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Program	Short-Medium Term

3. Ensure Equitable Access to Town Services

Strategy	Lead Organization	Supporting Partners	Potential Funding Sources	Implementation Target
Evaluate town websites and communication materials to ensure they are universally accessible and usable on all internet devices	Town staff	FRCOG; Alliance for Digital Equity	Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Program	Short-term
Provide upgraded routers for current residents who request them and/or mesh extenders for full home coverage	Municipal Light Plant and ISPs	Town committees	Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Program	Short-term
Provide up-to-date equipment in both town halls and in both libraries in order to host hybrid meetings and programing	Town administration; libraries	MLPs	Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Program; Community Compact IT Grant	Short-term

4. Framework for Promoting and Supporting People-Centered Digital Equity

Strategy	Lead Organization	Supporting Partners	Potential Funding Sources	Implementation Target
Support and enhance current digital equity partnerships (for example, actively engage with the Alliance for Digital Equity)	Town staff	FRCOG; Alliance for Digital Equity; Clinical & Support Options (CSO); School Districts; Greenfield Community College; local businesses	Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Program; AARP Community Challenge grants; Massachusetts Councils on Aging (MCOA) Service Incentive Grant; Point 32Health Foundation	Short-Long Term
Work with other Franklin County towns (especially those who have completed Digital Equity Plans) to promote and implement digital equity regionally.	Town staff	Other Franklin County towns; FRCOG; Alliance for Digital Equity; Other digital equity asset partners (as listed in plan)	Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Program; Executive Office of Elder Affairs grants, or funding through the Massachusetts Libraries Board of Library Commissions	Short-Long Term
Promote and support local and regional organizations providing digital equity (i.e. libraries, senior centers, Alliance for Digital Equity, etc.)	Town staff	Libraries; senior centers/COAs; Alliance for Digital Equity; FRCOG	Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Program, Executive Office of Elder Affairs grants, library grants through the Massachusetts Libraries Board of Library Commissions, etc.	Short-Long Term

IX.   Appendices

Acknowledgements

The contributions of the Digital Equity Steering Committee and project stakeholders join the comments of residents and stakeholders who participated in meetings and surveys throughout the Digital Equity planning process.

Digital Equity Steering Committee

- Gayle Huntress, MLP Manager, Town of Shutesbury
- Marjorie McGinnis, Leverett Town Administrator / LMLP Manager

Digital Equity Stakeholders

- Mary Anne Antonellis, Director, M.N. Spear Memorial Library (Shutesbury)
- Martha Favre, Chair. Shutesbury Council on Aging
- Judi Fonsh, Co-chair, Leverett Council on Aging
- Linda Hoer, Co-chair, Leverett Council on Aging
- Debbie Lee, Computer Teacher/Technology Coordinator, Shutesbury Elementary School
- Hannah Paessel, Director, Leverett Library
- Donna Rivers, Library Teacher & Tech Coordinator, Leverett Elementary School

Consultant Team (Franklin Regional Council of Governments)

- Jessica Atwood, Director of Planning
- Ted Harvey, Senior Economic Development Planner
- Nicole Krantz, Planning & Digital Equity Intern
- Mark Maloni, Communications Manager

Digital Equity Funding

Program	Type of Assistance	URL
State Digital Equity Capacity Grant Program	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 projects and the implementation of digital equity plans.	https://www.internetforall.gov/program/digital-equity-act-programs#
State Digital Equity Competitive Grant Program	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.	https://www.internetforall.gov/program/digital-equity-act-programs#
Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Program	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.	https://broadband.masstech.org/digital-equity-implementation
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. An eligible entity must conduct a challenge process prior to funds distribution for broadband deployment. Challenge support services are available.	https://broadbandusa.ntia.doc.gov/funding-programs/broadband-equity-access-and-deployment-bead-program

Community Compact Municipal Fiber 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.	https://www.mass.gov/municipal-fiber-grant-program
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.	https://broadband.masstech.org/gap-networks-grant-program
E-rate: Universal Service Program for Schools and Libraries	The schools and libraries universal service support program, commonly known as the E-rate program, helps schools and libraries to obtain affordable broadband.	https://www.fcc.gov/general/e-rate-schools-libraries-usf-program
Lifeline program for Low-income 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 Note: A family that qualifies for Lifeline also qualifies to receive EBB	https://www.fcc.gov/lifeline-consumers
Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP)	The Affordable Connectivity Program is an FCC benefit program that helps ensure that households can afford the broadband they need for work, school, healthcare and more. 1. $30 discount per month for internet service for eligible households; $75 discount for qualifying Tribal lands 2. One time $100 discount to purchase a laptop, desktop	https://www.fcc.gov/acp **NO LONGER AVAILABLE**

	computer, or tablet if the contribute between $10 to $50 toward purchase price.	
Municipal Cybersecurity Awareness Grant Program	The Executive Office of Technology Services and Security's (EOTSS) Office of Municipal and School Technology procures and manages the Municipal Cybersecurity Awareness Grant Program (MCAGP) – making the program free to participating organizations. The program improves overall cybersecurity posture through end-user training.	https://www.mass.gov/info-details/about-the-municipal-cybersecurity-awareness-grant-program#how-to-apply-
Community Compact IT Grant Program	This is a competitive grant program focused on driving innovation and transformation at the local level via investments in technology. 1. Grant to support implementation of innovative and transformative IT projects by funding one-time capital needs-tech infrastructure and/or purchases of equipment/ software. 2. One-time planning, design, installation, implementation, and intial training	https://www.mass.gov/community-compact-it-grant-program
Efficiency and Regionalization (E&R) Grant Program	Provide financial support for governmental entities (Planning and implementation activities are eligible)	https://www.mass.gov/efficiency-regionalization-grant-program

Telecommunications Industry Registered Apprenticeship Program (TIRAP)	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.	https://www.tirap.org/
Economic Adjustment Assistance Grant	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.	https://www.eda.gov/economic-adjustment-assistance
Local Planning and Technical Assistance Programs	Planning and local technical assistance investments to support economic development, foster job creation, and attract private investment in economically distressed areas.	https://www.eda.gov/sites/default/files/filebase/files/programs/eda-programs/FY21-23-Planning-and-LTA-NOFO_FINAL.pdf
Community Development Block Grants (CDBG)	1. Conduct broadband needs assessment 2. Install wiring, fiber optic cables, and permanently affixed equipment 3. Provide digital literacy classes.	https://www.mass.gov/info-details/community-development-block-grant-cdbg#how-to-apply-

Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)	1. 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.	https://www.dol.gov/agencies/eta/grants/apply
English Language Acquisition State Grants	Enhance instruction for English learners with digital resources	https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oese/oss/technicalassistance/elstar-user-guide-state-support-network.pdf
CommCorps YouthWorks Funding	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.	https://commcorp.org/program/youthworks/
Early Intervention Program for Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities	Assist with implementation of statewide systems of coordinated, comprehensive, multidisciplinary, interagency programs and extending early intervention programs	https://www2.ed.gov/fund/data/award/idea/index.html
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.	https://www.mass.gov/determination-of-need-don
USDA Community Connect Program	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 public safety benefits.	https://www.rd.usda.gov/community-connect

	Rural communities- extend access where broadband service is least likely commercially available	
USDA Telecommunications Infrastructure Loans & Loan Guarantees	This program provides financing for the construction, maintenance, improvement and expansion of telephone service and broadband in rural areas.	https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/telecommunications-programs/telecommunications-infrastructure-loans-loan-guarantees
High Cost Program (including Connect America Fund, Rural Digital Opportunity Fund and 5G Fund)	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.	https://www.usac.org/high-cost/
USDA 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.	https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/telecommunications-programs/distance-learning-telemedicine-grants
Massachusetts Community Health and Healthy Aging Funds - Determination of Need (DoN)	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	https://mahealthfunds.org/
Residential Internet Retrofit Program	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.	https://broadband.masstech.org/retrofit

Lead for America - America Connection Corps	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-onthe-ground" support at local host site organizations to help with expanding broadband awareness and digital adoption.	https://www.americanconnectioncorps.org/
Connect Humanity	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 development Promote a diverse broadband sector 1. Research on financing and operating models for community connectivity providers 2. Fund training to promote skills to build and maintain community broadband	https://connecthumanity.fund/
Centri-Tech foundation **Digital Integrators Pilot Program**	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.	https://www.digitalintegrators.org/
Bank foundations	Bank foundations can provide funding for the following digital equity-related progrograms and services: broadband, hardware/devices, tech support, librarian assiatance, digital skills	https://www.digitalequity.us/resources/cra-funding-guide-for-digital-equity/

Patrick J. McGovern Foundation	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.	https://www.mcgovern.org/grants/?exposed_mf_search&exposed_taxonomy_focusarea%5B0%5D=22&exposed_grant_approval_date_sort=date_desc&FZEWGNafiqRBuoy=0dfbn.rMQwW&iwNIhrR=VSjdZGI9sn5FUH&mb_nJCugrtsAIHc=%5BG3illaOL0vuBdj
Project UP by Comcast	Connectivity & adoption: Connecting people to the internet, technology, and resources needed to succeed in a digital world. Skills & creativity: Creating opportunities and new caeer 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.	https://corporate.comcast.com/impact/project-up
AARP's Community Challenge grants	Part of the nationwide AARP Livable Communities initiative that helps communities become great places to live for residents of all ages. The program is intended to help communities make immediate improvements and jump-start long-term progress in support of residents of all ages.	https://www.aarp.org/livable-communities/community-challenge/
Massachusetts Councils on Aging (MCOA) Service Incentive Grant	These funds will be used to provide direct grants to COAs under the following three categories (capacity building, innovations, and improving access and inclusion), and twelve project areas that have been approved by EOEA.	https://mcoaonline.org/fy25-fdp-grants/
Point 32Health Foundation funding	Grants are available to nonprofits doing work in aging that addresses equity, especially in communities most affected by systemic barriers.	https://www.point32healthfoundation.org/funding-grants/how-we-fund/

Digital Equity Assets

Organizations

Organization	Municipal, Regional, or Statewide	Website
Alliance for Digital Equity	Regional	https://sites.google.com/view/alliancefordigitalequity/home
Big Brothers Big Sisters Franklin County	Regional	https://bbbs-fc.org/
Black Economic Alliance Foundation	National	https://foundation.blackeconomicalliance.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 Compact Cabinet	state	https://www.mass.gov/orgs/community-compact-cabinet
Community Foundation of Western Massachusetts	Regional	https://communityfoundation.org/
CSforMA, Inc.	State	https://www.csforma.org/
Executive Office of Elder Affairs (EOEA)	State	https://www.mass.gov/orgs/executive-office-of-elder-affairs
Community Health Center of Franklin County	Regional	https://www.chcfc.org/
Franklin County Sheriff's Office	Regional	https://www.fcso-ma.us/

Franklin Regional Council of Governments	Regional	https://frcog.org/
Greenfield Community College	Regional	https://www.gcc.mass.edu/
LifePath	Regional	https://lifepathma.org/
MA Healthy Aging Collaborative	State	https://mahealthyagingcollaborative.org/
Mass Association for Community Action	State	https://www.masscap.org/
Massachusetts Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired	State	https://www.mabvi.org/
Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners	State	https://mblc.state.ma.us/
Massachusetts Business Alliance for Education	State	https://www.mbae.org/
Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education	State	https://www.doe.mass.edu/
Massachusetts Education and Career Opportunities, Inc. (MassEdCO)	State	https://www.massedco.org/
Massachusetts 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 (NECTA)	State	https://connectingne.com/
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/
T-Mobile	State	https://www.t-mobile.com/
United Way of the Franklin and Hampshire Region	Regional	https://uw-fh.org/
Verizon	National	https://www.verizon.com/
Xfinity/Comcast	National	https://www.xfinity.com/overview
Village Neighbors	Local/Regional	https://www.villageneighbors.org/content.aspx?page_id=0&club_id=845042

Municipal Libraries

Leverett	Leverett Library	https://leverettlibrary.org/
Shutesbury	MN Spear Memorial Library	https://sites.google.com/site/mnspearmemoriallibrary/

Municipal Senior Centers/Councils on Aging

Leverett	COA	https://leverett.ma.us/g/37/Council-on-Aging-COA
Shutesbury	COA	https://www.shutesbury.org/council_on_aging

Municipal Light Plants

Leverett	LeverettNet	https://www.leverett.ma.us/p/33/Leverett-Municipal-Light-Plant
Shutesbury	ShutesburyNet	https://www.shutesbury.org/broadband-home_transition

Leverett-Shutesbury Digital Equity and Internet Access Survey Data

Q1. Do you have internet service at your home using the town's network (provided by FiberSonic/South Hadley Electric (SHED)?		
	Response Percent	Response Number
Yes, through ShutesburyNET (Provided by FiberSonic/SHELD)	77.50%	372
Yes, through LeverettNET (Provided by FiberSonic/SHELD)	21.67%	104
Yes, through another provider	0.00%	0
Yes, through cell service	0.00%	0
No	0.83%	4

Q2. If you answered No to Question 1, please answer the following: What is the reason you don't have internet at your home? (check all that apply)		
	Response Percent	Response Number
Installation cost is too high	66.67%	2
Monthly cost is too high	33.33%	1
Costs for a device like a phone or a computer is too high	0.00%	0
I don't want the internet in my home	33.33%	1
I don't know how to use the internet	0.00%	0
I use another provider	0.00%	0
I only use cell service	0.00%	0

Q3. If you checked off "Installation Cost" and/or "Monthly Cost", please answer the following: Would you like assistance with installation costs or monthly service costs so you can get internet in your home?		
	Response Percent	Response Number
Yes, assistance with installation costs (please provide us your contact information below so we can follow up with you)	0.00%	0
Yes, assistance with monthly service costs (please provide us your contact information below so we can follow up with you)	0.00%	0

Q4. If you answered No to Question 1, please answer the following: If you do not have internet at home, where do you go to use internet most often?

	Response Percent	Response Number
Work	0.00%	0
School	0.00%	0
Our town library	33.33%	1
Other libraries	0.00%	0
A friend or family member's home	0.00%	0
Public place like cafe or restaurant	33.33%	1
I rely on cell service	0.00%	0
I don't use the internet	0.00%	0
Other (please specify)	66.67%	2

Q5. Is the speed of your internet adequate?

	Response Percent	Response Number
Yes, it is fast throughout my home.	66.81%	318
Mostly, but there are areas of my home where it is slow or certain devices where it doesn't work well.	21.85%	104
Mostly, but the speeds are inconsistent.	10.50%	50
No, it is slow overall.	0.84%	4

Q6. Is your internet service reliable?

	Response Percent	Response Number
Yes, no outages in the last year (Don't count those caused by overall power outages or storm damage)	71.52%	339
Yes, just one or two outages in the last year (Don't count those caused by overall power outages or storm damage)	26.79%	127
No, there have been more than two overall outages not caused by electric power outages/storm damage in the last year.	1.69%	8
No, it is slow overall.	0.84%	4

Q7. How difficult is it to afford your internet bill each month?		
	Response Percent	Response Number
Very easy	31.22%	148
Easy	29.54%	140
Neither easy nor difficult	31.22%	148
Difficult	6.12%	29
Very difficult	0.42%	2
Prefer not to answer	1.48%	7

Q8. Does everyone in your household have access to the computer devices they need to meet their everyday needs for internet use?		
	Response Percent	Response Number
Yes	97.89%	464
No, we don't have enough devices that work well for everyone in our household	2.11%	10

Q9. If you answered No: What is the main barrier to getting a device? (check all that apply)		
	Response Percent	Response Number
Cost	80.00%	8
Choice - we limit devices on purpose to curb or usage (or for other reasons)	0.00%	0
I/We don't have time to buy one	0.00%	0
I/We don't know what to buy	10.00%	1
Other (please specify)	10.00%	1

Q10. If you answered No to Question 8, are there computer or digital devices you wish you had?		
Answered	9	Answered
Skipped	474	Skipped

Q11. Does everyone in your household have access to the devices and services they need to access entertainment and support cultural literacy? (i.e. access to streaming services for movies, videos, and how-to's like Hoopla, Roku, Fire Sticks, portable DVD players, gaming systems, games, VR equipment, lendable computers or e-readers)		
	Response Percent	Response Number
Yes	95.10%	446
No	4.90%	23

Q12. If you answered No to Question 8, are there computer or digital devices you wish you had?		
Answered	105	Answered
Skipped	378	Skipped

Q13. How many people total (adults and children) in your household use the internet regularly?		
	Response Percent	Response Number
Zero	0.42%	2
One	13.56%	64
Two	50.42%	238
Three	14.41%	68
Four	14.41%	68
Five	5.51%	26
Six	0.85%	4
Seven	0.42%	2
Eight	0.00%	0
Nine	0.00%	0
Ten	0.00%	0

Q14. How many children do you have in your home under 18?		
	Response Percent	Response Number
Zero	75.27%	347
One	10.63%	49
Two	11.06%	51
Three	2.39%	11
Four	0.22%	1
Five	0.43%	2
Six	0.00%	0
Seven	0.00%	0
Eight	0.00%	0

Q15. Do you still have a home phone number?		
	Response Percent	Response Number
Yes, I/we still have a landline through Verizon.	17.74%	83
Yes, I/we still have a landline through ShutesburyNet or LeverettNet (SHELD).	54.27%	254
No, I/we only use mobile phones for calling	27.99%	131

Q16. Is there cell service at your home? (if there was no internet would you be able to make and receive calls using the cell phone network only?)

	Response Percent	Response Number
Yes, there is a strong cell signal.	25.43%	119
Yes, but it is a weak signal where calls only go through sometimes or we can only send texts, not voice calls.	45.73%	214
There is no cell service.	28.85%	135

Q17. Which of these tasks do you know how to do on your router? (please answer all that apply)

	Response Percent	Response Number
None, I don't access the router's software or know what this is	54.90%	252
Access router options and settings interface	37.69%	173
Change router password	41.83%	192
Change SSID name (network name)	32.24%	148
Set up parental controls	21.35%	98
Set up device prioritization	18.95%	87

Q18. Do you wish that you could call up support and they could reset your network password, help with device connections and fix network issues remotely?

(Currently tech support can't assist remotely with any router issues so they have to talk you through how to fix things on your own)

	Response Percent	Response Number
Yes, I'd like more enhanced help to fix network issues 24/7.	43.38%	200
No, what we have is fine.	56.62%	261

Q19. If you answered Yes: How much more per month would you be willing to pay for 24/7 enhanced tech support?

	Response Percent	Response Number
$5	10.00%	37
$4	2.16%	8
$3	10.27%	38
$2	12.43%	46
None. I'd prefer to not to have it if it raises costs.	65.14%	241

Q20. If you have internet problems with devices in your home such as your smart phones, printers, tablets and computers, how confident are you that you can fix them?		
	Response Percent	Response Number
Very confident	19.31%	89
Confident	23.43%	108
Somewhat confident	38.61%	178
Not at all confident	18.66%	86

Q21. If you've contacted tech support for help, have you been satisfied with the help you received?		
	Response Percent	Response Number
Yes, it was excellent.	19.74%	90
Yes, it was adequate.	20.61%	94
No, it was not satisfactory	6.36%	29
I've never contacted support or haven't contacted support in a long time.	53.29%	243

Q22. If you answered No: How could tech support be improved? (Please check all that apply)		
	Response Percent	Response Number
I want the tech support people to be able to do more remotely instead of talking me through the diagnostics and actions.	59.18%	87
I want someone just to come to my house that same day and fix the problem without having to stay on the phone.	20.41%	30
I need more help overall with the technology in my home (not necessarily just the internet) than what any support offers.	12.93%	19
Other (please specify)	27.21%	40

Q23. What are your biggest concerns about safety on the internet? (Please check all that apply)

	Response Percent	Response Number
Personal accounts getting hacked	89.49%	400
Being scammed	43.40%	194
My family accessing inappropriate websites	9.17%	41
Other (please specify)	6.49%	29

Q24. How likely would you be to attend a 45 minute online class to learn more about how to stay safe on the internet? (No cost)

	Response Percent	Response Number
Definitely! I'd love to do a class like that	10.35%	47
Probably	21.15%	96
Maybe	21.15%	96
Probably not	27.31%	124
Definitely not	20.04%	91

Q25. Do you use the town website (either www.leverett.ma.us for Leverett or https://www.shutesbury.org/ for Shutesbury) to access information about the town?

	Response Percent	Response Number
Yes	93.63%	426
No	6.37%	29

Q26. If you answered Yes, what do you use the town website for?

	Response Percent	Response Number
Committee meeting agendas and/or minutes	30.91%	119
Historical records	0.52%	2
Events information	15.84%	61
Contact information for different town departments	52.73%	203
Other (include anything from above options you were not able to click)		184

Q27. Do you find the town's website easy to use?

	Response Percent	Response Number
Yes	82.08%	371
No	12.39%	56
I don't use the town's website	5.53%	25

Q28. Do you have ideas how the town website could be improved?

Answered	105	Answered
Skipped	378	Skipped

Q29. Do you participate in municipal meetings remotely?

	Response Percent	Response Number
Yes	38.36%	173
No	61.64%	278

Q30. If you answered No, what prevents you from joining meetings online?

	Response Percent	Response Number
Can't hear conversation	5.83%	13
Can't see participants	3.14%	7
Poor connection	1.35%	3
Don't know how to access the meeting	19.73%	44
Other (please specify)	75.78%	169

Q31. What do you think would be the best use of grant funds if we are awarded money to improve broadband equity and access in our town? (Choose up to two)		
	Response Percent	Response Number
New household router upgrades townwide	38.16%	166
Upgrades to computers and technology at town library	19.77%	86
Educational seminars about online safety and optimizing internet use for education, healthcare, and remote work	12.18%	53
Device upgrades for low-income households	36.55%	159
Increased subsidies to install broadband for unconnected households	44.14%	192
A more affordable way to get in-person technical help with devices, setup and connectivity in my home.	17.01%	74
Update our Town's website	10.80%	47
Purchase of remote meeting equipment for Town Hall and/or other municipal meeting sites	21.15%	92
Other (please specify)	10.11%	44

Q32. Is there anything else you want the town to know about internet usage or internet concerns?		
Answered	122	Answered
Skipped	361	Skipped