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at the MassTech
Collaborative

Municipal Digital Equity Plan

Prepared for the Town of Somerset, MA

January 2025

Columbia Telecommunications Corporation

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1 Executive summary

The Town of Somerset commissioned CTC Technology & Energy (CTC) to engage in a study to document gaps in digital equity—a condition in which all residents have access to adequate broadband service and devices and possess the skills to use these resources—and develop strategies to bridge these gaps.

This report presents findings of significant digital equity gaps in Somerset, offers recommendations for how the Town can address these gaps, and discusses how other municipalities have recently implemented state-funded programs and services to address gaps in those municipalities.

This study was funded by the Massachusetts Broadband Institute (MBI) at the MassTech Collaborative under its Municipal Digital Equity Planning Program. Funding came from State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds provided under the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA). This report may also be considered by MBI as it develops strategies for addressing digital equity gaps under the Massachusetts State Digital Equity Plan.[1]

1.1 Project overview

This report presents findings (see Section 1.2) and recommendations (see Section 2.3.4) informed by the following tasks CTC performed over a six-month period, including:

- Analyzing the availability of broadband service, level of competition, and broadband pricing in Somerset (see Section 5).
- Determining levels of enrollment in the now-defunct Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP), which offered a $30 monthly subsidy toward broadband bills until earlier this year and estimating of the gap in utilization by eligible households (see Section 5.3).
- Conducting interviews with stakeholders from five entities over the course of several meetings to further illuminate gaps in affordability, skills, and devices; existence of local programs; and the ability of stakeholders to start or expand those programs to fill the

[1] The Digital Equity Act is a $2.75 billion federal program that, in part, funds state planning processes to establish a vision for digital equity that will guide overarching strategies and goals. The first draft of MBI's "Massachusetts State Digital Equity Plan" (SDEP) was released for public comment on November 13, 2023, and can be viewed here: https://broadband.masstech.org/news/mass-broadband-institute-announces-municipal-digital-equity-planning-program-participants. The SDEP report was in the process of being finalized for submission to the NTIA at the time this report was provided to the Town.

identified gaps. See Section 6 for a report on the stakeholder meetings and Appendix B for the stakeholder questionnaire.

- Promoting MBI's statewide residential digital equity survey (see Appendix A) and reporting on Somerset-specific findings on topics including broadband utilization, affordability, skills, device access, and related topics (see Section 5 below).
- Developing recommendations on strategies and activities designed to address gaps using potentially available funding, potentially augmented by local funds (see Section 3).
- Tracking how other towns and cities have used funds from MBI's Implementation Grant Program to execute programs in digital literacy, device distribution, education, outreach and adoption, and public space improvements and Wi-Fi availability in apartments (see Section 4).
- Outlining models for how, in the absence of the ACP, the Town can consider helping residents in connecting to broadband service with low-cost and any future subsidy programs. This includes opportunities for single-payer broadband arrangements with internet service providers, and promotion of low-cost broadband programs offered by local providers (see Section 7).

1.2 Key findings

The following are key findings of this report. At the highest level, digital equity gaps in Somerset are not rooted in a lack of available infrastructure; rather, they are about the affordability of the services, uptake in use of available broadband subsidy programs, skills in using broadband, access to adequate devices, and knowledge of online privacy and security best practices.

1.2.1 Comcast provides nearly ubiquitous residential broadband service at speeds above 100/20 Mbps, but no residential competition from other wired high-speed internet service providers (ISPs) exists in Somerset.

Comcast offers customers in Somerset a minimum of 300/20 Mbps[2], and every address can receive a maximum speed of 1200/40 Mbps—with some (16.7 percent of residential locations) that receive 2000/200 Mbps. However, no locations in Somerset have more than one choice of

[2] Megabits per second (Mbps) is a unit of measurement for data transfer rates and broadband speeds. 100/20 Mbps refers to service speeds of at least 100 Mbps download and 20 Mbps upload, the federal threshold for a location to be considered "served." Locations able to receive 25/3 or more, but less than 100/20, are considered "underserved" and locations unable to get 25/3 are considered "unserved."

high-speed wired service and there are no locations in the Town that have access to residential fiber services. (Many do have access to a fixed-wireless service, as noted in the next section.) This lack of competition is a challenge, as the non-discounted broadband tiers from Comcast may present a cost burden to some residents. However, Comcast's low-cost broadband program, Internet Essentials, offers internet to qualifying customers for as low as $9.94 per month (see Table 6 for more information on this program).

Comcast has been making network upgrades in some parts of town, resulting in 2000/200 Mbps service, the highest tier of Comcast's residential cable internet service. This reflects investments by Comcast in a technology standard known as DOCSIS 4.0, which enables far faster upload speeds.

1.2.2 Many residents have access to fixed wireless services, but speeds vary greatly

T-Mobile, and to a lesser extent Verizon and AT&T, offer fixed wireless home services (leveraging the networks previously used only for mobile service) to most locations in Somerset, but relatively few can obtain broadband-level speeds of at least 100/20 Mbps through these services. Still, these services provide a relatively affordable alternative to Comcast, but with the significant caveat that performance of these networks is dependent on individual subscribers' distance from wireless facilities, and the data may be cut (or "throttled") by these providers during times of mobile network congestion. FCC data show that 6,225 locations in Somerset have access to licensed fixed wireless services, with 1,771 being able to receive up to 10/1 Mbps, 2,257 locations receiving up to 50/4 Mbps, and 2,197 locations able to receive speeds of 100/20 Mbps or higher. These licensed fixed wireless services also require a bundled mobile plan and phone as an additional cost.

1.2.3 Somerset exceeds state and nationwide rates of home internet subscription, but low-income households experience larger gaps.

According to American Community Survey (ACS) data, 81 percent of households in the Town subscribe to residential internet services via wireline technology, which is higher than the state figure of 80.4 percent and the national figure of 73.3 percent. However, among households without wired broadband services, 67.4 percent earn less than $75,000 annually. This figure points to a need for programs to connect low-income households with programs that provide discounts or subsidies for broadband subscriptions.

1.2.4 ACS data show that approximately one in six Somerset residents do not own a laptop or desktop computer.

ACS data show that 83.6 percent of households in Somerset own a desktop or a laptop, which is slightly higher than the state figure of 82.8 percent and the national figure of 79.3 percent, but still points to gaps that could be addressed through device provision programs, subsidies, and

partnerships with nonprofits in this space. The 16.4 percent of households in Somerset lacking a laptop or desktop may be relying on smartphones to access the internet.

1.2.5 Approximately 38.7 percent of households that were potentially eligible for the FCC's Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) were enrolled by the end of the program.

All ISPs in Somerset participated in the ACP, either directly or through an affiliate. The federal ACP program paid a $30 monthly subsidy for broadband service for eligible low-income households. As of January 31, 2024, FCC data indicate that 478 households in Somerset were receiving the ACP subsidy—or 38.7 percent of the estimated 1,235 households eligible for the program.[3] This enrollment rate had steadily increased in the last year of the ACP—enrollment rates for eligible households were as low as 25.5 percent in January 2023 and had jumped to 32.3 percent in June 2023. This may reflect positive results of efforts by local entities to boost awareness and participation when the program was still active. Nevertheless, the data show that there is room for further improvement to connect residents to available programs (which include low-cost programs called Internet Essentials[4] from Comcast and Verizon Forward[5] from Verizon's fixed wireless service), and any future subsidies that may become available.

1.2.6 Somerset respondents to the MBI survey who had household income of less than $60,000 reported significantly lower confidence in performing common online tasks

With respect to skills, 96 percent of respondents with household income above $60,000 reported that general internet searching was "easy," yet just 72 percent of the respondents from lower income households said so. Similarly, 75 percent of respondents with income above $60,000 found searching and applying for benefits or resources online to be "easy," but only 56 percent of their counterparts felt the same. This points to the need for more digital literacy class opportunities for low-income households in Somerset, so that people seeking skills training can receive this education and support.

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[3] Estimates are based on 2022 American Community Survey reported data on household income, food stamp recipiency, Medicaid recipiency, supplemental security income, and public assistance income.
[4] "Internet Essentials," Comcast Xfinity, https://www.xfinity.com/learn/internet-service/internet-essentials.
[5] "Verizon Forward," Verizon, https://www.verizon.com/discounts/verizon-forward/?cmp=KNC_H_P_COE_GAW_FiOS_99_99_BP-9122&abr=CMOGBRPLUS&c=A005126&gad_source=1&gclid=EAIaIQobChMIhoXk08DKiAMVpwGtBh1igA4lEAAYASABEgK8nfD_BwE&gclsrc=aw.ds.

1.2.7 Low-income residents report significant difficulty in paying their monthly broadband bills, pointing to the need for wider enrollment in subsidy and low-cost programs

Paying monthly broadband bills is a challenge for low-income Somerset residents. The average monthly cost of home internet service for all Somerset residents who participated in the MBI survey is $141 for bundled service, and $102 for unbundled service (see Section 8). Of respondents from households with income lower than $60,000 per year, 69 percent said it was somewhat hard or very hard to pay their internet bill each month, compared to 40 percent of respondents with household income of more than $60,000 per year. Given that Somerset's broadband providers offer low-cost internet options like Comcast's Internet Essentials and Verizon's Forward program, this finding underscores the need for wider enrollment support in these programs among low-income residents.

1.2.8 Across the income spectrum, Somerset residents are very concerned about privacy and security online

Somerset residents who participated in the MBI residential survey expressed deep concerns about online safety and privacy, and these sentiments held across the income spectrum. Respondents are most concerned about their data being stolen or used without their consent—a concern cited by 92 percent of respondents. Additionally, 69 percent are most concerned that they or a loved one could get scammed or tricked, and 58 percent are most concerned about being tracked or surveilled. This suggests a need for skills training and education generally in the community.

2 Digital equity funding landscape

To implement strategies recommended in this report, the Town and its stakeholders can potentially leverage certain funding sources.

2.1 American Rescue Plan Act and Digital Equity Act

This subsection provides general background on the major funding sources. The next two subsections provide detail on what is available to Somerset.

The American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), established in 2021, gave State and Local Fiscal Recovery funds to both the State of Massachusetts and directly to local jurisdictions. Through MBI, the state has allocated $75 million in state ARPA funding to digital equity and directed $50 million to grants through its Broadband Innovation Fund. This fund supports grants under the Digital Equity Partnerships Program[6] and the Municipal Digital Equity Planning Program (which funded the development of this municipal report).[7]

Additionally, the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) offered grant programs for promoting digital equity, supporting digital inclusion activities, and building capacity for state-led efforts to increase adoption of broadband by their residents through the Digital Equity Act of 2021.[8] The bill has allocated $60 million for planning grants for states, territories, and Tribal governments to develop State Digital Equity Plans. MBI is the lead agency for Massachusetts and was responsible for conducting the planning process and drafting the state Plan with a $1 million federal grant under this program. The Plan was submitted to NTIA at the end of 2023.

The state digital equity plans set the stage for the $1.44 billion Digital Equity Capacity Building Grant program. The Capacity Grant program opened in early 2024 and is being reviewed on a rolling basis, allocating funding over the course of several years. Under this program, states apply for funding to support the implementation of their digital equity plans. States receive funding based on a legislatively mandated allocation formula. Once received, states have five years to use this federal funding to develop their own digital inclusion projects, including competitive grant programs for activities by state agencies, local governments, non-profits, and others.

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[6] "Digital Equity Partnerships Program," MassTech, www.broadband.masstech.org/partnerships.
[7] "Municipal Digital Equity Planning Program," MassTech, www.broadband.masstech.org/municipal.
[8] "Digital Equity Act of 2021," Congress.gov, https://www.congress.gov/index.php/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/1841.

Following the Capacity Grant program, NTIA implemented the $1.25 billion Digital Equity Competitive Grant program. This direct funding program awards individual grants to eligible entities, including local governments, nonprofits, and community anchor institutions. Funding will support programs that address the affordability of services and devices, provide education and tools to increase privacy and cybersecurity while online, develop digital literacy and technical skills for personal and professional growth, and provide technical support and training for repair and updates to devices. (Applications for this program were due on September 23, 2024, and the awards are likely to be announced by NTIA in early 2025.)

2.2 MBI-funded opportunities

Two groups of MBI funded programs provide opportunities for the Town of Somerset.

2.2.1 MBI's Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Program has launched and is available to municipalities for amounts up to $100,000

Following the Digital Equity Planning Program through ARPA, MBI launched its direct grant program—the Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Program (MDEIP)—for municipalities to access funds to implement programs proposed through this and similar reports.[9] The Town of Somerset can start its application for these funds immediately, using this report and ongoing conversations with local organizations as a guide.

The one-time grant of up to $100,000 is intended to help municipalities make local digital equity investments and execute projects that will increase access, adoption, and usage of the internet.[10] Applications are reviewed by MBI on a rolling basis (see Section 4 for examples of implementation projects in other municipalities).

CTC is ready to assist the Town in the process of applying for an implementation grant at no cost to the Town; MBI has already pre-approved covering the cost of this assistance.

2.2.2 MBI's Digital Equity Partnerships Program supports nine organizations across the states, some of which can assist the Town of Somerset

MBI's Broadband Innovation Fund addresses immediate and ongoing digital equity needs and has awarded nine organizations across the state with funding necessary to implement various initiatives. Some of these efforts can indirectly benefit the Town of Somerset, as noted below.

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[9] Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Program, MBI Massachusetts Broadband Institute, https://broadband.masstech.org/digital-equity-implementation

[10] "Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Program", MBI, https://broadband.masstech.org/digital-equity-implementation.

In September 2022, MBI issued an RFP soliciting partnerships with interested Regional Planning Agencies, Philanthropic Foundations, public and nonprofit service providers and other organizations across the state to facilitate the implementation of programs that address six key areas of digital equity:

1. digital literacy,
2. Wi-Fi access,
3. public space modernization,
4. connectivity for economic hardship,
5. device distribution and refurbishment, and
6. education, outreach, and adoption.

In 2023, MBI announced it was awarding funds through the Broadband Innovation Fund to nine partners: AgeSpan, Baystate Health, City of Boston, Tech Goes Home, Massachusetts League of Community Health Centers, Metropolitan Area Planning Council, Metro North Workforce Investment Board, UMass Lowell, and Vinfen. Each partner has a defined scope of services and their programs will be in operation through June 30, 2026. To varying degrees, the Town of Somerset or its residents can benefit from at least five these programs, either directly or indirectly, as noted in the following subsections.

2.2.2.1 AgeSpan

AgeSpan is a statewide organization supporting more than 230 age- and dementia-friendly communities, including Somerset. (Age-and dementia friendly communities are municipalities that have infrastructure, programs, and policies geared to assist older people or people with dementia. Somerset is included on the state's list of 230 such municipalities.[11])

AgeSpan supports MBI as part of the Statewide Digital Equity Plan Working Group and collaborates with various partners to promote inclusion of older adults in state and local digital equity planning and programs, working to connect aging services (councils on aging, affordable senior housing, aging service access points) to other partners doing this work including colleges, libraries, and housing partners.[12]

Areas of focus for this program are training services to help blind and visually impaired individuals, educational programs to protect against online fraud online, and helping boost

[11] "Examples of age- and dementia friendly community characteristics," Mass.gov, https://www.mass.gov/info-details/examples-of-age-and-dementia-friendly-community-characteristics.
[12] "About Us," AgeSpan, https://agespan.org/about-us/.

enrollment in low-cost broadband programs. The eight counties involved in this program include Bristol County.[13]

James Fuccione, the Senior Director of the Massachusetts Healthy Aging Collaborative (a co-lead to the AgeSpan Digital Equity Partnerships grant), stated that he and his team can assist Somerset's Council on Aging if it is interested in establishing new digital access programming. One model is a Digital Access Program that offers a free tablet device, training on how to operate the device, and free data plans for individuals without broadband access in their home for up to a year. More details on this program, which is offered on the North Shore, can be found at this link. Although the model program is not available to Somerset residents, AgeSpan can provide information and resources to assist Somerset's Council on Aging if it wants to develop similar programming in town.

2.2.2.2 Vinfen

In April 2023, Vinfen--on behalf of a group of Massachusetts health and human services providers serving people with disabilities–and other entities comprising the Human Services Alliance for Digital Equity,[14] received $4.3 million to increase digital inclusion among low-income people with physical disabilities, intellectual and developmental disabilities, and serious mental health conditions. The alliance deploys 15 technology navigators to help people obtain digital devices, develop digital skills, and enroll in low-cost broadband programs. The technology navigators collaborate with people served in their homes and in service settings. Individuals are primarily served through a closed referral system. Still, the alliance can offer materials and resources to interested municipalities seeking information for digital inclusion in telehealth for individuals with disabilities. In addition, the Town of Somerset can contact the MBI Partnerships Program lead at Vinfen, Jessie Wolfe, for more information on how Somerset residents with physical, intellectual or developmental disabilities can begin receiving telehealth services from participating organizations of the Alliance.

[13] "Healey-Driscoll Administration Awards $20 Million to Boost Digital Equity," MBI, https://broadband.masstech.org/news/healey-driscoll-administration-awards-20-million-boost-digital-equity.

[14] Organizations that comprise the Alliance are: Advocates, Behavioral Health Network, Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, Boston Center for Independent Living, Clinical Support Options, Open Sky, Riverside Community Care, and Vinfen.

2.2.2.3 Metropolitan Area Planning Council

MBI has partnered with the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC), to award $5.6 million for the Apartment Wi-Fi program.

This program allows MAPC to provide procurement support, capital expense funding, and funding for the first year of operating expenses to provide free Wi-Fi internet access to residents living in roughly 2,400 public and affordable housing units in Massachusetts. The effort targets residents most likely to face barriers to connectivity—those experiencing housing insecurity who have access to broadband but cannot afford it.[15] Details by municipality are yet to be determined.

If Somerset's housing authority wishes to consider applying for this program it can expressing interest at this link.

2.2.2.4 Mass League of Community Health Centers

The Mass League is a recipient of MBI's Digital Equity Partnership grant, using its funding to help hire and staff a digital navigator at 12 Community Health Centers across the Commonwealth. The navigators assist the health center patients with low-cost internet enrollment. Each health center also chose what digital health tools they would focus on, which could be telehealth, remote patient monitoring, or enrollment in patient portals with the goal that if patients are digitally engaged in their care, they will have healthier outcomes.

Mass League has an established digital navigation program under the FQHC (federally-qualified health center) Telehealth Consortium (FQHC Telehealth Consortium – Bridging the Health Equity Divide), which was founded during the pandemic as a partnership between C3 ACO and the Mass League. Community Health Centers serve the most underserved and diverse populations in healthcare, so the services are provided by and at the health centers for their patients in need.

Although Somerset does not have a Community Health Center, the neighboring City of Fall River has the SSTAR Family Health Center that participates in the FQHC Telehealth Consortium's digital navigation program. Community health centers often serve residents beyond the municipality in which the health center is located. As such, residents of Somerset who use this health center can receive access to these digital navigation services.

[15] "Smart Growth and Regional Collaboration: Apartment Wi-Fi," MAPC, https://www.mapc.org/our-work/expertise/digital-equity/apartment-wi-fi/.

2.2.2.5 Tech Goes Home

Tech Goes Home's goal is to support residents in Massachusetts to receive access to the digital tools, skills, and connectivity they need to thrive. In April 2023 it was announced that Tech Goes Home would be receiving a grant of $4.5 million to address four critical areas to close the digital divide:

1. Connectivity for economic hardship,
2. Digital literacy,
3. Device distribution and refurbishment, and
4. Education, outreach, and engagement.

Through MBI's Partnership Program, local entities in Gateway Cities have partnered with Tech Goes Home to advance digital education and device gaps by providing digital tools, skills, and connectivity necessary to thrive.

Although Somerset is not a Gateway City, entities in Town that are interested in offering digital literacy education and device distribution programs can still partner with Tech Goes Home directly. To get started on this process, interested local entities can complete this partnership inquiry form.[16]

2.2.2.6 City of Boston

The City of Boston was awarded $5 million in grant funding directed to the Boston Housing Authority to support residents seeking affordable and dependable internet connectivity, and to other community organizations that support telehealth programs in Boston and establish workforce development programs through refurbishing distributed devices. A portion of this grant will also go toward the expansion of the City's publicly accessible Wicked Free Wi-Fi network, and to expand the City's Digital Equity Fund.[17]

2.2.2.7 Metro North Workforce Investment Board

The Metro North Workforce Investment Board received an award of $4.1 million to expand its digital equity initiatives by hiring and training 32 digital navigators and provide employment and career counseling, provide 1,500 refurbished laptops, 300 hotspots, and provide internet access

[16] "Partnerships," Tech Goes Home, https://www.techgoeshome.org/becoming-a-tgh-site.
[17] "$5 Million in New Grant Funding to Expand Digital Equity," MBI, https://broadband.masstech.org/news/5-million-new-grant-funding-expand-digital-equity.

and IT support to recipients.[18] Towns and Cities covered in this programs service area are in Gateway Cities.

2.2.2.8 UMass Lowell

A $4 million grant was awarded to UMass Lowell to lead a digital equity initiative serving Gateway Cities on the North Shore. Partnering with other higher education community entities, UMass Lowell is providing technical skills, support and training for student digital navigators, and project management resources. Through this grant, UMass Lowell will also be improving multiple public facilities with broadband service, creating a multi-tiered digital literacy and navigation initiative that establishes a regional help desk at UMass Lowell and advances new digital literacy programs, distributing 1,200 new or refurbished devices, and expanding low-cost broadband outreach and adoption programs at six community-based organizations.[19]

2.3 Four other funding opportunities are potentially available to the Town of Somerset

2.3.1 MBI's Residential Retrofit Program

The Residential Retrofit program deploys fiber at approximately 22,000 public and affordable housing properties to replace deficient wiring and infrastructure through grants to qualified ISPs who will install, own, and maintain equipment.[20] This program is operated by MBI using Capital Projects Fund money.

Similar to MAPC's Apartment Wi-Fi program application, Somerset's housing authority can apply for this program online by expressing interest at this link.

2.3.2 Bristol Elder Services

Bristol Elder Services (BES) operates a network of in-home support to seniors and supports local Councils on Aging with the goal of enhancing the life of elderly people, individuals with disabilities, and their families in Bristol County.[21] BES operates a grant that entities can apply for to support programming to enhance the lives of seniors. This grant is supported by federal Title III funds under the Older Americans Act, which allows states to offer grants to advocate for and

[18] "Healey-Driscoll Administration Awards $20 Million to Boost Digital Equity," MBI, https://broadband.masstech.org/news/healey-driscoll-administration-awards-20-million-boost-digital-equity.
[19] "Healey-Driscoll Administration Awards $20 Million to Boost Digital Equity," MBI, https://broadband.masstech.org/news/healey-driscoll-administration-awards-20-million-boost-digital-equity.
[20] "Residential Retrofit Program," MBI, https://broadband.masstech.org/retrofit.
[21] "About Us," Bristol Elder Services, https://www.bristolelder.org/about-us/.

develop programs in nutrition, supportive services, caregiving, and preventative services for individuals aged 60 and over.[22] Past awardees used these funds to develop virtual and in-person digital literacy classes on topics that include "how to operate a smartphone," and telehealth education (how to book appointments online, how to attend a virtual appointment, and how to renew subscriptions online), and received awards between $5,000 and $10,000.

The next application window for this grant opens in March 2025 and will close at the end of May 2025. A representative at Bristol Elder Services said the organization will circulate the details of this grant program (including maximum award amounts and the application window) to all Council on Aging and senior services organizations in Bristol County in February of 2025.

2.3.3 Municipal Fiber Grant

The MA Division of Local Services is offering municipalities with the opportunity to apply for the Municipal Fiber Grant program, which offers assistance for the construction of municipally-owned fiber networks. Through this grant, the MA Division of Local Services hopes for municipalities to achieve certain goals of improving operations or improving disaster recovery and resiliency. Examples of this may include prevention of cyber security risks in local government, providing room for growth in internet bandwidth as municipalities grow, and supporting various infrastructure that rely on dependable technology for municipal needs including public safety, radio, and emergency operations centers.[23]

All fiber built must be owned by the municipality, and awards are up to $250,000 per individual municipality, or $500,000 for multi-jurisdictional municipalities. The next grant window opens on March 10, 2025, and will close on April 10, 2025.[24]

2.3.4 The Federal Communications Commission's E-Rate program can bring discounted services to schools and libraries in the area

The Federal Communications Commission's E-Rate program was created in 1996 to enhance access to advanced telecommunications and information services for all public and nonprofit elementary and secondary school classrooms and libraries.[25] E-Rate is one of four programs

[22] "Older Americans Act: Overview and Funding," Congressional Research Service, https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R43414.
[23] "About the Municipal Fiber Grant Program," Mass.gov, https://www.mass.gov/info-details/about-the-municipal-fiber-grant-program.
[24] "Municipal Fiber Grant Program FAQ," Mass.gov, https://www.mass.gov/info-details/municipal-fiber-grant-program-faq#what-kind-of-projects-are-eligible?-.
[25] Universal Service Administrative Co., E-Rate, https://www.usac.org/e-rate/

comprising the Universal Service Fund (USF) and is funded by fees paid by telecommunications companies to fulfill the Congressional goals of universal service.

Currently, E-Rate is a $4.27 billion federal funding program managed by the Universal Service Administrative Company (USAC) that approves and provides subsidy discounts for telecommunications and information services for schools and libraries. In late 2023, the FCC made the latest addition to the list of eligible services by approving subsidies for Wi-Fi services on school buses as an eligible program expense to help close the "homework gap" for students with limited broadband access at home.

Eligible schools and libraries identify goods or services they need and submit a request for competitive bids to USAC, which then posts these requests on its website for vendors to bid on. After reviewing the vendors' bids, the school or library selects the most cost-effective eligible products and services using price as the primary factor. It then applies to USAC for approval for the desired purchases.

Funds are awarded as discounts ranging from 20 to 90 percent of the eligible costs and discount levels are based on the poverty level of the schools. Rural schools and libraries may also receive a higher discount. Recipients must pay a portion of the service costs. Often, schools and libraries will form consortia to centralize and manage the E-Rate application, reporting, and budgeting processes within a central point of contact.[26]

Eligible schools and libraries in Massachusetts received $10.1 million in E-rate disbursements in 2023.[27] The Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners[28] tracks E-Rate participation by libraries and library networks and provides information and resources about the program. The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's Office of Digital Learning provides similar outreach and education for schools.[29] While Massachusetts does not manage a state-wide consortium, several of the State's library networks and school districts participate in E-Rate.

[26] Universal Service Administrative Co., E-Rate, Consortia, https://www.usac.org/e-rate/applicant-process/before-you-begin/consortia/
[27] Universal Service Administrative Co., E-Rate FRN Status Tool FY2016+, https://opendata.usac.org/E-Rate/E-Rate-FRN-Status-Tool-FY2016-/8xzh-ytkh.
[28] E-rate in Massachusetts Libraries, https://mblc.state.ma.us/programs-and-support/e-rate/index.php.
[29] Technology Planning and Sustainability, E-Rate, https://www.doe.mass.edu/odl/planning-funding/E-rate/.

A USAC customer service representative stated that the E-Rate program application window will open in late November or early December 2024. Interested entities should monitor USAC's E-Rate webpage for the upcoming application window announcement.

3 Recommendations

CTC recommends the Town, and its stakeholders explore the following strategies and pursue available funding sources to help close digital equity gaps in Somerset. Most recommendations involve work that established, proven, and trusted community partners could perform.

Table 1 and the following subsections summarize the major recommendations of this report. The first recommendation—for setting up an annual or biannual Town-wide digital equity meeting—would create an entity within Somerset comprised of the Town and its departments, local stakeholders, and any other entities. Taken together they would be tasked with facilitating coordination, setting priorities, and making funding recommendations.

Table 1: Summary of recommendations

Recommendation	Access and affordability	Devices	Skills	Privacy/ security	Potential annual cost
Convene local entities annually or biannually to harmonize digital equity efforts and support outreach to funders	X	X	X	X	N/A
Consider setting up a modest Town grant fund to fill small gaps and reduce reliance on uncertain or finite state or federal funding streams	X	X	X	X	$25,000
Consider funding a Town Digital Navigator to serve the Somerset Public Schools/Somerset Berkley Regional School District, Somerset Public Library, Council on Aging, Veterans Services, and Housing Authority	X		X	X	$80,000
Consider applying for Bristol Elderly Services grant in March 2025 to help fund one digital navigator	X		X		N/A
Seek technical support from Vinfen and AgeSpan for local entities interested in developing	X	X	X	X	N/A

Recommendation	Access and affordability	Devices	Skills	Privacy/ security	Potential annual cost
device access and digital navigation programs					
Establish partnership between the Somerset Berkely Regional School District and Somerset Public Library so that interested students can provide tech support at the library and receive volunteer hours	X		X		$10,000 for promotional materials and support training of volunteers at library and schools
Purchase three Wi-Fi access points for Somerset Public Library to strengthen internet connections in dead zones	X				$9,000 ($3,000 per access point)
Consider pursuing MAPC's Apartment Wi-Fi program and MBI's Residential Retrofit program for public and affordable housing properties	X				No cost for construction and first year of operations; Town must cover operating costs for subsequent years
Explore a partnership between the Council on Aging, the Housing Authority, and the library with Tech Goes Home to ensure those who want a computer can obtain one	X	X	X	X	$1,500 per learner
Pursue cybersecurity programming/partnership opportunities, and expand existing cybersecurity efforts at Somerset Public Schools for staff, and extend to students				X	Expand free KnowBe4 cybersecurity training. Pursuing free state cybersecurity programs[30] for other entities

[30] "About the Municipal Cybersecurity Awareness Grant Program," Mass.gov, https://www.mass.gov/info-details/about-the-municipal-cybersecurity-awareness-grant-program#how-to-apply.

Recommendation	Access and affordability	Devices	Skills	Privacy/ security	Potential annual cost
Explore establishing digital skills programs at Somerset Access Television	X		X		$10,000

3.1 Convene stakeholders annually or biannually to harmonize local digital equity efforts and support outreach to funders

Somerset's government is well suited to implementing some solutions, especially with respect to infrastructure, staffing, and programs, but it cannot address all challenges related to digital equity alone: connecting residents with subsidy programs, providing devices, assisting with device maintenance and updates, and helping individuals develop better computer skills.

Given these considerations, an important role the Town of Somerset could play is in organizing an annual or twice-annual meeting to convene the organizations already providing, planning to provide, or willing to contribute services in Somerset, including all stakeholders engaged in Section 6 of this report. An initial task would be to determine what Town staff position can take on the role of evaluating and operationalizing recommendations that the Town is able to fund or implement. This role could also be led by a Town Digital Navigator if the Town funds this staff position as detailed in recommendation 3.3.

Entities including the Council on Aging, Somerset Public Schools, Somerset Public Library, the Housing Authority, the Veterans Services Office, and others (some of which cover overlapping populations) should consider convening with the Town to ensure that digital equity efforts are coordinated. A meeting annually or biannually—with the structure to encourage attendees to distribute timely and relevant information and opportunities throughout the rest of the year—would help inform a holistic programmatic strategy to make recommendations to the Town, to funders, to potential philanthropies, and for future grant opportunities by the state.

These meetings could position the Town to better understand the existing relationships between local organizations, track progress of local initiatives, and serve as a liaison and communications channel with MBI and other state and federal agencies working on digital equity issues. Working with MBI and other larger regional entities, the Town could also expand partnerships across communities with housing authorities, regional library groups, senior groups, and other social service and public health entities to further improve coordination.

3.2 Consider setting up a modest Town grant fund to fill small gaps and reduce reliance on uncertain or finite state or federal funding streams

Given the funding uncertainty at the state level, the Town of Somerset would benefit from using local resources to create a small grant fund to address specific gaps in digital equity and inclusion. The Town could consider creating a modest grant fund of perhaps $20,000, with awards of approximately $2,500 to $10,000 to local nonprofits and community organizations to support existing programs and provide seed funding for new ones. The Town should reevaluate the total grant fund amount each year and consider incremental increases as additional funds become available.

A simple grant application, organized and managed by the Town, could allow local organizations serving Somerset to provide specific proposals for training, enrollment support for affordability programs, or device subsidy and assistance programs. The Town could develop metrics and reporting on timelines, financial accountability, and program results that will demonstrate the effectiveness of the use of these awarded funds and how they help meet digital equity goals and objectives created by MBI.

3.3 Consider funding a Town Digital Navigator to serve the Somerset Public Schools/Somerset Berkley Regional School District, Somerset Public Library, Council on Aging, Veterans Services, and Housing Authority

The data show there is a broad need for technical and skills assistance for Somerset residents, particularly low-income and older residents. A digital navigator on Town staff could help with digital skills training, technical support, and enrollment support for government broadband subsidy programs and ISPs' low-cost programs as a core function. One digital navigator, who could operate out of the Town IT Department, could organize their efforts monthly so that Somerset Public Schools, Somerset Public Library, the Council on Aging, Veterans Services, and the Housing Authority gain some support for the populations they serve.

A digital navigator could potentially help residents learn how to access lower-cost internet services such as Comcast's Internet Essentials and enroll in government programs online, in addition to helping residents better navigate the internet and gain digital skills more generally. This individual should also participate in any annual or biannual digital equity meetings by the Town (see recommendation 3.1) to better understand the needs of residents and entities.

- **Digital navigator's role at Somerset Public Schools/Somerset Berkley Regional School District:** The school district does not currently have a dedicated staff member supporting students and their families on digital equity-related topics, including information sharing and enrollment support in low-cost internet programs. As new students enter the

Somerset school system each year, the school district could benefit from having a digital navigator available at back-to-school and other school- or district-wide events to assist students and their families with various online applications, enrollments (including enrollment in low-cost internet programs), and school registration.

- **Digital navigator's role at Somerset Public Library:** Currently, the library operates a hotspot lending program for residents. A digital navigator could help those individuals who frequently rent hotspots enroll in Comcast's Internet Essentials or other low-cost broadband subscription programs that offer discounted service so these residents can become less reliant on the availability of hotspots at the library.

- **Digital navigator's role at Somerset Council on Aging:** There is a broad need for community support staff at the COA. The COA helps seniors in computer- and internet-related topics as needed; however, COA staff are not trained in digital literacy support, which results in seniors' needs not being met. This includes direct information sharing and enrollment support in low-cost broadband programs for seniors that are seeking more affordable residential internet options. Having a digital navigator spend a few days per month working specifically with seniors through the COA could help to provide more targeted and informed assistance in digital skills and literacy topics and alleviate some capacity strains that staff are currently experiencing.

- **Digital navigator's role at Somerset Veterans Services Office**: A representative at the VSO stated that the most pressing need of its population is affordability of service for low-income residents. Knowing this, the VSO would benefit from having a digital navigator make themselves available at veterans' events in Town to provide information, assist in low-cost subscription enrollments, and provide digital assistance with navigating governmental subsidy and social service applications that are now predominantly online.

3.3.1 Consider applying for Bristol Elder Services grant available in March 2025 to help fund this program

Bristol Elder Services (BES), which supports local Councils on Aging in Bristol County, operates a grant for senior service entities to develop programs in nutrition, supportive services, caregiving, and preventative services for individuals aged 60 and over (see Section 2.3.1 for more detail on this grant). Past awardees have used these funds to develop digital literacy and education programs, such as "how to operate a smartphone," and telehealth education. Somerset Council on Aging should consider applying for this grant, which opens in March 2025, to support the training and salary of one digital navigator.

Bristol Elder Services will be circulating all details of this grant (including maximum award amounts and application window) to all Council on Aging and senior services organizations in Bristol County in February of 2025.

3.4 Seek technical support from Vinfen and AgeSpan—both MBI partnership organizations—for local entities interested in developing device access and digital navigation programs

AgeSpan, a statewide organization supporting more than 230 communities, participates in MBI's Partnerships Program by offering digital training and educational programs to blind and visually impaired individuals, including device access and training to seniors.

Although Somerset's Council on Aging does not currently offer programming through AgeSpan, its MBI Partnerships team has expressed its availability to offer direct technical assistance to the Council on Aging for the development of new digital access programming if interested. More details on this program can be found in Section 2.2.2.1 above. As noted above, Somerset can contact the MBI Partnerships Program lead at Vinfen, Jessie Wolfe, for more information on how Somerset residents with physical, intellectual or developmental disabilities can begin receiving services from participating organizations of the Alliance.

3.5 Establish a partnership between the Somerset Berkely Regional School District and Somerset Public Library so that interested students can provide tech support at the library and receive volunteer hours

High school students at Somerset Berkley Regional School District are required to spend 15 hours on volunteer activities to graduate. Conversely, the library is frequently being asked (primarily by its senior patrons) how to operate devices and navigate online library services. The library is interested in partnering with Somerset Berkley Regional School District to invite interested students to assist with its digital literacy classes that occur once a month and assist with the library's one-on-one device and internet training weekly.

To conduct this volunteer program at the library, a small grant of $10,000 could be provided to the library for the development of promotional materials, and for the necessary training of student volunteers.

3.6 Purchase three Wi-Fi access points for Somerset Public Library to strengthen internet connections in dead zones

Somerset Public Library has publicly accessible Wi-Fi for its patrons, and in the month of April 2024, 768 users took advantage of this service. The number of internet users has been increasing monthly, as recent internet upgrades were implemented at the library, increasing service to 300 Mbps download speeds from Comcast. While this speed increase has been significant, there are

areas in the library that are "dead zones" where individuals are unable to connect to the internet on their personal devices. The library would like to upgrade its current Wi-Fi network by purchasing additional access points so that every area inside and outside of the building (including the parking lot) has a strong Wi-Fi signal.

Somerset Public Library can apply for funding through the Universal Service Administrative Co (USAC)'s E-Rate program to purchase these Wi-Fi access points. USAC plans to open the application window for this program in late November or early December 2024. If the library is not awarded E-Rate funding, the Town should consider purchasing of a minimum of three new access points for the library to address this issue. The cost for these access points would be $9,000 ($3,000 per access point).

3.7 Consider pursuing MAPC's Apartment Wi-Fi program and MBI's Residential Retrofit program for public and affordable housing properties

MBI has partnered with the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) to provide procurement support, capital expense funding, and funding for the first year of operating expenses to provide free Wi-Fi internet access to residents of public and affordable housing in Massachusetts (see Section 2.2.1 for more detail on this partnership). The effort targets residents most likely to face barriers to connectivity—those experiencing housing insecurity who have access to broadband but cannot afford it.[31] Details by municipality are yet to be determined.

Low-income Somerset residents subscribe to broadband at lower rates than the population as a whole.

The size of the grant program is $5.6 million, with plans to address roughly 2,400 housing units. The MAPC provides funding, project management, and procurement support to enable the construction of Wi-Fi networks to provide residents with service equal to or superior to what is available from local ISPs, at no cost to residents. The funding covers all capital costs associated with network design, construction, and equipment, and the first year of ongoing operating expenses.

The Housing Authority can also work with ISPs to pursue grants for wiring retrofits if required. In March, MBI announced a residential retrofit program to deploy fiber at approximately 22,000

[31] "Smart Growth and Regional Collaboration: Apartment Wi-Fi," MAPC, https://www.mapc.org/our-work/expertise/digital-equity/apartment-wi-fi/.

public and affordable housing properties to replace deficient wiring and infrastructure through grants to qualified ISPs who will install, own, and maintain equipment.[32]

Additionally, or as an alternative, the Town or the Housing Authority could consider exploring single-payer arrangements to deliver high-speed, reliable internet service to residents in public housing and other muti-family/unit dwellings (see Section 7.1.2 for more information). The Town may consider engaging with Comcast or other providers to seek quotes.

3.8 Explore partnerships between the Council on Aging, the Housing Authority, and Somerset Public Library with Tech Goes Home to ensure those who want a computer can obtain one

Device access is limited in Somerset, with the main distributor being the Somerset Public Schools through its 1:1 Chromebook program. Other entities engaged in this report highlighted two issues: a lack of devices at their organizations and a lack of awareness on how to engage and partner with third-party organizations focused on device distribution.

There are organizations across Massachusetts that aim to address the device gap. One is Tech Goes Home (TGH),[33] a nonprofit organization that partners with community organizations and local entities including Libraries and Council on Aging, to provide curated technology-based support through device distribution, internet access, digital literacy, and education. Upon successful completion of a TGH course through the community partner, students are provided with a device for personal use. The cost per pupil (including the device) is $1,500. It is recommended that the Town engage with TGH to explore partnership opportunities. See Section 2.2.2.5 for details on how entities can apply to become a TGH partner. Three entities that could benefit from this partnership are the library, Council on Aging (COA), and Housing Authority.

Currently, the COA is facing limited staffing and budget constraints, making it challenging for any new programs to be designed and operated through this office. However, the COA is interested in providing digital literacy and device support to its senior population. The COA can consider applying for Bristol Elder Services' biannual grant for supportive programming for seniors to fund this partnership (see Section 2.3.1 for more information). The application window for this grant opens in March 2025.

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[32] "Residential Retrofit Program," MBI, https://broadband.masstech.org/retrofit.
[33] "Tech Goes Home adds 25 new community partners", *Jamaica Plain Gazette*, https://jamaicaplaingazette.com/2024/02/05/tech-goes-home-adds-25-new-community-partners/.

Additionally, the Housing Authority is experiencing a structural change, in which it is merging its management team with surrounding Towns due to limited staff and small budgets. With this, programmatic efforts to address the digital needs of Housing Authority residents is not a priority presently.

Through a partnership with TGH, a staff person at the library—potentially the digital navigator discussed in recommendation 3.3—could be trained in TGH digital equity programming and device provision efforts and offer classes at the COA office and Somerset Housing Authority for seniors who would like to learn internet skills and device basics.

3.9 Explore cybersecurity programming/partnership opportunities, and expand existing cybersecurity efforts at Somerset Public Schools to include students

Concerns about online safety and privacy in Somerset are significant, with 89 percent of Somerset respondents to the MBI survey stating they are either somewhat concerned or very concerned about their online safety, and 91 percent of Somerset respondents saying their main concern online is having personal data stolen or used without their consent. MBI's state digital equity plan (SDEP) states that a future action to address online safety will include the development of a statewide cybersecurity curriculum. Additional actions will include training existing digital navigators, so they support, protect, and inform clients about their online safety, and embedding cybersecurity awareness into youth digital literacy programming.

In the near term, Somerset stakeholders can leverage the programming efforts by Somerset Public Schools by informing local stakeholders of the "KnowBe4" curriculum that schools offer staff—and that they would like to begin to extend to high school students as well. Additionally, online safety initiatives and resources are readily available through MassTech Collaborative's MassCyberSecurity department. As part of this, there is also a timely opportunity to apply for a state grant to enhance cybersecurity awareness grant for anyone using Town or other government networks.[34]

3.10 Explore establishing digital skills programs at Somerset Access Television

Somerset's population experiences significant broadband and digital skills gaps. Somerset Access Television (SATV) is a trusted and proven community partner.[35] SATV may need funds to establish digital skills training classes and associated outreach for the community. SATV could also be

[34] "About the Municipal Cybersecurity Awareness Grant Program," Mass.gov, https://www.mass.gov/info-details/about-the-municipal-cybersecurity-awareness-grant-program#how-to-apply-.
[35] "Home," Somerset Access Television, https://www.somersetaccesstv.org/satv/.

considered as a key participating entity in the annual or biannual digital equity meeting, as recommended in Section 3.1.

A small grant of $10,000 could provide the necessary support for SATV to develop and conduct outreach for digital skills programming.

Most community TV stations around the country are facing budget pressure as cable providers' commitments to providing funding are declining. Establishing new digital equity programs, and supporting existing programs, could open the possibility of new funding to assist the Somerset community. As an example, MBI recently provided funding for the Lynn Community TV station through the implementation grant fund for Wi-Fi support and upgrades, and digital literacy training for the community.

4 Examples of MBI implementation grant projects include housing authority Wi-Fi buildouts, device provision programs, and curriculum development

MBI launched its direct grant program, the Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Program (MDEIP)—for municipalities to access implementation funds to initiate local programs. This is a $6 million grant fund that provides participating municipalities with up to $100,000 to make local digital equity investments and execute projects that will increase access, adoption, and usage of the internet.[36] This funding can go toward five areas of digital equity:

1. Digital literacy
2. Devices
3. Education, outreach, and adoption
4. Public space improvements
5. Apartment Wi-Fi

Municipalities interested in applying for this digital equity implementation opportunity must complete a two-step application process after submitting a digital equity study to MBI.[37] Applications will be reviewed by MBI on a rolling basis, and the final deadline for submissions is July 31, 2025.

Any municipality that has participated in the Municipal Digital Equity Planning Program or has a pre-existing local digital equity plan or related document can apply for this implementation funding. If desired, the Town of Somerset can start its application for these funds immediately, using this report and ongoing conversations with local organizations as a guide.

The total award amount in the first round of MBI's implementation grant was $1,270,258, which was split between 18 municipalities and will be put toward the five initiative areas (digital literacy; devices; education, outreach, and adoption; public space improvements; and apartment Wi-Fi).

[36] "Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Program", MBI, https://broadband.masstech.org/digital-equity-implementation.
[37] "Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Program," MBI, https://broadband.masstech.org/digital-equity-implementation.

Examples of funded projects include the following, from CTC's experience serving these municipalities:

Watertown: The City of Watertown has put its funding toward one initiative for the Watertown Housing Authority. With its implementation funds, the City will support up to two years of operating expenses to match against either the apartment Wi-Fi or wiring retrofit programs (see Section 2.2.2.1 for more information) in Watertown Housing Authority units.

Lynn: The City of Lynn put its funding toward three initiatives:

1. Lynn Community TV received funding for Wi-Fi support and upgrades, and digital literacy training for the community.
2. New American Association of Massachusetts (NAAM)—a nonprofit that primarily serves refugees, political asylees, and migrants—received funds to purchase devices to distribute to its NAAM community that attend its free English as a second language (ESL) class.
3. Pathways—a nonprofit organization that provides adult education, skills training, and English literacy classes—received funds to support the development of an eight-week class curriculum that will serve 15 individuals per cohort.

New Bedford: The City of New Bedford has put its funding toward two initiatives:

1. The New Bedford Council on Aging (COA) is receiving support from this grant to equip its new computer lab with the necessary devices and staffing to offer digital literacy classes. In total, this grant funds the purchase of 12 desktop computers, 12 monitors, and a smartboard; and hiring of a digital literacy and skills instructor.
2. The Global Learning Charter Public School (GLC) opened a science, technology, engineering, art, and math (STEAM) Education building for its high school students, with a Thinkabit Lab. Funding is being dedicated to the growth of the Thinkabit Lab, to support the acquisition of new equipment, software licenses, professional development for staff, and the employment of part-time trainers or stipends for existing GLC employees.

Fairhaven: The Town of Fairhaven has put its funding toward three initiatives:

1. The Millicent Library and Fairhaven Council on Aging are receiving funds to develop their partnerships with Tech Goes Home (TGH). TGH is an organization that partners with schools, healthcare providers, and community organizations to provide curated technology-based support through device distribution, internet access, digital literacy, and education. Through its "train-the-trainer" approach to digital literacy education,

students are provided with a device for personal use after successful completion of their course at a community partner location.

2. Community Connections—a nonprofit community agency that offers support to adults with disabilities—is receiving funding to purchase 12 new devices to satisfy the demand by residents who participate in the organization's Workplace Readiness Curriculum, which teaches individuals how to write a resume, apply for a job, and learn how to be a positive and helpful employee.
3. Fairhaven TV (FHTV) is receiving funds for the purchase of audio assistant devices that can serve up to eight individuals at one time.

Other municipalities are using their round one grant funds to support various local entities and municipal projects. See Table 2 for a full list of all participating municipalities' initiatives and program plans.

Table 2: List of all round one Implementation Grant awardees and the entities or programs receiving these funds

Initiative area	Municipality	Entities/programs receiving funds
Digital literacy programs	Charlton	Library
	Somerville	Somerville Housing Authority
	Montague	Council on Aging
	Adams	Library and Council on Aging
	Lanesborough	Library and Council on Aging
	Worcester	Library
	Peabody	Citizens Inn Shelters
	Easthampton	(E-Media, LFA)
	Fairhaven	Library and Council on Aging
	Lynn	Lynn Community TV and Pathways
	New Bedford	Council on Aging and Thinkabit Lab
Device purchasing and distribution programs	Charlton	Library
	Florida	Florida Public Schools
	Cheshire	Library and Council on Aging
	Adams	Library and Council on Aging
	Lanesborough	Library and Council on Aging
	Worcester	Library
	Greenfield	Library
	Easthampton	E-Media
	Fairhaven	Community Connections and Fairhaven TV
	Lynn	New American Association of Massachusetts
	New Bedford	Council on Aging and Thinkabit Lab

Initiative area	Municipality	Entities/programs receiving funds
Education, outreach, and adoption programs	Somerville	Somerville Housing Authority
	Pittsfield	Wayfinding and Digital Equity Ambassador
	Greenfield	Accessibility of public resources
	Peabody	Citizens Inn
	Lynn	Lynn Community TV
Public space improvement programs	Pittsfield	Public park
	Cheshire	Transfer station hotspot
	North Adams	Library
	Adams	Library and outdoor center
	Lanesborough	Library and Council on Aging
	Lynn	Lynn Community TV
Apartment Wi-Fi programs	Greenfield	Greenfield Housing Authority
	Watertown	Watertown Housing Authority
	Peabody	Citizens Inn Shelters

5 Broadband availability conditions and participation in the ACP in Somerset

This section provides an analysis of current broadband conditions in the Town of Somerset related to infrastructure availability, level of competition, uptake of services (and of available subsidies) by residents, and device ownership. Data is based on publicly available information from the U.S. Census Bureau, the American Community Survey (ACS), and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC).

5.1 Somerset has ubiquitous wired broadband coverage from Comcast, but competition is mostly absent

CTC reviewed FCC data, researched websites of broadband providers operating in Somerset to collect market data on residential broadband pricing, availability, and level of competition.

Comcast provides high-speed cable internet service to nearly all addresses in the Town. Fixed wireless services (distinct from mobile services) are available from Verizon Wireless, AT&T, and T-Mobile to many households (5,750 locations, 542 locations, and 2,017 locations respectively). Additionally, FCC data show that six locations in Somerset have access to fiber, which may be a result of community anchor institutions being connected through Town fiber services from Comcast. Somerset does not have the benefit of a residential fiber provider as an alternative to cable.

Verizon DSL service was an option in Somerset as the only other wireline option for internet service, offered over its legacy copper network, and it is possible that some Somerset residents still use this service. However, a representative at Verizon stated that the company is no longer offering its DSL service to new customers. Verizon is still reporting its coverage for existing DSL customers to the FCC as required; however, the FCC is not making this data publicly available at this time.

Table 3 provides an analysis of FCC data for Somerset. FCC data are based on reports of service availability from service providers and show a total of 6,795 “broadband serviceable locations” (BSL), which generally means addresses (which may contain one or more units or apartments in

Somerset), and 8,010 serviceable units, which include multiple apartments at single addresses.[38] Table 4 provides an analysis of the competitive landscape in Somerset.

Served speed is defined as a minimum of 100/20 Mbps. Underserved is defined as reported speeds of between 25/3 Mbps and 100/20 Mbps.

Table 3: Broadband service in Somerset from FCC data as of June 2024

Tech	ISP	Number of locations	Number of Units
		6,795	**8,010**
Cable	Comcast (Xfinity)	**6,789** 5,655 locations with Speeds at least 1200/35 1,134 Locations with speeds at least 2000/200	**8,003** 6,754 units with Speeds at least 1200/35 1,249 units with speeds at least 2000/20
Licensed Fixed Wireless	T-Mobile, AT&T, or Verizon "5G Home Internet"	**6,225** 2,197 at or above 100/20 Mbps[39] 0 between 50/4 and 100/20 2,257 between 25/3 and 50/4[40] 0 between 10/1 and 25/3 1,771 between 0.2/0.2 and 10/1[41]	**7, 349** 2,629 units at or above 100/20 0 units between 50/4 and 100/20 2,671 between 25/3 and 50/4 0 units between 10/1 and 25/3 2,049 between 0.2/0.2 and 10/1
Fiber	Comcast (Xfinity)	**6**	**12**

[38] The FCC Broadband Data Collection reporting uses the term "broadband serviceable location (BSL)" to represent address level information. A BSL is shown as a single served address for locations that may have more than one household or unit, as is the case with duplexes and multi-tenant or apartment buildings. In cases where an address or location is serviced by a single provider or technology, an assumption can be made that the same is true for all households or units at that location.

[39] AT&T has 25 locations served at or above 100/20 Mbps; T-Mobile has 1,044 locations served at or above 100/20 Mbps; Verizon 1,388 locations served at or above 100/20 Mbps

[40] AT&T has 517 locations served at or above 25/3 Mbps; T-Mobile has 2,283 locations served at or above 25/3 Mbps; Verizon 412 locations served at or above 25/3 Mbps

[41] T-Mobile has 2,423 locations served less than 25/3 Mbps; Verizon 217 locations served less than 25/3 Mbps

DSL/Copper	No longer being made publicly available by FCC

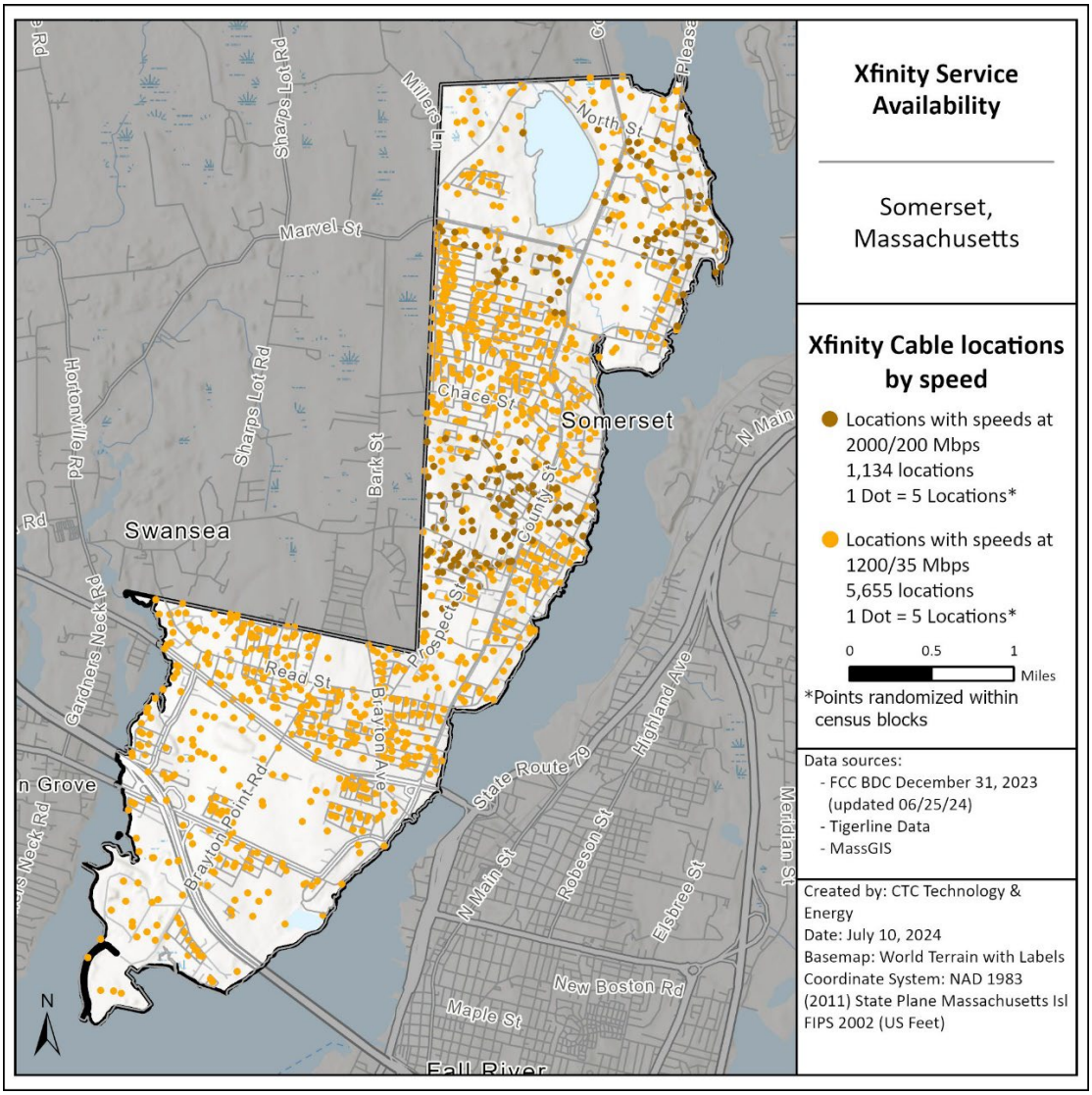
Table 4: State of high-speed broadband competition in Somerset per FCC data

Availability of wireline broadband service		**Locations**	**Units**
Addresses where 100/ Mbps download, 20 Mbps upload (100/20) or higher is available	Competition from two or more wireline providers	0	0
	Fiber available in competition areas	0	0
	Only one wireline provider	6794	8,003
Served only by licensed fixed wireless		4	4
Underserved addresses—no options at 100/20 Mbps but can get at least 25/3 (wireline or licensed fixed wireless)		0	0
No 25/3 or greater (wireline or licensed fixed wireless)		3	3
Total locations		**6,795**	**8,010**

5.1.1 Cable service

Figure 1 shows Comcast's service availability in Somerset, showing essentially ubiquitous coverage by Comcast. There are only six locations, with seven residential units, without Comcast service. All locations and units are served by at least 1200/35 Mbps service, and 1,134 (or 16.7 percent of) locations, and 1,249 (or 15.6 percent of) residential units are served by 2000/200 Mbps.

Figure 1: Comcast service availability in Somerset



5.1.2 Fixed wireless service

Residents have the option to subscribe to "5G Home Internet" services from Verizon, AT&T, and T-Mobile. These are known as "licensed fixed wireless" or LFW services because they use licensed spectrum under the exclusive control of the respective companies. The FCC notes that mobile wireless providers have been making these offerings an increasingly attractive alternative to services such as Comcast, given the more competitive pricing.[42] Yet these remain a complement of, and not a full replacement to, services such as Comcast. Providers can throttle or reduce

[42] "2020 Broadband Deployment Report," FCC, https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/FCC-20-50A1.pdf.

capacity in favor of mobile voice and data traffic during times of congestion. And the delivered speeds can vary greatly depending on distance from the wireless equipment or interferences in the line of sight in the environment.

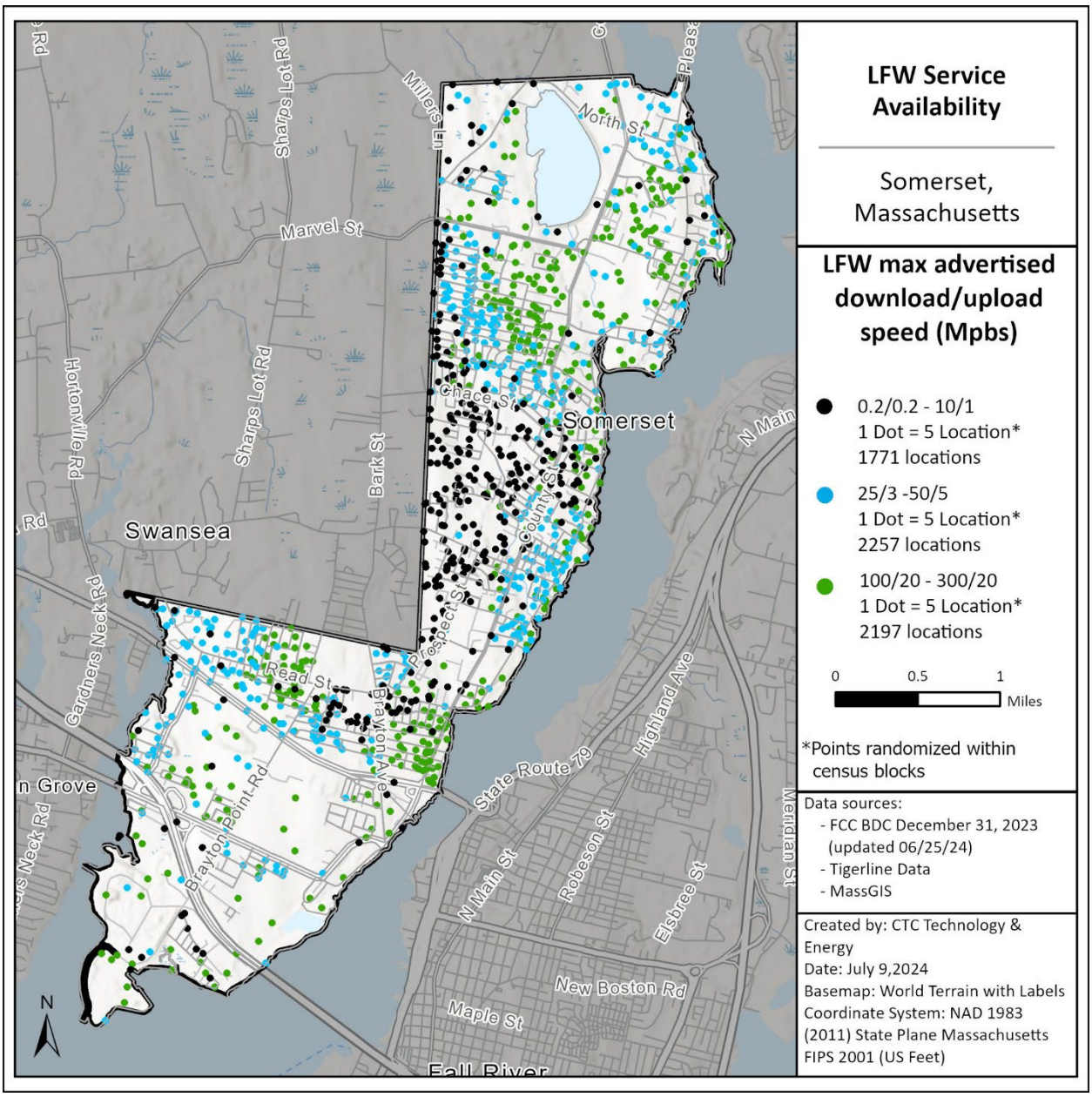
Figure 2 shows reported fixed wireless coverage levels by available speed. Although FCC data shows that 6,225 locations in Somerset can receive fixed wireless services, the data shows that the approximately 28.4 percent of (or 1,771) locations can only receive service at the slowest speed tranche, between .2/.2 Mbps and 10/1 Mbps, and 36.2 percent of (or 2,257) BSLs are underserved by service between 25/3 Mbps and 50/5 Mbps. Even this reported coverage may overstate what is really available.

Figure 3 shows that approximately 5,750 locations in Somerset can receive service from T-Mobile, 542 BSLs can receive service by AT&T, and 2,107 BSLs are served by Verizon Wireless, as reported in the FCC data.

In these figures, the dots represent five locations and are positioned randomly within census blocks. (The dots do not represent specific addresses.)

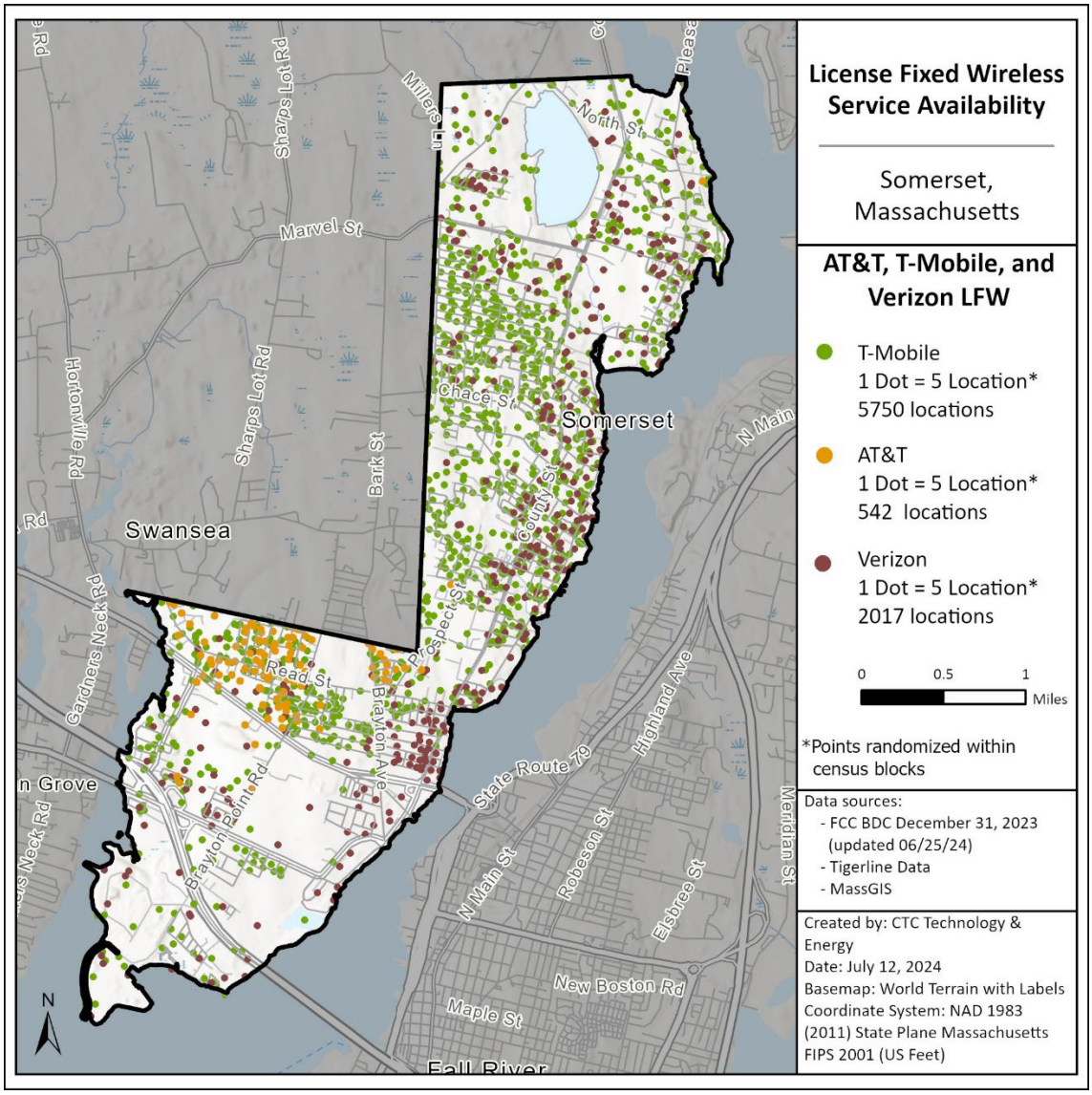
This reported coverage may overstate actual fixed wireless service availability and speeds in Somerset. The quality of the coverage will vary significantly depending on how far away the location is from the equipment or whether there are barriers that could block or weaken a signal such as trees and buildings. Many premises may not receive the reported level of service on a consistent basis.

Figure 2: Fixed wireless coverage by speed in Somerset[43]



[43] As reported to the FCC using the federal Broadband Data Collection rules, gaps in speed ranges reflect no reported locations at speeds between the ranges. The slowest fixed wireless speed reported is .2/.2Mbps and the fastest is 300/10 Mbps.

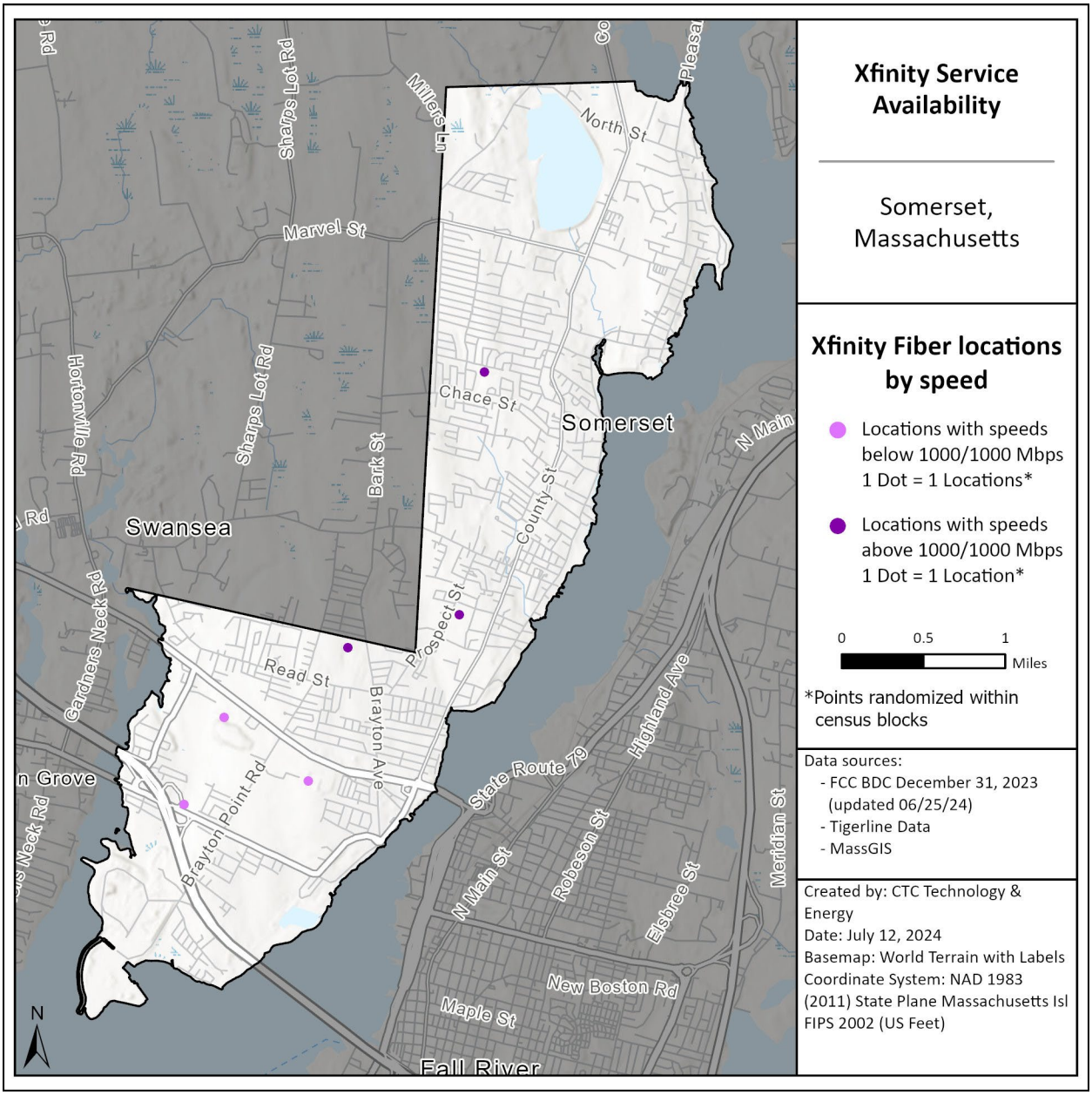
Figure 3: Fixed wireless coverage by provider in Somerset



5.1.3 Fiber service

Residential fiber services from Comcast are not available in Somerset as of August 2024. However, the FCC data show six locations that are served by fiber from Comcast Xfinity, as shown in Figure 4. These locations are most likely businesses.

Figure 4: Fiber coverage by speed in Somerset



5.2 Approximately 8.2 percent Somerset households rely on mobile services alone

As noted later in Section 5.5.1, roughly 8.2 percent of, or 605, Somerset households reported (in the ACS survey) that they are solely using a cellular internet service for broadband connectivity

at home. Some consumers who rely on cellphone data plans can use their smartphones to connect to wireless hotspots and connect other computing devices to the internet.

The FCC has repeatedly noted that mobile service is an inadequate substitute for fixed broadband services;[44] however, an estimated 11.2 percent of U.S. adults continue to rely on their smartphones and mobile data plans as the only source of home broadband connectivity[45] – a trend that is more common among young adults and low-income households[46] and that is reflected here in Somerset.

5.3 When the ACP was available, 38.7 percent of potentially eligible households enrolled in the program

The Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP), which provided a monthly subsidy toward some home internet subscriptions, presented an opportunity for many low-income residents to purchase a quality broadband subscription more affordably.

As of January 31, 2024, estimates based on FCC data reported by zip code showed that 478 households in Somerset were receiving the ACP subsidy—which is 38.7 percent of the estimated 1,235 eligible households in the Town.[47] While the enrollment rate of eligible households was low at the end of the program, the percent of those enrolled increased by approximately 13.2 percentage points over the final year of the ACP. This may reflect the positive results of local efforts designed to increase enrollment. This data is shown in Table 5.

Lack of enrollment among eligible households might be due to a lack of awareness of the program and a challenging sign-up process; many eligible residents may need to go to a library or other location with internet access just to begin the registration process. As a result, many local governments and other digital divide stakeholders conduct active outreach to households that may be eligible to make them aware of the program and assist in the sign-up process. Additionally, with the program no longer accepting new enrollments as of February 7, 2024, and

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[44] E.g., 2020 Broadband Deployment Report, para 11.
[45] "American Community Survey," US Census, https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST5Y2022.S2801?q=internet&g=010XX00US_040XX00US25_060XX00US2500562430,2500946365.
[46] "Mobile Technology and Home Broadband 2021," Pew Research Center, https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/06/03/mobile-technology-and-home-broadband-2021/.
[47] Estimates of total number of eligible households are calculated by The Benton Institute for Broadband & Society through its ACP tool, using 2021 American Community Survey reported data on household income, food stamp recipiency, Medicaid recipiency, supplemental security income, and public assistance income. "The Affordable Connectivity Program Enrollment Performance Tool," Benton Institute for Broadband & Society, https://www.benton.org/acp_tool.

funding that expired in May 2024, residents may still need help enrolling in low-cost programs offered by the Town's broadband providers, as described in the next subsection. While outreach may increase enrollment in some areas, some eligible residents will be uninterested or unwilling to participate. This may be the case if a household cannot afford internet even if it receives the ACP, feels no need to use the internet, receives satisfactory service from a cellular provider, receives free internet access through a communal source, or does not want to apply for a federal subsidy program—which can be a particular concern for recent immigrants.

Table 5: ACP enrollment in Somerset over one year[48]

Date	Eligible households enrolled	Enrolled Households	Eligible Households	Unenrolled eligible households
January 2023	**25.5%**	315	1,235	920
June 2023	**32.3%**	399	1,235	836
January 2024	**38.7%**	478	1,235	757

5.4 Somerset residents can obtain low-cost service offerings, some that were free with the ACP benefit, but initial prices may rise after promotional periods end

All broadband providers in Somerset participated in the now-expired ACP, either directly or through affiliates, and some still offer their own low-cost programs. When the discounts are combined, these programs enabled qualifying low-income residents to receive service at no cost. (Mobile plans have also been ACP-eligible, but each household can only use ACP once—so if a household were using the benefit for a mobile plan, they could not get the benefit again for a home plan.)

Those who do not qualify for a discounted plan must pay a minimum of $90 a month after the promotional price expires for reliable wired broadband speeds. For example, residents can obtain initial pricing from Comcast of $30 per month but these prices rise sharply following the promotional period. For existing wireless options, Somerset residents can pay a minimum of $50 a month for residents seeking home internet services and can be as low as $30 a month for existing T-Mobile 5G Wireless customers.

[48] "ACP Enrollment and Claims Tracker," USAC, data as of June, 2024, https://www.usac.org/about/affordable-connectivity-program/acp-enrollment-and-claims-tracker/.

People who were previously enrolled in ACP may need assistance navigating and pursuing alternative low-cost internet service options.

5.4.1 Comcast service offerings and prices

Table 6 shows Comcast's service offerings in Somerset. Options that had been free to those enrolled with ACP and/or are designed for eligible low-income residents are shaded green.

Comcast has made significant network upgrades in Somerset, offering speed tiers that reflect the investment and installation of new Data Over Cable Service Interface Specification (DOCSIS) 4.0 technology. Most cable companies have implemented DOCSIS 3.1, which allows near or just above gigabit download speeds but offers far slower upload speeds. But the newest generation, DOCSIS 4.0 (previously called DOCSIS 3.1 Full Duplex) has significantly increased upload speeds.

Table 6: Comcast (Xfinity) advertised service plans in Somerset (low-income programs in green)

Package	Internet speed	Monthly Cost	Notes
Internet Essentials	50/10 Mbps	$9.95	Available to eligible low-income customers following an application process and subject to certain conditions. Internet Essentials also includes added benefits; customers can purchase a refurbished computer for $149.99.[49]
Internet Essentials Plus	100/20 Mbps	$29.95	Available to eligible low-income customers following an application process and subject to certain conditions. Internet Essentials also includes added benefits; customers can purchase a refurbished computer for $149.99.
Connect More	300/20 Mbps	$30 for the first 12 months, then $90 plus $15/mo. router rental fee	Pricing guaranteed for 12 months. No term contract. Includes $10/mo. automatic payments and paperless billing discount with a stored bank account. Discount is $5/mo. when using a stored credit card. Professional installation fee of $100.
Gigabit	1000/20 Mbps	$50 for the first 12 months, then $115 plus $15/mo. router rental fee	Pricing guaranteed for 24 mos. with no term contract or 36 mos. with a term contract. Includes $10/mo. automatic payments and paperless billing discount with a stored bank account or $5/mo. when using a stored credit card.

[49] Comcast, "Comcast Broadband Opportunity Program" (accessed October 2023).
Apply for Internet Essentials or Internet Essentials Plus From Comcast - Xfinity Support

Package	Internet speed	Monthly Cost	Notes
Gigabit Extra	1200/40 Mbps	$75 for the first 12 months, then $120 plus $15/mo. modem rental fee	Pricing guaranteed for 24 mos. with no term contract or 36 mos. with a term contract. With term contract Includes $27/mo. Discount and $10/mo. automatic payments and paperless billing discount with a stored bank account or $5/mo. when using a stored credit card. Installation cost up to $500.
Gigabit X2	2,000/200 Mbps	$90 for the first 12 months, then $120 plus $15/mo. router rental fee	This is a non-promotional rate. No term contract. Includes $10/mo. automatic payments and paperless billing discount with a stored bank account. Discount is $5/mo. when using a stored credit card. Professional installation fee of $100.

5.4.2 Fixed wireless service offerings and plans

Table 7 shows pricing for T-Mobile's 5G Home Internet service plan at $50/month for 5G Home Internet-only service. T-Mobile will provide 5G Home Internet at $30/month if it is bundled with a cellular plan that costs between $60 and $100 per month for a single line.[50] T-Mobile prices its 5G Home Internet plans regardless of provided speeds; as noted above, Table 3 shows how these speeds vary widely.

T-Mobile did not participate in ACP directly for either its 5G Home Internet or mobile data plans.[51] Only T-Mobile affiliates – Metro by T-Mobile and Assurance Wireless – participated in ACP and offered discounts on mobile data plans. Somerset residents that qualified for ACP were required to sign up with prepaid provider Metro by T-Mobile for 5G Home Internet and could apply the ACP discount to the bundled 5G prepaid mobile plan. Metro by T-Mobile offers a 5G Home Internet plan and a mobile prepaid voice and data plan for $50 a month.[52]

[50] See T-Mobile Home Internet webpage, https://www.t-mobile.com/home-internet/plans?INTNAV=tNav%3APlans%3AHomeInternetPlan (accessed November 19, 2023).
[51] See T-Mobile Newsroom, February 8, 2023, Press Release, "Taking part in ACP- through both Assurance Wireless and Metro by T-Mobile – is just one way that T-Mobile demonstrates its commitment to bringing wireless access to everyone." https://www.t-mobile.com/news/community/t-mobile-expands-acp; See also, T-Mobile website, "T-Mobile is proud to participate in the new federal Affordable Connectivity Program, which offers internet service payment assistance to eligible households. We are making the program available through Metro by T-Mobile and Assurance Wireless." https://www.t-mobile.com/brand/affordable-connectivity-program?INTNAV=fNav%3AAdditionalSupport%3AAffordableConnectivityProgram.
[52] Metro by T-Mobile 5G Home Internet, https://www.metrobyt-mobile.com/plans/home-internet (accessed November 19, 2023). Customers that are not participating in autopay will pay $25/month. Customers must also purchase a modem for a one-time fee of $49.99.

Table 7: T-Mobile fixed wireless advertised service plans in Somerset

Package	Internet speed	Monthly Cost	
5G Home Internet	75/20 Mbps*	$30 mo. for T-Mobile 5G Wireless customers; $50 mo. for 5G Home Internet service only	Pricing includes a $5/mo. autopay discount. $30 service is only available to customers with a T-Mobile 5G phone and plan offered between $60-100/mo., plus the cost of a handset. Gateway router provided at no charge but at one-time $35 device connection charge at sign up.

* Speeds are estimated and rounded.

Table 8 shows pricing for Internet Air—AT&T's new residential fixed wireless service at $65/month. Like T-Mobile, AT&T has a fixed price for this plan regardless of actual and varied speeds received by individual households. AT&T states that it may temporarily slow data speeds if networks are busy. The company claims easy self-installation of Internet Air in under 15 minutes. AT&T Internet Air was eligible for the ACP.[53]

Table 8: AT&T fixed wireless advertised service plans in Somerset

Package	Internet speed	Monthly Cost	
Internet Air	75/10 Mbps*	$65 mo.	Can receive $5/mo. Discount with autopay available after two bill cycles. No contract. $9.99 late payment fee, and no fee for early termination. $10/mo. for up to 5 Extenders. Number of extenders determined at the sole discretion of AT&T.

* Speeds are estimated and rounded. Quoted download speeds were 75-225 Mbps with claims that 50% of customers experience speeds in this range and the remaining customers could receive service faster or slower than this range. Upload speeds were quoted as 10-30 Mbps.

Table 8 shows Verizon Wireless' 5G Home Internet service plans. Verizon does not require users to subscribe to Verizon Wireless mobile plans to get these home internet options, but significant discounts are only available if the fixed wireless service is bundled with a Verizon mobile plan and handset. These plans include a Verizon Forward program which can provide discounted service by up to $30 per month to any Verizon Wireless package.

[53] "Say Hello to AT&T Internet Air! Plug-And-Play Home Wi-Fi Installed in Less Than 15 Minutes," AT&T, https://about.att.com/blogs/2023/internet-air.html.

Table 9: Verizon Wireless fixed broadband service plans (low-income program in green)

Package	Internet speed	Monthly Cost	
5G Home Internet	50/5 Mbps	Discounted price $35/mo.; regular price $60/mo.	$10 discount available with Autopay and paperless billing. $15 discount when bundled with postpaid Verizon cellular plan and 5G phone. Pricing guaranteed for 24 months. Wireless Router included. Pricing for wireless plan and phone not included here.
5G Home Internet Plus	80/10 Mbps	Discounted price $45/mo.; regular price $80/mo.	$10 discount available with Autopay and paperless billing. $25 discount when bundled with postpaid Verizon cellular plan and 5G phone. Pricing guaranteed for 36 mos. Wireless Router, whole-home internet. Pricing for wireless plan and phone not included here.
5G Home Internet (Verizon Forward Program)	Can be applied to any 5G package	$30 discount to regular price of subscriptions	Must meet ACP eligibility requirements; wireless router included; available to existing customers. Can not use ACP discount for wireless phone plan if used for home internet service but can use Lifeline discount if applicable.

5.5 American Community Survey data reveal that low-income Somerset residents face gaps in subscriptions and device ownership

Data on internet adoption and device ownership is important to fully understand the nature of the digital divide in Somerset. ACS survey data show that Somerset lags the state and national averages in internet adoption and device ownership. While high-speed broadband services are available throughout Somerset, many households do not subscribe or own devices necessary to fully use these services—and those lacking subscriptions or devices are largely lower-income households.

The U.S. Census Bureau yearly and nationwide conduct the ACS. However, it is important to note a five-year sampling period (2016 – 2021)[54] that may not accurately illustrate most recent trends.

A preliminary analysis of the ACS data found in Somerset:

- 19 percent of households lack a wireline internet subscription.

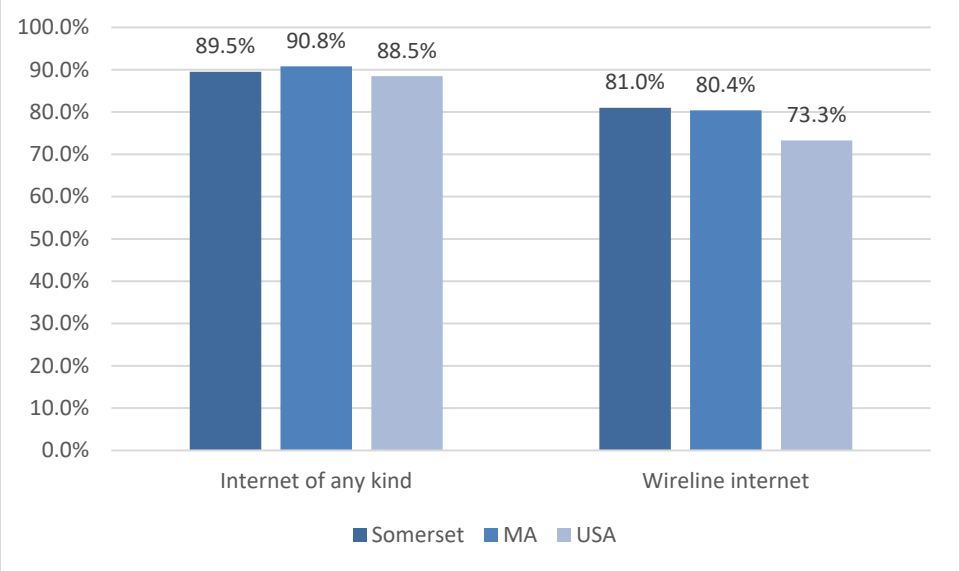
[54] The U.S. Census Bureau does not release data for communities the size of Somerset for sampling periods less than five years in order to keep margins of error to a minimum.

- 67.4 percent of households that lack a wireline internet subscription also earn less than $75,000 annually.
- 16.4 percent of households do not own a desktop or laptop computer device.

5.5.1 Somerset leads state and national adoption rates for residential wireline internet subscriptions, but low-income residents face significant gaps

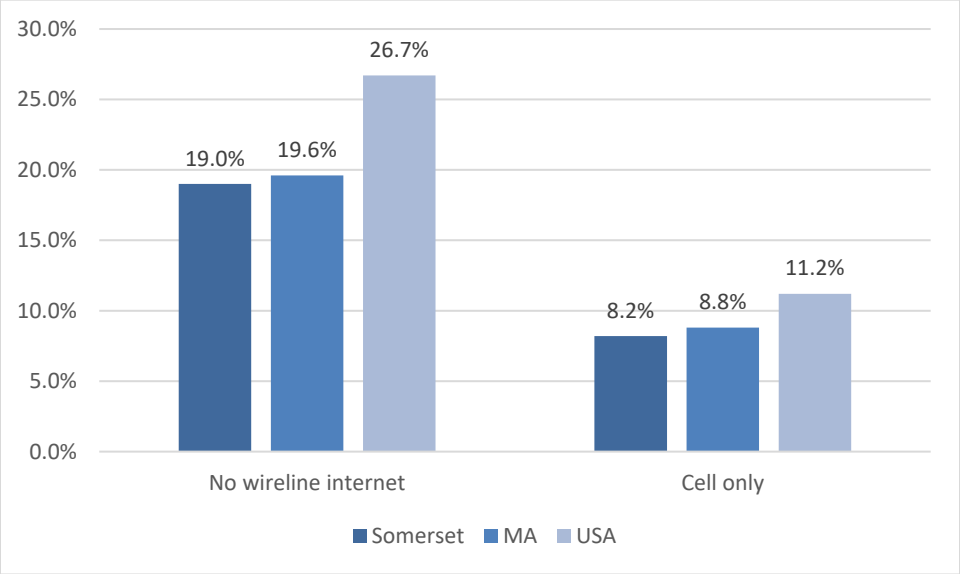
According to ACS data, 89.5 percent of Somerset households subscribe to residential internet services. Most of these subscriptions, 81 percent, are via wireline technology (cable or DSL). The town lags the state but leads the nation in internet subscriptions of any kind, and leads the state in wireline internet subscriptions, as shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Internet subscription rates in Somerset compared to the state and nation



While internet adoption rates are relatively high in Somerset, an estimated 1,356 (or 19 percent of) households lack residential wireline internet service (Figure 6Figure 5). Of those households without wireline service, roughly 605 are solely using a cellular internet service from their homes. Lower income households may use their cellular connection and smartphone in lieu of a more robust connection. However, reliance on cellular service will not enable all members of a household to participate in the digital economy, because of data caps and the potential for the service to be throttled in times of mobile network congestion.

Figure 6: No access to wireline internet and mobile-only subscriptions compared to the state and nation

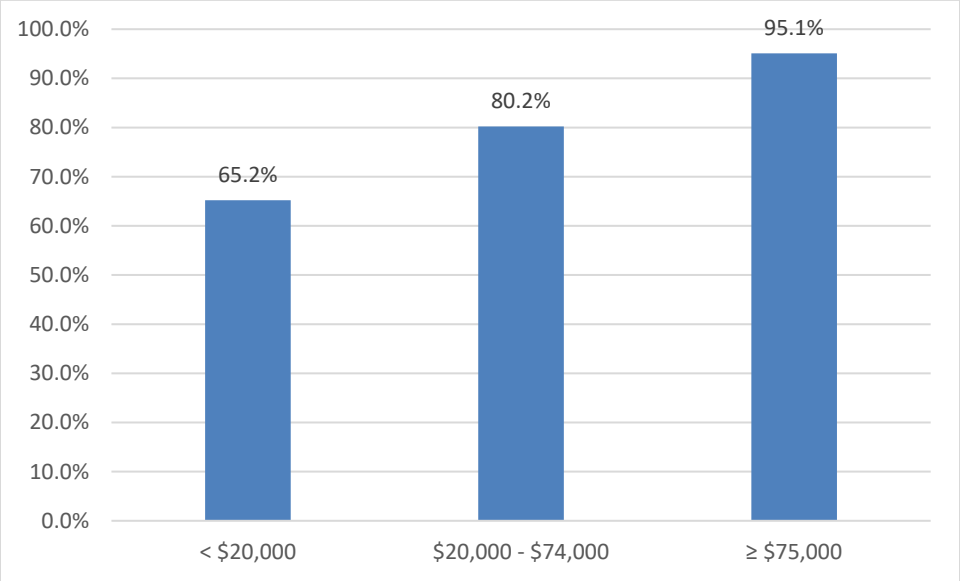


5.5.2 Most Somerset households that lack wireline internet access earn less than $75,000 per year

In Somerset, most of the households lacking an internet subscription are lower-income households. Whereas 95.1 percent of households making more than $75,000 subscribe to wireline internet services, only 80.2 percent of households making between $20,000 and $75,000, and 65.2 percent of those earning less than $20,000 do so.[55] After accounting for the total number of households across all three income brackets, an estimated 67.4 percent of (or 520 out of 772) households without an internet subscription earn less than $75,000 per year. Figure 7 shows wireline subscription rates by income bracket.

[55] For both of these income brackets, some households are likely able to afford service yet choose not to purchase it because they simply are not interested. For this reason, a 100 percent subscription rate does not represent the ideal or goal rates for any given population.

Figure 7: Wireline internet subscription rates by income level



5.5.3 Somerset leads both state and national device ownership rates for laptops/desktops and tablets, with 4.9 percent of households lacking device access

ACS data show that 95.1 percent of households in Somerset own one or more computing devices, a figure that leads both the state and national figures. Access to affordable devices that meet a household's needs is a critical element of the effort to expand broadband access to any community. Looking across different types of devices, including desktop, laptop, smartphone, and tablet ownership, Somerset's ownership rates show that the town is mostly ahead of the state and nation with access to devices (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Device ownership rates in Somerset compared to the state and nation

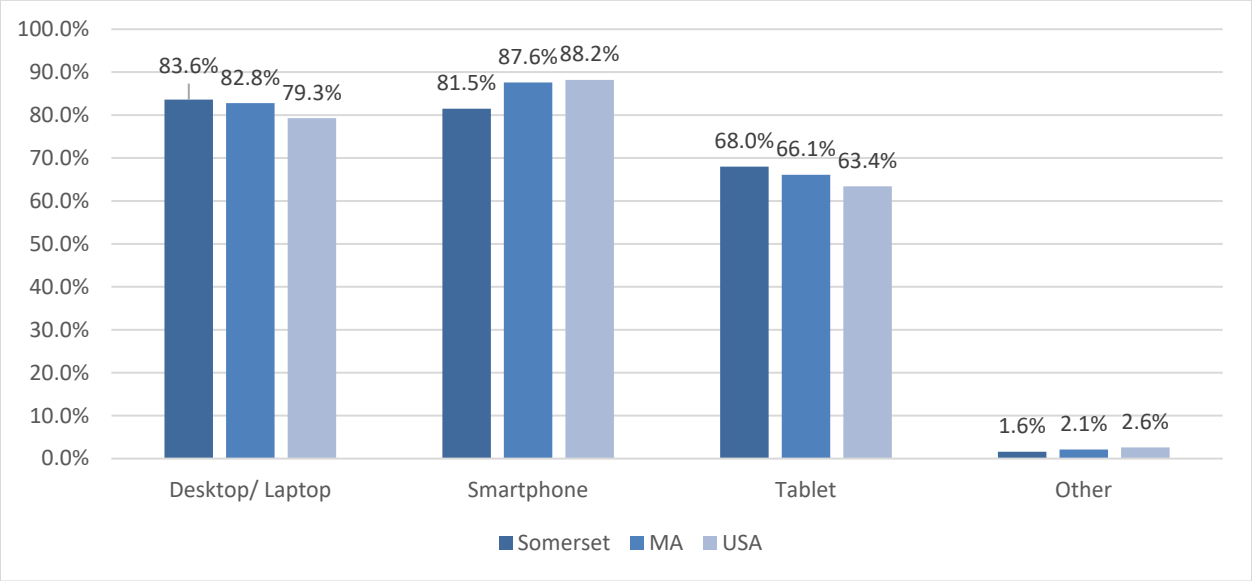
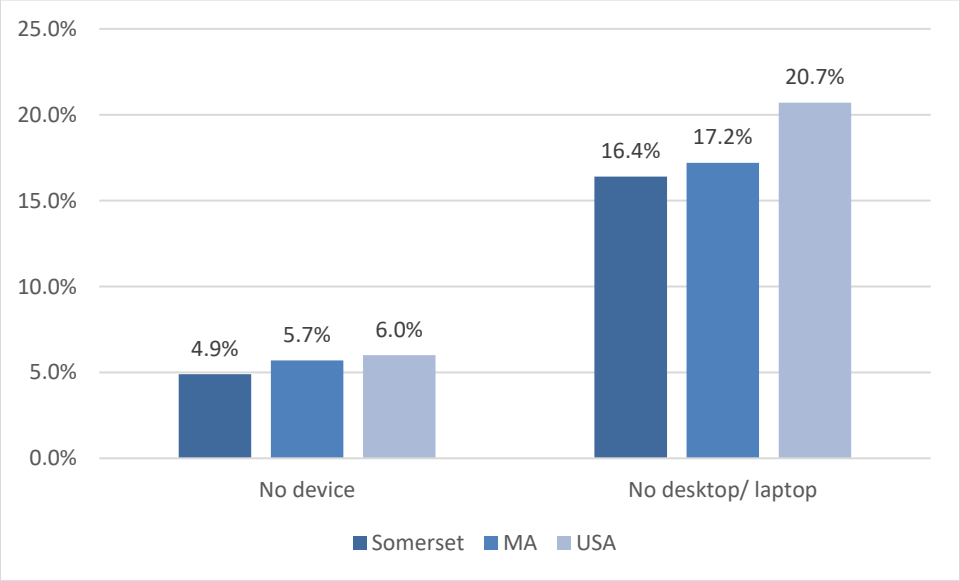


Figure 9 shows that 4.9 percent of Somerset households lack a device, which is less than both the state and national averages. However, 16.4 percent of households in Somerset do not have a laptop or desktop leaving these residents to rely on smartphones or tablets and making it difficult to fully engage in the digital economy or successfully learn and work from home.

Figure 9: Lack of devices in Somerset compared to state and national averages



Additional device barriers may exist even after device ownership numbers are improved. For example, for households with many individuals, a single desktop or laptop will likely not deliver

sufficient capacity for all members of the household to meaningfully use the internet. Further, ownership of a device is not sufficient to ensure full access to the benefits of broadband. Many households will require digital literacy training and access to technical support to maximize the benefits of these services.

6 Somerset stakeholders report successful programs that are having an impact and could be expanded if funding allowed

The Town of Somerset and CTC convened and facilitated several stakeholder meetings to gather feedback about the digital needs and challenges in Somerset. CTC also prepared and disseminated an online questionnaire to participants in these meetings. The questionnaire was designed, in part, to facilitate orderly data collection about existing programs underway, the services offered, populations served, existing capacity, remaining gaps, and the potential for expanding these programs.

The stakeholder meetings were organized around the following theme areas, though there was considerable overlap on these themes:

- Education and libraries
- Seniors
- Youth
- Government departments
- Private and community organizations serving vulnerable populations

The following subsections—organized by theme and entity—identify the participants and organizations in these meetings and summarize the insights provided by each stakeholder during the meetings and in questionnaire responses (if provided).

Recommendations developed from a synthesis of stakeholder data, survey data, and other research performed for this study are provided in Section 2.3.4.

6.1 Somerset Public Schools/Somerset Berkley Regional School District

There are four elementary and middle schools in the Somerset Public School system, with approximately 1,600 students enrolled in the 2023/2024 school year. Somerset Berkley Regional High School (SBRHS) serves both the Town of Somerset and the neighboring Town of Berkley—approximately 1,000 students are enrolled at this high school. All Somerset Public Schools and SBRHS have fiber services from Comcast.

Device access: Somerset Public Schools and SBRHS have a one-to-one device program, which provides a Chromebook device that can be taken home each day to all students in grade 6 to grade 12. Students in kindergarten through grade 5 are provided devices which always remain in school. These devices are refreshed in grades 6 and grade 9, at no cost to the student.

Internet access: The Somerset and Somerset Berkley Regional School Districts disseminated six hotspots during the pandemic to students in families that did not have internet service at home.

These hotspots were funded through the Elementary and Secondary Emergency Relief (ESSER) Fund. Over the last two school years, Somerset distributed one hotspot to a student that needed one temporarily. Because of the lack of interest and need, the Somerset and Somerset Berkley Regional School Districts are not interested in expanding their hotspot distribution efforts.

Digital literacy: Somerset Public Schools have incorporated digital skills and literacy classes into each grade's curriculum. Students in kindergarten to grade 5 have one technology class each week, including classes on how to navigate a computer, basic keyboard typing, and computer science and coding for older elementary students. Middle school students (grades 6 to 8) must take a technology class each year that builds on the digital skills learned in previous grades, with classes focusing on coding, more advanced digital literacy skills, and digital citizenship. In high school, classes offered include graphic design, cybersecurity, and computer science; however, high school students are not required to take a technology-based course.

SBRHS uses curricula from "Project Lead the Way" for its computer science-related classes for high school students. Project Lead the Way courses begin with an introduction to computer science. This curriculum helps students that are interested in studying and working in this field after high school be prepared to enter industry.

Cybersecurity and digital stewardship training: Somerset and Somerset Berkley Regional have all staff take cybersecurity awareness training each year on phishing and online scams through an online platform called KnowBe4. This is not offered to students, but Somerset and Somerset Berkley are interested in expanding this training to their student body. Similarly, Somerset and Somerset Berkley would like to implement opportunities to educate students about cyber-bullying, digital stewardship, and other forms of safety online.

6.2 Somerset Public Library

Somerset Public Library has over 140,000 items in its collection, which includes books, audio and visual media, and electronic materials and resources. In 2023, the library had more than 6,000 registered patrons, mostly from the Town of Somerset, with other patrons that live in Fall River and Swansea.[56]

Connectivity: Somerset Public Library has publicly accessible Wi-Fi for its patrons, which was accessed by 768 users in the month of April 2024. Unfortunately, some areas of the library have weak connections, and so the library would like to upgrade its current Wi-Fi network so that every area inside and outside of the building (including the parking lot) has a strong Wi-Fi signal.

[56] "Long Range Plan", Somerset Public Library, https://www.somersetpubliclibrary.org/new-patron-brochure.

Somerset Public Library had hoped to receive funding through the E-Rate program to complete this network upgrade but missed the application deadline to do so. The Library plans to reapply at the next application window, which will open in late November or early December 2024.

Digital literacy classes: Somerset Public Library has a monthly class for library patrons that covers a digital literacy topic that is of interest to the community. These classes are once a month for an hour on a Friday and are free to the public. Topics have included how to use the library's online database and how to use Microsoft products.

The library also provides assistance with device-related questions on a per-request basis. The library does not have a dedicated technology staff member to provide this device and tech support and is interested in partnering with the local high school to offer students the opportunity to volunteer their time to teach patrons about device and digital skills training.

6.3 Somerset Veterans Services Office (VSO)

Somerset Veterans Services Office provides an array of services to veterans and their families, including employment assistance and enrollment support in public assistance programs. While the VSO does not offer any programming directly related to digital equity, a representative at the office highlighted that the most pressing challenges that veterans in Town face are their fixed incomes, making it difficult to pay for monthly home internet subscriptions. Additionally, many veterans in Town have limited knowledge of how to use computers or the internet, yet the majority of (if not all) public assistance applications are online, presenting a major barrier to many.

The VSO would like to partner with other entities in Town that are offering digital literacy classes, digital navigation, or device provision services, so that Somerset's veterans receive the support they need to connect online.

6.4 Somerset Council on Aging

Somerset Council on Aging (COA) provides services to residents ages 60+, including those with disabilities. The Council on Aging has a Senior Center that is attended by approximately 40 individuals every day. A representative at the COA stated that the main challenge that seniors in Somerset face is access to affordable internet, and many lack the skills for online tasks.

Digital literacy: The COA previously held basic computer literacy classes for seniors from 2018 to 2021, but these classes are no longer offered due to limited interest from residents. Since the end of these classes, the COA has transitioned to offering direct one-on-one digital literacy and device support to assist seniors with their email, online government and public assistance applications, and a variety of other internet and device-related questions as needed. The COA

has expressed a potential interest in restarting computer literacy classes, so long as a community partner was leading this initiative.

Device access: A small number of seniors have asked the COA to assist them in obtaining a laptop to own. Additionally, the COA operates a laptop "borrowing program" funded by a hybrid grant, in which interested seniors can take a laptop home for up to two weeks at a time. This program began in 2021, and there are 10 laptops available for loan. These laptops meet the existing demand at the senior center, and the COA is not interested in increasing their stock of devices. Based on the funding structure for these 10 laptops, they are only allowed to be rented and not permanently disseminated.

6.5 Somerset Housing Authority

Somerset Housing Authority manages two buildings, with 135 units and 137 residents. Residents are predominantly seniors over the age of 60. The Housing Authority has two staff members, the executive director and assistant. As of June 2024, the Housing Authority was in the process of changing its management agreement so that these Somerset buildings would be managed by a new executive director that would also oversee the Swansea and Westport Housing Authorities.

The Somerset Housing Authority does not have internet access available to residents in either building's community rooms. The executive director was hesitant to equip community rooms with desktop or laptop computers because these rooms are accessible to the public, not just Housing Authority residents.

All Somerset Housing Authority forms and documents for its residents are provided in paper hard copies and are not available to complete online, eliminating the need for residents to have internet to submit necessary forms. While the executive director was not certain of the number of residents that do not have an internet subscription in their unit, it was mentioned that residents do often go to the library to use its public computers as needed, and periodically borrow laptops from the Council on Aging as well.

7 The demise of the ACP was a challenge to low-income households nationally and in Somerset, but there are options for filling this gap

Many households across the country relied on the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) to secure and maintain an internet connection at home, and the program's end has been a significant loss for many. A recent Benton Institute for Broadband & Society survey conducted immediately after the ACP ended in April 2024 found that 13 percent of households would disconnect their service without the ACP subsidy, and 36 percent of respondents would downgrade to a cheaper or slower plan.[57] Additionally, nearly half of respondents saw a home internet connection as an uncertainty, implying that they view their internet subscription as a service that may be canceled at any time based on the household's limited budget and varied costs each month. With over 23.2 million households enrolled in the program nationwide, and over 367,000 enrolled in Massachusetts, there are a significant number of households that are now feeling the tremendous impact of the program's end.

At the end of the ACP, Somerset had 478 households enrolled, and as many as 757 potentially eligible households that remained unenrolled. Some unenrolled yet eligible households may have not wished to subscribe, but accelerating enrollment efforts in low-cost programs offered by Somerset's broadband providers would help close the enrollment and affordability gap and reinforce all digital equity programmatic efforts throughout this report.

Table 10: ACP enrollment in Somerset over one year[58]

Date	Eligible households enrolled	Enrolled households	Eligible households	Unenrolled eligible households
January 2023	**25.5%**	315	1,235	920
June 2023	**32.3%**	399	1,235	836
January 2024	**38.7%**	478	1,235	757

[57] "Leaving Money on the Table: The ACP's Expiration Means Billions in Lost Savings," Benton Institute for Broadband & Society, https://www.benton.org/publications/acp-expiration-means-billions-lost-savings.
[58] "ACP Enrollment and Claims Tracker," USAC, data as of June 2024, https://www.usac.org/about/affordable-connectivity-program/acp-enrollment-and-claims-tracker/.

7.1 There are ways that Somerset can support residents' post-ACP, primarily through enrollment assistance in low-cost internet programs or by pursuing more ambitious subsidy efforts

A variety of low-cost services do exist through existing ISPs in Somerset, which should be promoted through various channels throughout Town as described in more detail below. Additionally, there are examples of more ambitious models of subsidy-based programs that have been demonstrated regionally or nationally that can be adopted locally.

7.1.1 ISPs in Somerset offer several low-cost broadband programs

Verizon, Comcast, and T-Mobile offer low-cost programs in Somerset. Low-cost programs can provide significant relief to the 478 households that were previously receiving the ACP, and to the additional 757 households that were eligible for the ACP at the time of the program's end. Somerset can utilize existing resources from local entities and organizations or consider creating a Town digital navigator position (as referenced in Section 3.3) to support residents in the process for enrolling in these low-cost programs. A navigator would potentially help residents learn how to access competitive and lower-cost internet solutions by informing consumers about switching from expensive service plans that place a strain on monthly budgets to a more cost-effective plan.

Low-cost programs offered by ISPs in Somerset are:

- **Verizon Forward,** which provides up to a $30 monthly discount toward any internet subscription for those who are eligible, resulting in service for as low as $20 per month.[59] Eligibility includes:
    - Federal Pell Grant recipient within the last year,
    - Qualify for WIC, or
    - Qualify for the FCC's Lifeline discount of $9.25 per month toward wireline or wireless service (through participation in SNAP, Medicaid, or other programs; or if income is 135 percent or less than the Federal Poverty Guidelines).[60]

[59] "Verizon Forward," Verizon, https://www.verizon.com/discounts/verizon-forward/?cmp=KNC_H_P_COE_GAW_FiOS_99_99_BP-9122&abr=CMOGBRPLUS&c=A005126&gad_source=1&gclid=EAIaIQobChMIhoXk08DKiAMVpwGtBh1igA4lEAAYASABEgK8nfD_BwE&gclsrc=aw.ds.

[60] "Lifeline," FCC, https://www.fcc.gov/lifeline-consumers.

- **Comcast Internet Essentials**, a cable internet plan that provides 50/10 Mbps service for the discounted price of $9.95 per month for eligible households. [61] Eligibility includes:
    - Participation in assistance programs like the National School Lunch Program, public housing assistance, Medicaid, SNAP, TANF, SSI, Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, WIC, Federal Pell Grant, Veterans pension, and Tribal assistance, or were enrolled in the Affordable Connectivity Program
    - Have not had Xfinity Internet within the last 90 days
    - Have no outstanding debt on any Comcast account that is less than one year old

- **Comcast Internet Essentials Plus,** a cable internet plan that provides up to 100/20 Mbps service for the discounted price of $29.95 per month for eligible households. Eligibility requirements for Internet Essentials Plus are the same as for Internet Essentials, listed above.

7.1.2 Single-payer agreements with ISPs have proven to be successful in closing the digital divide in communities across the country

Single-payer internet arrangements—in which a jurisdictional entity partners with an internet provider to pay for a defined population's monthly internet bill through a bulk purchase agreement—are common approaches nationally and are readily embraced by many ISPs. Somerset could consider a single-payer agreement with a local internet provider, so that a segment of the Town's population that is struggling to pay for home internet services each month is able to receive subsidized or free service. Somerset could begin this process by issuing a request for proposals (RFP) from providers in Town to get an understanding of who would be interested in partnering with the Town. Successful examples of this include:

- **Chicago Connected:** The National Digital Inclusion Alliance notes that through a single-payer program called Chicago Connected, more than 40,000 Chicago Public School students and their families have received broadband subscriptions since 2021.[62] Chicago Connected has become nationally recognized as a successful model for other entities nationwide.[63]

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[61] "Internet Essentials," Comcast Xfinity, https://www.xfinity.com/learn/internet-service/internet-essentials.
[62] "Chicago Connected," Chicago Public Schools, https://www.cps.edu/strategic-initiatives/chicago-connected/.
[63] "What Are Single Payer Agreements?" NDIA, https://www.digitalinclusion.org/blog/2020/08/28/what-are-single-payer-agreements/#:~:text=Chicago's%20single%2Dpayer%20agreement%20exists,families%20receiving%20the%20internet%20service.

- **San Francisco/Monkeybrains**: The City operates the "Fiber to Housing program," which provides free internet to low-income San Francisco residents, through the Department of Technology and in partnership with the local internet provider Monkeybrains. Fiber to Housing began in 2018 and leverages existing municipal fiber resources and private sector partnerships to operate the program.[64]

- **Cruzio Equal Access Program:** Cruzio started its Equal Access program in California at the beginning of the pandemic, and the company has raised nearly $1 million for projects to cover both infrastructure and discounted services. The Equal Access project provides connectivity to students and their families who may not be able to afford internet service. Completed projects are located in the City of Santa Cruz, Live Oak, and Pajaro Valley (all located in Santa Cruz County).[65] These projects were completed through a partnership between Cruzio, the County Office of Education, and Community Foundation Santa Cruz County, as well as the Housing Authority of the County and the Central Coast Broadband Consortium.

[64] "Monkeybrains and Fiber to Housing," Monkeybrains, https://www.monkeybrains.net/MB_fiber_to_housing.pdf.
[65] "Previous Projects," Equal Access Santa Cruz, https://equalaccesssantacruz.com/previous-projects/.

8 Results from MBI survey completed by Somerset residents show access, device and skills gaps and major concerns about privacy and security

This report is based on data collected from Somerset residents who responded to a survey instrument created by the Massachusetts Broadband Institute (MBI) and posted online. PDFs of paper copies in nine languages were also made available to residents of the Town. Both the online and PDF versions were also shared by other means including posting on the Town's website and sharing at the Somerset Public Library, during a Veterans Services Office event, at the Housing Authority, and by word of mouth. More broadly, the survey was made available to anyone who wished to fill it out across the state.

The results presented in this section are based on analysis of information provided in the survey by 476 residents of Somerset. Unless otherwise indicated, the percentages reported are based on valid responses from those who provided an answer and do not reflect individuals who said "don't know" or otherwise did not supply an answer because the question did not apply to them. Key results are noted where appropriate.

The survey sample was self-selected, and as such it is not necessarily representative of the larger population. Because lower-income residents were underrepresented, the report separately highlights answers from respondents reporting households earning less than $60,000 (the highest income category respondents could check was "$60,000 or above.")

This report focuses on data collected that is unambiguous with regard to meaning or accuracy, relevant to the topic of digital equity, and provides insights that are potentially actionable. The full survey instrument is posted in Appendix A.

8.1 Residential internet service

Respondents were asked about internet connection types and providers. This information provides valuable insight into residents' need for various internet and related communications services.

8.1.1 Internet access

Although 98 percent of Somerset respondents reported having either a home internet or mobile subscription, only 68 percent said they have wireline internet service in the home, leaving 32 percent not subscribing. Table 1 highlights the saturation of home internet subscriptions by key demographic groups. Respondents with a lower household income, women, and those who live alone are less likely than their counterparts to have wireline internet service.

Table 11: Home internet subscriptions by key demographics

	Percent having wireline internet	*Count*
TOTAL	**68%**	***325***
Respondent Age		
Less than 45	73%	*99*
45 to 59	68%	*126*
60 or older	67%	*139*
Income		
Less than $60,000	57%	*82*
$60,000 or more	73%	*186*
Education		
HS graduate or less	67%	*83*
2-year associate degree	68%	*60*
4-year college/university/bachelor's degree	71%	*108*
Postgraduate or professional degree	67%	*97*
Race/Ethnicity		
White, non-Hispanic	70%	*310*
Racial/ethnic minority	67%	*18*
Household Size		
One HH member	57%	*44*
Two HH members	75%	*104*
Three-four HH members	64%	*87*
Five + HH members	72%	*125*
Children in Household		
No children in HH	69%	*206*
Children in HH	70%	*151*
Gender Identity		
Man	79%	*105*
Woman	65%	*246*
Other gender identity	100%	*2*
Other demographics		
Identify as person with disability	61%	*49*
Member of LGBTQIA+ community	63%	*16*
Serve on active duty in US Armed Forces	68%	*34*
Live in affordable housing	43%	*7*

8.1.2 Questions for those with home internet service

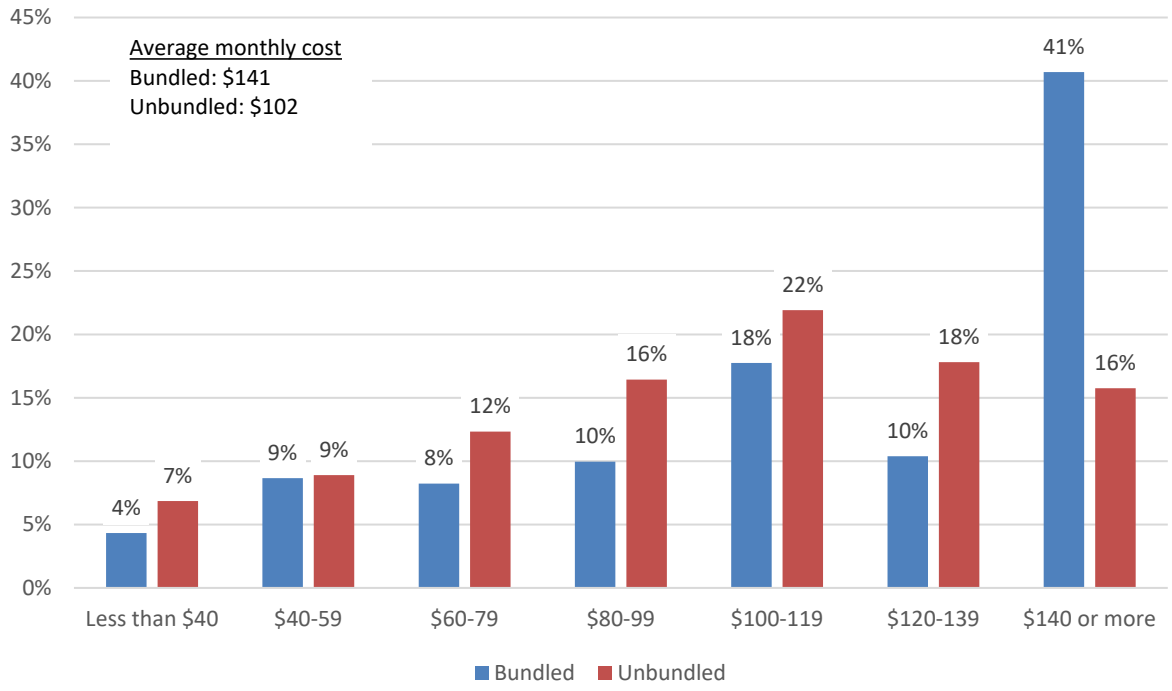
Respondents subscribing to home internet service were asked a series of questions about their service, including provider used and price paid.

- **Home internet service provider:** Most households with home internet service have Comcast/Xfinity (94 percent). Three percent have T-Mobile, and two percent have

Verizon. (CTC combined answers in cases where the survey instrument listed the same provider twice, but under different brand or company names.)

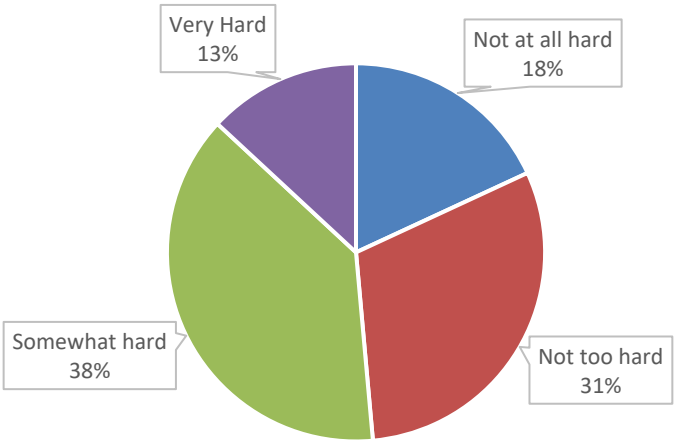
- **How well home internet service works:** Most internet subscribers (75 percent) said their service is good enough to meet their household's needs, but 23 percent said it is not good enough and two percent said they do not know.
- **Internet service cost:** Respondents were asked to give the cost of their home internet service, as well as indicate whether or not they bundle internet with TV and/or phone service. Overall, 66 percent of subscribers bundle their internet service. Respondents pay an average of $141 per month for bundled internet service and an average of $102 per month for unbundled internet service (see Figure 10). Sixty-nine percent of those with bundled service pay at least $100 per month, compared with 55 percent of those with internet-only service.

Figure 10: Monthly price for internet service



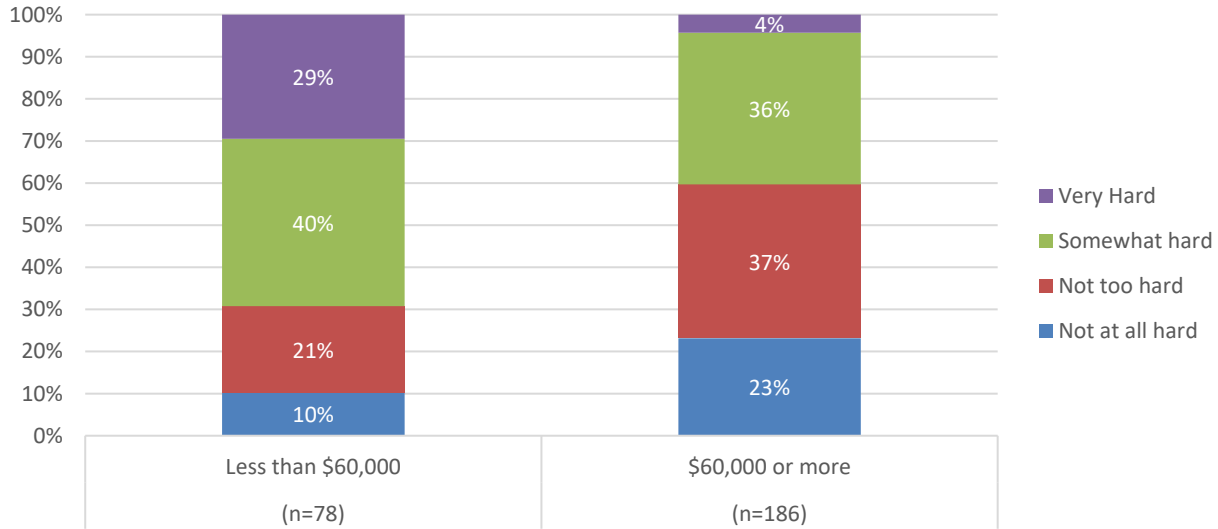
- **Service affordability:** Respondents were also asked how hard it is to pay their internet bill. About one-half of subscribers said it is not at all hard (18 percent) or not too hard (31 percent) to pay, as illustrated in Figure 11. However, many subscribers said it is somewhat hard (38 percent) or very hard (13 percent) to pay their internet bill.

Figure 11: How hard is it to pay internet bill



As may be expected, respondents in lower income households were more likely than those in higher income households to say it is somewhat hard or very hard to pay their internet bill (see Figure 12). Specifically, 69 percent of those earning less than $60,000 per year said paying their bill was "somewhat hard" or "very hard." Although based on a relatively small number of respondents in the lower-income cohort, this data contributes to our finding that affordability is a significant concern for lower-income residents of Somerset.

Figure 12: How hard is it to pay internet bill by household income



8.1.3 Questions for those without any home internet service—subscription or smartphone

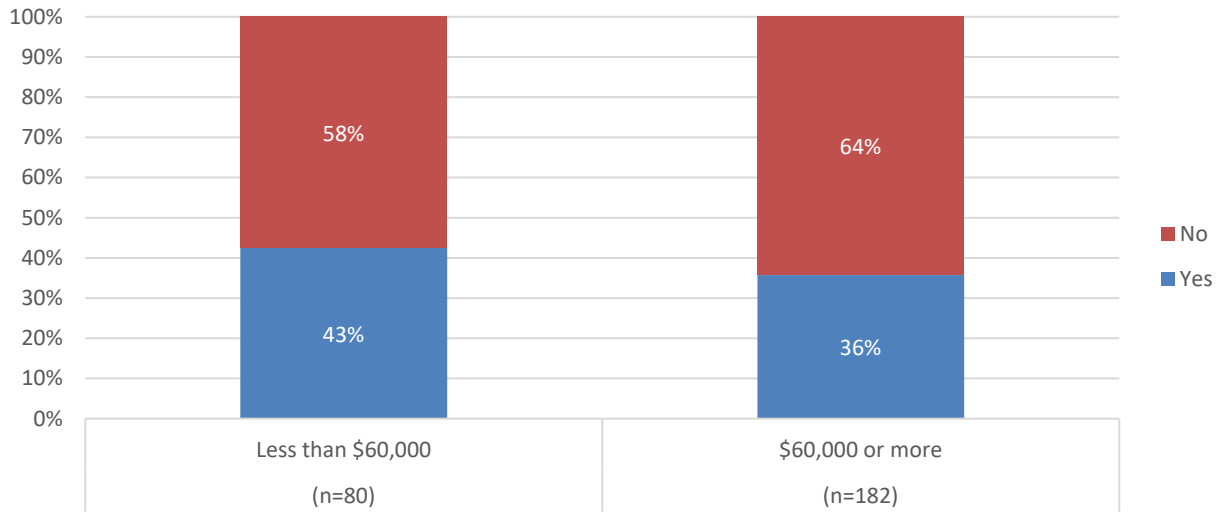
Respondents without internet services were asked to indicate the various reasons for this. The survey asked this question only of the very small number of people who lack any kind service (neither a home subscription nor a smartphone), not the larger number who, while they might have a smartphone, do not have home internet subscriptions specifically. As such, this report will use American Community Survey data on this point.

Given that only nine people who responded lack either a home subscription or mobile subscription, the sample is too small to analyze in-depth. Six of the nine individuals cited the high expense as a barrier to having internet service. Seven of the nine respondents, without mobile or home internet service access the internet elsewhere outside the home; two individuals do not access the internet at any of the locations listed on the questionnaire.

8.1.4 Internet subsidy programs

All respondents were asked if they had heard of the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP), which is available to eligible low-income households. As shown in Figure 13, only 43 percent of respondents with an annual household income of less than $60,000, and who thus might be in a position to take advantage of the ACP, are aware of this program. This datapoint supports our recommendation that enrollment support efforts be expanded in Somerset.

Figure 13: Aware of the Affordable Connectivity Program by household income

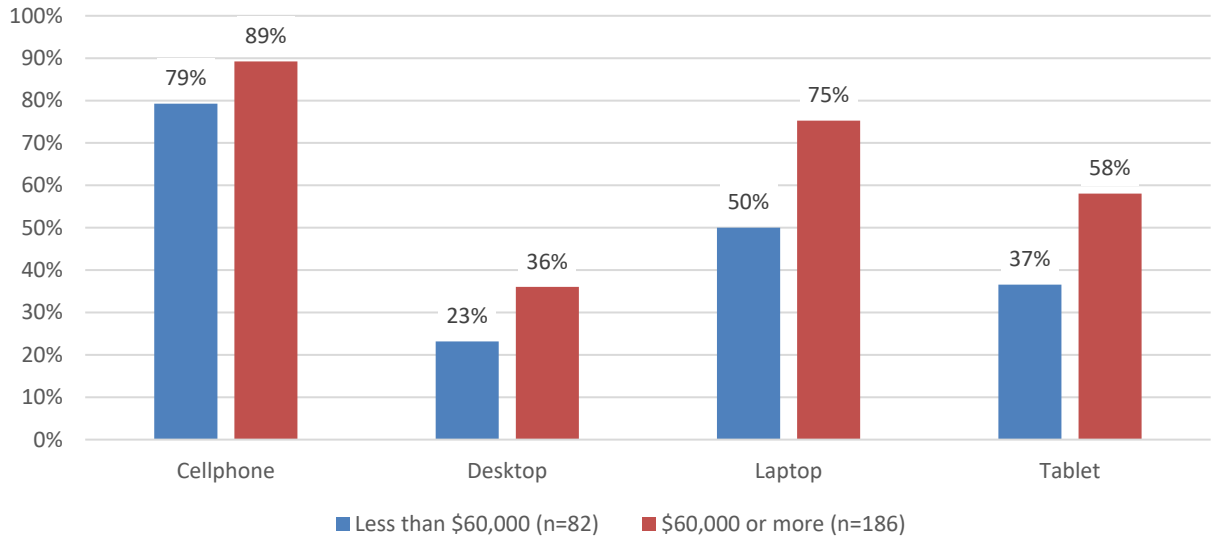


8.1.5 Computing devices used in household

Respondents were asked a series of questions about access to computing devices and types of devices used. Most respondents (94 percent) said everyone in their household has access to the

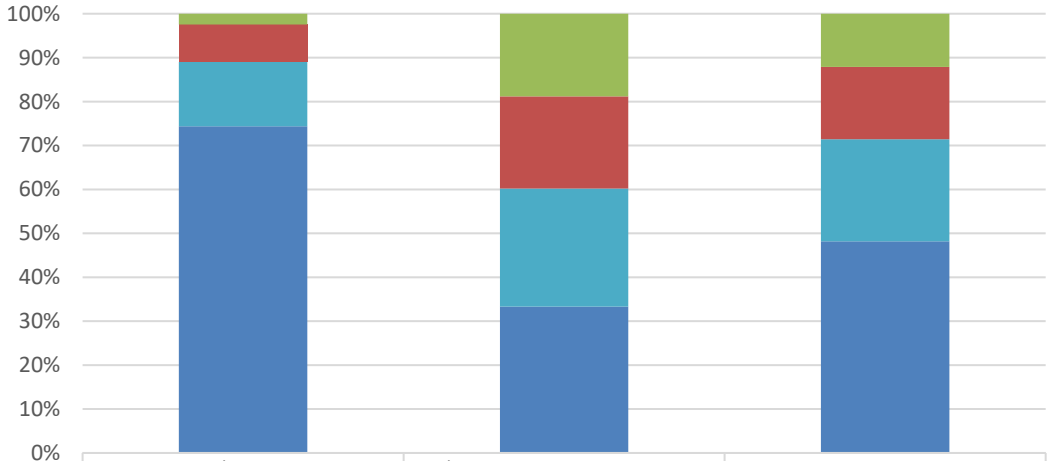
computing devices they need to meet their everyday needs for internet use. However, those with an annual household income under $60,000 are less likely than those in higher income households to use a device to connect to the internet (see Figure 14). This informs our recommendation that device access programs for low-income residents of Somerset be expanded.

Figure 14: Devices used most of the time to connect to the internet by household income



As shown in Figure 15, just 28 percent of respondents would be able to pay $500 or more for a laptop or desktop computer. Three-fourths of respondents earning under $60,000 per year could pay only $250 or less for a computer, compared with 33 percent of those earning $60,000 or more per year. Again, this informs our recommendation that device access programs for low-income residents of Somerset be expanded.

Figure 15: Amount able to pay for laptop or desktop computer



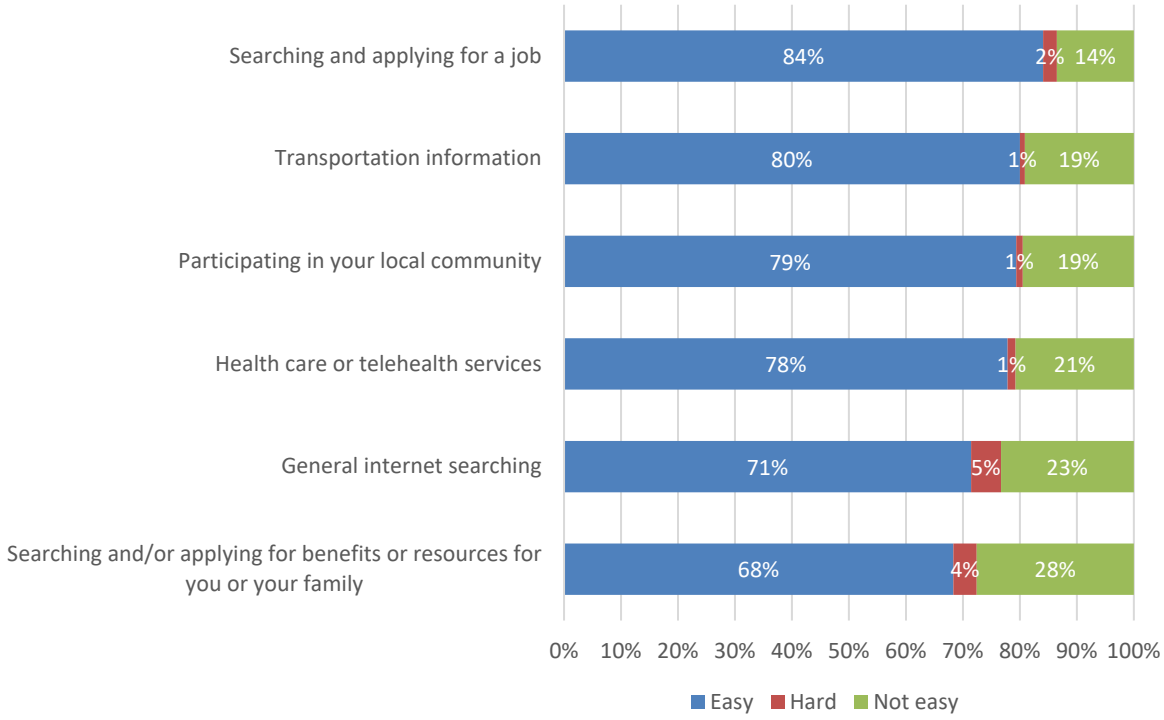
	Less than $60,000 (n=82)	$60,000 or more (n=186)	All Respondents (n=413)
More than $1,000	2%	19%	12%
$500-1000	9%	21%	16%
$250-500	15%	27%	23%
$0-250	74%	33%	48%

8.2 Digital skills

Respondents were asked a series of questions on how skilled they are using the internet in general and for specific activities. This information provides valuable insight into where there may be gaps in abilities and opportunities to educate residents. Almost all (95 percent) respondents said they can regularly use the internet for online activities. However, a sizeable percentage of respondents said using the internet is hard/not easy for various tasks, as shown in Figure 16.

Most (84 percent) respondents said using the internet for searching and applying for a job is easy. About eight in 10 respondents said it is easy to use the internet for transportation information (80 percent), participating in their local community (79 percent), and health care or telehealth services (78 percent). Seventy-one percent said it is easy to use the internet for general searching, while 29 percent said it is hard/not easy. Sixty-eight percent of respondents said it is easy to use the internet for searching and applying for benefits or resources.

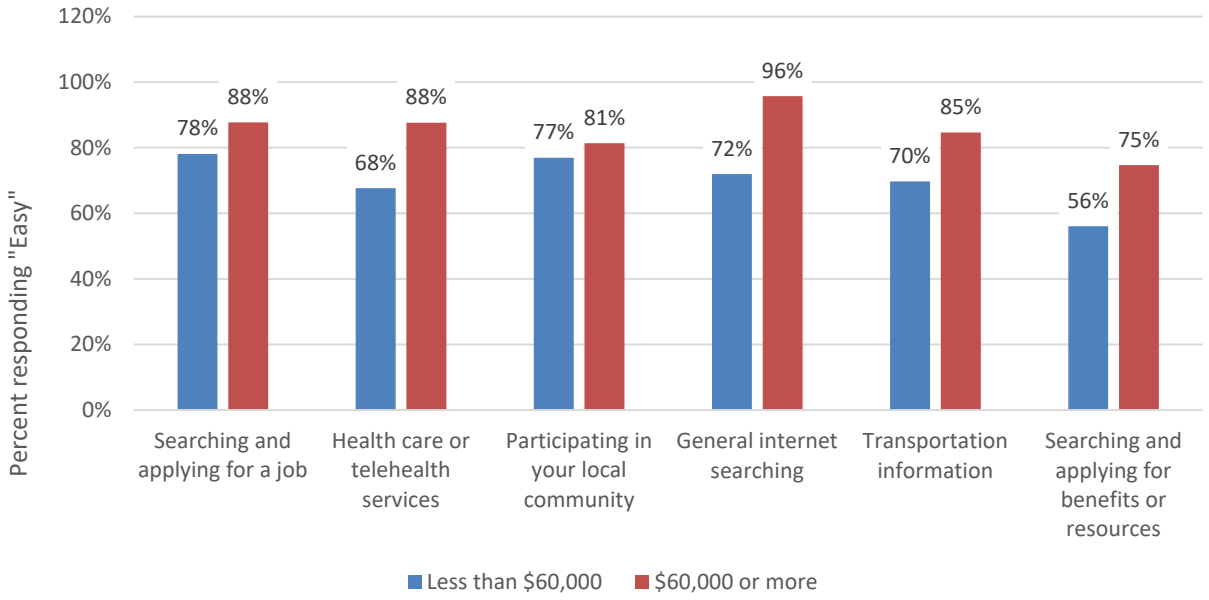
Figure 16: Difficulty in using the internet for various tasks



However, as shown in

Figure 17, respondents with a household income of less than $60,000 were less likely than those in higher-income households to say using the internet for key tasks is easy, demonstrating that lower-income residents are most in need of skills programs. This informs our recommendation that skills programs for low-income residents of Somerset be expanded.

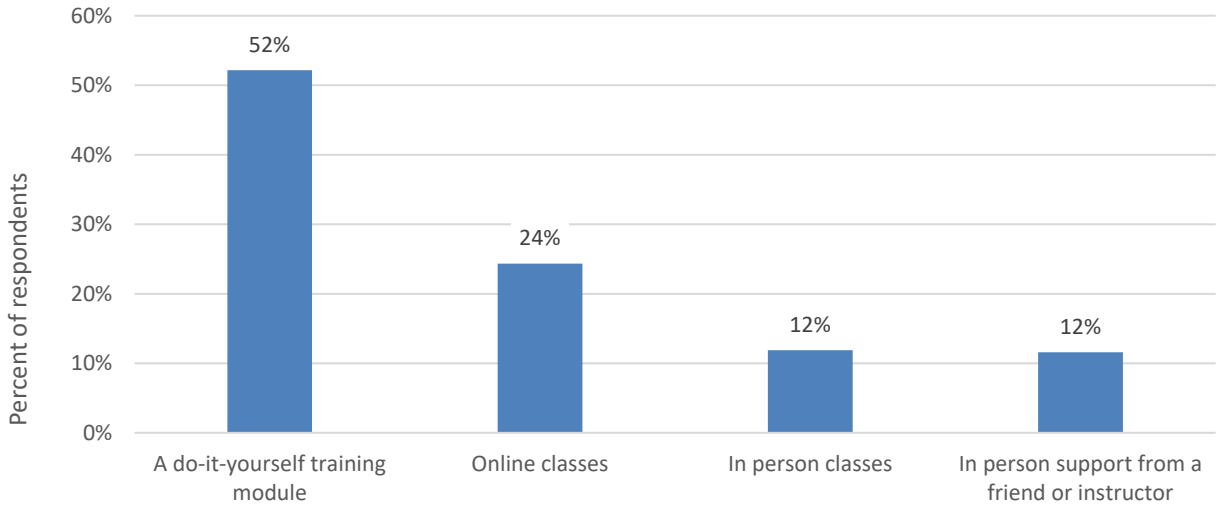
Figure 17: Ease in using the internet for various tasks by household income



Seventy-two percent of respondents were able to indicate the type of digital skills support they would be most interested in. Among this segment of respondents, 52 percent said they would be most interested in a do-it-yourself training module (see Figure 18).

The question did not provide respondents with the opportunity to say they were not interested in taking any kind of class. In other jurisdictions, CTC has found that significant numbers of people, even those lacking skills, are not interested in attending classes. As such, these results should not be taken to mean that Somerset needs to expand skills-training programs at the levels indicated here.

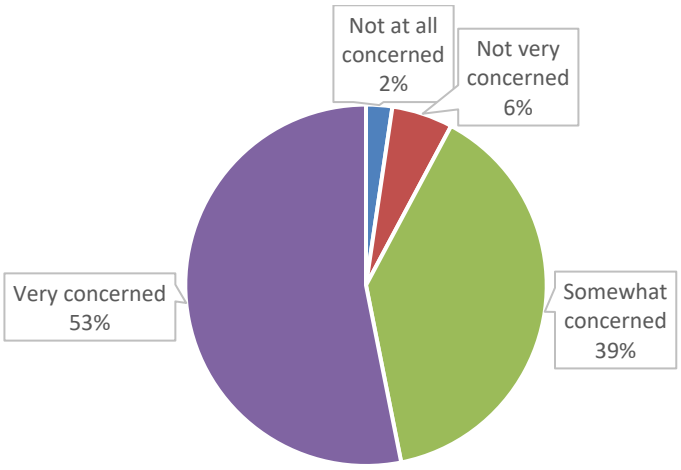
Figure 18: Digital skills support most interested in



8.3 Internet safety

Somerset residents across the income and other demographic categories have significant concerns about online safety and privacy. Respondents were asked a series of questions pertaining to individual awareness of, and the use of, measures to secure online privacy and internet safety. Most respondents are either somewhat concerned (39 percent) or very concerned (53 percent) about online safety (see Figure 19). Concern is high across all demographic groups.

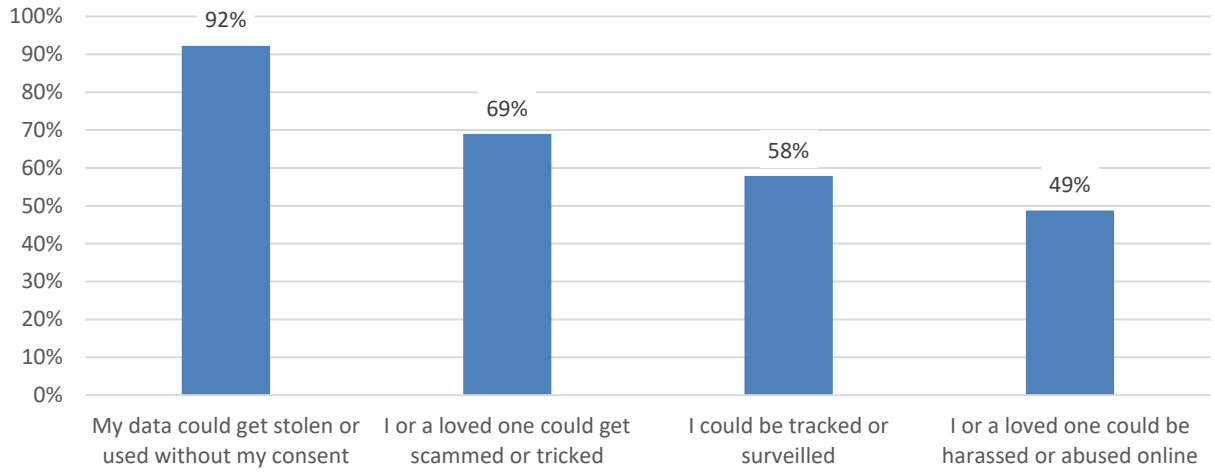
Figure 19: Concern about online safety



Respondents are most concerned about their data being stolen or used without their consent, cited by 92 percent (see Figure 20). About seven in 10 respondents are most concerned that they or a loved one could get scammed or tricked, and 58 percent are most concerned they could be tracked or surveilled. Another 49 percent are most concerned about being harassed or abused

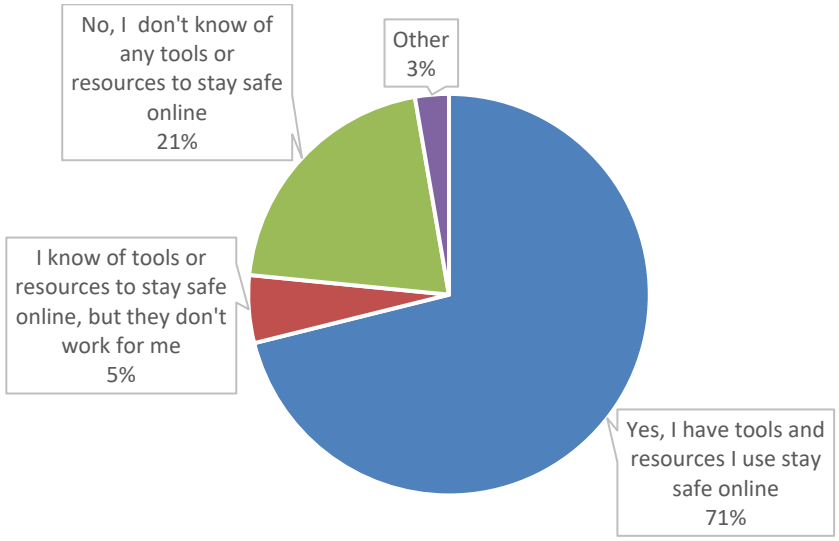
online.

Figure 20: Most concerned about internet safety



About seven in 10 respondents who answered said they have the tools and resources they need to stay safe online (see Figure 21). (367, or 77 percent, respondents answered this question.) Another 21 percent of respondents said they do not know of any tools or resources to stay safe online, while five percent said they know of tools or resources, but they do not work.

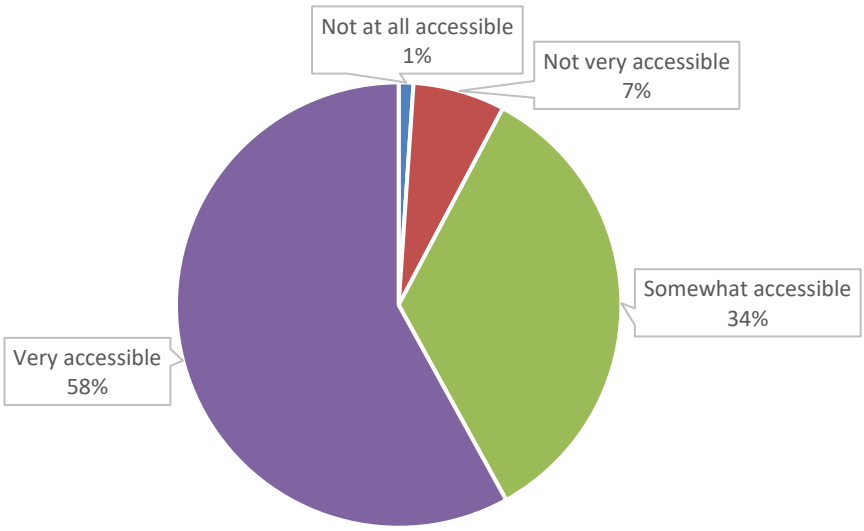
Figure 21: Aware of tools or resources respondents can use to stay safe online



8.4 Online accessibility and inclusiveness

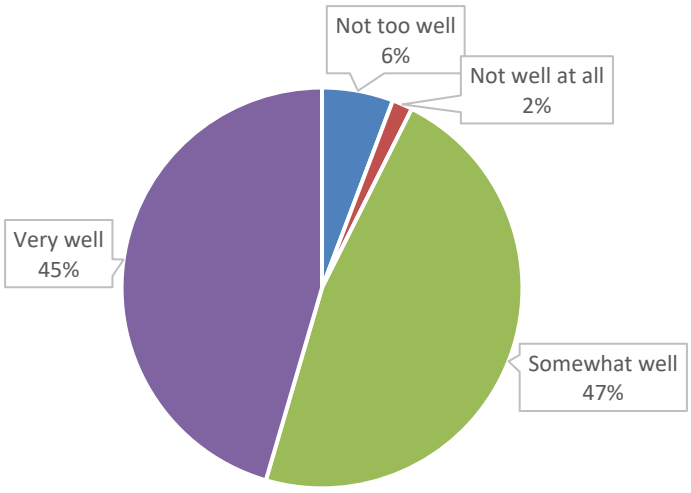
Respondents were asked questions related to online accessibility and inclusivity of public resources and services. Most respondents said online government services are somewhat accessible (34 percent) or very accessible (58 percent), as shown in Figure 22.

Figure 22: Accessibility of online government services



More than nine in 10 respondents said online government services have worked somewhat well (47 percent) or very well (45 percent), as shown in Figure 23. Online government services are assessed highly across demographic groups.

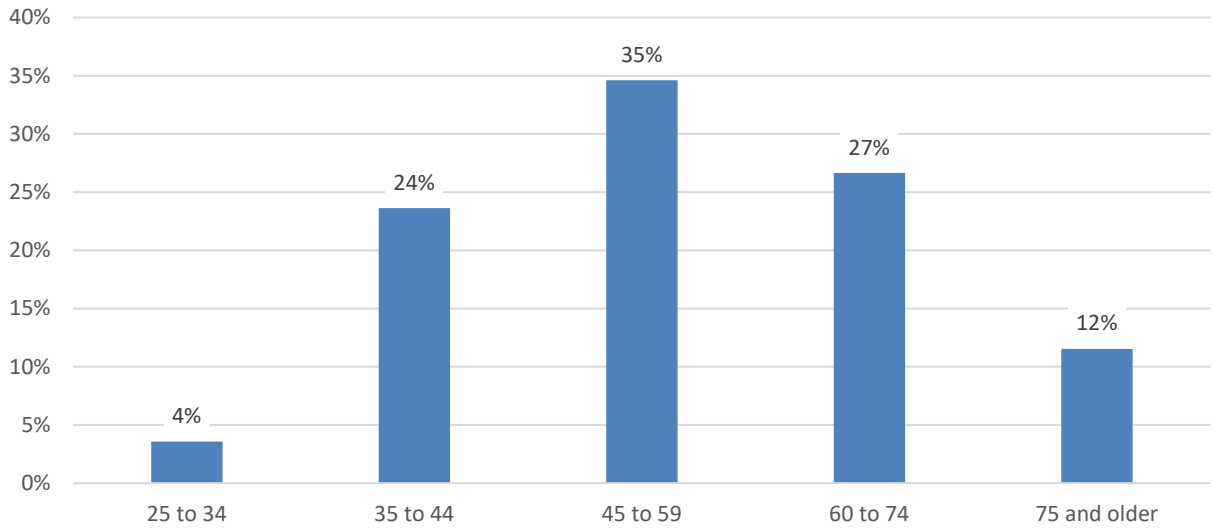
Figure 23: How well online government services have worked



8.5 Respondent information

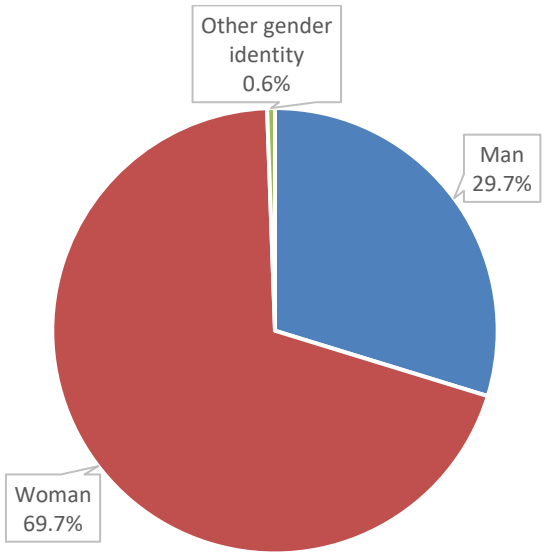
Basic demographic information was gathered from survey respondents and is summarized in this section. Several comparisons of respondent demographic information and other survey questions were provided previously in this report. As shown in Figure 24, 28 percent of respondents are under age 45, 35 percent are ages 45 to 59 years, and 38 percent are ages 60 or older.

Figure 24: Age of respondents



Seven in 10 respondents identify as a woman, and three in 10 identify as a man (see Figure 25). Fewer than one percent of respondents have another gender identity.

Figure 25: Gender identity



Respondents were asked to indicate the number of adults and children in their household. Twenty-nine percent of households have two members, 24 percent have three or four household members, and 35 percent have five or more household members. Just 12 percent of respondents live alone (see Figure 26). Forty-two percent of respondents have children living in the household (see Figure 27).

Figure 26: Total household size

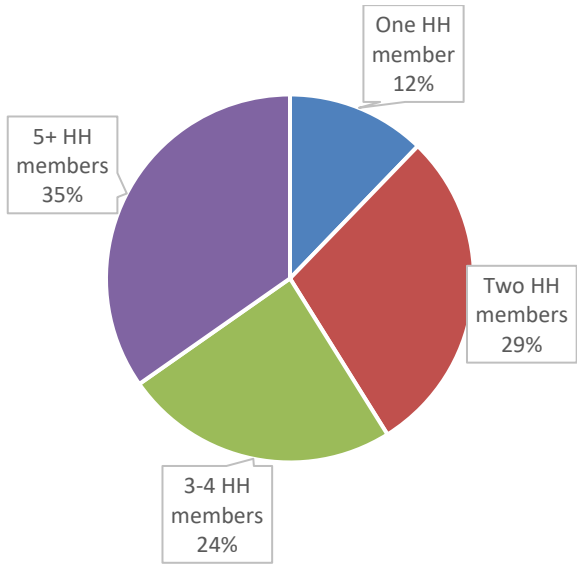
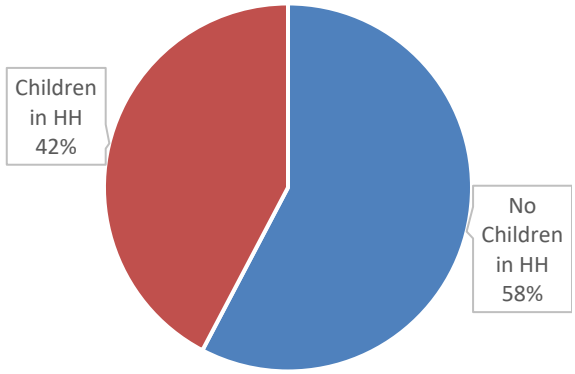
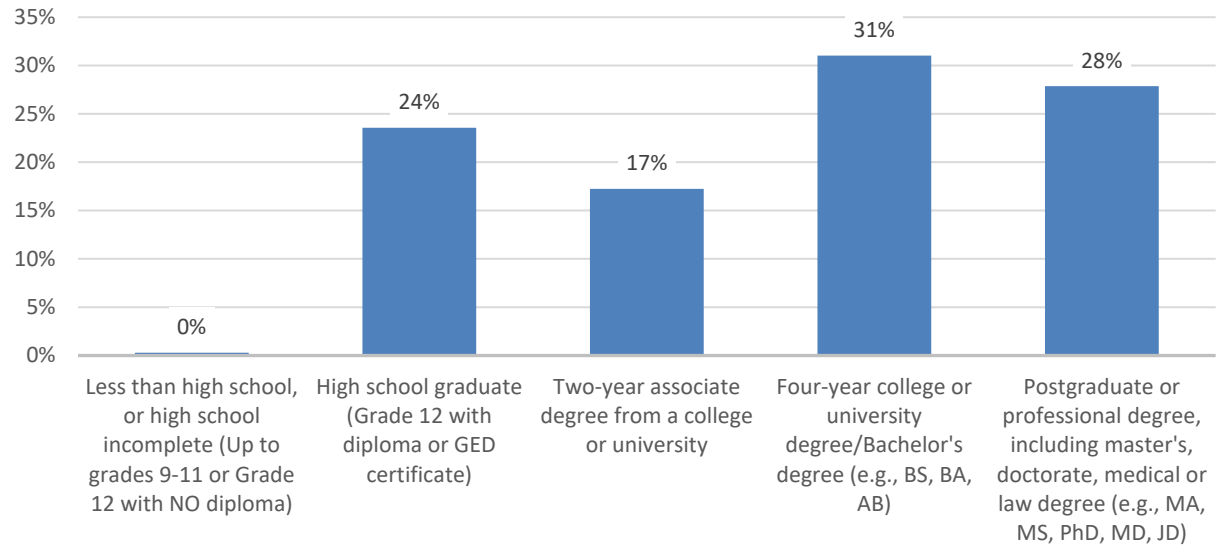


Figure 27: Number of children in household



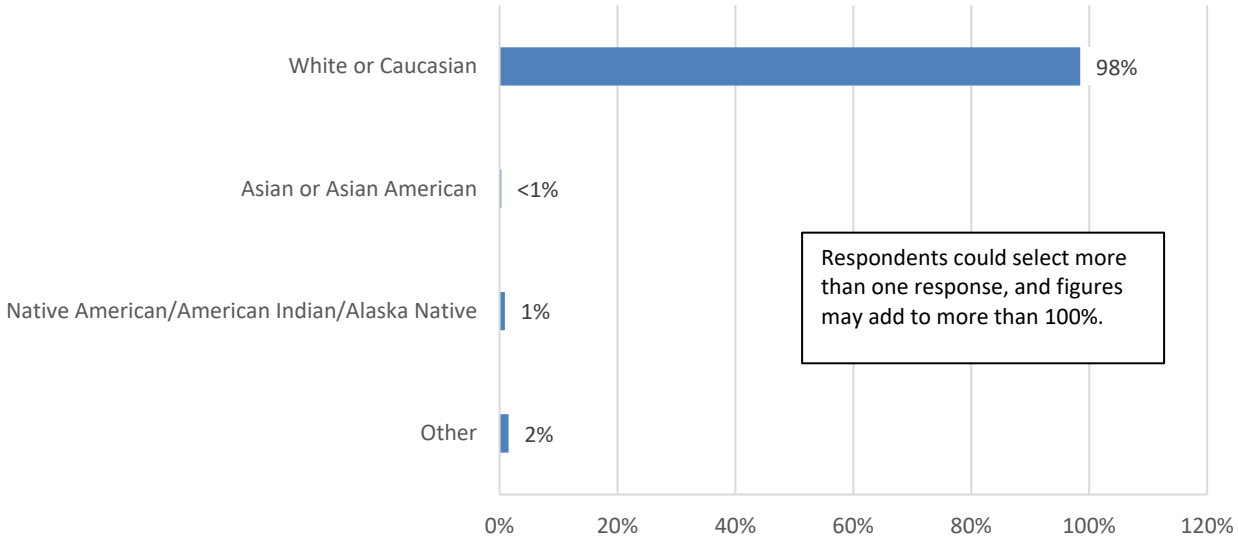
The respondents' highest level of education attained is summarized in Figure 28. Almost one-fourth of respondents have a high school education or less, and 17 percent have a two-year associate degree. Another 31 percent of respondents have a four-year college degree, and 28 percent have a postgraduate or professional degree.

Figure 28: Education of respondent



Respondents were asked to indicate what categories best describe their race (see Figure 29). Sixty-nine percent of all respondents provided this information. Among this segment, 98 percent are White or Caucasian.

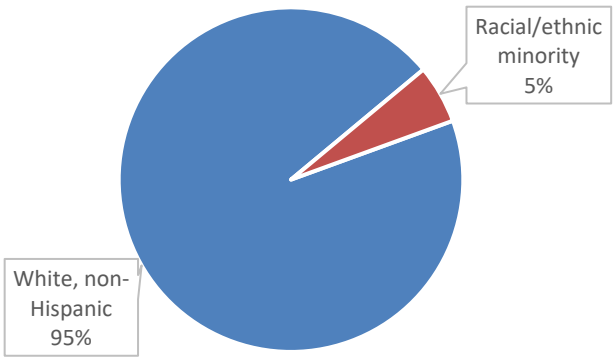
Figure 29: Race/ethnicity grouped



Respondents were also asked to indicate their ethnicity and if they belonged to a North American Indigenous, Native, or Tribal Group. About three percent of respondents said they are of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin. Two percent of respondents belong to a North American

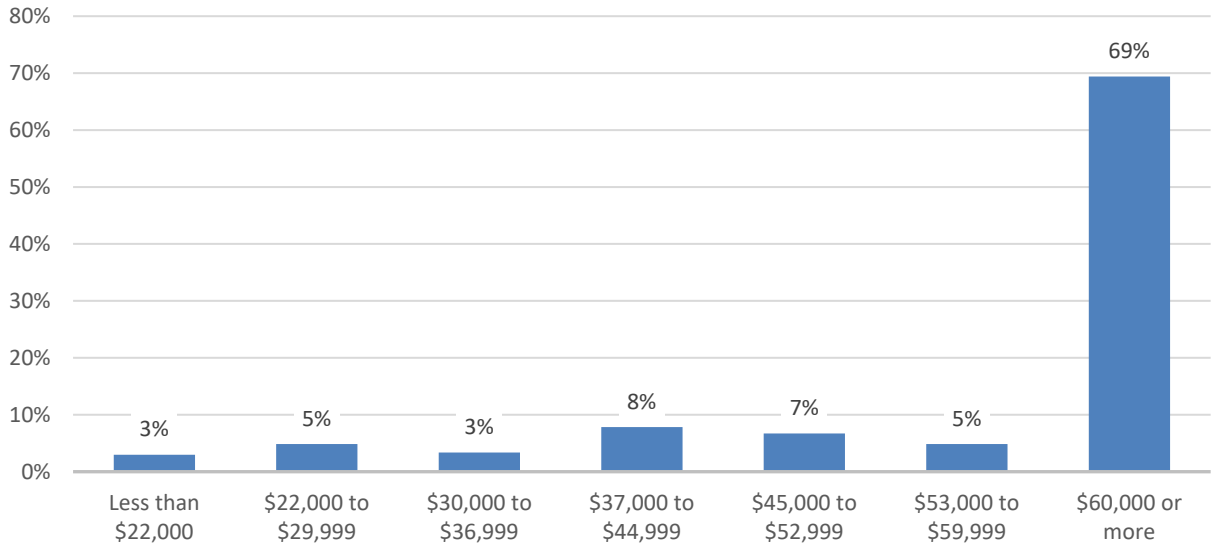
Indigenous, Native, or Tribal Group. Among those who responded to the race and ethnicity questions, 95 percent are White, non-Hispanic, and five percent belong to a racial or ethnic minority group (see Figure 30). Keep in mind that 31 percent of respondents cannot be classified (i.e., did not respond to race and ethnicity questions).

Figure 30: Race and ethnicity



As illustrated in Figure 31, 31 percent of respondents have an annual household income of less than $60,000, and 69 percent earn $60,000 or more per year.

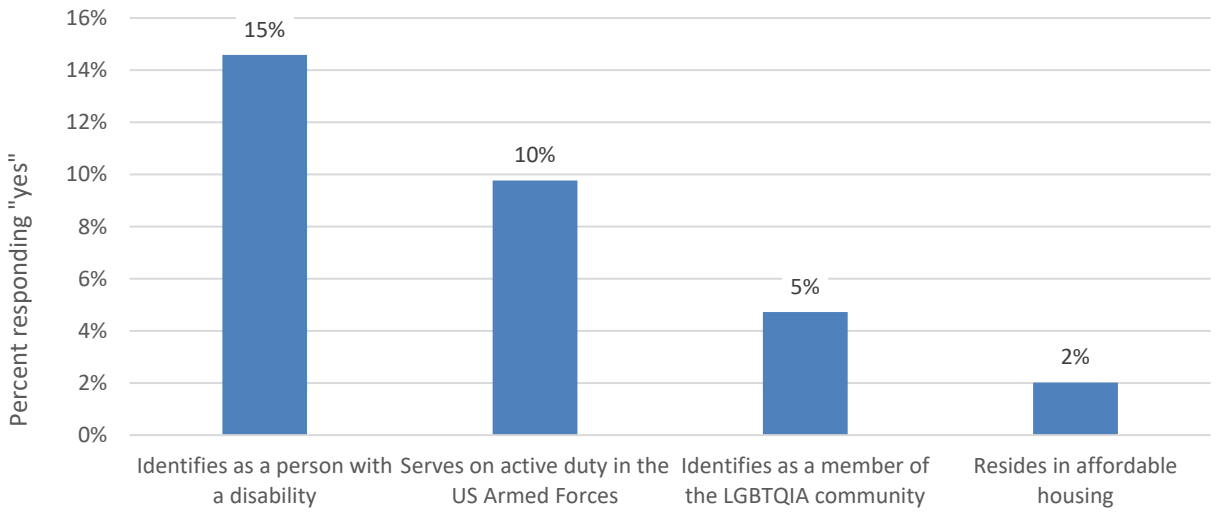
Figure 31: Annual household income



Respondents were asked if they belonged to certain other demographic groups. Fifteen percent of those who responded said they identify as a person with a disability (see Figure 32).

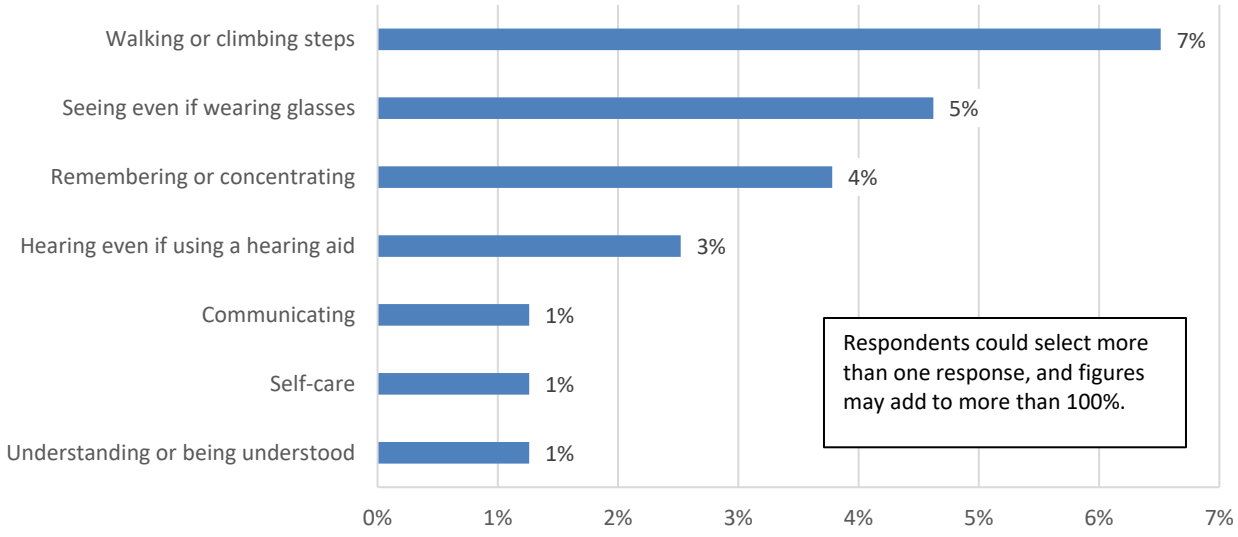
Additionally, 10 percent serve on active duty in the US Armed Forces, and five percent identify as a member of the LGBTQIA community. Only two percent said they reside in affordable housing.

Figure 32: Respondent belongs to particular demographic groups



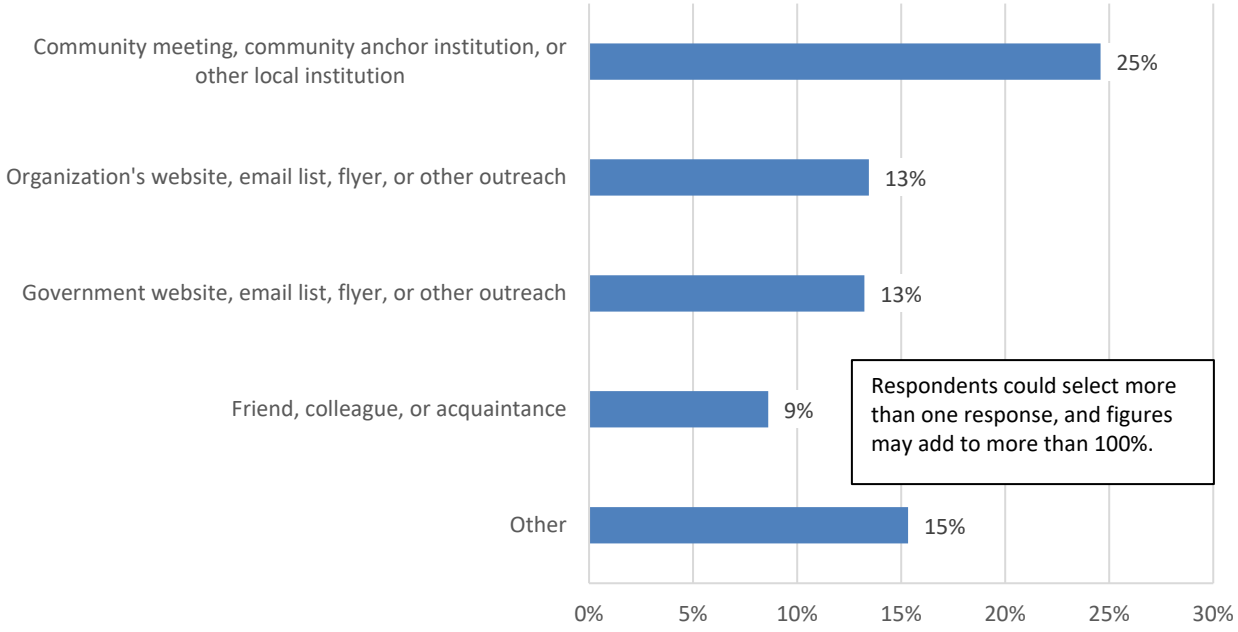
Additionally, respondents were asked if they faced difficulty in a variety of areas, as shown in Figure 33. Most respondents (89 percent) did not indicate any areas of difficulty. A small segment of respondents does face difficulties, such as walking or climbing steps (seven percent), seeing even if wearing glasses (five percent) and remembering or concentrating (four percent).

Figure 33: Respondent has difficulty in various areas



Respondents learned about the survey through a variety of sources, including 25 percent who heard about it from a community meeting, community anchor institutions, or other local institution. Other sources include an organization's website, email list, flyer, or other outreach (13 percent), a government website, email list, flyer, or other outreach (13 percent), and friend, colleague, or acquaintance (nine percent; see Figure 34).

Figure 34: Where respondents heard about survey



Appendix A: MBI survey

MBI
MASSACHUSETTS BROADBAND INSTITUTE
at the MassTech Collaborative

Massachusetts Statewide Digital Equity Survey

The Massachusetts Broadband Institute (MBI) wants to hear from you about your experiences with getting and using internet service! This survey is completely anonymous and should be completed by one individual per household. **Your feedback is vital to understand barriers to internet access, affordability, and adoption to help close the digital divide.** Thank you for your time and participation.

Section 1: Please answer the following questions.

1. What is your zip code? _____
2. Which Massachusetts municipality do you live in? _____

Do you have internet service in your home?

- ☐ **YES** – Please proceed to Section 2 below
- ☐ **NO** – Please skip to Section 3 (flip this page over)

Section 2: Please answer the following questions only if you CAN connect to the internet from home.

3. Who is your internet service provider? _____
4. What kind of internet service do you have at home? Please check all that apply.
   - ☐ A data plan for a smartphone, hotspot, or tablet
   - ☐ Dial-up internet
   - ☐ Home wireline connection (cable, fiber, DSL, etc.)
   - ☐ Satellite internet
5. How well does your home internet service work?
   - ☐ Good enough to meet my household's needs
   - ☐ I don't know
   - ☐ Not good enough to meet my household's needs
6. Is your home internet service bundled with other services such as telephone or TV?
   - ☐ Yes
   - ☐ No
7. How much do you pay for the internet every month? $_____
8. How hard is it for you to pay your internet bill?
   - ☐ Very hard
   - ☐ Not too hard
   - ☐ Somewhat hard
   - ☐ Not at all hard
9. Have you heard about the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) that provides discounted internet service for low-income households?
   - ☐ Yes
   - ☐ I don't know
   - ☐ No

   For more information and to find out if you qualify for ACP, call the Federal Communication Commission's ACP Support Center: 877-384-2575.

When complete, skip to section 4 below.

Section 3: Please answer the following questions only if you CANNOT connect to the internet at home.

10. If you do not have internet service in your home, what is the reason?
    - ☐ Service is not available in my area
    - ☐ Service is too expensive
    - ☐ I am concerned about online privacy or safety
    - ☐ I don't feel confident navigating the internet or using online tools
    - ☐ I can't afford or access a device to use the internet
    - ☐ I don't want / don't use the internet.
    - ☐ Other (please specify): _____

11. If you do not have internet at home, where do you go to use the internet? Please check all that apply.
    - ☐ A workplace
    - ☐ A friend or family member's home
    - ☐ School, college, or university
    - ☐ A library or community center
    - ☐ A business such as a restaurant, cafe, or bookstore (e.g., McDonald's, Taco Bell, Starbucks, etc.)
    - ☐ A public space such as a park or government building
    - ☐ On public transit
    - ☐ I do not regularly access internet in these or any other spaces
    - ☐ Other (please specify): _____

When complete, proceed to section 4 below.

Section 4: All respondents should answer these questions.

12. Does everyone in your household have access to the computer devices they need to meet their everyday needs for internet use? (Computers, smartphones, tablets, or other internet enabled devices)?
    - ☐ Yes
    - ☐ No

13. Which of the following devices do you use most of the time to connect to the internet? (Check all that apply)
    - ☐ Cellphone
    - ☐ Desktop computer
    - ☐ Laptop computer
    - ☐ Tablet (or similar device)
    - ☐ Other (please specify): _____

14. How much would you be able to pay for a laptop or desktop computer?
    - ☐ $0-50
    - ☐ $50-100
    - ☐ $100-150
    - ☐ $150-250
    - ☐ $250-500
    - ☐ More than $1,000

15. Are you able to regularly use the internet for online activities?
    - ☐ Yes
    - ☐ No

16. Please rank the level of difficulty for what you use the internet for. (Easy, Not easy, Hard)

	Easy	*Not easy*	*Hard*
Searching and applying for a job	☐	☐	☐
Health care or telehealth services	☐	☐	☐
Participating in your local community	☐	☐	☐
General internet searching	☐	☐	☐
Transportation information	☐	☐	☐
Searching and/or applying for benefits or resources for you or your family	☐	☐	☐

17. If you do not have regular access to the internet, what would most like to use it for if you could?
    - ☐ Searching and applying for a job
    - ☐ Health care or telehealth services
    - ☐ Participating in your local community
    - ☐ General internet searching
    - ☐ Transportation information
    - ☐ Searching and/or applying for benefits or resources for you and your family
    - ☐ Something else
    - ☐ I don't want to use the internet regularly

18. What kind of digital skills support would you be most interested in?
    - ☐ In person classes
    - ☐ Online classes
    - ☐ In person support from a friend or instructor
    - ☐ A do-it-yourself training module

19. How concerned are you, if at all, about internet safety?
    - ☐ Very concerned
    - ☐ Somewhat concerned
    - ☐ Not very concerned
    - ☐ Not at all concerned

20. What are you most concerned about? (Select all that apply)
    - ☐ That my data could get stolen or used without my consent
    - ☐ That I or a loved one could get scammed or tricked
    - ☐ That I could be tracked or surveilled
    - ☐ That I or a loved one could be harassed or abused online

21. Are you aware of tools or resources you can use to stay safe online?
    - ☐ Yes, I have tools and resources I use stay safe online
    - ☐ No, I don't know of any tools or resources to stay safe online
    - ☐ I know of tools or resources to stay safe online, but they don't work for me
    - ☐ Other (please specify) : _____

22. How accessible are online government services like benefits portals, RMV services, or paying for permits or tickets to you?
    - ☐ Very accessible
    - ☐ Somewhat accessible
    - ☐ Not very accessible
    - ☐ Not at all accessible

23. When you have used online government services like benefits portals, RMV services, or paying for permits or tickets, how well did they work for you?
    - ☐ Very well
    - ☐ Somewhat well
    - ☐ Not too well
    - ☐ Not well at all

When complete, proceed to section 5 below.

Section 5: All respondents should answer these questions. *We collect demographic information so that we can make sure we are representing all neighborhoods, towns, cities and groups across the Commonwealth.*

24. What is your age?
- ☐ 18 to 24
- ☐ 25 to 34
- ☐ 35 to 44
- ☐ 45 to 59
- ☐ 60 to 74
- ☐ 75 and older
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

25. What is your gender identity?
- ☐ Woman
- ☐ Man
- ☐ Non-binary
- ☐ Gender fluid
- ☐ Other
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

26. How many people, including yourself, currently live in your household? *(Note: A household is defined as all the people who currently occupy the housing unit where you live).*
- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ 5
- ☐ 6
- ☐ 7
- ☐ 8 or more
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

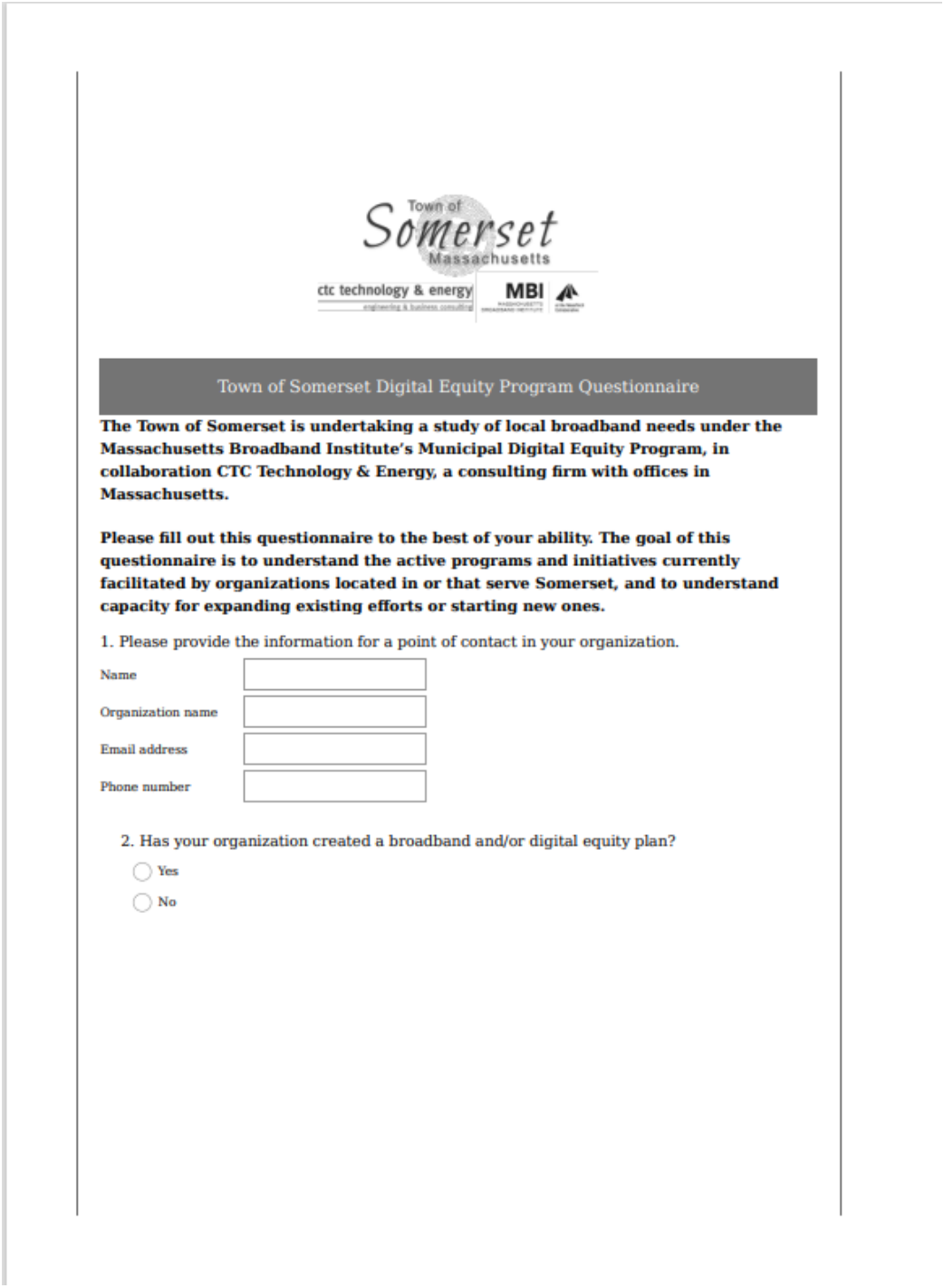
27. How many children under age 18, currently live in your household? *(Note: A household is defined as all the people who currently occupy the housing unit where you live).*
- ☐ 0
- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ 5 or more
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

28. What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?
- ☐ Less than high school, or high school incomplete (Up to grades 9-11 or Grade 12 with NO diploma)
- ☐ High school graduate (Grade 12 with diploma or GED certificate)
- ☐ Two-year associate degree from a college or university
- ☐ Four-year college or university degree/Bachelor's degree (e.g., BS, BA, AB)
- ☐ Postgraduate or professional degree, including master's, doctorate, medical or law degree (e.g., MA, MS, PhD, MD, JD)
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

29. Are you of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin, such as Mexican, Puerto Rican, or Cuban?
- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

30. Which of the following best describes your race? (Select all that apply)
- ☐ White or Caucasian
- ☐ Black or African-American
- ☐ Asian or Asian-American
- ☐ Native American/American Indian/Alaska Native
- ☐ Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian
- ☐ Some other race (please specify) _____
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

Appendix B: Stakeholder questionnaire



Town of Somerset Massachusetts

ctc technology & energy

MBI

Town of Somerset Digital Equity Program Questionnaire

The Town of Somerset is undertaking a study of local broadband needs under the Massachusetts Broadband Institute's Municipal Digital Equity Program, in collaboration CTC Technology & Energy, a consulting firm with offices in Massachusetts.

Please fill out this questionnaire to the best of your ability. The goal of this questionnaire is to understand the active programs and initiatives currently facilitated by organizations located in or that serve Somerset, and to understand capacity for expanding existing efforts or starting new ones.

1. Please provide the information for a point of contact in your organization.

Name

Organization name

Email address

Phone number

2. Has your organization created a broadband and/or digital equity plan?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

Town of Somerset Massachusetts

ctc technology & energy engineering & business consulting

MBI

Town of Somerset Digital Equity Program Questionnaire

Digital Equity Programs Introduction

Digital equity programs aim to ensure that individuals have the skills, technology, and capacity to use broadband to its fullest extent. Examples of digital equity programs include those that promote computer skills, internet access, and computing device access.

3. What do you believe are the most pressing challenges associated with digital equity and access in Somerset, and for whom?

* 4. Does your organization offer digital equity programs?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

Town of Somerset Massachusetts

ctc technology & energy | MBI

Town of Somerset Digital Equity Program Questionnaire

Program Details

We want to collect data on all digital equity programs you currently provide. Please record as many details as you can about the program you offer. If your organization has more than one active digital equity program, there is an opportunity for you to answer the same questions for a second program.

5. What is the name of the project?

Project name

6. What aspects of digital equity does the program address? Check all that apply.

- [ ] Availability and affordability of internet
- [ ] Digital literacy
- [ ] Cybersecurity
- [ ] Devices and technical support
- [ ] Online accessibility and inclusivity

7. Please describe the program in a few sentences:

8. Does the program focus on certain populations? Check all that apply.

- [ ] Individuals with disabilities
- [ ] Veterans
- [ ] Aging individuals (60 and above)
- [ ] Incarcerated individuals
- [ ] Individuals with a language barrier, including individuals who are English learners; and have low levels of literacy
- [ ] Individuals who are members of a racial or ethnic minority group
- [ ] Individuals whose household income is lower than 150% of the poverty level
- [ ] No particular focus on a population
- [ ] Other (please specify)

9. What is the annual project budget?

Cost in dollars

10. How much does the program cost to each participant?

Cost in dollars

11. What is the cost per participant served?

Cost in dollars

12. Please give us a sense of the geography you serve.

- ○ Municipal-wide
- ○ Neighborhood-wide
- ○ Other (please specify)

13. How long has the program been active, in months?

Program length in months

14. How many people were served by the program in the last fiscal year?

- ◯ Under 25 people
- ◯ 26 to 50 people
- ◯ 51 to 100 people
- ◯ More than 100 people
- ◯ Other (please specify)

15. How many participants do you expect to serve over the life of the program?

- ◯ 1 to 50
- ◯ 51 to 100 people
- ◯ 101 to 250 people
- ◯ 251 to 500 people
- ◯ More than 500 people

16. If you had the resources, would you want to scale the project to serve more people?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

* 17. Does your organization have another digital equity program?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

Town of Somerset Massachusetts

ctc technology & energy

MBI

Town of Somerset Digital Equity Program Questionnaire

Digital Equity Program #2

18. What is the name of the project?

Project name

19. What aspects of digital equity does the program address? Check all that apply.

- [ ] Availability and affordability of internet
- [ ] Digital literacy
- [ ] Cybersecurity
- [ ] Devices and technical support
- [ ] Online accessibility and inclusivity

20. Please describe the program in a few sentences:

21. Does the program focus on certain populations? Check all that apply.

- [ ] Individuals with disabilities
- [ ] Veterans
- [ ] Aging individuals (60 and above)
- [ ] Incarcerated individuals
- [ ] Individuals with a language barrier, including individuals who are English learners; and have low levels of literacy
- [ ] Individuals who are members of a racial or ethnic minority group
- [ ] Individuals whose household income is lower than 150% of the poverty level
- [ ] No particular focus on a population
- [ ] Other (please specify)

22. What is the annual project budget?

Cost in dollars

23. How much does the program cost to each participant?

Cost in dollars

24. What is the cost per participant served?

Cost in dollars

25. Please give us a sense of the geography you serve.

- ○ Municipal-wide
- ○ Neighborhood-wide
- ○ Other (please specify)

26. How long has the program been active, in months?

Program length in months

27. How many people were served by the program in the last fiscal year?

- ◯ Under 25 people
- ◯ 26 to 50 people
- ◯ 51 to 100 people
- ◯ More than 100 people
- ◯ Other (please specify)

28. How many participants do you expect to serve over the life of the program?

- ◯ 1 to 50
- ◯ 51 to 100 people
- ◯ 101 to 250 people
- ◯ 251 to 500 people
- ◯ More than 500 people

29. If you had the resources, would you want to scale the project to serve more people?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

30. Does your organization have another digital equity program?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

Town of Somerset Digital Equity Program Questionnaire

Planned Programs

We would like to collect information on any digital equity programs your organization is currently in the process of planning but has not yet implemented. Please record as many details about the upcoming program as possible.

* 31. Is your organization in the process of developing a digital equity program?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

Town of Somerset Digital Equity Program Questionnaire

Planned Programs

32. What kind of digital equity program(s) is your organization developing? Please select the categories that best fit the program type.

- ◯ Digital skills and literacy
- ◯ Data privacy and cybersecurity
- ◯ Devices (Laptops, computers, tablets)
- ◯ Technical support
- ◯ Digital navigators
- ◯ Broadband access
- ◯ Creating accessible and inclusive internet content

33. What is the annual budget need?

34. What else do you need to launch the program?

35. What work (if any) has already been completed to launch the new program?