Freetown Digital Equity Plan

Acknowledgments

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Project Background

Why is Freetown creating a Digital Equity Plan?

Freetown is working with Southeastern Regional Planning and Economic Development District (SRPEDD) and the Massachusetts Broadband Institute (MBI) to increase digital access in town. SRPEDD first collaborated with MBI in the Fall of 2023 to collect an inventory of digital equity assets in the Southeast Region. During this period, over 120 digital equity assets across the region were identified. This includes existing digital equity programming, digital skills classes, and plans or documents related to digital equity. Outreach was then conducted to all 27 SRPEDD communities, including Freetown, encouraging stakeholders to apply to MBI's Municipal Digital Equity Planning Program.

After SRPEDD's initial outreach, several communities in the SRPEDD region expressed interest in applying for the program and SRPEDD staff subsequently began to work with five of those communities to create digital equity plans tailored to their unique needs.

Alongside this, in the summer of 2023 SRPEDD worked to recruit and hire a Lead For America, American Connection Corps fellow to expand the agency's capacity to work on digital equity planning across the region and to help create Freetown's own Digital Equity Plan.

Project Timeline

Spring 2024
Stakeholder kickoff, project branding, steering committee formation, and

Summer 2024
Promotional events, digital equity charette, and existing conditions analysis

Fall 2024
Digital equity plan writing, stakeholder interviews, and review.

Winter 2024
Finalize plan and present to the Board of Selectmen.

What is a digital equity plan?

A digital equity plan aims to guide municipal decision-making related to services and infrastructure to close digital gaps in unserved and underserved communities. This plan first analyzes the current state of internet access and digital equity in the Freetown community, then outlines the planning process, where residents reflected on who is most affected by the lack of broadband access and finally provides goals and recommendations based on findings collected through data analysis, research, and outreach to the public and stakeholders.

Freetown can utilize the outlined goals and strategies to submit grant proposals for existing or forthcoming state or federal programs to support digital equity activities.

...In short, this plan hopes to expand access for vulnerable populations, especially the senior and veteran communities.

Through stakeholder meetings with church leaders, public workshops, and the public outreach process, the project team provided recommendations and an implementation pathway to improve the state of digital equity in Freetown.

Introduction to Digital Equity

The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic illuminated crucial gaps present in unserved and underserved communities across the United States. Rising costs of internet plans and devices or unreliable connections due to inadequate infrastructure in rural areas affected students adapting to online schooling, job seekers in a new remote work world, and everyday people who wanted to socialize and connect with others. These issues still persist and in 2025, digital equity plans and programs continue to help provide internet access at the local level.

Digital equity is defined as the condition in which all individuals and communities have the information technology capacity needed for full participation in society (for example, scheduling a dentist appointment online), democracy (for example, registering to vote online), and economy (for example, paying a bill online). In other words, it is ensuring that everyone has access to adequate devices like routers and

computers, the ability to afford a fast and stable connection, and the skills necessary to navigate and troubleshoot their technology.

Digital equity is necessary for civic and cultural participation, employment, lifelong learning, and access to essential services. The digital divide is created when everyone does not have equal access to these things. This gap affects social connectivity, healthcare access, workforce preparedness, educational opportunities, civic participation, and financial resources and hinder vulnerable populations from participating in everyday life.

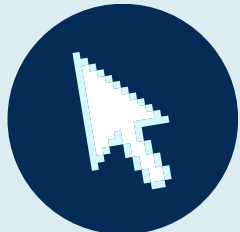## Three Pillars of Digital Equity

The National Digital Inclusion Alliance utilizes the following framework to describe the three main pillars necessary for all individuals in each community to possess to attain digital equity.

Connection
Having a fast, affordable, and stable connection to the internet.

Devices
Access to working desktops, laptops, or tablets.

Literacy
Ability to navigate technology to meet everyday needs.

Digital Equity Gaps

Internet access is no longer a luxury but a necessity. Not having internet access, device access, or digital literacy affects many aspects of a person's life. The digital divide impacts:

Social Connectivity
Communicating with family or friends on social media or email.

Educational Opportunities
Online learning for students and the ability to pursue adult learning resources.

Healthcare Access
Access to health records and telehealth services.

Workforce Preparedness
Ability to apply to jobs online or prepare application materials.

Financial Resources
Access to online banking, financial literacy resources and assistance.

Civic Participation
Staying informed about voting, online public meetings or engagement opportunities.

Vision Statement and Goals

The goal of Freetown's Municipal Digital Equity Plan (MDEP) is to expand internet access and digital equity through the town of Freetown. The planning outreach and engagement process was targeted towards reaching all unserved and underserved populations – though due to Freetown's increasing aging population, the needs of seniors served as a major theme and focus for the plan's goals and recommendations.

Goals

1. Community

    a. Identify existing group or form new Digital Equity Implementation Committee to ensure the plan is implemented.

    b. Support town staff and community stakeholders in continual digital equity efforts.

    c. Foster partnerships with local and regional community institutions to increase impact.

2. Connectivity and Affordability

    a. Increase access to affordable devices and broadband.

    b. Assess areas with low cell coverage and dead zones.

    c. Address affordability and lack of provider options.

3. Device Access

    a. Create a computer lending program at town-owned anchor institutions.

4. Digital Literacy

    a. Provide expert and dedicated staff to advance digital literacy.

    b. Protect vulnerable populations from online scams and phishing.

    c. Provide general assistance and opportunities to increase diverse set of digital skills.

Image 1. Freetown Four Corners

Existing Conditions

Freetown, Massachusetts is one of 170 rural communities identified by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts Office of Rural Health.[1] The town borders the Cities of Fall River and New Bedford, and the Towns of Lakeville, Rochester, Acushnet, Dartmouth, and Berkley. Community members in town typically identify as being from two village areas – East Freetown or Assonet (the western most part of town along the Assonet River). With a total population of 9,206, residents from both sides of Freetown take pride in the rural small town feel of their community.[2]

This following section will offer an overview and definitions of existing digital equity conditions and assets in Freetown.

Map 1. Freetown Map
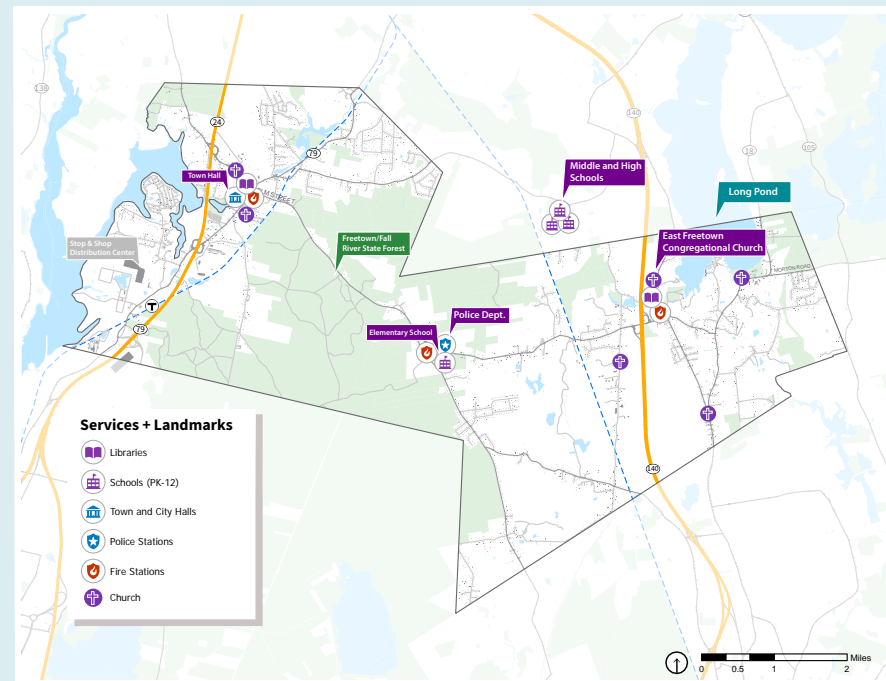
1   [Massachusetts State Office of Rural Health](#), 2017
2   U.S. Census Bureau, 2020

Connectivity and Affordability

The Commonwealth's 2019 *Rural Policy Plan* emphasized a need to update broadband infrastructure to support community needs and economic development in rural communities.[3] While Western Massachusetts is the primary area in need of infrastructure improvements, issues that affect rural communities are still present in Freetown. Out of forty-two survey respondents, twenty percent (20%) revealed that their internet service did not meet their household needs while others identified specific dead zones in town. Additionally, excessive costs associated with internet provider monopolies (where there is only one viable option for internet service in a fixed location or market) were mentioned as a primary concern at each phase of the engagement process.

What is broadband?

Broadband is colloquially referred to as 'high-speed internet' but is technically defined by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) as internet with speeds of at least "100/20 Mbps" – meaning internet with a 100 megabits per second (Mbps) download speed and 20 Mbps upload speed.

This figure was recently updated in 2024 from 25/3 Mbps to 100/20 Mbps to ensure all residents have internet that is fast enough to effectively participate in modern online activities, such as visiting web pages, watching video presentations, or participating in video calls. Having internet that is slower than broadband speeds can greatly limit the activities that a person can engage in online. Streaming content can take up to 25 Mbps and playing online video games can take up to 100 Mbps. General web browsing and email sending takes between 1 and 5 Mbps. Broadband internet speeds of 100/20 Mbps generally support the needs of up to four internet users at a time.[4] A broadband serviceable location, or "BSL," is defined as any residential or business address that can have a broadband internet subscription.

3   Rural Policy Commission, Rural Policy Plan, (Commonwealth of Massachusetts 2019), 16
4   Cooper, Tyler, ["How Much Internet Speed Do You Need?"](#), Broadband Now, 2024

Running speed tests can help a community measure the upload and download speeds at a specific location. The following table shows the data for 832 speed tests that were run in Freetown, including internet speeds, jitter, and latency.[5]

MBI conducted speed tests across the state using Ookla between December 2021 and November 2022 and later aggregated the tests into data sets by municipality. In Freetown, 127 (15.2%) of locations where tests were run experience speeds that are less than 100/20 Mbps, or less than broadband internet speeds[6].
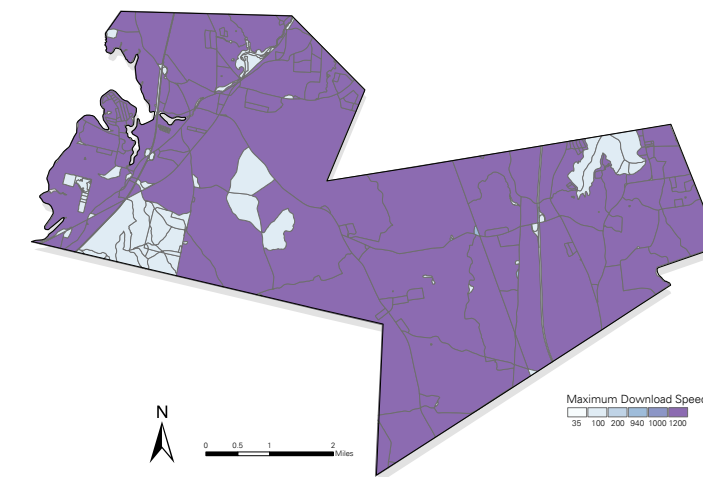
Table 1. Speed Test Data

Total Tests	832
Unique ID Tests	177
Jitter > 50 ms	33
Latency > 100 ms	2
Speeds > 500 ms	0
Speeds < 25 x 3 Mbps	11
Speeds < 50 x 10 Mbps	56
Speeds < 100 x 20 Mbps	127
Speeds at least 25 x 3 Mbps	773
Speeds at least 50 x 10 Mbps	633
Speeds at least 100 x 20 Mbps	398
Speeds at least 100 x 100 Mbps	68

The following maps show the maximum upload and maximum download speeds throughout Freetown. The download speed identifies how fast information travels to you such as the speed at which it takes to download large PDFs or loading web pages with many pictures. The upload speed is how fast information can travel from you. This effects activities such as one's ability to participate in a virtual doctor's appointment, which can take 5-10 Mbps. As shown in the map, some areas of Freetown have faster internet speeds than others. In general, East Freetown has better, faster internet than Assonet.

Map 2. Maximum Download Speeds in Freetown

Map 3. Maximum Upload Speeds in Freetown

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5   According to LiveAction, jitter is a measure of network performance that refers to the irregularity in the time it takes for a data packet to travel from its source to its destination, potentially leading to disruptions and inconsistencies in the flow of data. Latency is a measure of network performance referring to the time it takes for a data packet to travel from its source it its destination.
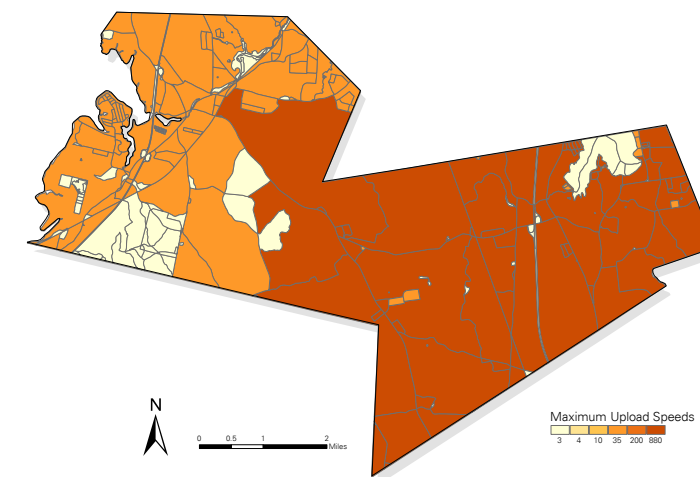
6   It is important to note that speed test data was not collected by specific geography within Freetown and tests may vary due to time of day, number of users online, and proximity to routers.
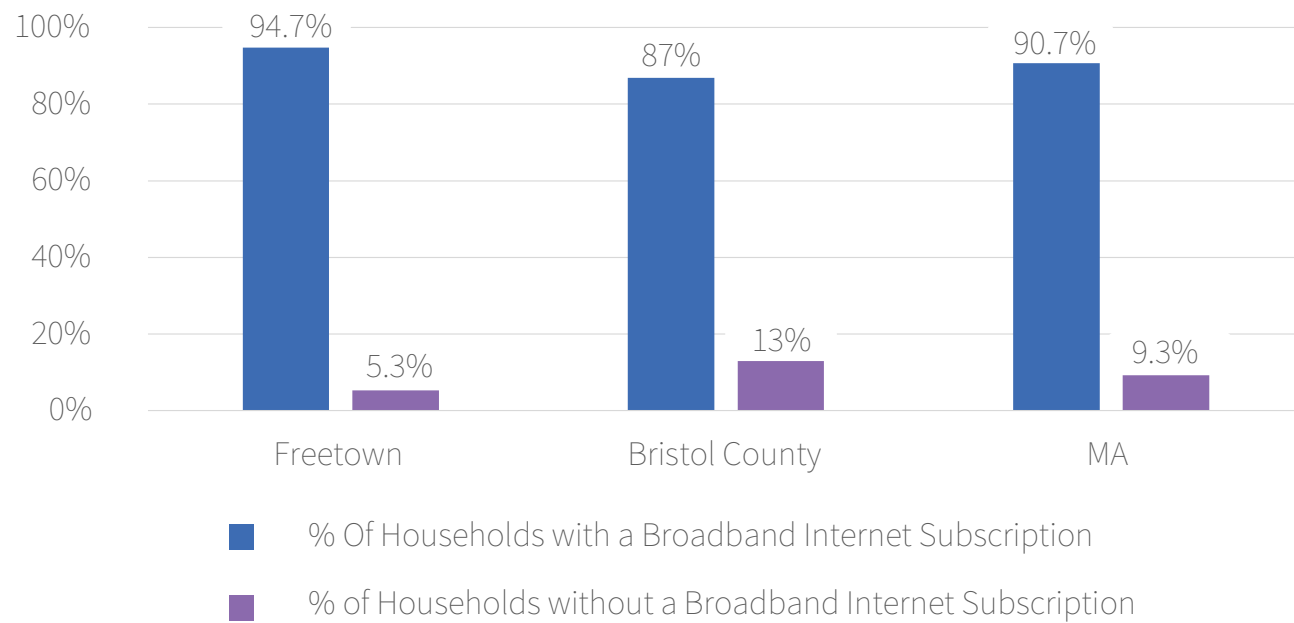
Internet Service Providers in Freetown: Coverage and Competition

In Freetown, 5.3% of households do not have a broadband internet subscription compared to 13% of households in Bristol County, and 9.3% of households in the state. While the percentage for Freetown is smaller than the county and the state, there is still a meaningful percentage of the population that lacks access to broadband in their home.

The Massachusetts Broadband Institute identifies Comcast (also known as Xfinity), T-Mobile, and Verizon as internet service providers that operate in Freetown. In SRPEDD's research, staff found that ViaSat and Hughesnet also provide internet service through parts of Freetown. As is consistent with what has been heard from Freetown residents, Comcast provides service to 99.67% of broadband serviceable locations (BSLs), a much higher percentage than any of the other providers operating in Freetown.

Figure 1. Percentage of Households With & Without a Broadband Internet Subscription in Freetown

Source: U.S Census Bureau QuickFacts, Freetown

Table 2. Internet Service Providers in Freetown

Provider Name	Technology	Max Advertised Download Speed (Mbps)	Max Advertised Upload Speed (Mbps)	# of BSLs with Service Available	% of BSLs with Service Available
Comcast Cable Communications, LLC	Cable	1200	35	3,574	99.67%
T-Mobile USA, Inc	Fixed Wireless	100	20	571	15.92%
T-Mobile USA, Inc	Fixed Wireless	25	3	527	14.7%
Verizon Communications Inc.	Fiber	940	880	1,406	39.21%
Hughesnet	Satellite	100	5	N/A	N/A
ViaSat	Satellite	100	5	N/A	N/A

The following two tables show coverage and competition of internet service providers (ISPs) in Freetown. Only 39.21% of households in Freetown have access to broadband internet speeds from two or more providers - indicating a monopoly of ISPs in most of Freetown.

Table 3. Coverage and Competition

Service Coverage of at Least 25/3 Mbps from 1 or More Provider	Service Coverage of at Least 100/20 Mbps from 1 or More Provider	Service Coverage of at Least 100/20 Mbps from 2 or More Providers
99.67%	99.67%	39.21%

Table 4. Number of Internet Service Providers

0 Providers	1 Provider	2 Providers	3 Providers	4 or More Providers
0.22%	45.59%	38.65%	15.53%	0%

More than three quarters of respondents listed Comcast or Xfinity as their internet service provider indicating that Xfinity, a subsidiary to Comcast, serves as the primary provider for residential internet service. There is some competition in the market with Verizon and T-Mobile offering internet service in the town, but residents stated that they do not offer service to every address in the town partiularly in Assonet.

Figure 3. Survey Response "Who is your Internet Service Provider?"

- Comcast Cable
- T-Mobile
- Verizon
- Xfinity

27.5%
52.5%
15%
5%
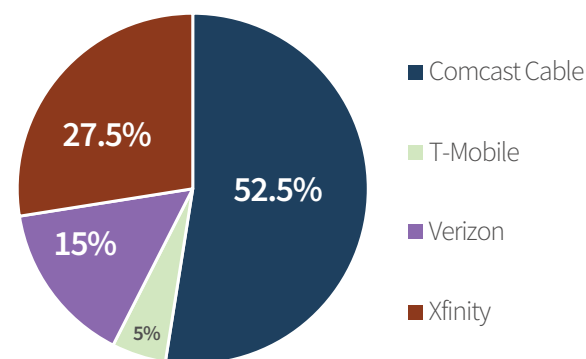
Source: MBI Statewide Survey

The ACP: A temporary solution

The Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) was a federal program created during the COVID-19 pandemic aimed at alleviating the price of a monthly internet bill for low-income households. The program provided households with a $30 credit off their monthly internet bill, and a $100 credit towards a device, or $75 off their monthly internet bill if they were living on tribal lands. Households with income levels not exceeding 200% of the federal poverty level were eligible to participate in the ACP. Other characteristics that constituted eligibility included having at least one member in the household who received a Federal Pell Grant that year, or if the individual or household were already enrolled in an existing assistance program, such as SNAP or Medicaid. Even though the program ended in May 2024 due to a lack of funding at the federal level, ACP information can provide insights about the need for digital assistance in Freetown.

Eligible holdshouseholds with income levels not exceeding 200% of the federal poverty levels in Freetown (839) compared with the number of households enrolled in the ACP (210) indicate that about a quarter of eligible households were utilizing this benefit. The end of this program means that these households are now forced to either start paying more for their monthly internet bill or discontinue internet service if they could no longer afford it when the ACP ended.

Image 2. ACP Has Ended For Now Website Banner

Source: Federal Communication Commission

Despite the end of the ACP, there are other lesser-known options that residents can utilize to obtain cheaper internet prices. The Comcast "Internet Essentials Program" offers 50 Mbps for $9.95 a month or 100 Mbps for $29.95 a month (Internet Essentials Plus). To participate in this program, people must qualify by currently participating in certain assistance program.[7] Additionally, the Universal Service Administrative Company's (USAC) Lifeline Program provides a discount of $9.25 a month off of phone, internet, or bundled services for qualified participants. Participants can qualify via income or participating in another government assistance program.[8] While these programs both provide some relief for the price of a monthly internet bill, neither are a replacement for the ACP.

Figure 2. ACP Enrollment vs. Households Living 200% Below the Federal Poverty Line in Freetown
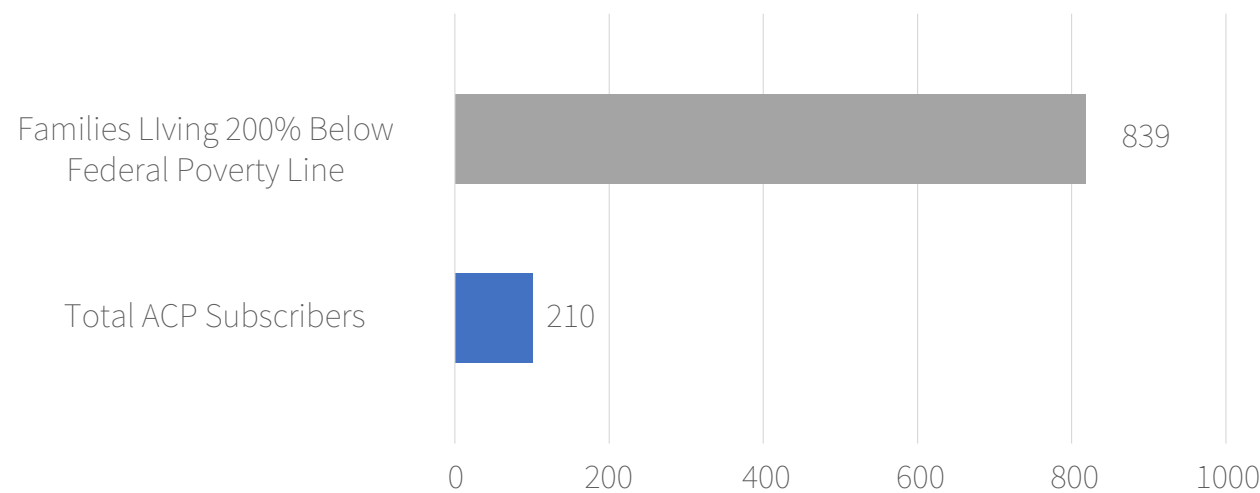
Source: U.S Census Bureau QuickFacts, Freetown, FCC


7   Xfinity, Internet Essentials Web page
8   USAC Lifeline Support Web page

Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) Program

The Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment (BEAD) program's goal is to build high-speed internet connections to all unserved and underserved communities in Massachusetts. The purpose of the BEAD Challenge process is to help catalogue unidentified broadband serviceable locations (BSLs) in these communities This process allowed eligible entities a chance to dispute the status of "served" (a location with an internet speed of 100/20 Mbps), "underserved" (a location with an internets speed slower than 100/20 Mbps), or "unserved" (a location receiving internet service slower than 25/3 Mbps) BSLs and it did not take affordability into consideration. During the process there were two challenges in Freetown with no rebuttals.

According to MBI's BEAD Map, as of January of 2025, 10 locations are underserved while 9 are unserved in Freetown making them eligible for BEAD deployment funding.

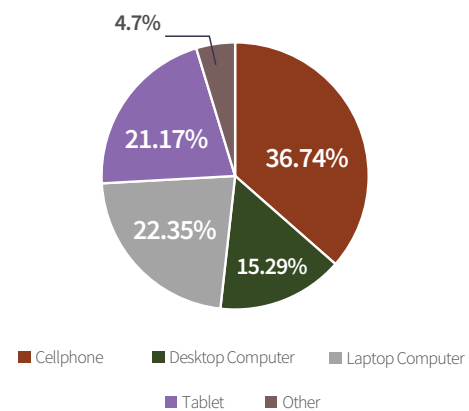Image 3.   MBI's BEAD Dashboard for Freetown
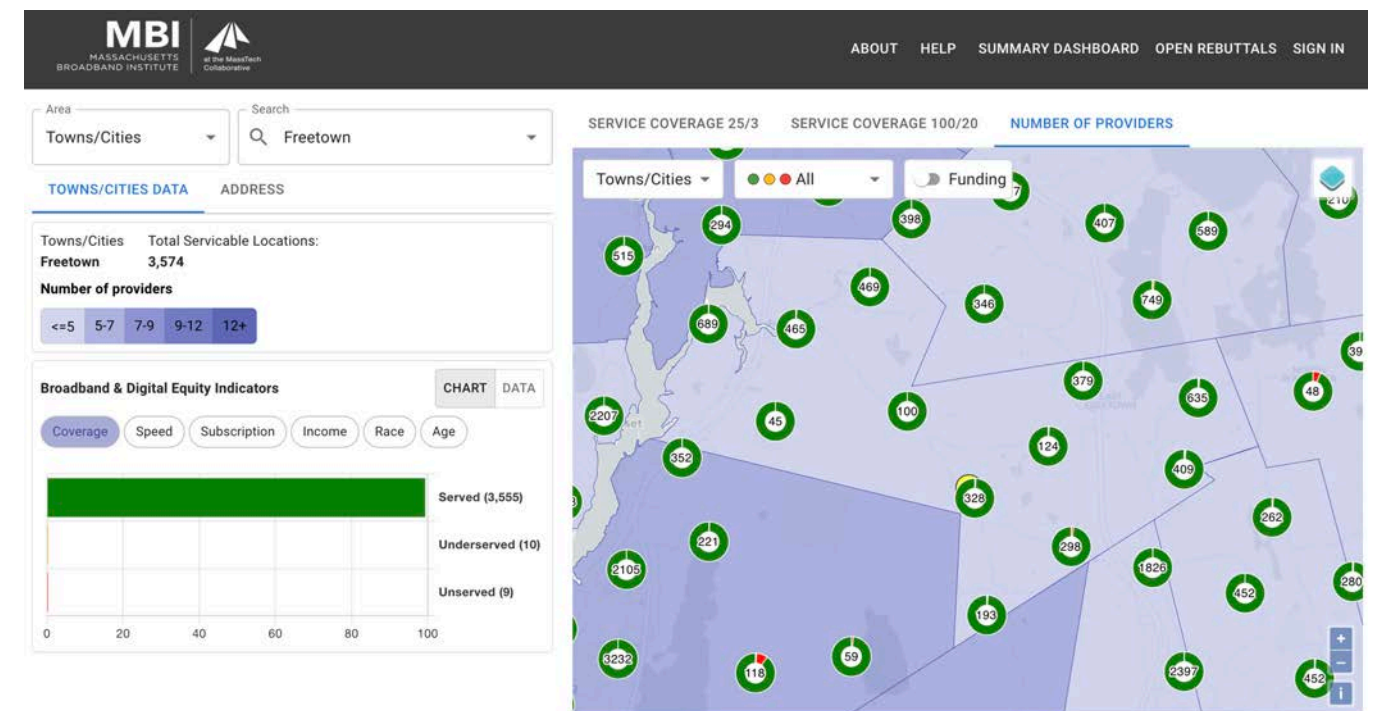
Device Access

Most households in Freetown have access to a computer. According to US Census data, 3.2% of households in Freetown do not have a computer at home. This figure is lower in comparison with 8% of households in Bristol County and 5.7% of households in Massachusetts, which do not have a computer in their home.
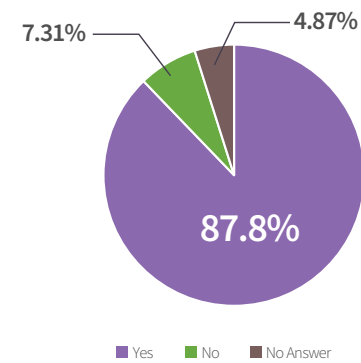
Though many Americans are shifting to rely more on smartphones to access the internet (this is notable among the 65+ population), certain websites and software limit what can be done on a smartphone, and in some cases, only work properly on a laptop or tablet.[9] Access to a computer can open opportunities to an adult learner who wants to pursue higher education, or to aging individuals wanting to participate in civic and social discourse on the interent.

In the digital equity survey, most residents (36 out of 41 survey respondents) noted that they do have access to the devices necessary to meet their everyday needs for internet use. It is important, however, to note the importance of the third pillar of digital equity – having the ability to safely navigate and trouble shoot devices. Though it is difficult to measure digital literacy competency, insights gained through cataloging and speaking with managers of Freetown's digital equity assets help paint a better picture of what the state of digital literacy is in Freetown.

Figure 6. Households With or Without Computers in Freetown

Source: U.S Census Bureau QuickFacts, Freetown

Figure 7. Households That Have a Smartphone and No Other types of Computers in Freetown

Source: American Community Survey, S2801: Types of Computers and Internet Subscriptions

Figure 4. "Which of the Following Devices do you use most of the time to connect to the internet?"
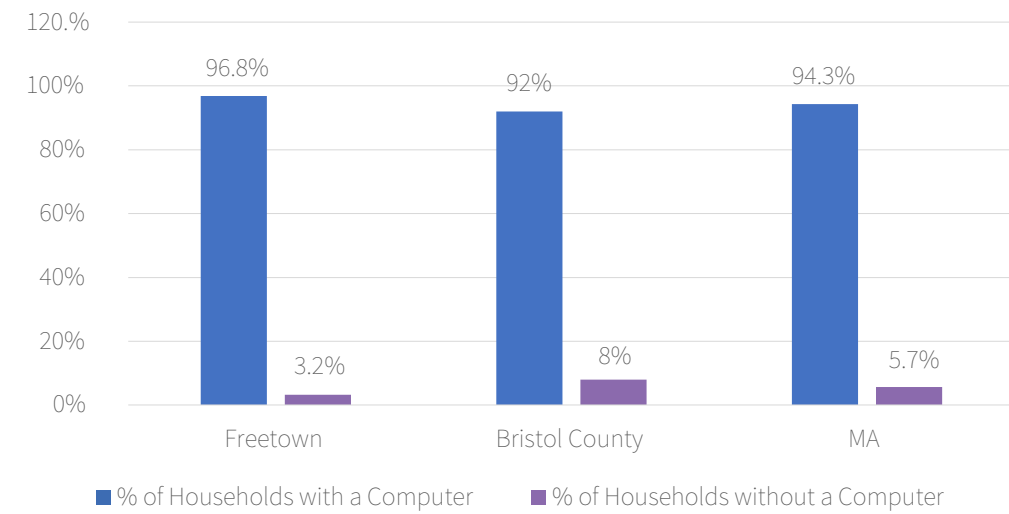

Figure 5. "Does everyone in your household have access to the computer devices they need to meet their everyday needs for internet use?"
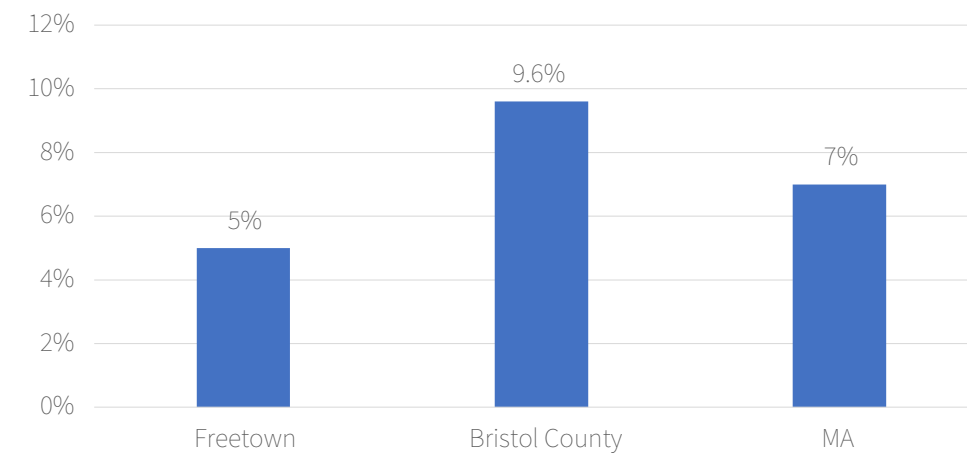

9   Pew Research Center, "Mobile Fact Sheet", https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/mobile/, 2024

Digital Equity Assets

As part of SRPEDD's work with MBI in Fall 2023, staff compiled a list of digital equity assets throughout the Southeast region of Massachusetts. A digital equity asset is anything that supports or promotes digital equity. These can include things such as device distribution programs, digital navigators, any relevant plans, or other programs supporting digital equity.

During the initial regional asset mapping phase, staff identified two digital equity assets in Freetown - the hotspot lending program at Guilford H. Hathaway and the James White Memorial libraries, and the 2020-2023 Freetown-Lakeville School District Technology Plan.

The public libraries in town have hotspots available for people to check out - allowing people who may not otherwise have internet access to get online by converting cellular signal into Wi-Fi. Hotspots are a good short-term fix, but are not a permanent solution for someone who does not have internet access at home since it relies on cellular signal to work; if someone lives in an area with low cellular signal, a hotspot will only provide slow or nonexistent Wi-Fi. For example, many Freetown residents indicated that there are areas of town, namely Slab Bridge Road, lacking cellular service – making a hotspot in that area ineffective.

Additionally, the Freetown-Lakeville School District Technology Plan outlines goals for technology usage and existing digital assets for students in the district. One of the benchmarks in this plan is "technology integration and literacy."[10] This benchmark outlines how technology will help achieve appropriate digital literacy skills for students. Each grade has specific technology literacy skills outlined for their grade level. Additionally, the regional school district distributes Chromebooks for student use. Freetown Elementary School (the only regional school in Freetown) has one computer lab and 28 workstations.

Image 4.   Guilford H. Hathaway Public Library

Image 5.   Freetown Lakeville Regional School District Logo

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10   Freetown Lakeville Regional School District, Freetown-Lakeville School District Technology Plan, (2020)

Public Engagement Process

The public engagement process for this plan involved a variety of in-person on-the-ground engagement; the project team attempted to disseminate information and gather feedback in popular areas around Town. The following section describes the community planning process that informed this document.

Project Kick Off

In early Spring of 2024, SRPEDD staff kicked off the public engagement process with a Steering Committee formed by the Town Administrator and Planner. There, committee members were introduced to digital equity as a concept and assisted in creating strategy to meaningfully target unserved and underserved communities in Freetown. Throughout the planning process, the Steering Committee assisted in organizing tabling events, hosting the digital equity charette, and connected SRPEDD staff with local champions. Members of the Steering Committee represented:

- The Freetown Planning Department
- Freetown Elementary School
- Freetown Public Library
- Freetown Council on Aging

Image 6.   Freeetown Public Safety Building

Department Head Questionnaire

Information was gathered from town staff through a detailed questionnaire for department heads. The intent was to better understand how the state of internet use in their departments may deter their ability to assist residents with 1:1 help and civic participation. Boards and Department that were questioned includes:

- Planning Board, Conservation Commission, Zoning Board of Appeals
- Town Administrator
- Health Department
- Office of the Town Clerk

Surveys and Online Engagement

The project survey was distributed though MBI and promoted at in-person events and key communication platforms online. To increase number of survey responses; SRPEDD offered an incentive. Anyone who filled out a paper survey was entered to win a $25 gift card to Profile Tavern, a local Freetown restaurant. The project received a total of 41 total responses on the digital equity survey which assisted in understanding the state of internet affordability and town demographics.

SRPEDD also hosted a project web page with information about why and how the digital equity plan was being conducted. This page was regularly updated with event information and invited residents to participate in the online survey.

Image 7.   Online Survey Flyer   Image 8.   Project Webpage
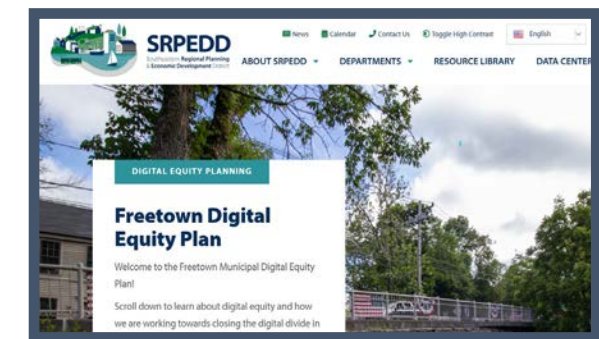
Community Pop Ups

Tabling and community pop-ups allowed staff to engage with residents to directly hear more nuanced takes on digital equity needs. At all in-person events, staff spoke with residents about digital equity and ongoing planning efforts in Freetown. Residents were given flyers with information about the plan, paper surveys, QR codes to access the plan website and the online version of the survey, along with pens and sticky notes to leave feedback about internet service in the town on informational boards.

Strawberry Festival

SRPEDD staff tabled at the Freetown Strawberry Festival, held on June 16th, 2024, at the Freetown Bandstand, to promote the digital equity plan workshop, discuss resident's needs, and to pass out project surveys to Freetown residents. At this event, staff engaged with a wide range of Freetown residents, from children to seniors.

Image 9. Tabling at the Freetown Strawberry Festival

Senior Club Presentation

In September, staff spoke at the monthly meeting of the Freetown Senior Club to discuss findings and pass out plan surveys. This marked the plan's most successful community engagement event as staff were able to speak to around fifty seniors about concerns regarding their internet service.

Image 10. Presentation at Freetown Senior Club

Cavalry Pentecostal Farmer's Market

After a stakeholder interview with Calvary Pentecostal's Reverend Dias, staff were welcomed back to the church to host an informational table at their weekly farmer's market. This was a valuable outreach opportunity as staff were able to engage with lower income Freetown residents who often go unnoticed or have lower participation in planning or civic engagement processes.

Digital Equity Charette

On June 13th, 2024, staff held an in-person Digital Equity Charette at the Freetown Council on Aging. Materials from the event are available in the Appendix of this plan. The following week, on June 20th, 2024, an accompanying presentation was held via online Zoom. During this workshop, staff presented a brief presentation introducing the plan and explaining digital equity. Staff then went through a series of interactive boards that presented existing digital equity conditions in Freetown and invited residents to share their thoughts their experiences given the data. During the workshop, the project team and attendees also brainstormed possible implementation ideas that residents themselves are interested in seeing in their town.

Image 11. In-Person Digital Equity Charette

Stakeholder Interviews

As part of the public engagement process, SRPEDD staff reached out to two community leaders to hear their experience serving residents outside of civic spaces and to garner a better understanding of the state of digital equity in Freetown - particularly from experiences interacting with underserved populations. These conversations provided important insights to digital equity initiatives being led outside of town hall. Staff interviewed:

- Reverend Curtis D. Dias, Calvary Pentacostal Church
- Reverend Gregory Baker, United Church of Assonet

Image 12. United Church of Assonet

Image 13. Calvary Pentecostal Church

Community Needs & Vulnerable Populations

The Digital Equity Act of 2021 identifies 8 covered populations that have historically experienced lower rates of computer and internet use. The covered populations named in the legislation include:

- **Low-Income Households**
- **Aging Individuals**
- **Incarcerated Individuals**
- **Veterans**
- **Individuals with Disabilities**
- **Individuals with a Language Barrier**
- **Individuals who are members of a racial or ethnic minority group**
- **Individuals who live in a rural area**

The Massachusetts Broadband Institute (MBI) and the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) recognize these populations and prioritize them for broadband deployment and other digital equity initiatives across the country and Massachusetts.

In Freetown, three of the eight groups – **Aging Individuals, Veterans**, and **Individuals who live in a rural area** – were identified as the predominant focus populations for this plan due to their relative prevalence in the community. Still, Freetown also contains other populations, including individuals with disabilities, ethnic minorities, and those who may not speak English as a first language present; these groups will also benefit from digital equity initiatives.

Aging Individuals

Populations are aging across the region – and this is true in Freetown, as well. 17.6% of Freetown residents are over 65, consistent the with county and state trends. From 2000 to 2021, the number of people over 60 more than doubled in Freetown, from 12% to 25%. The large percentage of seniors in Freetown's population drove much of the project team's engagement and throughout the public engagement process; it was commonly mentioned that seniors would be the ones to benefit the most from digital equity programming and planning.

Figure 8. Age Distribution in Freetown, 2000 vs 2021

2000

12%

27%

61%

Median Age: 38

■ Under 20 ■ 20-59 ■ 60+

2021

25%

21%

54%

Median Age: 43

■ Under 20 ■ 20-59 ■ 60+
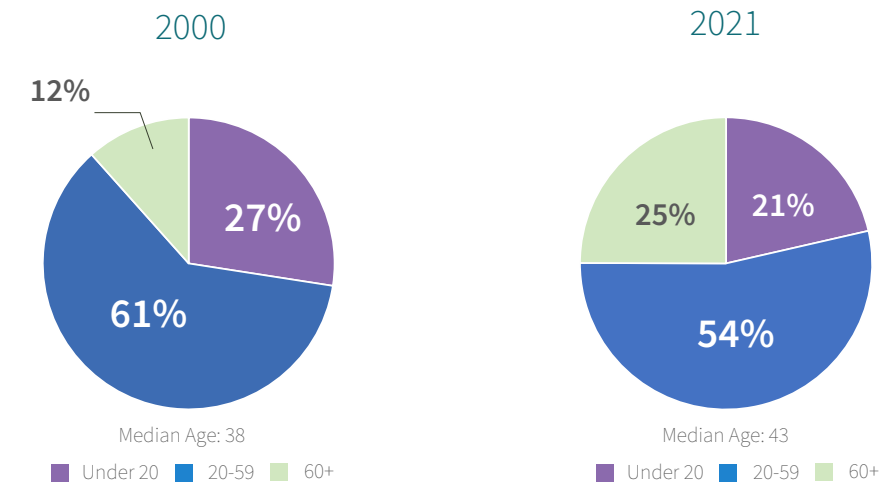
Figure 9. Survey Response to "What is your Age?"

2.63%   2.63%

10.53%

7.89%

47.37%

28.95%

■ 18 to 22
■ 35 to 44
■ 45 to 59
■ 60 to 74
■ 75 or older
■ Prefer not to say
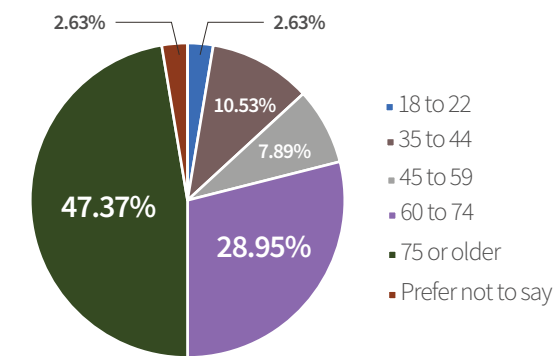
Individuals Who Live in a Rural Area

As indicated in the Device Access Section, Freetown is a rural community, making all residents individuals who live in a rural area. Residents of rural areas often have access to fewer internet provider options, accompanied by high prices and lower speeds. This can be due to lack of infrastructure or providers not wanting to operate in less densely populated areas. Please note that the 2019 Massachusetts *Rural Policy Plan*, also classifies Freetown as a rural community having fewer than 500 residents per square mile.

Map 4. Rural Communities in Massachusetts
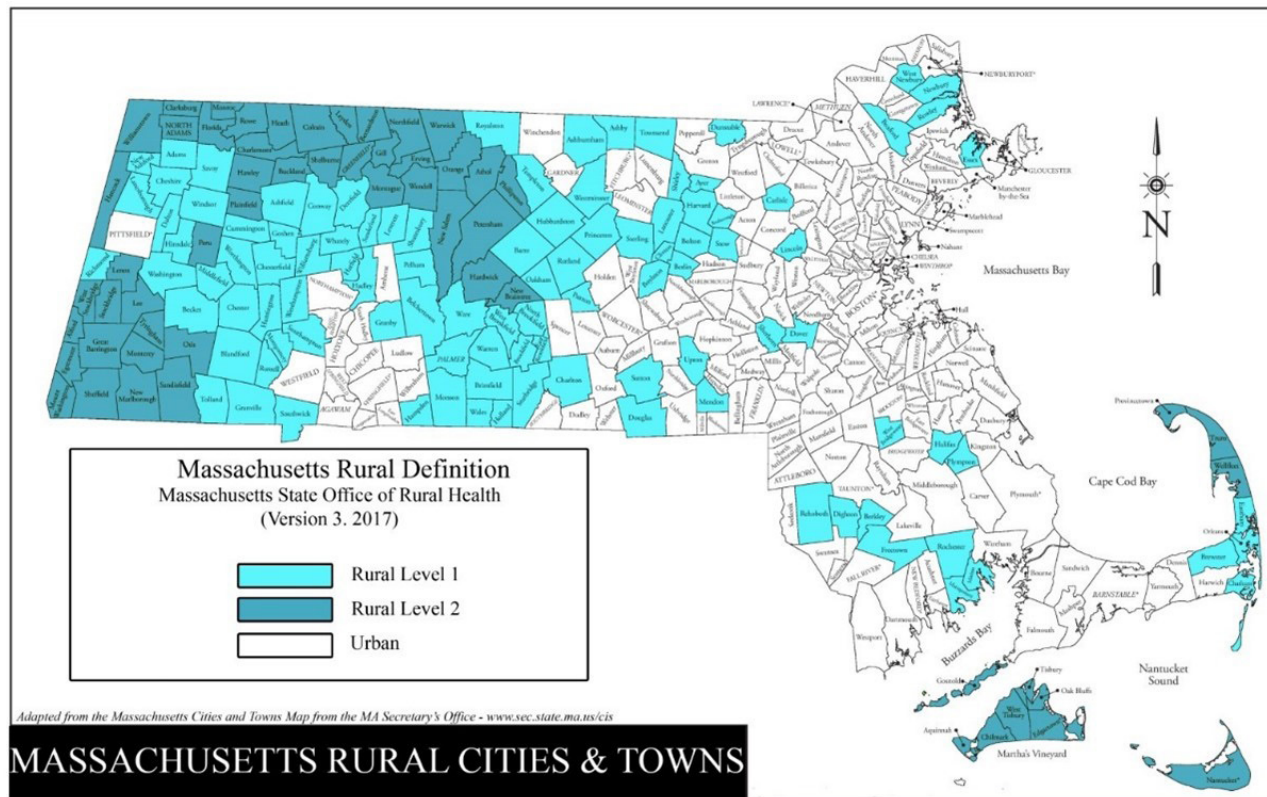
Source: Massachusetts State Office of Rural Health, Massachusetts Rural Towns Map

Veterans

Veterans and their families need the capability to effectively access the online resources, such as checking benefit eligibility or ways to contact their local Veterans Agent.[11] Freetown's population has nearly double the proportion of veterans compared to the proportion of Bristol County and Massachusetts. In Freetown, 7.7% of the population is veterans, with only 4.4% of the population of Bristol County being veterans, and 3.8% of the Massachusetts population.

Figure 10.   Veteran Population in Freetown
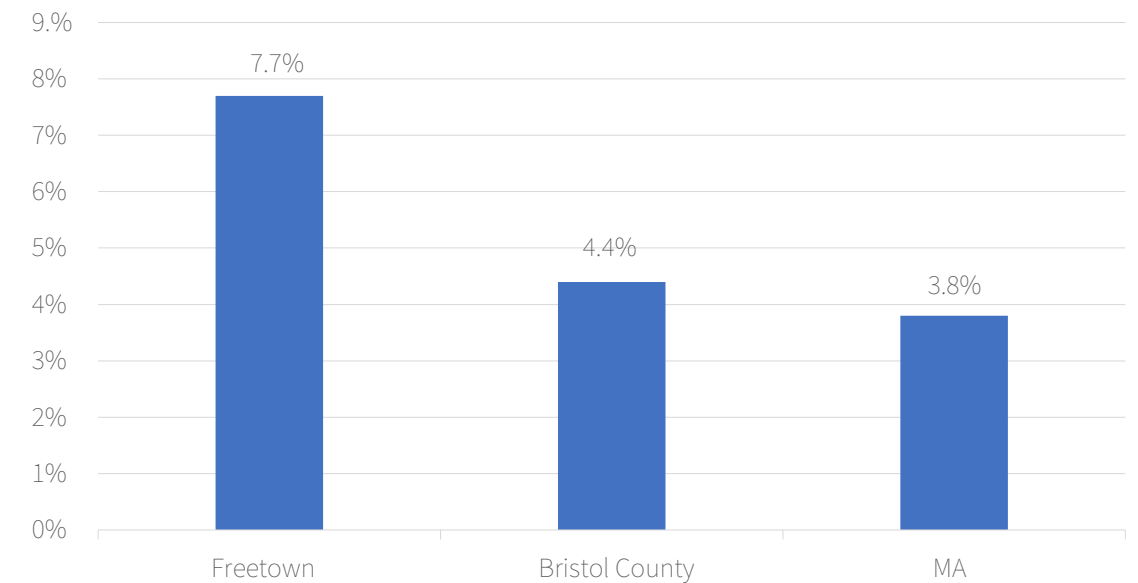
Source: U.S Census Bureau QuickFacts, Freetown

Staff were able to engage with a small number of veterans via the project survey, but were unable to engage with the Veterans Agent or veterans directly despite several efforts.

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11   See the VSO Finder tool https://www.mass.gov/info-details/find-a-veterans-service-officer-near-you.

Data on other underserved communities

Low-Income Households
- Freetown's owner-occupied housing rate is 91%; and while only 25% of homeowners are cost-burdened, of the small percentage of renters in Freetown, roughly 50% of those households are cost-burdened.

Individuals with Disabilities
- In Freetown, 6.7% of people under the age of 65 have disability status, compared to 10.5% of people in Bristol County and 8.1% of people in Massachusetts.

Individuals with a Language Barrier
- In Freetown, only 4.4% of people over the age of 5 speak a language other than English at home; this compares to 22.1% in Bristol County and 25.3% in Massachusetts.

Individuals who are members of a racial or ethnic minority group
- In Freetown, 4.4% of residents belong to a racial or ethnic minority group; this compares to 22.2% in Bristol County and 31.2% in Massachusetts.

Image 14. United Church of Assonet

Key Findings

The following section is a summary of key findings shaped by the entire engagement process and data review.

Digital Literacy concerns in an Aging town

Community stakeholders and Town Staff recognized a lack of digital literacy skills among seniors as their primary digital equity concern. Specific concerns included:

Cyber Security

- Residents and stakeholders at every stage of engagement expressed concerns over internet safety. Adult children with senior parents complained that their parents are often susceptible to spam and phishing, while seniors, themselves, generally explained how difficult it was to spot cyber threats. On the survey, internet safety was the highest concern of most respondents with 63% marking "Very Concerned" when asked about internet safety.

Figure 11.   Survey Response to "How concerned are you about internet safety?"
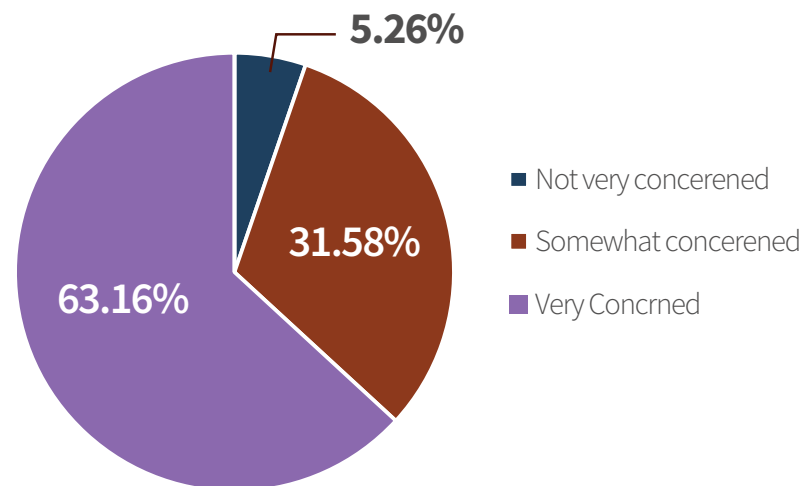
5 out of 6 respondents in the Department Head Questionnaire cited 'Digital Literacy' as the top digital equity need among Freetown residents.

Social Interaction

- Seniors expressed that they feel isolated from their loved ones when they are unable to access technology to communicate with them. This was typically in part to being unable to understand internet vernacular when interacting with younger grandchildren, communicating via Zoom or other video call, or even playing online games.

Civic Participation

- Freetown residents themselves (and seniors in particular) expressed difficulty remaining civically engaged due to an inability to navigate social media or the town website. Attendees of the workshop shared with us that most information about things happening in the town, whether it be information about community events, volunteer opportunities, or elections, are conveyed online. They said that their Board of Selectmen is very active online, specifically on Facebook and shared concerns that if someone does not have the means or skills to access social media, then they are essentially unable to get the information about important town decisions.

Programming

- Most town staff explained that they did have the capacity to assist residents with online portals 1:1. However, residents did express a desire to attend technology classes aimed at developing a diverse set of digital skills.

Key Anchor Institutions Serve as Main Town Resource and Advocates; However, They Are Geographically Far Apart and Have Small Facilities

- The project team also learned that the Council on Aging offers classes and tech support at times, but not on a consistent basis. Town department heads also explained that offering 1:1 help to those in need does not put a strain on staff capacity. However, residents expressed a desire to for digital literacy classes; and while both the COA and libraries serve as a main point of contact for 1:1 assistance, the library has the devices but lacks space to host computer classes while the COA has the space but lacks the devices.

- Freetown's 'geographic divide' (Assonet vs East Freetown) also contributes to a lack of coordination between key anchor institutions – though town-owned institutions, such as the COA and Library, have recently worked closely with one another.

Map 5. Key Achor Institutions in Freetown
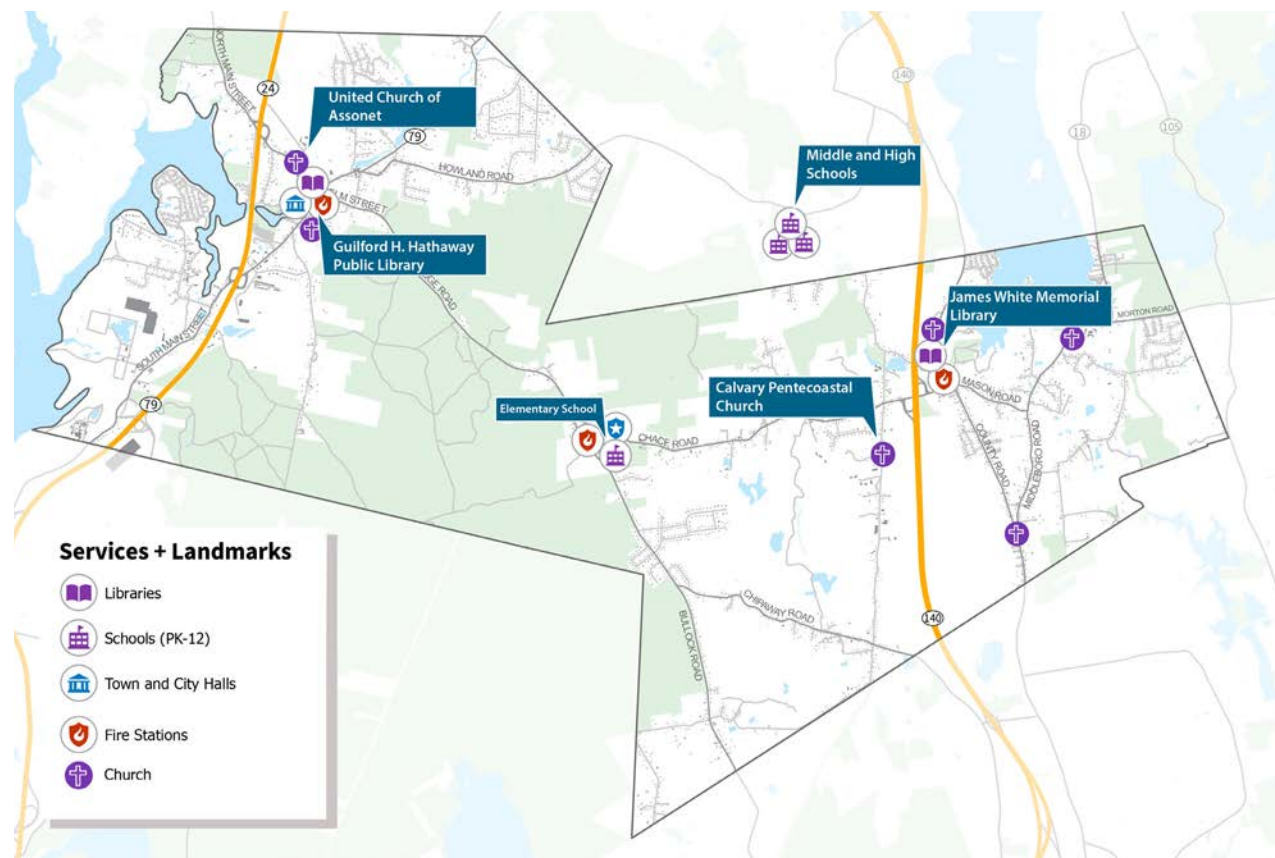
Internet costs feel too high

In Massachusetts, 81% of the digital divide is caused by the cost of broadband internet.[12] Most residents with whom staff engaged felt that their internet was fast and reliable enough, but that they are paying too much for their monthly bill - some citing it was hard for them to afford.

Figure 12. Survey Response to "How hard is it for you to pay your internet bill?"
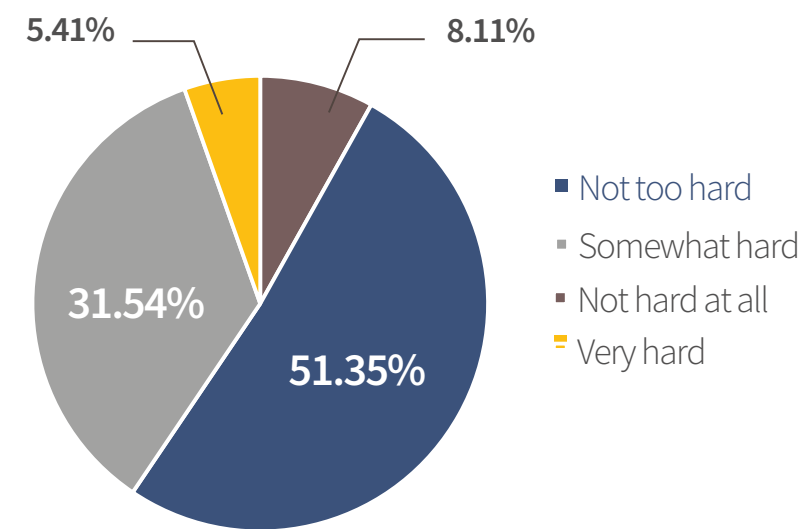
Fear of asking for Help

- During his stakeholder interview, Reverand Greg Baker noted that many who may require financial assistance do not often like to talk about their problems outwardly. While the median household income in Freetown is higher than the county and the state, there is still a poverty issue that is not always noticeable. Residents during the workshop also indicated that there are populations of low-income households who either struggle to ask for help or are unaware of resources available to them.

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12   Education Superhighway, Massachusetts Broadband Affordability Gap, 2021, https://www.educationsuperhighway.org/wp-content/uploads/NoHomeLeftOffline_Infographic_Massachusetts.pdf

Lack of Competition Geographically

- There is an overwhelming feeling that Comcast holds a monopoly on the town. Residents said that they had Comcast as their internet service provider, not necessarily because they want Comcast, but because it is the only company that provides service to their address. At the project's public workshop, staff presented a graph showing internet service packages available at a sample address in Freetown. Attendees suggested the plan have a breakdown of internet service packages for each side of town, East Freetown, and Assonet, because coverage is often different depending on the side of town.

- These graphs show the monthly cost of each plan compared to the maximum download speed (in Mbps) provided by the plan. At the sample address in East Freetown, the average cost for internet based on the plans identified is $65.75 a month. However, that average price includes Xfinity Internet Essentials and Internet Essentials Plus, which are service packages that people must qualify for based on need; in short, including these subsidized prices brings down the average price in this sample. Enrollment in the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP), SNAP, and Medicaid are examples of eligibility requirements for these plans. Excluding these plans, the average cost of an internet service plan in East Freetown rises to $74.08 a month.

- Feedback from both members of the Steering Committee and community members suggest they believe their monthly internet bill is too high for the service they get. According to the State Digital Equity Plan, the average lowest broadband cost for the southeast region is $58 a month, making East Freetown's average cost higher than compared to the region. However, the median price for internet across respondents to the statewide survey was $75 a month, which is in line with the average cost in East Freetown. Similarly, in Assonet the average monthly cost is $75.55.[13]

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13   Survey respondents indicated they paid $153.81 a month for internet but may have included their whole internet/phone/TV bundle cost in their response.

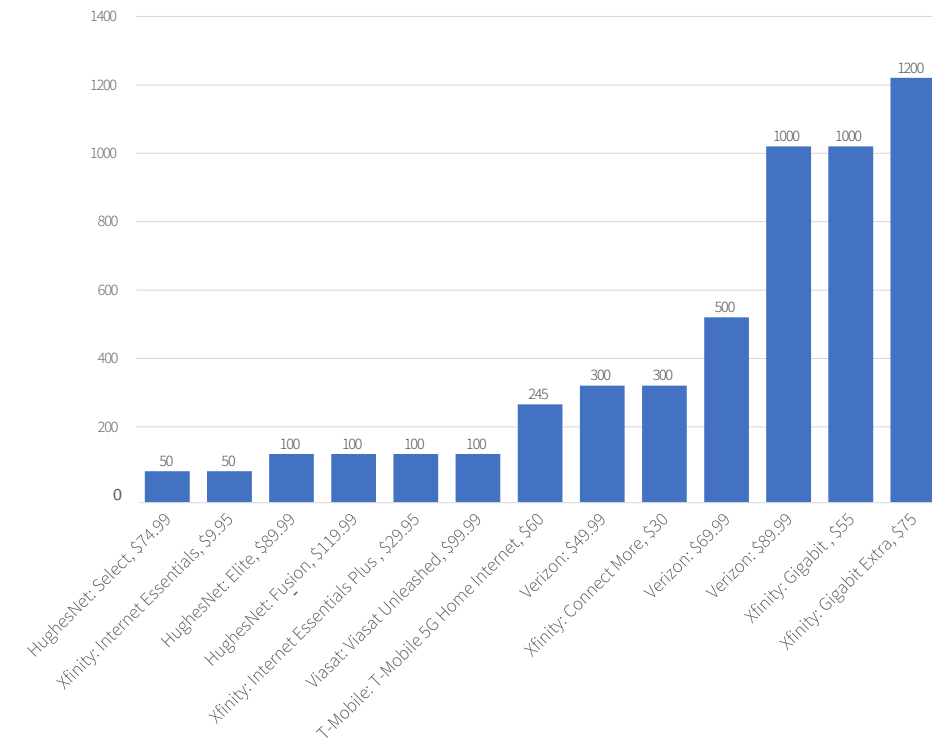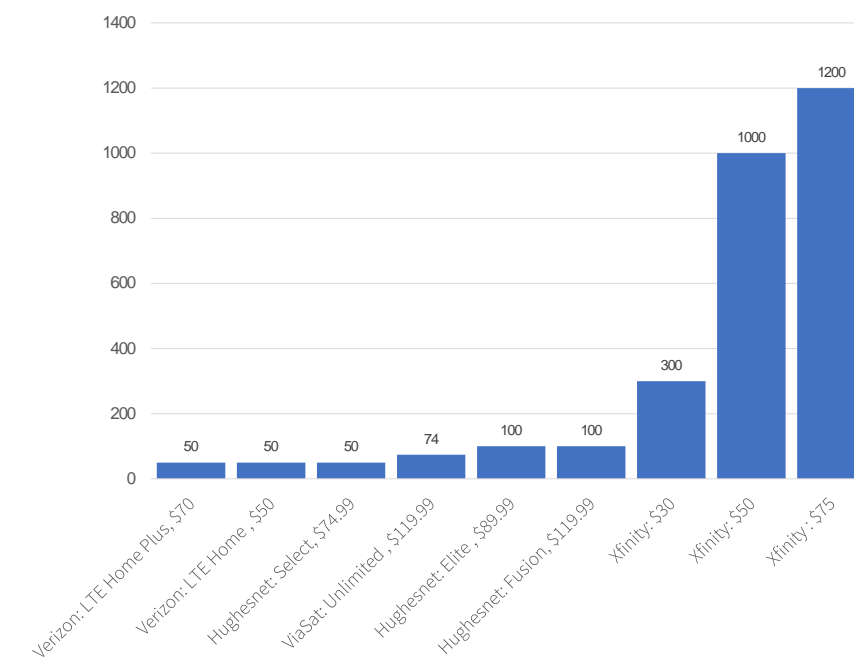**Figure 13.**   ISP Packages Available at Sample Address in East Freetown (Mbps)

Figure 14.   ISP Packages Available at Sample Address in Assonet (Mbps)

Though small, Minorities and English as a Second language Populations Do Exist

- Equity means affirmatively assisting even the smallest minority populations – including the 4.6% of Freetown residents who speak a language other than English at home and the 4.6% who are minorities.[14] Through predominantly white, there is a historic Cape Verdean population in East Freetown on Braley Road also known as "Tobacco Road." Reverand Dias has served as an activist and champion for this community. His ministry – Calvary Pentecostal – serves as a local and regional resource for low- to moderate-income families in Freetown and Lakeville. These communities often go overlooked in many planning processes and must be prioritized or informed of ongoing digital equity initiatives.[15]

- A Steering Committee member also noted a slight increase of minorities – particularly those who speak English as a second language. At Freetown Elementary (the only district school solely in Freetown) data from the Department of Education shows that in the past ten years the White student population is declining slightly while the Hispanic or Latino and Multi-Race Non-Hispanic populations are slightly increasing.[16]

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14 U.S. Census Bureau Freetown Fast Facts, 2022
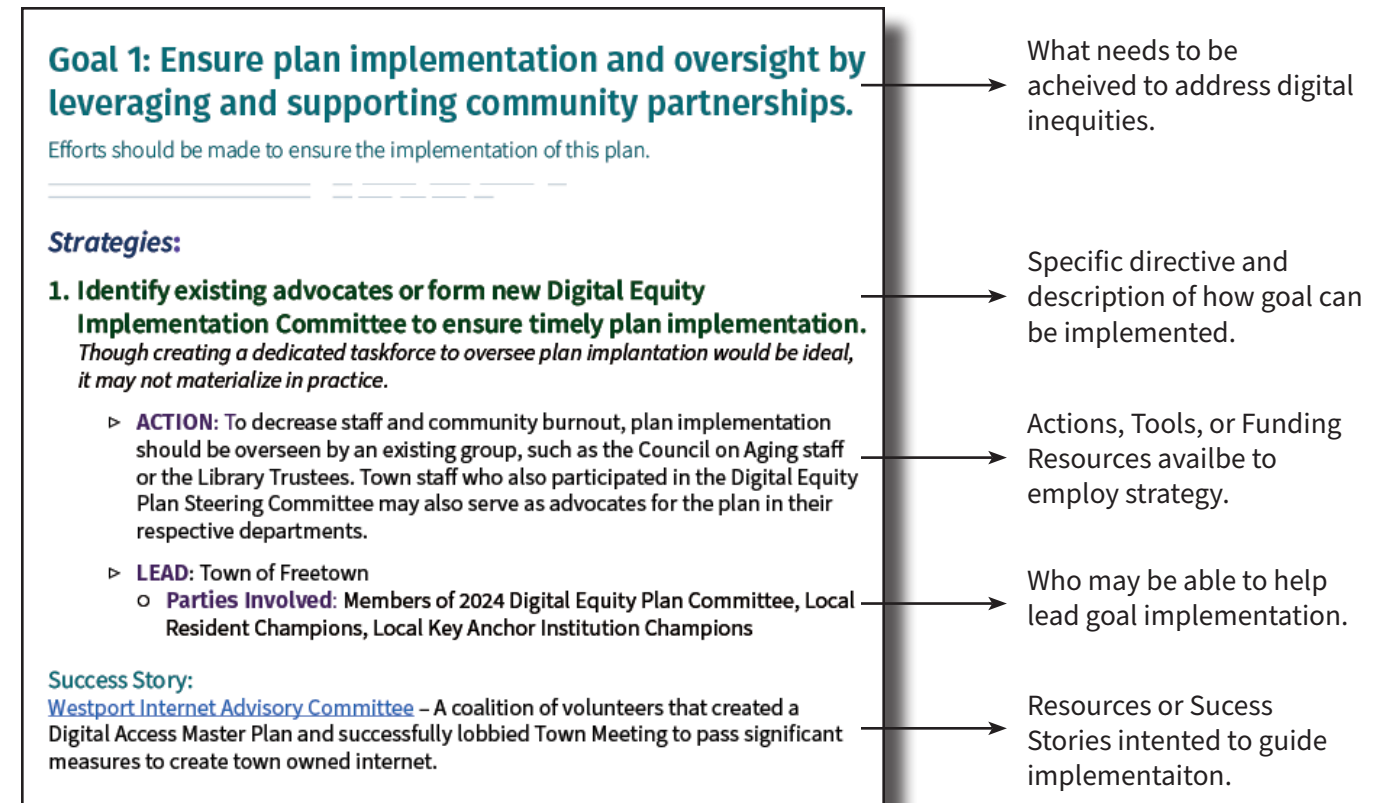15 T. Borseti, 'Zoning dispute turns ugly in Freetown', 2001
16 School and District Profiles: Enrollment by Race/Gender, (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2013-204, 2023-2024)

Recommendations

Freetown can leverage state, federal, and community resources to implement goals outlined in the plan. The following section outlines goals and strategic recommendations for the Town to take steps towards achieving digital equity based on current data and key findings found throughout the engagement and research process.

These recommendations are organized by four general goals – the first of which outlines steps the community can take to towards closing the digital divide and three of which correspond to a specific digital equity pillar. Each goal provides a strategy that may include action items, tools, success stories and other steps Freetown can take to lead and fund digital equity initiatives.

Image 15. How to Read Reccomndations Layout

Goal 1: Ensure plan implementation and oversight by leveraging and supporting community partnerships.

Efforts should be made to ensure the implementation of this plan.

What needs to be acheived to address digital inequities.

Strategies:

1. **Identify existing advocates or form new Digital Equity Implementation Committee to ensure timely plan implementation.** *Though creating a dedicated taskforce to oversee plan implantation would be ideal, it may not materialize in practice.*

   Specific directive and description of how goal can be implemented.

   ▷ **ACTION:** To decrease staff and community burnout, plan implementation should be overseen by an existing group, such as the Council on Aging staff or the Library Trustees. Town staff who also participated in the Digital Equity Plan Steering Committee may also serve as advocates for the plan in their respective departments.

   Actions, Tools, or Funding Resources availbe to employ strategy.

   ▷ **LEAD:** Town of Freetown
   o **Parties Involved:** Members of 2024 Digital Equity Plan Committee, Local Resident Champions, Local Key Anchor Institution Champions

   Who may be able to help lead goal implementation.

Success Story:
Westport Internet Advisory Committee – A coalition of volunteers that created a Digital Access Master Plan and successfully lobbied Town Meeting to pass significant measures to create town owned internet.

Resources or Sucess Stories intented to guide implementaiton.

Goal 1: Ensure plan implementation and oversight by leveraging and supporting community partnerships.

Efforts should be made to ensure the implementation of this plan.

Strategies:

1. Identify existing advocates or form new Digital Equity Implementation Committee to ensure timely plan implementation.

Though creating a dedicated taskforce to oversee plan implantation would be ideal, it may not materialize in practice.

▷ **ACTION**: To decrease staff and community burnout, plan implementation should be overseen by an existing group, such as the Council on Aging staff or the Library Trustees. Town staff who also participated in the Digital Equity Plan Steering Committee may also serve as advocates for the plan in their respective departments.

▷ **LEAD**: Town of Freetown
  ○ **Parties Involved**: Members of 2024 Digital Equity Plan Committee, Local Resident Champions, Local Key Anchor Institution Champions

Success Story:
Westport Internet Advisory Committee – A coalition of volunteers that created a Digital Access Master Plan and successfully lobbied Town Meeting to pass significant measures to create town owned internet.

2. Support town staff and community stakeholders in continual digital equity efforts.

Town staff and community stakeholders should be provided with proper digital equity tools, such as curriculum, modules, or contacts to address concerns as they arise.

▷ **ACTION**: Digital literacy curriculum and modules like the AARP's Older Adults Technology Services (OATS) can either be purchased or created to give structure to digital literacy education. Staff can present these materials and other resources at department head meetings or via a staff memo. Staff and volunteers may also explore participating in digital navigator certification to improve their skills when helping residents 1:1.

▷ **IMPLEMENTATION FUND**: Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Program

▷ **LEAD**: Town Staff
  ○ **Parties Involved**: Southeastern Massachusetts SER – Jobs for Progress, Inc., Coastline Elderly Services, AARP

Success Story:
Swansea COA – The Director of Swansea's COA has leveraged their experience with creating lesson plans and created a tailored lesson plan for how to navigate the internet with tablets and phones.

3. Foster partnerships with local and regional community institutions to increase impact.

Building partnerships using existing programming across town and in surrounding communities will help stakeholders maintain consistent implementation activities that helps reach vulnerable and underserved populations where they are already seeking services.

▷ **ACTION**: Key anchor institutions can get involved with Tech Goes Home (or collaborate with the partner site in nearby Fall River), access resources,[17] or attain instructor certification. Community anchor institutions can also work more closely together, for example, by hosting a semi-annual community leaders retreat on digital equity.

▷ **LEAD**: Town Staff – Community Outreach Staff, Key Anchor Institutions
  ○ **Parties Involved**:Tech Goes Home

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17   See general resources for instructors - https://www.techgoeshome.org/trainers-content

Goal 2: Increase affordable and reliable connections by expanding number of service providers and assessing current internet availability.

The most common concern the project team heard during the outreach phase was the lack of service providers in Freetown, combined with the price of internet being too high.

Strategies:

1. **Increase access to affordable broadband through awareness.**

   Though the ACP no longer exists, there are private broadband affordability programs the town can work to promote so that those who qualify understand resources available to them.

   ▷ **ACTION**: Town staff and community leaders can coordinate and work to create promotional campaign that outlines how particular demographics may be eligible to receive discounts on their internet bill. Freetown can also utilize the Comcast Internet Essentials Partnership Program. This program allows towns to purchase a certain number of Internet Essentials internet plans and provide them to residents free of charge.

   ▷ **IMPLEMENTATION TOOLS:** Comcast Internet Essentials Partnership Program

   ▷ **LEADS:** Town Staff, Local Community Leaders

   Success Story:
   - Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania- Pittsburgh Public Schools identified 1,000 families in the district that did not have internet in their home, and through the Comcast Internet Essentials Partnership Program, they were able to provide these households with a year of internet.

2. **Assess areas with low cell coverage and dead zones.**

   The town should explore programming from the Massachusetts Broadband Institute (MBI) or the National Telecommunications and Infrastructure Administration (NTIA) to assess and explore improving cellular infrastructure in dead zones, especially in rural households along Slab Bridge Road.

   ▷ **ACTION**: SRPEDD or other consultant can be hired to conduct a study or Wirelesss Telecommunications Plan to better understand community needs and actual broadband/cellular speeds. This study can later be presented to local cellular provider or relevant town staff to address issue directly.

   ▷ **IMPLEMENTATION FUND**: USDA Telecom Programs, Federal Grants Funding for Emergency Communications

   ▷ **LEAD/PARTIES INVOLVED:** Local Digital Equity Advocates, SRPEDD or Relevant Consultant

   Example Stories/Additional Reading
   - 'Cell on Wheels' - Williamsburg, VA
   - 'Wireless Telecommunications Master Plan' - Fort Collins, CO
   - CTC Report on How Localities Can Improve Wireless Service

3. **Address affordability and lack of provider options.**

   Comcast's effective monopoly in Freetown can place burdens on vulnerable populations through lack of competition and resulting high costs. The town should explore options to address the issue of internet affordability and the lack of provider options in the town.

   ▷ **ACTION**: In the long term, Freetown's Town Administrator can utilize digital equity plan and other relevant resources to expand existing Municipal Fiber Network or look to coordinate with other providers in the region, such as Open Cape or the Taunton Municipal Light Plan (TMLP). Similarly, the Town can coordinate and stay up to date with future funding opportunities from MBI's.

   ▷ **IMPLEMENTATION FUND**: State Municipal Fiber Program

   ▷ **LEAD**: Town Administrator, Board of Selectmen

Goal 3: Create opportunities for underserved communities to access the internet in public places.

Community stakeholders expressed that they would like to see more spaces the public could visit to access devices or internet.

Strategies:

1. **Create a computer lending program at town-owned anchor institutions.**
   The town should develop a device lending program for mobile computer labs and individual use.

   ▷ **ACTION**: The town can utilize their Cable Advisory Committee to assess feasibility and ownership of devices and house 10 Chromebooks in a secure location at the library. A Chromebook could also be purchased for the COA's outreach coordinator – this way they can work with seniors 1:1 during house visits.

   ▷ **IMPLEMENTATION FUND:**
     ○ T-Mobile Hometown Grant: This grant program is meant for shovel-ready projects in towns of 50,000 or less for "projects that foster local connections, like technology upgrades, outdoor spaces, the arts, and community centers."[18]
     ○ Computers4People: A nonprofit that provides computers to organizations and people in Massachusetts free of charge.

   ▷ **LEAD**: Town Administrator
     ○ **Parties Involved**: Cable Advisory Committee, Library, Council on Aging, Church Leaders

Sucess Stories:
- Boston Public Library offers patrons in good standing the oppurtunity to check out a Chromebook Home Connectivity Kit for three weeks. This kit includes a laptop, mouse, startup guide and laptop bag and the program is funded through Emergency Connectivy Fund Program.

Image 16. Boston Public Library Chromebook Home Connectivity Kit

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18   T-Mobile Hometown Grants, 2024
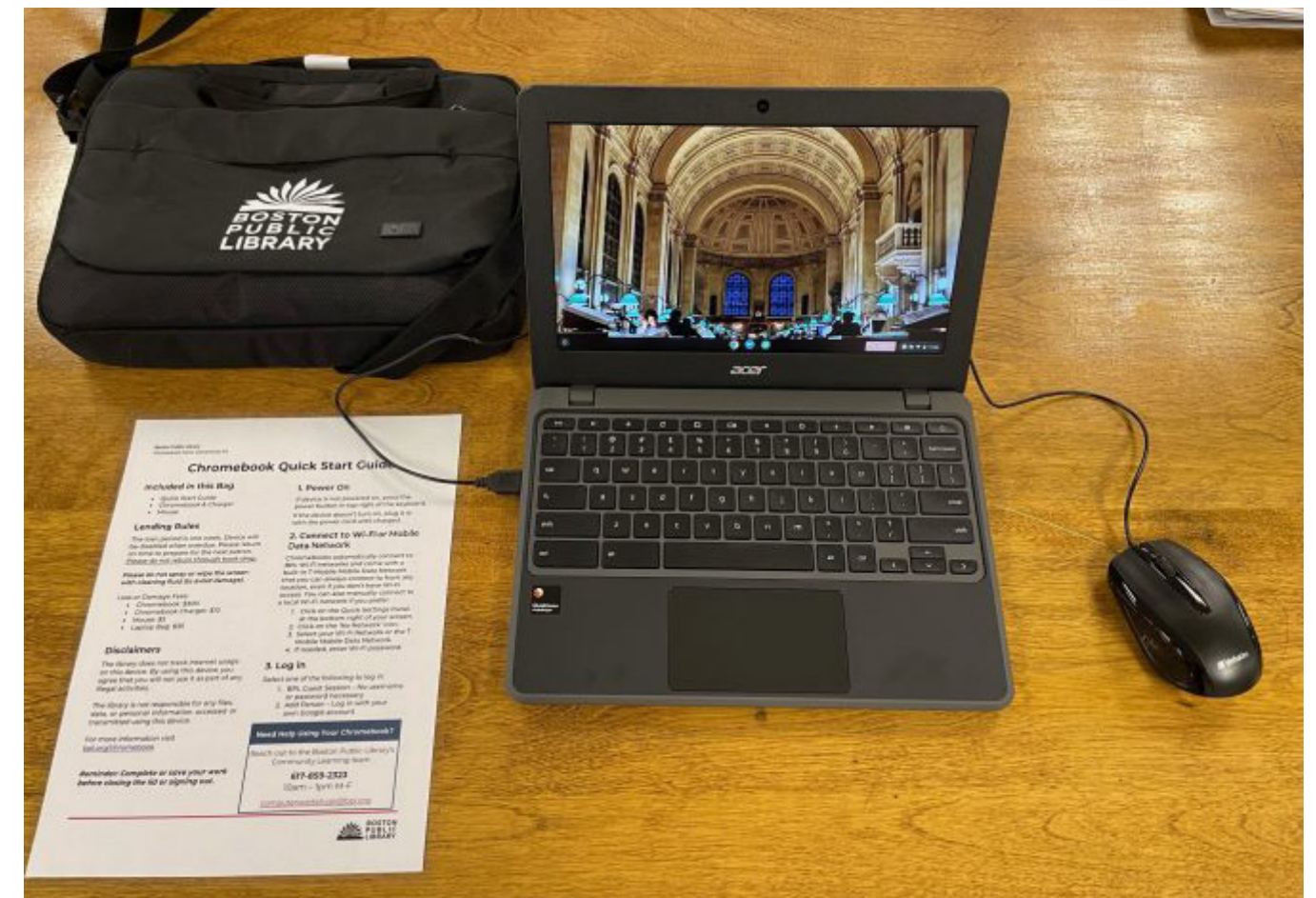
Goal 4: Assist vulnerable and underserved populations in safely and effectively navigating and troubleshooting digital devices and the internet.

A common concern expressed by Freetown residents and stakeholders is the lack of digital literacy and digital skills amongst residents of the town.

Strategies:

1. Identify and provide expert/dedicated staff to assist those in need.

The town should identify town staff who can assist residents that are in need of digital skills help. The digital skillset of Freetown residents can be improved by empowering staff at the Council on Aging and Library with digital skills tools. These staff should be provided with the tools necessary to provide trainings and classes to residents.

▷ **ACTION:** The town can partner with Tech Goes Home for free trainings and curriculum. Organizations, such as Comcast and Tech Goes Home, can provide the curriculum necessary for town staff to utilize for trainings and classes.

▷ **IMPLEMENTATION FUND:**
  ○ Comcast can provide curriculum free of charge.
  ○ Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners (MBLC) Open Grant Program: This is a general grant opportunity for libraries when other MBLC grants are not a good match for their program. This program can be used to solve problems and build new programs, and it should directly serve a target population.

▷ **LEAD:** Council on Aging, Public Library
  ○ **PARTIES INVOLVED:** Board of Selectmen, Town Administrator

2. Protect vulnerable populations from online scams and phishing.
Cybersecurity awareness should be promoted through a dedicated communications campaign.

▷ **ACTION:** The town should either create or obtain a cybersecurity curriculum to create a communications campaign outlining common online scams and phishing tactics and providing the skills necessary to avoid these scams.

▷ **TOOLS:** Comcast can provide cybersecurity curriculum to provide cybersecurity trainings to relevant Community Anchor Institutions and residents. Residents can also utilize the AARP scam map to report scams and look at other cybersecurity scams in the area.[19]

▷ **IMPLEMENTATION FUND**: Municipal Cybersecurity Awareness Grant Program**:** The Executive Office of Technology Services and Security's Office of Municipal and School Technology runs the Municipal Cybersecurity Awareness Grant Program (MCAGP). This program is free for organizations, including municipalities, to participate in and provides four different learning paths to learn about cybersecurity and the dangers of phishing scams.

▷ **LEAD**: Police Department
  ○ **PARTIES INVOLVED**: Comcast, Freetown Police Department, Council on Aging

Success Story:
■ Greenfield Community College Cyber-Seniors Program: This program connects older adults and youth, providing senior with one-on-one tech support, staffed by Greenfield Community College work study students.

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19   AARP Scam Map

3. Provide for general assistance and opportunities to increase diverse set of digital skills.

Freetown should develop a diverse set of programming aimed at identifying specific digital inequity gaps. The town should host ongoing and evolving digital skills and digital literacy classes in the town aimed at residents of all ages. The town can explore the possibility of partnering with Comcast or Tech Goes Home to expand curriculum and course offerings.

▷ **IMPLEMENTATION FUND:**
- PLA Digital Literacy**:** This grant provides $10,000 for fifty large libraries or $5,000 for fifty small libraries to foster public library adoption of 8 Core DigitalLearn basic topics.
- Community Facilities (CF) Direct Loan and Grant Program**:** This grant program is meant for libraries, K-12 schools, higher education institutions, local government, territorial governments, tribal governments, public safety entities, healthcare facilities, and non-profit organizations. This money can be used for digital inclusion efforts including broadband adoption, devices, public access, digital skills, trainings, and tech support.

▷ **LEAD/PARTIES INVOLVED***:* Council on Aging, Library, Community Outreach Coordinator

Success Story:
- Chelmsford Public Library- The Chelmsford Public Library was awarded a PLA Digital Literacy Workshop Incentive Grant, which allowed them to offer technology workshops twice a week for adults and teenagers.

Conclusion

Thanks to the collaboration and willingness of Town staff and residents, the project team were able to develop meaningful goals and strategies that can bring Freetown closer to providing affordable, fast internet and the ability to access online portals with functioning devices and digital skills.

Readers are encouraged to look through the glossary and appendix for additional definitions and details.

Image 17. Freetown Town Forrest

Glossary

AFFORDABLE CONNECTIVITY PROGRAM (ACP)- A program created during the pandemic to ensure that everyone had access to broadband in their households. The program provided households with a $30 credit off their monthly internet bill, and a $100 credit towards a device, or $75 off their monthly internet bill if they were living on tribal lands. This program ended in May 2024.

BROADBAND- Internet that has speeds of at least 100/20 Mbps.

BROADBAND SERVICEABLE LOCATION (BSL)- A residential location or business where internet can be installed.

COVERED POPULATIONS- The Massachusetts Broadband Institute (MBI) and the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) recognizes the eight groups below as covered populations regarding digital equity: Low Income Households, Aging Individuals, Incarcerated Individuals, Veterans, Individuals with Disabilities, Individuals with a Language Barrier, Individuals who are members of a racial or ethnic minority group, Individuals who live in a rural area

DIGITAL EQUITY- The condition in which all individuals and communities have the information technology capacity needed for full participation in our society, democracy, and economy.

DIGITAL EQUITY ASSET- Any services, programs, documents, organizations, etc. that support or promote digital equity. For example, device distribution programs, digital navigators, and relevant planning documents are digital equity assets.

DIGITAL LITERACY- The skills necessary to use technology and navigate the internet, such as the ability to maintain devices, communicate effectively online and evaluate online information and security risks.

DIGITAL REDLINING- According to the Boston University School of Public Health, digital redlining is "discriminatory disinvestment in broadband infrastructure that disproportionately affects people of color, low-income communities, and rural populations, worsening disparities in access to healthcare, social services, education, and employment for these populations."[20]

HOTSPOT- Intel defines a hotspot as "a physical location where people can access the Internet, typically using Wi-Fi, via a wireless local area network (WLAN) with a router connected to an Internet service provider."[21]

JITTER- A measure of network performance that refers to the irregularity in the time it takes for a data packet to travel from its source to its destination, potentially leading to disruptions and inconsistencies in the flow of data.[22]

LATENCY- A measure of network performance referring to the time it takes for a data packet to travel from its source it its destination.[23]

SPEED TEST- Measures the speed at which data transfers back and forth from a web server to a device via a router in megabits per second (Mbps). On March 14th, 2024, the Federal Communications Commission raised "the Commission's benchmark for high-speed fixed broadband to download speeds of 100 megabits per second and upload speeds of 20 megabits per second."[24]

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20   Jillian Mckoy, "Combating Digital Redlining 'Is Imperative for Advancing Health Equity'", 2024
21   Intel, "What is a Hotspot- WiFi Hotspot Definitions and Details"
22   LiveAction, "Jitter vs Latency: Unraveling the Nuances in Network Performance"
23   Ibid.
24   Federal Communications Commission, "FCC Increases Broadband Speed Benchmark", 2024

Appendix

Appendix 1.   Department Head Questionare

1/5/25, 10:26 PM   Freetown Digital Equity Plan Department Head Questionnaire

Responses Overview   Active

Responses	Average Time	Duration
9	07:17	257 Days

1. What is your full name and role?

8
Responses

Latest Responses
"Harrie Ashley Fire Chief"
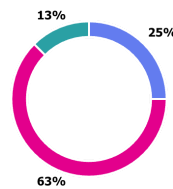"Nicole Davignon - Library Director"
"Mike McCue"
. . .

2. What department do you oversee?

8
Responses

Latest Responses
"Fire Department"
"Library"
"Cemetery & Assessors"
. . .

3. Would you consider your department a Community Anchor Institution?

- Yes   2
- No   5
- Maybe   1
- Other   0

13%
25%
63%

4. Where is your department located?

7
Responses

Latest Responses
"25 Bullock rd"
"We have two locations - James White Library in E. Freetown and Guilford H. Hath... "
"Town Hall & Cemetery"
. . .

5. Please select all the ways your department accesses the internet.

- Data plan for smartphone, hotspot, or tablet   5
- Wireline connection (cable, fiber, DSL, etc.)   8
- Dial-Up Internet   1
- Satellite Internet   1
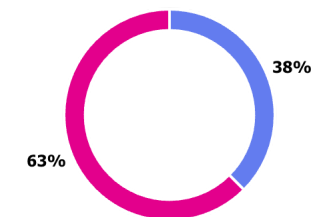
7% 7%
7%
33%
53%
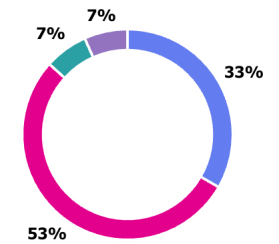
6. How well does your department's internet service work?

- Good enough to meet my department's needs   6
- Not good enough to meet my department's needs   2
- I don't know   0

25%
75%
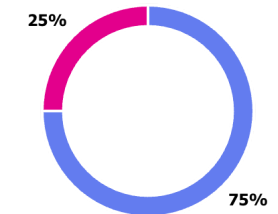
7. Is there any concern about the privacy or safety of your department's data?

- Yes   3
- No   5
- I don't know 0

38%
63%

8. Do residents need to interface with an online portal or other web-based tools to access your department's services?

8
Responses

Latest Responses
"yes"
"Not necessarily"
""Need" no, but it is optional and we encourage it."
. . .

9. Do residents need help navigating online portals or other web-based tools when accessing your department's services?
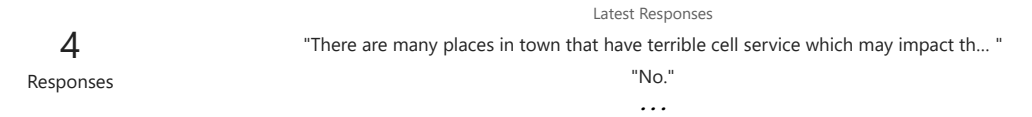
- Yes — 5
- No — 1
- Other — 2

25%
63%
13%

10. Do you or your staff have the capacity to help residents navigate online portals or web-based tools?

- Yes — 7
- No — 1
- Not Applicable — 0
- Other — 0

13%
88%

11. Which of the following target populations does your department interface with regularly?

- Low-Income Households — 3
- Aging Individuals — 6
- Incarcerated Individuals — 1
- Veterans — 5
- Persons of Color — 4
- Indigenous and Native American Populations — 2
- Members of ethnic and religious minorities — 3
- Women — 5
- LGBTQI+ Persons — 4
- Persons with Disabilities — 6
- People with language barriers — 3
- Racial and Ethnic Minorities — 2
- Rural inhabitants — 4
- Persons adversely affected by persistent poverty or inequity — 2

12. Are there specific or general geographic locations in Freetown you feel lack adequate internet access?

4
Responses

Latest Responses
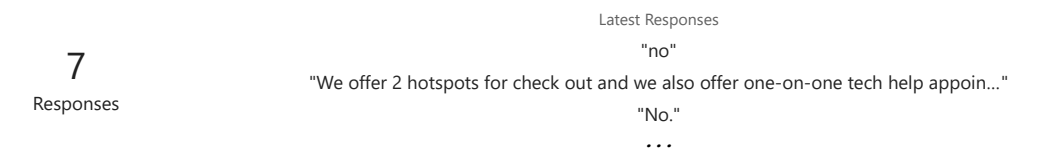"There are many places in town that have terrible cell service which may impact th... "
"No."
• • •

13. Which of the following factors needed for digital equity are residents in Freetown in the greatest need of?

1 **Digital Literacy** - Understanding how to use technological devices for everyday life

2 **Connection -** fast, reliable, and affordable access to the internet

3 **Adequate Device** - access to a router or personal computer
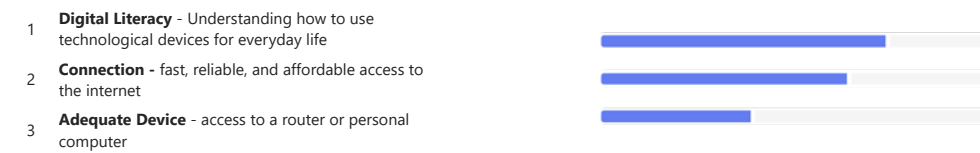
14. What types of digital equity programs/initiatives do you think Freetown residents could benefit from?

- Device Distribution Programs — 0
- Digital Skills Classes — 2
- Internet Affordability Programs for Low-Income Residents — 1
- Other — 0

33%
67%
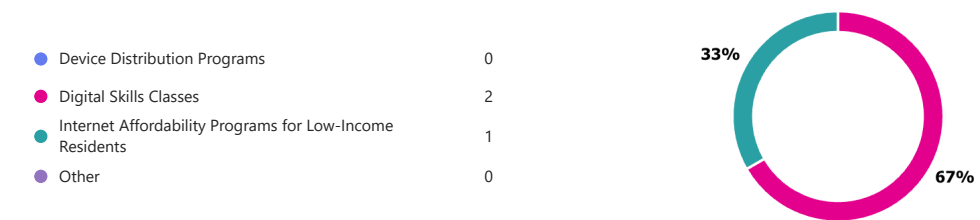
15. Does your department currently host or facilitate any digital equity programs/initiatives?

7
Responses

Latest Responses
"no"
"We offer 2 hotspots for check out and we also offer one-on-one tech help appoin..."
"No."
• • •

16. Is there anyone in the broader community who you think should be included in the discussion of digital equity in Freetown?

3
Responses

Latest Responses
"No."
• • •

Appendix 2.   Charette Materials

WELCOME

Freetown Digital Equity Plan Workshop

Freetown Council on Aging
1 PM - 4 PM

TOWN OF FREETOWN, MASS. INCORPORATED 1683

SRPEDD
Southeastern Regional Planning & Economic Development District

MBI
MASSACHUSETTS BROADBAND INSTITUTE
at the MassTech Collaborative

Introduction to the Plan

What's a Digital Equity Plan?

A Digital Equity Plan seeks to understand and address barriers to digital access to ensure residents of all backgrounds and ages have a fast, affordable, and reliable connection to the Internet.

Plan Contents

Digital Equity Plans may vary based on community members' needs. These plans typically contain:

- Town Vision
- Current State of Digital Equity
- Stakeholder Engagement Process
- Objective & Implementation Strategies
- Evaluation & Updates

Project Team

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Massachusetts Broadband Institute

This project was funded by the Massachusetts Broadband Institute at the MassTech Collaborative under the Municipal Digital Equity Planning Program. Funding was provided by Massachusetts ARPA State Fiscal Recovery Funds.

Timeline

2023
Asset Mapping and Municipal Digital Equity Program promotion in SRPEDD region

Spring 2024
Stakeholder kickoff, project branding, steering committee formation, and charette planning.

We're Here!

Summer 2024
Promotional events, digital equity charette, and existing conditions analysis

Fall 2024
Digital equity plan writing and open houses.

Winter 2024
Finalize plan and present to the Board of Selectmen.

Introduction

What is Digital Equity?

Digital equity describes **a community's (or an individual's) ability to engage with the internet**, and involves **efforts to build the necessary resources, knowledge, and skills** in communities that may need them **to fully participate in online aspects of our society or economy.**

There are three main ways to understand digital equity and barriers to digital access:

Connection: Having a fast, affordable, and stable connection to the internet.

Barriers: connectivity interruptions, digital redlining, or the inability to afford or access services.

Devices: to access education, career development, socialization, and more.

Barriers: outdated software, a device not matching a users needs, or lack of affordability.

Literacy: using technology, maintaining devices, evaluating online information and security risks.

Barriers: limited skills, fear or shame, or inaccessible trainings.

Questions

1. How do you think digital equity might impact people or communities in Freetown?

Data sources: National Digital Inclusion Alliance

Introduction

How does the digital divide impact everyday life?

Internet access is not a luxury. It is essential.
Lack of access impacts many aspects of our modern day to day.

The Digital Divide Impacts..

Social Connectivity
Communicating with family or friends on social media or email.

Educational Opportunities
Online learning for students and the ability to pursue adult learning resources.

Healthcare Access
Access to health records and telehealth services.

Workforce Preparedness
Ability to apply to jobs online or prepare application materials.

Financial Resources
Access to online banking, financial literacy resources and assistance.

Civic Participation
Staying informed about voting, online public meetings or engagement opportunities.

Questions

1. How would your daily routine change if you suddenly lost access to the internet?

2. What aspects of your life would be most affected?

Imagine...

Your grandmother needs internet to access **telehealth services**. To use these services, she would need
- Functioning devices that are connected to reliable internet (such as a personal computer or router).
- A stable internet connection to facilitate a video call.
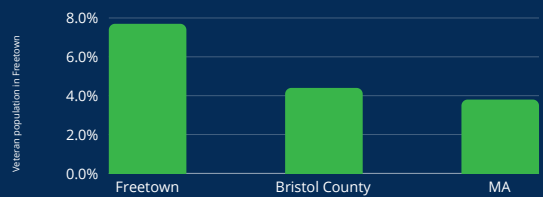- And the digital literacy skills necessary to properly navigate online services.

Data sources: National Digital Inclusion Alliance
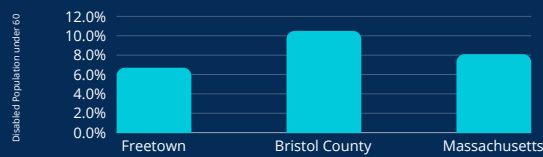
Demographics

Which populations typically lack internet access?
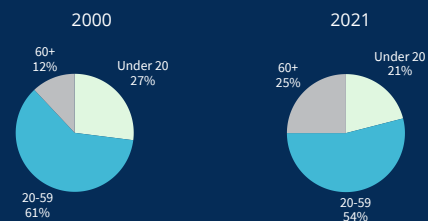
Covered Populations In Freetown

Freetown's Veteran population is much higher compated to Bristol County and statewide trends.

Freetown's population of individuals with disabilities under 60 is lower than the county and state, but still significant.

Freetown is aging - a trend consistent across the region.

Digital Equity Act

The Digital Equity Act of 2021 identifies 8 covered populations that have historically experienced lower rates of computer and internet use. The covered populations named in the legislation include:

Populations Covered by the Digital Equity Act

- Persons who are 60 years of age or older
- Veterans
- Persons with disabilities
- Rural residents
- Members of a racial or ethnic minority group
- Individuals with a language barrier, including those who are English learners or have low literacy levels
- Individuals living in households with incomes not exceeding 150 percent of the poverty level
- Incarcerated individuals

Questions

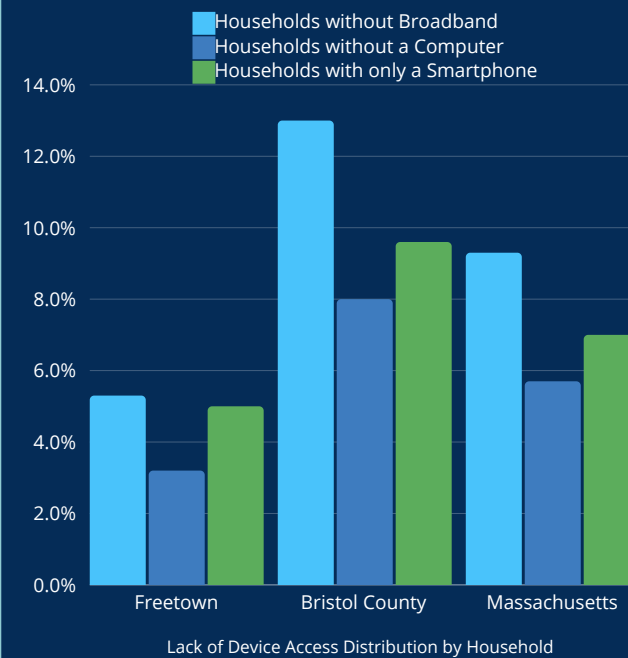1. What populations should we focus on for Freetown?

Data sources: American Community Survey, 2018-2022
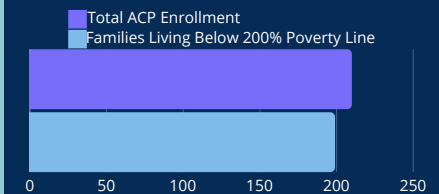

Device Access

Who needs computers or routers?

A smaller percentage of Freetown households lack access to a device compared to Bristol County and the state.

Lack of Device Access Distribution by Household

American Connectivity Program (ACP)

This recently defunct public program helped ensure that households were able to afford broadband and provided a discount of up to $30 per month toward internet service for eligible households and up to $75 per month for eligible households on tribal land.

Recent ACP Enrollment data shows Freetowners below the 200% poverty line might have been taking advantage of the program.

Questions

1. What device do you use to access the internet?

2. Do you have adequate access to a device at home?

Data sources: American Community Survey, 2018-2022.

Internet Service Providers (ISPs): Coverage

Is your connection reliable?

All of Freetown has access to broadband internet, but only 39.21 of Freetown households have access to 2 or more providers offering broadband speeds.
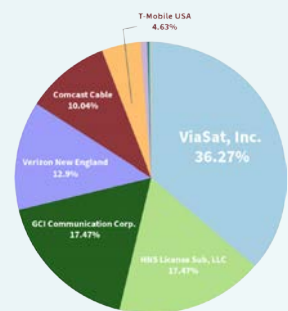

0 0.5 1   2 Miles

Number of Network Providers in Census Block
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
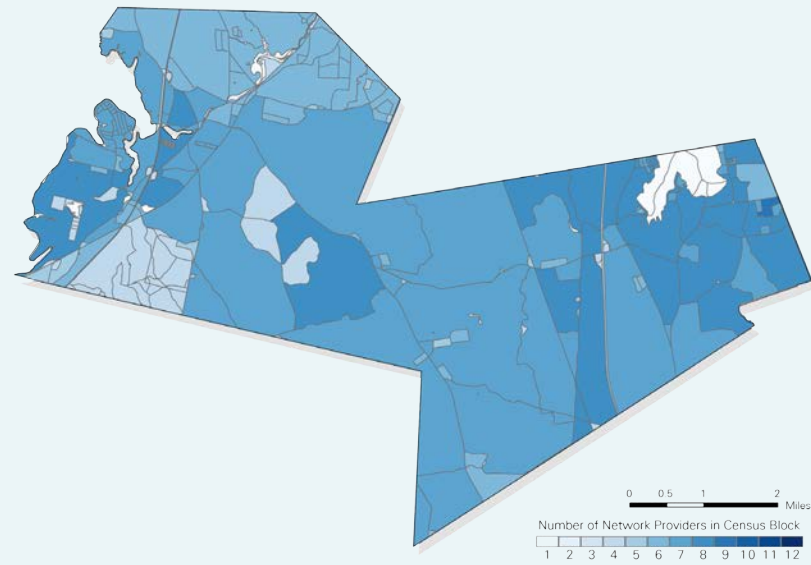
Coverage in Freetown by Number of Providers

Questions

1. Do you have a steady and reliable internet connection?

While there are options for residents, 45.59% of Freetown households only have 1 option.

T-Mobile USA
4.63%

Comcast Cable
10.04%

Verizon New England
13.9%

GCI Communication Corp.
17.47%

HNS Lincase Sub, LLC
17.47%
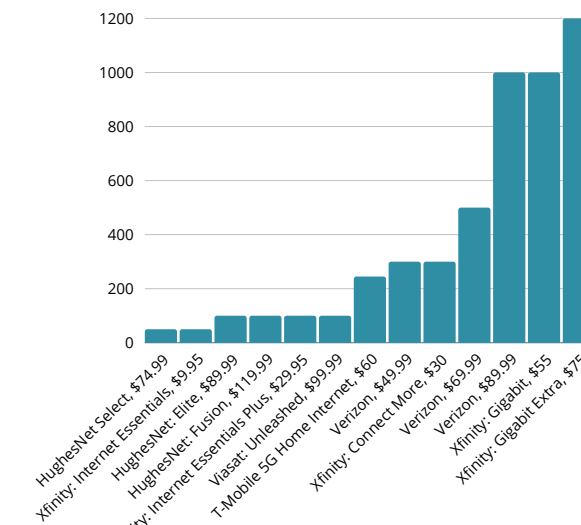
ViaSat, Inc.
36.27%

ISPs Distribution in Freetown
*Note: This chart represents only 82% of ISPs in Freetown
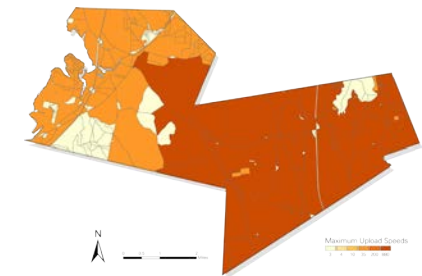
Data sources: Federal Communications Commission

Internet Service Providers (ISPs): Speed and Affordability

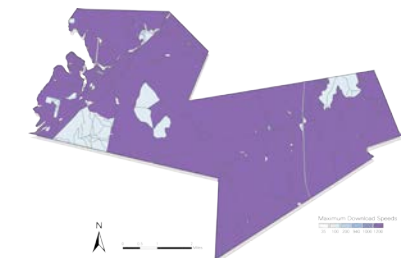Is your connection fast and affordable?

The average price of an internet plan in Freetown is $65.75 a month, however many report spending $100+.

Service packages found at Sample Address in Freetown by Max Download Speed

Max Upload Speeds

Max Download Speeds

Questions

1. Do you struggle to pay your internet bill?

What do speed tests tell us?

Download Speed - How fast information travels to you. It may affect how fast it takes to download large files or show pages with many pictures.

Upload Speed - How fast information can transfer from you. It affects things like your ability to participate in a virtual doctor's appointment.

Data sources: Federal Communications Commission

Digital Equity Assets

Current Assets Identified in Freetown:

Freetown-Lakeville School District Technology Plan

Library Hot Spot Lending

What is a digital equity asset?

Digital equity assets include things like computer classes, cybersecurity resources, device support, device distribution services, or any other plans or programs related to digital equity.

Potential Digital Equity Assets

Digital Navigators

Digital Skills Classes

Device Lending Programs

Questions

1. Do you feel confident navigating the internet?

2. How can the town help improve digital literacy?