DIGITAL EQUITY PLAN

Town of
SOUTHBRIDGE
Massachusetts

June 2025

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1 Introduction

1.1 Project Background

Chapter 231 of the Acts of 2008 established the Massachusetts Broadband Institute (MBI) as a new division within the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative to provide for a program to achieve the deployment of affordable and ubiquitous broadband access for every citizen of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.[1] This legislation provided funding to MBI to oversee and administer across the Commonwealth.

Additionally, the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) allocated $147 million to Massachusetts under the BEAD program to build out broadband infrastructure to remaining unserved[2] and underserved[3] locations across the state.[4] The NTIA has also allocated $1 million to Massachusetts to develop a State Digital Equity Plan and another $14.1 million to implement that plan under the Digital Equity Act. Funds from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) were then used to establish a Municipal Digital Equity Planning Program, supporting these efforts at the local level. Specifically, the Municipal Digital Equity Planning activities will accomplish two goals:

1. Guide municipal decision-making and investments that will increase access, adoption, and usage of the internet for the populations most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Prepare municipalities to submit grant proposals to existing or forthcoming state or federal programs to support digital equity activities.

1.2 What is Broadband?

The term broadband, also known as high-speed internet, is the transmission of data using a wide range of frequencies that allows for the fast and efficient transfer of large amounts of information. In contrast to traditional Digital Subscriber Lines (DSL) or dial-up access, which requires a telephone line to connect, broadband remains consistently connected to the internet without the need for manual connection initiation.

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[1] Source: https://broadband.masstech.org/

[2] An unserved service project is defined as a project in which not less than 80 percent of broadband-serviceable locations served by the project are unserved locations. An “Unserved Service Project” may be as small as a single unserved broadband serviceable location (NOFO Section I.C.ee). An unserved location is defined as a broadband-serviceable location that the Broadband DATA Maps show as (a) having no access to broadband service, or (b) lacking access to Reliable Broadband Service offered with - (i) a speed of not less than 25 Mbps for downloads; and (ii) a speed of not less than 3 Mbps for uploads; and (iii) latency less than or equal to 100 milliseconds (NOFO Section I.C.dd).

[3] An underserved service project is defined as a project in which not less than 80 percent of broadband-serviceable locations served by the project are unserved locations or underserved locations. An “Underserved Service Project” may be as small as a single underserved broadband serviceable location (NOFO Section I.C.cc). An underserved location is defined as a broadband-serviceable location that is (a) not an unserved location, and (b) that the Broadband DATA Maps show as lacking access to Reliable Broadband Service offered with - (i) a speed of not less than 100 Mbps for downloads; and (ii) a speed of not less than 20 Mbps for uploads; and (iii) latency less than or equal to 100 milliseconds (NOFO Section I.C.bb).

[4] The current federal administration has halted the continuation of the Digital Equity Act and terminated grants to states as of May 12, 2025, including MA’s award of $14.1 million.

Broadband can be split into two (2) types, fixed and mobile. Generally speaking, fixed broadband includes those types of connections with a physical wire and cables to the home (e.g.: VDSL (Very High Speed Digital Subscriber Line), fiber optic, cable modem, fixed antenna, and satellite) and wireless broadband includes anything without a physical wire connection (e.g.: mobile and cellular). Broadband speed can vary based on factors such as technology, level of service, or congestion. In March 2024, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) voted to increase the threshold for speed from 25 megabits per second (Mbps) download speed and 3 Mbps upload speed to 100 Mbps download speed and 20 Mbps upload speed.

There are three (3) main metrics that must be met to an acceptable degree for the internet to be considered high-speed.

- **Speed** is typically measured in Mbps, which is a measurement of the amount of data capable of being transmitted each second.
- **Bandwidth** is the connection's capacity for transmitting data. Broadband is like an internet highway, the higher the bandwidth, the more lanes your internet highway has and the more devices you can connect simultaneously.
- **Latency** is the time it takes for the information to reach its destination related to potential delays. It is critical to applications that use live connections. The effects of high latency include jittery connections and frequent pauses while connected.

In 2015, the FCC defined high-speed internet as download speeds of at least 25 Mbps and upload speeds of at least 3 Mbps. In order to keep up with increasing data demands, a new definition of "high-speed" is recommended by the 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA). The law sets a minimum threshold of 100 Mbps download speeds and 20 Mbps upload for new projects to receive federal broadband funds.

1.3 What is Digital Equity and Why is it Important?

Digital equity is a concept that ensures individuals and communities have equitable access to and use of information technology, enabling them to fully participate in social and economic life. It recognizes that in today's digital age, access to technology and the internet is essential for various aspects of life, including education, employment, healthcare, and civic engagement.

According to the National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA), "Digital Equity is a condition in which all individuals and communities have the information technology capacity needed for full participation in our society, democracy, and economy. Digital Equity is necessary for civic and cultural participation, employment, lifelong learning, and access to essential services."

1.4 Vision and Goals

The Town of Southbridge values digital accessibility and literacy for all citizens. With 60% of the population classified as low-to-moderate income (LMI) and 16.2% living in poverty[5], the Town is dedicated to providing everyone the opportunity and ability to access reliable, affordable, high-speed

[5] The Census Bureau poverty definition - Following the Office of Management and Budget's (OMB) Statistical Policy Directive 14, the Census Bureau uses a set of money income thresholds that vary by family size and composition to determine who is in poverty. If a family's total income is less than the family's threshold, then that family and every individual in it is considered in poverty. The official poverty thresholds do not vary geographically, but they are updated for inflation using Consumer Price Index (CPI-U). The official poverty definition uses money income before taxes and does not include capital gains or noncash benefits (such as public housing, Medicaid, and food stamps).

internet service and the skills to use digital devices safely. By focusing on digital equity, Southbridge aims to enhance personal, civic, and economic participation, ensuring that all individuals can fully engage in and contribute to the community's growth and prosperity.

Consistent with the Massachusetts Broadband Strategic Plan, the strategy involves these four (4) pillars.

- **Extend and Improve Broadband Access and Infrastructure.** Investments in reliable infrastructure where it's lacking, which may be found in pocket locations along town edges, low-density areas, and low- income urban neighborhoods.
- **Reaching Target Populations through Partnerships.** Best practice from the Mass Internet Connect implementation experience is that it is vital to have a distribution partner trusted in the community with the ability to reach the target population and deliver support on devices, subsidies, and digital literacy training.
- **Digital Literacy**. Go beyond connectivity by providing the necessary digital and computer skills for vulnerable populations. More than one out of four participants in the Mass Internet Connect program with MassHire has requested Digital Literacy support.
- **Adoption and Affordability.** Getting devices to people who need them and directing consumers to broadband service subsidies and low-cost service options.

2 Community Engagement

2.1 Steering Committee

The input of various municipal stakeholders was incorporated into the Digital Equity Plan through the Digital Equity Steering Committee (the Steering Committee). The Steering Committee included representatives from the Southbridge Information Technology department, Economic Development & Planning department, and Jacob Edwards Library. The Steering Committee discussed the purpose plan, provided strategic support, and facilitated communication with selected stakeholder groups.

- **Steering Committee Meeting (September 26, 2024)** – Introduced the Steering Committee to the project study team, explained the concept of the Digital Equity Plan and initial research findings, and held an open discussion for any additional information to consider. The discussion emphasized the town's socioeconomic demographics. Participants noted that when the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) was available, social services helped promote the program and assisted individuals to sign up. The Town has its own cable access, Southbridge Community Television, that strives to keep the citizens informed while providing quality local programming of public interest.

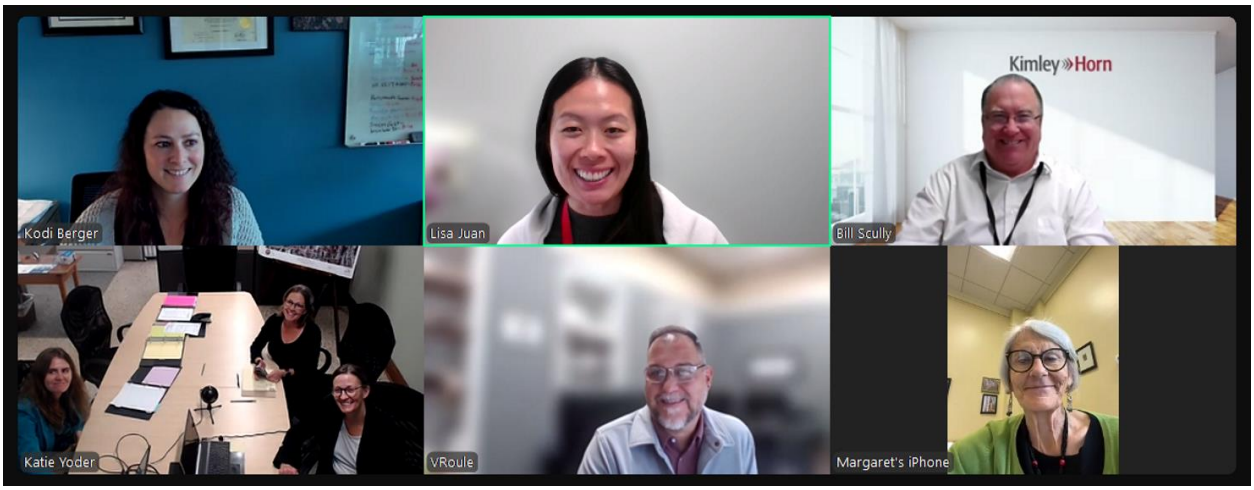


Figure 1. Steering Committee Meeting Group Photo

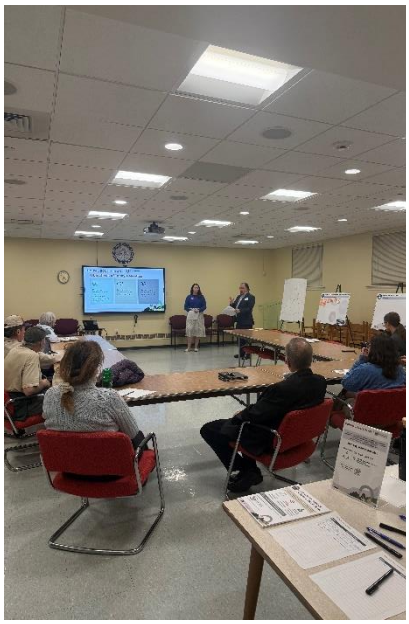
2.2 Stakeholder Interviews

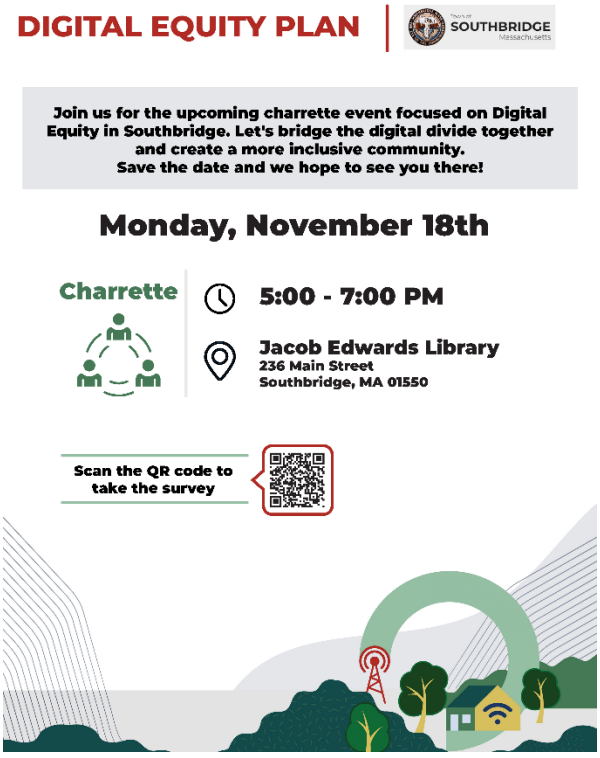
The Steering Committee identified additional stakeholders within the community who could help provide further insight into the state of broadband for various groups across the community. Members of the Steering Committee then hosted one-on-one meetings with those stakeholders to discuss their perspectives and experiences, broadband and digital device barriers and opportunities within the community, and their vision for improved equity. The following stakeholders were selected for interviews:

- Margaret Morrissey, Library Director at **Jacob Edwards Library**
- Kathleen "Katie" Alicea-Tilton, Staff Member at **Council on Aging (COA)**
- Emily Billings, Site Director at **Seven Hills Foundations & Affiliates**

2.3 Community Outreach

In addition to the Steering Committee and stakeholders, the broader Southbridge community was involved in the development of the Plan through a community workshop during which citizens could provide input on the challenges they face with digital access and literacy.





The community workshop was held on November 18, 2024, at the Jacob Edwards Library. Workshop activities included a presentation on the importance of digital equity and an overview of the plan development process; opportunities for participant input on areas with limited or no mobile coverage, good experiences with wireline or mobile connections, devices, affordable/reliable connection, and digital literacy; and the opportunity to take the MBI survey. As part of the attendees, the Digital Equity Project Manager from MBI was present.

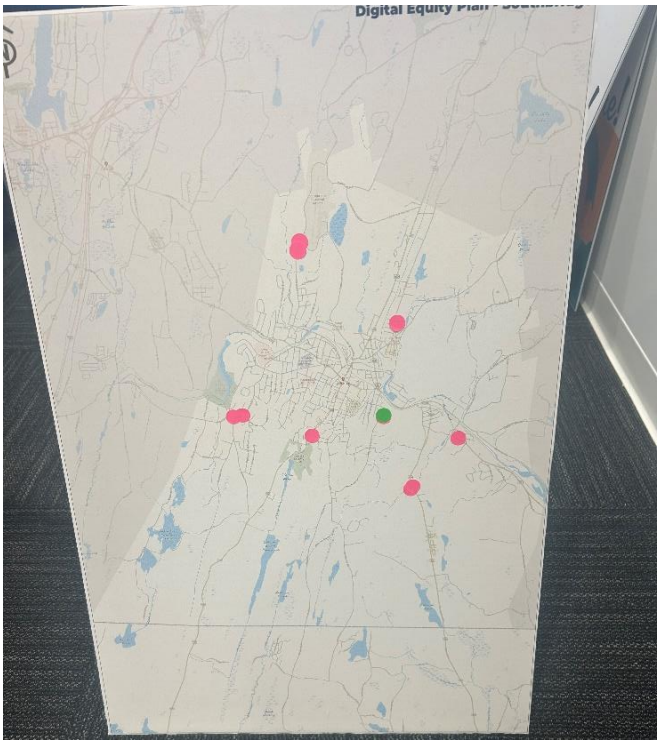


Figure 2. Community Workshop Public Input on Specific Locations – broadband quality

2.4 MBI Survey

MBI also prepared a survey to assess broadband access and needs across the state. This anonymous survey included questions regarding residents' internet service provider, type(s), quality, and cost, as well as questions regarding their personal experiences with device access and desires to participate in training opportunities. As of January 2, 2025, Southbridge residents had submitted 67 responses to the survey. Some of the information gathered from these responses includes the following:

- On average, respondents reported spending $95 per month on their internet subscription.
- 30% of respondents indicated their internet service does not work well enough to support their daily needs.
- Many residents may also benefit from digital literacy and internet safety resources. About 75% of respondents indicated they were interested in training, with a preference (58%) for online trainings.
- Most households reported accessing the internet using a cellphone or laptop computer, with desktop computers and tablets being slightly less common.

3 Community Assessment

The Town of Southbridge recognizes the importance of addressing gaps in broadband access and is working to improve broadband availability, especially for vulnerable populations such as children, older adults, and low-income groups. Southbridge is located within Worcester County with a population of 17,880[6] residents across 7,030 households and 4,494 families.

The Town of Southbridge is a fairly rural and spread-out community. The urban setting of the downtown is fairly compact. The town encompasses 20.2 square miles, with over three-quarters of this area is classified as forest, agriculture, open land, water, or unforested wetlands as shown in **Figure 3**. Opportunities for rezoning have been identified in *A Master Plan for Southbridge: Moving Forward Together A Clear Vision Forward to 2030* to add more recreation areas and improve the resident's experience. However, at the time of this plan's development, a large percentage of the town's land is non-residential. The sprawling nature of the town combined with the topography and tree coverage have contributed to gaps in internet coverage.

[6] US Census Bureau, Population Estimates July 2023

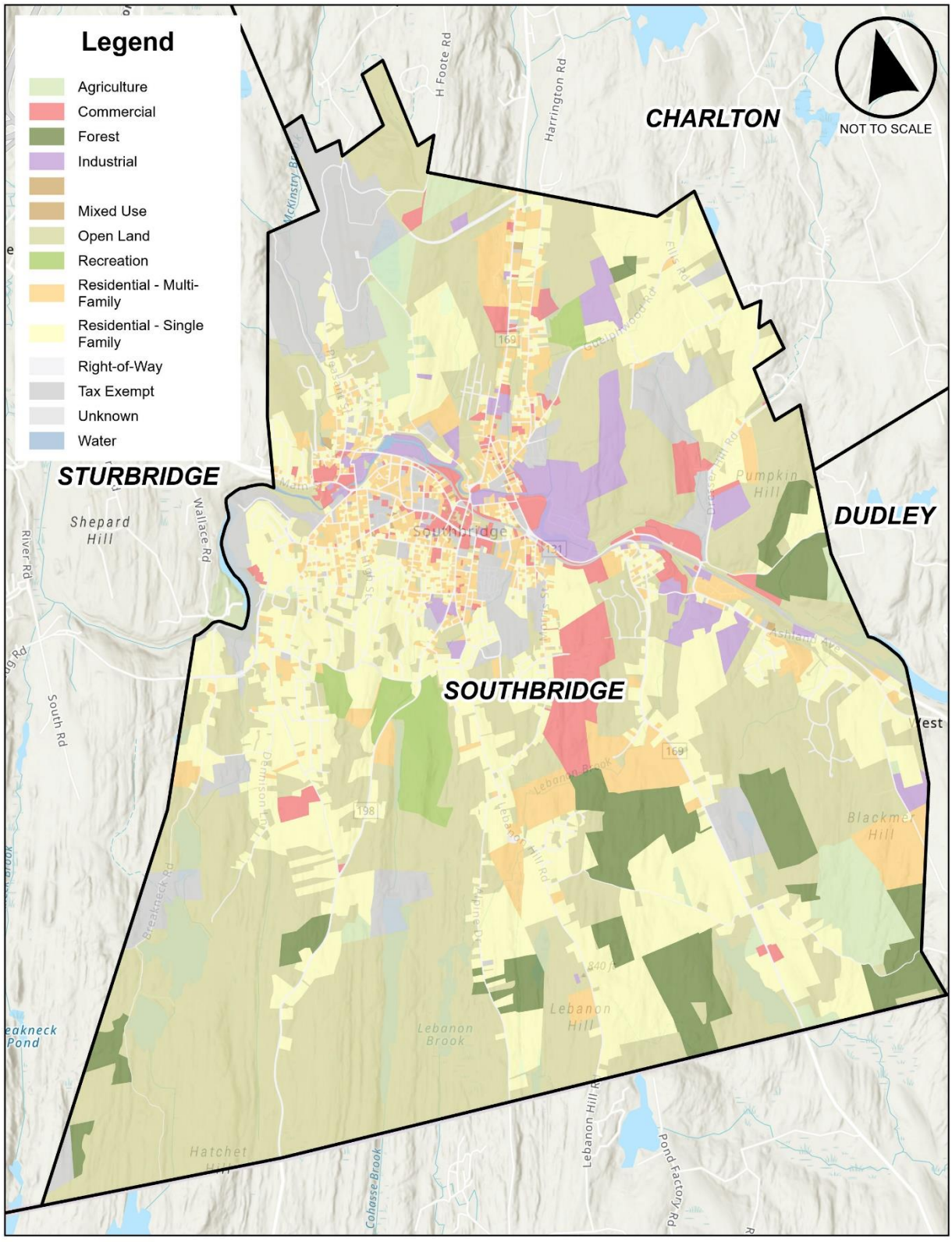


Figure 3. Land Use

3.1 Demographics

Key Demographics

Population[1]	17,880
Home Ownership[1]	43.8% of occupied units are owned 56.2% of occupied units are rental units
Race[2]	35.9% are non-White
Language[1]	33.9% speak language other than English at home
Education[1]	17% have bachelor's degree or higher
Disabilities[1]	19% disabled
Median Household Income[1]	$55,182
Median Age[1]	38.6

Notes: [1]US Census Bureau [2]Data USA

Approximately 36% of Southbridge residents are non-white. The majority of the non-white population of Southbridge are either Hispanic or multiracial. Figure 4 details the racial profile of the town. *A Master Plan for Southbridge: Moving Forward Together: A Clear Vision Forward to 2030* notes that approximately one-third of residents in the community are Spanish-speaking. Of this population, one-third is considered linguistically isolated. It is important to incorporate feedback from underrepresented non-white groups and groups with limited English proficiency in Southbridge to reduce any existing inequities and bridge gaps in access to technology and resources. This can also be done through targeted outreach by providing the materials in languages other than English, particularly Spanish.

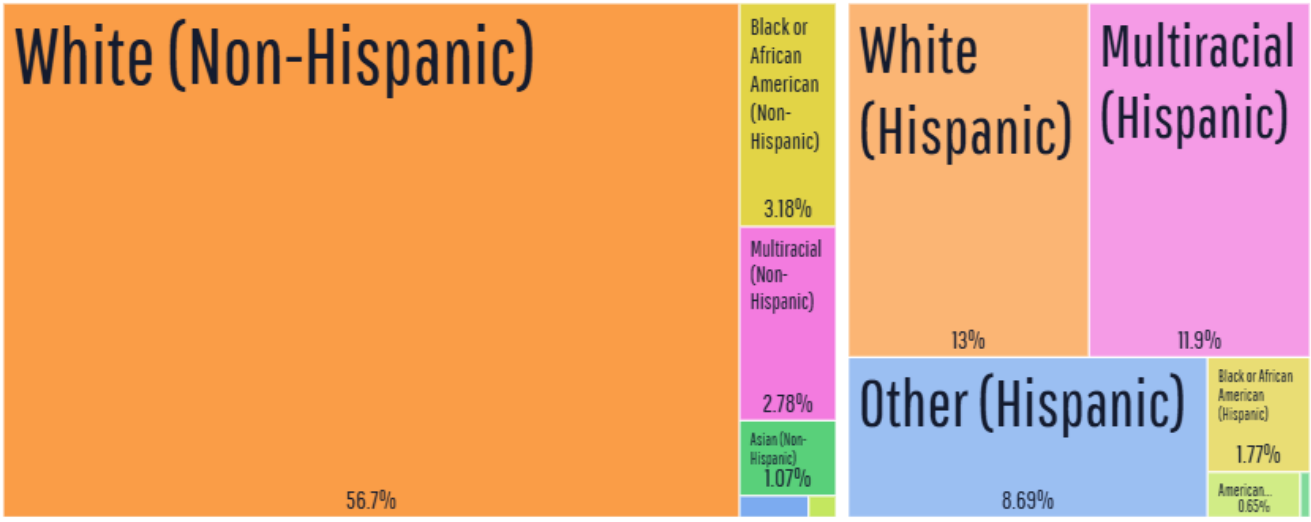


Figure 4. Southbridge Resident Race and Ethnicity 2022 (Source: Data USA)

Figure 5 depicts the age distribution in the Town of Southbridge. With approximately 22.5% of Southbridge residents under the age of 18, the population skews younger than the State of Massachusetts (19.2%). Younger residents may face greater challenges in connecting to broadband, this may be due to the cost of service or some young individuals might not be fully aware of their options when it comes to broadband providers, plans, and installation procedures Broadband offers a greater opportunity to access education resources, which in turn plays a crucial role in lifetime earning opportunities. Inability to access high paying jobs that require higher educational attainment can exacerbate inequity over time.

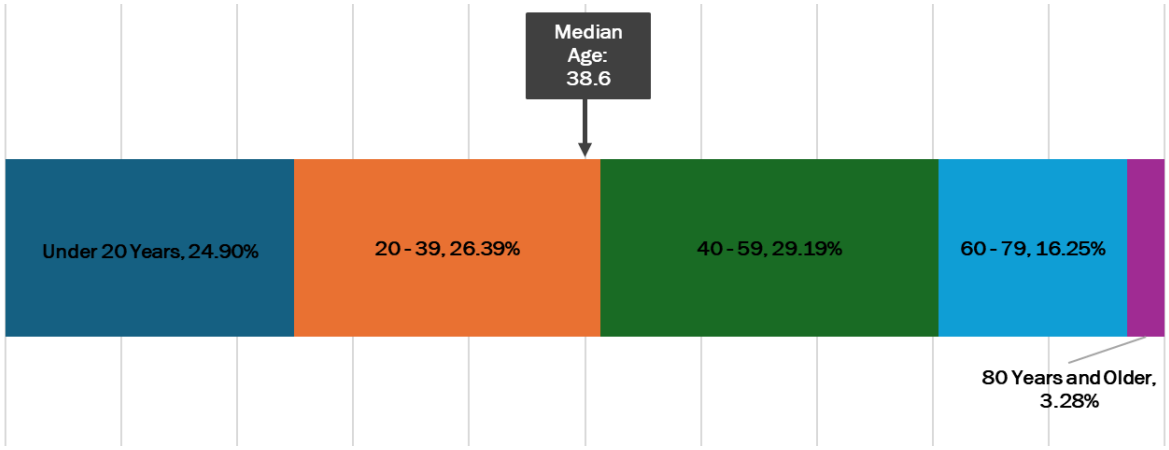


Figure 5. Age Distribution (Source: Data USA)

Income disparities in Southbridge were noted in the MBI survey. Approximately 35% of residents made less than $35,000 per year. Southbridge's median income was $55,182. over $35,000 lower than the median for Worcester County. Figure 6 shows the overall distribution of income among Southbridge residents.

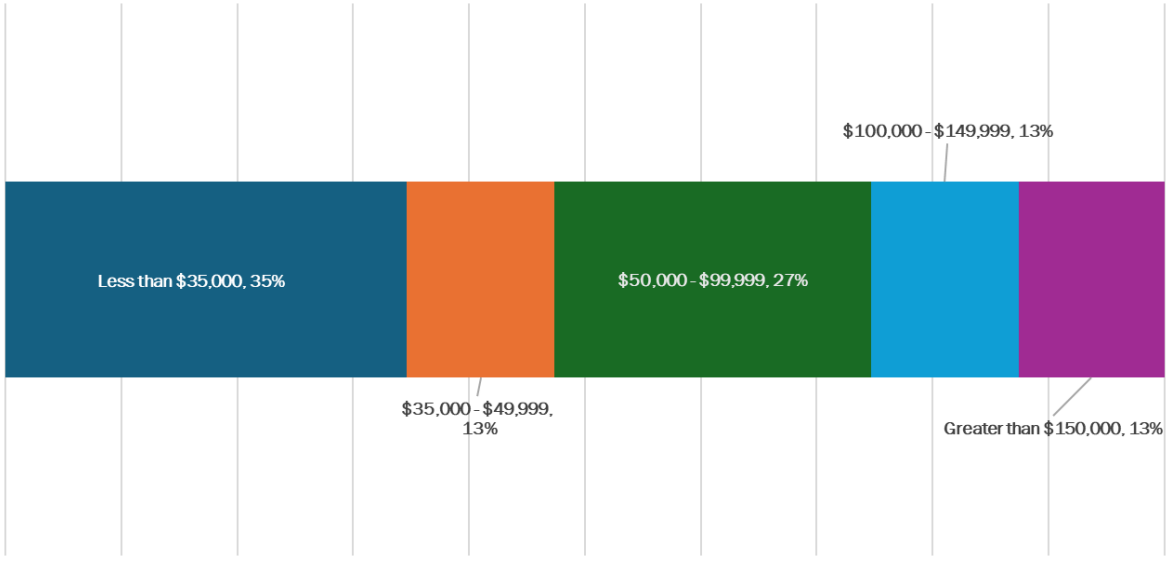


Figure 6. Income Distribution (Source: Data USA)

Household income impacts the ability of individuals and families to afford adequate internet services. Renters may have more limited financial resources, and the cost of rent can significantly impact their ability to allocate funds for other household expenses, including internet access. "Cost burdened" refers to the percentage of households that spend more than 30% of their household income on housing expenses. 48% of renter-occupied households in Southbridge are cost-burdened[7], while 34% of owner-occupied households are cost-burdened.

According to the US Census, approximately 19% of the population of Southbridge has at least one disability. The most common disabilities are shown in Figure 7, with independent living difficulties being the highest percentage. Despite the presence of disabilities across the population, the services and accommodation needed for each individual vary vastly. Digital literacy gaps are exasperated by certain groups within the population that require additional intervention or support and should be addressed accordingly in future implementation.

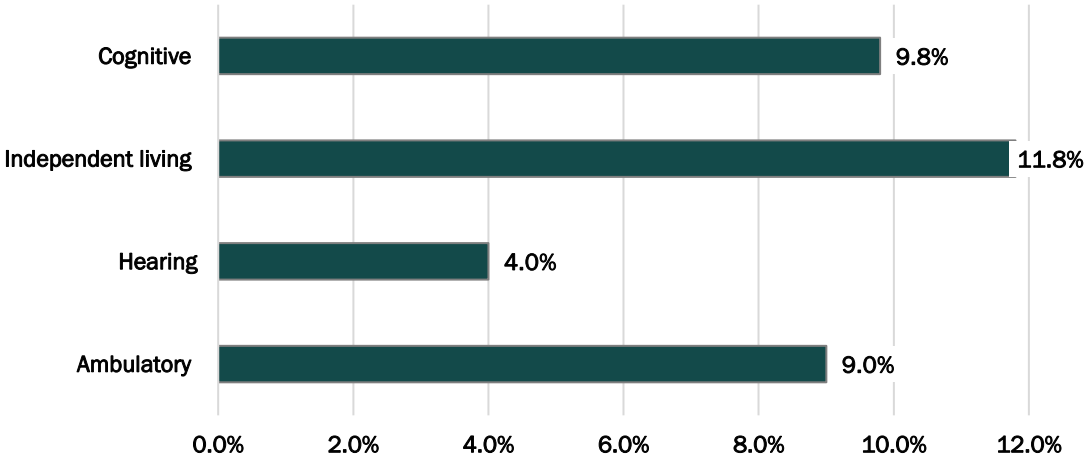


Figure 7. Common Disabilities (Source: US Census Bureau)

3.2 Broadband Access

In Southbridge, there are seven (7) providers of fixed internet connections. All providers offer residential connections, while two (2) offer connection for businesses as shown in

Table 1. Note that some of these providers represent fixed options offered by wireless providers (i.e. the ability to install a Wi-Fi router in the home which is served[8] by wireless internet). Currently, Spectrum/Charter is the only provider offering fixed (or wired) internet in Southbridge.

[7] Source: American Community Survey (ACS)
[8] The National Broadband Map shows that a location has broadband service available at a speed of at least 100 Mbps for downloads and at least 20 Mbps for uploads and latency less than or equal to 100 milliseconds using Technology Codes 71 or 72, that location will be treated as “served.”

Table 1. Summary of Fixed Internet Providers

	Residential		Commercial	
Provider	Download (Mbps)	Upload (Mbps)	Download (Mbps)	Upload (Mbps)
Spectrum	1,000	35	-	-
T-Mobile*	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2
Verizon*	300	20	-	-
Starlink*	220	25	-	-
Viasat*	50	3	35	4

** Provider offers Wi-Fi in the home serviced by wireless internet or satellite*

Wireless internet (cellular or satellite) is also available from four (4) providers. These providers, their associated networks, and speeds are listed in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of Wireless Providers

Providers	Networks	Download (Mbps)	Upload (Mbps)
New Cingular	4G-LTE, 5G-NR	35	3
Project Genesis	5G-NR	35	3
T-Mobile	5G-NR	35	3
Verizon	5G-NR	35	3

According to FCC data, over 99.9% of Southbridge is adequately served, with only four (4) unserved locations out of 4,652 serviceable locations. However, this does not necessarily reflect whether individuals are able to afford service and does not reflect quality issues that may be present. The speeds of served locations are at least 100/20 Mbps across Southbridge, qualifying as broadband.

On average, Southbridge residents pay about $95 each month for their internet service.

Windstream is the only Metro network in Southbridge, but it has good coverage over the town and lots of connected buildings in the town center.

3.2.1 Federal Connectivity Programs

The **Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP)** offered monthly service and device discounts to eligible households to reduce the burden of internet and technology. Households were eligible for ACP if their income was at or below 200% of the federal poverty guidelines or if they received benefits from certain assistance programs or grants. An estimated 6,886 individuals out of 17,390 and 1,623 families out of 4,494 qualified based on income. An estimated 3,463 households (19%) of

Southbridge were eligible for ACP, and as of February 2024 Southbridge had 3,114 enrolled households[9]. This program was ended on June 1st, 2024, but it is possible that it will receive additional funding in the future.

Lifeline, another federally funded program established in 1985, has been available to support low-income households access to broadband services. It has been noted that not all residents who previously received assistance from the ACP program may qualify for Lifeline, suggesting a potential gap in residents' ability to afford internet services.

However, while the ACP offered a $30 per month subsidy, the Lifeline subsidy is only up to $9.25 per month.

3.3 Community Anchor Institutions (CAIs)

Community Anchor Institutions (CAI) are places such as schools, libraries, hospitals, safety entities, or religious institutions which support their communities access to and use of broadband service. In Southbridge, there are several locations which either currently offer technical resources or have high potential to serve as CAIs in the future.

The JACOB EDWARDS LIBRARY offers free public Wi-Fi throughout the library property. The library has purchased the higher speed services for the public. It also offers hotspot lending, which allows residents to check out a hotspot device to connect to the internet from anywhere. Hotspot devices have a maximum checkout period of one (1) week due to high demand. The library disables internet service after the checkout period has ended to encourage timely returns. The library also has public access computers for residents. Expanding access to computers could help bridge gaps to broadband internet for those who are burdened not just by monthly service costs, but the cost of devices capable of connecting to the internet. Being open to the public during regular hours, the library can offer assistance with web access, filling out online forms, and printing forms or documents. The library offers assistance with technology both on demand and by 30-minute appointments with questions on the internet and technology in general.

The SOUTHBRIDGE COMMUNITY CENTER provides quality, affordable recreation programs and maintains safe and accessible facilities throughout the community. The Community Center offers recreational opportunities for Southbridge residents and holds weekly community events. It has the potential to serve as a hub for promoting digital literacy. The Community Center is equipped to organize workshops, training sessions, and classes on various aspects of digital literacy, such as internet usage, online safety, basic computer skills, and navigating online platforms. These educational programs could be open to all ages and skill levels to ensure inclusivity. The Community Center currently serves as a municipal shelter, though there are plans to relocate shelter services to the middle school and high school.

The CASAUBON SENIOR CENTER holds multiple weekly events for senior Southbridge residents. With its existing infrastructure and resources, the senior center is well-equipped to offer digital literacy programs to help seniors develop the skills needed to navigate the digital world. By incorporating these events into their regular schedule, the senior center can provide seniors convenient access to valuable digital learning opportunities.

[9] Based on data published by Universal Service Administrative Co. at https://www.usac.org/about/affordable-connectivity-program/acp-enrollment-and-claims-tracker/

The SOUTHBRIDGE INNOVATION CENTER includes the Southbridge Hotel and Conference Center and occupies over 1.2 million square feet located to the south of downtown. It is a major employment center, with plans to employ over 700 people once fully developed. As a large space with hotel rooms and residential spaces planned, it could serve as an emergency shelter, with backup power and connectivity to the internet a vital component of its use.

The UMASS MEMORIAL HEALTH – HARRINGTON HOSPITAL is a major medical center in Southbridge. As a well-established healthcare facility, maintaining uninterrupted access to power and the internet is critical to fulfilling its mission. This means the hospital could serve as reliable resource for residents in need of access to internet or power during emergencies.

4 Key Findings

From public input and stakeholder interviews, challenges, opportunities, and resources were identified throughout Southbridge related to digital literacy and access.

4.1 Barriers and Challenges

4.1.1 Vulnerable Populations

Different demographic groups may experience varying levels of digital literacy and access or have specific unaddressed needs compared to the general population.

Through stakeholder interviews and community outreach, several vulnerable populations were identified in relation to digital equity. These populations included older adults, low-income individuals or families, and linguistically isolated households.

4.1.1.1 Senior Population

With nearly 20% of the Southbridge population over the age of 60, it is essential to plan for Digital Equity with older technology users in mind. Those who were less exposed to technology in a formal context, such as through education or work, have been shown to be likely to have less interest or literacy with current technologies. It is also anticipated that a sustained effort of digital education will be needed as the pace of change in technology continues and seniors have fewer in-person options for keeping current or increasing their digital literacy. Older individuals can also be vulnerable to cybersecurity threats and scams, putting their personal data at risk.

Online resources can also be additionally helpful to older individuals, who are more likely to be faced with disabilities or limited mobility. Telehealth and other online services can reduce the effort associated with receiving the same services in-person, out of the house, however 24% of survey respondents indicated they have difficulties accessing telehealth services. The combination of both digital literacy and access to the internet pose a challenge to the senior population, who would benefit greatly from telehealth appointments as they expand in availability in the future.

4.1.1.2 Low-Income Population

Costs can create a substantial barrier to broadband access for lower-income individuals and families. 55% of survey respondents said that it is “hard” or “somewhat hard” to pay their monthly internet bill, which is costs $95 on average. More than 48% of survey respondents stated that they had heard of the ACP, suggesting that they were aware of the program while it was available. Finding a suitable substitute for this program will be required to support the populations that require assistance.

4.1.1.3 Multilingual Population

Approximately 34% of the Southbridge population speaks a language other than English at home. Language barriers can create a significant divide between non-native English speakers and the resources they need, including the internet and devices capable of accessing it. While many stakeholders have emphasized the importance of making resources available in multiple languages, there are currently limited efforts to accomplish this. The MBI survey, which assessed broadband access and needs across the state, was available in different languages, including Spanish.

As school-provided computers or personally registered devices become more prevalent, schoolwork has increasingly switched to digital formats, as have assigned reading materials. Students within the

multilingual population may require access to the internet in their homes for translation services and additional instruction outside of classroom time, in addition to class assignments and homework.

4.1.2 Broadband Access and Quality

There are several areas noted across the town with limited or no cellular coverage, including Wall St, Langlois Ave, and Main St near Big Bunny. According to the FCC, only 86.9% of households have an internet subscription. This may be in part due to access, cost, or a combination of the two.

Furthermore, Charter/Spectrum has a monopoly on fixed (wired) services in Southbridge. Residents have reported that the quality of internet quality, speeds, and customer service provided from Charter/Spectrum do not meet their needs at the price they are offered, with approximately one-third of survey respondents indicating their internet services do not work well enough to meet their household needs. Several residents also reported that their download and upload speeds are inconsistent depending on the device they are using and the time of day, which indicates that the "broadband access" reported by the FCC may not reflect current conditions.

Poor quality/consistency also makes it very difficult for residents to work from home. This is also a challenge for non-residents who work in Southbridge because the business's internet may also be down. Low speeds also do not allow for Wi-Fi calling which is necessary for most remote and in-person jobs.

Where wireless can be a reasonable alternative to wired options in most towns, the topography and cellular coverage within Southbridge limit this option. One resident reported that "cell phone service is terrible, calls are dropped, and phone goes into SOS mode and does not transmit or receive signals."

Last, cost is a significant barrier in Southbridge. Many residents cannot afford the speeds required to meet their needs, and those who do not struggle to pay their monthly bill may struggle if a major unexpected expense arises. If the ACP receives additional funding, it may benefit many of these residents, with 48% of respondents already aware of the program.

4.1.3 Digital Literacy and Technology Access

According to the US Census Bureau, 89.8% of households in Southbridge have a computer, while 86.9% have a broadband internet subscription. These numbers suggest that there may still be a gap in device access for some residents.

Most people's primary device is a cell phone which means there may be limited experience in using other digital devices. According to the MBI survey, most households access the internet using a cellphone (69%) or laptop computer (73%), with desktop computers and tablets being slightly less common. Cost appears to be a significant factor. According to the MBI survey, 68% of residents would not be able to afford over $500 for a new laptop or desktop computer, and 18% would not be able to pay $50.

There is also a digital literacy and language need. In many of the families where the Department of Children & Families (DCF) is involved, grandparents are taking care of the children and technology is an issue.

Several residents also noted concerns with respect to security and safety on the internet. Many indicated they do not use online banking or are afraid of getting hacked. According to the MBI survey,

approximately 75% of respondents would be interested in digital literacy training. Approximately 60% indicated online would be preferred as compared to in-person.

4.2 Assets and Strengths

4.2.1 Internet and Device Access

Where residents don't have access to these resources in the home, resources at the **Library** are working well to help residents meet their needs. In addition to free Wi-Fi, the Library provides access to desktop computers, printing, offline readers/magnifiers for those with vision impairment, five hotspots, study rooms, and meeting rooms. For example, if residents in Southbridge and the surrounding towns come to Southbridge for an important appointment at the RMV and either forget a document or don't have access to a printer, they are able to print them at the Library. It should be noted that the internet service currently at the library still has room for improvement. They technically get broadband-level speeds (600 Mbps download and 20 Mbps upload), but users still report challenges when there are a lot of users online at once, especially for video calls or streaming.

There is a guest Wi-Fi network (password protected) at **Seven Hills Foundations & Affiliates**, mostly used for staff and healthcare providers, and there is a public desktop computer, which is connected to the printer, scanner, and fax and gets used pretty consistently.

The **COA** and **Town Hall** also provide free Wi-Fi to visitors. It has been reported that the public Wi-Fi at the Town Hall is poor, but the Wi-Fi available to employees works well.

The town has also taken advantage of a Community Compact Best Practice for **municipal fiber** assessment and intends to apply for Municipal Fiber Grant to build out municipal fiber to municipal buildings.

MassHire Southbridge Career Center provides computer access and training for job applications.

4.2.2 Literacy

The **COA** has staff available to provide technical support upon request. Additionally, at the **library**, there is literacy technical assistance provided by Literacy volunteers, which includes assistance with technology, both on demand and by 30-minute appointments, with questions on the internet and technology in general. They have also hosted a cybersecurity event with banks to discuss online banking and troubleshooting. At the library, they staffed sufficiently for the current demand for assistance with technology. Currently, most of the assistance requested is for help with mobile printing.

5 Recommendations and Conclusions

5.1 Action Plan

The Town of Southbridge's Digital Equity Plan provides a framework to unite existing work efforts and build new initiatives under a focused, evidence-based strategy for cooperative effort. Achieving digital equity for all residents will require a concerted effort by the government, community-based organizations, higher education organizations, and individuals who are committed to the goals of the Digital Equity Plan. To achieve the vision and goals, the Digital Equity Steering Committee/ Broadband Committee is committed to taking the following strategies, as shown in **Table 3**. Each strategy identifies the focus areas, lead organization, cost, funding opportunities", and timeframe.

The cost is an approximation of the financial cost (capital or operational), defined as follows:

- "$": less than $5,000
- "$$": $5,000 to $50,000
- "$$$": more than $50,000

The timeframe is the anticipated length of time for the completion of a given strategy, defined as follows:

- "short-term": 0 months to one (1) year
- "mid-term": one (1) to three (3) years
- "long-term": more than three (3) years

Table 4 depicts the nine (9) focus area icons for the different strategies.

Table 3. Action Plan

Focus Area(s)	Strategy	Description	Lead Organization	Cost	Funding Opportunities	Timeframe
	Establish Fiber Task Force	Establish a group dedicated to bringing additional internet connectivity to businesses and residents and apply for funding	Digital Equity Steering Committee	$	N/A	Short-term
	Designate a Digital Champion	Designate a Digital Champion to lead the Fiber Task Force and coordinate with external groups	Fiber Task Force	$	N/A	Short-term
	Continue working to bring new internet providers into the Town	Pursue discussions with other service providers including quasi-public entities such as Whip City or Fiberspring to gauge interest in working with Town	Fiber Task Force	$	N/A	Short-term
	Complete Town's Municipal Fiber Buildout	Purchase and install remaining networking equipment to activate municipal fiber	Town IT Department, Fiber Task Force	$$$	Community Compact Municipal Fiber Grant, Last Mile Infrastructure Grant	Short-term
	Improve Wi-Fi speeds at the Library, Senior Center, and Town Hall	Increasing upload and download speeds and capacity to keep up with the demands from residents while access to the home remains an issue	Town IT Department/Internet providers	$$$	MBI Digital Equity Implementation Program	Long-term
	Purchase additional digital devices for public use at Library	Acquire additional Wi-Fi hotspots	Town IT Department	$	AARP, Healthy Aging Funds	Mid-term

Focus Area(s)	Strategy	Description	Lead Organization	Cost	Funding Opportunities	Timeframe
	Update Broadband Infrastructure at Housing Authority Buildings	Provide new and updated capabilities for residents to connect to the internet with durable, high-quality infrastructure	Town Administration and Southbridge Housing Authority	$$	Residential Retrofit Program	Mid-term
	Increase device support staff at Library, Senior Center, and Town Hall	Provide additional staff at Library to manage new digital devices and provide troubleshooting support to the public. Promote the Tech help more widely at the Library.	Library, COA, Town Administration	$*	AARP, Healthy Aging Funds	Mid-term
	Create a digital library of on-demand digital skills training	Compile a library of on-demand trainings that can be hosted in-person or viewed online for free in English and Spanish	Digital Equity Steering Committee	$	Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Program	Mid-term
	Establish Spanish-speaking "Digital Navigators"	Assign "Digital Navigators" at Library, Senior Center, and Hospital	Digital Equity Steering Committee	$*	Volunteers	Short-term
	Provide digital skills workshops	Host in-person workshops covering online safety and device troubleshooting	Library, Council on Aging, Digital Equity Steering Committee	$*	Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Program	Mid-term
	Update the Town's Bylaws to require developers to install conduits for future use	To ensure long-term connectivity, require developers to install conduit(s) for future use by internet/cable providers	Planning Department	$	N/A	Mid-term
	Expand the availability of public wi-fi in the downtown area	Build off the high speed network at the library and other public spaces to allow for the public to be able to connect to the library network from nearby	IT Department	$	Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Program	Short-term

Focus Area(s)	Strategy	Description	Lead Organization	Cost	Funding Opportunities	Timeframe
		public spaces within some defined distance of the library				
	Reach out to families with children being cared for by grandparents	Coordinate with public school system to identify families with children being cared for by grandparents that may have digital literacy gaps	Public Schools	$	AARP, Healthy Aging Funds	Short-term

* This strategy could be accomplished at no cost by volunteers but may require paid staff.

Table 4. Focus Area Legend

Focus Area Icon	Focus Area Description	Focus Area Icon	Focus Area Description
	Staff Capacity for Digital Equity		Digital Literacy
	Wi-Fi Access and Innovative Connectivity Technology		Device Distribution and Refurbishment
	Public Space Modernization		Education, Outreach, and Adoption
	Connectivity for Economic Hardship		Access Diversification
	Policies for Future Access		

5.2 Funding Opportunities

Various funding programs are available to help address the needs listed in Section 4. Project-specific applications should be researched and prepared in advance of the application deadlines, but the following programs have been identified as being applicable for the Town of Southbridge's identified needs.

- BEAD Program: https://broadband.masstech.org/bead-program
- MBI Digital Equity Implementation: https://broadband.masstech.org/digital-equity-implementation
- USDA's Distance Learning and Telemedicine Grants: https://www.rd.usda.gov/programs-services/telecommunications-programs/distance-learning-telemedicine-grants
- Affordable Housing Trust: https://www.mass.gov/info-details/affordable-housing-trust-fund-ahtf
- Residential Retrofit Program: https://broadband.masstech.org/retrofit
- Community Compact IT Grant: https://www.mass.gov/community-compact-it-grant-program
- Community Compact Municipal Fiber Grant: https://www.mass.gov/municipal-fiber-grant-program
- Gap Network Grant: https://broadband.masstech.org/gap-networks-grant-program
- Massachusetts Community Health & Healthy Aging Funds: https://mahealthfunds.org/
- AARP Foundation Grants: https://www.aarp.org/aarp-foundation/grants/
- Retrofit Ancillary Grantee (RANGE) Program: https://broadband.masstech.org/RANGE
- Launchpad Program: https://broadband.masstech.org/launchpad-program

5.3 Conclusion

The Town of Southbridge has completed a holistic analysis of their existing infrastructure with regards to digital equity. From organizational opportunities, like the Fiber Task Force to "Digital Navigators," there are quick wins that can help build upon the success and energy already established within the community. Sharing the successes of these programs while mid and long-term funding are being secured can provide a continued sense of ownership among the residents, who can act as project champions in future endeavors.

Town of
SOUTHBRIDGE
Massachusetts