



Pioneer  
Valley  
Planning  
Commission

# CITY OF HOLYOKE DIGITAL ACCESSIBILITY PLAN: INTERNET FOR ALL

FINAL REPORT 7/30/25



at the MasTech  
Collaborative

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## Introduction

The “Digital Divide” is the gap between those who have affordable access, skills and support to effectively engage online and those who do not. 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. (*National Digital Inclusion Alliance, <https://www.digitalinclusion.org/definitions/>.*)

To address this critical issue of the digital divide and to further digital equity at the municipal level, the Massachusetts Broadband Institute created the Municipal Digital Equity Planning program to help communities explore the local conditions related to the digital divide and come up with community-based solutions on how best to create digital equity. This draft report reflects the culmination of empirical research into the current status of digital equity, drawing on several meetings with the City of Holyoke’s core advisory group guiding the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission’s municipal digital equity planning in Holyoke, and incorporating feedback received through several public engagement outreach efforts. Based on both quantitative and qualitative data and input, the following programmatic and process strategies are recommended for implementation to ensure further progress towards digital equity in Holyoke.

**Digital divide is the issue.**  
**Digital equity is the goal.**  
**Digital inclusion is the work.**

## Summary of High Priority Recommendations

PVPC recognizes that in order to make tangible progress towards universal digital accessibility in Holyoke, the City needs a focused approach. Below find PVPC’s top recommendations for the City of Holyoke to pursue to effectively advance digital accessibility for its residents. In pursuit of the following recommendations, PVPC will work with the City by applying to MBI for funding under the **Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Program**. PVPC will also provide technical assistance support for implementation of the following recommendations:

- 1. Create a permanent Digital Equity Working Group (DEWG) for the city.** *To ensure continued progress towards the Vision statement below, we recommend the creation of a permanent oversight body, consisting of residents and key stakeholders. Membership would include (but not be limited to) representation from Holyoke School District, Holyoke Public Library, members of the City Council (not fewer than one, not more than three, as determined by the President of the City Council), at least three citizen representatives, and representatives of local or regional community based or non-profit entities such as Way Finders, Tech Hub/Tech Foundry, or New North Citizen’s Council.*
- 2. Assign responsibility to oversee ongoing digital accessibility work to a specific person within the City of Holyoke** – *This person could pursue relevant funding opportunities serve as the primary point of contact for digital accessibility interventions selected by the city.*

3. **Expand hotspot lending program.** *Hotspots are available at approximately \$120/month (based on Verizon and T-Mobile vendors). This involves purchasing the unit and a required annual subscription. Libraries in Holyoke have experience overseeing a hotspot lending program.*
4. **Support expansion of fiber to the premises (FTTP) by HG&E, providing consumers with high quality, reliable broadband service while encouraging competitive pricing.** *Given the substantial investment in fiber infrastructure within the City by Holyoke Gas & Electric, seeking additional resources to provide Fiber to the Home is worth further timely consideration.*
5. **Identify strategic locations for public Wi-Fi deployment** [based on areas of greatest need] *Installation of publicly accessible Wi-Fi would improve connectivity in areas where residential connectivity is poor due to quality or affordability. This would require planning and implementation costs with a 1–3-year deployment window, depending on how extensive the deployment is.*
6. **Monitor expansion of reliable internet in multi-dwelling units via MBI’s Residential Retrofit Program.** *Several Holyoke Public Housing sites, with over 800 housing units, will benefit from the Commonwealth’s Residential Retrofit program, which replaces outdated technology with fiber-optic internet service to each unit. The City should monitor this process, ensuring that improved accessibility and reliability of service are realized.*
7. **Establish a fund to support distribution of computer devices (loaned, discounted, or free), helping people in arrears on payments to provider.** *Many residents lack devices appropriate for connecting to the internet. Devices such as laptops, desktop computers, tablets or Chromebooks could be distributed through intermediary organizations. One noted approach could use the Tech Goes Home model which bundles digital skills training with a device and one year of internet service (if needed). To enable residents to enroll in discounted internet packages the City could provide targeted assistance.*
8. **Coordinate city-wide with existing programs to provide digital skills training and tech support.** *There are currently many organizations offering formal digital equity training and support in Holyoke and the surrounding region and others that more informally provide these services, as needed. Additional funding to coordinate, support and formalize these efforts could create a more systematic approach to providing residents with digital skills.*

## Summary of Recommendations and Cost Estimates

The table below presents a summary of the recommendations for advancing digital accessibility within the City of Holyoke, along with cost estimates for which the city will be seeking funding through MBI's Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Program.

### City of Holyoke Summary of Recommendations and Cost Estimates, totaling \$67,604

Action Steps	Comments	Total Cost	Timeline	Responsible Party
1. Create Permanent Digital Equity Working Group	No cost	\$ -	8/31/2025	Mayor's Office
2. Digital Accessibility Program Coordination	1/2 FTE or added to existing staff responsibilities	\$ 10,000	n/a	n/a
3. Expand Hot Spot Program	\$120/unit/yr (75 units) + administration/maintenance	\$ 10,000	12/31/2025	Holyoke Public Library & Holyoke Public Schools
4. Support expansion of fiber to the premises by HG&E or other ISP(s), in support of expanded availability, competitive pricing	HG&E to prepare plan for phased implementation, leading to full coverage		Encourage Phased Approach	HG&E
5. Phase-in provision of Wi-Fi in public buildings and public spaces (such as parks).	Prioritize areas with lower rates of accessibility such as Armor Yard Community Field and Springdale Park	\$ 10,000	Ongoing	DPW; Parks & Recreation
6. Work with ISP providers and landlords (including Holyoke Public Housing) to increase connectivity city-wide	PVPC to provide technical assistance & support includes #4 above	\$ 10,000	Ongoing through 06/30/2027	PVPC
7. Support distribution of devices (tablets, Chromebooks) through expanded Holyoke Public Library programs	Supplements current programs	\$ 10,000	Ongoing	Holyoke Public Library
8. Coordinate and expand existing programs for digital skills training, tech support	Supplements existing training offered by Tech Foundry	\$ 17,604		Tech Foundry
	<b>Total Estimated Costs</b>	<b>\$ 67,604</b>		

The City of Holyoke eligible for up to \$100,000 from MBI's Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Program.

## PART 1: PURPOSE, BACKGROUND AND PROCESS

### City of Holyoke Digital Equity Vision Statement

The following vision statement has shaped PVPC’s work in the City of Holyoke in pursuit of improved digital equity:

*“Our vision is for the residents of Holyoke to have access to: affordable, high-speed internet; appropriate devices; and support to understand the use of this technology. Our vision recognizes that access, which includes cost, speed, devices and knowledge, is not a privilege for those who can afford it, but a right for all residents.”*

This digital equity plan lays the groundwork for investing in our community to achieve digital equity for all. With this Plan, the City will be well-positioned to compete for funds to support broadband infrastructure and digital equity programs.

### Purpose

The purpose of this report is to provide the City of Holyoke with a digital equity roadmap to help guide the city in its efforts to overcome the digital divide which now exists.

### The Importance of Bridging the Digital Divide

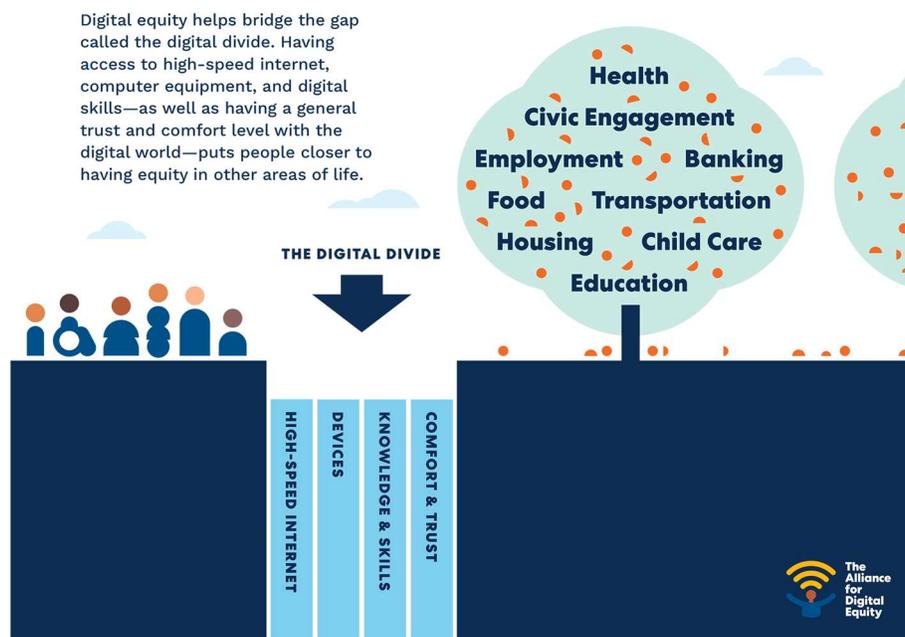
Technology and the internet show up in every part of our daily lives: connecting with family and friends, employment, finding housing, connecting with services and health providers, education, and much more. However, as technology grows, so does the digital equity divide (the disparity in access to digital technologies - limited access to devices, unaffordable or unreliable broadband, limited technology knowledge).<sup>1</sup>

Inequitable access to digital technologies creates multiple barriers to equity across several dimensions of our lives, including health, education, employment, and government services. The flip side of that coin is that by removing those barriers to digital equity, we are able to accelerate efforts to achieve equity across those many dimensions.

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<sup>1</sup> Baystate Medical Center, 2022 Community Health Needs Assessment, p. 87.  
<https://www.baystatehealth.org/about-us/community-programs/community-health-needs-assessments>.

The image below, prepared by Baystate Health-based Alliance for Digital Equity, graphically illustrates both the challenges posed by a lack of digital equity and the potential benefits resulting from successfully bridging the digital divide. Existing barriers to digital equity: lack of access to high-speed internet, lack of devices, lack of necessary knowledge and skills, and absence of comfort and trust impedes the ability of residents to access services increasing available online, such as health care, education, and civic engagement. As we remove each type of barrier, access becomes more equitable.



## Partnering with MBI to Bridge the Digital Divide

The Massachusetts Broadband Institute (MBI), a division of Massachusetts Technology Collaborative (MassTech) has been the primary conduit channeling federal funds into the Commonwealth of Massachusetts for the purpose of expanding digital equity and eliminating the digital divide. The Municipal Digital Equity Planning Grant program was designed to help communities explore the local conditions related to the digital divide and come up with community-based solutions on how best to create digital equity.

For the past two years PVPC has been providing Municipal Digital Equity Planning services to the City of Holyoke. PVPC staff has collaborated closely with the identified municipal contact(s) to strategize on how the community should best be engaged in this planning process. This effort is locally focused, and we identified specific community needs related to digital access, literacy, devices, connectivity, and affordability.

This work led by PVPC has consisted of three main categories of work:

- Exploring Current Conditions (including mapping existing digital equity assets)
- Engaging in a series of community engagement conversations
- Making prioritized recommendations for further investment

## Review of Current Digital Accessibility Landscape

With the transition from the Biden to Trump administrations, several changes have occurred that impact the path forward. As of June 6, 2025 the following changes have occurred:

On May 8, President Trump announced the cancellation of the federal Digital Equity Act, under which states were to receive funds to improve access to the internet, including \$2.5B to implement state plans to address the digital divide.

On May 16, in response to the Trump Administration's announcement, Massachusetts Governor Maura Healey announced that several Massachusetts programs were being suspended indefinitely:

"The termination of the DEA Capacity Grant Program will suspend the Massachusetts Broadband Institute (MBI) at Massachusetts Technology Collaborative's (MassTech's) Launchpad Program and the expansion of Municipal Digital Equity Planning and Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Programs. As a result, the programs will be forced to suspend efforts to advance digital skills

## Trump Administration Halts \$14.1 Million in Funding to Increase Internet Access in Massachusetts

Programs were Aimed at Expanding Internet Access and Adoption for Veterans, Rural Communities and Individuals with Disabilities



May 16, 2025

Source: Mass.gov

**Boston** – The Healey-Driscoll Administration is raising the alarm about the Trump Administration's recent action to terminate \$14.1 million in federal funding to expand internet access for veterans, rural communities and individuals with disabilities in Massachusetts. The previously awarded funding from the Digital Equity Act (DEA) Capacity Grant Program would have provided communities with the tools, skills and resources to expand the adoption and use of high-speed internet service.

"Everyone deserves access to the internet. It's essential for being able to participate in our economy and utilize the resources and services that so many of us rely on," said **Governor Maura Healey**. "It's terrible that the Trump Administration is blocking our efforts to bring internet access to veterans, rural communities and individuals with disabilities across the state."

"The Trump Administration continues to gut programs that connect people with essential services, training opportunities, and tools needed to achieve upward mobility," said **Lieutenant Governor Kim Driscoll**. "While the federal government is busy rolling back efforts to expand internet access, Massachusetts will keep building on our progress toward internet for all, ensuring everyone has the ability to participate in the digital economy."

The termination of the DEA Capacity Grant Program will suspend the Massachusetts Broadband Institute (MBI) at Massachusetts Technology Collaborative's (MassTech's) [Launchpad Program](#) and the expansion of [Municipal Digital Equity Planning](#) and [Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Programs](#). As a result, the programs will be forced to suspend efforts to advance digital skills training, expand access to digital devices, and assist local governments with digital equity planning activities across Massachusetts.

training, expand access to digital devices, and assist local governments with digital equity planning activities across Massachusetts.”<sup>2</sup>

On June 4, 2025, U.S. Secretary of Commerce, Howard Lutnick, indicated in testimony before the U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee that changes would be coming to the BEAD program. On June 6, the Trump Administration announced the “Benefit of the Bargain BEAD Program”, a new set of guidelines substantially altering the conditions under which states will be eligible for funding. “After careful review, NTIA announces reforms that will remove rules favoring particular technologies and eliminate unnecessary regulatory burdens.”<sup>3</sup>

While it is clear that substantial changes will need to be made to any state programs that had previously been announced, at this time MBI has not released any revised program guidelines for which the City of Holyoke should consider applying.

## Scope of Work

Specifically the PVPC has:

1. Worked with a core planning team and the Digital Equity Working Group and provided guidance throughout the planning process.
2. Conducted asset mapping by researching the existing municipal digital equity status and needs. Engage with the identified municipal contact(s) and community groups to determine the baseline for community digital equity.
3. Provided qualitative data research for a needs assessment, including working with a local contact(s) to identify the most effective outreach methods (including work already completed by the city).
4. Created outreach materials for use City wide.
5. Facilitated, in collaboration with City officials, stakeholders, and other resource partners, a series of iterative community engagement activities.

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<sup>2</sup> NTIA Press Release, June 6, 2025. “Trump Administration Announces the Benefit of the Bargain BEAD Program that Removes Regulatory Burdens, Lowers Costs and Expands Use of All Technologies”. <https://www.ntia.gov/press-release/2025/trump-administration-announces-benefit-bargain-bead-program-removes-regulatory-burdens-lowers-costs>.

<sup>3</sup> NTIA Press Release, June 6, 2025. “Trump Administration Announces the Benefit of the Bargain BEAD Program that Removes Regulatory Burdens, Lowers Costs and Expands Use of All Technologies”. <https://www.ntia.gov/press-release/2025/trump-administration-announces-benefit-bargain-bead-program-removes-regulatory-burdens-lowers-costs>.

## PART 2: CURRENT CONDITIONS AND FINDINGS

In our research related to this project, we have discovered that due to the hard work of a handful of community based organizations (CBOs) the City of Holyoke has had some success addressing the challenges of digital equity. It became clear that there is a direct correlation between wealth and access to the internet. For digital equity to be achieved, this challenge must be overcome.

### Community Identified Digital Equity Issues and Solutions:

#### What We Learned

As direct result of the process of working with the Community the PVPC was able to identify the following needs and issues, as expressed by the community. It is clear from all of the data and information collected that internet access and income level are critically interrelated. Simply put, those with greater incomes have more access and more devices than those who lack financial resources.

#### Digital Inequity Influenced By:

- Poverty is a cause of digital equity. 24% (approximately 9,000 people) of Holyoke residents live homes with incomes falling below the federal poverty threshold (\$32,150 for a family of four, in 2025).
- Depends on one's employment (income). Unemployment rates within the City of Holyoke are consistently higher than for most communities in the region.
- Access to internet
- Affordability
- Knowledge – where to go, what to do
- Digital equity is worse for disenfranchised communities
- Made worse by a lack of options of internet service providers (ISPs)
- Once one gets a computer, they might not know where to connect
- There can be a lack of skills about how to use a computer
- Stability of job influences income
- Low-income forces people to make choices – pay for internet v food or rent

#### What Does The Internet Let You Do?

- Medical care
- Stay in touch with family and friends
- Buy things (esp. important if someone is not mobile)
- Banking
- Folks, especially older adults or those not mobile, want independence (for example they can order meds or food online and then have a PCA pick it up)
- Access to Education via online courses, hybrid classes, zoom calls
- Apply for jobs
- Attend professional meetings in other parts of the state without needing to travel

- Access mental health services, and make meaningful connections necessary for overall well-being. (learning how to use the internet can be a healthy activity)
- Make connections with communities with whom one has common background or interests
- Access to telehealth services can mean difference between life and death in some circumstances.

### Community feedback regarding barriers to digital access:

- During the pandemic it was reported that some residents had no internet and no computer despite Holyoke Public Schools distributing chrome books
- Official surveys miss people who do not have internet access, so the reality of the situation is often worse than captured from official information gathering
- For those dependent on cell phones, many people in low income neighborhoods have data limits on so-called Obama phones. Folks need phones without data caps.
- Comments about Comcast – lack of reliability and concerns about where cable is available.
- Data presented that was collected during the pandemic is misleading since many of the devices were “loaners” and there were hotspots rather than computers
- People are actively scamming folks on the street in the neighborhood, offering free equipment but in reality using people’s Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) credit
- Seniors can’t afford the cost of cable – how do we make it affordable for them?
- Being a student and taking time to learn digital skills often costs either money or time (which can mean taking time off from work or family). This is a barrier



*Members of Way Finders' digital equity coalition, with members from Holyoke and Springfield*

- People who don't know how to use the internet are often embarrassed that in 2023 they don't know how. This is a barrier to their coming forward to get connected or trained
- If you are on the internet there is a chance you will be caught up by fraud. This is a real fear of users. Fear keeps people from using the internet



*PVPC's Eric Weiss addresses members of Way Finders' digital equity coalition, comprised of residents of Holyoke and Springfield*

- If the internet at peoples' house is unstable but they work is online, this results in a slowdown and inefficiencies, including uneven participation in meetings. Increases the cost of working from home or makes it impossible
- People used to attend civic gatherings like neighborhood council meetings but during the pandemic they couldn't attend because they didn't have internet access. Even for those that did have internet access, their cable connections were slow or they had old devices.
- People don't trust the government or big companies/systems
- The cost of a computer is too expensive for some people

## What Would Make Digital Equity Possible?

- Investment in infrastructure (cable and old buildings are a problem). Municipalities and the state should invest in upgrades
- Treat internet access like a necessity; If we are going to force people to digitize, society needs to support folks in the transition
- More options of ISPs; in Holyoke, Comcast/Xfinity is the primary provider of broadband, though much of the city now also has access to Licensed Fixed Wireless provided by either Verizon or AT&T.
- More outreach is needed to support people's awareness, including about the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP)

- People are hesitant to learn digital skills; libraries are a great place BUT many people see libraries as only being about books so expanding library communication is important.
- Need trusted people in the community that folks can turn to ask questions
- There is fear of breaking the computer
- Normalize technology – see it everywhere. Think about where people go in the community
- Re-enforce the need for financial sustainability, esp. for low-cost plans
- Put affordable plans in place in case ACP ends in 2024 due to lack of federal renewal
- Because technology is always changing, in 2 years, the underlying issues will be the same, even if on the surface they are different.
- People still won't know why they need to use the internet
- With technology always changing, the goal posts are always moving
- There will always be some resistance to using the internet or a computer among some people. There is a continued need to get those folks to understand why they need to use technology
- There needs to be a focus on providing professional development for teachers around technology; many teachers, who are in the position of teaching and encouraging young people, don't know or feel comfortable with technology themselves.
- Digital skills – need to be adaptable. Use a “bumper car” approach which means be able to find work arounds when you hit a wall with the approach one tried first
- Consider “digital competency”
- Learning should be situational to be effective – we need to ask people why they want to use a computer or the internet. Then teach them what they need to make that interesting activity happen. Additionally, practice needs to be applied soon after learning something new otherwise people can forget.
- Interest in a municipally owned broadband system – would help with affordability

### Actionable Insights

- Encourage more choices of ISP providers, create competition among internet service providers
- Create wireless solutions
- Have more fiber installed in the city
- Install wide area mesh networks, especially in areas of Holyoke that have low access
- Establish a part-time or shared staff position with the City to shepherd the deployment of digital equity programs

- Develop a Community Advisory group to advise the city on how to allocate awarded funds to the city
- Make sure that youth are involved in whatever we do. We need hear their voices and ideas
- Design solutions that accommodate the needs for Older Adults
- Distribute resources through trusted community organizations so people don't get scammed
- Need trusted people to guide and support community members to the right resources – “digital ambassadors”
- Make sure that any funds designated for broadband go to the right place – to neighborhoods and people who need it
- Recognize that people not using computers now are an untapped resource. They may have talent and abilities they didn't know they had and once trained can have better jobs and contribute more to their household and community.

## Planning and Data Gathering

The PVPC is in the process of collecting as much data as possible concerning internet services available in Holyoke. The challenges are significant but accurate information is key to moving the process ahead in the proper fashion. This research is being performed at multiple levels and some examples of what we have discovered so far are shared below.

### Holyoke Public Schools are Emerging from Receivership

Holyoke schools were placed in receivership status in 2015. The State Department of Education then made a provisional determination in October 2024 that the schools would be ready to re-helm the district if the School Committee completed a plan for rebuilding and sustaining the schools. “Holyoke has worked hard to regain local control of its schools, and this is a great moment for the city, students, educators and families,” said Gov. Maura Healey in a statement released on 6/23/25. Since 2015, the state has reported significant progress including an improved graduation rate, reduced out-of-school suspension rate, and expansion of pre-K, programs. Holyoke currently enrolls about 4,900 students across 10 schools and the district is now building a new middle school to open next fall. Therefore, at this time including the schools in the digital accessibility plan is a strong opportunity for Holyoke.

As of July 1, 2025 the City of Holyoke school system will be exiting receivership and return to self-governance. Since March 2024, the Local Control Subcommittee of the Holyoke School Committee has been meeting to map out a school committee capacity building plan for school committee governance. The school district also embarked on an effort to evaluate the criteria of hiring a new superintendent next year (FY 2027).

As part of the process for both of these efforts the PVPC utilized a meeting of the Community Advisory Team (CAT) to make technology-based recommendations after

discussing the needs in a one-hour charette to explore needs. The recommendations emerging from that process were as follows:

- This is a good time to address technology needs.
- The city and schools can work more closely together on advancing technology within Holyoke Public Schools.
- *Having* technology is not the same as *using* technology. The more we can prepare students the better off they will be. Providing students with the digital literacy skills needed to thrive academically today, will also enhance their contributions to a rapidly evolving economy.
- Upgrading school technology is expensive because of the size and needs of the system

## Impediments to Digital Equity

The research undertaken in the preparation of this report has confirmed that the impediments to digital equity in the City of Holyoke are broadly consistent with those facing residents both state- and nation-wide. The National Telecommunications and Information Association (NTIA) has identified the following areas of concern:

- Broadband Affordability & Availability
- Accessibility of Devices and Device Support
- Digital Literacy
- Privacy & Cybersecurity
- Accessibility & Inclusivity of Public Resources<sup>4</sup>

Both affordability and privacy & security are two areas that clearly have captured the attention of municipal residents. Other impediments may be of less urgent concern to residents.

## Broadband Affordability & Availability

Our research throughout Hampden County has shown that the primary driver of digital inequity preventing people from accessing high quality internet services and devices such as desktop or laptop computers, is lack of affordability. This factor hits hard in Holyoke, the community with the third lowest median household income in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, approximately half the statewide median (\$51,892 vs \$101,341<sup>5</sup>).

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<sup>4</sup> The statewide digital equity plan prepared by the Massachusetts Broadband Institute (MBI) addresses measurable objectives to overcome barriers relating to these areas. The Executive Summary of the statewide plan can be found in the Appendix.

<sup>5</sup> American Community Survey, 5-year data, 2019-2023, Table S1901.

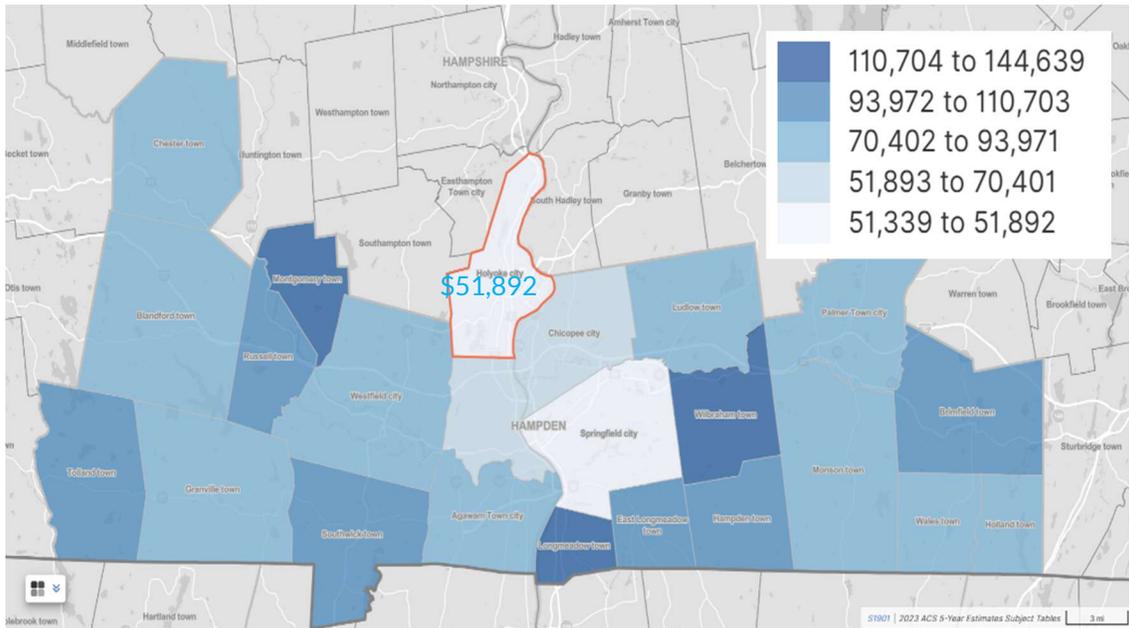
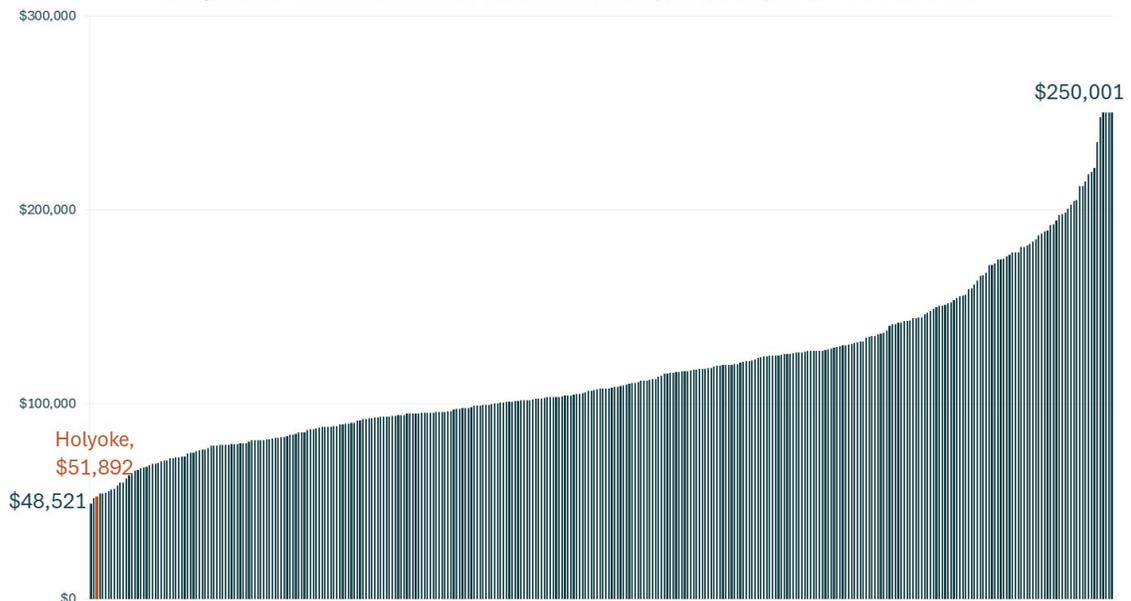


Figure 1: Median Household Incomes throughout Hampden County

Median household incomes of all Massachusetts communities:  
**Holyoke's Median Household Income (\$51,892) falls third lowest**



Source: US Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 5-year data, 2019-2023  
 [Note, 4 communities with median household incomes exceeding \$250,000 for which the Census Bureau has suppressed data, are shown here with median household incomes of \$250,001]. Highest and lowest median household incomes labeled for reference.

Figure 2: Median Household Incomes

## Devices available to Holyoke residents

During the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, we quickly learned that the range of devices available for use at home was quite broad, and varied by community and within communities. In Figure 3, we see that the share of households with desktop or laptop computers – certainly the “gold standard” for computing devices – was 64% in the City of Holyoke, which compares to 72% across Hampden County, and 83% across the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Both Hampden County and Holyoke trail the statewide averages for those using smartphones or tablets.

Notably, as discussed further below, one in ten households in Holyoke lacked any computer at all, similar to the share of households lacking a computer in Hampden County, but twice the share of residents statewide.

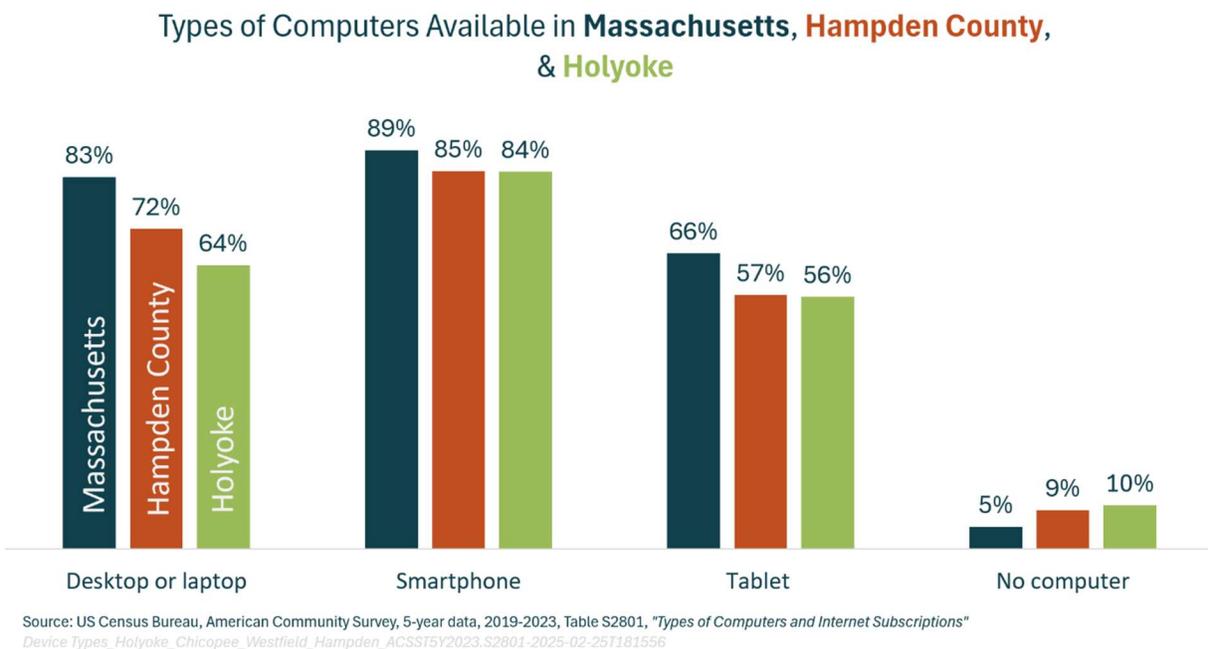


Figure 3: Types of computers available

## Digital Inequity

Our digital equity work throughout Hampden County has uniformly shown that the most significant impediment to digital equity is affordability. The City of Holyoke has the second lowest median household income in Hampden County and third lowest throughout the

Commonwealth of Massachusetts (\$51,892), only slightly above the median household income in the City of Springfield (\$51,339).

Figure 2 shows the correlation between median household income and reliance on a smart phone as only device to access the internet. Holyoke and Springfield both stand as outliers, with low median household incomes and comparatively high rates of homes relying on smartphones as their only available computer device.

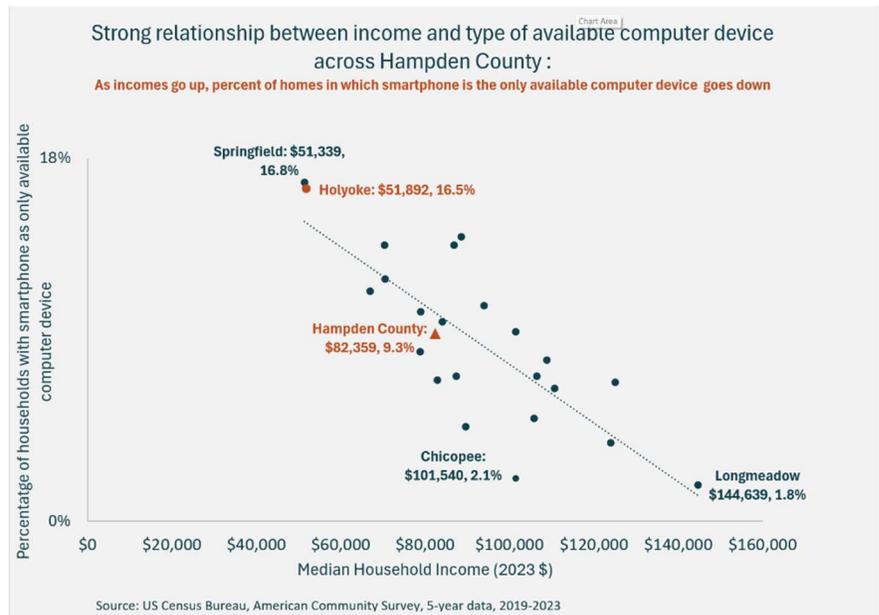
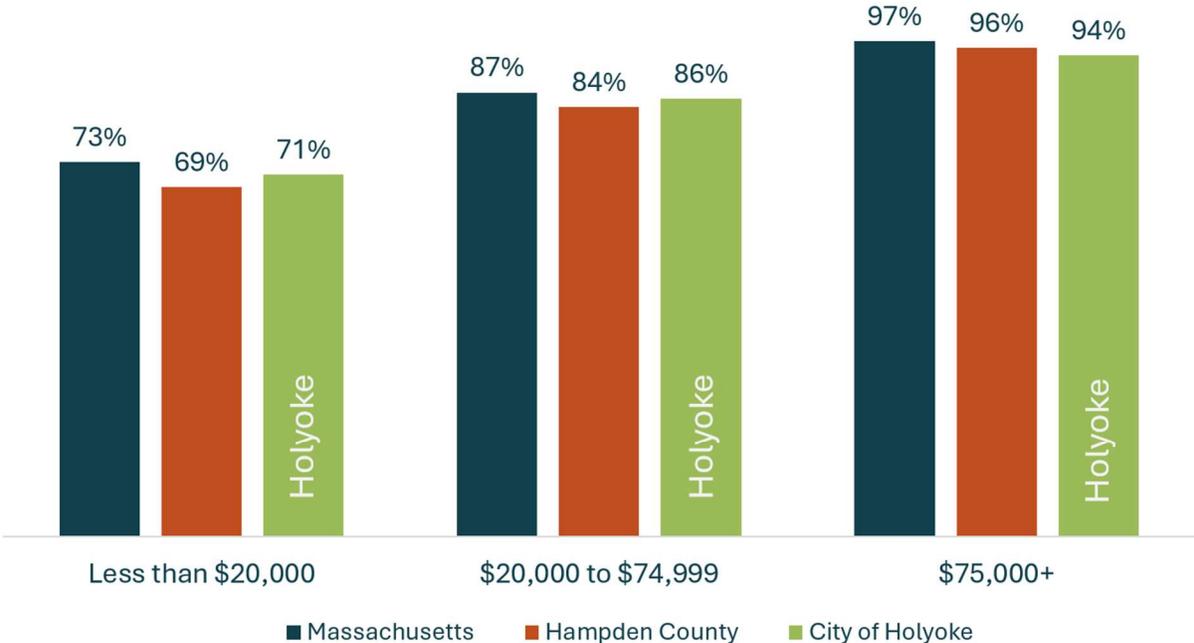


Figure 4: Relationship between median household income (x-axis) and percent of households in which smartphone is the only available computer

Figure 5 below provides a clear picture of the digital divide. Among all households in Holyoke with incomes less than \$20,000/year, 71% have broadband internet, while for households with income greater than \$75,000, nearly all (94%) have broadband internet.

Share of Households with Broadband Internet, by Income Level:  
**Massachusetts, Hampden County, and City of Holyoke**



Source: US Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 5-year data (2019-2023), Table S2801, Types of Computers and Internet Subscriptions

Figure 5: Share of Households with Broadband Internet

At the same time, evident in Figure 4 we see hopeful trends in access to broadband for Holyoke residents across all income groups. Across all three income ranges shown (\$75k+, \$20k-75k, and <\$20k), a growing share of homes had a broadband subscription over the five-year period 2019-2023 compared with the five-year period 2014-2018, with the lowest income earners making the largest strides, gaining broadband access to 20% more homes.

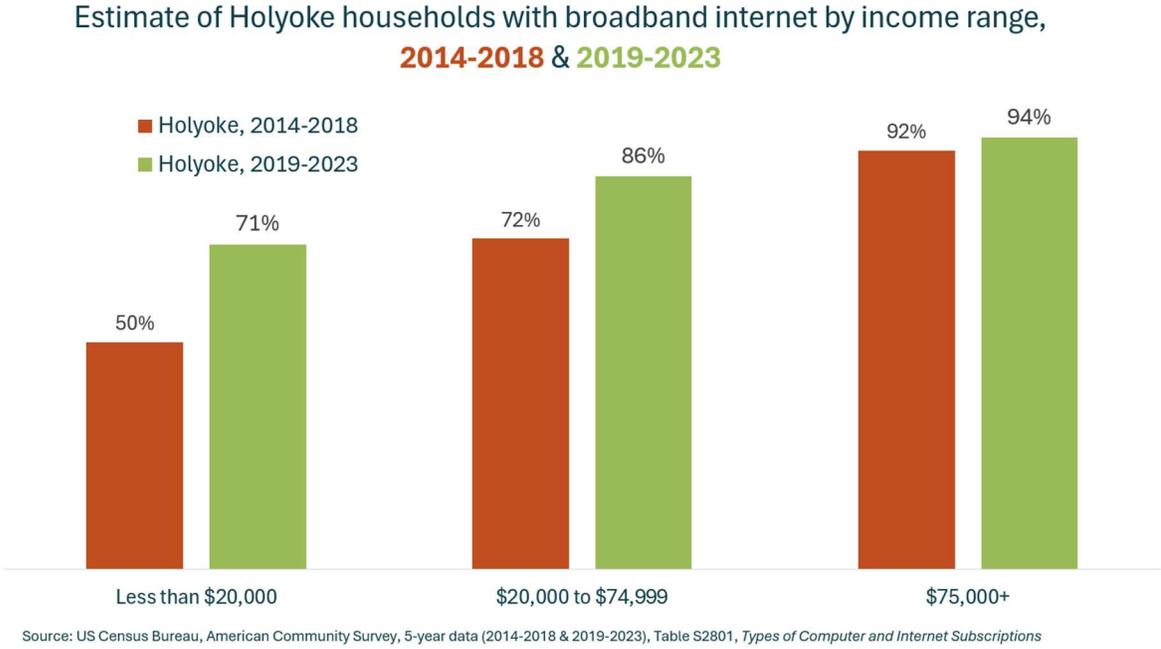


Figure 4: Estimate of Holyoke Households with Broadband, by Income Range

We see these disparities play out differently across Holyoke’s neighborhoods, as seen in Figure 3 below. The share of homes lacking an internet subscription ranges from 4% in Census Tract 8119 which covers the Smith’s Ferry and Highland Park neighborhoods, to 25% in Census Tract 8121.04 which covers the Elmwood neighborhood.

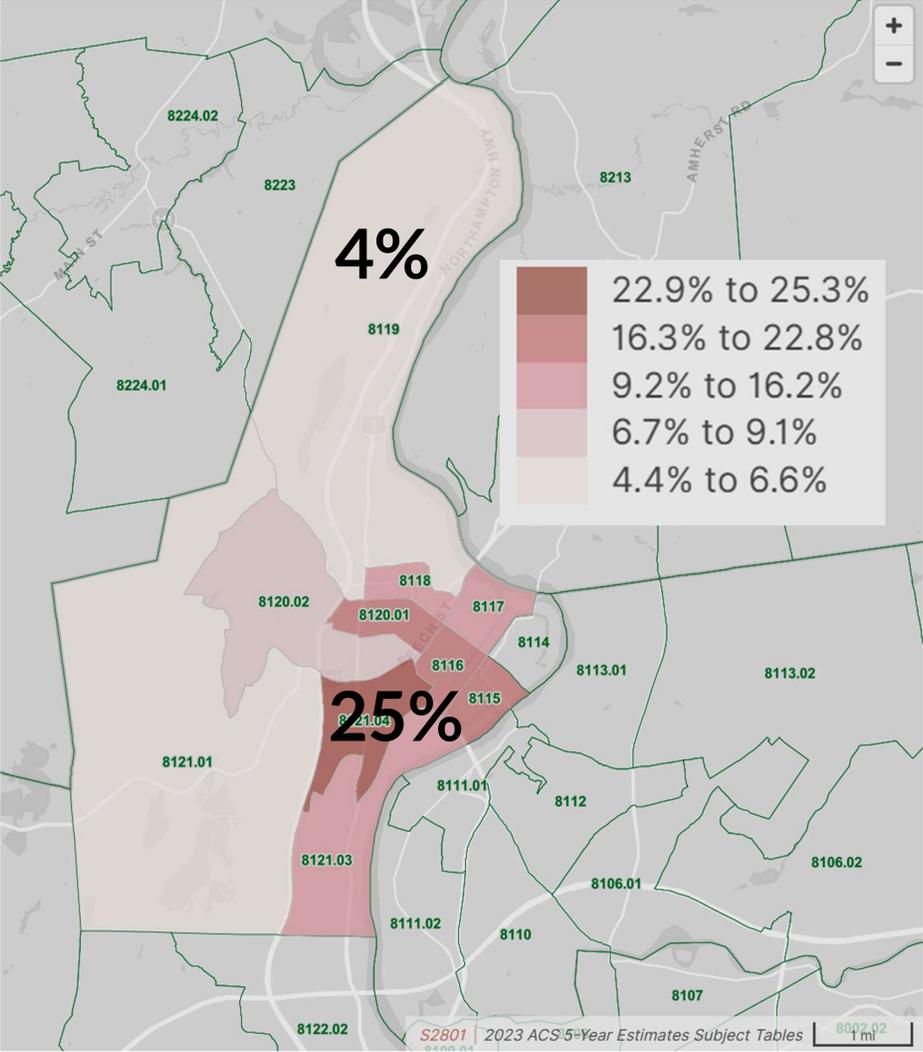
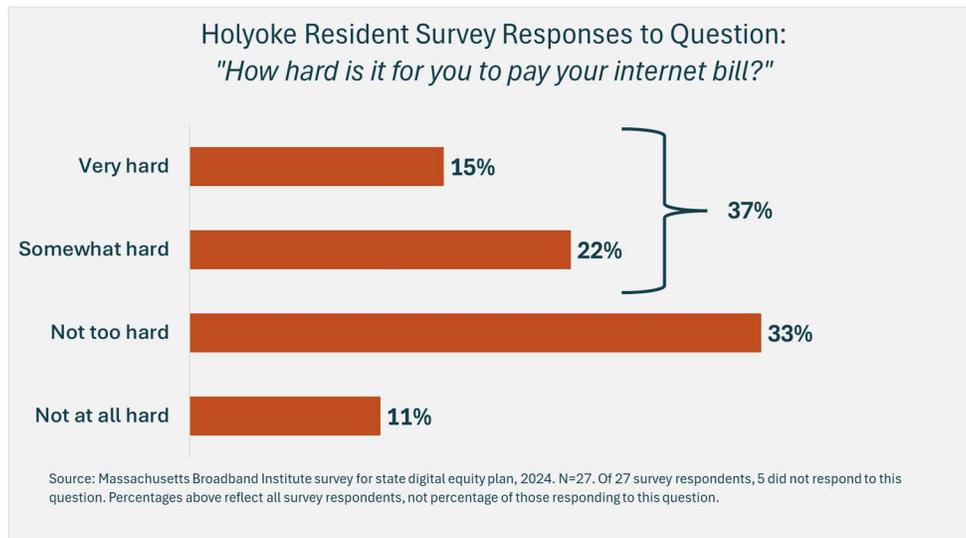


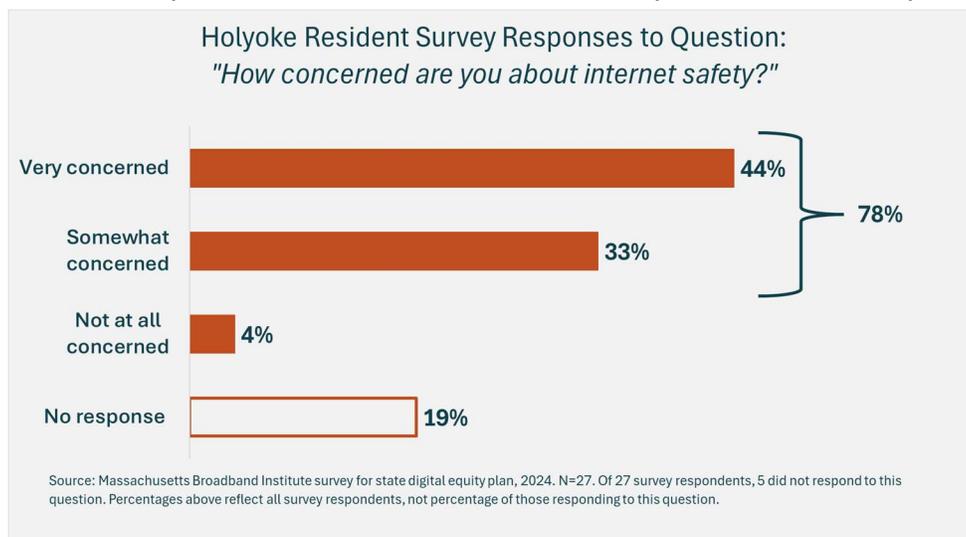
Figure 3: Share of Homes lacking an internet subscription

The Massachusetts Broadband Institute undertook extensive public surveys to inform preparation of the statewide digital equity plan. Holyoke survey respondents emphasized the extent to which affordability has been a major barrier to accessing the internet, with 37% of survey respondents indicating it is either “somewhat hard” (22%) or “very hard” (15%) to pay their internet bill.



## Privacy & Cybersecurity

Holyoke respondents<sup>6</sup> to MBI’s survey made clear that internet safety is a significant concern. In response to the question “How concerned are you about internet safety?”, survey respondents overwhelmingly affirmed that this was a concern for them. Forty-four percent of respondents indicated they were “Very concerned”, while another thirty-three percent indicated they were “somewhat concerned”. Only 4% indicated they were not at



<sup>6</sup> While these survey results are informative, and reinforce patterns we know to be true from other jurisdictions, the results are not representative of the entire population of Springfield.

all concerned.

Issues of privacy and security are of paramount concern for older adults. The AARP has a program in place, Older Adults Technology Services (OATS) that has resources specifically tailored for older Americans, focusing specifically on browsing the internet confidently, protecting personal information online, and socializing safely online.<sup>7</sup> As well, the Holyoke Council on Aging & Senior Center offers training to protect seniors from “scams, schemes, & fraud”.

## SCAMS, SCHEMES, & FRAUD: PREVENTING THE EXPLOITATION OF OLDER ADULTS



Representatives from the United States Attorney's Office, the United States Postal Inspection Service and Internal Revenue Service Criminal Investigations will provide an information session on the financial exploitation of elders. Please join us on:

**Thursday, March 27, 2025**  
**9:30 – 11:00 am**  
**Holyoke Council on Aging & Senior Center**  
**291 Pine Street, Holyoke**

As part of the Department of Justice Elder Justice Initiative, the goals of this outreach event are to enable community members to recognize, stop, report, and help prevent fraud. Information about current and evolving scams, schemes and frauds, and why older adults are disproportionately targeted by fraudsters, will be addressed.



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<sup>7</sup> AARP, Older Adults Technology Services, 2023. *Online Safety for Older Adults: New Fact Sheets from engAGED and OATS*. [Online Safety for Older Adults: New Fact Sheets from engAGED and OATS - OATS](#).

## Digital Divide Reflects/Exacerbates Existing Socio-Economic Disparities

The disparities we see when we look at digital equity data are consistent with the disparities we see between Census Tracts across various other socio-economic measures, including median household income, educational attainment, race and/or ethnicity, and language skills. Table 1 compares the Census Tracts with the highest and lowest rates of poverty in Holyoke.

**The Digital (and every other type of) Divide**

Census Bureau Data Points	Census Tract 8115 (South Holyoke)	Census Tract 8119 (Smith's Ferry/Highland Park)
<b>Smartphone only computer device</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>5%</b>
Median Household Income	\$19,770	\$95,717
Educational Attainment: Bachelor's Degree or Higher	3%	40%
Hispanic or Latino	86%	12%
Black (not Hispanic or Latino)	5%	3%
Speak English "Less than very well"	28%	6%
Below Federal Poverty Rate	72%	2%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 5-year data, 2018-2022. (Race & Ethnicity data from 2020 Decennial Census, Table DP1)

Table 1

## Digital Divide Experienced Disproportionately by Race/Ethnicity

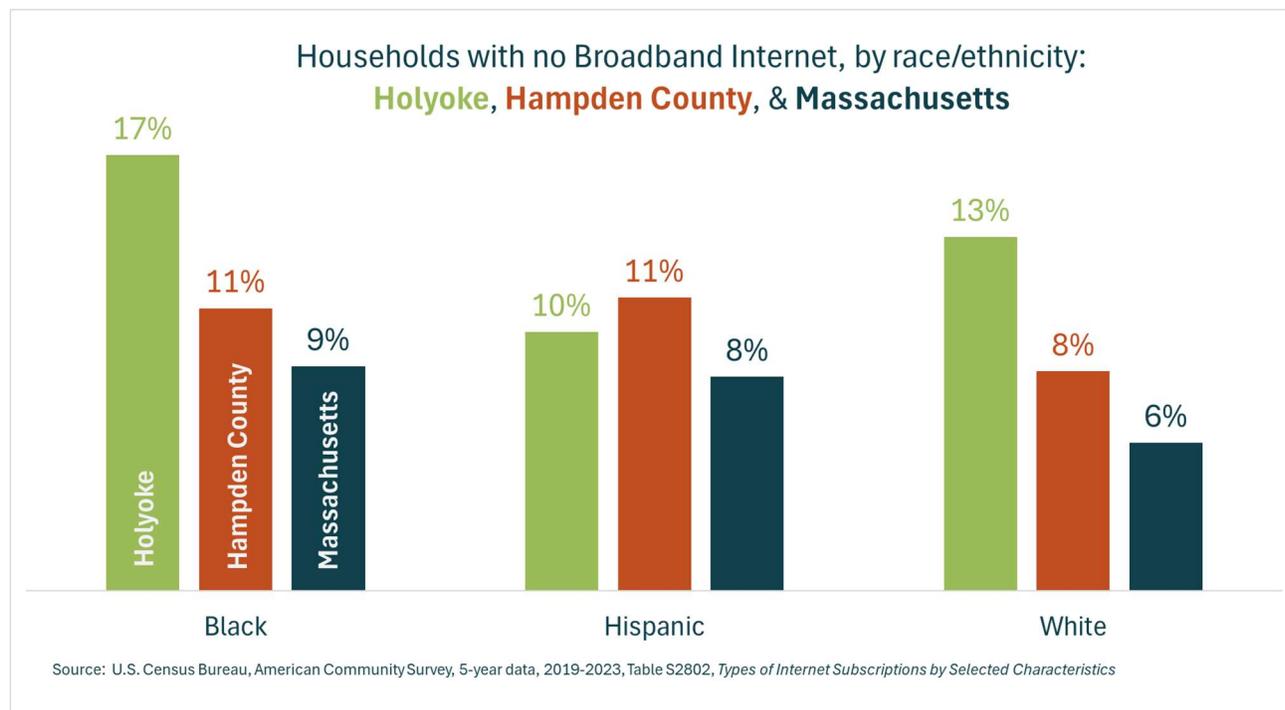


Figure 6: Share of Households without internet, by race/ethnicity

We see in Figure 6 the disparities in access to the internet by race and ethnicity. In Holyoke, Census Bureau estimates show 17% of Black headed households without broadband internet, 10% of Hispanic or Latino households, and 13% of non-Hispanic white households.

### Digital Divide Experienced Disproportionately by Age

We also see stark inequalities based on the age of householder, with older residents – those 65 years old and older – experiencing much higher rates of lacking broadband internet of any kind. In Figure 7, we see that in Holyoke, older residents lacked broadband internet at a rate more than 3 times the rate for adults 18-64 years of age, and 6 times the rate for children. While the numbers showing lack of broadband internet for Hampden County and statewide are smaller than for Holyoke, the ratios are very similar across all three geographies.

For older Holyoke residents, access to broadband internet is likely the result of a combination of factors, each of which needs to be addressed to close this gap in access. Affordability, lack of digital skills, and (well-founded) mistrust of the internet are all factors that are particularly acute for older residents.

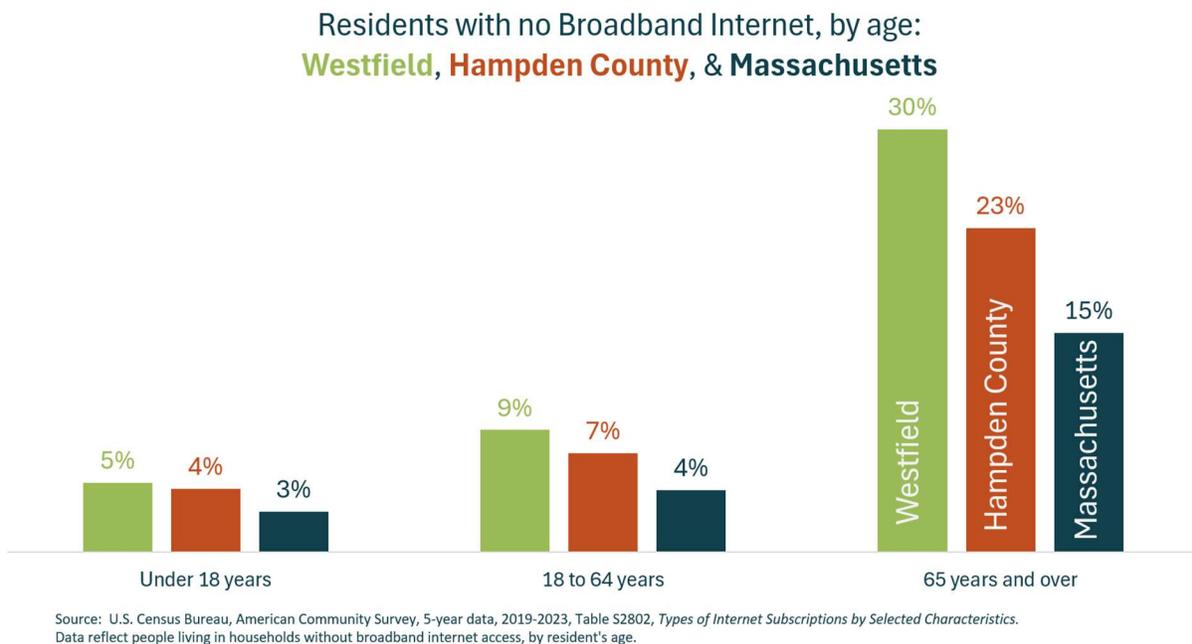


Figure 7: Share of households lacking a computer, by age

Notably, the digital divide exacerbates the impact on families of the other disparities they face, while closing the digital divide allows families to improve their economic situation.

## Digital Equity in our rapidly evolving economy

Achieving digital equity is important not only for the individuals and families living in our communities, but also for the overall economy, as the proportion of jobs requiring digital literacy grows. The increased share of workers working from home is one example of the shifts in our economy that can happen in a short period of time. Figure 8 below shows that the share of workers working from home in both Holyoke and throughout Hampden County has more than doubled, when comparing the five year average from 2019-2023 with the preceding five year window (2014-2018)

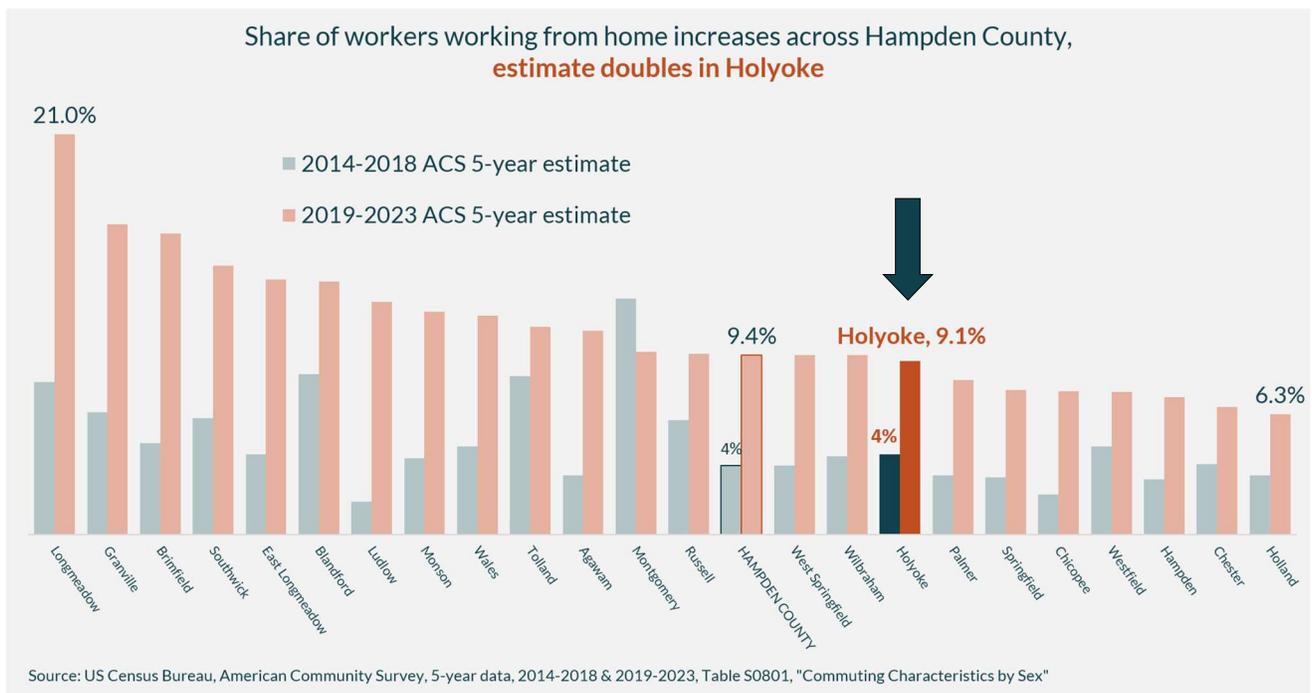


Figure 8: Share (%) of workers working from home

## Download Speeds

One factor that impacts the experience of Internet users is the speed at which data is transferred, during both the downloading and uploading of data. The primary source of data on download speeds is derived from the multiple occurrences of people checking their own speeds, via Speedtest.net, a tool provided by Ookla. Data available from this tool shows that Holyoke's average monthly download speed has averaged approximately 275 Megabits per second (Mbps) over the period from November 2023 to February 2025 (slightly faster, than neighboring Springfield's average of 245 Mbps), and slightly slower than neighboring Chicopee (283 Mbps).

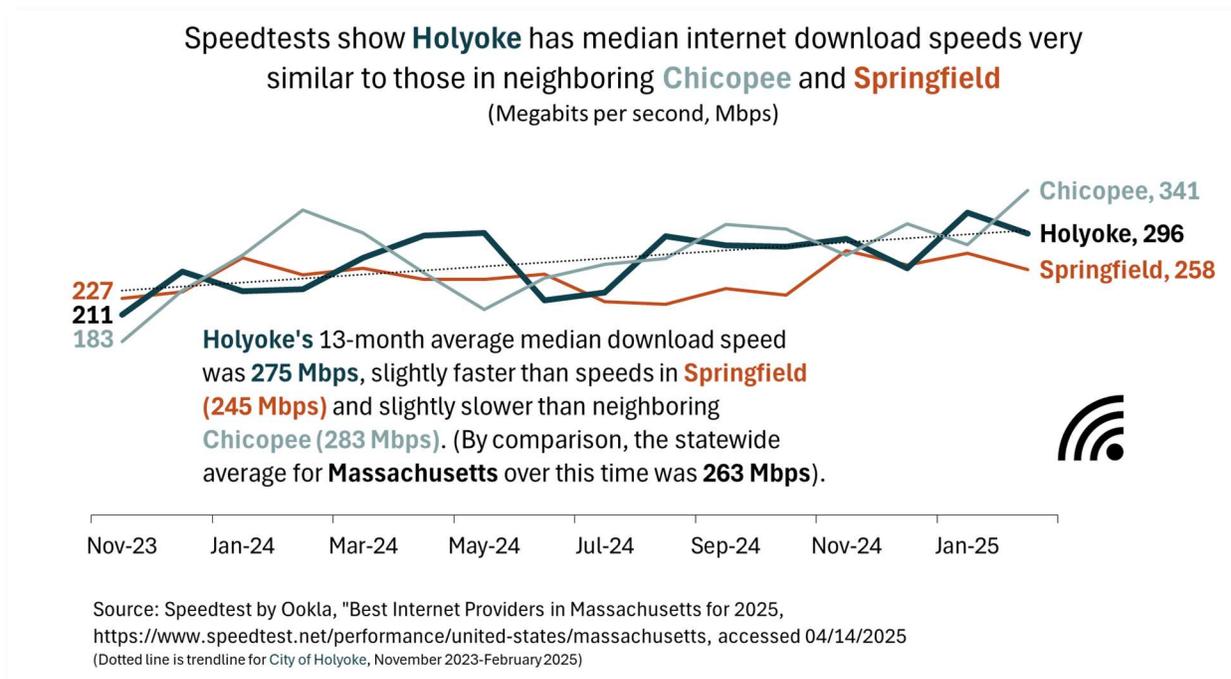


Figure 9: Average Monthly Download Speeds, Holyoke and Springfield

## Lack of Competition

Available data indicate that there is a lack of competition at the provider level in the City of Holyoke. At the City level, fewer than 25% of customers have access to more than one provider (Figure 7). Comcast/Xfinity has 100% coverage citywide, while Charter Communications covers 1.1% of users. T-Mobile also provides “fixed wireless” (though at slow 25 Mbps speeds) to nearly a quarter of users, and faster service to 1.5% of the city.

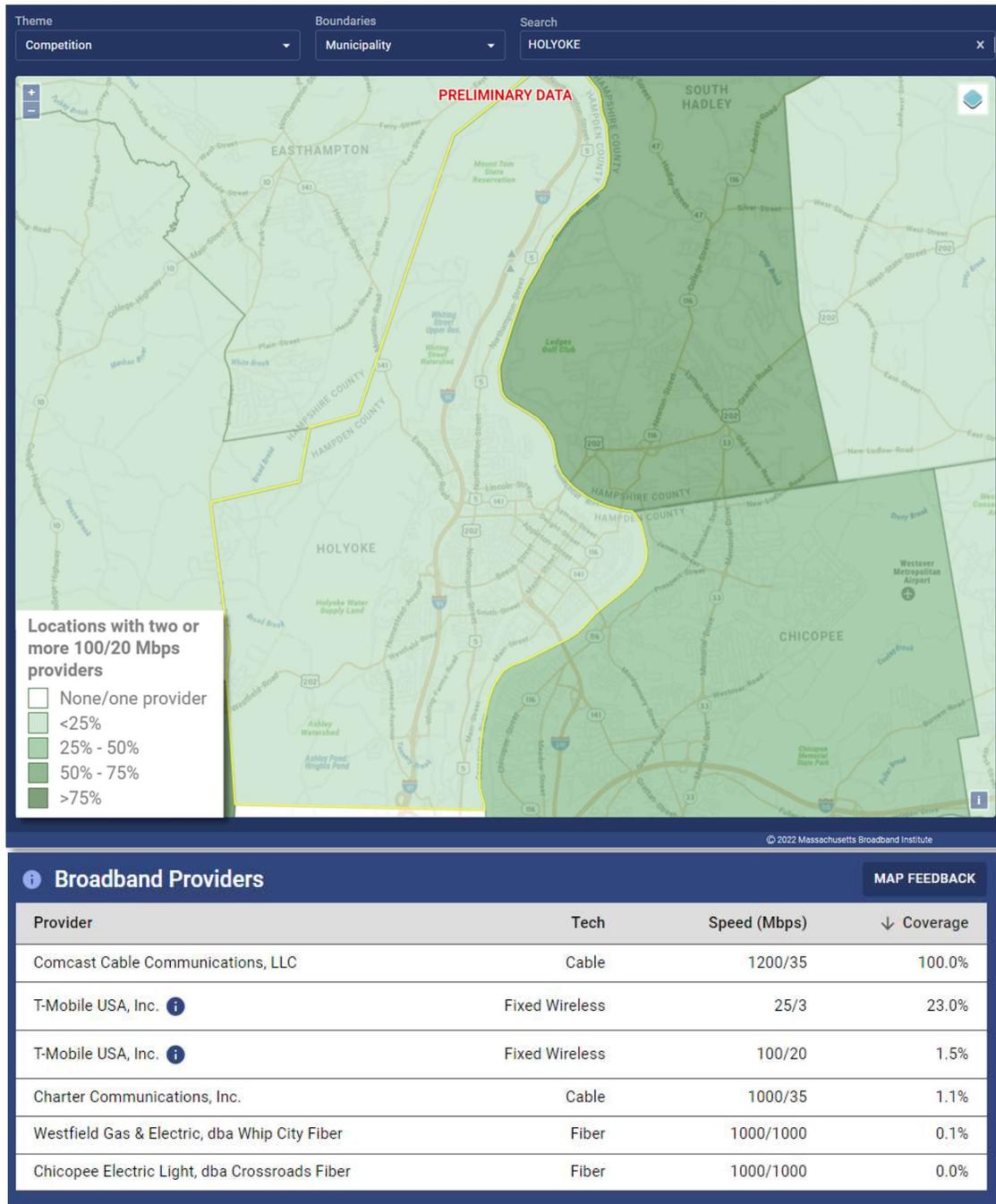


Figure 10: Lack of Provider Competition at City-wide level

As seen in Figure 8 below, at the Census Block Group level, preliminary data shows the existence of somewhat higher levels of competition along the city's southwest border adjacent to Easthampton, Southamptton, and Westfield.

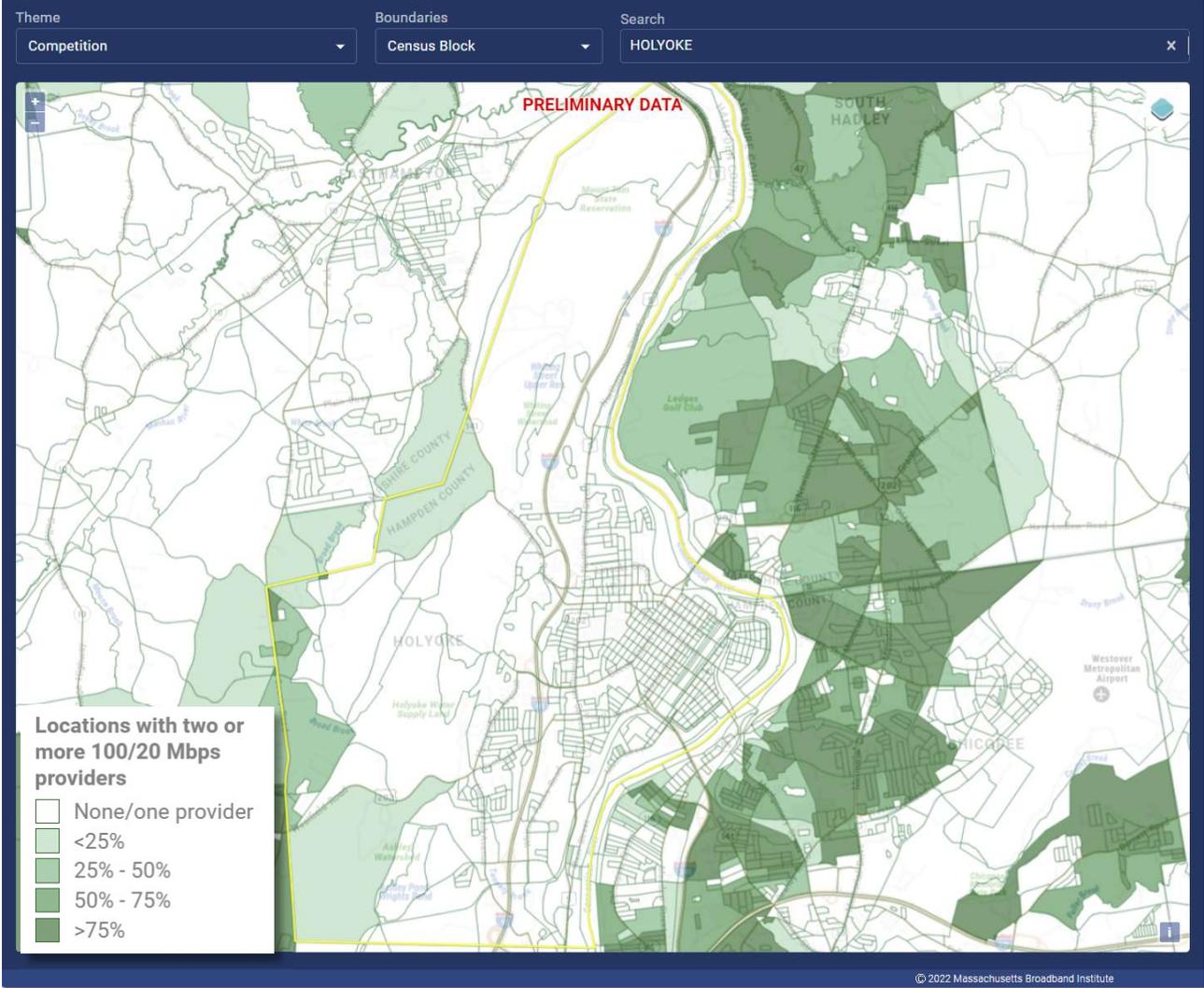
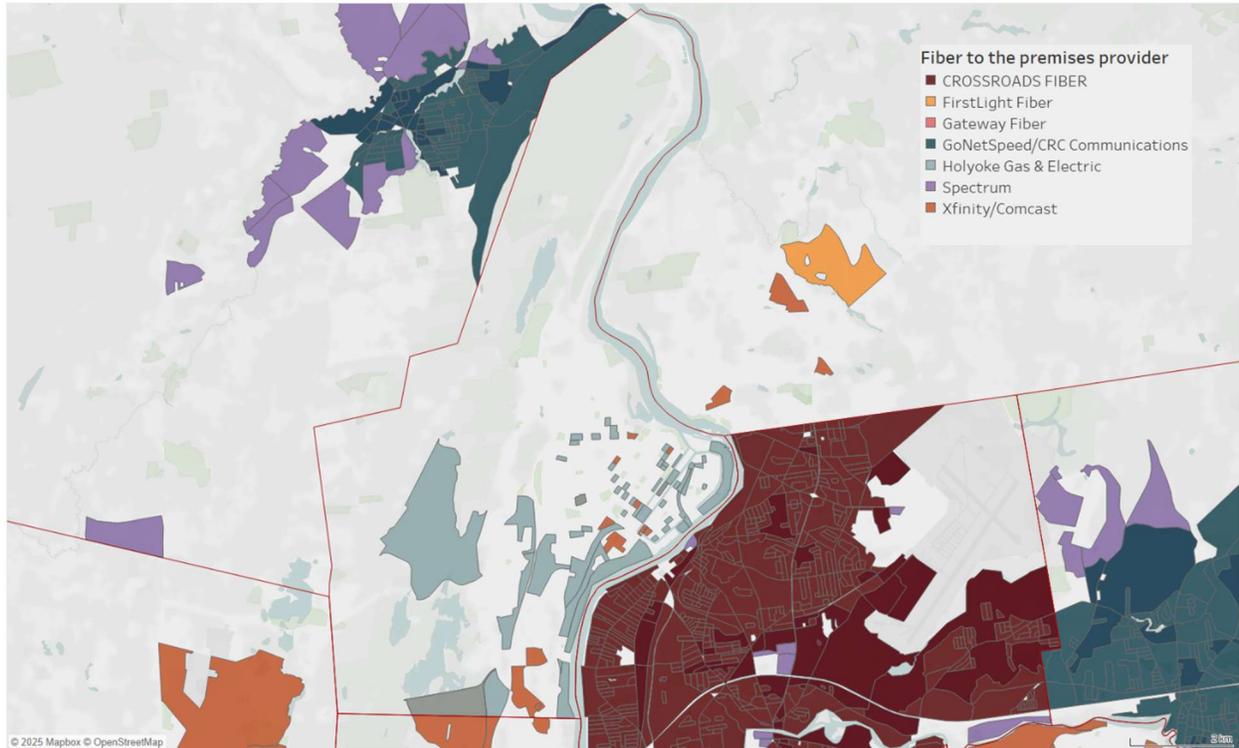


Figure 8: Evidence of Somewhat Greater Competition at Block Group level

## Nascent Fiber Optic Service

Provider data submitted to the FCC as of December 31, 2024 shows that Holyoke Gas & Electric (HG&E) has established a Fiber to the Premises (FTTP) presence in several Census Blocks within Holyoke, as has Xfinity/Comcast, to a lesser extent.<sup>8</sup>

HG&E poised to compete with Xfinity/Comcast via fiber to the premises (FTTP) in a handful of Holyoke neighborhoods



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<sup>8</sup> Note that areas that are shaded indicate Census Blocks in which FTTP is available. FTTP service may not be available to all locations within the Census Block.

## Level of Service

Evident in Figure 9, below, we see that nearly all of the City of Holyoke's Broadband Serviceable Locations (BSLs) have service at or above a 100 Mbps (download)/20 Mbps (upload) level.

Of the 8,608 BSLs, 8,572 (99.6%) are served at or above the 100/20 level, with 34 unserved locations and 2 underserved locations. Any remaining locations currently unserved will be addressed by Verizon through MBI's \$145 million Gap Networks Grant program, a program that "aims to expand access and connectivity in unserved and underserved locations throughout the Commonwealth to bridge the digital divide."<sup>9</sup>

Figure 10 zooms into the street level, providing an example of the granularity of detail that is available. Green dots indicate availability of service at a 100 (download)/20 (upload) or faster rate, and red dots indicate locations that are "unserved", lacking even service at a slow 25/3 rate. A majority of locations considered unserved are non-residential locations.

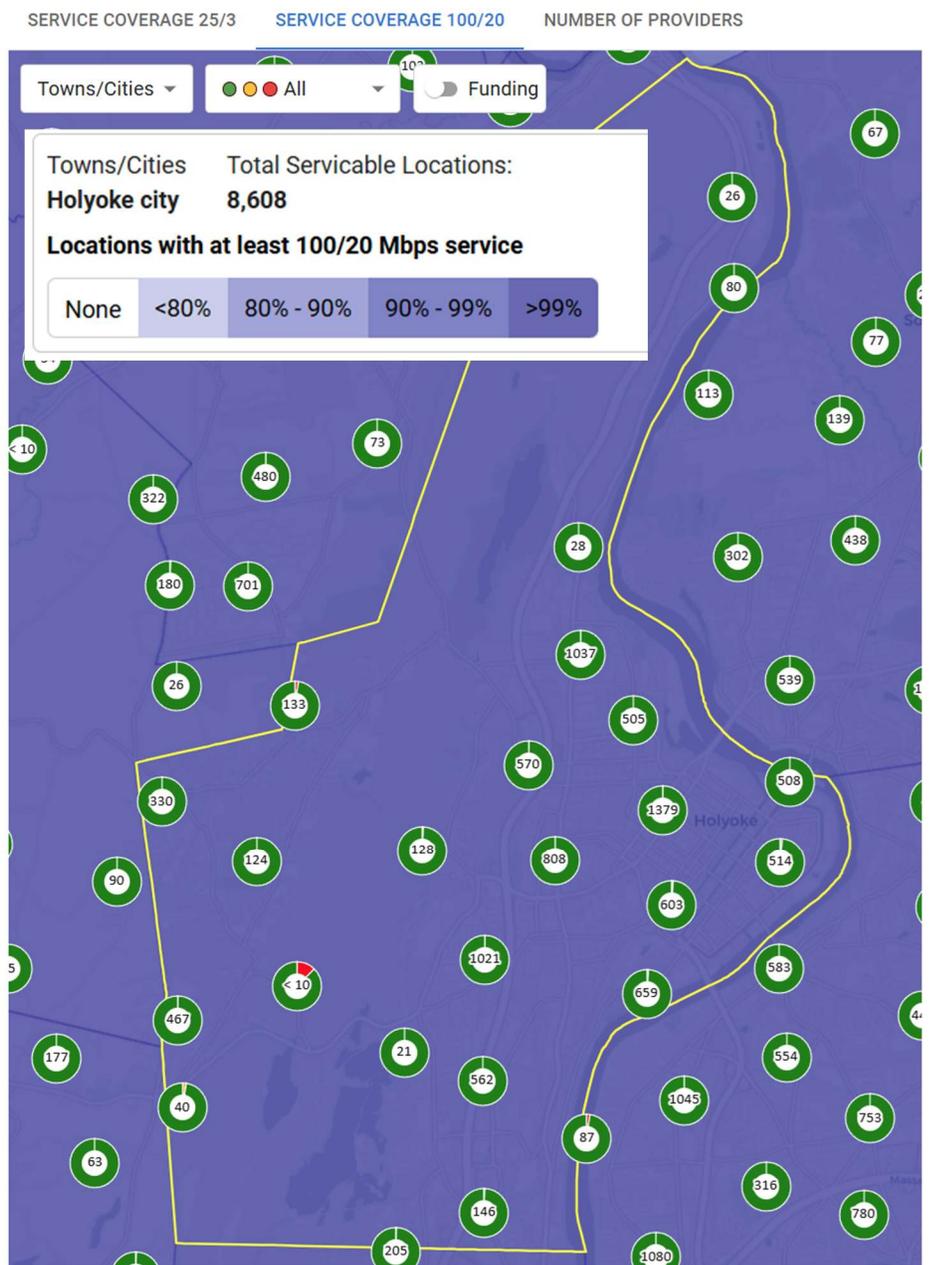


Figure 9: Total Serviceable Locations in City of Holyoke at or above the 100/20 level

<sup>9</sup> Massachusetts Broadband Institute at the MassTech Collaborative. <https://broadband.masstech.org/gap-networks-grant-program>.



Figure 10: Level of service at each Broadband Serviceable Location (BSL).

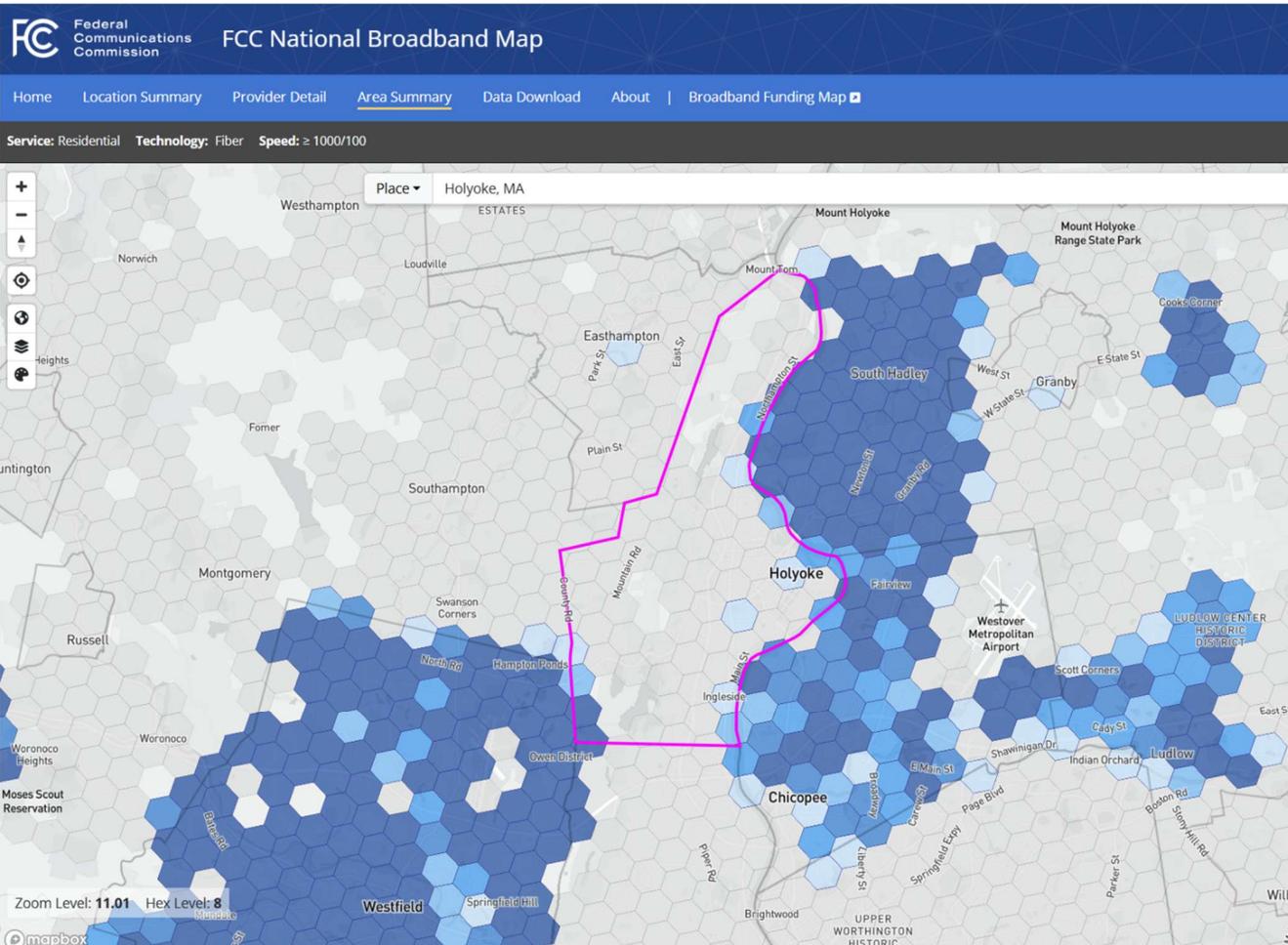


Figure 4: Source: FCC National Broadband Map, data as of June 30, 2024 [updated as of March 18, 2025]

Holyoke is flanked by communities that have embraced municipal operated Fiber-to-the-Home as both a way to increase competition for residents, and a sound strategy to future-proof what will become an increasingly important tool for local economic development.

## Outreach and Community Engagement

A significant part of this effort is community Engagement. The PVPC recognizes that this effort is an iterative process requiring a significant amount of engagement at the local level. To this end a number of important steps have been taken. Our community engagement work benefited from the guidance and feedback of Holyoke’s digital equity core planning team, whose members include the following:

- Mayor Joshua Garcia, City of Holyoke
- Stephen Fay, City of Holyoke
- Aaron Vega, City of Holyoke
- Navae Rodriguez, Holyoke Council on Aging
- Nydia Hernandez, Way Finders
- Keishla Archeval, Way Finders
- Beatrice Dewberry, Way Finders
- Jaime Morrow, City of Holyoke
- Jason Lefebvre, Holyoke Public Library
- Nayroby Rosa-Soriano, One Holyoke
- Christy Prosser, Holyoke Public Schools
- Adlyn Colon, Holyoke Community College
- Jeff Hayden, Holyoke Community College
- Sonia Edwin

### Representing PVPC

- Eric Weiss, PVPC
- Doug Hall, PVPC
- Michael Dechiara, consultant to the PVPC

The PVPC has also worked collaboratively with several regional community groups including Way Finders, Tech Foundry, and other concerned citizens. Through our consultation efforts, we received valuable feedback from residents and advocates that uncovered common themes, highlighting a series of challenges and impediments to digital accessibility, and pointing to a series of potential remedies to address those barriers.

## Digital Equity Assets in City<sup>10</sup>

### Holyoke Gas and Electric [HG&E]<sup>11</sup>

As the City of Holyoke considers how best to increase digital equity across the city, weighing the role that HG&E can play will be a key factor to consider.

In 1998, HG&E constructed a fiber optic network to serve its utility needs, and to provide high speed internet service to Holyoke's public schools and municipal buildings. As a natural extension of this business model, HG&E began serving commercial customers that were located along the fiber network path. Today, HG&E, through HGE.Net, continues to provide high speed internet services to business customers.

Making a fiber connection from the existing fiber network to a home or business can cost several thousand dollars. This connection is referred to as the “last-mile”. Larger businesses are able to spread the installation costs over several months and will sign a three year service contract in return. While a major extension of HG&E's fiber network would make last-mile costs more manageable, HG&E would be required to make a significant capital investment to extend the current network.

HG&E's mission is to provide competitive rates, innovative and sustainable energy solutions, reliable service, and excellent customer care to customers. Taking the time to fully understand the impact of a potential [Fiber-to-the-Home] FTTH build is critical to meeting our mission...

[Holyoke Gas & Electric](#)

HG&E has been studying the possibility of expanding its offerings to provide Fiber-to-the-Home (FTTH) serving residential customers, recognizing that other cities in the region have pursued this course. Recent estimates indicate that a City-wide network build-out could cost upwards of \$40 million, a substantial sum by any reasonable measure.



FIBER-TO-THE-HOME

One step of HG&E's deliberate and thoughtful approach to evaluating the possibility of expanding into FTTH involves a feasibility study gauging the level of interest within the community for such a service.

<sup>10</sup> The organizations whose work is highlighted in this section are intended to be illustrative of the depth and breadth of digital equity assets available to Holyoke residents.

<sup>11</sup> This discussion of HG&E draws heavily on information provided on the utility's website: <https://www.hged.com/telecom/fiber-to-the-home/about-ftth.aspx>

HG&E's mission is to provide competitive rates, innovative and sustainable energy solutions, reliable service, and excellent customer care to customers.

## Holyoke Council on Aging & Senior Center

Through the Council on Aging & Senior Center, older residents of Holyoke have access to twice-monthly availability of a volunteer staff person. These sessions, "Tech Support with Wayne", Holyoke seniors can bring their devices, including phones, tablets, or laptops for troubleshooting and digital accessibility mentoring.

The Senior Center also has a computer lab for seniors to make use of.

## Way Finders

Way Finders promotes digital equity in Holyoke through its Community Building and Engagement team via several complementary channels.

"We are focused on engaging directly with residents and inspiring them to act as peer mentors, ready to help others overcome technological fears and barriers.

We are focused on advocacy, and on exploring both the policies that have contributed to the digital divide and the local and national efforts to eliminate it. We also work in partnership: Way Finders is a core partner of the Alliance for Digital Equity, a regional task force working to enact policies and systemic changes to benefit underserved urban and rural communities in western Massachusetts."<sup>12</sup>

**TECH SUPPORT WITH WAYNE**  
**Two Fridays a month from 1 - 2pm**  
**June 13 & 27; July 18**  
 Volunteer Wayne Klinge will be on hand twice a month to answer all of your questions. Feel free to bring the laptop, tablet, or phone that's giving you trouble, and Wayne will offer his help or advice.



**SOPORTE TÉCNICO CON WAYNE**  
**Dos viernes al mes de 1 a 2pm**  
**13 y 27 de junio; 18 de julio**  
 El voluntario Wayne Klinge estará presente dos veces al mes para responder a todas tus preguntas. No dudes en traer el portátil, la tableta o el teléfono que te esté dando problemas, y Wayne te ofrecerá su ayuda o consejo.





<sup>12</sup> Way Finders, <https://www.wayfinders.org/western-ma/digital-equity/>.

### Digital Literacy Skills Training

Way Finders offers digital literacy skills training, focusing on helping residents learn how to send emails, navigate the internet, create and maintain passwords, make video calls, and create, share, and save documents. Their approach meets residents where they are in their digital equity journey, teaching core skills as well as tailoring training to meet individual needs.

### Digital Navigation Support

During the period of the federal Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP), Way Finders worked to maximize enrollment by Holyoke residents. With the demise of the program, their focus has shifted to helping residents access the resources needed access the internet.

### Digital Equity Coalition

This resident-led coalition from Springfield and Holyoke works to advocate for all residents to have equal access to computers, internet connectivity and digital literacy. The Coalition has working groups for both the City of Springfield and the City of Holyoke. They have also created a Facebook group, the Connect Hampden County Coalition. Through the work of the Digital Equity Coalition, Way Finders empowers citizens to advocate for themselves and their communities.<sup>13</sup>



*Way Finders' Community Engagement Director, Bea Dewberry addressing digital equity coalition meeting*

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<sup>13</sup> Residents interested in connecting with the digital equity work led by Way Finders should contact Keishla Archeval, Way Finder's Digital Equity Coordinator, at [karcheval@wayfinders.org](mailto:karcheval@wayfinders.org).

## Tech Foundry/Tech Hub

Tech Foundry has been serving Western Massachusetts for ten years. Tech Foundry's Mission is "To help people realize economic stability through equitable, accessible, and inclusive opportunities in the tech workforce." Prioritizing participants who "represent the diversity lacking in IT, including women, people of color, LGBTQA+ people and those from non-traditional educational backgrounds", Tech Foundry offers intensive education and training that builds upon a set of IT Fundamentals. Students engage in 14 weeks of coursework, followed by a four-week internship. The course format allows students to accelerate through several stages of digital literacy, allowing students to overcome barriers to digital equity and instead use their newfound expertise in IT to build a strong foundation for a more prosperous future.

In 2023, Tech Foundry created "Tech Hub", located in the City of Holyoke. Tech Hub offers free virtual and in-person tech support and digital literacy classes.

Appointments are required for either Help Desk or Device Assistance. Tech Hub has also partnered with Comcast to provide a limited quantity of computer devices to qualified individuals throughout Western Massachusetts. Unfortunately, recent federal budget cuts have presented challenges to the sustainability of Holyoke's Tech Hub. Business West reports that "[b]eginning on Aug. 7, Tech Hub Holyoke...will offer limited workshops" and that "community workshops [that Tech Hub has been offering] in Hampden, Hampshire, and Franklin counties will be suspended until additional funding is secured."<sup>14</sup>



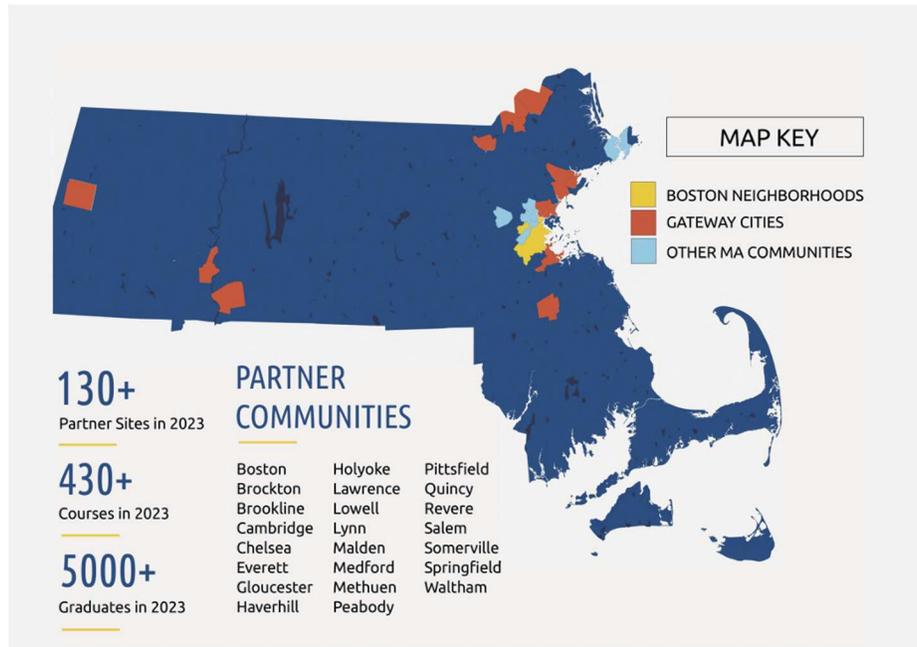
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<sup>14</sup> BusinessWest staff, June 16, 2025, "Tech Hub in Holyoke to Drastically Cut Services Due to Funding Shortfall", <https://businesswest.com/blog/tech-hub-in-holyoke-to-drastically-cut-services-due-to-funding-shortfall/>.

## Tech Goes Home<sup>15</sup>

Founded in Boston in 2000, Tech Goes Home “empowers communities to access and use digital tools to overcome barriers and advance lives.” It achieves those goals by offering a combination of training and the provision of free computer devices to improve digital equity.

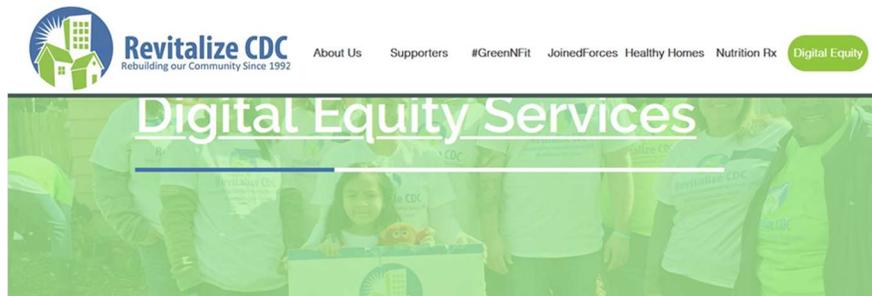
Tech Goes Home partners with communities and organizations throughout Massachusetts, including the City of Holyoke.



*Tech Goes Home community partnerships across the Commonwealth*

## Revitalize CDC

With funding provided by the Public Health Institute of Western Massachusetts (PHI), Revitalize CDC has a full-time digital navigator working to provide a range of digital equity services to residents of the four counties of Western Massachusetts. To date, they have served 60 people in the with 1 on 1 home visits for digital skills training, device support and free wifi access. They have distributed 15



### Digital Equity Program



Our Digital Navigator will teach computer skills 1 on 1 in client's homes or virtually to help them reach their personal and professional goals. We will also help you find and sign up for low cost internet and provide the tools needed to succeed.

<sup>15</sup> For further information on Tech Goes Home, email [info@techgoeshome.org](mailto:info@techgoeshome.org)

computers and 3 hotspots to area residents in need, and maintain a waiting list for laptop computers. Revitalize CDC has conducted 8 digital equity workshops focusing on computer literacy and basic device usage and have many more planned for the spring and summer.

## The Alliance for Digital Equity

The Alliance for Digital Equity (“The Alliance”) has been coordinating extensive efforts throughout Western Massachusetts to advance digital equity since 2020. Founded by Baystate Health and the Community Foundation for Western Massachusetts, The Alliance “is an evolving coalition of organizations and individual stakeholders committed to addressing the Digital Divide.” The Alliance recognizes the importance of building upon existing strengths, embodying the belief that the whole we create in alliance with like-minded organizations can be stronger than the sum of its parts. While the Alliance itself does not offer direct services, it plays a critical role in connecting the many organizations and agencies offering various digital equity programs and services. The Alliance believes that by bringing existing community resources together, the Alliance can accelerate the path towards digital equity.

“The goal of the Alliance is to get people the access they need—to the equipment, to the infrastructure, and to the knowledge and skills—and that will allow them to fully participate in the digital world. The Alliance works to develop big picture solutions as well as the routes that lead to them.”<sup>16</sup>



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<sup>16</sup> The Alliance for Digital Equity, <https://alliancefordigitalequity.org/about-the-alliance/>.

Alliance for Digital Equity member organizations based in or serving Holyoke	
Holyoke Community College (HCC)	Public Health Institute of Western Mass
Holyoke Media	Revitalize CDC
Human Service Forum	Springfield Works (EDC)
Baystate Health	Tech Foundry/Tech Hub
Common Capital	United Way Pioneer Valley
Community Foundation of Western Mass	Way Finders
Dress for Success of Western Mass	Stavros
Pioneer Valley Planning Commission	New North Citizen's Council

### Digital equity and health

There is a strong relationship between digital equity and access to health care. As such, while telehealth options can serve as great convenience for people who might otherwise lack the ability to access health care in person (due to time constraints, physical disabilities, or lack of transportation), it can also exacerbate existing disparities in health care access in the absence of measures to achieve digital equity and access for all. A 2020 report prepared by the Office of [then] Attorney-General Maura Healey notes that “[t]elehealth eliminates the time and cost of travel and allows those with limited mobility to access care more easily...”, warning that “[a]lthough telehealth is an opportunity to increase access to care, government entities and health systems must ensure that the expansion of telehealth does not worsen existing health disparities by leaving behind low-income, older, rural, and non-English speaking residents.”<sup>17</sup> In a November 2020 webinar, Healey reflects on the longstanding existence of health disparities, noting the role that COVID-19 played in shining light on them:

“Now these inequities are heartbreaking, and they’re not new, of course. I think what COVID-19 did was just amplify, reveal, certainly exacerbate, the healthcare disparities that have existed in our society...from the beginning.”<sup>18</sup>

Although “telehealth” has been available in various forms for years, reliance on telehealth emerged as a key tool for people in need of health care during the peak period of the COVID-19 pandemic. The renowned Mayo Clinic explains what telehealth is: “Telehealth is the use of digital information and communication technologies to access health care services remotely and manage your health care. Technologies can include computers and

<sup>17</sup> Office of the Attorney General, Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 2020. *Building Toward Racial Justice and Equity in Health: A Call to Action*, <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/building-toward-racial-justice-and-equity-in-health-a-call-to-action>. Accessed 12/17/2024, 11:36 am.

<sup>18</sup> Attorney General Maura Healey, November 16, 2020. “Building Toward Racial Justice and Equity in Health: A Call to Action”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w8WIS6LXMOU>.

mobile devices, such as tablets and smartphones.”<sup>19</sup> In order to access such health care services, patients need both a reliable remote connection, and access to or ownership of appropriate devices such as outlined above.

**Achieving health equity that includes equitable access to the multiple dimensions of telehealth requires building upon a foundation of digital equity.** Moreover, in the absence of bold measures to address the digital divide, people will get left even further behind as technological change progresses at exponential rates. Baystate Health’s most recent federally mandated Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA) drives this point home:

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<sup>19</sup> Mayo Clinic Staff, “Telehealth: Technology meets health care.” <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/consumer-health/in-depth/telehealth/art-20044878>. Accessed 12/17/2024, 11:15am.

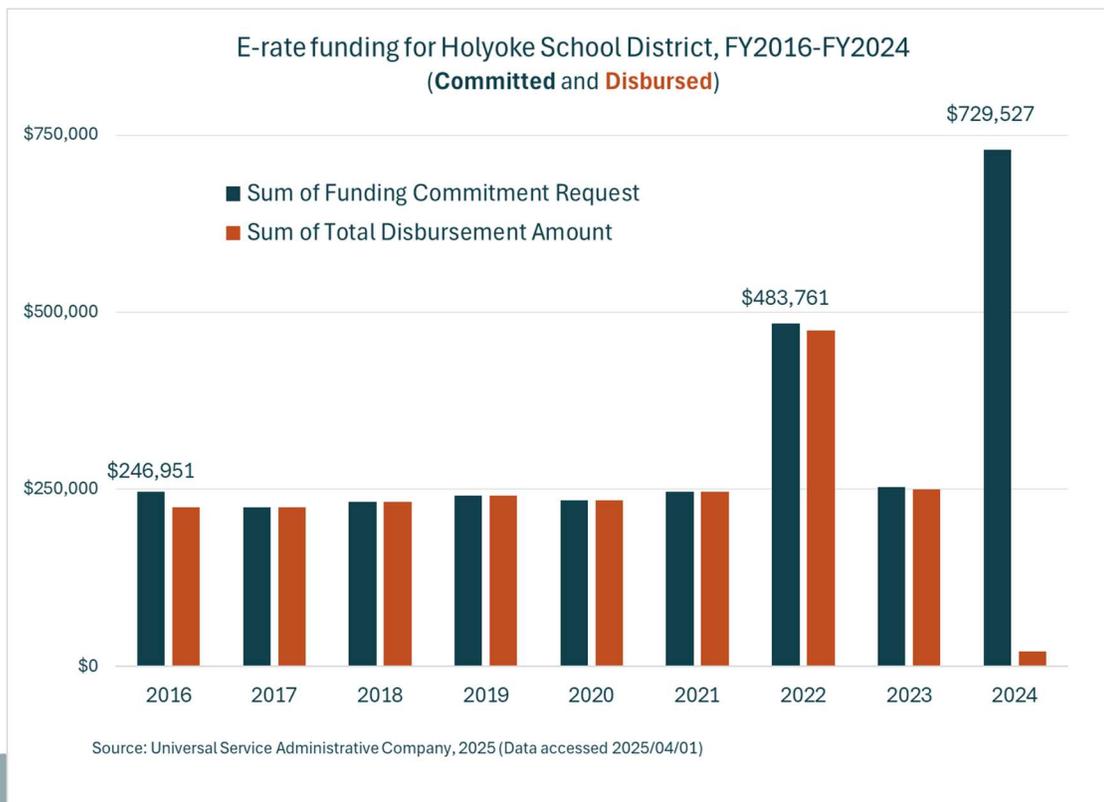
## Digital equity and education

It also has been recognized that access to online learning helps achieve digital equity by ensuring that all our children have access to the education and information needed to achieve their full academic potential. In the past, digital skills were something that a comparatively small share of students would acquire, through discrete courses such as computer science. Today, every subject area has content that can be delivered digitally (remotely, via access to the internet), or that requires and builds upon a base of knowledge of various digital skills.

The Commonwealth of Massachusetts has recognized the importance of leveraging digital skills for building a prosperous economy, and for developing a future-focused workforce development strategy. Both schools and libraries have, for example, been providing both computer devices [tablets/laptops], and mobile access devices to students who may not own or be able to afford such devices. The challenge of overcoming existing digital equities was recognized as a major area in need of significant support by educators during the initial phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the pandemic posed unique challenges, many of

“THE ONGOING PROLIFERATION OF INNOVATIVE DIGITAL LEARNING TECHNOLOGIES AND THE NEED TO CONNECT STUDENTS, TEACHERS AND CONSUMERS TO JOBS, LIFE-LONG LEARNING, AND INFORMATION HAVE LED TO A STEADY RISE IN DEMAND FOR BANDWIDTH IN SCHOOLS AND LIBRARIES.

FCC, E-rate: Universal Service Program for Schools and Libraries,  
<https://www.fcc.gov/consumers/guides/11>



these challenges continue to exist today, Massachusetts schools and libraries continue to play important roles helping to achieve greater digital equity.

Massachusetts school districts and libraries have been effectively leveraging **e-rate**, a federal program—delivered through the Universal Services Administrative Company (USAC), which is overseen by the FCC. E-rate is application based, not grant based, meaning all districts are eligible. In its current form, E-rate funding is generously funded, with an inflation-adjusted \$4.7B funding cap, which has not been fully utilized in recent years. The program uses discount rates, based on each school district's poverty level, as determined by eligibility for the national school lunch program (NSLP).

Holyoke School District has successfully leveraged federal e-rate funding, drawing down \$249,884 in FY 2023 to support operating costs of maintaining internet connectivity throughout the K-12 education system. Since FY2016, Holyoke has leveraged \$2.9 million funding via the e-rate discount program, of which \$2.1 million had been disbursed by April 2025.

While true digital equity in education requires equitable access to digital resources in both home and school, the Holyoke School District has made full use of available resources to ensure digital equity for its students.

## Community Identified Needs

As a result of our community engagement efforts to date, PVPC has identified the following needs and opportunities facing residents in the City of Holyoke:

### Community identified digital equity issues and solutions:

- **Expand hotspot lending program**  
*Wi-fi hotspots that enable portable connection of devices to the Internet are available at approximately \$120/month (based on Verizon and T-Mobile vendors). This involves purchase of the unit and a required annual subscription. Libraries in Holyoke have experience distributing hotspots on a lending basis.*
- **Create city-fund to assist people in arears with their Internet bill** if they are income-eligible for subsidized program (Internet Essentials)  
*In order for customers to receive discounted Comcast service through Internet Essentials, they cannot be in arears. A city fund could help address this situation for eligible residents. Parameters would need to be developed and the fund created and managed.*
- **Encourage HG&E to develop a workplan to provide Fiber to the Home (FTTH) internet services**  
*There has been much discussion about the need to create better connectivity options for Holyoke residents. Most expensive would be building out HG&E's fiber network to encompass Fiber-to-the-Home [FTTH], but could also include development of wireless options (strategically placed Wi-Fi or mesh networks).*
- **Network of free public access points** [based on areas of greatest need]  
*Installation of publicly accessible Wi-Fi would help connectivity in areas where residential connectivity is poor due to quality or affordability. This would require planning and implementation costs with a 1-3 year deployment window, depending on how extensive the deployment is.*
- **Develop wide area mesh networks to connect underserved neighborhoods**  
*Similar to strategic Wi-Fi deployment, deploying wide area mesh networks that would cover wide parts of the city to address current connectivity barriers will require planning and deployment.*
- **Monitor expansion of reliable internet in multi-dwelling units via MBI's Residential Retrofit Program.**  
*Several Holyoke Public Housing sites, with over 800 housing units, will benefit from the Commonwealth's Residential Retrofit program, which replaces outdated technology with fiber-optic internet service to each unit. The City should monitor this process, ensuring that improved accessibility and reliability of service are realized.*
- **Subsidized Open fiber network to create high quality,** competitive internet access to encourage competition in internet services [not just Comcast/Xfinity]  
*This would be forward thinking intervention to both address connectivity needs of residents and businesses but also as an economic development strategy to attract residents and business to a 21st century Holyoke. This will require significant funds for assessment and*

*planning prior to any deployment. Planning would include both engineering and financial plans.*

### **Community Initiated Points Regarding Devices (computers and laptops):**

- **Explore program to provide ownership** for free or low-cost computer devices  
*The lack of internet-accessible devices continues to be a barrier. This includes laptops, desktops, tablets and Chromebooks. These could be distributed through a system of intermediaries. One noted approach could use the Tech Goes Home model which bundles digital skills training with a device and one year of internet service (if needed).*
- **Devices available to borrow**  
*Holyoke libraries have provided some devices via loan. Funds could be provided to distribute laptops, Chromebooks or tablets through libraries or community-based intermediaries.*

### **Community Initiated Points Regarding Digital Skills and Tech Support:**

- **Designate digital accessibility responsibilities to a single staff person within the City of Holyoke.** *This person could pursue future funding opportunities to advance digital accessibility throughout the city, and would serve as the primary point of contact for any of the digital equity interventions selected by the city.*
- **Digital mentors** [buddy system, pairing user with someone with greater comfort and knowledge, youth corps pairing older adults with young tech-savvy volunteers]  
*There are various organizations in the city that engage mentoring or volunteering models that could be support to expand to include explicit digital equity support. Similarly, programs like Tech Goes Home or Cyber Seniors, which use a Train-the-Trainer model could also help develop a digital equity mentor model.*
- **Places to get digital skills training or support** [including advice about cyber security]  
*There are currently organizations intentionally offering digital equity support in Holyoke and others that more informally provide these services, as needed. Additional funding to support and formalize these efforts could create a more systematic approach to providing residents with digital skills.*
- **A place to get tech support for your devices**  
*Tech Foundry currently offers this “Apple Store for the People” approach through the Tech Hub in Holyoke, though we understand that federal budget cuts have negatively impacted their ability to offer a full range of services. Other organizations interested in providing these services could include the library, senior centers, etc. This latter solution could be addressed through funding for a circuit rider tech support model with community-based office hours.*
- **Encourage schools to provide more devices & digital navigation services**  
*Schools are likely providing some support for students. How and if this support could be expanded for students as well as household members or community members, might be explored with additional funding.*
- **Work with Holyoke Council On Aging and Holyoke Housing Authority** to encourage expanded access to fast, reliable, and affordable internet service.
- **Provide cross agency digital skills training to City agencies** engaging with the public

*This would likely require the identification of appropriate city agencies, point people within those agencies and then the training of those employees. Clarification of what support can be provided to residents via these agency staff versus referrals for more extensive support would need to occur.*

- **Create system for referrals for digital equity services**

*It is true that no one entity can meet all the digital equity needs of a resident or business. Therefore, to create efficiency and enhance impact, a system of referrals to trusted and/or funded partners that can offer various and appropriate digital equity services to residents and businesses should be established. This could be through 413Cares.org or managed through a city agency.*

### Community Initiated Points Regarding Community Input and Policy

- **Create a permanent Digital Equity Working Group (DEWG) for the city.**

*The original working group that consisted of residents and key stakeholders provided an important conduit for input and guidance to inform the City's digital equity efforts. This should be continued.*

- **Ensure community engagement built into implementation process**

*Beyond the Working Group, community input, education and awareness regarding digital equity issues and efforts should be formalized. This could include a City Webpage, posting of meetings on YouTube, email notifications, etc.*

- **Step up City's efforts to share data with citizens, encourage accountability**

*If the City embraces the idea that its residents and businesses should have digital equity, then the tracking of data regarding connectivity, devices and skills could be established and then posted online for public accessibility. These metrics would promote create accountability towards the City's goals for digital equity.*

- **Incorporate digital accessibility services into all cities grant proposals** to ensure adequate funding to support ongoing implementation.

*As a way of integrating digital equity into all of its work, the City can begin to seek funding for digital equity services through its regular funding for operations. This would increase available funding generally for digital equity. This would create a need for a digital equity plan so that funds that are sought align with what is needed by the City.*

- **Plan for evolving technology, ensuring funding to remain current**

*There must be the recognition that technology is continually evolving and that no solution established in 2025 will continue to be sufficient in 5-10 years. Given this the City needs to identify a group or process that can continually monitor changes in opportunities, needs and technology developments, so that the City can address these in an on-going manner, so that future interventions can be undertaken in a manageable and thoughtful way.*

## PVPC Recommendations & Cost Estimates

Based on the identified issues and opportunities, the following recommendations are being made. Those actions requiring funding can be included in an application for funding up to \$100,000 through MBI's Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Program. (Note the city has signed a Reservation of Funds agreement with MBI, maintaining the city's eligibility to apply for funding through the Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Program. The agreement does not guarantee funding, nor commit to a specific amount, which will be determined based on the strength of application submitted by the city, and the availability of funds.)

Here is a condensed version of the top recommendations that the PVPC makes for the City of Holyoke to effectively advance digital equity for its residents.

1. Create a permanent Digital Accessibility Working Group (DAWG) for the city.
2. Assign responsibility to oversee ongoing digital accessibility work to a specific person within the City of Holyoke
3. Expand hotspot lending program.
4. Support expansion of fiber to the premises (FTTP) by HG&E (or other regional FTTP providers), to ensure consumers have access to with high quality, reliable broadband service while encouraging competitive pricing.
5. Pursue phased-in deployment of publicly accessible Wi-Fi in public spaces including all City of Holyoke buildings and select public spaces such as parks.
6. Monitor expansion of reliable internet in multi-dwelling units via MBI's Residential Retrofit Program.
7. Support distribution of computer devices (loaned, discounted, or free), helping people in arrears on payments to provider.
8. Coordinate city-wide with existing programs to provide digital skills training and tech support

## Conclusion

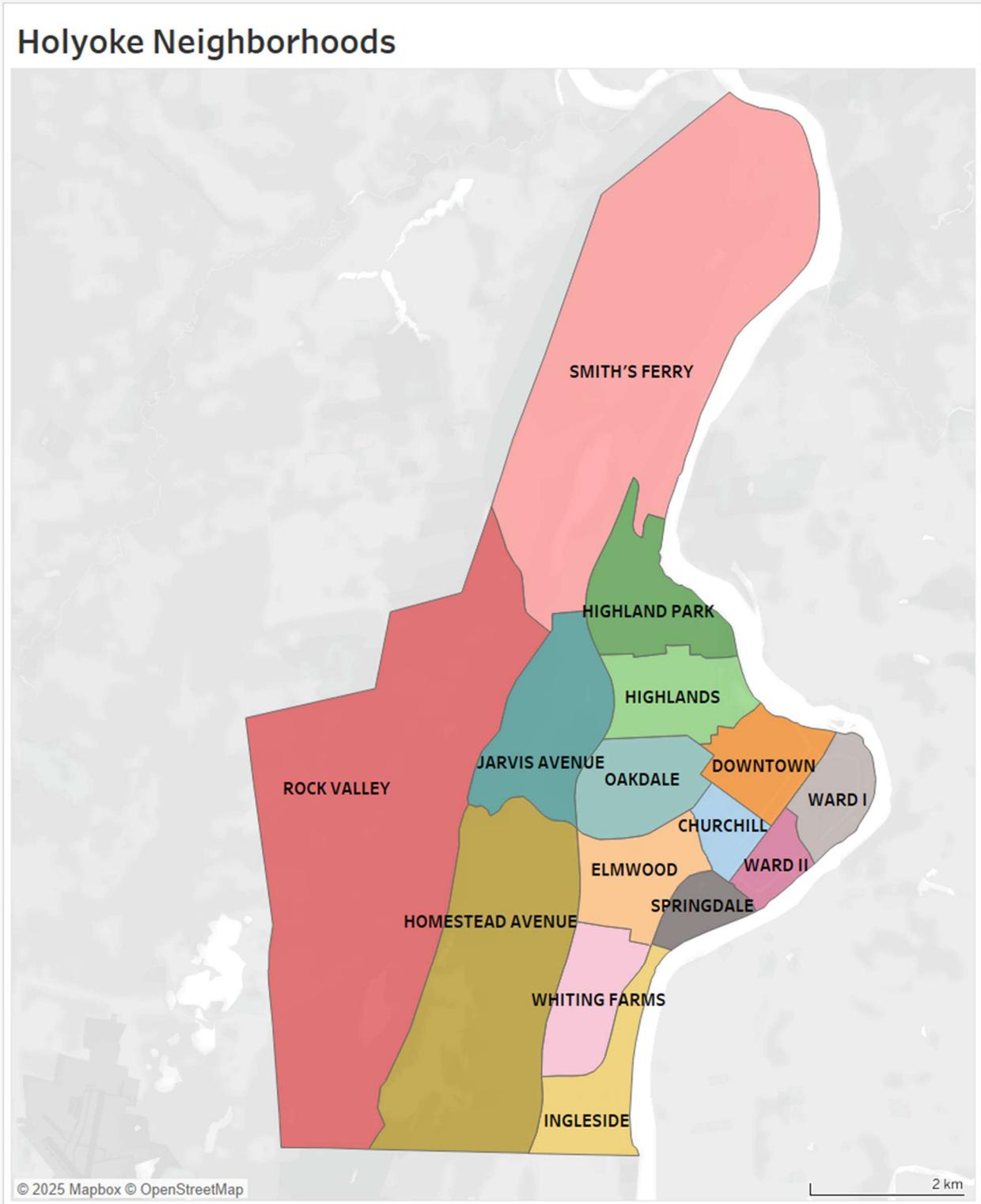
With this report, the City of Holyoke is well positioned to begin an organized and intentional effort to expand digital accessibility for its residents and businesses. PVPC's recommendations address all three legs of the "digital equity stool": access to both the internet and devices, and attainment of digital skills. They also address the important element connecting each of the legs—affordability—recognizing that socio-economic status is a powerful factor contributing to the digital divide.

The challenge for Holyoke will be to pursue this work with an eye to the future, recognizing that the opportunity to move Holyoke into the to future innovation and prosperity will be largely shaped by the quality of the digital infrastructure in use by local residents and businesses. In this context sustainability means thinking about how resources, both financial and personnel, are deployed so they are integrated in all that the city does and supports. Similarly, the commitment to digital equity must be sustained in the context of ever-changing technology; while technology will evolve and the expectations of how people use technology will similarly shift, the commitment to digital equity should remain solid. If nothing else, this report should leave the city asking the question, "How do we support digital equity internally for city government and externally with our community in all that we do?" Doing so will not only close existing digital equity gaps, it will lay a strong foundation for the future prosperity of the city. This is the shift that the Springfield Digital Equity report seeks to catalyze.

## Appendices

1. Holyoke Neighborhood Map
2. Overview of Digital Accessibility Alternatives Recommended in Comparison Communities
3. Executive Summary of the Commonwealth's Digital Equity Plan

# Appendix 1: Holyoke Neighborhood Map



## Appendix 2: Overview of Digital Accessibility Alternatives Recommended in Comparison Communities

Holyoke’s options for pursuing expanded digital accessibility can be compared with options considered in several comparison communities (Worcester, Springfield, Somerville, New Bedford, Greenfield, Easthampton, Brockton, and Lynn):

CITY	RECOMMENDATIONS
<b>Worcester</b>	Create Digital Equity Coalition
	Create Digital Navigator position
	Create a DE manager position
	ACP replacement grant program
	Support digital skills training through library
	Partner with educational institutions to enhance learning and resources
	Targeted digital skills on cyber security
	Support healthy use of digital by youth
	Create device refurbishment program
	Explore expanding of ISP providers
<b>Springfield</b>	Create a permanent Digital Accessibility Working Group (DAWG) for the city
	Assign digital accessibility responsibilities to one person within City of Holyoke
	Expand hotspot lending program
	Pursue expanded competition among ISP providers, particularly providers of fiber to the premises (FTTP)
	Pursue phased-in deployment of publicly available Wi-Fi installations, including both public buildings and public spaces such as parks
	Support training/mentoring via local/regional CBOs such as Way Finders and Tech Foundry
	Work with ISPs and owners of multi-dwelling units (MDUs, including public housing) to ensure residents have access to high speed internet at affordable prices
<b>Somerville</b>	Build asset map to create Directory for residents
	Create digital navigator program
	Create multi-lingual educational resources for residents
	Create multi-lingual education materials on cyber security and safety
	Create free public wifi
	Expand Hotspot distribution
	Expand device distribution/lending
	Organize device donation drives
	Fund computer labs in CBOs
	Funding to CBOs for device refurbishment and distribution programs
	Convene a community of practice for CBOs doing digital equity work
	Collaborate with anchor institutions to coordinate and expand services
	Dig Once policy - adding fiber when roadwork is done
	Engage ISPs to encourage more competition
	Consider consumer advocacy and protection policies
	Provide direct financial support to household given loss of ACP
	Consier open fiber infrastructure
	Regional partnerships with neighboring municipalities
	Improve connectivity in residential units
	Create permanent Digital Equity position in City
Incorporate digital equity funding requests in other city grant proposals	
Continue digital equity discovery of needs	
Coordinate among city departments for shared digital equity goals	

CITY	RECOMMENDATIONS
<b>New Bedford</b>	Convene a digital equity coalition with annual meetings
	Unspecified grant program (\$50K)
	Hire two digital navigators for schools
	Seek funding for digital navigators at library
	Seek funding for COA computer lab
	Explore partnerships to establish device distribution
	Improve connectivity in residential units
	Explore cyber security programs
	Seek funding for digital skills at Charter school
<b>Greenfield</b>	Apply for MBI funds to expand local wifi ISP (GCET)
	Explore ways to fund an ACP replacement program
	Expand public wifi
	Continue hotspot lending thru library
	Adopt a city digital equity policy
	Continue funding library's computer lab
	Expand device distribution/lending
	Create Steering Committee to coordinate digital equity activities
	Continue funding library's digital navigator
	Seek funding to continue digital skills training thru library and GCC
	Support CBOs providing digital equity services
<b>Easthampton</b>	Be an active member of the Western Massachusetts Alliance for Digital Equity
	Apply to NDIA Trailblazer program for recognition and ideas
	Assess business needs through Chamber of Commerce
	Support legislation for "one touch" to promote installation of fiber
	Work with neighboring municipalities for improved reliability of broadband networks
	Create a digital equity coalition to advance the digital equity plan
	Create an asset map that can be used to assist residents with DE needs
	Create and maintain fiber and cable maps and providers
	Encourage anchor institutions to expand DE involvement and resources
<b>Brockton</b>	Create a digital equity coalition to advance the digital equity plan
	Assign city employee to coordinate digital equity activities
	Establish goals and identify data to establish benchmark progress
	Outreach for ACP
	Improve connectivity in residential units
	Increase eligibility for federal infrastructure funding
	Monitor ISPs for improved performance
	Expand device distribution/lending
	Establish a device refurbishment program
	Support digital navigation at CBOs
Build national and state partnerships for digital skills	
<b>Lynn</b>	Convene a digital equity coalition with annual meetings
	Create city grant funding to support ACP replacement or digital skills
	Explore funding for public TV to do digital skills
	Explore funding for digital navigators
	Explore funding for CBO digital skills training including Tech Goes Home
	Explore funding for support specialist at the community college
	Improve connectivity in residential units
	Support CBOs for device purchases (for distribution?)
	Explore cyber security programs

**Appendix 3: Executive Summary of Massachusetts Digital Equity For All Plan**

# Massachusetts Internet for All Plan

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY |**

**Massachusetts Broadband Institute**

**MBI**  
MASSACHUSETTS  
BROADBAND INSTITUTE



at the MassTech  
Collaborative



# Digital Equity in Massachusetts: A Transformational Opportunity

**Massachusetts is at a pivotal moment with a unique opportunity to drive transformative change in digital equity.**

The Massachusetts Broadband Institute (MBI) is the central broadband office for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. MBI is one of five primary divisions of the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative (MassTech), a quasi-public economic development agency that works closely with the state Executive Office of Economic Development.

MBI has made significant investments to expand internet access across the State. MBI has funded last mile projects, established a middle mile network, and facilitated public-private partnerships to extend high-speed internet access to underserved and remote areas. These efforts have included grants, technical assistance, and collaborations between public entities and private service providers, all aimed at bridging the digital divide and ensuring better connectivity. With these investments, Massachusetts has achieved an availability rate that exceeds 98%, measured by the number of locations with high-speed internet infrastructure. This leaves a limited number of locations lacking high speed connections. Through a once-in-a generation federal funding investment, Massachusetts has an unprecedented opportunity to achieve its strategic goals and unlock meaningful economic potential for all residents.

## Vision for Digital Equity

**The vision for broadband and digital equity in the Commonwealth is that:**

Every resident in Massachusetts has high-speed, high-quality internet availability and can confidently adopt and use the internet regardless of who they are or where they live. This universal connectivity will ensure that everyone has the support they need to enjoy full personal, civic, and economic digital participation throughout their lives with safety and security.

Availability	Adoption	Quality of Service
Every location has high-speed internet <b>available</b> .	Every resident can <b>utilize</b> and <b>afford</b> the internet.	Every location has <b>reliable</b> service.

## Shaping the BEAD and DEA Planning Processes

**MBI's planning process for Broadband Equity Access and Deployment (BEAD) and Digital Equity Act (DEA) prioritized alignment.** While the BEAD and DEA plans seek unique goals - with BEAD investing in statewide infrastructure, and DEA focusing on digital equity investments - MBI aligned the efforts to ensure coordinated stakeholder engagement and visioning activities. This allowed MBI to develop a shared strategy to bridge the digital divide across the Commonwealth.

**MBI's historic investments in middle mile and last mile infrastructure has set the stage for the Commonwealth to achieve universal broadband availability in the coming years.** The sequencing of MBI's infrastructure grant funds will begin with the Broadband Infrastructure Gap Networks Grant Program<sup>1</sup> which aims to fill the remaining gaps in Massachusetts broadband coverage. Any remaining

coverage gaps that remain after the Gap Networks Program or that are identified through the BEAD Challenge Process will be addressed with BEAD Deployment funds.

**Following the guidance provided by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA), we conducted a large-scale engagement process to understand the state of digital equity in Massachusetts and where gaps exist.** MBI established a Broadband & Digital Equity Working Group to bring together practitioners across the Commonwealth to inform every step of this work; conducted stakeholder interviews; hosted statewide listening sessions and focus groups; distributed a statewide Digital Equity survey in nine languages; and conducted data analysis involving publicly available data.

**This Plan is made possible by our robust network of partners, including existing MBI grantees advancing local, regional, and municipal digital equity planning efforts across the Commonwealth.** Throughout the planning process, we deliberately created opportunities to invite these partners to inform both the BEAD and DEA Plans and ensure these Plans reflected their expertise and understanding of digital equity. This exercise helped to strengthen the community of digital equity practitioners across the Commonwealth and positions Massachusetts well to effectively allocate and execute on the Plan with BEAD funds and Digital Equity Capacity grants when available.

## Main Findings

Based upon learnings from this process, MBI established digital equity gaps, sourced from the State's major digital equity needs. From these gaps, MBI generated correlating actions, linked to future programs to implement throughout Massachusetts. Gaps were categorized by the NTIA's Measurable Objectives, and are connected to forward-looking strategies established in the Statewide Digital Equity Plan. High-level findings from each Measurable Objective area include:

### Broadband Affordability & Availability

- High internet subscription costs are the largest identified barrier that prevent Massachusetts residents from having broadband at home.
- Many residents with internet subscriptions experience poor internet quality.

### Accessibility of Devices and Device Support

- Residents identify a need for low-cost devices.
- Residents need devices that are easy to use.
- Residents need sustainable devices.

### Digital Literacy

- Residents need greater digital literacy support, especially support that is linguistically and culturally accessible across different demographic groups.
- Residents need support using the internet to conduct essential day-to-day activities, including accessing job opportunities and healthcare.
- Institutions offering digital literacy programs, including libraries, need operating support.

### Privacy & Cybersecurity

- Residents are concerned about internet safety, especially with regard to protecting themselves from having their data stolen, from online scams, and from digital surveillance.
- Individuals with disabilities are particularly concerned about medical data breaches.
- Residents are concerned about youth safety online.

## Accessibility & Inclusivity of Public Resources

- Residents, particularly those with language and accessibility barriers, identify difficulty accessing public resources online.
- Residents need more information about how to access online public resources and desire support programs tailored to their needs.

**MBI's assessment of needs found that greater affordability, higher quality of service, and increased internet safety are top priorities for residents across Covered and Underrepresented Populations and regions of the state.** These consistent themes underlie the diverse needs across different regions and demographic groups. As a result, MBI is committed to being responsive to the diversity of resident needs, recognizing the unique differences in needs across regions and demographic groups and avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach. MBI used this understanding of needs to recommend programs to improve digital equity in the Commonwealth.

## Implementation Plan

**MBI developed an implementation strategy to organize our efforts to achieve digital equity in Massachusetts.** We designed the framework to rely on extensive collaboration with our local and statewide partners and to make the Plan effective and sustainable over the long term. MBI's implementation strategy is structured to achieve the vision through 3 sets of activities: build on existing programs, develop new programs, and create foundations for success. The list of recommended programs below provides examples that MBI may want to prioritize from the full list of programs.

### Build on Existing Programs

**Digital Equity Partnerships Program.** MBI will scale its existing Partnerships program with a focus on 3 objectives: expand geographical coverage to regions with gaps in support, expand coverage by target populations regardless of geographic location, and expand initiatives supported through past grants where these have proven to be successful.

**Municipal Digital Equity Planning Program:** Building on the 70 municipalities that have participated in this program to date, MBI's future investments will focus on two initiatives: provide participating municipalities with easily accessible funding to implement priority initiatives based on their plans and create meaningful funding options to implement larger, longer-term projects.

### Develop New Programs

**State-Supported Technical Assistance.** MBI will develop a Front Door program to support quality of service through a consumer-facing web portal dedicated to addressing quality-of-service concerns for the residents through education, troubleshooting tools, and escalation options.

**Statewide Digital Navigator Corps.** MBI will support organizations throughout Massachusetts to hire, train, and staff digital navigators who can provide local support with technology troubleshooting, education, program access, and more. We will prioritize increasing the number of navigators in regions and among populations where this resource is currently unavailable.

### Create Foundations for Success

**Foster Regional and Topic-Specific Digital Equity Coalitions:** MBI will facilitate the creation of coalitions that promote digital equity across Massachusetts. MBI envisions that coalitions could be structured by

region, Covered Population or other socioeconomic or demographic characteristics, priority outcome areas (economic and workforce development, education, healthcare, housing, and infrastructure), or other dimensions.

**Establish Best Practices Catalogue:** MBI will strengthen the ability of all organizations to support digital equity objectives by educating practitioners and developing a catalogue of best practices. This support will be available both to organizations that focus on digital equity and to those that do not.

**MBI will track the outputs and outcomes of its programs in multiple ways.** Existing MBI programs already have in place methods to track KPIs and overall progress. Building on these structures and KPIs, MBI will set program evaluation measures with its partners for all programs—based on the Measurable Objectives and key performance indicators—that allow it to assess whether programs are producing results and, if not, where they should improve. MBI will also establish mechanisms for lessons learned to be shared statewide so that successful programs can be expanded more broadly.

## The Way Forward

**Completing the Massachusetts Internet for All Broadband and Digital Equity Plans is the first step.**

As we move towards putting the Plans into action, we understand the need to ensure Plans remain as “living documents” that will continue to reflect the realities of diverse communities in the Commonwealth and can guide investments and partnerships where it meets the need and the moment. To do so, MBI will continue ongoing connections with stakeholders and communities across the Commonwealth to have an up-to-date understanding of needs and barriers.

**This will be an all-hands-on-deck effort over the coming years,** and we look forward to joining hands with major stakeholders in and outside of government—including Commonwealth and local government agencies, nonprofit leaders, and private industry partners—to meet this pivotal moment and ensure universal connectivity and its benefits for all.