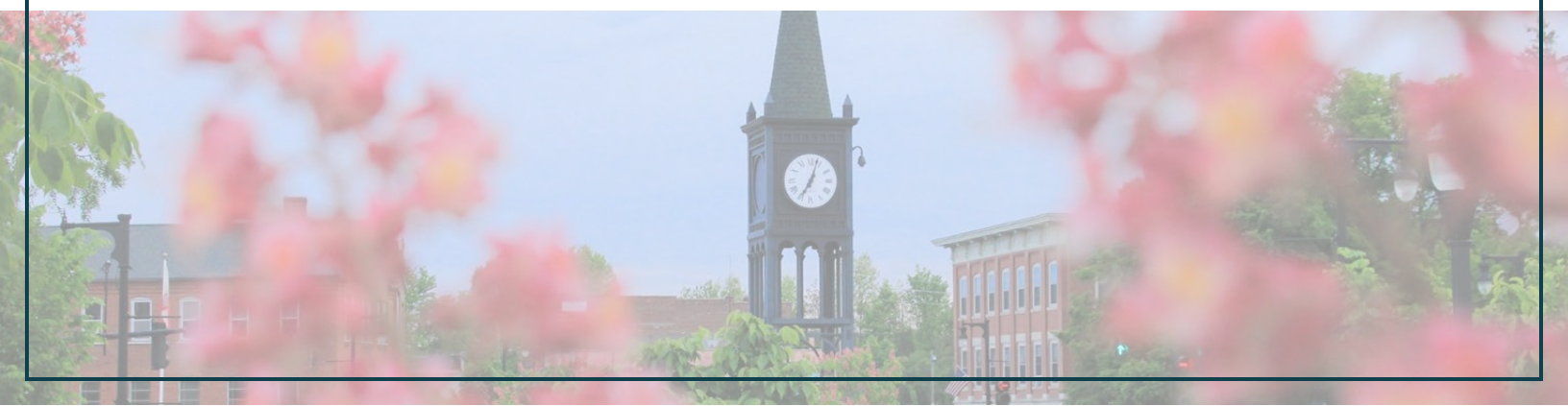


# **CITY OF WESTFIELD DIGITAL ACCESSIBILITY PLAN: INTERNET FOR ALL**

**SEPTEMBER 30, 2025**



**THIS MUNICIPAL DIGITAL ACCESSIBILITY PLAN IS FUNDED BY THE  
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## Introduction

To overcome digital accessibility barriers is to close the gap between those who have affordable access, skills and support to effectively engage online and those who do not. Digital Accessibility 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/>).

This project was funded by the Massachusetts Broadband Institute at the MassTech Collaborative under the Municipal Digital Equity Planning Program. This funding came from Massachusetts ARPA State Fiscal Recovery Funds. To address the critical issue of digital accessibility barriers and to further digital accessibility at the municipal level, the Massachusetts Broadband Institute created the Municipal Digital Accessibility Planning program to help communities explore the local conditions related to the digital accessibility barriers and come up with community-based solutions on how best to create digital accessibility. This report reflects the culmination of empirical research into the current status of digital accessibility, drawing on several meetings with the City of Westfield's core advisory group, which is guiding the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission's municipal digital accessibility planning in Westfield, 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 accessibility in Westfield.

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

## Summary of High Priority Recommendations

In order to make tangible progress towards digital accessibility in Westfield, the city needs a focused approach. This is based on the reality that resources – funding and personnel/capacity – are limited, and yet the need for action is essential to improve the lives of residents. To this end, the PVPC makes the following recommendations to achieve progress in the short-term. Please refer to PART 3: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS for a complete list of unprioritized recommendations that include longer-term initiatives.

- 1. Create a permanent Digital Accessibility Working Group for the city.** *The original working group, which 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, and should include representation from Westfield Public Schools, the Westfield Council on Aging, Westfield Athenaeum, members of the City Council, the Westfield Community Development Department, a representative from Westfield Gas and Electric, and representatives of Westfield community-based or non-profit entities such as the Boys' and Girls' Club.*

2. **Support for a consultant, to represent the city and work with ISP providers and landlords (including Westfield Housing Authority) to increase connectivity city-wide.** *Additional funding would allow for a consultant to assist the city in closing connectivity gaps that exist in the community. A consultant could collaborate with the City of Westfield and Whip City Fiber to resolve this issue, particularly in multi-family housing or apartment complexes, and could facilitate the expansion of fiber to those areas by Whip City Fiber. This effort would help to support expanded availability and competitive pricing those areas in which only one ISP provider exists.*
3. **Expand the hotspot lending program.** *The current hotspot lending program costs approximately \$180/year (based on Verizon and T-Mobile vendors). This involves purchasing the unit and a required monthly subscription. Both the Westfield Athenaeum and the Westfield Public Schools have experience distributing hotspots on a lending basis.*
4. **Encourage schools to provide more devices & digital navigation services.** *The Westfield Public Schools are currently providing support for students through an equipment lending program. However, due to budgetary restrictions, the department can only supply devices to middle and high school students. Furthermore, due to increased equipment costs and decreased budget capacity, the school department has had to reduce the number of devices available to its student population. An increase in funding for this program could be used to not only bring the number of devices up to previous levels, but also to increase the number of devices available and thereby increase the number of students who can take advantage of this service.*
5. **Establish a fund to support the distribution of computer devices (loaned, discounted, or free), and/or help people in arrears on payments to their internet 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 approach could be to use the Tech Goes Home model, which bundles digital skills training with a device and one year of internet service (if needed). Also, to enable residents to enroll in discounted internet packages such as Internet Essentials, the city could provide targeted assistance.*
6. **Work with ISPs and owners of multi-dwelling units (MDUs) to ensure residents have access to high-speed internet at affordable prices.** *We learned of instances where fast and reliable internet service was available to the building, but that service too often deteriorates as it is distributed to housing units within the building. This is a problem that requires a multifaceted approach.*

## PART 1: PURPOSE, BACKGROUND AND PROCESS

### Purpose and Vision

The purpose of this report is to provide the City of Westfield with a roadmap to help guide the city in its efforts to overcome the challenges and barriers that now exist. This digital accessibility plan lays the groundwork for investing in the community to achieve digital access for all.

#### City of Westfield Digital Accessibility Vision Statement:

The following vision statement has shaped PVPC's work in the City of Westfield in pursuit of improved digital accessibility:

*“Our vision is for ALL residents of Westfield 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.”*

With this plan, the city will be well-positioned to compete for funds to support broadband infrastructure and digital accessibility programs.

### The Importance of Overcoming Digital Accessibility Barriers

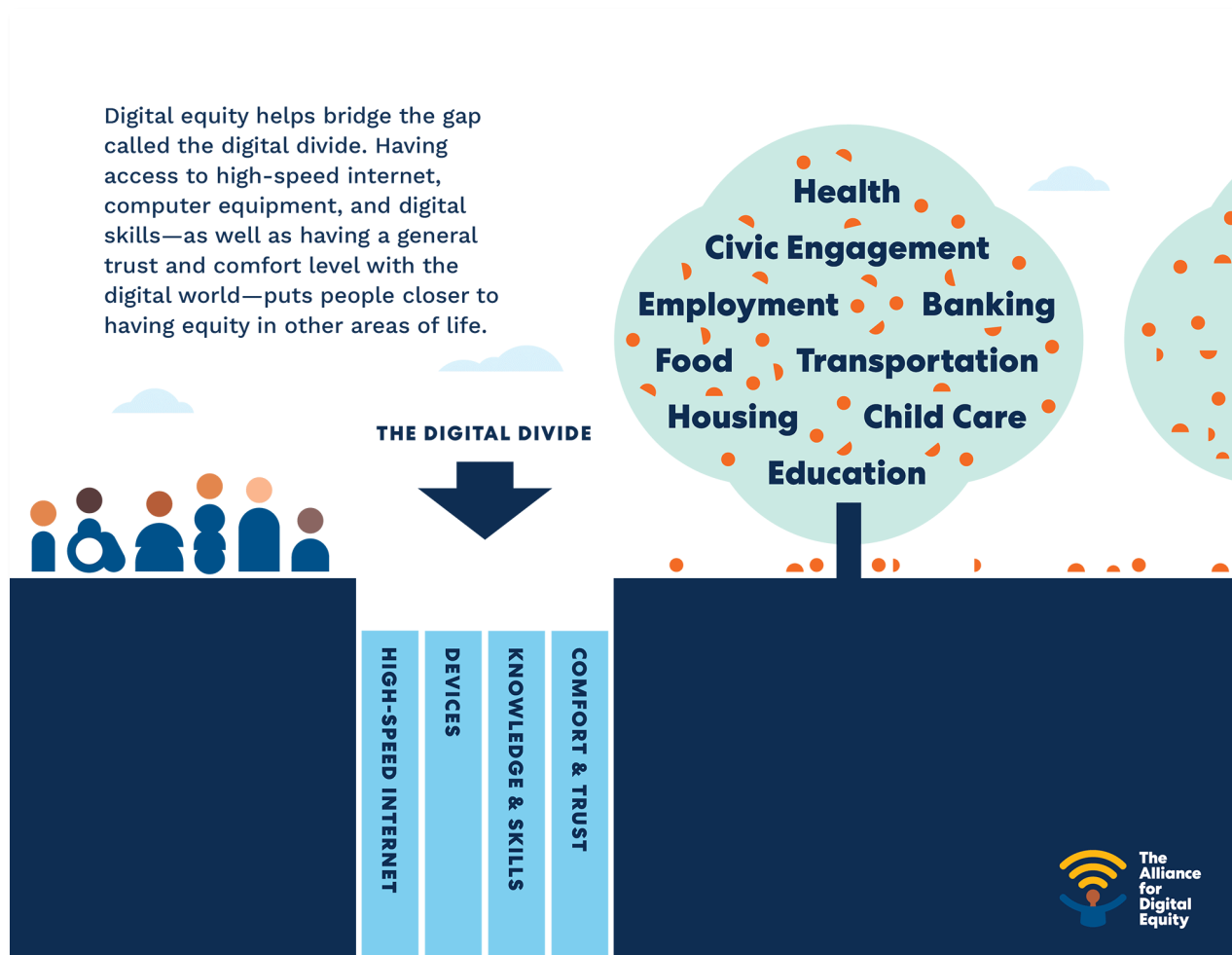
Technology and the internet show up in every part of our daily lives: connecting with family and friends, employment, finding housing, connecting with services and health providers, education, and much more. However, as technology grows, so do the barriers to digital accessibility (limited access to devices, unaffordable or unreliable broadband, limited technology knowledge).<sup>1</sup> The flip side of that coin is that by removing those barriers to digital accessibility, we are able to accelerate efforts to achieve accessibility across those many dimensions.

The following sections describe the ways that the City of Westfield is working to overcome barriers to digital access for all.

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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 Accessibility, graphically illustrates both the challenges posed by a lack of digital accessibility and the potential benefits resulting from successfully reducing the barriers to digital accessibility. Existing barriers include lack of access to high-speed internet, lack of devices, lack of necessary knowledge and skills, and absence of comfort and trust. These issues impede the ability of residents to access services increasingly available online, such as banking, health care, education, and civic engagement. As we remove each type of barrier, access becomes more possible.



## Partnering with MBI to Overcome Barriers

The Massachusetts Broadband Institute (MBI), a division of the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative (Mass Tech) has been the primary conduit channeling federal funds into the Commonwealth of Massachusetts for the purpose of expanding digital accessibility and eliminating barriers. The Municipal Digital Accessibility Planning Grant program, which funded this report, was designed to help communities explore the local conditions related to digital accessibility barriers and come up with community-based solutions on how best to improve access.

## The Plan Process

PVPC began providing Municipal Digital Accessibility Planning services to the City of Westfield in late 2024. PVPC staff has collaborated closely with the identified municipal contacts to strategize 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:

- Exploring current conditions (including mapping existing digital accessibility assets)
- Engaging in a series of community engagement conversations
- Making prioritized recommendations for further investment

Specifically, the PVPC:

- 1) Worked with a core planning team and the Digital Accessibility Working Group and provided guidance throughout the planning process;
- 2) Conducted asset mapping by researching the existing municipal digital accessibility status and needs;
- 3) Engaged with the identified municipal contact(s) and community groups to determine the baseline for community digital accessibility;
- 4) 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);
- 5) Created outreach materials for use city wide; and
- 6) Facilitated, in collaboration with city officials, stakeholders, and other resource partners, a series of community engagement activities.

## Outreach and Community Engagement

The planning process included a number of community outreach efforts with the guidance and involvement of the City of Westfield's Core Planning Working Group. These in-person events occurred in spring of 2025. The PVPC also worked collaboratively with several community groups including the Westfield Athenaeum, The Westfield Artworks, The Westfield Boys and Girls Club, and other concerned citizens.

All of this work was made possible by the members of the City of Westfield's Core Planning Group on Digital and Internet Accessibility:

- Mayor Michael McCabe, City of Westfield
- Peter Miller, City of Westfield
- Brian Dutko, Westfield Public Schools
- Michael Squindo, Westfield Council on Aging
- Lenore Bernashe, City of Westfield

- Christian Boor, Westfield Athenaeum
- Becky Blackburn, Westfield Athenaeum
- Andrew Short, Westfield Gas and Electric
- Bo Sullivan, Westfield Boys and Girls Club
- Ann Lentini



Community Engagement at the Westfield Senior Center, hosted by the Executive Director of the Westfield Council on Aging, Michael Squindo

Community engagement was prioritized for groups with greater documented digital accessibility barriers. The engagement involved a variety of formats including holding a series of community events, publishing a city-wide online survey, appearing on community access television, and one large-scale charette-style event. We received valuable feedback from the residents and stakeholders through these activities 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. These group sessions were strategically held throughout the city, to directly hear feedback from residents and try to meet and talk to residents where they are.

## Community Partnerships

Due to the hard work of several community-based organizations (CBOs) the City of Westfield has already had some success addressing the challenges of digital accessibility.

### Whip City Fiber

Unlike many other municipalities and communities, the city of Westfield has the unique distinction of owning and operating its own utility company. Over the past 20 years, the Westfield Gas and Electric Company has developed a strong partnership with the City of Westfield to provide internet and communication services to the city. This partnership further evolved in 2015 with the launch of the Whip City Fiber program to provide fiber internet connectivity to the entire city. This unique relationship allows Westfield to have a level of control and oversight over utility providers that is not possible for municipalities that rely on third-party vendors. The partnership also allows the city to better implement initiatives and projects, such as those recommended in this report, as the city does not have to go through a private entity to get approval and permission to implement its digital accessibility plan.



### Westfield Public Schools, Council on Aging, and the Athenaeum



PVPC’s Eric Weiss and Evan Mastroianni at the Council on Aging’s weekly Television show “Wakeup Wednesdays “

Throughout the process of researching digital accessibility in Westfield, PVPC received remarkable support and feedback from a variety of community stakeholders. Specifically, the Council on Aging, the public schools and the Athenaeum have been our main partners in this endeavor. Due in large part to their strong pre-existing relationships with the community of

Westfield, these organizations became invaluable for this effort, as PVPC staff were able to attend public events and meetings that were hosted by these organizations to conduct outreach

and to solicit feedback. These programs were a way in which PVPC could “meet people where they were” and allowed us a level of exposure to the public that would not have been possible otherwise.

## The Importance of Community Champions

One of the biggest challenges encountered in this digital equity planning effort was the difficulty of engaging residents in the process. There can be many reasons for this, including lack of trust, travel difficulties, and lack of awareness of the opportunities.

One of the ways to address this challenge is to have a designated organization or group of committed individuals to champion the pursuit of digital equity. In some communities in the region, this need is served by Way Finders, Tech Hub, or community action agencies. In others, a working group is formed with members of a variety of involved organizations. Strong partnerships can also take some of the burden off a single organization and help reduce burnout while bringing a fresh outside perspective.

The private sector can be a valuable partner for communities as well. This could be for-profit broadband companies, collaborating with local governments to provide internet access in areas of low digital access, or private employers who are eager to see more job applicants with basic digital skills. Also, many companies need clients and customers to be more digitally competent. Many banks are conscious of the problems for their online banking strategies posed by communities full of customers who lack digital connections and skills. Hospitals want more patients to use their online patient portals and scheduling, prescription and telehealth applications. Utilities want customers to use smart meters. It may be possible to find corporate leadership that is very supportive of local initiatives that promise to address these issues.<sup>2</sup>

### Recruiting Community Champions

Begin by finding the people in the community who are already engaged in efforts to help disadvantaged, under-connected residents gain digital access and skills. In addition to the groups mentioned above, these can include leadership and staff at the public library, senior center, other neighborhood centers and organizations, the public housing authority, other nonprofit housing groups, workforce training agencies, faith-based social services, Goodwill Industries, the public schools, and so on. It would also make sense to look for any nonprofit computer refurbishers and for individuals or groups engaged in “community wi-fi” projects. Also reach out to community relations staff at local employers.

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<sup>2</sup> [Digital Equity and Public Engagement - ELGL](#)

## **Successful Engagement**

While it is fairly straightforward to work with a group of stakeholders or actively engaged citizens, reaching beyond the most accessible groups can take some special efforts and best practices. Recent research on the subject can provide a number of suggestions.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Identify and communicate purpose and roles***

Before engaging the public, it's critical to articulate the purpose of the engagement clearly. People need to know why their participation matters and what role they play in the process. Are they being consulted for their opinions, actively involved in shaping decisions, or empowered to co-create solutions? Setting clear expectations not only enhances participation but also builds credibility and trust.

Inform participants upfront about how their input will be used, which encourages them to fully invest in the process.

### ***Build relationships***

Once you've identified the right people, arrange some casual meetings with them. This takes time and will involve connecting with a wide range of community groups. However, this is the front-end work that results in the success of the project. Having strong relationships with key community leaders is critical to the success of digital access efforts.

Find out from these folks the best ways to communicate and advertise within their communities. Is it a community newspaper or radio? Through social networks and word-of-mouth? Find out what concerns that community has and how they intersect with your work. Are the impacted communities particularly interested in getting devices, just having nearby access (like the library), learning to navigate the digital world, or perhaps something local officials haven't thought of yet?

### ***Create feedback loops***

Transparency is key to building trust. Share updates regularly and be clear about how public input is being used. If certain suggestions cannot be implemented, explain why. Demonstrating accountability helps participants feel that their time and effort are valued.

- Show how community input is used.
- Explain when and why suggestions can't be implemented.

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<sup>3</sup> Many of these ideas and suggestions came from the following sources: [www.strongtowns.org](http://www.strongtowns.org) guide: [The Ultimate Guide to Better Public Engagement](#); the IBM Center for The Business of Government: [How to Best Communicate with the Public | IBM Center for The Business of Government](#); the Institute for Local Government [Inclusive Public Engagement - Institute for Local Government](#); and Engaging Local Government Leaders (ELGL): [Digital Equity and Public Engagement - ELGL](#)

Create a standalone website to house reports, newsletters, and other materials that document the project's progress. This transparency allows participants to see how their input is shaping the project and ensures accountability of all stakeholders.

### ***Ask all the questions***

Good systems for collecting the answers to your questions are also vital. A variety of methods to gain feedback can be used before, during, and after project implementation. These include phone calls, door knocking, online surveys and on-site comment cards. This thorough feedback creates not just a better final product but also a community that feels more ownership over the project.

Create opportunities for engagement through channels and events both within and outside of the public agency. Offer multiple opportunities for the public to communicate back to the agency (surveys, online forums and meetings) to reflect that different groups will have different preferences in terms of communications channels. Show progress, new information or actions as proactively and quickly as possible. Follow up on commitments made (for example, to get answers to questions) and (when possible) immediately ask for feedback about the agency's communications and engagement efforts. Recognize and thank partners and collaborating stakeholders for their efforts during the engagement process.

As with any relationship, maintaining communication after an engagement effort has been completed will ensure that audiences and stakeholders stay informed – making them more likely to participate in future efforts. Share findings and lessons learned from debriefing and performance assessments. Circle back to stakeholders with information that shows how their efforts made a difference. Thank them for their involvement. Use existing venues (governing body meetings, public events) and resources (website, e-mail newsletters) to celebrate new approaches, new relationships or specific successful outcomes that highlight partners or collaborating stakeholders. Create an ongoing network for information sharing with stakeholders and community groups. Look for ways to support or connect with stakeholders during the periods between major engagement efforts

### ***Meet people where they are***

If you're hoping to change or improve something in a neighborhood, you need to meet residents where they are, in a way that works for them, in order to get their input.

Choose Neutral, Accessible Spaces

- Avoid locations that require ID or are hard to reach.
- Use familiar, welcoming venues like libraries or parks.

Foster informal, welcoming environments.

- Use food, art, and interactive tools like models to gather input.
- Design meetings to accommodate parents and children.
- Include child-friendly spaces or activities.

Ensure Language Accessibility

- Provide materials and staff in multiple languages.
- Make translation services visible and proactive.

Provide childcare and food when possible, ensuring that materials and presentations are offered in the language(s) of the residents, and locate meetings in spaces that are familiar and accessible to residents (like churches, community centers, schools and restaurants).

Residents can also be provided with a small stipend to host neighborhood events where input and feedback can be gathered for the project. Residents could use the stipend to host any event they wanted that would get neighbors to show up. These include church suppers, basketball tournaments, and more. Meeting residents in spaces where they feel comfortable and giving them the tools to fully participate ensures that their input will be fully accounted for in any city or neighborhood project.

## Community-Identified Barriers to Digital Accessibility and Solutions:

### What We Learned

As a result of the process of working with Westfield and conducting a citywide survey (**Please see Appendix A for survey results**) as well as through our work in neighboring communities, the PVPC identified the following needs and issues, as expressed by the community. This was an iterative and collaborative process and involved steady communication between the city, stakeholders and the PVPC. It is clear from the data and information collected that internet access, income level, and age are all critically interrelated, and these interrelationships are widespread across the region. Simply put, those with greater incomes and those who are younger adults have more ability to access and navigate the internet than those who lack financial resources or are older adults.

The following responses were expressed by the community in response to the stated questions:

### What Factors Limit Access to Digital Resources?

- Those who are older adults have a difficult time connecting to and navigating the internet.
- Access to the internet (availability)
- Access to devices and training on how to use devices
- Affordability

- Knowledge – where to go, what to do, why it is important for what I do in my life?
- Digital accessibility is worse for some communities than for others
- Once one gets a computer, they might not know where or how to connect
- There can be a lack of skills about how to use a computer
- Low incomes force people to make choices – pay for internet v. food or rent

### **What Does the Internet Help You Do?**

- Medical care (scheduling and access to health information and documents)
- Stay in touch with family and friends
- Buy things (esp. important if someone is not mobile)
- Banking needs
- Increased accessibility for people with mobility issues who want independence (for example they can order meds or food online and then have a PCA pick it up)
- Access to education opportunities and programs
- Job and workforce training programs
- Attend professional meetings in other parts of the state without needing to travel
- Mental health services (learning how to use the internet can be a healthy activity)

### **What Would Increase Digital Accessibility?**

- 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.
- Build the cost of internet into rent so it is bundled.
- More outreach is needed to support people's awareness.
- 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.
- Reinforce the need for financial sustainability, esp. for low-cost plans.
- 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 the term “digital competency” instead of “literacy,” which implies that some people might be “illiterate.”
- 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.
- Look into a municipally owned broadband system – would help with affordability.

### **Additional Community Feedback Regarding Barriers to Digital Access**

The following summarized feedback was taken from our discussions with residents both from Westfield and across the Pioneer Valley region:

- During the pandemic, it was reported that some residents had unreliable internet and a lack of access to internet devices despite access to hotspots and device lending programs.
- 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 certain types of phones that are more affordable. Folks need phones without data caps.
- Comments about Whip City Fiber – great relationship with the city and has been a great asset to counter providers that would be left with no competition if not for Whip City.
- The data presented, which was collected during the pandemic, is misleading since many of the devices were “loaners,” and there were hotspots rather than computers.
- 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.
- 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.

- If the internet at people's houses is unstable but their 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 who 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.

## PART 2: CURRENT CONDITIONS AND FINDINGS

### Impediments to Digital Accessibility

The research undertaken in the preparation of this report has confirmed that the impediments to digital accessibility in the City of Westfield 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>

In our various engagements with members of the community and with the city, digital literacy, privacy and cybersecurity, and accessibility of devices have clearly captured the attention of Westfield. Other impediments may be of less urgent concern to the community.

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.

### Review of Current Digital Accessibility Landscape

#### Demise of the Affordable Connectivity Program

Over the past two years, there have been significant changes in terms of accessibility to broadband internet for low-income residents. To its credit, via a bipartisan agreement, the federal government created the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) to provide subsidized access to broadband services. The ACP provided access to the internet at a significantly lower cost than the market rate and was a great benefit for those who used it.

The Affordable Connectivity Program was a key component of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill passed in 2021 that made significant inroads in eliminating gaps in access to digital accessibility. The ACP replaced the previous EBB Program (Emergency Broadband Benefit). Across Massachusetts, prior to the discontinuation of the program, the ACP helped 368,000 households access affordable internet access and, in some cases, also devices such as tablets. In Westfield, the program helped approximately 1,500 households overcome the barriers to digital access.

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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 Appendices.

From the program's inception at the beginning of 2022, ACP claimants in Westfield were able to access over a million dollars in ACP benefits, helping those families while also freeing up household income for other needs. When Congress did not approve a funding extension for the program, it ceased operating in May 2024, leaving the program's 1,508 participants in Westfield without this critically needed assistance.

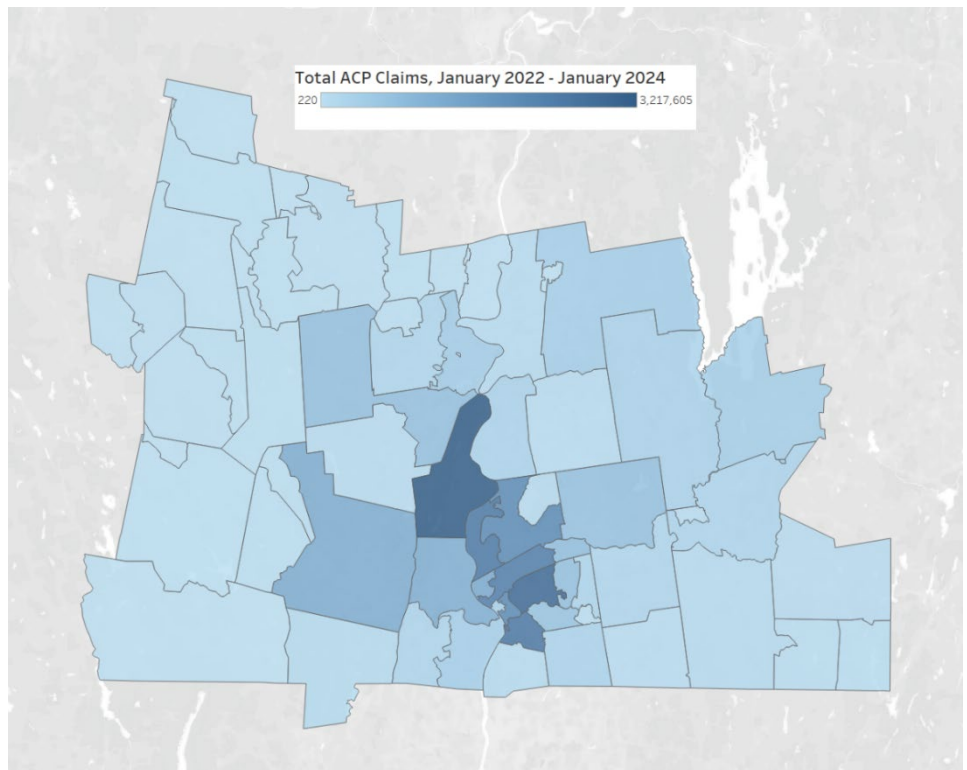


Figure 1

### Other Recent Changes in Federal Funding

With the transition from the Biden to the Trump Administrations, several changes have occurred that impact the path forward. As of the date of this report, the following changes have occurred:

- On May 8, 2025, 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 digital accessibility barriers.
- On May 16, 2025, 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*

training, expand access to digital devices, and assist local governments with digital equity planning activities across Massachusetts.”<sup>5</sup>

## 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.

On June 4, 2025, in testimony before the U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee, U.S. Secretary of Commerce Howard Lutnick indicated that changes would be coming to the BEAD program. On June 6<sup>th</sup>, 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>6</sup>

On July 11, 2025, the Massachusetts Executive Office of Economic Development and Massachusetts Broadband Institute released a new solicitation that aligns with and implements the updated BEAD Program requirements. According to this new Benefit of the Bargain Round:

*"The Commonwealth of Massachusetts has been allocated BEAD funding totaling \$147 million to support expansion of broadband access to Unserved and Underserved*

<sup>5</sup> Trump administration halts \$14.1 million in funding to increase internet access in Massachusetts. Mass.gov. (n.d.). <https://www.mass.gov/news/trump-administration-halts-141-million-in-funding-to-increase-internet-access-in-massachusetts>

<sup>6</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>.

*Locations. The Executive Office of Economic Development (EOED), working in close collaboration with MBI, is managing the Commonwealth’s BEAD funding. EOED is the prime recipient and responsible for the delivery, reporting, and compliance related to the funding. The BEAD program in Massachusetts aims to provide universal broadband access and support digital equity initiatives. The goal is that the BEAD deployment program will achieve its 100% availability goal.”*

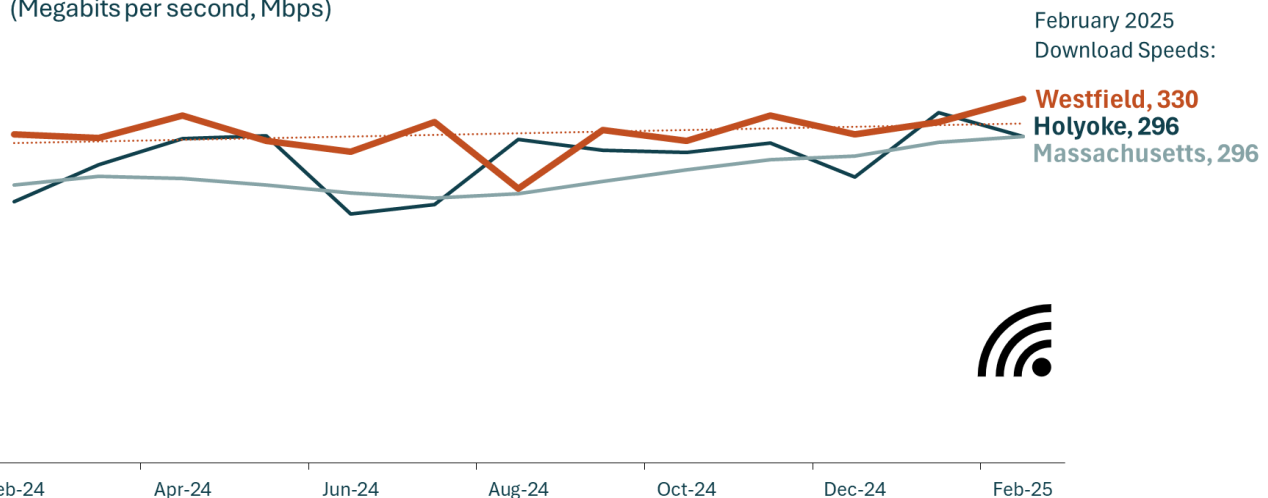
MBI submitted the Massachusetts BEAD Final Proposal to NTIA on September 4, 2025.

## Existing Broadband Affordability & Availability in Westfield

### 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.<sup>7</sup> Data available from this tool shows a February 2025 average download speed of 330 Megabits per second (Mbps) in Westfield, compared with 296 Mbps both statewide and in neighboring Holyoke, as seen in Figure 10 below.

Speedtests show **Westfield** has median internet download speeds consistently faster than those across **Massachusetts**, and usually faster than those in neighboring **Holyoke** (Megabits per second, Mbps)



Source: Speedtest by Ookla, "Best Internet Providers in Massachusetts for 2024," <https://www.speedtest.net/performance/united-states/massachusetts>, accessed 04/14/2025 (Dotted line is 13 month trendline for City of Westfield)

Figure 2

Over the 13-month period spanning February 2024 to February 2025, Westfield’s average monthly download speed was 299 Mbps, slightly faster than both neighboring Holyoke’s average of 275 Mbps, and the statewide average of 263 Mbps.

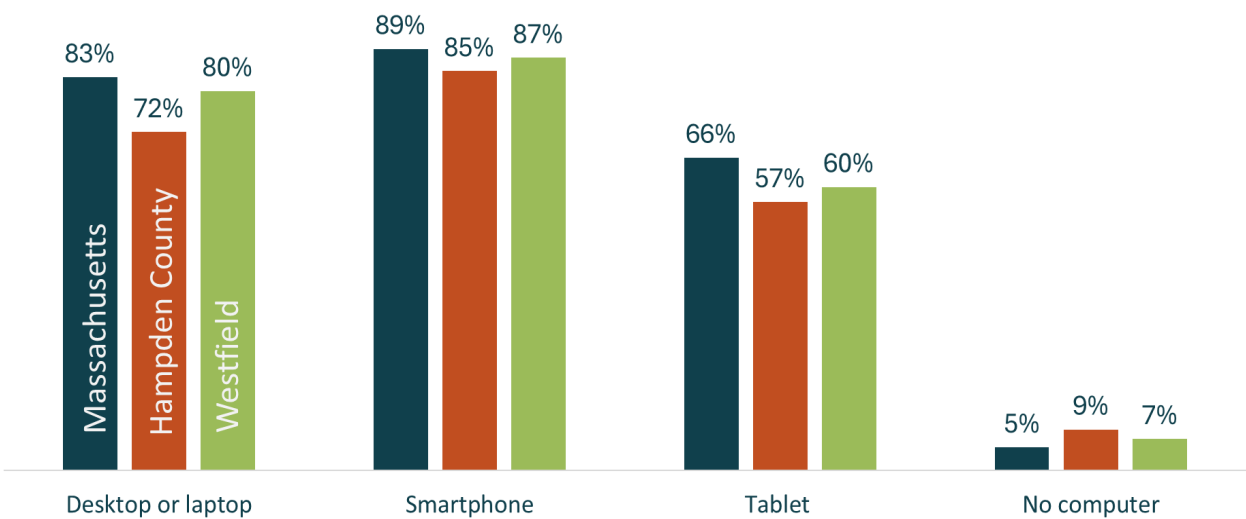
<sup>7</sup> Ookla is a division of Ziff Davis ([NASDAQ: ZD](https://www.nasdaq.com/symbol/zd)), a vertically focused digital media and internet company whose portfolio includes leading brands in technology, entertainment, shopping, health, cybersecurity, and martech.

### Devices in Use by Westfield Residents

The range of devices being used at home is quite broad and varies 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 80% in the City of Westfield, which compares to 72% across Hampden County and 83% across the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. The share of households in Westfield with smartphones (87%) and tablets (60%) falls midway between the shares in Hampden County and statewide.

Notably, as discussed further below, seven percent of households in Westfield have **no computer device** (not even a smartphone), again midway between the shares lacking a computer in Hampden County (9%) and across the Commonwealth (5%).

Types of Computers Available in **Massachusetts**, **Hampden County**, & **Westfield**



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

Figure 3: Types of computers in use at home

### Relationship of Income Level to Digital Access

Our research throughout Hampden County has shown that the primary driver of digital inaccessibility, preventing people from accessing high-quality internet services and devices such as desktop or laptop computers, is a lack of affordability.

With a median household income of \$82,847, well above the Hampden County median of \$70,535, Westfield fares relatively well compared to other cities in the region.

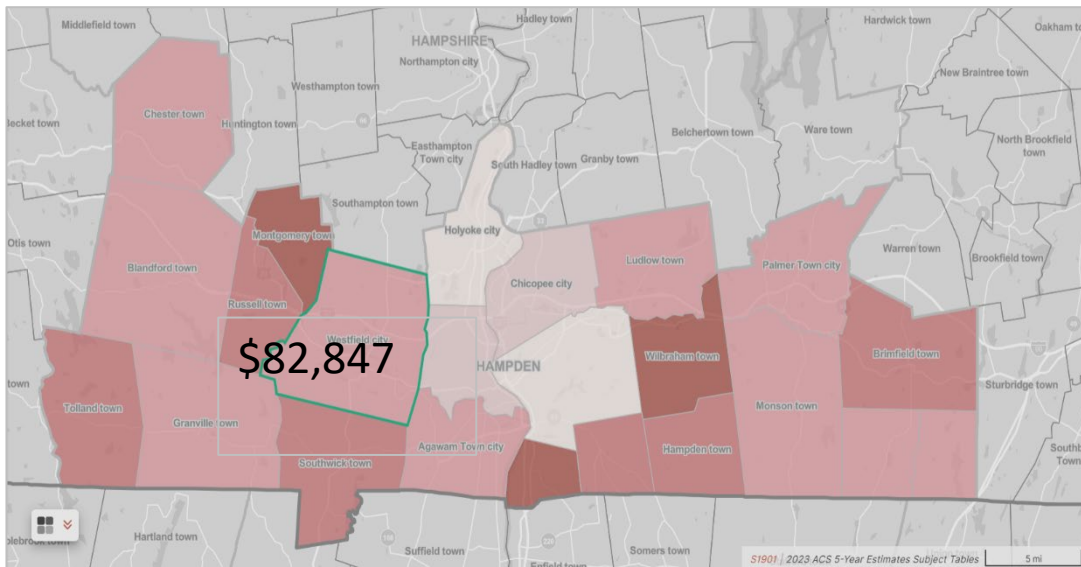


Figure 4: Median Household Incomes throughout Hampden County

However, Westfield still has the eighth lowest median household income out of 23 communities in the county.

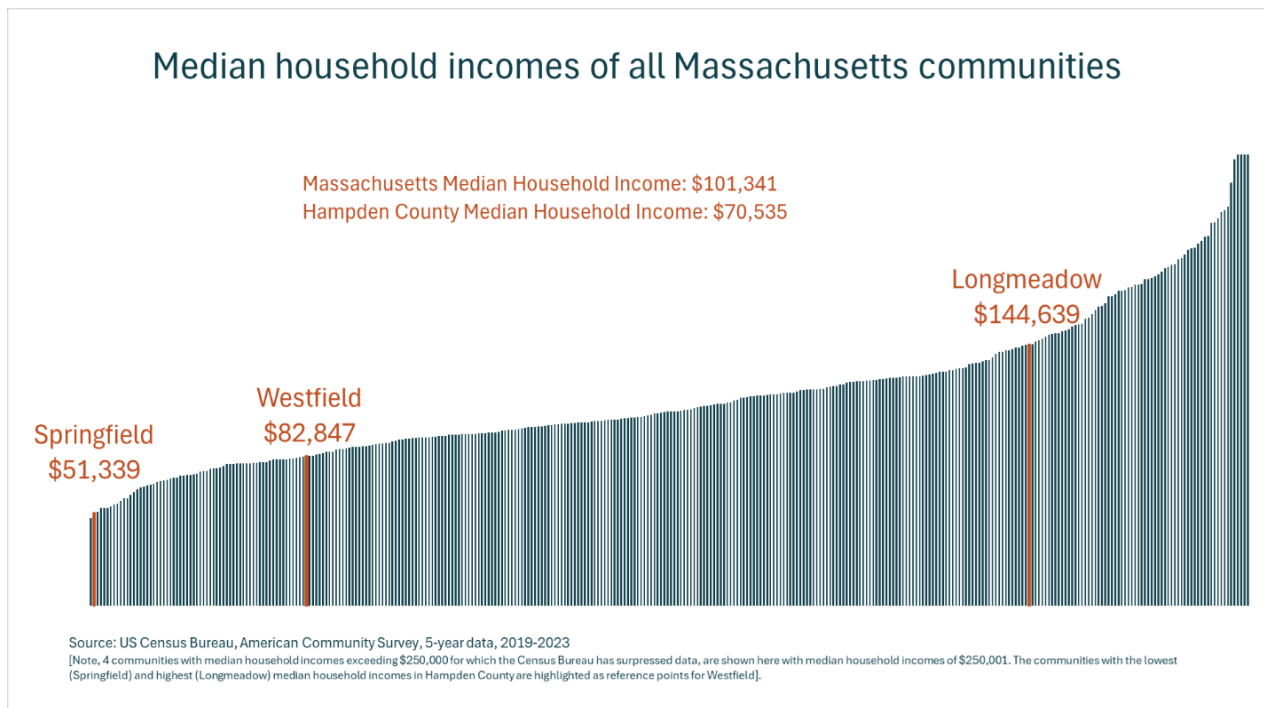


Figure 5

Westfield also has the 15<sup>th</sup> highest share of households without an internet connection.

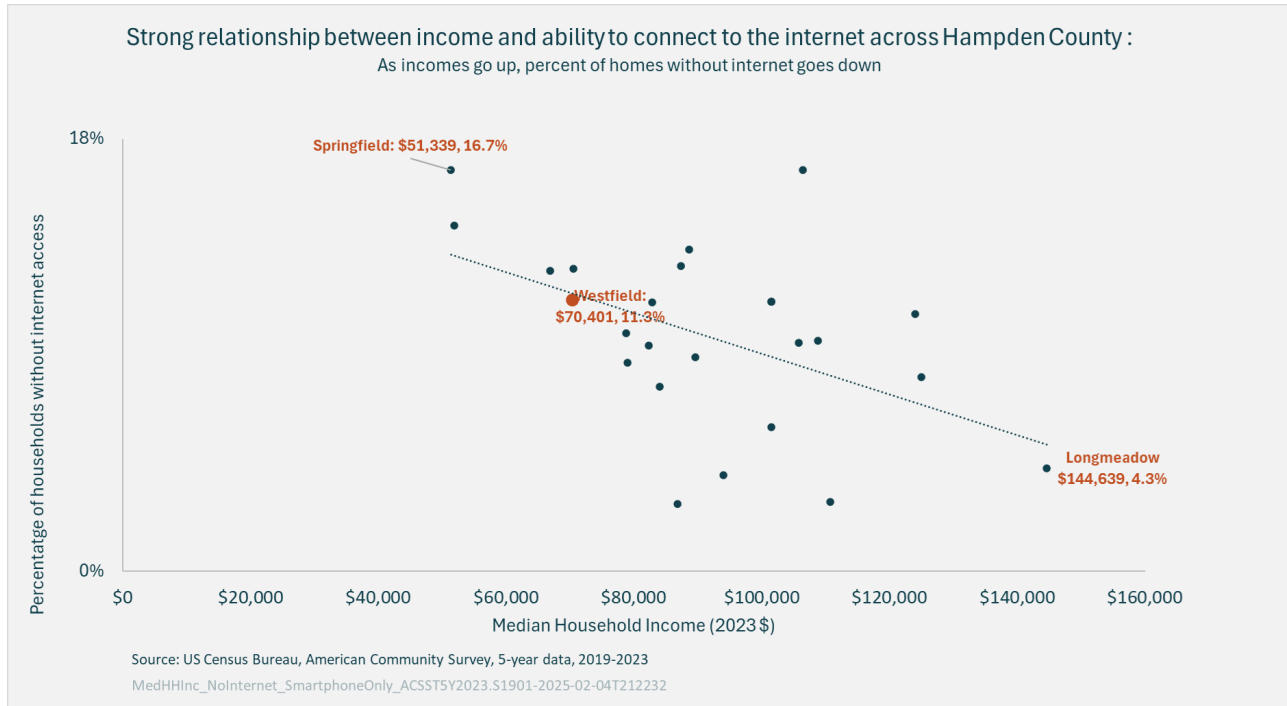
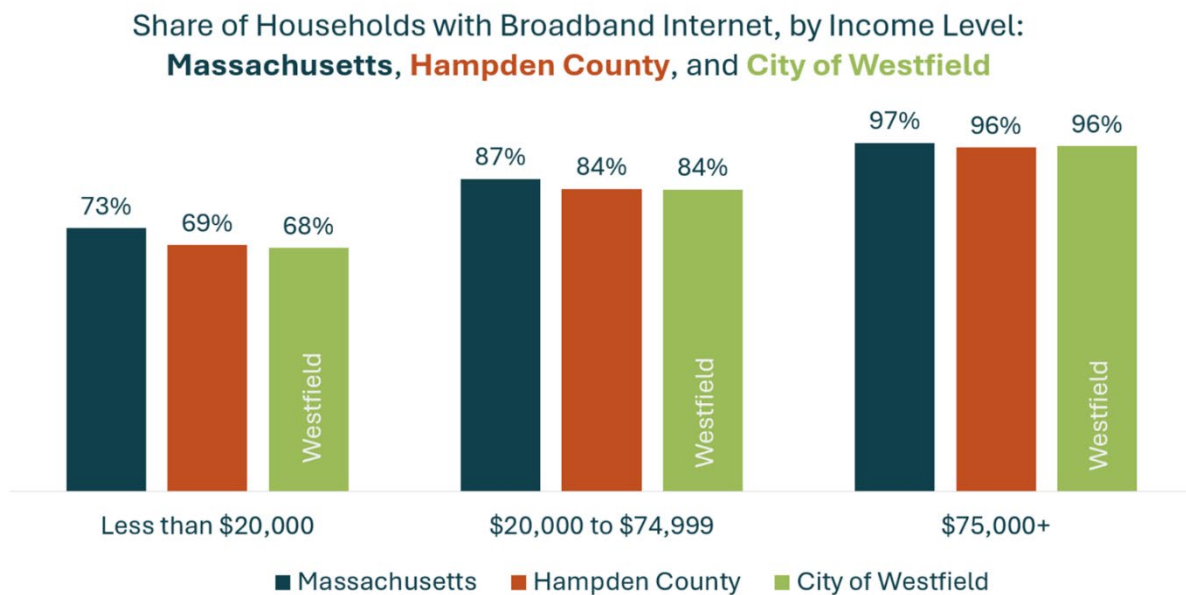


Figure 6

Figure 7, below, provides a clear picture of the barriers to digital accessibility. Among all households in Westfield with incomes less than \$20,000/year, 68% have broadband internet, while for households with incomes greater than \$75,000, nearly all (96%) have broadband internet.

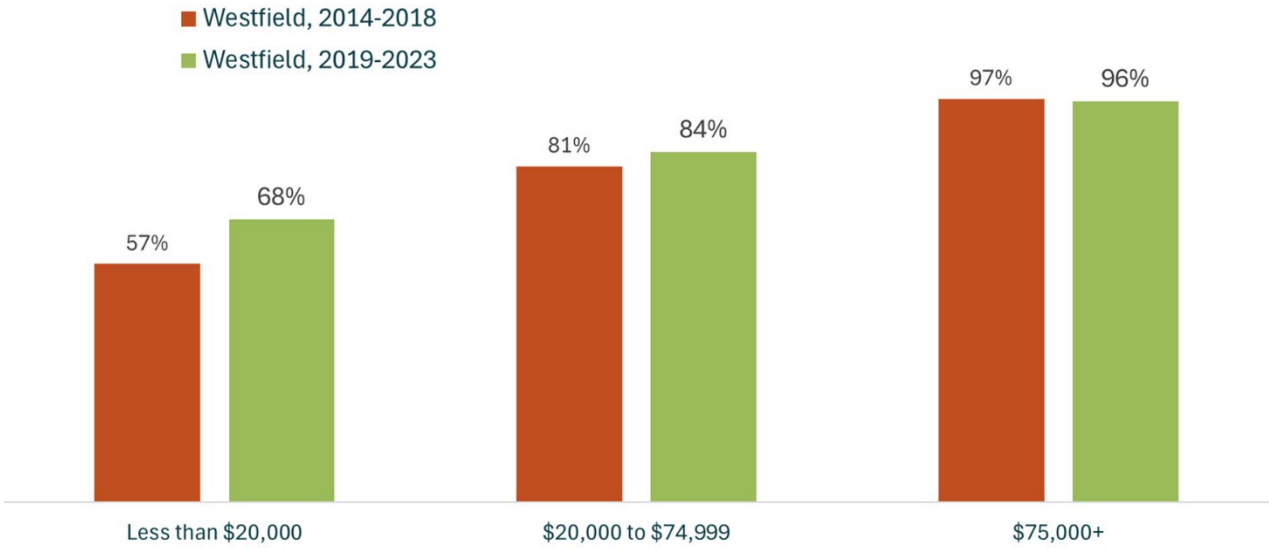


Source: US Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 5-year data (2019-2023), Table S2801, Types of Computers and Internet Subscriptions  
BroadbandbyIncome\_MA\_hampden\_WFD\_HKE\_ACSST5Y2023.S2801-2025-02-25T181556

Figure 7

At the same time, evident in Figure 8, we see hopeful trends in access to broadband for both low- and middle-income households. Households with incomes less than \$20,000 saw an increase from 57% to 68% of households with broadband when comparing the five-year window 2019-2023 with the preceding 5-year window. For households with income between \$20k and \$74,999, the increase was from 81% to 84%.

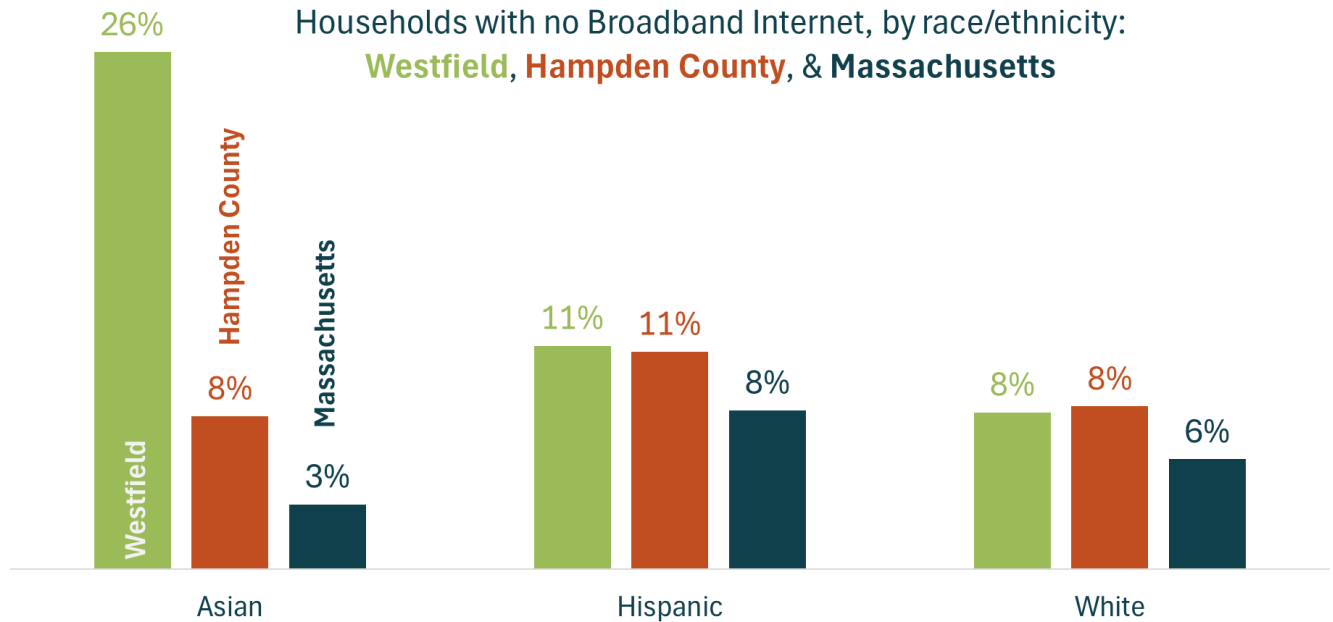
Estimate of Westfield households with broadband internet by income range,  
**2014-2018 & 2019-2023**



Source: US Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 5-year data (2014-2018 & 2019-2023), Table S2801, Types of Computer and Internet Subscriptions

Figure 8: Estimate of Westfield households with broadband internet, by income range

## Digital Accessibility Barriers by Race/Ethnicity



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 5-year data, 2019-2023, Table S2802, Types of Internet Subscriptions by Selected Characteristics

Figure 9: Share of Households without internet, by race/ethnicity\*

We see in Figure 9 the disparities in access to the internet by race and ethnicity. In Westfield, Census Bureau estimates show 26% of Asian households without broadband internet, 11% of Hispanic or Latino households, and 8% of non-Hispanic white households.

\*Note that because the size of the Asian population is relatively small, the 26% estimate has quite a large margin of error, such that the actual share of households without broadband internet could be as much as 20 percentage points higher or lower than estimated. Because the data in Figure 9 are not precise regarding the number of Asian households without broadband internet, **please see Appendix B for more information** on these households.

### Barriers Experienced Disproportionately by Age

We also see stark inequalities based on the age of the householder, with older residents – those 65 years old and older – experiencing much higher rates of lacking broadband internet of any kind. In Figure 8, we see that in Westfield, older residents lacked broadband internet at a rate more than three times the rate for adults 18-64 years of age, and six times the rate for youth. While the numbers showing a lack of broadband access for residents of Hampden County and statewide are smaller than for Westfield, the ratios are very similar across all three geographies.

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

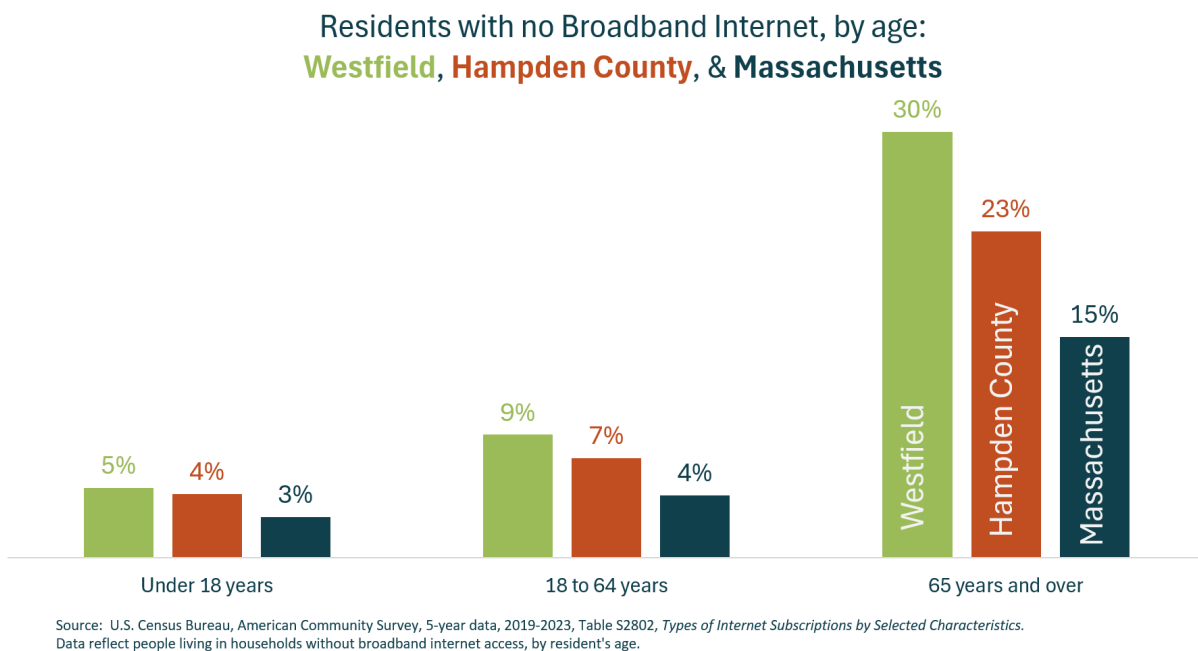


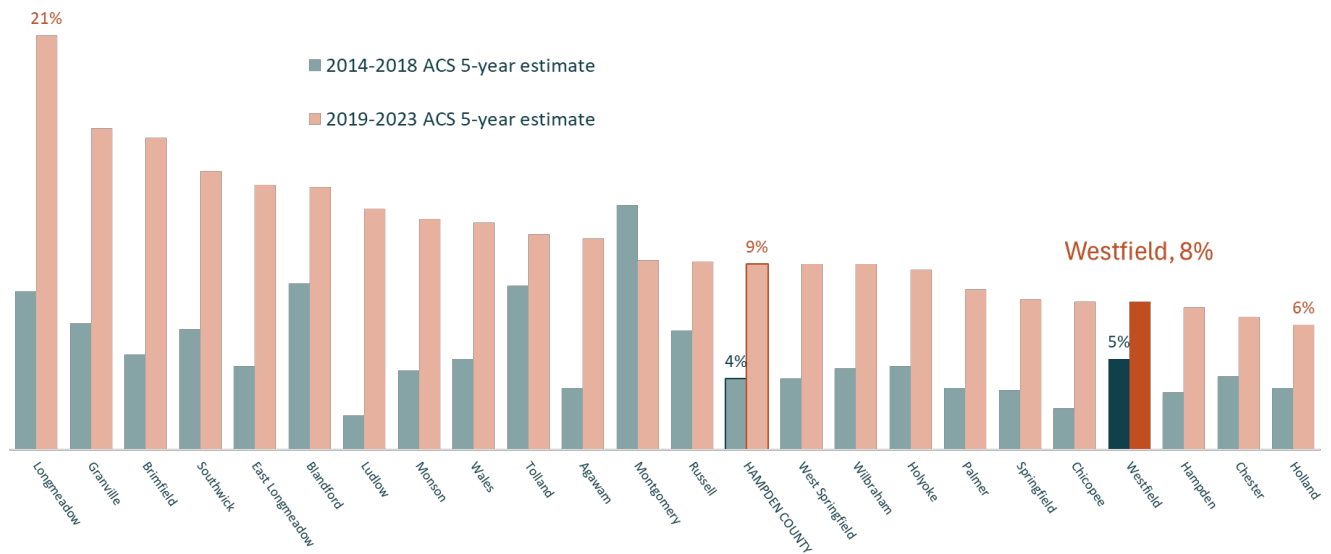
Figure 10: Share of households lacking broadband internet, by age

### Digital Accessibility in Our Rapidly Evolving Economy

Achieving digital accessibility 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 11 below shows that the share of workers working from home in Westfield has increased from 5% of workers to 8% of workers, while doubling county-wide throughout Hampden County, when comparing the five-year average from 2019-2023 with the preceding five-year window (2014-2018).

However, working at home generally requires a robust internet connection and a reliable device, usually a laptop or desktop computer. This can be a limitation for workers who might prefer to work at home but do not have the necessary facilities.

Share of workers working from home increases across Hampden County, estimate nearly doubles in **Westfield**



Source: US Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 5-year data, 2014-2018 & 2019-2023, Table S0801, "Commuting Characteristics by Sex"

Figure 11: Share of workers working from home most workdays

## PART 3: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There are numerous avenues the city can take to increase digital access. Some of them have been highlighted and prioritized in the introduction to this report, and funding has been sought to implement them. Others can be taken over the next several years or perhaps may evolve as technology and circumstances change.

These recommendations reflect the fact that the City of Westfield has a uniquely strong relationship with Whip City Fiber Company. This existing partnership between the city and Whip City Fiber, which has already built out fiber networks to much of the city, can greatly help in the city's efforts to achieve the goals outlined in this report.

### Top Recommendations for Initial Implementation

The primary recommendations for initial implementation have been summarized on pages 3-5 of this report.

### Potential Actions to Advance Digital Access in Westfield

The City of Westfield could benefit from all of the following interventions and programs. Some elements of these have been prioritized for the initial implementation grant from MBI, as described previously.

- 1. Create a permanent Digital Access Working Group 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 and could help with implementing future community engagement efforts.*
- 2. Expand hotspot lending program.** *The current hotspot lending program costs approximately \$180/year (based on Verizon and T-Mobile vendors). This involves purchasing the unit and a required monthly subscription. Both the Westfield Athenaeum and the Westfield Public Schools have experience distributing hotspots on a lending basis.*
- 3. Advocacy to secure MBI/BEAD funds** *There has been much discussion about the need to create better connectivity options for Westfield residents. Most expensive would be the development of an open fiber network (see below) but could also include development of wireless options (strategically placed Wi-Fi or mesh networks). Those involved should include the City Council, the Mayor and the legislative delegation.*
- 4. Work to replace federal Affordable Connectivity Program ("ACP")** *There is no federal response to replace ACP in the upcoming Congress. Massachusetts officials have stated that the Commonwealth cannot afford the \$7M/month cost of subsidizing residents at \$30/month. However, Westfield could subsidize some residents at a lesser amount if the budget allows.*

- 5. Create 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.*
- 6. Develop wide area mesh networks to connect underserved neighborhoods.** *Similar to strategic Wi-Fi deployment, deploying wide area mesh networks that would cover large parts of the city to address current connectivity barriers will require planning and deployment. The level of planning and time for deployment would likely be longer than limited Wi-Fi deployment but with likely broader impact.*
- 7. Support for a consultant to represent the city and work with ISP providers and landlords (including Westfield Housing Authority) to increase connectivity city-wide.** *Additional funding would allow for a consultant to assist the city in closing connectivity gaps that exist in the community. A consultant could collaborate with the City of Westfield and Whip City Fiber to resolve this issue, particularly in multi-family housing or apartment complexes, and could facilitate the expansion of fiber to those areas by Whip City Fiber. This effort would help to support expanded availability and competitive pricing those areas in which only one ISP provider exists.*
- 8. Create city fund to assist people with their internet bills 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 arrears. A city fund could help address this situation for eligible residents. Parameters would need to be developed and the fund created and managed.*
- 9. Explore program to provide ownership for free or low-cost computer devices.** *The cost 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 is the Tech Goes Home model which bundles digital skills training with a device and one year of internet service (if needed). Also included here could be devices available to borrow; for example, Westfield libraries have provided some devices via loan. Funds could be provided to distribute laptops, Chromebooks or tablets through libraries or community-based intermediaries.*
- 10. Coordinate city wide with places/programs to get digital skills training or support** [including advice about cyber security]. *There are currently many organizations intentionally offering digital equity support in Westfield 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. Could support it with digital mentors [buddy system, pairing user with someone with greater comfort and knowledge, youth corps pairing older adults with young tech-savvy volunteers]*

- 11. A place to get tech support for your devices.** *For example, Tech Foundry currently offers an “Apple Store for the People” approach through the Tech Hub in Holyoke. The Athenaeum in Westfield could be an organization that could provide a similar service to the City of Westfield, should funding be available. This latter solution could be addressed through funding for a circuit rider tech support model with community-based office hours.*
- 12. Encourage schools to provide more devices & digital navigation services.** *The Westfield Public Schools are currently providing support for students through an equipment lending program. However, due to budgetary restrictions, the schools can only supply devices to middle and high school students. Furthermore, due to increased equipment costs and decreased budget capacity, the school department has had to reduce the number of devices available to its student population. An increase in funding for this program could be used to not only bring the number of devices up to previous levels, but also to further increase the number of devices available and thereby increase the number of students who can take advantage of this service.*
- 13. Work with Libraries, Council on Aging and Housing Authority** *to continue to provide coordinated support and access and education to improve digital literacy.*
- 14. Subsidized open fiber network to create high quality, competitive internet access to encourage competition in internet services** [not just Comcast/Xfinity]. *This would be an expensive and forward-thinking intervention to address connectivity needs of residents and businesses but also as an economic development strategy to attract residents and business to a 21<sup>st</sup> century Westfield. This would require significant funds for assessment and planning prior to any deployment. Planning would include both engineering and a financial plan.*
- 15. 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.*
- 16. 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.*
- 17. Beyond the Working Group, provide for community input, education and awareness.** *Public education regarding digital equity issues and efforts should be formalized. This could include a city webpage, posting of meetings on YouTube, email notifications, etc.*

**18. 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 accountability for efforts to advance the city's goals for digital equity.*

**19. Incorporate digital equity services into all city 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.**

**20. 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 challenges.*

**21. Establish an on-going Digital Equity Action and Accountability subgroup that reports to the Digital Equity Working Group and the Office of Digital Equity. This subgroup can monitor progress and ensure fidelity to the recommendations adopted from this report or for other city supported digital equity initiatives including the municipal implementation activities. This will include review of the measurable objectives, advice regarding outside funding opportunities, and adherence to the implementation plan and its strategies. While this will be a smaller group with more a more focused charge, it should include community representation, departmental representation and knowledge/expertise in program monitoring. Meetings should be no less than quarterly.**

**22. The city, with input from the Digital Equity Working Group and the Office of Digital Equity should publish an annual status report on digital equity progress and current conditions. This report and relevant metrics should be posted on the city's website for public access.**

## Summary of Recommendations and Cost Estimates

Summary of Recommendations and Cost Estimates, totaling **\$65,000**

Action Steps	Per Item Costs	\$65,000	Timeline	Responsible Party
1. Create Permanent Digital Accessibility Working Group	No cost to the city	\$ 0	8/31/25	The City of Westfield
2. Expand Hot Spot Program	\$180/unit/yr (75 units) + administration/maintenance	\$ 20,000	11/1/25	Westfield Athenaeum, Westfield Public Schools, and the Council on Aging
3. Support for a consultant to represent the city and work with ISP providers and landlords (including the Westfield Housing Authority) to increase connectivity city-wide	Collaborative effort with city officials to improve connectivity city-wide, including expanding connectivity at public spaces such as city parks and to help to resolve connectivity gaps that exist in the city (E.G. multi-family housing)	\$ 15,000	12/1/25	PVPC working with the city and Whip City Fiber
4. Support the distribution of computer devices (laptops, tablets, Chromebooks) through an expanded public library distribution program	Supplement current programs	\$ 15,000	1/1/26	Through the Westfield Athenaeum and Public Schools
5. Coordinate and expand existing programs for digital skills training and tech support.	Supplements existing training offered by organizations such as the Library and the Council on Aging.	\$ 15,000	Expand ongoing Council on Aging and Westfield Athenaeum programs	Expand and support existing programs
<b>Total Estimated Implementation Cost</b>	Dependent on Award Size from MBI	\$ 65,000		

## Conclusion

With this report, the City of Westfield 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 the internet, access to 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 Westfield will be to pursue this work with an eye to the future, recognizing that the opportunity to move the city towards innovation and prosperity will be largely shaped by the quality of the digital infrastructure available to local residents and businesses. In this context, sustainability means thinking about how city resources, both funding 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, but it will also lay a strong foundation for the future prosperity of the city. This is the shift that the Westfield Digital Equity report seeks to catalyze.

## Appendices

**Appendix A: Westfield Community Survey Responses**

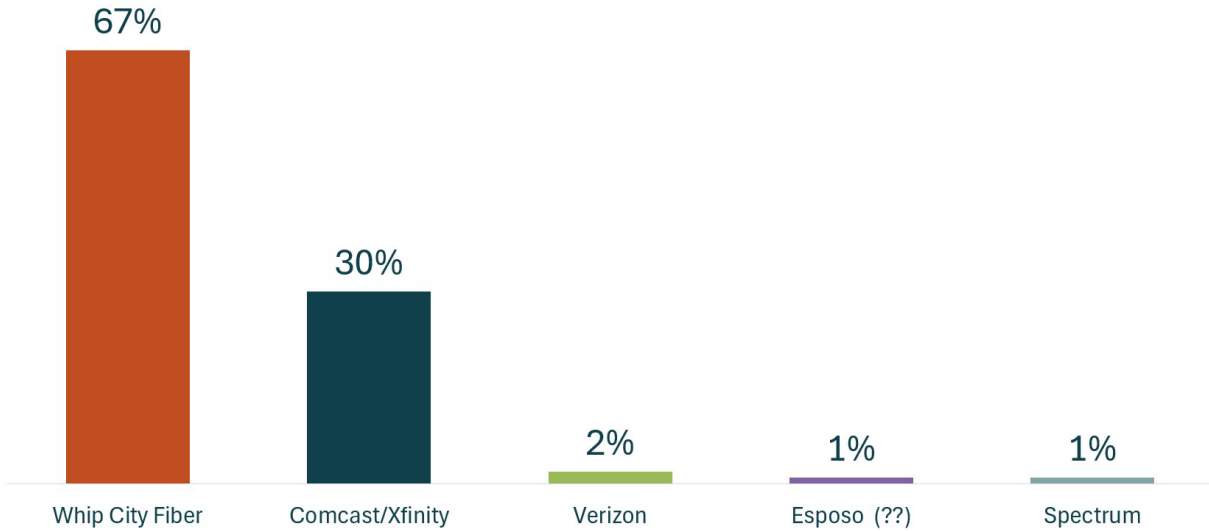
**Appendix B: Explanation of Race and Ethnicity Data**

**Appendix C: Executive Summary of Massachusetts Digital Equity for All Plan**

## Appendix A: Westfield Community Survey Responses

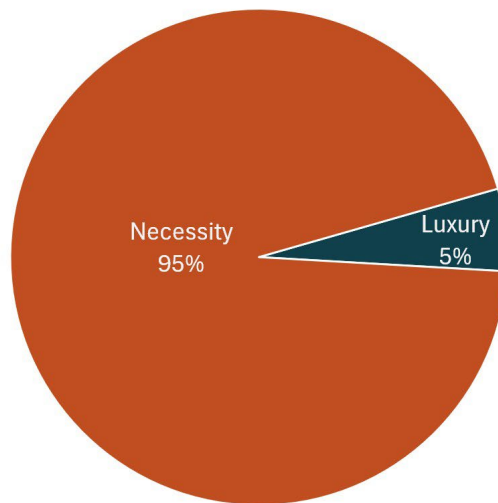
### Breakdown of Westfield Internet Providers

Westfield Survey Respondents: "Who is your internet provider?"



### Is the Internet Essential in Westfield?

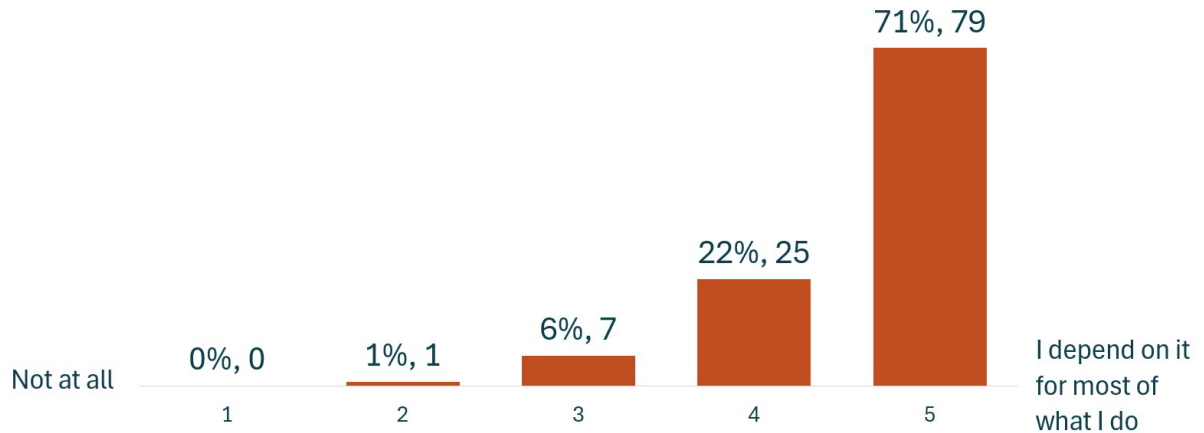
Westfield Survey Respondents:  
"Do you think internet access is a necessity or a luxury?"



## Level of Dependence on the Internet

Westfield respondents: "How much do you depend on the internet?"

(values 1-5, from "Not at all" to "I depend on it for most of what I do")

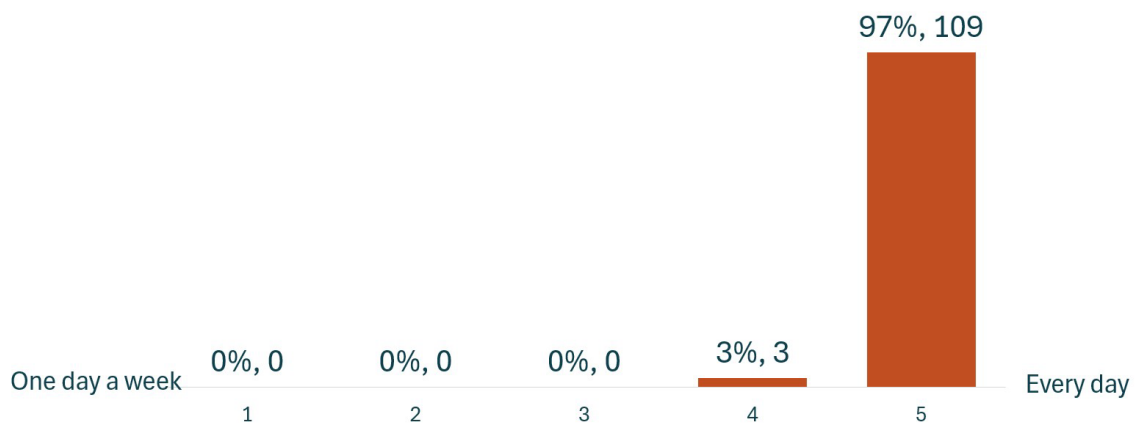


112 respondents, values shown reflect percent (%) and number (#) of respondents

## Frequency of Use

Westfield respondents: "How often do you use the internet?"

(values 1-5, from "One day a week" to "Every day")

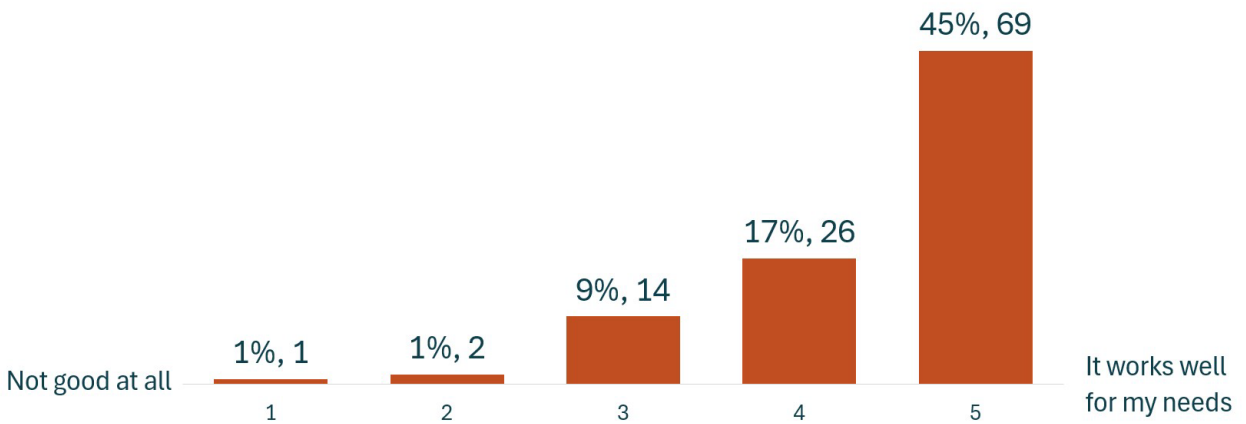


112 respondents, values shown reflect percent (%) and number (#) of respondents

## Quality of the Internet

### Westfield respondents: "How would you rate your current internet service?"

(values 1-5, from "Not good at all" to "It works well for my needs")



112 respondents, values shown reflect percent (%) and number (#) of respondents

### Survey Narrative

The main purpose of the survey was to gather direct feedback from the residents and stakeholders of the city to get a snapshot of what the residents of the city's ability was to both navigate and access the internet. The survey questions and format were created using the Google Forms software. Flyers with a link to the survey were created and given to members of the Planning Group to distribute to the constituents, as well as being passed out at community events and outreach opportunities that were conducted by PVPC.

## Appendix B: Explanation of Race and Ethnicity Data

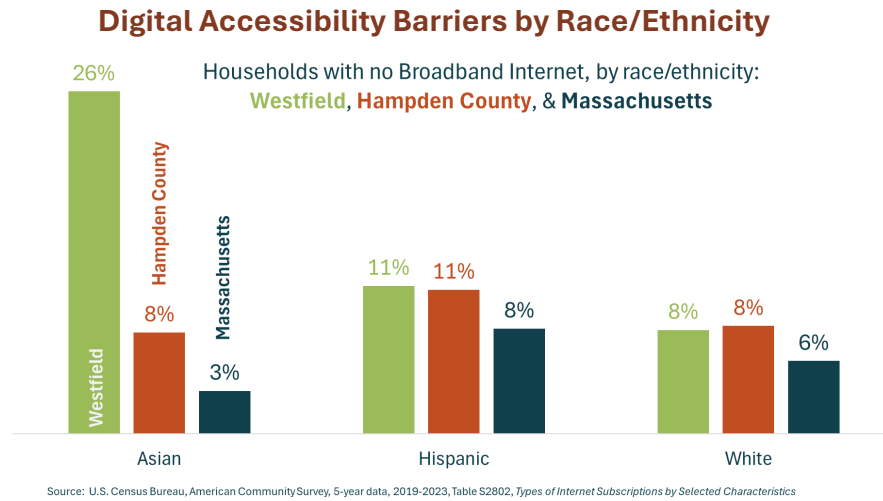
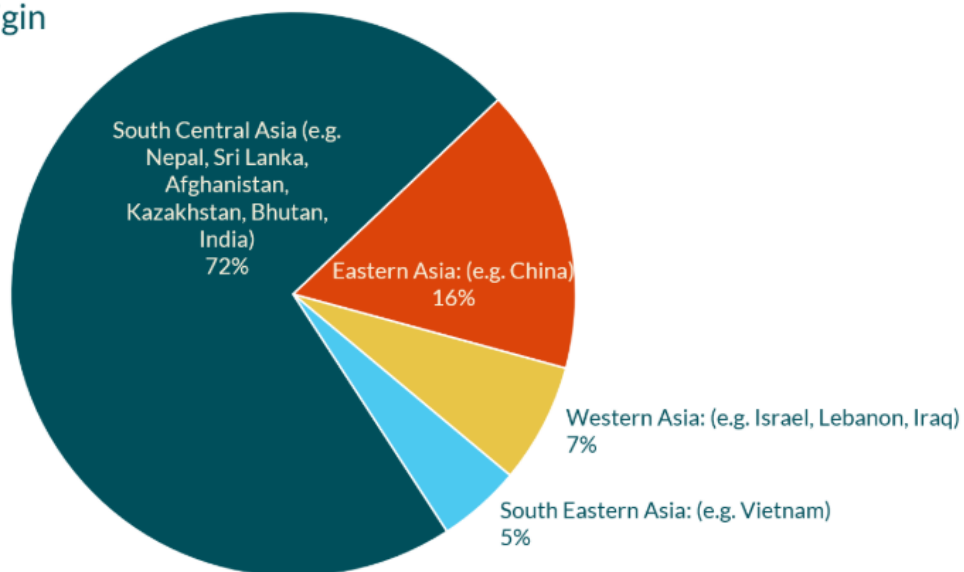


Figure 9: Share of Households without internet, by race/ethnicity

We see in Figure 9, from page 27 of this report, that Census Bureau estimates show 26% of Asian households in Westfield without broadband internet. However, because the size of the Asian population is relatively small, the 26% estimate has a very large margin of error, such that the actual share of households without broadband internet could be as much as 20 percentage points higher or lower than estimated.

The Census Bureau data in the figure **below** shows the origins of Westfield’s Asian population, with the majority coming from South Central Asia.

### Distribution of Westfield's Asian population by region/nation of origin

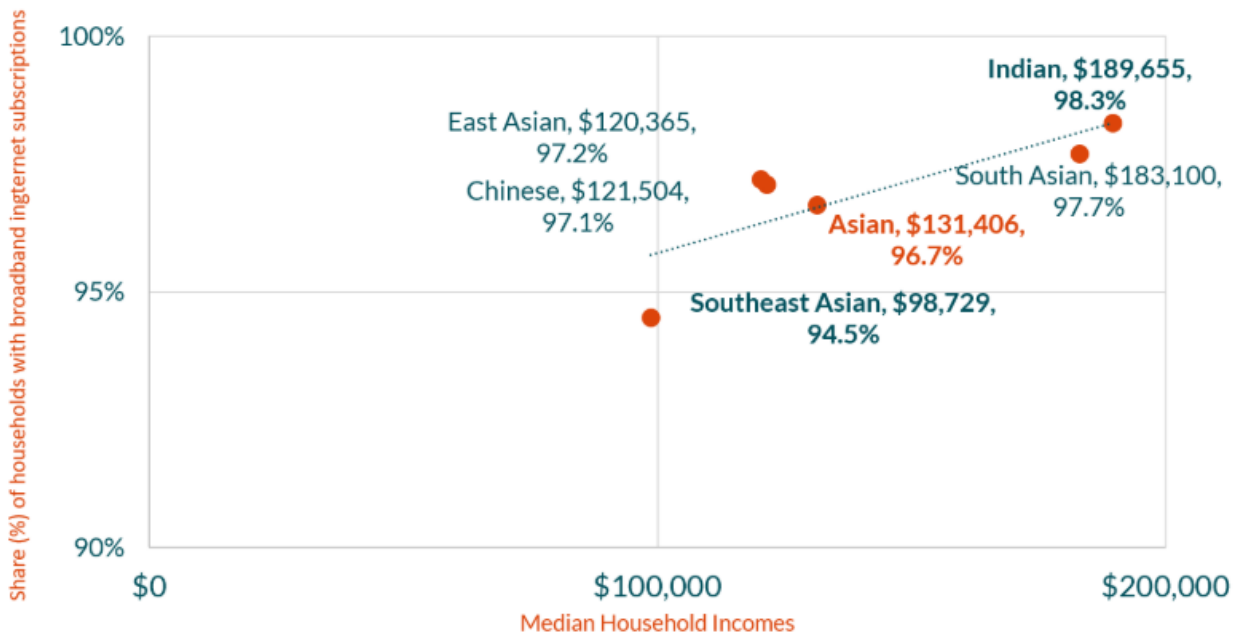


Source: US Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 5-year data, 2019-2023, Table B05006

Statewide, there are substantial variations in median household income based on the national origin of Asian residents, with Indian residents averaging on the higher end, and Southeast Asian residents having a lower average income. We also see that at the statewide level, there is a positive relationship between median household income and living in a household with broadband internet.

The fact that the majority of Westfield’s Asian population is from South Central Asia and that residents with that area of origin tend to have lower incomes, may partly explain the seemingly high numbers of Asian residents without broadband internet. However, the large margin of error surely still plays a role in the data in Figure 9.

There are substantial disparities in the well-being of **Asians** often depending on their region of origin: **Southeast Asians** fare least well, while **Asian Indians** fare best among Massachusetts residents



US Census Bureau, American Community Survey, 1 year data, 2023. Table S0201, "Selected Population Profile in the United States"

**Appendix C: Executive Summary of Massachusetts Digital Equity for All Plan**