



Mendon
MASSACHUSETTS

Digital Inclusion Plan

**Produced by the Central Massachusetts
Regional Planning Commission (CMRPC)
for the Town of Mendon, MA**

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Introduction

The Town of Mendon is a rural community in Central Massachusetts, home to 6,266 residents. The town is known for its small-town rural character, agricultural history, and sense of community. The town is located 30 miles southwest of Boston and 17 miles southeast of Worcester. The town is part of the Mendon Upton Regional School District. The town applied to participate in the Municipal Digital Equity Planning Program in 2025 to support local efforts to close the digital divide and increase digital inclusion and opportunity.

The digital divide is defined as “the gap between those who have affordable access, skills, and support to effectively engage online and those who do not.”ⁱ Several elements contribute to an individual’s ability to access and use Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). According to the National Digital Inclusion Alliance, these elements include:

- Affordable, robust broadband internet service
- Internet-enabled devices that meet the needs of the user
- Access to digital literacy training
- Quality technical support
- Application and online content designed to enable and encourage self-sufficiency, participation, and collaboration

Digital inclusion is the work of increasing access to and opportunities available through technology and the internet. As the world is increasingly reliant on digital technology, ensuring that all individuals and communities have access to, and the capacity for, full civic engagement, employment, learning, communication, and services is essential.

This report was developed under Massachusetts Broadband Institute’s Municipal Digital Equity Planning Program, with funding from the Massachusetts Broadband Institute at the Mass Tech Collaborative through the Massachusetts ARPA State Fiscal Recovery Funds. Beginning in December 2025, the Town of Mendon worked with Central Massachusetts Regional Planning Commission (CMRPC) to assess existing conditions and engage with community members to better understand the needs and challenges related to technology and internet use. Two community charettes were held in June 2026, on June 9th at the Mendon Town Hall and on June 15th at the Council of Aging, engaging 18 residents on topics including cybersecurity, artificial intelligence (AI), and ease of use as it pertains to devices. This report includes findings from community charettes, stakeholder interviews, the Statewide Broadband and Digital Equity Survey, and data from the U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), Ookla, and other sources. The report concludes with strategic recommendations, opportunities, and resources to address gaps in internet access and use of digital tools.

Prior Planning

Digital access and inclusion intersect with many overlapping experiences of residents, including social, economic, geographic, and demographic contexts. Digital technologies are increasingly integrated into the daily experiences of residents and communities, influencing how and where people shop, work, and learn; how they communicate; and how they access essential services like healthcare and municipal resources.

As the town works to ensure that all residents can fully participate in modern civic, educational, health, and economic opportunities, efforts to improve digital access and inclusion build on numerous prior planning efforts.

Master Plan (2023)

Mendon's 2023 Master Plan includes comprehensive strategies to strengthen the local economy, invest in infrastructure, and improve climate resiliency, while preserving the town's small-town atmosphere, history, and natural spaces. The plan outlines goals and strategies for topics including housing, open space, historic preservation, economic development, town services, transportation, and land use. Community involvement and civic engagement are central to the town's vision for the future. Several Master Plan recommendations explicitly consider the use of technology in municipal communications and services, as well as local regulations.

Housing Production Plan (2024)

The Housing Production Plan includes a housing needs assessment, an analysis of housing challenges, and outlines production goals and strategies. The plan seeks to expand housing opportunities for seniors, young adults, families, low-income households, and people with disabilities while preserving Mendon's rural character and small-town feel. Many of these populations are also disproportionately impacted by the digital divide.

Open Space and Recreation (2023)

The Open Space and Recreation Plan defines recreational needs and opportunities, and outlines strategies to preserve open space and natural resources. The goals outlined in the plan include: (1) Improve access to open space and recreation resources; (2) Expand the amount of and improve the condition of passive and active recreation opportunities; (3) Protect the natural resources in Mendon, including forests, farmlands, water resources, and wildlife habitats; and (4) Preserve Mendon's sense of community. The plan recommends utilizing technology for online mapping and enhancing communications and local outreach.

Community Preservation Plan (2026)

The Community Preservation Plan, updated in 2026, guides the town's use of Community Preservation Act (CPA) funds for open space and recreation, historic preservation, and affordable housing. The plan outlines selection criteria for projects, including consistency with town plans, feasibility, urgency, affordability, and the ability to leverage other funding sources.

Hazard Mitigation Plan (2017)

The Hazard Mitigation Plan identifies natural hazards, including flooding, severe storms, hurricanes, severe thunderstorms, drought, wildfires, earthquakes, dam failure, and extreme temperatures, and evaluates risks to residents, infrastructure, and critical facilities. The plan outlines mitigation strategies to improve emergency preparedness and long-term resilience. Access to information and communications is essential to these strategies.

Mendon-Upton Regional Schools Technology Plan (2016-2021)

The Mendon-Upton Regional School District strives to give their students the best education, including the usage and integration of technology. The plan outlines four main goals that are substituted with initiatives that are specific and action oriented.

The goals for the district include: (1) Prepare students to be productive digital citizens, empowering them to think critically, behave safely, and participate responsibly in the digital world; (2) Improve curriculum as well as the instructional and assessment practices of professional staff through balanced, purposeful, and developmentally appropriate technology integration across all grade levels and content areas; (3) Upgrade technology equipment, network, and infrastructure so all students may have equal opportunities for access and effective technology integration may be maximized; (4) Use technology to consistently improve communication and collaboration with all stakeholders.

Existing Conditions & Community Profile

Demographics

Population

The Town of Mendon is characterized as a rural community with a population less than 10,000 and a population density of less than 500 people per square mile. According to 2023 ACS estimates, the town has a population of 6,266, and a population density of approximately 353 people per square mile.ⁱⁱ

Income & Poverty

The median household income is about \$129,837, higher than Massachusetts (\$101,341) and Worcester County (\$96,602).ⁱⁱⁱ Overall, median household income has increased in the last decade, with a slight decline between 2022-2023. Since 2020, the percentage of the population in poverty has also increased (figure 2). Notably, the cost of housing and utilities in Central Massachusetts and the state have also increased significantly during this period.^{iv}

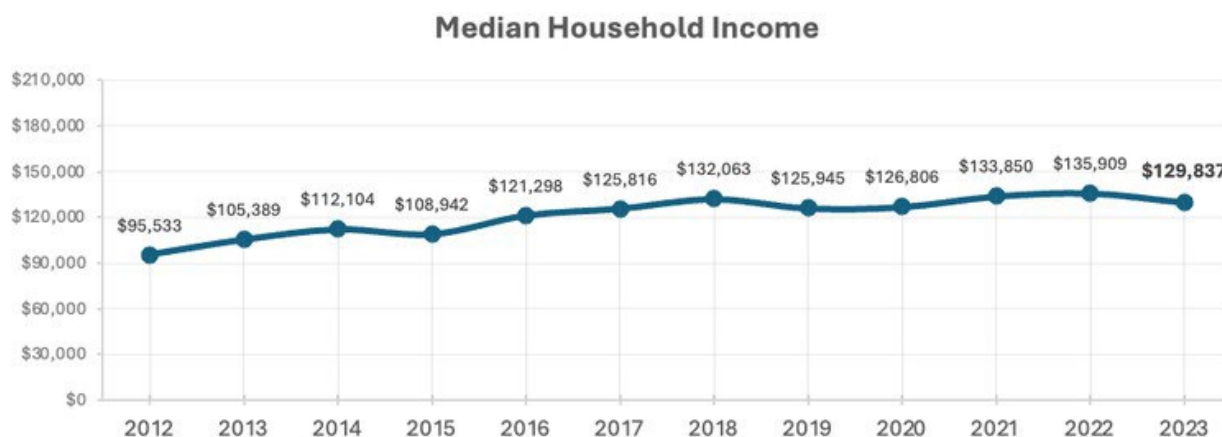


FIGURE 1: MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME (2012-2023) SOURCE: 2022 ACS 5-YEAR ESTIMATES (\$1901)

According to ACS 5-year estimates, 6% of Mendon's population is living below the poverty level. In comparison to Massachusetts and Worcester County (9.7% and 9.6%, respectively), the percentage of residents living below the poverty line is lower, though higher than in previous years in Mendon (Figure 2). The percentage of residents below the poverty level is highest among children under 18 (11.7%) and adults between 18 and 34 years (6.2%) in comparison to adults between 35 and 64 years (4.7%) and 65 years and over (0%).^v Low-

income households may have greater difficulty affording internet service and/or digital devices.

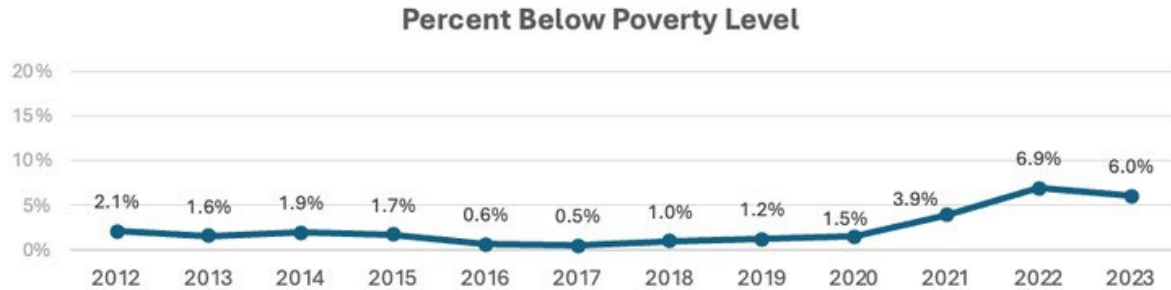


FIGURE 2: PERCENT BELOW POVERTY LEVEL (2012-2023) SOURCE: 2023 ACS ESTIMATES, TABLE S1701

2022 ACS 5-YEAR EST

Household Characteristics

91% of housing units are owner-occupied, the remaining 9% are renter-occupied. Of homeowners, about 32% are cost-burdened, with housing costs between 30-49% of household income, and 12% of owner-occupied households are considered severely cost-burdened with housing costs exceeding 50% of household income. Though there are few rental units relative to owner-occupied homes, renters are disproportionately cost-burdened—24% of renters allocate 30-49% of household income to housing costs, and 36% are severely cost-burdened, spending 50% of their monthly income for rent and associated housing costs.

Households by Type	Percent
Households with one or more people under 18 years	40%
Households with one or more people 60 years and over	46%
Households with one or more people 65 years and over	32%
Householder living alone	13%
65 years and over	8%
Housing Tenure	
Owner-occupied housing units	91%
Renter-occupied housing units	9%

FIGURE 3: HOUSEHOLD CHARACTERISTICS AND OCCUPIED UNITS HOUSING TENURE. SOURCE: 2023 ACS 5-YEAR ESTIMATES TABLE S1101;TABLE DP04

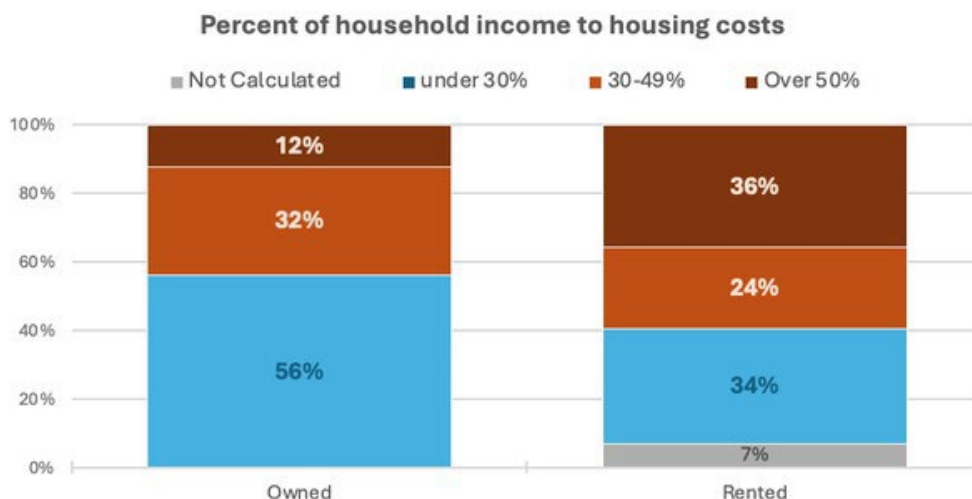


FIGURE 4: HOUSING COST BURDEN (ESTIMATED 1916 UNITS OWNED, 187 RENTED).
 SOURCE: 2023 ACS 5-YEAR ESTIMATES, TABLE B25140

Age Distribution

The median age in Mendon is 43.9, comparable to that of surrounding towns (figure 5). The town's population is primarily comprised of school-aged children and middle-aged adults, with a smaller proportion of young adults and older adults, 65 years and older (figure 6). Various age cohorts may have varying degrees of comfort using digital devices and different needs regarding digital use and internet access.

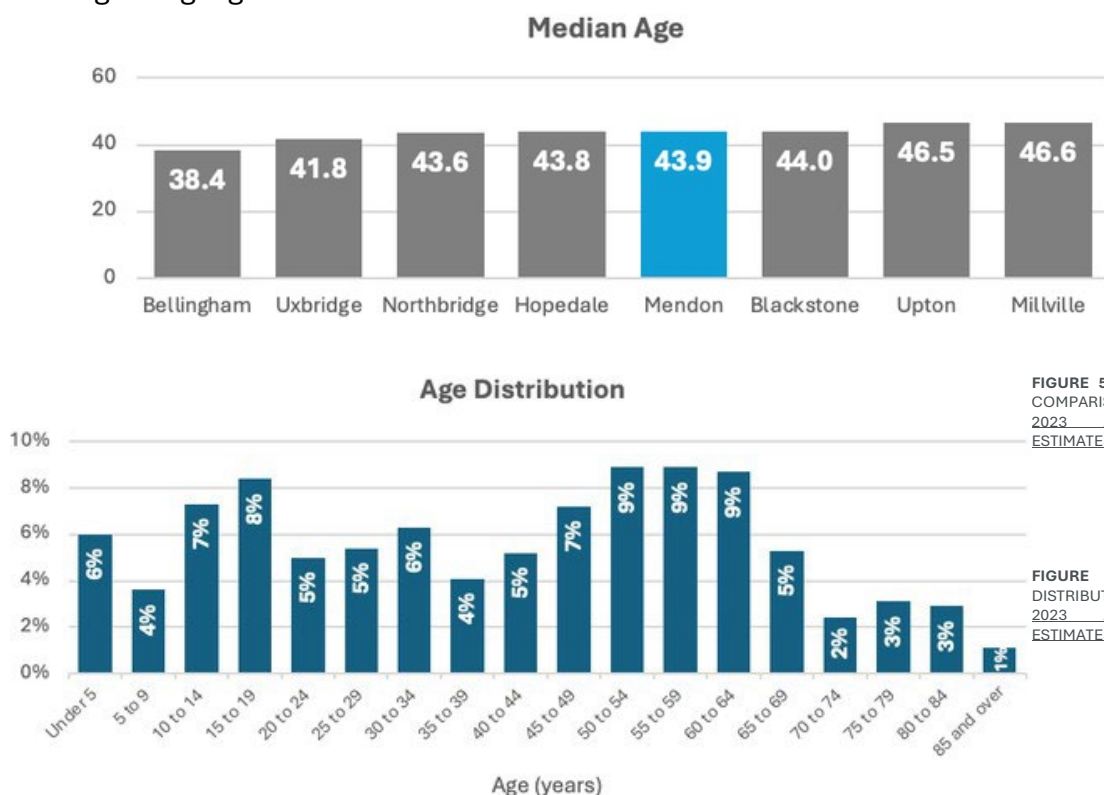


FIGURE 5: MEDIAN AGE COMPARISON. SOURCE: 2023 ACS 5-YEAR ESTIMATES, TABLE S0101

FIGURE 6: AGE DISTRIBUTION. SOURCE: 2023 ACS 5-YEAR ESTIMATES, TABLE DP05

Youth

About one-fourth of Mendon's population is under 20 years of age, and about 40% of households have one or more people under 18 years. For children and young adults, digital access is essential to education, workforce development, communication, entertainment, and social activities. Though younger cohorts are typically more comfortable with technology use, online safety is a common concern for children and youth.

Older Adults

About 15% of the town's population is age 65 and over, though nearly one-third (32%) of the population is 55 years and over. Nearly half (46%) of households have one or more household members aged 60 and over, and about 8% of householders living alone are 65 years and over. While the proportion of older adults is smaller than other age groups, the number of seniors living in town will likely increase, as middle-aged adults grow older and remain in town. Older adults typically have lower levels of access and comfort using technology and may have concerns about trusting information online. Despite challenges, older adults often rely on the internet and digital devices for telehealth appointments, communications and information, social connection, civic engagement opportunities, entertainment, and more.

Language Spoken at Home

According to 2023 ACS 5-year estimates, 86% of Mendon's population speaks only English, and about 14% speak a language other than English. Languages spoken at home include English, Spanish (1.3%), other Indo-European languages (8.2%), and Asian and Pacific Island languages (0.2%), and other languages (4.4%).^{vi} Of those 18 years and over who speak a language other than English, 85% speak English "very well" and 15% speak English less than "very well" (i.e. "well," "not well," or "not at all"). Among students of the Mendon-Upton School District, about 8.2% speak a language other than English as their first language, and about 3.8% are English Language Learners.^{vii}

Race & Ethnicity

Approximately 92% of residents identify as white alone, not Hispanic or Latino. About 4% of residents identify as Hispanic or Latino (of any race), 3% as two or more races, and less than 1% as Asian. National studies have found significant gaps in broadband access for Black and Hispanic or Latino households in comparison to white households.^{viii}

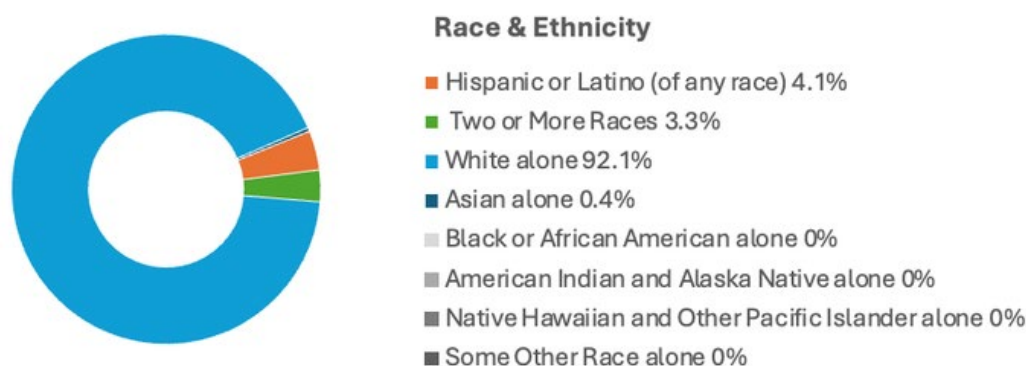


FIGURE 7: RACE AND ETHNICITY. SOURCE: 2023 ACS ESTIMATES, TABLE DP05

Connection

As reported in the 2023 ACS 5-year estimates, 96% of households in Mendon have an internet subscription. 4% of households have no internet subscription, while 4% have a cellular data plan with no other type of internet subscription. Broadband, such as cable, fiber optic, or DSL are the most common source of internet at 91%, 90% of households have a cellular data plan.

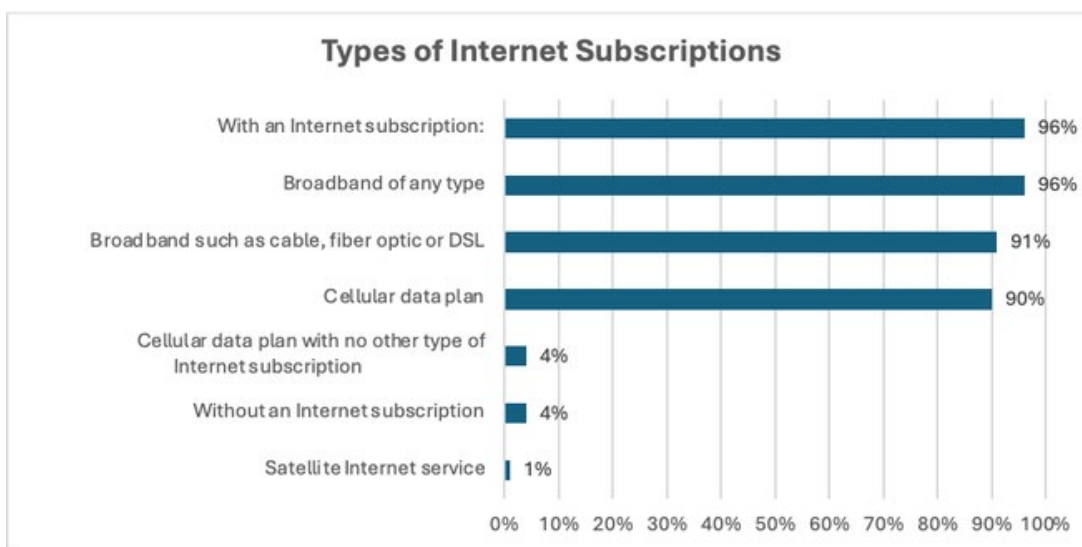


FIGURE 8: TYPES OF INTERNET SUBSCRIPTIONS. SOURCE: ACS 5-YEAR 2023 TABLE S2801

Low-income households are less connected than higher-income households. Of households with \$20,000 or less income, 17% have no internet subscription. Of households with income between \$20,000 and \$74,999, 14% do not have an internet subscription. Households with \$75,000 or more in income are significantly more connected in comparison, but 1% still lack internet subscriptions (figure 9).

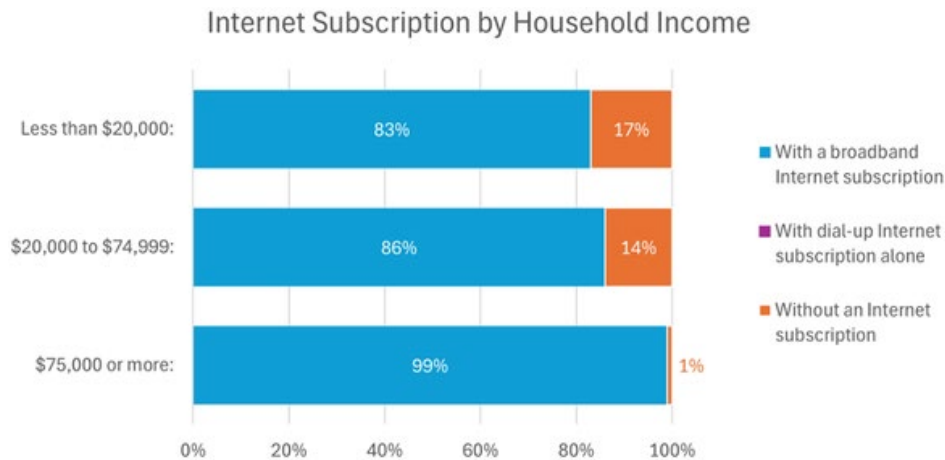


FIGURE 9: INTERNET SUBSCRIPTION BY HOUSEHOLD INCOME. SOURCE: ACS 5-YEAR 2023 TABLE S2801

Device Access

Access to a computing device is necessary for utilizing the internet. An estimated 7% of Mendon households have no computer at home. According to ACS estimates, 98.7% of households have at least one computing device (including a desktop or laptop, smartphone, tablet, or other computer).

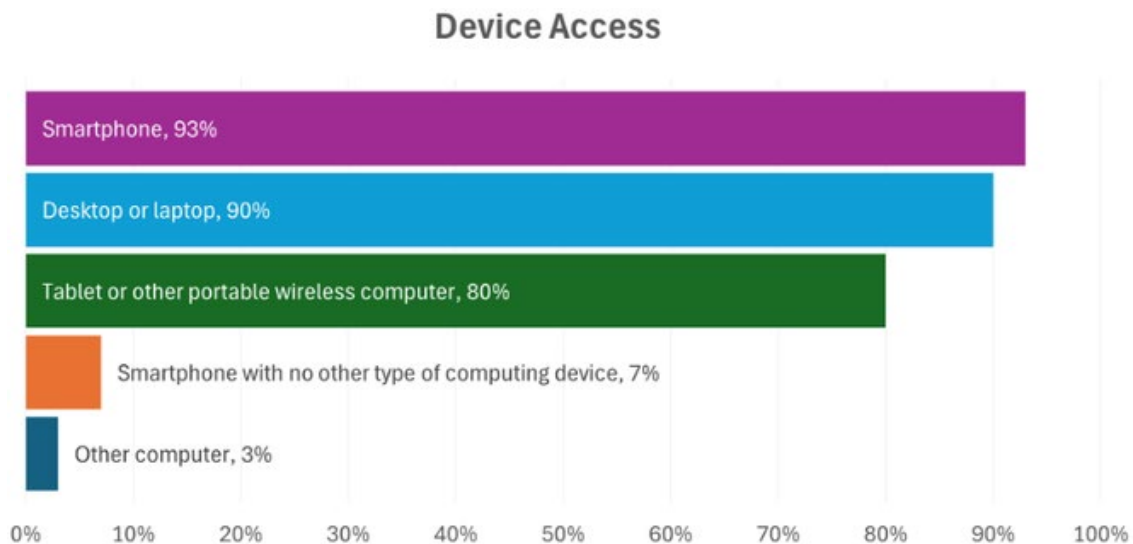


FIGURE 10: DEVICE ACCESS. SOURCE: ACS 5-YEAR 2023 TABLE S2801

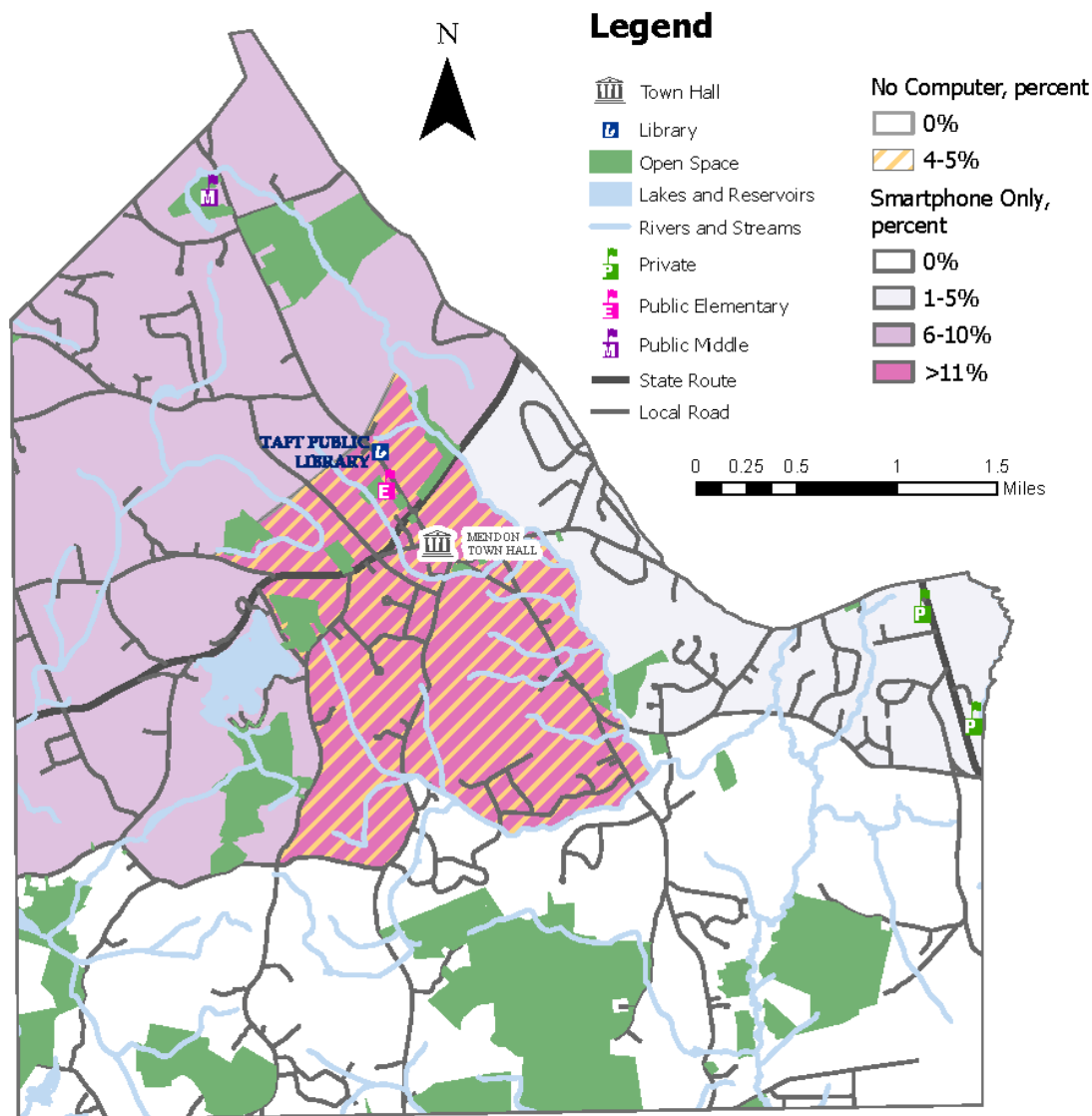
ACS census data estimates on digital access by age suggest that while there are very few Mendon residents without a computer, those with no computer are 65 years and over.

Computer Access by Age	Estimate
Under 18 years:	1502
Has a computer:	1502
No computer	0
18 to 64 years:	3808
Has a computer:	3808
No computer	0
65 years and over:	931
Has a computer:	904
No computer	27

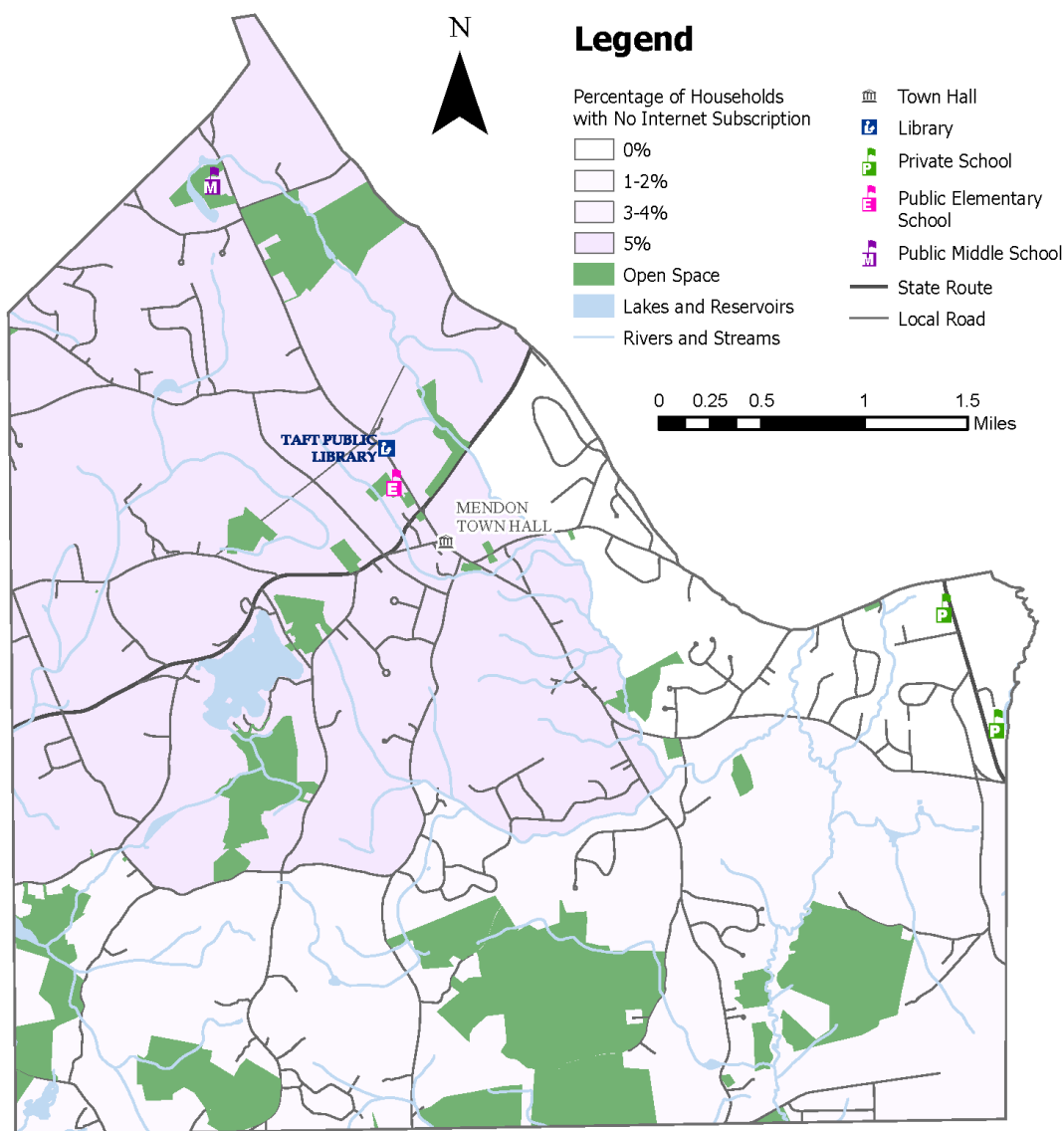
FIGURE 11: COMPUTER ACCESS BY AGE. SOURCE: ACS 5-YEAR 2023 TABLE S2801

An overwhelming 93% of households in Mendon utilize a smartphone, and 7% (136)¹² of households have a smartphone only with no other type of digital device. Although smartphones provide the capacity to get online, there are still limitations to the capacity of a smartphone versus accessing the internet via a desktop or laptop with broadband connections. Smartphones pose constraints with data caps and compatibility issues for applications and websites for learning and working.

Mendon Percentage of Households with No Computer by Census Block Group



Mendon Percentage of Households with No Internet Subscription by Census Block Group



Digital Skills & Literacy

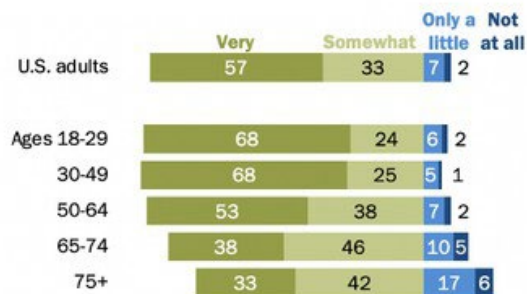
Using digital technology has implications for a person's access to opportunities and overall prosperity in the current digital age. Not only is access to a digital device and the internet important, but a quality connection to the internet is vital for civic participation, and the skills and ability to navigate the device are essential to attain full access to the digital world.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of establishments, schools, and businesses in the U.S. had to find reactive ways to keep connected. As explored in *Impact of digital surge during Covid-19 pandemic: A viewpoint on research and practice*, the pandemic highlighted the implications of the digital divide and the fact that many were facing exclusion. New routines that were born from social distancing meant a heavy reliance on internet access to continue participation in jobs, education, civic engagement, and socializing. Some individuals were equipped to take on this reactive change, while others were left out; unaffordable device access and internet access, and a lack of the skillset to participate online emphasized inequities in participating in the digital landscape.

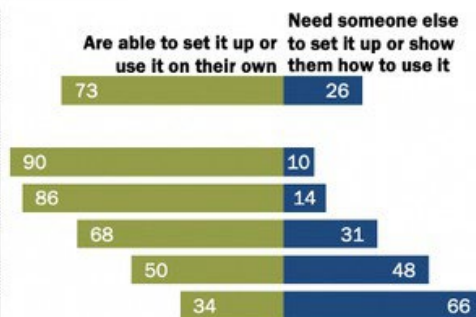
The Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, in partnership with the National Skills Coalition (NSC), released *Closing the Digital Skill Divide*, which provided a snapshot of the demand for digital skills in the U.S. labor market. Based on a nationwide online poll conducted in March 2024, the analysis finds that "92% of jobs in the U.S. definitely require or likely require digital skills." The analysis also indicates that one-third of laborers in the U.S. do not have the foundational skillset to participate and succeed in the current job market. Additionally, the report finds that the lack of digital equity in skills and literacy disproportionately affects low-income individuals and rural residents.

A majority of adults 75 and older report needing help from others to set up or show them how to use new devices when they get them

% of U.S. adults who say they are ___ confident using computers, smartphones or other electronic devices to do the things they need to do online



% of U.S. adults who say when they get a new computer, smartphone or other electronic device, they usually ...



Note: Those who did not give an answer are not shown.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted April 12-18, 2021.
"The Internet and the Pandemic"

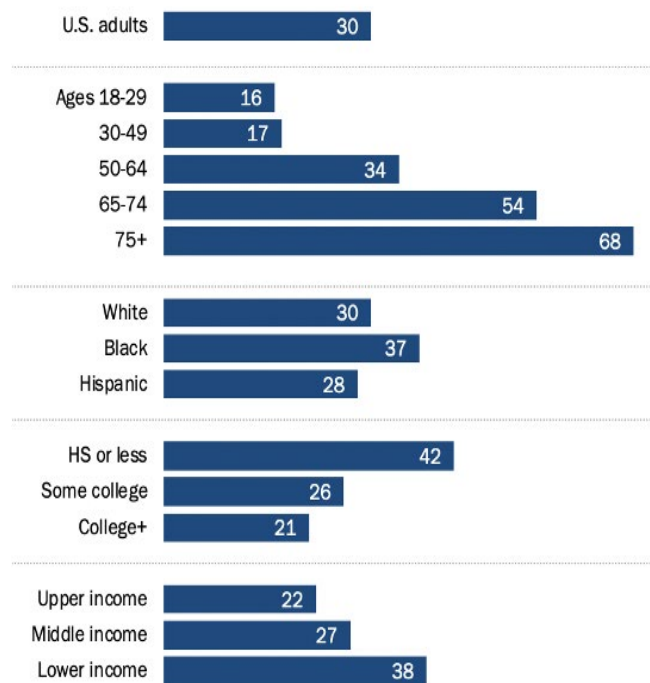
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Although Mendon currently lacks available data on its existing digital literacy landscape, the Pew Research Center's 2021 study titled *The Internet and the Pandemic* found that 26% of adults require assistance while setting up a new digital device or need to be shown how to use the technology. 10% of American adults say they are not at all, or only a little, confident using digital devices to complete the tasks they need to do online. Older adults tend to have a harder time setting up and using devices. This population is frequently significant in semi-rural/rural communities in Massachusetts, and adults 75 and older can be at the forefront of becoming marginalized and excluded from tech-readiness.

"Lower tech readiness" is described as individuals who are not at all, or only a little confident using their digital devices to participate in necessary online tasks or typically require assistance in setting up and using a new device. Based on findings from the Pew Research Center's *The Internet and the Pandemic*, 30% of U.S. adults are characterized this way.

30% of Americans have lower tech readiness, which varies by age, educational attainment and income

% of U.S. adults who *have lower tech readiness**



*Those with lower tech readiness say they either are not at all or only a little confident using their computers, smartphones or other electronic devices to do the things they need to do online, or they usually need someone else to set up or show them how to use a new computer, smartphone or other electronic device when they get it.

Note: White and Black adults include those who report being only one race and are not Hispanic. Hispanics are of any race. Family income tiers are based on adjusted 2019 earnings. Those who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted April 12-18, 2021.

"The Internet and the Pandemic"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

The growth of Artificial Intelligence (AI) plays a role in the current climate of digital literacy and skills. AI has experienced a boom and has become an increasingly common form of technology that people use in their homes, workplaces, classrooms, and communities. As we discuss the importance of digital literacy, AI literacy is becoming a major component of the conversation.

AI is quickly becoming a skill set in the job market that recruiters are seeking, as well as employers actively exploring ways to implement the technology. According to a recent survey conducted by Microsoft and LinkedIn of more than 31,000 professionals from around the world, "66 percent of leaders say they wouldn't hire someone without AI skills, and 71 percent say they'd rather hire a less experienced candidate with AI skills than a more experienced candidate without them." ix

Data shows that AI literacy is becoming an extension of digital literacy. As AI becomes commonplace, “more than half of adults believe they need to gain new skills to prepare for the impacts of artificial intelligence—and one-third believe they'll need them within the next year,”^x according to a survey commissioned for Jobs for the Future’s Center for Artificial Intelligence & the Future of Work.

“A Youth Perspective on Navigating the Digital World”^{xi} identifies a number of partners to be considered in conversations about the digital landscape, and young adults are noted as key stakeholders. Parents highlighted wanting to ensure the safety of their children, educators want students to participate online ethically, and companies seek to expand on the growing digital space online. Across these conversations, there is a common question: how can media enhance a user’s life, vs. becoming detrimental? In discussions concerning digital literacy, young adults tend to be absent from the conversation, often on the sidelines due to their age or a perceived lack of knowledge/experience. However, their lived experience can be a useful tool when it comes to discussions on creating an online space that is equitable and safe.

Concerns were also noted about the misuse of data compromising safety and privacy, as personal information has become increasingly available to the general public. Alongside privacy, sifting through misinformation can make the digital landscape overwhelming, especially with the advent of AI. Young adults are aware that AI-driven social media can deliver content that is one-sided and polarizing. This can pull young adults apart and create divisions, as algorithms often drive the one-sidedness of issues and information.

“A Youth Perspective on Navigating the Digital World” identifies a key action: foster more digital literacy. According to the article, young people expressed that digital literacy skills have focused on avoiding plagiarism and vetting reliable sources of information, rather than a holistic view of digital media literacy. Teens expressed that learning is strongest when it is linked to the context they are already engaging in, versus developing a separate course for media literacy, which is often less feasible in the classroom setting.

As mentioned, staying connected in a digitally dependent society is crucial to an individual's ability to participate in our current landscape. This connection is also critical to ensuring consistent and dependable communication during extreme weather scenarios, and emergency response services must also maintain accessibility.^{xii}

The digital divide and the way it impacts emergency planning is largely overlooked: “limited internet access is silently undermining disaster resilience and deepening environmental injustice.”^{xiii}

Communities suffering from limitations in broadband and digital literacy are at risk of failing to register for emergency evacuation, missing a weather alert, as well as missing important information regarding disaster aid; not being connected to these resources can be a matter of life or death in inclement weather situations. Failing to treat broadband access as an essential utility and service worsens the climate resilience gap in America.

In the Chelsea and East Boston, MA area, the organization GreenRoots works to address environmental disparities that burden working-class and ethnically and racially diverse communities. In March 2020, two days prior to the pandemic shutdown in Massachusetts, GreenRoots convened with 15 stakeholders to begin coordinating emergency response services among governmental partners, the community, and nonprofits. Born out of the organizational efforts, this became known as the Chelsea Pandemic Response Team, a community-led pandemic response. “Our overarching conclusion is that resilience is rooted in social capacities to work together, mobilize resources, and take care of one another. Climate is not a separate issue siloed from other ones; it is part of an intersectional set of issues.”^{xiv}

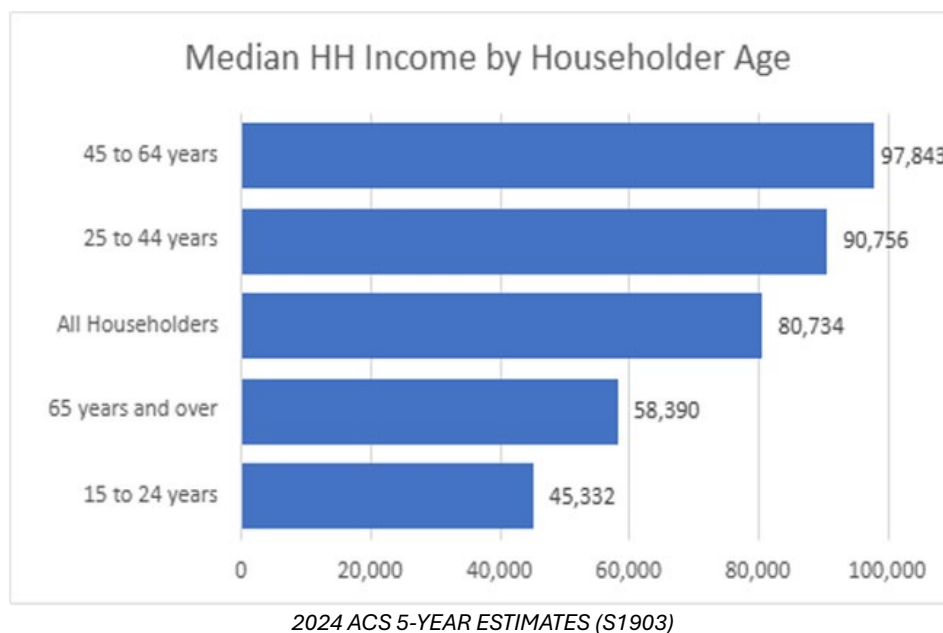
Although Mendon is considered a rural-suburban community, many towns characterized as rural have routinely highlighted the dangers of spotty cellular coverage, and this can contribute to pronounced challenges during inclement weather scenarios. Similar to the efforts resulting from GreenRoots’ coordination of stakeholders in 2020, it is emphasized that “community involvement is key to the success of energy preparedness (EP) strategies, especially in rural areas.”^{xv}

Coalitions are underscored as being an excellent tool to promote community cooperation and engagement, allowing for tabletop exercises, risk assessments, and the development of planning documents that can introduce expected results from successful collaboration in the event of a disaster. Although promoting readiness and collaboration is important, communication is still the key consideration. “Sharing a message, coordinating a response, and ultimately saving lives requires the use of mediums such as telephone and broadband, especially in rural communities.”^{xvi}

Affordability

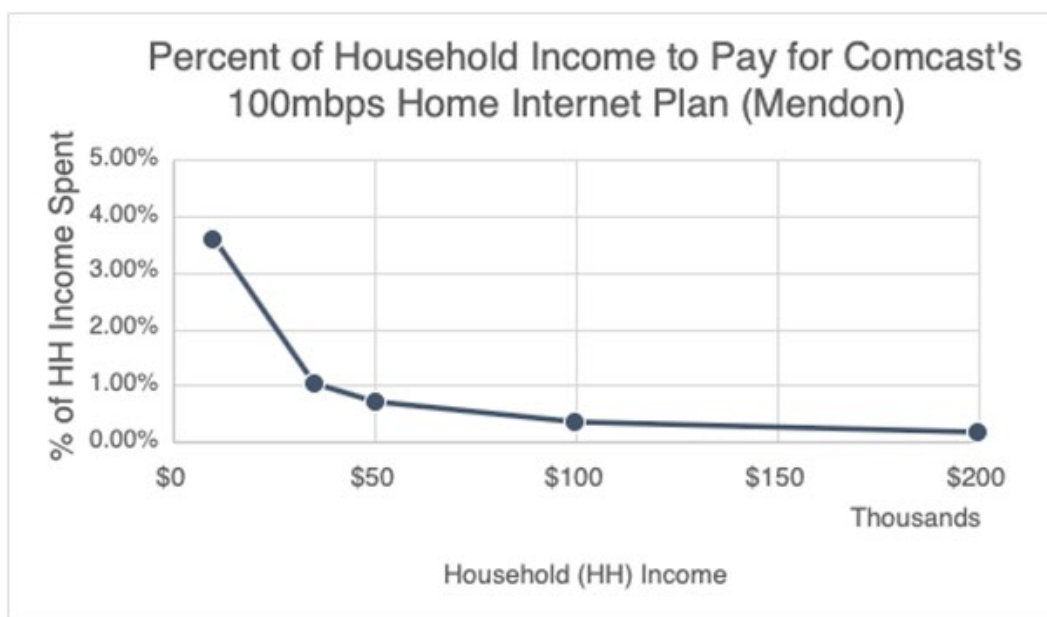
Despite widespread internet and device access, affordability may still pose a challenge for some residents, especially households that earn low incomes relative to the Town median. Householders 65 years and older fall into this category. Census median income data for

most ethnic and racial groups is not available due to insufficient sample size.



For nearly all households, the Internet is an indispensable resource. But the lower the income a household earns, the higher the relative share of income it must spend on internet costs. The following case study illustrates this point. Comcast's Xfinity service offers internet subscription packages to most Mendon households. Packages offered range from 100 Mbps to 1,000 Mbps of download speed, but for the average household in the US, 100 Mbps is generally sufficient for daily internet service.^{xvii}

The monthly cost of a Comcast Xfinity 100 Mbps internet package is \$30.00 per month, which adds up to \$360 a year. As the accompanying chart demonstrates, at this price point, households that earn \$10,000 annually must spend more than 3 percent of their household income on home internet costs. In contrast, households that earn \$200,000 per year must pay only slightly less than 0.2 percent of their income for the same plan. More than 5% of households in Mendon earn less than \$35,000 annually, meaning they must pay 1 percent or more of their household income to afford Comcast's most basic fixed internet plan.^{xviii}



Internet affordability challenges are also exacerbated by the high proportion of income that many Mendon households already spend on housing costs. A total of 34.5% of households in Mendon spend more than 30% of their household income on housing, making them “cost burdened” according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.^{xix}

Twenty-five percent of owner-occupied households and 9.5% of renter-occupied households are cost burdened. The share of burdened households is even higher for those earning under \$75,000. Around 73 percent of households in Mendon earning less than \$75,000 per year spend 30 percent or more of their income on housing costs.

Competition is another factor that influences the affordability of internet subscription prices. Studies suggest that competition between internet service providers (ISPs) results in lower internet prices for consumers.^{xx} The chart below provides a look into the internet subscription options available to Mendon residents. Because provider options may vary by location throughout the town, the chart displays internet subscription options available at a sample address on Maple Street in Mendon. Prices and download speed data were collected from ISP websites, specifically the new consumer labels that ISPs were recently mandated to display by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC).^{xxi}

Home Internet Plan	Provider	Technology	Typical Download Speed (Mbps)	Price / Month	Price / Mbps
Viasat Unleashed	Viasat	Satellite	15	\$99.99	\$6.67
Service Plan: Lite	HughesNet	Satellite	25	\$54.99	\$2.20
Viasat Essentials	Viasat	Satellite	45	\$69.99	\$1.56
Service Plan: Select	HughesNet	Satellite	50	\$79.99	\$1.60

Service Plan: Elite	HughesNet	Satellite	100	\$94.99	\$0.95
Service Plan: Fusion	HughesNet	Satellite	100	\$124.99	\$1.25
Xfinity 100 Mbps	Comcast	Cable	117	\$30.00	\$0.26
Residential Lite	Starlink	Satellite	200	\$80.00	\$0.40
Xfinity 200 Mbps	Comcast	Cable	231	\$45.00	\$0.19
Residential Standard	Starlink	Satellite	305	\$120.00	\$0.39
Fios 300 Mbps	Verizon	Fiber	311	\$59.99	\$0.19
Xfinity 300 Mbps	Comcast	Cable	352	\$50.00	\$0.14
Rely Home Internet GEO TE	T-Mobile	Fixed Wireless	415	\$45.00	\$0.11
Amplified Internet	T-Mobile	Fixed Wireless	498	\$65.00	\$0.13
All-In Internet	T-Mobile	Fixed Wireless	498	\$75.00	\$0.15
Fios 500 Mbps	Verizon	Fiber	517	\$84.99	\$0.16
Xfinity 500 Mbps	Comcast	Cable	586	\$55.00	\$0.09
Fios 1 Gig	Verizon	Fiber	939	\$99.99	\$0.11
Xfinity 1 Gig	Comcast	Cable	1170	\$60.00	\$0.05
Fios 2 Gig	Verizon	Fiber	2376	\$119.99	\$0.05

High-speed, reliable internet is important for businesses in Mendon to enable daily operations and communication with customers. Affordable internet service can help maintain competitiveness for local businesses, expand their outreach, and contribute to the Town's economy. The methodology used to compile the information on business internet service providers is the same as that used for home internet.

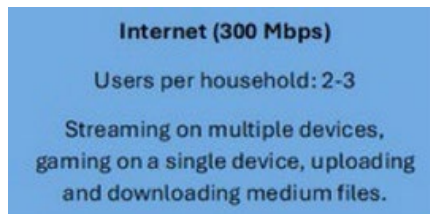
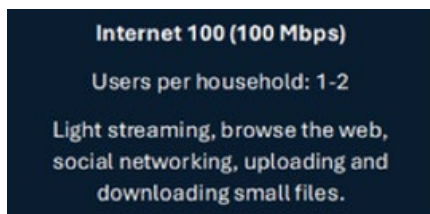
Business Internet Plan	Provider	Technology	Typical Download Speed (Mbps)	Price / Month	Price / Mbps
LTE Business Internet 25 Mbps	Verizon Business	Fiber	22.5	\$84.00	\$3.73
LTE Business Internet 50 Mbps	Verizon Business	Fiber	25	\$109.00	\$4.36
Select Pro	HughesNet	Satellite	50	\$84.99	\$1.70
Business Choice 100 Mbps / Unlimited	Viasat	Satellite	51	\$199.99	\$3.92
Business Added Choice 100 Mbps / Unlimited	Viasat	Satellite	51	\$214.99	\$4.22
Business Backup Choice 50 Mbps / 50 GB	Viasat	Satellite	53	\$49.99	\$0.94
Business Choice 100 Mbps / 300 GB	Viasat	Satellite	78	\$99.99	\$1.28
Elite Pro	HughesNet	Satellite	100	\$99.99	\$1.00
Fusion Pro	HughesNet	Satellite	100	\$129.99	\$1.30

Comcast Business Essential	Comcast Business	Cable	178	\$99.95	\$0.56
Comcast Business Standard	Comcast Business	Cable	357	\$149.95	\$0.42
Business Internet Unlimited	T-Mobile for Business	Fixed Wireless	361	\$70.00	\$0.19
Comcast Business Performance	Comcast Business	Cable	582	\$199.95	\$0.34
Comcast Business Advanced	Comcast Business	Cable	952	\$249.95	\$0.26
Comcast Business Gigabit Extra	Comcast Business	Cable	1415	\$399.95	\$0.28
Comcast Business 2 Gigabit	Comcast Business	Cable	2214	\$499.95	\$0.23

The need for more affordable internet pricing in Mendon is indicated by the number of households that signed up for the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP). Between May 2021 and April 2024, the ACP and its predecessor provided eligible low-income households that were a part of the program with a monthly discount (\$30) off the cost of broadband internet subscriptions.^{xxii} According to the Benton Institute for Broadband and Society, 378 Mendon households were eligible for enrollment in the ACP, and 74 households had enrolled in the program as of February 2024.^{xxiii} This enrollment level was slightly lower than what the Benton Institute predicted based on various socio-economic and community characteristics. In response to the ACP's termination, the Benton Institute ascribed a risk score of 27 to Mendon. Measured on a scale of 0 to 100, the risk score "indicates the degree to which households in a given zip code are at risk of losing or reducing internet connectivity should the ACP benefit lapse."^{xxiv}

Performance & Infrastructure

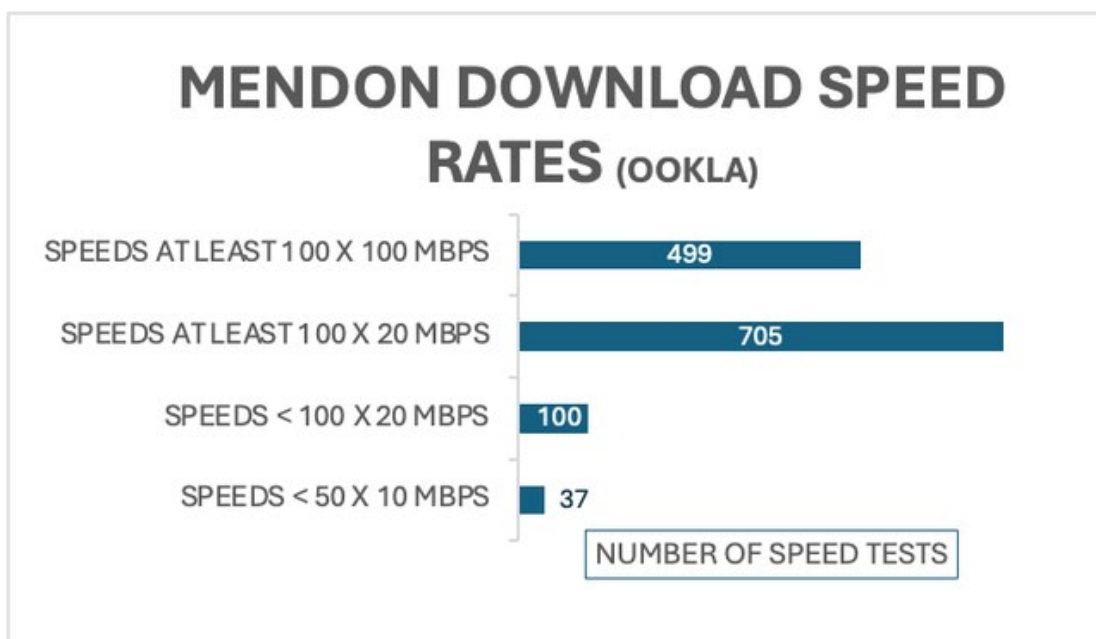
Routine use of the internet – from web browsing to telehealth appointments, to entertainment and video streaming – relies on a stable and speedy connection. Internet speed, defined as "how long it takes data to transfer back and forth to your device from the web server"^{xxv}, is measured in megabits per second (Mbps). It will affect web page load times, video or audio buffering, and virtually all other online activities. 'Broadband' internet is the benchmark for reliable internet access, and, in March of 2024, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) set a minimum standard for internet service to be



considered broadband. This standard requires a minimum download speed of 100 Mbps and an upload speed of 20 Mbps.^{xxvi}

According to 2021–2022 speed test data from Ookla, supplied by MBI, approximately 90% of Mendon internet users have a service that meets the current minimum criteria for broadband, while 10% of users are below the acceptable speeds. Ookla’s open-source internet speed test datasets^{xxvii} show that Mendon’s median download speed of 268.05 Mbps is slightly lower than the State median of 305.13 Mbps. It can be assumed that this data has improved in subsequent years.

There are other factors in the evaluation of internet performance, such as upload speed and latency. While these do not have standards set by the FCC, Internet Service Providers (ISPs) are required to inform customers of these factors by labeling their internet products with this information. According to Ookla data, Mendon’s median upload rate is 169.67 Mbps, significantly higher than the state median of 47.06 Mbps.^{xxviii}



Mendon has up to seven available service providers, though these options depend on a resident’s specific address. The two providers offering the fastest residential services are

Xfinity (cable) and Verizon (fiber), with advertised maximum download speeds of 1200 Mbps and 940 Mbps, respectively.

Internet Service Provider	Technology			
	Cable	Fiber	Fixed Wireless	Satellite
Xfinity	X			
Verizon Communications		X		
AT&T			X	
T-Mobile, USA			X	
Hughes Network System (Hughesnet)				X
Viasat				X
Space Exploration Technologies Corp. (Starlink)				X

Cable: Mendon uses existing cable TV infrastructure (coaxial cables) to connect users to the internet. Cable internet is generally reliable and offers high speeds. Though cable is potentially able to equal the speed of fiber, providers commonly limit speeds to accommodate bandwidth distribution.^{xxix}

Fiber: Fiber optic lines can connect users to the internet. Fiber internet offers the fastest speeds, symmetrical upload and download speeds, and “fiber’s design is simply better for data transmission over long distances than cable’s electrical signals.”^{xxx}

Fixed Wireless: This relies on stationary transmitters to provide wireless internet access via mobile networks such as 5G.^{xxxi} Towers need line-of-sight connection to perform well, and speeds are usually slower than cable internet speeds.^{xxxii}

Satellite: Satellite typically “Doesn’t rely on ground-laid infrastructure” but instead uses a dish to connect to orbiting satellites to transfer internet signals to your home. Compared to cable and fiber, satellite internet often has low speeds and strict data caps.^{xxxiii}

Community Outreach Process

Community outreach and involvement play a key role in the process. Between January and June of 2026, CMRPC staff had the opportunity to meet with stakeholders, organizations, and community groups, alongside hosting two public dialogue sessions to gain insight into the current digital landscape in Mendon. These conversations provided meaningful perspectives into the challenges and gaps the community is still currently facing, and helped to identify recommendations, strategies, and actions that the Town of Mendon can undertake to positively move towards the continuation of bridging the digital divide.

One-on-one Stakeholder Interviews: CMRPC staff met with community organizations and stakeholders throughout the projects process. Meeting with community members allowed us the opportunity to introduce the project's purpose to a wide range of individuals, as well as gaining an understanding of current assets available to the community currently; and areas of improvement that would bridge the current gap. These conversations allow us to pick up on themes and similar interests among members, as well as learning about unique opportunities Mendon has participated in previously, and what people may be looking forward to as it pertains to new opportunities.

Survey Distribution: Survey distribution allows us to capture additional information about the community and supports our existing conditions data analysis as well. The Town of Mendon and CMRPC distributed MBI's statewide survey in several ways. These methods of distribution included Facebook postings and ads, town websites and social media networks, as well as newsletters and physical flyers at locations such as the public library and the Council on Aging (COA). Over 70 responses have since been received.

Social Media: CMRPC promoted the community dialogues through its various social media channels. This includes Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, as well as the agency's monthly newsletter. CMRPC also created a public page on its website, dedicated to resources and updates regarding Mendon's Digital Inclusion dialogues.

Mendon Town Hall & Mendon Council on Aging: CMRPC hosted two public dialogues, one at Mendon Town Hall, and COA. The Town Hall dialogue provided a known, central, and accessible location for residents to participate. The COA allowed staff to engage directly with the towns aging population in a comfortable and familiar environment. CMRPC presented the project's timeline and intention, followed by breakout discussions led by staff and stakeholders attending.

Community Findings & Needs Assessment

CMRPC engaged Mendon's community organizations, residents, and stakeholders to assess the Town's digital divide and gain perspective on the current needs of the community.

One-on-one Stakeholder Interviews: CMRPC interviewed several organizations and stakeholders within spheres of advocacy, administration, social services, community development, and technology services. Questions that CMRPC staff used to guide stakeholder conversations included:

- What digital devices do your clients'/community members prefer?
- Are there digital services that people in your network struggle to access?
- Who in your network and organization lacks access to and/or struggles to afford Internet service?
- What does your organization have in place/ what is your organization doing to bridge the digital divide?
- What is the greatest barrier to digital access that you have noticed?
- What is the easiest barrier to digital access for your community to overcome?

Throughout the project's community engagement process and dialogue conversations, participants discussed the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact it has on the current gap in digital accessibility. Despite the community having resources that have allowed Mendon to take a proactive approach, there is still room to continue connecting residents to resources such as troubleshooting conversations with providers, one-on-one device support, or upgrading devices and hotspots at the local public library.

Internet Access and Affordability

Notable as a common issue among our rural/ semi-rural communities, is the improvement of internet access and connectivity in areas that are consistently spotty, whether it be personal Wi-Fi in the home, or outside using broadband. During our dialogue process, we learned about a resident's struggle with accessing consistent internet coverage in the home. This lack of consistency is described as frustrating, as previous medical emergencies have arisen, and have caused delays in connecting with the right people for intervention.

Beyond spotty coverage, working with providers such as Spectrum/Charter or Verizon when it comes to troubleshooting issues with connectivity comes with its own tensions. Although a minority of the aging population finds it easy to advocate for themselves, an overwhelming number do not find it easy to navigate situations when phone service representatives are not very responsive, or do not fully resolve issues.

From these conversations, many rely on intervention from family members that may be more tech savvy or rely on resources in the community such as connecting with peers at the COA, or the library as well.

As it pertains to affordability, residents are not impressed with the costs associated with in home Wi-Fi and data used on the go. Some residents reported billing costs being in the triple digits, although still navigating spotty coverage. Due to reliance on broadband for everyday tasks, most people still feel inclined to keep their current coverage despite the dissatisfaction in costs. “If you can’t afford broadband, you lose out on resources, connecting, and simply keeping up.” Some aging adults have forfeited using the internet all together, as they have found the pricing of services to be a barrier.

Regarding resources in the community for bridging gaps in connectivity, the Mendon Public Library supports the community with accessible hotspots that people may check out, as well as desktops available on site for use. Mendon’s Public Library staff have noticed that most individuals frequenting the space typically show up with their own device but may use the library as a space to access reliable internet. For those looking for access on the go, the hotspots are well utilized and almost always checked out for use. Some residents have noted that these hot spots are accessible but could use an upgrade as the current capabilities do pose limitations in internet access on occasion. Hotspots are a great option for residents that prefer not to have internet access at all in their home. Throughout our conversations, it is important to note that some were more interested in visiting the library when they needed internet access, as it is not a part of their daily routine and habits.

Device Access and Affordability

As previously discussed, the Mendon Public Library supports the community with internet access, whether it be onsite or the hotspots on rotation for checking out. The library has expressed that upgrades and additional hotspots are of interest, as there is a demand given how often they are checked out, four are currently on rotation, and currently only support 4G connectivity. Although desktops have been functional, staff also recognize the need to keep technology up to date and functional. Mendon’s community is quite small, supporting a little over 6,000. As most individuals support their own tech devices and internet connectivity, there are maybe 5-6 patrons that are regular users of the readily available devices at the library. Mendon has three desktop computers for adults, and three in the children’s area.

Although unable to connect with stakeholders at the Mendon Public Schools, Mendon's school district is front facing with their commitment and interests in providing students with technology and resources to enhance learning opportunities and experiences in the classroom. Noted in the [*Mendon-Upton Regional Schools Technology Plan, 2016-2021*](#), "We believe an individual's ability to effectively use and integrate technology into daily life is critical toward his/her future success." ^{xxxvii} The school district integrates technology across its K-12 curriculum, ensuring all students are equipped with a device. This is a common theme among school districts in Massachusetts, providing devices to students to ensure there are no gaps present in access.

Taking access a further step, the Mendon-Upton School District has recently been proactive about introducing artificial intelligence (AI) into the classroom. At Miscoe Hill Middle School, students had the opportunity to experiment with an online program called Magic School, an AI platform created to support students' learning. This aims to introduce students to using the ever-present resource that has now become a common part of participating online, as well as maintaining a guideline and providing a framework to AI usage. "[AI tools must support, not substitute, student learning.](#)" ^{xxxviii}

Digital Literacy

Digital literacy is important in supporting a community's goals of achieving digital inclusion for all. Without digital literacy skills, internet connectivity and device access cannot be fully utilized by users. Throughout community engagement, attendees recognized the value of digital tools, with two participants noting that technology allows them to stay connected with family virtually anywhere and at any time. Others shared that they regularly use online resources to stay informed about local events, community services, and town news.

The Public Library has supported high school and college students volunteering their time to assist residents with technology questions. More recently, students from Nipmuc Regional High School have also visited the Council on Aging (COA) to provide one-on-one technology assistance to seniors. While these efforts have been beneficial, attendees expressed that more consistent support would better meet community needs. Many participants described the library as a valuable and reliable resource, noting that when they ask for help, they receive it. However, library staff often find themselves providing technical assistance while balancing the responsibilities of a small public library with limited staff capacity.

Residents shared that they frequently rely on online resources, such as YouTube, to troubleshoot devices, learn everyday digital skills, and access leisure activities like streaming movies. Participants also discussed the growing use of artificial intelligence (AI) applications as problem-solving tools for troubleshooting technology issues, and members of the aging population expressed interest in learning how AI can be incorporated into digital literacy training. At the same time, attendees acknowledged uncertainty about AI's role in everyday life, with some expressing frustration over AI-powered smartphone assistants that provide incorrect suggestions or make inaccurate assumptions.

Several digital literacy challenges were identified. Participants noted that the interfaces of devices and applications change frequently, making it difficult for some users to complete routine tasks such as checking email, paying bills, or accessing community information. Residents also discussed the challenges of managing telehealth appointments and accessing medical information online, particularly as many healthcare services that were once conducted in person or through paper records have transitioned to digital platforms. While the Mendon COA offers health insurance counseling through scheduled one-on-one appointments, attendees expressed interest in receiving additional support for navigating online healthcare services.

Residents also expressed a desire for more assistance completing everyday online tasks, including activities such as renewing licenses, filing taxes, and accessing government services. Many shared that they hesitate to complete these tasks independently because they fear making mistakes, damaging their devices, or exposing themselves to cybersecurity risks. Participants suggested that instruction from peers with similar experiences would help make learning more approachable and relatable. Supporting this need, the Mendon COA recently received a grant to develop more structured technology classes focused on helping older adults complete essential life activities online. The COA also hopes to introduce a remote learning option, expanding access to residents who may be unable to attend classes in person.

Cybersecurity also emerged as an important concern. Seniors expressed apprehension about online safety, and one attendee shared that they stopped using a MacBook after it became infected with a virus. Participants also noted that young adults remain vulnerable to online scams, highlighting that cybersecurity education is important across all age groups.

Community members expressed a strong desire for additional digital literacy and technology navigation support. Participants suggested providing device users with printed, step-by-step troubleshooting guides that address common issues before requiring them to contact customer service. Library staff noted that they have already begun distributing flyers with troubleshooting instructions, helping patrons build confidence by resolving common issues independently. Participants also identified the value of establishing a digital navigator position, emphasizing that a dedicated, unbiased resource would provide reliable one-on-one assistance without attempting to sell products or services.

Library staff also discussed future goals and ideas that have been incorporated into their FY27 community planning, including expanding services to individuals who are homebound. Although the library serves as an accessible community hub, traveling to the facility is not feasible for all residents. Providing outreach services to homebound community members offers an opportunity to continue building digital literacy skills for those who may otherwise have limited access to assistance. The library would also like to expand programming that addresses hesitancy surrounding device use through the addition of a part-time staff member. Overall, library staff emphasized that increased one-on-one support would strengthen existing services and help address current staff capacity limitations. Additionally, the library hopes to collaborate more closely with the COA to expand digital literacy services and educational opportunities throughout the community.

Digital Literacy & Provider Options

As technology continues to evolve, residents noted that maintaining devices has become an ongoing challenge. One participant described visiting a local computer store to renew the security software on their computer, only to learn that Windows 10 was no longer being supported and that upgrading the device was the only practical option. For many, particularly older adults, the rapid pace at which devices and software become outdated makes it difficult to keep up with changing technology. Beyond the financial burden of replacing devices, residents shared that adapting to new operating systems and interfaces can be overwhelming.

Participants also discussed the challenges of purchasing and upgrading devices. Understanding device specifications, comparing features, and determining whether a product meets individual needs can be difficult, especially for users with limited technical knowledge. Several attendees expressed a preference for simpler devices that prioritize essential functions rather than offering an extensive range of features. Residents also noted that they often lack confidence when making purchasing

decisions and face similar uncertainty when navigating cybersecurity recommendations or accessing sensitive information online.

Community members also shared concerns about their interactions with internet and technology service providers. Some residents indicated that they rely on service representatives for guidance but are unsure whether the recommendations they receive are based on their actual needs. One attendee described visiting Xfinity for a simple service request but was instead encouraged to purchase bundled services and additional devices, including two Apple Watches that they did not want or need. Others noted that smartphones and other devices frequently require mandatory software updates, leaving users with little choice but to adapt to changing interfaces and features. These experiences highlight the importance of providing residents with unbiased guidance so they can make informed decisions about devices, services, and technology that best meet their needs.

Strengths, Weaknesses, Vulnerabilities

Throughout the outreach process and community dialogues, participants, the town, and CMRPC identified strengths and weaknesses, allowing the planning team to evaluate opportunities to further digital inclusion goals.

Strengths:

- Mendon Public Library
- Mendon Council on Aging
- Mendon-Upton Public Schools
- Community-based businesses/organizations

Weaknesses:

- Lack of staff capacity at anchor institutions
- Age barriers in digital literacy accessibility
- Transparency among ISP services and devices available
- Spotty broadband conditions in homes and rural areas

Opportunities:

- Grant funding opportunities currently implemented at the Council on Aging
- Expanding digital literacy services and devices in local organizations such as the Public Library
- Expanding digital services and assistance to homebound residents

- Expanding digital literacy opportunities in public schools and the broader community with AI assistance

Threats & Challenges:

- Discontinuation of the Affordable Connectivity Program
- Increasing cost of internet plans and computing devices
- Federal funding cuts through MBI for implementation services

Limitations

CMRPC and the Town of Mendon dedicated considerable effort to engaging residents and community stakeholders throughout this project. While these outreach activities provided valuable input, several limitations should be acknowledged to better understand the scope of the findings and identify opportunities for future engagement.

The project's 90-day timeline limited the amount of time available for outreach and community engagement. In addition, introducing the concept of digital inclusion to residents required more time than the project schedule allowed, as many community members were unfamiliar with the topic. Outreach efforts also relied primarily on existing communication channels and established networks, which may not have reached all segments of the community or fully captured the range of resident experiences and needs.

Strategic Recommendations

1. INCREASE PARTNERSHIP LEVELS BETWEEN TOWN DEPARTMENTS TO PROVIDE ADDITIONAL ASSISTANCE AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR TECHNOLOGY SUPPORT

Implementation Time Frame: Short Term (12-18 Months)

Cost: \$

Effort Level: Low

Description: The Town should work to coordinate digital literacy and technology support efforts across departments to ensure residents have equitable access to online services. Cross-department collaboration can help ensure that residents are connected to the right resources regardless of where they first seek assistance. Joint technology support initiatives, shared referral systems, and coordinated outreach efforts can reduce barriers to accessing online services while improving the overall resident experience. Leveraging existing staff expertise and community touchpoints will allow the Town to provide more comprehensive digital support without requiring significant new resources.

2. INCREASE DIGITAL LITERACY EDUCATION FOR MENDON'S OLDER ADULTS, WITH A FOCUS ON PEER-LED PROGRAMS

Implementation Time Frame: Short Term (12-18 Months)

Cost: \$\$

Effort Level: Medium

Description: The Town of Mendon should expand digital literacy education opportunities for older adults through the Mendon Senior Center. Community feedback indicates that some older residents face challenges using computers, smartphones, online services, and other digital tools needed to access information, healthcare resources, and government services. Strengthening technology education at the Senior Center can help residents build confidence and develop practical skills that support greater independence and well-being.

As a trusted gathering place for older adults, the Senior Center is well positioned to serve as a hub for digital literacy programming. Mendon should support regular technology workshops, drop-in assistance sessions, and peer-led learning opportunities that provide hands-on guidance in a comfortable and familiar setting. Seniors have expressed interest and concerns in the following topics:

- Device onboarding and navigation
- Identifying scams
- Navigating telehealth services
- Using technology-based services offered in public settings

Program Example: *GetSetUp* is a live classroom platform for aging adults. The virtual classroom setting offers opportunities for physical, mental, and social growth creating participation to empower older adults. *GetSetUp* offers various opportunities to learn about technology and other subjects. Users have been able to scale up their experience and skills with using computers and applications such as One Drive, Excel, Word, and Gmail.

3. INVESTIGATE DEVICE RECYCLING AND REUSE AS A COST-EFFECTIVE APPROACH TO SUPPORT ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE DEVICES

Implementation Time Frame: Medium (2-5 Years)

Cost: \$\$

Effort Level: Medium

Description: Developing a device recycling program that allows for the reuse and/or refurbishing of electronics is a cost-effective mode of increasing access to affordable digital devices. Working with Mendon's public schools and local technology businesses such as the Mendon Computer Outlet, the town could provide internet-enabled devices to residents in need.

Case Study: Organizations in the U.S. have recognized that supporting the recycling and refurbishing of devices can aid in bridging the digital divide. Located in Dawsonville, GA, New Life is a technology group founded in 2015. Since starting as a non-profit, the New Life organization recycles, refurbishes, and redistributes old computers, IT equipment, and electronic waste as well. New Life offers its community

free pickups, as well as accepting drop-offs at a central location. New Life is focused on putting refurbished technology back into the hands of its community members, as well as being dedicated to curbing the environmental impact of e-waste.

4. EXPAND DEVICE INVENTORY AT THE MENDON PUBLIC LIBRARY

Implementation Time Frame: Short - Medium Term (1-3 Years)

Cost: \$\$\$

Effort Level: Low-Medium

Description: Mendon's Taft Public Library offers residents access to desktop computers at the library as well as loaning a limited number of hot spots. Conversations with both library patrons and staff identified that a technology refresh in the library along with additional devices for residents to use at home would be of great benefit. The Town and Public Library should work to bring new, up to date, devices to the library and increase the number of hot spots and other devices available for residents to take home.

5. PROVIDE ONLINE SAFETY TRAINING TO MENDON RESIDENTS

Implementation Time Frame: Short Term (1-2 Years)

Cost: \$\$

Effort Level: Low - Medium

Description: As residents increasingly rely on digital technologies for communication, banking, healthcare, education, and access to government services, online safety has become an essential component of digital equity. Many individuals—particularly older adults, families with young children, and those with limited digital experience—may be vulnerable to cybersecurity threats such as phishing scams, identity theft, online fraud, misinformation, and privacy breaches. Providing accessible online safety training will help residents develop the knowledge and confidence needed to navigate digital environments securely and responsibly. By partnering with local institutions such as the Public Library, schools, and senior center, and regional organizations such as the Blackstone Valley Hub for Workforce Development, Mendon can offer workshops,

resources, and awareness campaigns that equip residents with practical skills to protect their personal information and recognize online risks.

In addition to in-person learning, the Town of Mendon should implement an ongoing online safety awareness campaign through municipal communication channels. The Town's website, social media accounts, library communications, school newsletters, and Council on Aging outreach materials can be used to share information on topics such as phishing scams, identity theft, password security, online privacy, misinformation, and safe use of social media. The campaign could include monthly cybersecurity tips, scam alerts, short educational videos, and links to trusted resources from state and federal agencies.

6. EXPLORE CREATING A DIGITAL NAVIGATOR POSITION OR PROGRAM TO CONNECT MENDON'S COMMUNITY WITH RESOURCES, PARTNERSHIPS, AND TRAINING FOCUSED ON BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE AND ELIMINATING BARRIERS TO DIGITAL EQUITY.

Implementation Time Frame: Short - Medium (1-3 years)

Cost: \$\$\$\$

Effort Level: Medium - High

Description: The public charette process and discussions with local organizations reveal a clear need for individuals who can assist community members with various technological challenges. The National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA) has created a model for digital navigators, who support the digital inclusion process—covering devices, digital skills, and home connectivity—through continuous engagement with community members. The Town of Mendon should consider implementing the NDIA model when establishing a digital navigator role or program.

As a way to create efficiencies and cost savings, this position could be implemented as a staff person shared across departments or even across more than one community. The digital navigator could also be a contracted position, designed to specific services at specific times and places.

Community needs that digital navigators could address include:

- Facilitate the expansion of digital skills training for life, work, and learning, complementing existing offerings at the Taft Public Library.

- Collaborate with the local senior center to enhance confidence in the aging population, helping them combat scams and use technology for telehealth services and continued civic and social engagement.
- Assist incoming ESL residents in connecting to community resources that may be less accessible due to language barriers.

Case Study: Arizona State University

Arizona State University, in collaboration with the Maricopa County Broadband Initiative and the Digital Equity Institute (DEI), has partnered to address the digital divide in Arizona. The Digital Navigators are supported by a central hub that manages incoming phone calls, resolves technology issues, and enhances digital literacy skills within the community. The Digital Navigators team plays a key role in bridging the digital divide in Maricopa County, acting as a vital resource for those facing challenges in navigating the digital landscape. ^{xxix}

Opportunities and Resources

AARP Community Challenge

The AARP Community Challenge provides grant funding for community-based programs promoting livability for people of all ages, especially older adults. 2026 grants included projects to increase broadband access and adoption, as well as digital skills training for older adults.

AARP Senior Planet

AARP Senior Planet is a program that allows older adults the opportunity to participate in a variety of offerings to achieve positive measurable outcomes in one or more areas of their lives: social engagement, creative expression, civic participation, health and wellness, and financial security. Alongside structured multi-week courses, this program includes workshops, lectures, special events, guest speakers, and participation-driven affinity groups.

Commonwealth Corporation Youth Works Funding

This opportunity is a state-funded youth employment program that supports teens and young adults in developing the experiences and skills needed to find and maintain employment. Mendon may be interested in leveraging the program, as Youth Work participants can be employed as digital navigators for their communities.

Community Compact IT Grant Program

This grant program awards grants of up to \$200,000 to support the implementation of IT projects by funding capital needs such as technology infrastructure, software, planning initiatives, design, installation services, or training that a community may be seeking. Funding awarded this year prioritized projects improving digital accessibility for residents with disabilities.

GetSetUp

GetSetUp is a virtual platform that offers aging adults the opportunity for physical, mental, and social growth. GetSetUp aims to address the lack of sufficient infrastructure to support the aging population by providing a wide range of programs for individuals to participate in. GetSetUp is also dedicated to addressing the digital divide by providing training courses in line with device onboarding, application use, scam prevention, and more.

Lead for America – American Connection Corps

The American Connection Corps (ACC) is a program of Lead for America. The ACC is dedicated to advancing economic success in digitally disconnected communities. ACC Members support host communities through active community engagement and resource development. This program builds the capacity of nonprofits, government entities (local, tribal, or state), and faith-based organizations while providing training opportunities to members.

Lifeline Program

The Lifeline Program supports households with a household income at or below 135% of the federal poverty guidelines (this will vary depending on the size of the household), as well as program-based eligibility through Medicaid, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Supplemental Security Income, etc. Lifeline provides a monthly service discount of up to \$9.25 for eligible households; Lifeline subscribers have the choice to apply their discount to either a home phone service, home internet service when available, or a wireless phone plan with data.

Massachusetts Broadband Institute at MassTech

A division of the Massachusetts Technology Collaborative, Massachusetts Broadband Institute (MBI) is working to extend high-speed internet access and availability across the state. To achieve this, MBI uses state and federal funding to launch infrastructure expansion programs that target areas of the state that lack high-speed internet access as well as digital equity programs that tackle barriers to internet adoption and increase availability, addressing critical issues around affordability, enhanced public Wi-Fi, the need for internet-

enabled devices, and digital literacy training. In addition to the Municipal Digital Equity Planning program, MBI programs include the following:

- **Broadband Equity Access & Deployment Program (BEAD)**

The Deployment Phase of the BEAD program will fund infrastructure projects that will connect the remaining BSLs that are unserved (below a 25/3 Mbps threshold) and underserved (below a 100/20 Mbps threshold), in addition to eligible CAIs that facilitate greater use of broadband service by vulnerable populations and lack access to 1 Gbps symmetrical service. In February 2026, the National Telecommunications and Information Administration approved the Massachusetts BEAD final proposal of \$18.8 million for broadband connectivity for underserved homes and communities.

- **Connected & Online**

The goal of the program is to expand access to education, workforce training and telehealth by establishing public device lending programs and on-site device stations, especially in Gateway Cities and rural communities. Devices will be fully loaded with software, selected accessories and warranties at no cost to awardees. Funding is provided by the U.S. Treasury Capital Projects Fund (CPF).

Mobile Beacon

Mobile Beacon is dedicated to connecting communities digitally through mobile connectivity solutions such as hotspots, tablets, laptops, and routers to provide high-speed internet to libraries, nonprofits, schools, healthcare, and government organizations. Mobile beacon provides qualifying organizations with affordable, unlimited, high-speed internet. 501(c)(3) nonprofits, schools, and public libraries are eligible for Mobile Beacon's TechSoup program.

National Digital Inclusion Alliance

The National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA) implements digital inclusion through its four pillars: support, policy, practitioner, awareness, and data & research. The organization has a plethora of resources including models for implementing digital navigators, digital equity and inclusion webinars, and digital inclusion guidebooks and manuals.

Northstar Digital Literacy Curriculum

The curriculum is aligned with Northstar Digital Literacy standards, on topics including essential computer skills, essential software skills, and daily technology use. Each unit of curriculum contains 7-9 two-hour lesson plans (Career Search Skills includes 15 lesson plans to address the extensive standards for that topic). The curriculum is accessible as a resource to subscribing Northstar locations. Single-location subscription pricing for a non-

profit, school, or library starts at \$550/year. The website includes free online digital literacy skill assessments and other external resources.

Potential Opportunity in the Pipeline as of July 2026

Digital Opportunity Foundation Act of 2026

This initiative seeks to establish a new nonprofit foundation that uses both public and private investments to expand digital opportunities nationwide. Two of the goals highlighted by the foundation is awarding grants and supporting research, as well as providing training and education.

Conclusion

The digital equity planning process revealed that Mendon has many digital strengths. The majority of households in Town have an internet subscription and at least one internet-enabled device, and the town benefits from resources like the Taft Public Library, the Council on Aging, and the Mendon-Upton Regional School District, which already serve as informal hubs for technology access and support. This planning process also revealed gaps that are easy to overlook in a community with high overall connectivity rates, such as spotty service in pockets of town, rising internet and device costs that fall hardest on older adults, low-income households, and renters, and the increasing need for hands-on digital literacy support, particularly for tasks like telehealth, online safety, and government services.

These gaps are not evenly distributed. Residents who are 65 and older, households earning below the town median, and renters face disproportionate barriers to affording and using digital tools, even where broadband infrastructure is not the limiting factor. Expanding digital device access, digital literacy assistance programs, and providing affordable service are crucial components needed to bridge the digital divide in Mendon.

The strategic recommendations in this are designed to meet residents where they already are: at the library, at the Council on Aging, in the schools, and within the town's existing community organizations. Implementing them will involve coordination among Town departments, the school district, and community partners, as well as the pursuit of state and federal grant opportunities as they become available. As technology, online services, and the skills needed to use them continue to evolve, Mendon's ability to keep residents of all ages and backgrounds connected online will become increasingly important. By taking on this planning process, the Town has increased its capacity do so.

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