State of Maine
Digital Equity Plan

MAINE CONNECTIVITY AUTHORITY

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DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE · UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Digital Equity Plan
State of Maine

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1. Executive Summary

Understanding Digital Equity in Maine

Maine faces a perfect storm of challenges in achieving digital equity. Our remote and rugged terrain makes our state one of the most difficult and expensive to reach with digital infrastructure. As the oldest state in the nation, we have a significant population that hasn't grown up with all of the technology available today. Maine's median household and per capita income lag behind most other states, at 34th and 29th, respectively, in the state rankings. Almost all of us live in small, rural communities with limited resources. These forces combine to shape the contours of the digital divide in Maine.

The National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) estimates that 89% of Mainers identify as a population likely to be most impacted by the digital divide, referred to as "covered populations" in the Digital Equity Act. These important audiences include: older adults, low-income households, people living in rural areas, veterans, individuals with a disability, individuals with a language barrier, individuals who are members of a racial or ethnic minority group, and people who are incarcerated.

Through the engagement process, we set out to explore the experience of many Mainers. We learned that the barriers to digital equity that impact all of us are exacerbated for these covered populations in our state. It's not enough to simply have access to broadband service; we must also be able to afford that service and have the skills, devices, and support to truly benefit from it.

These challenges and their pervasive impact on Maine's other strategic priorities–economic development, education, climate change, or health equity–have also helped contribute to Maine's resourcefulness, resolve and focus. We are lucky to have an amazing ecosystem of organizations and programs across our state that can form a strong foundation to knock down the barriers so many of us face.

One thing has been clear and consistent throughout the planning process: Maine people recognize that digital connectivity is essential to our daily lives. As one focus group participant said, **"You can *survive* without internet access, but you can't really *live* or function."** Our goal through this digital equity strategy and plan is not just to enable covered populations to *survive* in bridging the digital divide - but to *thrive*.

We must ensure that current and future generations of Maine people can access opportunities provided by connectivity to thrive in an increasingly connected world–especially the most vulnerable among us, for whom reliable access to the internet will have the most transformative impact.

Our Goals & Vision

To address these barriers and build from our strengths, the digital equity plan for Maine strives to ensure that every person in our state, regardless of their background, resources, circumstances, identity, or community, will have equitable access to the digital world, including:

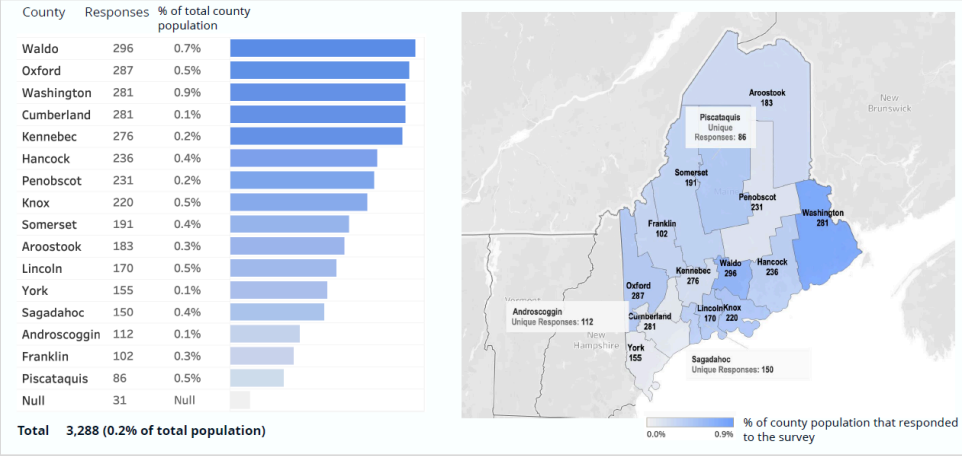
1. Affordable, reliable internet connectivity;
2. An affordable device that meets their needs;
3. The opportunity to develop digital skills and access technical support;
4. Tools and information to protect themselves and their families online;
5. And online state resources that are inclusive and accessible for all.

Designing strategies to advance these elements of digital equity will serve as the foundation to further state goals to build a thriving economy, increase educational attainment, support older adults to age in place, and improve health outcomes through telehealth.

In short, digital equity and inclusion for Mainers means that we are not held back by the digital world, regardless of our circumstances: we don't have to think about whether we have internet at home, whether the service is reliable or fast enough, or whether we can afford to pay the monthly bill for it. We have a device that makes it easy to accomplish everyday tasks like email, checking a bank balance, or talking with a doctor or our child's teacher by video. We have ready access to help from someone who speaks our language when it doesn't work! And we feel comfortable recognizing an online scammer and knowing how to avoid giving away personal information. With this day-to-day experience of digital equity, Maine people can thrive.

How We Created This Plan

To create this plan, MCA and its partners conducted significant outreach and engagement between January and June 2023. Six stakeholder groups comprising 117 individuals, organizations, and agencies contributed to the engagement process. Additionally, three formal tribal consultations were held with the Chiefs of the Mi'kmaq Nation, the Passamaquoddy Tribe at Sipayik, and the Passamaquoddy Tribe at Motahkomikuk.



County	Responses	% of total county population
Waldo	296	0.7%
Oxford	287	0.5%
Washington	281	0.9%
Cumberland	281	0.1%
Kennebec	276	0.2%
Hancock	236	0.4%
Penobscot	231	0.2%
Knox	220	0.5%
Somerset	191	0.4%
Aroostook	183	0.3%
Lincoln	170	0.5%
York	155	0.1%
Sagadahoc	150	0.4%
Androscoggin	112	0.1%
Franklin	102	0.3%
Piscataquis	86	0.5%
Null	31	Null

The statewide **Maine Broadband Survey** collected over 3,200 responses online and in hard copy versions and was translated into 12 languages. Thirteen focus groups were facilitated by MCA and hosted by organizations that serve or represent the covered populations. An additional 16 community meetings were held around the state to collect feedback from the general public. Almost twenty partners from Maine attended the Net Inclusion conference to explore best practices and learn from others around the country.

Thirteen regional and tribal broadband partners supported this planning effort, convening 180 digital equity coalition partners, conducting 651 interviews, and creating a digital equity plan for each region and tribal community. MCA and its partners hosted the first-ever Digital Equity Workshop facilitated by the National Digital Inclusion Alliance, bringing together 100 participants and concluding the engagement.

What We've Learned

Summary of Assets

The first step in understanding the state of digital equity in Maine was to catalog and evaluate the programs and organizations currently providing digital equity and inclusion information and services. In late 2022, the Maine Connectivity Authority contracted with the University of Maine Center on Aging to research and create the first Digital Equity Asset Inventory for the State of Maine. This inventory included 93 organizations, programs, and resources around the state.

Courtesy of NDIA

In addition, MCA worked with each of the 13 Regional and Tribal Broadband partners to identify additional assets in their regions through individual and organizational interviews. The resources collected in these two processes will continue to evolve and be updated regularly for use by the public and partners. The outreach and engagement required to keep the asset inventory relevant will be a shared responsibility of the digital equity ecosystem in Maine and will be administered by MCA. The digital equity assets in the State of Maine are limited–often by resources and capacity–in size and scope, resulting in varying levels of digital inclusion programming and available resources from place to place and very few resources focused on some of the covered populations. As a result, assets often provide modest digital inclusion support to the covered populations relative to the need.

We will leverage the following collaborators or networks to reach our digital equity goals:

- **Core Digital Equity Partners**, including the National Digital Equity Center, Give IT. Get IT., Maine Department of Education, Adult Education Programs, Maine's Public Libraries and the Maine School and Library Network.

- **Networks of opportunity,** such as Community Action Programs or Area Agencies on Aging, are organizations we identified that provide direct support and have existing relationships with the covered populations. Though most of these networks are not currently doing digital inclusion work or doing it inconsistently with limited resources, they are well positioned with existing relationships with the people and communities we must reach with digital inclusion programs and education.
- **Regional and Tribal Broadband Partners**, thirteen organizational partners identified to support community planning for infrastructure solutions and digital equity planning for each region and Tribe. Thanks to the work of these partners, there are now 13 separate regional and tribal digital equity coalitions with 180 partners engaged.
- **Digital Equity Taskforce,** a statewide coalition of over 40 partners who helped guide the development of this plan. At both the regional and state level, the partners are organizations that represent, serve, or support the covered populations.

Summary of Barriers

The outreach and engagement period has surfaced many barriers consistently faced by Maine people and communities. Most community members and covered populations see access to broadband as essential but find it difficult to rely on existing broadband infrastructure.

- The **quality of internet connections** causes frustration for many Mainers, whether because of a slow connection, a lack of capacity to support all the devices and uses, or periodic outages. Our Maine Broadband Survey showed that 40% of respondents are dissatisfied with their connection.
- **Cost is a significant barrier** to many. Users often have difficulty navigating available service options and prices to ensure they get what they need for an affordable price. 47% of the survey respondents have at least some difficulty paying for their internet service.
- Users of all types are **concerned about internet safety** and have low levels of comfort protecting themselves online. In our survey, 93% of respondents are concerned about internet safety, focusing on effectively protecting older adults and children. In focus groups, community meetings, and interviews, Maine people named very few resources, tools or sources of information available to bolster their internet safety.
- **Access to devices** is not always considered a barrier, with many people saying they have sufficient devices to meet their needs. However, many describe ongoing issues that could be resolved with improved device access, a newer device, or available technical support. In our survey, just 5% of respondents visited a trusted local institution for technical support, most utilized friends, family, or coworkers for support, and more than a quarter simply gave up when they couldn't fix their device. For many of the covered populations, the cost of the device itself is a barrier.
- Our engagement reinforced the widespread need for **digital skill building**, especially among older adults and other covered populations.

Covered populations had less confidence in every digital skill category measured in the survey compared to other respondents. People in focus groups and community meetings noted a desire for various learning formats, including one-on-one and small groups. Further comments clarified that classes are rarely tailored to specific covered populations and often do not start at an appropriate skill level or use language that people understand.

- Most people see the benefit of **government processes and resources offered online**. Over 92% of survey respondents reported using the internet to access government resources, but most find it difficult. Many struggle to use these resources because of a lack of internet service at home or accessibility of the sites, forms, or processes, especially when viewed on a phone or not provided in the user's first language.

In each of the elements of digital inclusion that we researched for this plan, the barriers were more intense and manifested in specific ways for the more vulnerable covered populations. As we move forward, MCA and its partners must prioritize resources to address these more difficult barriers first.

Our Strategies & Approach

This plan outlines key strategies to address the barriers to access, affordability, and adoption that build on our strengths and assets. Through the planning process, we discovered that Maine has strong collaborators and partners well positioned to reach those most impacted by the digital divide. To take advantage of this moment, we will work together to target investments that have the greatest impact in the short term and raise significantly more resources to sustain and grow our effort over time.

1 **Create the Basic Building Blocks to Advance Digital Equity -** Maine must invest in the core capacity, tools, and resources to help advance digital equity across our state. These investments include sustaining digital equity staffing, establishing a digital equity committee of the board as a standing body to guide our work, and adjusting funding programs to ensure that digital equity is used as a lens when making program decisions and prioritizing investments. The digital equity asset inventory, digital equity events and education, coalition building, and tracking impact are crucial to ensure we sustain and grow this work over time.

2 **Leverage Partnerships to Reach Places & People -** Maine has many organizational partners and networks that are significant assets to enable digital inclusion programs and activities. We must work together to reach every corner of the state geographically while focusing on people and communities facing increased barriers to connecting. We can reach more people and places by leveraging the work of core digital inclusion organizations with partners serving particular regions or specific covered populations to share best practices and digital inclusion expertise. It will be crucial to embed and align digital inclusion activity into networks with existing relationships with covered populations.

3 **Focus on Affordability -** We must focus attention on strategies that can improve the affordability of internet service, particularly for the covered populations for whom this is a significant barrier. These strategies will involve supporting Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) enrollment for eligible households, instituting targeted policy solutions, launching an apartment wifi program to connect residents of affordable housing units across the state and increasing the availability of different technologies to enable more options for consumers.

4 **Launch Statewide Education & Information Campaigns -** The State must coordinate education campaigns centrally, providing a structure and tools for various partners to engage and participate. MCA will work with collaborators to design and launch statewide campaigns promoting internet safety and device refurbishment, providing practical tools and resources. We will also leverage existing tools such as 211 to provide information about digital inclusion programs and resources, working closely with telehealth partners to promote and share best practices. Lastly, MCA will lead the development of an educational campaign with multimedia storytelling to illustrate examples of the digital divide and the impact of digital equity on Mainers' lives.

5 **Sustain and Grow Our Investment in Digital Equity -** Maine's commitment to digital equity requires ongoing investment to stretch funding and enable impact. To activate and sustain digital inclusion in Maine, we will need to facilitate a diverse array of partnerships to raise funding beyond what may be available from the federal government. MCA will seek to double the resources to support the digital equity ecosystem by creating a Digital Equity Fund to leverage capacity and implementation funds and provide a pathway for the private and philanthropic sectors to sustain impact. As the State's digital equity and inclusion needs to grow and evolve, a need to support literacy, adoption, awareness, and access across geography and population types will remain. This fund will serve as a mechanism to raise funds and strategically sustain and grow a healthy ecosystem designed for digital inclusion.

How We'll Measure Success

As we implement the strategies above, we will also begin monitoring our progress toward success. MCA will integrate these key metrics into our existing progress monitoring framework and share the results annually. A more in-depth interim evaluation will be completed mid-way through the implementation period in 2027, and a final report will be generated in 2030, with additional surveys and focus groups conducted at these points. More detailed metrics associated with these measurable objectives can be found in Section 2.3 Strategies & Objectives. They are also outlined briefly below:

1. Increase Broadband Access

- Every Mainer who wants an internet connection can get one by prioritizing infrastructure deployment to the 42,000 locations across the state with no connection (service of 25/3 Mbps or less).

- In addition, Maine will work to improve service to approximately 50,000 locations with unreliable & slow service below 100/20 Mbps.

2. Improve Affordability of Internet Service

- Increase enrollment in the Affordable Connectivity Program (or its successor) by 84,000 households by 2029, increasing the enrollment percentage to 62%.
- Expand free or low-cost connectivity (wired or wifi) for residents of affordable housing units, ensuring service to approximately 41,000 households in subsidized rentals.

3. Ensure Access to Affordable Devices (Desktops, laptops, tablets) & Technical Support

- Distribute 50,000 free or low-cost computer devices that meet the user's needs to covered populations by 2029
- Secure 25,000 donated devices from businesses, institutions, and agencies to refurbish
- Improve access to and awareness of technical support

4. Improve Mainers' Digital Skills

- Provide 50,000 people with a personal digital skills assessment or digital skills training
- Improve the digital skills confidence of covered populations across all digital skill categories

5. Help Mainers Stay Safe Online

- Reach at least 50,000 Mainers with internet safety outreach and education programming
- Improve Mainers' ability to stay safe online and protect their personal privacy and data

6. Make it Easier to Access Resources & Programs Online

- Complete a user-focused accessibility audit on the Top 10 critical state programs used most by covered populations
- Improve Mainers' confidence and experience in accessing state and local government, and other services, online

7. Sustain and Grow Our Investment

- Raise $15 million for a Maine Digital Equity Fund from private sector partners, philanthropic partners and others

Looking toward the Future

By working together to implement the plan outlined in the following pages, we can ensure Maine people and communities can connect within and beyond our borders, creating pathways of opportunity to realize the full economic, educational, health, social, civic, and cultural benefits of being connected. Focusing on our goals of securing access, ensuring affordability, and enabling adoption for all will reinforce our core message:

There is a place in Maine's economy and our communities for everyone to thrive.

2. Introduction and Vision for Digital Equity

2.1 Vision

The future of Maine is highly connected. Though we live in a place where the opportunity to unplug is everywhere you turn, our priority is to ensure that the digital world is accessible to all of us.

We envision a Maine where all of us, especially those traditionally underserved and facing more barriers to being connected, can take full advantage of the economic, educational, health, civic, social and other benefits that reliable, affordable, high-speed broadband can provide. By connecting everyone and ensuring that Mainers have the support and resources to realize the benefits of that connectivity fully, we can ensure there is a place for everyone to thrive in our economy and communities.

Every person in Maine, regardless of background, resources, circumstances, identity, or community, will have equitable access to the digital world, including:

1. Affordable, reliable internet connectivity at home;
2. An affordable device that meets their needs;
3. The opportunity to develop digital skills and access technical support;
4. Tools and information to protect themselves and their families online;
5. And online state resources that are inclusive and accessible for all.

Ensuring this access will empower Maine people and communities to connect beyond and within our borders, creating pathways of opportunity to realize the full economic, educational, health, social, civic, and cultural benefits of being connected. Focusing on our goals of securing access and ensuring affordability and adoption for all will reinforce our core message: **There is a place in Maine's economy and our communities for everyone to thrive**.

Maine will embrace the following values to accomplish these goals:

- **Adopt a data-driven, transparent approach**: Apply a digital equity lens to infrastructure projects and other programs to prioritize investment where it makes the biggest impact via the Broadband Mapping Platform. Continue to collect and share data with our partners to adjust our goals and approach.
- **Grow and strengthen the ecosystem**: Nurture relationships, shared learning, and collaboration; increase capacity, and provide the tools and structures partners need to help people get connected. Serve the people we most need to reach through a place and people-based approach.
- **Leverage networks of opportunity**: Prioritize digital equity investments and partnerships that capitalize on existing relationships with or are led by individuals and communities that face more barriers to access and adoption.

- **Get creative:** Support and learn from various approaches from place to place and population to population, recognizing that no one has the answers and that every place and community is different.
- **Shout it from the rooftops:** Tell a broad range of stories in a variety of mediums to illustrate the real impact of the digital divide on people and communities, what the work of digital inclusion looks like, and the positive impact of achieving digital equity through access and adoption.

2.2 Alignment with Existing Efforts to Improve Outcomes

The objectives of this digital equity plan impact and interact with the goals of the State of Maine in several areas, including economic and workforce development, educational attainment, healthy aging, and improved access to telehealth and telemonitoring services.

The *Maine 10-Year Economic Development Plan* has three primary goals: to grow the average annual wage by 10% to benefit workers at all income levels, increase the value of what we sell per worker by 10%, and add 75,000 people to our talent pool by both increasing participation of those in Maine and attracting more people from other places. The measurable goals for increasing access to broadband and improving affordability named in this plan are also articulated in this economic development plan and are being tracked along with a number of other metrics across agencies. Access to affordable, reliable, high-speed broadband is considered central to Maine's ability to grow wages, improve productivity, and engage new talent. The new measurable objectives outlined in Maine's digital equity plan will further contribute to these goals by:

- Increasing access to devices and technical support to enable Mainers to engage in the economy and workforce fully,
- Increasing the digital skills of Maine's current and future workforce to encourage engagement and productivity,
- And increasing accessibility of state resources that are essential to workforce and economic engagement.

The measurable objectives outlined above will be added to broadband and digital equity metrics being tracked by MCA within the overall 10-Year Economic Development Plan.

Maine has also adopted a statewide educational attainment goal of 60% of Mainers with a degree or credential of value by 2025. As of 2021, this rate stands at 52.6%. Just one-third of Maine high school graduates enroll and graduate from college within six years. Economically disadvantaged students, as well as students who identify as black, Hispanic, and Native American, are less likely to enroll, persist and complete a degree or credential than other students. Improving access to affordable, reliable high-speed internet to low-income families and racial and ethnically diverse households could improve the ability of these students to engage with education online and ensure that they have the digital skills and devices they need to fully access educational opportunities and successfully complete requirements.

In addition, ensuring that students of all ages and abilities can access educational programs and resources online could enable Maine people to enroll, persist, and complete degrees and credentials more easily.

The State of Maine has also established a Cabinet on Aging through executive order, which has a goal to help older adults age in place. This follows the Governor's designation of Maine as an Age-Friendly State in 2019. The Cabinet has identified broadband access, digital skills and access to devices and technical support as important elements to combat social isolation for older adults and provide access to healthcare and other resources online for this population. The measurable goals outlined in this plan will be important to enable older adults to age in place with dignity and health, remain engaged in their communities, and access the support they need. MCA intends to partner with a broad network of organizations and volunteers that serve and support older adults in Maine (including the Cabinet on Aging) to coordinate our efforts toward these aligned goals.

A Telehealth and Telemonitoring Advisory Group was also established in statute for the State of Maine in 2017 and charged with identifying technical barriers to telehealth access and making recommendations to the Department of Health and Human Services for improving telehealth and telemonitoring services statewide. Access to affordable, reliable, high-speed internet and devices, technical support, digital skills, education and tools to promote internet safety, and accessible healthcare resources online will all enable more telehealth services statewide. As outlined in this plan, the establishment of Connectivity Hubs to serve in part as telehealth access points will also improve access to virtual healthcare in areas or for populations that face barriers utilizing telehealth services. The Telehealth and Telemonitoring Advisory Group submitted recommendations to inform the development of this Digital Equity Plan (included in the Appendix), including recommendations that align with measurable goals related to access, affordability, digital skills, technical support, and inclusive government resources. MCA will continue to partner with the Telehealth and Telemonitoring Advisory Group to implement the shared objectives.

The State of Maine does not have formally adopted goals for the efficient delivery of services or civic engagement that were discovered during our planning and outreach process. However, access to affordable internet and the tools and skills to adopt and utilize this technology by more Maine people will facilitate greater civic, community, and social engagement. In addition, online delivery of services is often more efficient: enabling both accessible state resources and improving Mainers' ability to access them will improve service delivery.

During the planning process, MCA reviewed findings and recommendations from the Maine Advisory Committee to the US Commission on Civil Rights (Appendix H) from a 2022 report. These recommendations include expanding access to digital skills training and assessments, improving broadband access and affordability for underserved individuals and communities (Black Mainers, Latino Mainers, Native Americans), improving device access to meet the needs of older adults, individuals with disabilities and those with language barriers, and closely connecting broadband infrastructure expansion and funding with digital inclusion activities that will ensure adoption by those most impacted by the digital divide.

State Goal	Digital Equity Goals: *What contributes most directly toward this State Goal?*	Notes
Economic Goals 1. Grow wages by 10% 2. Increase value of what we sell by 10% 3. Increase talent pool by 75,000	• **Increase Broadband Access** *Reference Appendix J, 'Measuring Impact', Column D: Ensuring that every location that wants a connection will have one by 2030; 100% of locations can support remote work.* • **Improve Affordability** *Reference Appendix J, 'Measuring Impact', Column D: Reducing the percentage of covered populations for whom it is difficult to pay for service.* • **Access to Affordable Devices** *Reference Appendix J, 'Measuring Impact', Column F: Ensuring that programs serving individuals with language barriers and those in reentry programs offer affordable devices; improving access to affordable devices for racial and ethnic minorities, tribal members, individuals with disabilities, and low-income Mainers.* • **Improve Digital Skills** *Reference Appendix J, 'Measuring Impact', Column H: Improving the confidence of covered populations across all digital skills areas; increasing awareness of and access to technical support; ensuring tech support and skills instruction offered in multiple languages.*	Providing broadband service to tens of thousands more locations will help create conditions for economic growth. These conditions can result in wage and productivity growth if Maine ensures service is affordable, that people can gain valuable digital skills in the workplace, and that they have access to affordable devices to facilitate skill building and fully engage. Having a digitally skilled workforce can improve productivity for employers, which can also lead to higher wages. Better high-speed internet infrastructure, along with these other strategies, can help facilitate greater workforce engagement through remote work and help attract new talent to Maine to bolster our workforce numbers. For the covered populations that are the focus of the State's digital equity strategy, affordable broadband access, access to devices that meet their needs, and digital skills instruction can mean greater engagement in Maine's economy. Achieving digital equity can help improve rather than exacerbate the other barriers covered populations face, increase wages and income, and increase the number of covered populations participating in the workforce overall.

State Goal	Digital Equity Goals: *What contributes most directly toward this State Goal?*	Notes
Educational Goals 1. 60% of Mainers with a degree or credential 2. Maine is part of a 50-state compact to expose more K-12 students to computer science	• **Increase Broadband Access** *Reference Appendix J, 'Measuring Impact', Column D: Ensuring that every location that wants a connection will have one by 2030; 100% of locations can support remote work.* • **Improve Affordability** *Reference Appendix J, 'Measuring Impact', Column D: Reducing the percentage of covered populations for whom it is difficult to pay for service.* • **Access to Affordable Devices** *Reference Appendix J, 'Measuring Impact', Column F: Ensuring that programs serving individuals with language barriers and those in reentry programs offer affordable devices; improving access to affordable devices for racial and ethnic minorities, tribal members, individuals with disabilities, and low-income Mainers.* • **Improve Digital Skills** *Reference Appendix J, 'Measuring Impact', Column H: Improving the confidence of covered populations across all digital skills areas; increasing awareness of and access to technical support; ensuring tech support and skills instruction offered in multiple languages.*	Increasing broadband access combined with strategies to ensure adoption can improve access to online educational opportunities. Improving the digital skills of Maine workers will also increase the chances they achieve a degree or credential. This may be particularly true if they are one of the thousands of adults in Maine with some college but no degree who might be more likely to need online educational opportunities because they are working or juggling family and school. Improving home broadband access can directly impact kids' participation with school, performance outcomes and digital skills leading to higher educational attainment in adulthood. Lastly, with Maine's investment in broadband infrastructure come opportunities for broadband workforce growth and the associated credentials for those positions. For the covered populations addressed by this plan in particular, such as low-income families and individuals with disabilities, digital inclusion can help level the playing field by increasing educational attainment rates. Increased skills and credentials can increase household and individual income and bolster engagement in society and the economy for those who face barriers to participation.

State Goal	Digital Equity Goals: *What contributes most directly toward this State Goal?*	Notes
Healthy Aging Goals 1. Help older adults age in place 2. Combat social isolation 3. Allow greater access to healthcare & resources online	• **Increase Broadband Access** *Reference Appendix J, 'Measuring Impact', Column D: Ensuring that every location that wants a connection will have one by 2030.* • **Improve Affordability** *Reference Appendix J, 'Measuring Impact', Column D: Reducing the percentage of older adults for whom it is difficult to pay for service.* • **Access to Affordable Devices** *Reference Appendix J, 'Measuring Impact', Column F: improving access to affordable devices for covered populations, including older adults who may also be low-income, disabled, or members of racial or ethnic minority groups.* • **Improve Digital Skills** *Reference Appendix J, 'Measuring Impact', Column H: Improving the confidence of older adults across all digital skills areas; increasing awareness of and access to technical support; ensuring tech support and skills instruction offered in multiple languages.* • **Help People Stay Safe Online** *Reference Appendix J, 'Measuring Impact', Column J: Improving awareness of resources to improve online safety; confidence of older adults so they can protect themselves and their privacy and data online.*	Broadband expansion can also improve health and life outcomes of older adults in Maine by providing greater access to remote healthcare options, online social networks, and educational, volunteer, and remote work opportunities as well. Smart devices in the home or for individuals can improve health monitoring, lower costs, and improve safety for older adults. With connectivity, older adults can remain engaged in their communities and have greater access to the support and resources they need to thrive as they age. Investing in digital skills, technical support, and internet safety measures is essential for older adults, as they often did not grow up with digital access, may not be as familiar with internet-enabled devices and can be more vulnerable to online scams and hacks. As is detailed in this plan, older adults in Maine tend to have difficulty affording internet service at home, have less confidence in their digital skills, and have significant concern about internet safety as well as lack of awareness about resources they can draw on to protect themselves online. Addressing these barriers is critical to achieving Maine's goals to promote healthy aging in our State.

State Goal	Digital Equity Goals: *What contributes most directly toward this State Goal?*	Notes
Telehealth & Telemonitoring Goals 1. Evaluate technical and other barriers 2. Improve Access	• **Increase Broadband Access** *Reference Appendix J, 'Measuring Impact', Column D: Ensuring that every location that wants a connection will have one by 2030.* • **Improve Affordability** *Reference Appendix J, 'Measuring Impact', Column D: Reducing the percentage of covered populations for whom it is difficult to pay for service.* • **Access to Affordable Devices** *Reference Appendix J, 'Measuring Impact', Column F: Ensuring that programs serving individuals with language barriers and those in reentry programs offer affordable devices; improving access to affordable devices for racial and ethnic minorities, tribal members, individuals with disabilities, and low-income Mainers.* • **Improve Digital Skills** *Reference Appendix J, 'Measuring Impact', Column H: Improving the confidence of covered populations across all digital skills areas; increasing awareness of and access to technical support; ensuring tech support and skills instruction offered in multiple languages.*	The use of telecommunications to deliver health services and health education can directly improve Mainers' health outcomes–particularly for those who have less access to providers because they are in remote and rural communities or lack transportation or the ability to get to an appointment during the work day. Expanding access to unserved locations will help expand telehealth services in Maine, but especially if we ensure adoption by addressing the affordability of service, and ensure that people have the digital skills, devices, and technical support to navigate this service. For many covered populations, accessing telehealth and health monitoring services is particularly critical, including older adults, people living in rural areas, veterans, low-income families, and tribal members. Removing the barriers that limit telehealth care, such as affordable access to home internet, access to a device, confidence with the technology, and accessibility and online safety and privacy, can help drive better health outcomes for these populations in particular.

State Goal	Digital Equity Goals: *What contributes most directly toward this State Goal?*	Notes
Telehealth & Telemonitoring Goals (cont.) 1. Evaluate technical and other barriers 2. Improve Access	• **Accessible Government Resources** *Reference Appendix J, 'Measuring Impact', Column L: Improving covered populations' experience accessing government resources online; expanding resources in different languages; improving access to telehealth programs and resources by veterans, tribal members, and older adults.*	Lastly, it's important to ensure that forms and processes people may need to access online for their health care are accessible to everyone and easy to use. If people feel confident they have tools to protect themselves online, they may also be more likely to feel comfortable sharing health information online.

Municipal Plans

MCA collected 25 existing municipal and regional digital inclusion plans as part of our outreach to create a digital equity asset inventory. These plans were created primarily between 2017 and 2022 for 34 towns and four counties or regions. In analyzing these plans, MCA discovered that they had been implemented to varying degrees and sometimes not at all and that none of the existing plans met all of the requirements of the Digital Equity Act for the state plan. MCA opted not to incorporate these plans into the state plan directly but instead ensured that the Regional and Tribal Broadband partners had access to the plans as they conducted outreach and planning in their regions.

Regional and Tribal Plans

MCA opted to make regional and tribal digital equity planning and coalition building a core component of the development of the state plan. The goal of developing strategies at this scale is to ensure that the state digital equity plan recognizes and accounts for differences from region to region and to ensure that assets can be developed at scale to support all of the individuals and communities within the region or Tribe, even if resources at the community or local level are limited.

Regional and Tribal partners were identified through a competitive process to support every region and the five Wabanaki Tribes, and each partner was tasked with creating a digital equity coalition made up of partners that support and represent the covered populations. MCA collected 12 regional plans from all 16 counties and a single plan for the five Tribal Nations with separate visions and budgets for each Tribe.

The regional and tribal plan development resulted in additional outreach and engagement to covered populations and the organizations that support them within each region and the identification of additional digital equity assets in each region.

The plans propose specific digital inclusion strategies to be funded as part of the state's implementation plan working toward the measurable goals. The regional and tribal plans propose spending approximately $10 million annually on digital inclusion activities throughout the five-year implementation period. Proposed strategies include:

- Strategically placed Connectivity Hubs supporting public access to internet and devices as well as digital skills training and other programming
- Affordable Connectivity Program enrollment and outreach activities and matching local subsidy programs
- Digital skills trainers, implemented in many cases with partners in the regions such as adult education
- Device donation campaigns, device distribution and technical support
- Digital navigator positions
- Public awareness campaigns
- Ongoing digital equity coalition building and collaboration

The Regional and Tribal Digital Equity Plans can be found in Appendix D.

Coordinating Digital Equity Funding

The Maine Connectivity Authority (MCA) intends to weave Digital Equity Capacity Grant Funding and BEAD funding with multiple other complementary sources of funding to achieve our goals, as follows:

- **$235 million** (estimated) - BEAD funding will be distributed to deploy infrastructure first to approximately 32,000 locations with no connection across the state, addressing affordable access for those who don't currently have it and meeting our digital equity goal of available access. The next priority for these funds will be 87,000 locations considered unserved. MCA has developed a framework through our Broadband Mapping Platform that will apply a digital equity lens to BEAD infrastructure investment, looking at areas with high percentages of covered populations, homes without a device, or layering in other factors such as income, educational attainment, and gaps in programs and resources identified in the digital equity asset inventory.
- **$6 million** - Maine Jobs & Recovery Program (ARPA State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds) funding allocated by the State of Maine for broadband are being utilized to support the Regional and Tribal Broadband Partners Program 2023-2024.

This two-year program was designed to provide capacity for developing community-led broadband solutions and digital equity planning across every county of the State. The second year of this program (2024) will fund the first year of digital inclusion strategies outlined in the regional and tribal plans before the State Capacity Grant funding is deployed, starting in late 2024 or early 2025.

- **$11.8 million** - ARPA Capital Projects Fund funding for Connectivity Hubs will complement digital equity implementation in 2025 and 2026. These funds will be deployed in underserved regions and tribal communities to support connectivity for specific covered populations. Connectivity Hubs will help achieve affordable access goals by providing public access to the internet, access to affordable devices for public use and lending programs, workforce and digital skills training, education and telehealth programming.
- **$30 Million** - Recently awarded NTIA funding for Middle Mile investments will also complement digital equity investments by enabling access to last mile connectivity - especially for those in rural areas - and providing high-speed access to Connectivity Hubs as a source of public access to devices, technical support, digital skills training and other resources particularly for underserved covered populations.

Other complementary funding sources include:

- MCA has identified a key strategy to launch and raise funds for a Digital Equity Fund ($15 million), supported by private-sector and philanthropic funding, to support digital equity implementation measures outlined in this plan.
- MCA and its partners will work to identify opportunities and support proposals for the Digital Equity Competitive Grants program to maximize this additional support to our partners toward implementing Maine's digital equity priorities.

Throughout the planning process, it became clear that closing the digital divide in Maine will be an ongoing challenge that requires significant resources. This is particularly true because our outreach and engagement process illustrated how important staffing capacity is to this challenge: staffing for digital navigator positions, digital skills instruction in various locations and formats, staffing for technical support, and staffing to help facilitate partnerships across organizations and regions. Because of these needs, MCA will work closely with other partners to identify opportunities to match funding or build digital inclusion activities into existing programs and resources.

2.3 Strategy and Objectives

In this section, we will outline the key strategies and associated activities within each of those strategies, with greater detail provided in Section 5: Implementation & Timeline. To advance digital equity in Maine, we all must work together to build the capacity and basic tools to sustain the work over time. Maine needs to focus on investing in both places and people: 1) to ensure we have resources in proximity to everyone and at a scale to meet the need, and 2) to ensure that we reach people who face the most significant barriers to being connected no matter where they are.

It is essential that we make broadband more affordable to all Mainers by focusing on increasing enrollment in the Affordable Connectivity Program and exploring and piloting new strategies to reduce the cost of internet service.

Through Maine Connectivity Authority (MCA), the State must partner with others to create overarching educational and digital inclusion campaigns that will help all partners share resources and best practices and tackle problems at scale. Lastly, we recognize that the Digital Equity implementation funding for the State of Maine will not be enough to reach everyone: we must bring all resources to bear to launch a Digital Equity Fund, more than doubling the resources available through NTIA to close the digital divide in Maine.

Strategy 1: Create Basic Building Blocks to Advance Digital Equity

Maine must invest in the core capacity, tools, and resources to help advance digital equity across our state. These investments must include sustaining digital equity staffing at MCA and adjusting funding programs to ensure that digital equity is used as a lens when making program decisions and prioritizing investments.

The digital equity asset inventory, digital equity-focused events, coalition building, and tracking progress and impact are all important to ensure we sustain and grow this work over time.

- Apply a **digital equity lens to infrastructure and program decisions** by layering additional data to the Broadband Mapping Platform.
- MCA's **Digital Equity Manager,** who will work directly with partners and help lead the implementation of digital equity programs outlined in this plan.
- The **Digital Equity Asset Inventory** will be developed as an online resource to provide information about digital inclusion programs and resources for members of the public, digital navigators, and organizational partners.
- **Coalition building, digital equity events, and ongoing monitoring and progress evaluation** are all core activities under this strategy.

Strategy 2: Leverage Partnerships to Reach Places & People

Maine has many organizational partners and networks that are significant assets to enable digital inclusion programs and activities. We need to work together to reach every corner of the state geographically while focusing on people and communities who are facing more barriers to being connected. We can leverage the work of core digital inclusion organizations with partners serving particular regions or specific covered populations to share best practices and digital inclusion expertise, reaching more people and places. It will be important to embed and align digital inclusion activity into networks that already have relationships with covered populations.

- MCA will **directly fund partners and design and launch a competitive funding program** to support digital inclusion activities that will reach a broad geography and explicitly support the covered populations. This funding will target partner networks with existing relationships with covered populations, core digital equity partners, and regional and tribal partners.
- MCA will design and launch a **Connectivity Hubs program** from 2024 to 2026 through the Capital Projects Fund to support education, workforce and telehealth programming and public access to the internet, devices and digital skills.
- MCA will support a **Tribal Broadband Initiative** to support connectivity and digital equity for the Tribes in Maine, using Maine Jobs & Recovery Program (ARPA) funding in 2024 and State Digital Equity Capacity Funds in the future as needed.
- MCA will support a **Prison & Reentry Broadband Initiative** to support connectivity and digital equity in prisons and jails, address the unique circumstances of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals, and collaborate closely with the Maine Department of Corrections, Maine Department of Labor, and other civil rights and community-based partner organizations.

Strategy 3: Focus on Affordability

Many Mainers find paying for internet service at home challenging. The state needs to focus attention on strategies that can improve affordability, particularly for the covered populations for whom this is a significant barrier. These strategies will involve supporting Affordable Connectivity Program enrollment for more eligible households, researching other local and policy solutions, and launching an apartment wifi program to better connect residents of affordable housing units across the state.

- MCA will continue to lead and expand enrollment in the **Affordable Connectivity Program** through the **ACP4ME Campaign**.
- MCA and its partners will also engage with partners to **explore other policy solutions to improve affordability.**
- MCA will work with the affordable housing community to research, launch, and fund an **Affordable Housing Connectivity Program.**
- Provide **support to Maine Telecommunications Relay Services (TRS)** to enable individuals with disabilities that require assistive technology to transition from analog to digital service by identifying individual locations that need access or providing ACP or other support to those individuals.
- MCA will refine existing infrastructure programs to 1) enable diverse technologies to increase competition and options that lower costs and 2) include requirements for funded infrastructure projects to lower consumer costs.

Strategy 4: Launch Statewide Education & Information Campaigns

Some critical campaigns need to be coordinated centrally by the State, providing a structure and tools with which various partners can engage and participate. MCA will work with collaborators to design and launch statewide campaigns promoting internet safety and device refurbishment, providing practical tools and resources. The state will also leverage existing tools such as 211 to provide information about digital inclusion programs and resources and work closely with partners in Telehealth to promote and share best practices. Lastly, MCA will lead the development of an educational campaign with photographic and video storytelling to illustrate examples of the digital divide and the impact of digital equity on Maine people's lives.

- MCA will launch an **Internet Safety for ME Campaign**, creating various tools to be employed by trusted partners and leveraging media and law enforcement engagement.
- MCA will work with partners to launch an **Affordable Devices for ME Campaign** encouraging and enabling device donation for refurbishment and redistribution to covered populations.
- MCA will work with partners to produce a **Digital Equity Story series,** including video and photographic storytelling illustrating the impact of the digital divide, examples of digital inclusion programs, and the impact of digital equity on people's lives and communities.
- MCA will work to leverage Maine 211 and Digital Maine Library as broadband and digital equity resources.
- MCA and the National Digital Equity Center will partner to support a **statewide cohort of digital navigators** across organizations and agencies, hosting training and sharing best practices and resources.
- MCA will work with the Telehealth and Telemonitoring Advisory Group and other telehealth partners to support **telehealth education, best practices, and models** to decrease barriers for covered populations.

Strategy 5: Sustain and Grow Our Investment in Digital Equity

Maine's commitment to digital equity means a significant commitment of resources to sustain our collective work and tackle a growing digital divide. To put many of these strategies in motion, we will need to raise funding well beyond what may be available to our State from the Digital Equity Capacity funding from NTIA. MCA will seek to double the resources to support this work by creating and raising funds for a Digital Equity Fund, providing support for partners seeking other funding sources, and tracking the impact of our collective work to help make a case for further investment.

- MCA will more than double NTIA's (likely) investment in Maine by launching a **$15 million Digital Equity Fund** to support the strategies outlined in this plan. We will work with partners to secure resources from various partners, including private sector partners, ISPs, philanthropy, and additional state & federal funding sources.

Measurable Objectives:

Through the strategies and associated activities outlined above, MCA and its partners will work toward the following measurable objectives digital equity in Maine. You can read more about the expected impact of these objectives on digital equity in Maine in this chart outlining measurable impact linked in the Appendix.

1. Improve Access to Broadband

- Every Mainer who wants an internet connection at home can get one. MCA will invest in infrastructure that reaches 42,000 homes and businesses that remain with no connection (25/3 Mbps or less) as of December 2022–or approximately 6.6% of potential subscriber locations. In addition, Maine will work to improve service to 50,000 locations with unreliable & slow service below 100/20 Mbps.

2. Increase Affordability of Internet Service

- Increase enrollment in the Affordable Connectivity Program by 84,000, going from 27% of eligible households in 2022 to 62% of eligible households by 2029.
- Expand free or low-cost connectivity (wired or wifi) for residents of affordable housing units, ensuring service to approximately 41,000 households in subsidized rentals.
- The covered populations that will be the highest priority to address affordability – for whom affordability is the most intense barrier– are individuals with a disability, low-income households, racial and ethnic minority populations, and tribal members.

3. Ensure Access to Affordable Devices (Desktops, Laptops, Tablets) & Tech Support)

- Distribute 50,000 free or low-cost devices that meet the user's needs to covered populations (refurbished & new)
- Secure 50,000 donated devices from businesses, institutions, and agencies to be refurbished
- Improve access to and awareness of technical support by providing technical support with 100% of distributed devices
- The covered populations that will be the highest priority to address affordable devices–for whom lack of devices is the most intense barrier–include tribal members, members of racial and ethnic minority populations, low-income households, individuals with a disability, and people in reentry from incarceration.

4. Improve Mainers' Digital Skills

- Provide 50,000 people with digital skills assessment and/or one or more digital skills training
- Improve the digital skills confidence of covered populations with the largest gaps
- Covered populations for whom the lack of digital skills are a particular barrier include tribal members, individuals who are members of racial and ethnic minority groups, individuals with disabilities, veterans, individuals in reentry from incarceration, and older adults.

5. Help Mainers Stay Safe Online

- Reach at least 50,000 Mainers with internet safety outreach and education programming
- Improve Mainers' confidence and ability to protect their personal data. The covered populations for whom internet safety is the most intense barrier and will be a priority for this programming include older adults, individuals with a disability, low-income individuals, people in reentry from incarceration, and tribal members.

6. Make it Easier to Access Government Resources & Programs Online

- Complete a user-focused accessibility audit on the top ten critical state resources used most by covered populations
- Improve the confidence of covered populations in accessing government services online
- This work will prioritize covered populations for whom this is a particularly intense barrier, including low-income individuals, veterans, people in reentry from incarceration, individuals with disabilities, and individuals with language barriers.

7. Sustain and Grow Our Investment

- Raise $15 million for a Maine Digital Equity Fund to match the (likely) investment by NTIA

The goals outlined above can directly impact and align with the State's economic, workforce, educational, healthy aging, and telehealth goals.

By the Numbers:

This plan recognizes that a comprehensive approach to digital inclusion should (as much as possible and based on the individuals' needs and goals) include providing digital skills or a skills assessment, technical support, ACP enrollment, and internet safety education along with the distribution of a device. Because of this, we have an overall goal of reaching 50,000 Mainers with this comprehensive approach in mind. This goal represents approximately a five-fold increase from the number of people we are reaching through existing programs currently, which we estimate can be accomplished with the significant investment of digital equity funding outlined in this plan.

This goal has not been divided into specific goals for reaching each covered population; however, priority populations have been identified in each of the elements of digital inclusion in this plan. Individuals don't often identify as just one covered population but rather multiple covered populations, and the barriers an individual faces may be compounded when they identify as more than one of the covered populations.

If the goal to reach 50,000 Mainers were divided based on the percentage of each of the covered populations in Maine, it would provide the following benchmarks for reaching covered populations with the comprehensive approach:

- Approximately 15,000 older adults
- Approximately 2,000 incarcerated individuals
- Approximately 3,600 veterans
- Approximately 10,000 individuals with a disability
- Approximately 5,800 low-income individuals
- Approximately 2,000 English-language learners
- Approximately 6,500 individuals with low levels of literacy
- Approximately 3,600 individuals who are members of a racial or ethnic minority
- And Approximately 1,500 Maine tribal members

Note: In addition to these numbers, about 75% of Maine's population is considered rural by NTIA's definition of rural. Our goal to provide broadband access to 92,000 locations will largely focus on locations that reach rural inhabitants. The ACP enrollment goal is similarly broken out by covered population benchmarks in Appendix J.

3. Current State of Digital Equity: Assets and Barriers

3.1 Asset Inventory

3.1.1 Digital Inclusion Assets by Covered Population

The first step toward understanding the state of digital equity in Maine has been to catalog and evaluate the place from which we are building. In late 2022, the Maine Connectivity Authority contracted with the University of Maine Center on Aging to research and create the first Digital Equity Asset Inventory for the State of Maine. The research team utilized three primary methods to identify digital equity and inclusion resources:

1. A review of online resources to identify information about assets;
2. Key informant interviews with individuals within organizations that have a major role in digital equity or are knowledgeable about the landscape of resources;
3. Surveys with large networks of organizations providing digital equity and inclusion resources, including adult education programs, libraries, and housing authorities.

Twenty-eight individuals participated in key informant interviews, and information was collected on 93 assets via the survey. The Maine Digital Equity Asset Inventory can be found in Appendix E.

In addition to the first draft of the asset inventory compiled by the University of Maine researchers, MCA tasked each of the 13 Regional and Tribal Broadband partners to identify additional assets in their regions through individual and organizational interviews conducted throughout the outreach and engagement period. The regional and tribal broadband partners identified over 30 additional assets that need to be explored in greater detail and added to the next version of the asset inventory.

The Digital Equity Asset Inventory will remain an evolving collection of information. As part of the State's digital equity implementation plan, MCA will design and launch an online resource where both members of the public and digital navigators can find digital inclusion resources and submit information about new assets to add to the inventory. The outreach and engagement required to keep the asset inventory relevant will be a shared responsibility of the digital equity ecosystem in Maine and will be administered by MCA. The inventory will help grow and strengthen the ecosystem by nurturing partner relationships and spreading awareness about digital inclusion programs and resources.

The digital equity assets in the State of Maine are limited–often by resources and capacity–in size and scope. The assets provide modest digital inclusion support to the covered populations relative to the need. Because funding is limited, individuals and communities in different geographies may have vastly different levels of digital inclusion programming and available resources.

Among the most significant assets identified are the following **Core Digital Equity Partners**:

National Digital Equity Center (NDEC): National Digital Equity Center (NDEC): NDEC is a national nonprofit organization in midcoast Maine with a mission to close the digital divide. The organization has digital navigators on staff, offers digital skills classes, and works to provide devices and technical support through partner organizations to individuals who need them. NDEC offers over 40 classes that fall into the categories of "For Work & Business," "For Home & Education," and "Aging Well With Technology." Classes are free to Maine residents and typically include 5-10 participants in one to three one-hour sessions. NDEC also offers Digital Skills Assessments for novice computer users to assess their digital skill level and creates Individual Learning Plans to guide individuals on a career pathway or to understand the use of technology. One-on-one assistance is provided as needed. NDEC also offers in-person classes in partnership with over 130 libraries, adult education programs, and community centers across Maine. Partners are trained as "facilitators" to offer on-site classes.

NDEC recently received funding from the National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA) to support two digital navigators supporting older adults and tribal members in Washington County, and grant funding from the FCC to support outreach and engagement on the Affordable Connectivity Program. The FCC funding will enable part-time digital navigators in other locations around Maine to support ACP enrollment. NDEC is also collaborating with Four Directions Development Corporation to hire tribal members as digital navigators to support the tribal communities in Maine. NDEC received funding at the onset of the pandemic to provide tablets to 100 older adults and additional funding to expand the program to over 2,000 individuals. Resources to support devices for those needing them have depended on fundraising and are not always available. NDEC has trained over 200 community volunteers and provides a train-the-trainer program. National Digital Equity Center

Give IT. Get IT.: give IT. get IT. is a statewide nonprofit that provides low-cost and high-quality computers to individuals and families, IT needs and goals assessment, training, and technical support. Eligibility for individuals and families is based on income and goals. A secure and sustainable electronics recycling arm of the organization supports the program. Individuals seeking services can connect with an expert staff member by phone to help assess the individuals' program eligibility, IT needs, and goals driving their need for personal computers, internet, training, and support. Based on conversations with staff, clients are provided recommendations on an internet provider in their area based on cost, speed and reliability if needed; a computing device that best suits their goals (new or refurbished, with a 2+ year plan); initial support and training needs such as their computer literacy level; and additional 'outside' resources available that would support their objectives such as work ready, other training, small business startup, and disability and employment programs. give IT. get IT. has established referral relationships with 27 organizations throughout Maine, including organizations that work directly with covered populations and other vulnerable individuals. give IT. get IT.

Maine Department of Education: Maine's Department of Education (DoE) administers the Maine Learning Technology Initiative (MLTI), providing device access for Maine's public school students. DoE has recently launched the Maine Learning Technology Initiative 2.0, which has expanded beyond device access to also focus on access to applications and learning tools. Key elements of MLTI 2.0 include providing personal computing devices for students in grades 7 and 8, assisting teachers in integrating technology to support student learning and helping schools evaluate their technology infrastructure. Maine's public schools have access to broadband internet through the Maine School Library Network. Recognizing the potential inequities in access outside of school, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, mobile hotspots were made available to schools to provide to students with connectivity challenges. Individual schools now own these hotspots while paying for the internet service. Website (Maine Learning Technology Initiative 2.0): MLTI 2.0 | Department of Education Starting this year, every K-12 school in Maine will have the opportunity to secure a mobile computer science lab to ensure that Maine students have access to real-world training in robotics, programming, augmented and virtual reality, coding, and hardware.

Adult Education Programs: Maine has approximately 70 adult education programs organized into nine "hubs." These programs provide various services that facilitate a pathway for adults in the state to attain employment or access post-secondary education. Digital literacy is adult education programs' primary digital equity and inclusion focus. At intake, students are assessed for their digital skills, needs, and access to computing devices. Programs use the Northstar Digital Literacy package as an entry-level program for assessing and developing digital literacy or 18 the IC3 Digital Literacy Certification, which has beginning, intermediate, and advanced components. This is an industry-recognized credential that can potentially qualify for college credit. Adult education programs use collaborative approaches to student learning, and some have developed partnerships with the National Digital Equity Center to access their curriculum.

Adult education programs have also received ARPA funding, which has gone towards purchasing loanable devices and funding several new positions called Career Success Coordinators at seven college campuses and Four Career Success Navigators, who, in addition to other duties, will address digital equity needs. Adult education programs also work closely with libraries, sometimes offering to have staff meet students at these locations where they can use library devices. Adult Education's Work Ready program has also worked with give IT. get IT. in the past to secure computers for participants. Lastly, a network of adult education programs supports educational access at the County Jail facilities. Access to the facilities, space for programming, and device access vary from county to county. Adult Education.

Maine's Public Libraries & the Maine School and Library Network: Maine's 255 public Libraries play a crucial role in supporting digital equity and inclusion. Often, libraries are one of the few local public services in rural areas. A key role of libraries is their ability to serve as an access point for free, publicly available wireless internet through the Maine School and Library Network (MSLN), which connects nearly 1,000 schools and libraries across the state courtesy of Network Maine which provides K-12 schools and public libraries in the state with Internet connectivity at little or no cost Public libraries' other important roles include device access, technical support, and training.

Libraries have a wide range of computing resources available to patrons, ranging from desktop computers to Chromebooks in public library computing spaces, some of which can be borrowed from certain libraries. The amount and nature of computing resources can vary widely depending on the size of the library. Library staff may provide technical support during scheduled drop-in hours or on an ad hoc basis, both for library-owned and privately owned devices. Library staff may also provide digital skills training, either informally on a one-on-one basis, through in-house training, or through partnerships with groups such as the National Digital Equity Center. Beyond digital literacy skills, library staff also play a role in facilitating access to online resources, whether applying for benefits online or helping patrons access job-searching resources. Most importantly, these services are free to patrons, helping to overcome economic barriers.

Libraries have begun to expand into a welcoming space for other community services, expanding library demand in an environment of limited staffing and financial resources, particularly for small libraries. Partnerships with groups such as the National Digital Equity Center and Career Centers evidence this. During the pandemic, with funds through the American Rescue Plan, ten Maine libraries took part in a telehealth pilot through the Maine State Library's Libraries Health Connect Program. This program worked with participating libraries to develop private spaces equipped with devices to allow patrons to access telehealth care.

At the state level, the Maine State Library provides capacity-building services for Maine's public libraries. For example, as federal relief funds came into the state to provide access to hotspots and devices, Maine State Library took on the role of grant application to secure funding for local libraries, providing assistance beyond the capacity of many small libraries. Maine State Library also maintains the LearningExpress Library 3.0 program, which includes basic internet and computer instruction. This learning package can be accessed in public libraries, adult education settings, Career Centers, public schools or online through the Digital Maine Library.

The Asset Inventory also surfaced numerous **digital inclusion programs and organizations specifically supporting the covered populations.**

Low-Income households

Category	Assets
Available & affordable broadband access	• Maine has ten Community Action Agencies serving different state regions. Community Action Program services differ by location, but common programs include energy assistance, parenting education, and emergency assistance. Several CAP agencies have started integrating digital inclusion into their programs: In Aroostook County, the CAP is an FCC grantee and has made ACP enrollment part of their whole family approach to services. Waldo CAP is partnering with NDEC to provide digital skills classes on site. • Evernorth (regional affordable housing provider) has a Digital Services initiative that has piloted free Wi-Fi services for residents within its developments. https://evernorthus.org/evernorth-connections/digital-services/
Access to devices and technical support	• Maine DHHS: Higher Opportunities for Pathways to Employment, which helps "Maine families pursue training and education beyond high school and achieve their career plans by addressing barriers to success." The program is available to individuals who meet various qualifications, including being a parent or caretaker, having financial need, and being enrolled in an academic program. The program funds $50 per month for internet service and up to $500 for computers and technology.
Digital Skills	• Maine's twelve Career Centers provide free employment and training services to support Maine workers in building skills and finding a career while helping businesses connect to workers. In the digital equity space, Maine Career Centers provide internet access to individuals at Career Center locations. Career Centers have also partnered with the National Digital Equity Center to access their training resources.
Other	• Maine's 23 housing authorities are a source of affordable housing for Maine residents through services such as the Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher Program, which assists families with low incomes in accessing safe and affordable housing. Many Maine Housing Authorities are supporting digital equity. For example: Portland Housing Authority maintains study centers in four locations in the Housing Authority's family housing neighborhoods. These study centers allow computer and Wi-Fi access for educational use.

	• Brewer Housing Authority refers individuals to the FCC Affordable Connectivity Program and assists with completing the application. Free internet access is provided to residents in their apartments/homes, and desktops and Wi-Fi are available in common areas. Staff members are available to help residents with technical issues and provide assistance with using devices. The Bath Housing Authority has partnerships with the Patten Free Library and local law enforcement to provide technical support and education around internet safety. • Goodwill Northern New England offers payments for internet or data plans and offers the following programming for device access: a Laptop lending program; Laptop and smartphone purchasing; Connection to free/reduced price hardware. They also offer the following programming for digital skills: Digital literacy assessments, Connections to existing digital literacy programs, Career Advising and Life Navigation to help individuals with components of digital literacy (e.g. professional email communication, social media use, etc.)

Rural inhabitants

Category	Assets
Available & affordable broadband access	• Maine's 255 Public Libraries. During the pandemic, with funds through the American Rescue Plan, ten Maine libraries have taken part in a telehealth pilot through the Maine State Library's Libraries Health Connect Program. This program worked with participating libraries to develop private spaces equipped with devices to allow patrons to access telehealth care. • Main Street Maine programs provide downtown public wifi networks: eight of the fifteen towns identified municipal buildings as a source of Wi-Fi. Using Wi-Fi signal extenders, several of the towns indicated that wireless internet covers significant sections of downtown areas and areas immediately surrounding libraries and municipal buildings.
Other	• The Island Institute has played a key role in supporting broadband planning for island and remote coastal communities, including education about broadband benefits, community engagement, needs and feasibility assessments, and selecting appropriate funding models. The Island Institute offers a Community-Driven Broadband Guide, case studies, and broadband planning grants.

Veterans

Category	Assets
Access to devices and technical support, affordability	• Veterans Health Administration: Through a "Digital Divide Consult" the Veterans Health Administration will refer veterans to a VA social worker who can assist with evaluating device and connectivity needs and determine eligibility for programs that can help. The VA is also able to offer internet-connected tablets for the purposes of healthcare visits. Certain providers will also waive data charges for users of the VA Video Connect application (used to interface with VA providers). • Veteran Upward Bound helps veterans sign up for the ACP and loans out laptops. They also offer digital skills classes through NDEC. • Maine Military and Community Network centers offer devices for veterans to use.

Racial/Ethnic Minorities

Category	Assets
Available & affordable broadband access	• Four Directions Development Corporation supports Maine's five Tribal nations to improve broadband access and adoption by partnering with the NDEC to support tribal digital navigators in each tribal community. The organization is also funded by the FCC grant program to support ACP enrollment through the digital navigator positions in each tribal community, and is working to establish Native Entrepreneur Centers and have partnered with give IT. get IT. to access technology for the Centers. • Maine Immigrant and Refugee Services in Lewiston has provided space for immigrant and refugee children and families to access the internet and devices as well as technical support if needed.
Access to devices and technical support	• The Education Resources department for the Passamaquoddy Nation at Motahkomikuk has partnered with Abbott Labs to provide refurbished devices to students. In addition to the enhanced FCC Affordable Connectivity Program for tribal members, there is also a tribal affordability fund that extends eligibility to tribal crafters, veterans, people in addiction recovery, and people using telehealth services. • The Passamaquoddy Nation has joined the Downeast Broadband Utility, and a fiber-to-the-premise build is almost complete with Pioneer Broadband.

Digital Skills	• Greater Portland Immigrant Welcome Center offers a variety of programs to new immigrant populations, including a business hub and coworking space, and occasionally can offer device access within specific programs like the Women Lead program, which will launch Summer 2023.
Other	• Maine Immigrant Rights Coalition is a policy advocate, convenor, and source of information and resources for immigrant populations and organizations in Maine. In addition to helping to coordinate and raise funds for multiple needs including digital needs, they have a working group developing a New Arrivals Needs Assessment which could help identify internet and digital inclusion needs and identify these needs to partners.

People with disabilities

Category	Assets
Access to devices and technical support	• The Iris Network's Rehabilitation Center helps individuals with vision impairments develop vocational and independent living skills. Clients of the Rehabilitation Center can access support from Assistive Technology Specialists in learning to utilize adaptive equipment. The Iris Network also maintains a Low Vision Center, which provides guidance on assistive technology devices and the opportunity to purchase these devices, which include desktop computer video magnifiers, and Alexa devices. • MaineCITE (Community Inclusion Through Technology) program: Individuals who need assistive technology can borrow devices for thirty days and try them before buying. Examples of digital technology include screen readers, braille notetakers, keyboards and mice, and tablets. • Spurwink Alltech's mission is to "provide technology solutions for the educational, communication, daily living and workplace challenges experienced by people of all ages and abilities." Alltech provides services that include assistive technology-related consultation, assessment, and technical assistance. It is one of the technology loan partners with MaineCITE. • Maine Developmental Disabilities Council: MDDC bought 147 new iPads for distribution to individuals with developmental disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic in partnership with the Center for Community Inclusion and Disability Studies and Spurwink Services.

	Outreach to potential applicants with developmental disabilities was carried out through case managers, service providers, and parent and self-advocacy organizations, and over 450 requests were received. MDDC currently partners with the National Digital Equity Center to provide device access and training for individuals in rural areas with developmental disabilities.
Other	• Disability Rights Maine: Advocacy and education re: digital needs of individuals with a disability in Maine. • Maine Department of Labor offers specific support for blind and visually impaired individuals; deaf, hard of hearing, and late deafened individuals; and individuals with physical, mental or emotional disabilities. These programs focus on ensuring employment opportunities and may include digital inclusion elements such as device access and digital skills training.

Incarcerated/Formerly Incarcerated People

Category	Assets
Digital skills	• ME Department of Corrections: Offerings include the IC3 Digital Literacy Certification. In the past, the Department has collaborated with a company to provide tablets that provide educational, job training, and rehabilitative programming

Older adults

Category	Assets
Available & affordable broadband access	• AARP Age-Friendly Community Programs: a nationwide program focused on supporting the ability of older adults and residents of all ages to live successfully in their communities. When becoming part of the AARP Network, communities assess needs and develop a plan for supporting livability. Local needs and resources drive the work of a community. The following is a sample of how this program supports digital equity and inclusion: Age-Friendly Saco Developed a "handy helper" program that utilizes volunteers to support older adults by providing a tablet computer and connecting them with their municipalities' low-cost internet program. They also provide older residents with Echo Dots (smart devices) to use as personal assistants.

Access to devices and technical support	• Area Agencies on Aging: Maine has five Area Agencies on Aging that provide services regionally. Several of Maine's AAAs provide digital equity and inclusion-related services such as device access and technical support. For example, Aroostook Area Agency on Aging Utilizes volunteer "Friendly Techies" to help with electronic device set-up, sending emails, and using Zoom. The program has iPads to loan consumers so they can access AAA services remotely. Friendly Techies provide support to those iPad users.
Digital skills	• Maine's Senior Community Service Employment Program: Learn IT 2 Work - A4TD

People with Language Barriers

Category	Assets
Available & affordable broadband access	• Greater Portland Immigrant Welcome Center provides a coworking space and the iEnglish project, which utilizes an English learning platform that also provides workforce and career skills including digital literacy.
Access to devices and technical support	• In Her Presence has provided laptops, tablets, and data plans to Maine immigrant women to meet their needs for internet access. • Maine Immigrant Rights Coalition: The organization has been involved in collaborative efforts to increase device access and support for immigrants. Goodwill has been a device donating partner 12 that refurbishes and donates or sells affordable devices. The application for this program has been translated and made available to MIRC partner organizations. MIRC also partners with Hope Acts to allow asylum seekers to remotely access asylum hearings through WebEx (which used to require trips to Boston). Catholic Charities has partnered to offer technology workshops for immigrants.
Digital Skills	• Literacy Volunteers programs are local and regional organizations that pair individuals with low literacy or those for whom English is a second language to volunteer tutors to develop language skills. During the pandemic, the need for remote learning made in-person meetings between literacy volunteers and clients difficult. Literacy Volunteers of Kennebec established a Technology Access Program that provided tablets and internet connectivity, and the program was expanded with $50,000 in funding through Central Maine Power.

	Funding was provided to eight Literacy Volunteer Programs to increase access to technology and develop technology skills • New Mainers Resource Center/Portland Adult Education: This program supports device access and digital skills for immigrant and refugee populations in Portland and often is a source of public access to the internet as well as technical support and devices when students need them.

Assets identified serving other vulnerable populations include:

Vulnerable youth/youth in foster care - Jobs for Maine's Graduates (JMG) has utilized a donation program through AT&T to provide devices for students. In 2022, JMG provided 150 laptops and 41 Chromebooks for students or groups of students with a need identified by JMG specialists. JMG has also paid for some or all of the cost of 18 additional computers for students through the Opportunity Passport program, which provides financial education to Maine youth who have been in foster care, while also providing dollar-for-dollar matching up to $1,000 for certain purchases.

Throughout the outreach and engagement period and the development of the asset inventory, MCA also identified several Networks of Opportunity supporting covered populations, telehealth and workforce skill building.

Supporting Covered Populations, Telehealth, & Workforce Skills with Networks of Opportunity

Through our outreach and engagement period, MCA identified many networks that provide direct support and have existing relationships with the covered populations. Though most of these networks are not currently doing digital inclusion work or doing it inconsistently with limited resources, they are well positioned with existing relationships with the people and communities we must reach with digital inclusion programs and education.

Low-Income Families - The network of Community Action Programs is a significant resource for low-income families and individuals, and some of the ten programs around the state support education and outreach around the Affordable Connectivity Program or provide programs to build digital skills or access devices. The Aroostook Community Action Program (ACAP) has integrated ACP enrollment into their whole family approach to services. The FCC recently provided funding to ACAP to increase their ACP outreach for eligible households in Aroostook County. Maine's 9 United Way chapters are also important allies for reaching low-income Mainers and supporting or educating them about digital equity. Lastly, many low-income Mainers are supported through the strong network of partners tackling food insecurity, especially those coordinated through the Good Shepherd Food Bank.

Older Adults - The Maine Cabinet on Aging, AARP Maine, the network of Age-Friendly Communities, and the Area Agencies on Aging are all partners with strong relationships and programming for older adults across the State. AARP has an extensive volunteer network and has deployed volunteers to support broadband and digital inclusion work at the community level. Age-Friendly communities often have tech support programs for community members, and several of the AAA chapters have had programs at various times to support older adults with devices, technical support, and digital skills. The University of Southern Maine hosts the Maine Senior College Network, which provides volunteer-taught non-credit courses to people over 50 at 17 locations from Fort Kent to Wells. Older adults can sign up for a low-cost membership to access all courses, pay a small fee per course, or apply for a scholarship. There are currently 6,500 members.This could prove a valuable network, particularly for providing digital skills, technical support, and internet safety education.

Incarcerated & Formerly Incarcerated Individuals - The Maine Prisoner Recovery Network, as well as the regional and community-based reentry and long-term recovery programs that are part of the network, are a significant resource to leverage. The network supports formerly and currently incarcerated individuals working toward reentry. The Network is a strong policy advocate and has the added benefit of having many people in leadership positions and involved in community efforts who have shared lived experiences. The MPRN has provided devices on a case-by-case basis as funding allows to those who need them but does not have formal digital inclusion programs.

Veterans - The network of 5 Vet Centers and chapters of the Maine Military and Community Network and the 9 VA Clinics are assets well-positioned to help support digital inclusion for veterans. The Bureau of Veterans Services also maintains a robust resource library for veterans in which digital inclusion resources could be included.

Individuals with Language Barriers - The Adult Education programs and the Literacy Volunteers are both networks of organizations that can support people with low literacy or language barriers. All adult education programs provide digital skills, but some can provide devices, Wi-Fi access, and occasional technical support—at least 10 Literacy Volunteer programs in Maine work with people of all ages.

Individuals Who Are Members of Racial and Ethnic Minority Groups - The Maine Immigrant Rights Coalition, Maine Immigrant Welcome Center, Catholic Charities, and Maine Immigrant and Refugee Services all support new immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers - many of whom are both members of racial and ethnic minority groups in Maine and have language barriers. Four Directions Development Corporation, Wabanaki Public Health and Wellness, and the education resource officers within tribal government are all critical supports for providing capacity to the Tribes and tribal members. The Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous, and Tribal Populations is an important advocate and partner that could be part of outreach, education, policy, or data collection efforts related to digital inclusion.

Individuals with Disabilities - Disability Rights Maine, the Maine Telecommunications Relay Service Council, the Maine Developmental Disabilities Council, and the Maine Association of Community Service Providers are important support networks for individuals with disabilities.

Telehealth - Significant telehealth partners include the New England Telehealth Resource Center, the Telehealth and Telemonitoring Advisory Group, and the network of rural libraries participating in the telehealth pilot. These and other partners and health care providers represent an opportunity to collaborate to increase access to telehealth statewide, especially for veterans, tribal members, and older adults.

Career Centers & CTEs - Maine Department of Labor's 12 Career Centers and the 27 Career and Technical Schools/Centers are a key network for expanding broadband workforce opportunities and digital skills training.

3.1.2 Existing Digital Equity Plans

As previously noted, MCA collected 25 existing municipal and regional digital inclusion plans as part of the digital equity asset inventory. In reviewing these plans and related community activities, MCA discovered that many communities struggled to find funding to implement digital inclusion activities locally.

3.1.3 Existing Digital Equity Programs

Addressed above.

3.1.4 Broadband Adoption Assets

Digital equity/inclusion coalitions

As part of the outreach and engagement process to create the digital equity plan, MCA launched the Regional and Tribal Broadband Partners program to identify organizational partners in every state region to support community planning for infrastructure solutions and digital equity planning for each region and Tribe. Thanks to the work of these partners, there are now 13 separate regional and tribal digital equity coalitions with 180 partners engaged so far. MCA has also convened more than 40 Digital Equity Taskforce partners in a statewide coalition. At both the regional and state level, the partners are organizations that represent, serve, or support the covered populations.

Percentage of residents within the State/Territory who have adopted broadband

According to the 2021 American Community Survey estimates, 86% of Maine households have a broadband internet subscription, and 92.1% of households have a computer. These rates are 1% less than the national rate on both measures. 13.6% of older Mainers above 65 do not have a computer in the home, which is on par with the national rate of 13.5%.

Meaningful Use

To better understand the percentage of Maine people using high-speed internet access for meaningful use (referring to how individuals use digital literacy skills to enhance educational and employment opportunities), MCA and our partners conducted the Maine Broadband Survey as part of the outreach and engagement period in February to April 2023. This outreach and engagement also included focus groups with covered populations and community meetings in various communities around the state. Analysis of the outreach results found that "a shortfall of critical digital skills support is a major barrier to digital equity in Maine. Without these skills, residents are less able to leverage the internet to further education or work goals." Specifically, the outreach found:

- Members of the following groups all felt less confident than respondents overall in almost every digital skill presented on the survey:
    - Low-income households
    - Racial and ethnic minorities
    - Native American and Tribal Groups
    - Veterans
    - Individuals living with disabilities
    - Aging individuals
    - (Formerly) incarcerated individuals (learned this from focus groups)
    - Individuals with language barriers (learned this from focus groups)
- Among rural populations who cannot regularly use the internet, 63% indicate that they would like to use it to work or otherwise make money.
- Compared to all respondents who said they used the internet to work or make money, significantly fewer respondents from low-income households indicated utilizing it for that reason (33% vs. 64%).
- Veterans surveyed were 10% less likely to use the internet for work or educational purposes than respondents overall.

3.1.5 Broadband Affordability Assets

The two most prevalent affordability programs for devices and internet access are the Lifeline and Affordable Connectivity Programs.

Lifeline: Lifeline is a monthly subsidy program for a credit of up to $9.25 for phone, internet, or bundled services. Lifeline is open to consumers who have household incomes that are 135% or less than the Federal Poverty Guidelines or if a household member participates in any of these programs: SNAP, Medicaid, Supplemental Security Income, Federal Public Housing Assistance, or the Veterans Pension and Survivors Benefit. For individuals living on tribal lands, additional benefit programs assist with eligibility.

Households on tribal lands also have access to an expanded benefit, receiving a monthly discount of up to $34.25 and up to a $100 reduction in connection charges. Once qualified, Lifeline is accessed through phone or internet companies that offer Lifeline benefits. About Lifeline.

As of January 2023, approximately 20,200 out of 164,000 eligible Maine households were signed up for the Lifeline benefit.

Affordable Connectivity Program: The Affordable Connectivity Program is administered by the Federal Communications Commission and provides financial assistance for households to access broadband internet. A secondary component is a one-time discount to purchase a desktop, laptop or tablet if a person contributes between $10 and $50 to the cost. Benefits are accessed through telecommunications providers; all Maine providers offer the Affordable Connectivity Program. The Affordable Connectivity Program is open to households with an income of 200% or less of the Federal Poverty Guidelines. It is also available to households that have a member who accesses any of the following programs: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid, Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Federal Public Housing Assistance (FPHA), Veterans Pension and Survivors Benefit, Free and Reduced-Price School Lunch Program or School Breakfast Program, Federal Pell Grant (received in current award year). Tribal members involved in specific additional programs are also eligible. Tribal members who live on federally recognized tribal lands are eligible for a more significant potential benefit (up to $75 per month). ACP Enrollment Assistant

In Maine, 238,710 households are eligible for the ACP, yet only about 89,959 (38% of those eligible) have enrolled. The national average is about 39%, and outreach and engagement efforts by MCA and partner organizations have improved enrollment in Maine since December 2022.

Three local models to support affordability

1. The Town of Bremen, a small community in Lincoln County, has established a fund to support broadband subsidies for residents in need. Bremen is among the first towns in Maine to use town funds to implement a plan to support access for low-income residents to a fiber optic network serving the town. Bremen's Budget Committee and Select Board have approved a $25,000 budget to support low-income families. The National Digital Equity Center will implement the affordable broadband program on behalf of the town. Though the details are not yet finalized, the benefit would be prioritized for families with school-age children (5-18 years old) with incomes up to 50% of federal poverty guidelines to address the "homework gap." Covered populations and others would be considered case-by-case if the funding is available. The funds may be used to support installation and router costs, where the service cost would be $0 after the $30 ACP benefit of $30 is applied.

2. The Passamaquoddy Nation at Motahkomikuk also established an affordability fund as part of their fiber-to-the-premise build with Pioneer Broadband. The fund is being used to help support Tribal members who need assistance with broadband costs, specifically with upfront installation costs.

3. Piscataquis County launched a program in 2022 that provides residents who don't currently have an internet connection reimbursement for 50% (up to $300) for the cost of hardware like routers and modems when they sign up for service. The program was recently extended for three months, and the county set aside up to $150,000 of ARPA funds to support it.

3.2 Needs Assessment

The outreach and engagement period surfaced many barriers Maine people and communities consistently face. Most community members and covered populations see access to broadband as essential but find it difficult to rely on existing broadband infrastructure. There were also many instances where these barriers manifested more intensely for a number of covered populations.

- The **quality of internet connections** causes frustration for Mainers across the board, whether because of a slow connection, a lack of capacity to support all the devices and uses, or periodic outages. The Maine Broadband Survey showed that 40% are dissatisfied with their connection.
- **Cost is a significant barrier**: people have difficulty navigating options and prices and getting what they need or want for what they consider a good price. Almost half of the survey respondents (47%) have at least some difficulty paying for service. It was also noted by key informants who work with covered populations during the asset inventory interviews that there is evidence that people from these populations experience poverty at a higher rate, thus exacerbating digital equity issues.
- Across the board, there is a **high level of concern about internet safety** and low levels of comfort in protecting oneself online. People are particularly concerned about older adults and children and don't know what to do to protect them effectively. In our survey, 93% of Mainers are concerned or very concerned about internet safety. Survey respondents had the least confidence in protecting their personal data online. In focus groups, community meetings, and interviews, Maine people named just a handful of resources as tools or sources of information on internet safety. A majority couldn't name any resources they might utilize.
- **Access to devices** is not always considered a barrier, with most people saying they have enough. However, many describe issues that could be resolved with better or different devices: something other than a phone, a newer device, or available technical support. People are using friends, family, or coworkers for technical support. There are insufficient trusted and accessible sources for technical support in communities or awareness of existing supports. In our survey, just 5% went to a local institution for help, and more than a quarter simply gave up when they couldn't fix their device. Individuals with disabilities feel more acutely the expense and difficulty of accessing the right device because they may need specialized equipment.

- There is widespread interest in and need for **digital skill building**, especially among older adults and other covered populations: people would like various options, including small groups and one-on-one, in addition to classes. There is a prevailing sense that classes are rarely tailored to specific covered populations or starting where they need to start. Public access to the internet and devices, including welcoming judgment-free zones for support, are important for covered populations. These users are less likely to have access at home and more likely not to have enough devices, struggle to afford a device or have robust digital skills. For some covered populations, such as older adults, veterans, and people in reentry or recovery, it would be particularly effective to have digital navigators, skills instructors, or other supports provided by people with the same lived experience.
- Most people see the benefit of **government processes and resources being offered online**. Still, many people struggle to use them because of a lack of internet access at home or accessibility of the sites, forms, or processes. Many sites are not mobile-friendly, and many users access them with phones.

3.2.1 Covered Population Needs Assessment

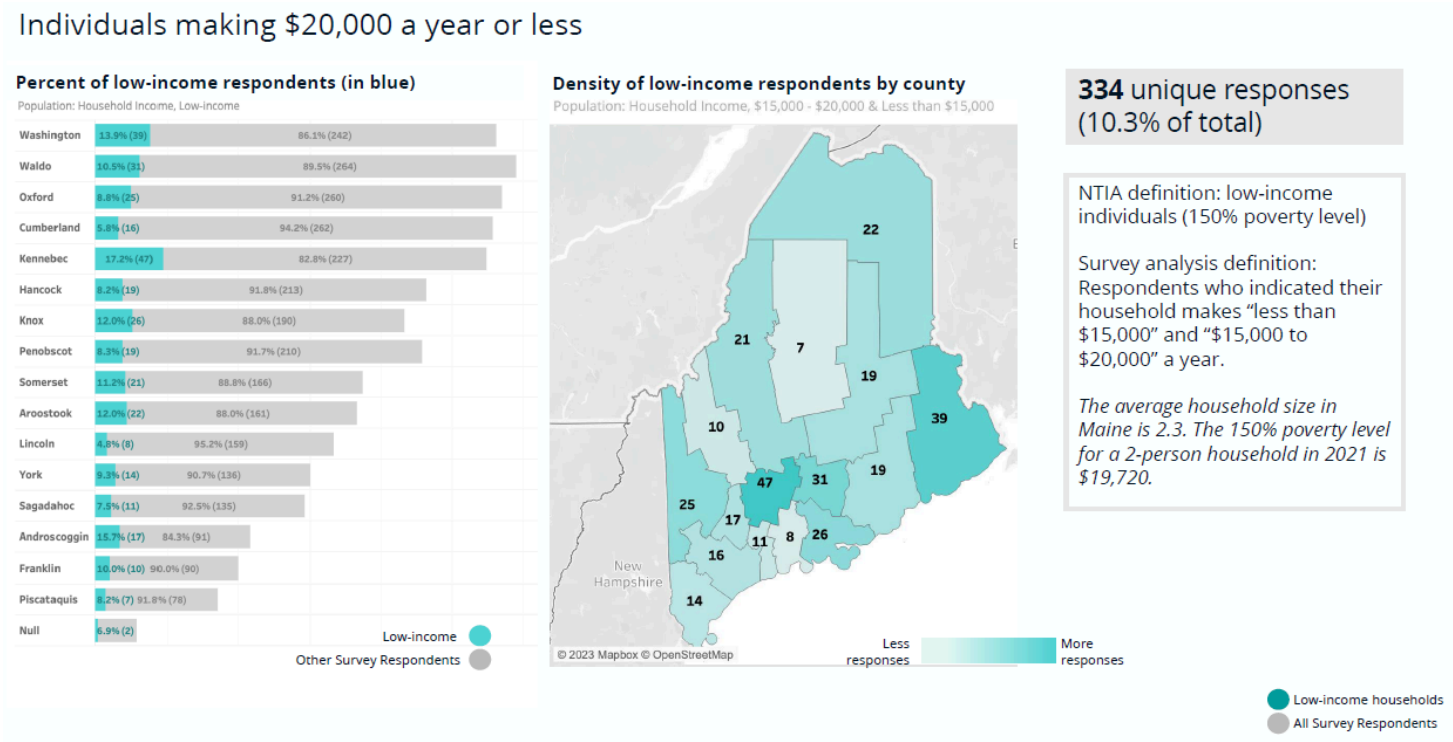
The following are barriers and baseline data collected about each covered population during the outreach and engagement process. The information is based on Maine Broadband Survey and focus group data and analysis conducted between February - April 2023. The full analysis can be found in Appendix F. This analysis is also the source of percentages cited in the measurable outcomes as part of Section 2.3 Strategies & Objectives.

Low-Income households

Category	Barriers & Baseline
Available & affordable broadband access	• 8% of respondents in low-income households have no internet compared to 2% overall. • Respondents in low-income households find it difficult to pay for their monthly internet bill (77% vs 47%). • 42% of respondents in low-income households surveyed enrolled in internet subsidy programs compared to 11% overall.
Access to devices and technical support	• 29% of respondents in low-income households don't have enough devices to fit their needs compared to the overall survey population (11%). • 20% of respondents in low-income households would find purchasing a device for $250 too expensive, compared to just 9% of the overall population surveyed.

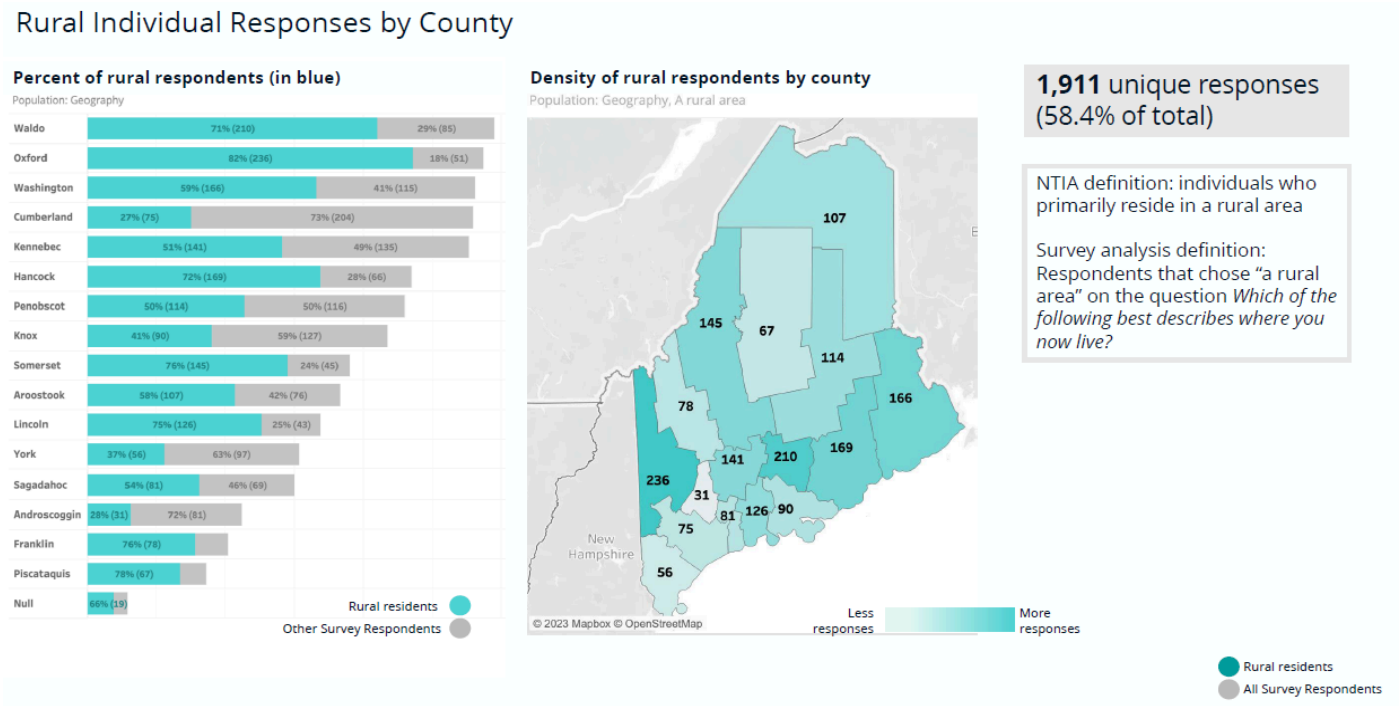
Digital skills	• Respondents in low-income households reported feeling significantly less confident in finding tools to protect personal data and online banking. • Respondents in low-income households report feeling less confident in job searching, finding health information, and finding educational information • 28% of respondents in low-income households are not confident in finding courses online, and 30% are not confident using video applications like Zoom.
Inclusive Government Resources	• 20% of respondents in low-income households reported that their internet search for government information did not meet their needs well. • 11% said these online public resources were not accessible.

From Asset Inventory Report: *Poverty underlays many digital equity and inclusion challenges. The lack of affordable broadband and affordable device access is amplified for low-income individuals. This was mentioned in the context of K-12 students, who may experience gaps in home versus school equity that grow more acute as technology becomes more critical in educational settings. For people in poverty, bad credit, outstanding bills with providers, and other financial challenges can be setbacks for connectivity. Key informants serving covered populations also noted evidence that people from these covered populations experience poverty at a higher rate, thus exacerbating digital equity issues.*



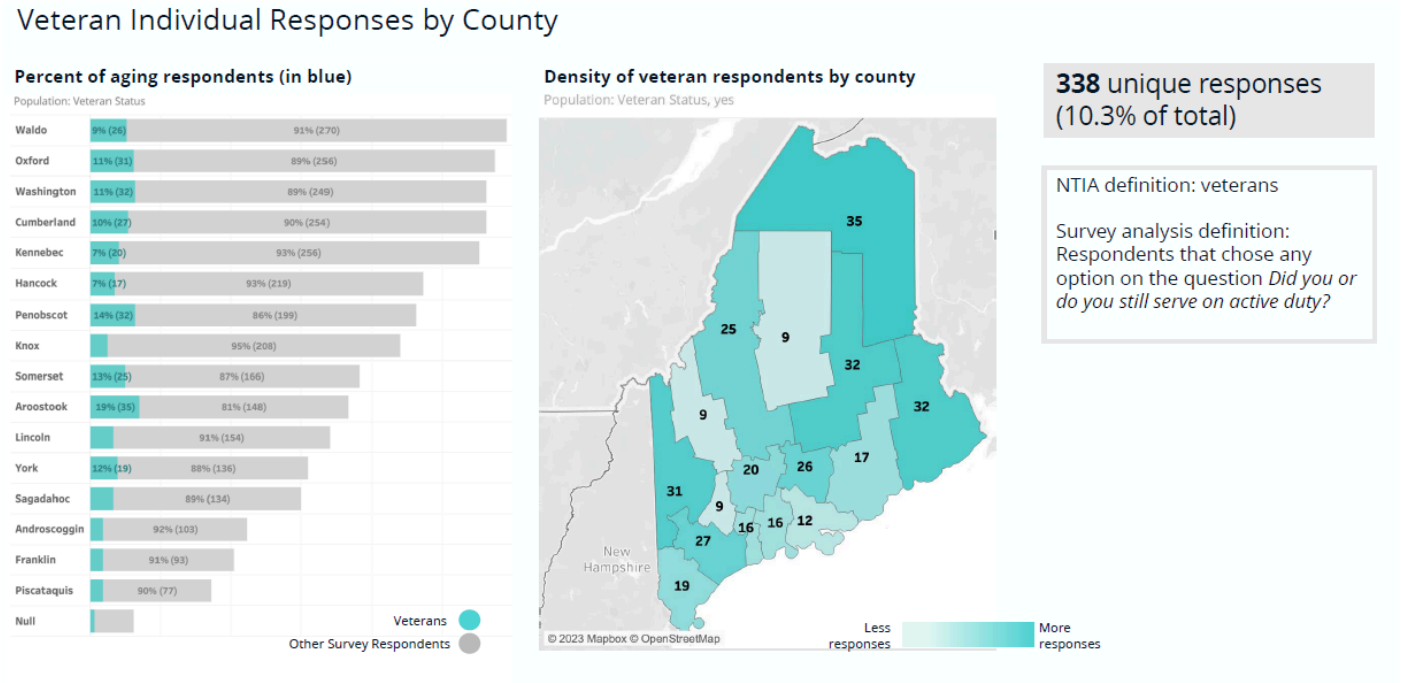
Rural inhabitants

Category	Barriers & Baseline
Available & affordable broadband access	• Rural respondents were more likely to have DSL (28% vs. 22% overall) and less likely to have cable (just 29% vs. 41% overall). • 47% said it is somewhat or very difficult to fit the cost of their internet into their budget. • 65% are paying $70 or more for monthly internet. • While great strides have been made in broadband expansion in Maine, key informants indicated there are rural areas that still need broadband or are in cellular dead zones. For example, during the pandemic, hotspots were distributed to students and through other venues, but this effort was hampered to some extent by a lack of cellular service (from asset inventory interview).
Other	• 63% of rural residents without regular internet access would like to use the internet to work or make money. • For people in rural communities, the cost of installing service may present a significant barrier to accessing home internet. For example, consumers may be asked to pay for line extensions with quotes from internet providers of thousands of dollars. • There are also typically fewer community anchor institutions nearby that offer support and resources, and these individuals must travel greater distances for support.



Veterans

Category	Barrier & Baseline
Available & affordable broadband access	• 44% of veterans reported at least some difficulty affording monthly internet service.
Access to devices and technical support	• 9% of veterans don't have enough devices in the household.
Digital skills	• Veterans report feeling less confident than other respondents in 10 of 12 digital skill areas in the survey, including job searching, finding medical or educational information, using email and social media, or using Zoom.
Other	• Veterans must access their veterans benefits online and often have a greater frequency of health and mental health visits, or a need to access specific care for veterans. These conditions result in a greater reliance on internet access, devices and skills to access health care and benefits virtually, and veterans often find these processes difficult or don't have the devices or connection to do so. • We also discovered a specific challenge with a travel reimbursement app required by VA during our outreach to veterans.

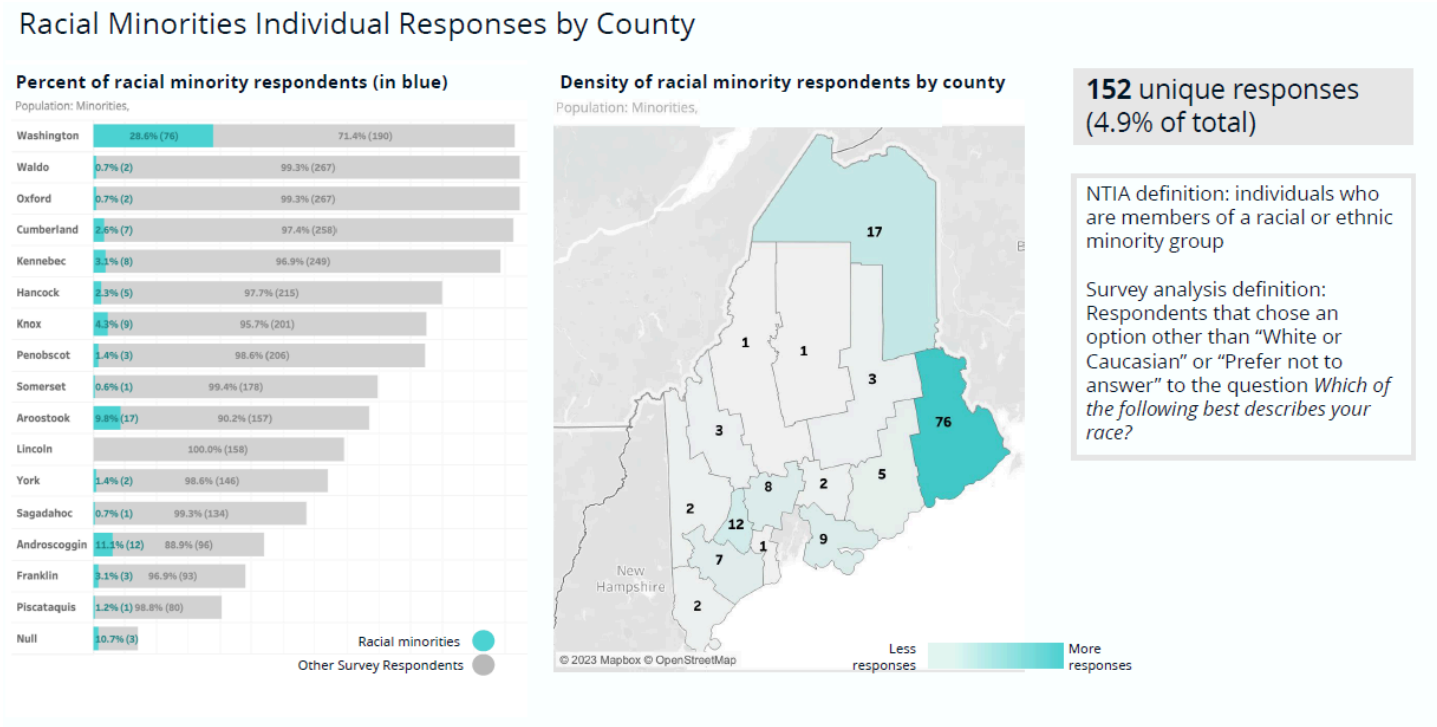


Racial/ethnic minorities

Category	Barrier & Baseline
Available & affordable broadband access	• Racial minority residents surveyed find it much more difficult to afford monthly internet bills compared to all survey respondents. • 24% of racial minority residents surveyed report finding it very difficult to fit their monthly internet bill into their household's budget compared to 11% of the overall population surveyed. • They are more likely (27% compared to 11%) to have used the internet to enroll in internet subsidy programs than the overall population surveyed.
Access to devices and technical support	• Racial minority residents surveyed are much less likely to have enough devices to fit their needs than the survey population. (26% don't have enough vs. 11%) • 18% of the racial minority residents surveyed would find purchasing a device for $250 too expensive, compared to just 9% of the overall population surveyed.
Digital skills	• Racial and ethnic minorities report feeling less confident in 11 of 12 digital skills in the survey than other respondents.

Other	• Racial and ethnic minorities are much less likely to use the internet to communicate with health professionals, participate in the local community, and access government services than other survey respondents. • Hispanic or Latino residents surveyed are much less likely to use the internet to access government services and more likely to use the internet for educational purposes. • More racially diverse immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers often lack a form of identification for ACP enrollment. They may not have permanent or stable housing to allow for a home internet connection and have a strong reliance on public access. Language barriers create a barrier for government services and resources online, which are often not offered in multiple languages.

Additional information from asset inventory interview: *The state's migrant populations were identified as a group that may not be adequately served. For students of migrant parents, frequently moving from school to school may not allow the time for teachers and administrators to become knowledgeable of the student's needs. A key informant indicated that ensuring providers of digital equity and inclusion services are versed in the needs of immigrant and refugee communities is critical to serving this population effectively.*

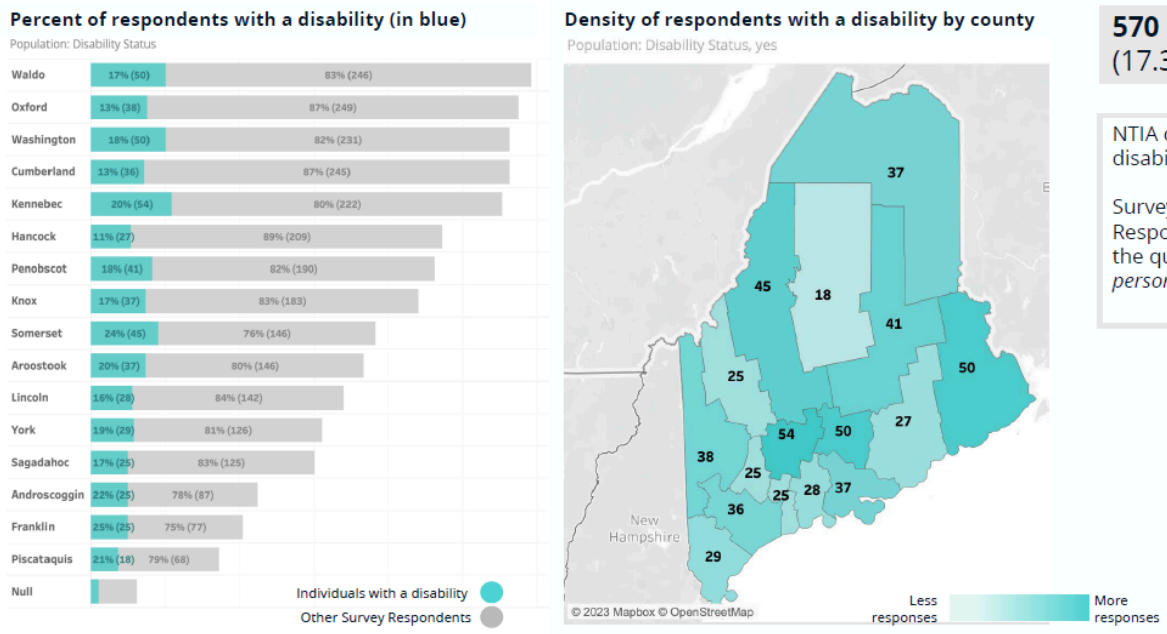


People with disabilities

Category	Barrier & Baseline
Available & affordable broadband access	• Individuals with disabilities find it much more difficult to afford monthly internet bills compared to all survey respondents. • 27% of individuals with disabilities surveyed found it very difficult to fit their monthly internet bill into their household budget compared to just 11% overall
Access to devices and technical support	• Individuals with disabilities are less likely to have enough devices to meet their needs compared to the overall survey population. 20% say they don't have enough for the household, compared to 11%.
Digital skills	• This population reports less confidence with all 12 digital skills included in the survey.
Other	• 46% of individuals with disabilities surveyed indicate that they use the internet for work, compared to 64% of all survey respondents. • Individuals with disabilities are more likely to use the internet to access government services and communicate with health professionals compared to all survey respondents. • Individuals with disabilities report higher levels of concern about internet safety and less familiarity with maintaining internet safety online. • Only 36% of individuals living with disabilities reported that online public resources were very accessible, as compared to 44% of all respondents. • Individuals with a disability often need specialized equipment and support, which can create a cost barrier. • There is a specific need to address connectivity in group homes and for people who use Maine TRS specialized support and are transitioning from analog to digital. These individuals may struggle with the transition if they don't have internet access or cannot afford monthly internet costs.

Additional feedback from the asset inventory interviews: *Adults with disabilities in community-based settings or facilities have "hit or miss" connectivity issues because connectivity differs by housing provider. A key informant identified a potential policy and funding solution through Medicaid or for developmental services, including requirements for access. Connectivity could also be included in lists of fundamental rights for people with disabilities. Another issue identified as a need is more training capacity. MaineCare supports funding for assessment, purchasing technology, and training, but the training time for assistive equipment is limited.*

Individuals with Disabilities Individual Responses by County



570 unique responses (17.3% of total)

NTIA definition: individuals with disabilities

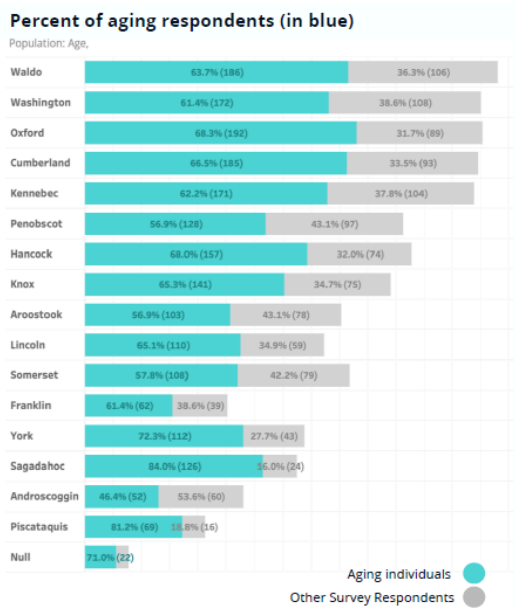
Survey analysis definition: Respondents that chose "yes" on the question *Do you identify as a person with a disability?*

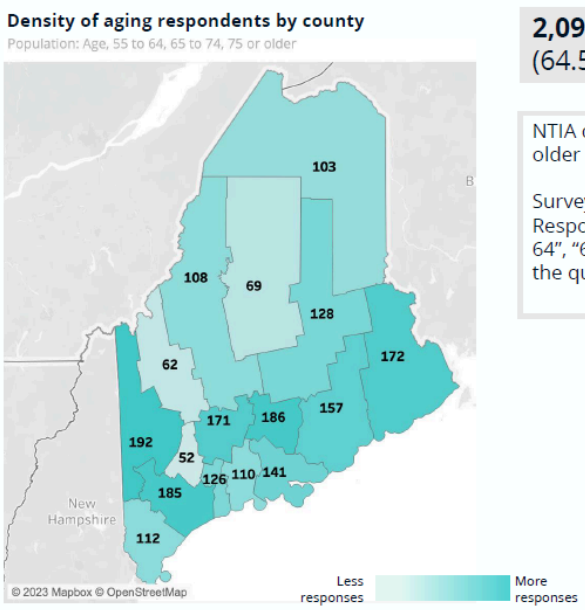
Older adults

Category	Barrier & Baseline
Available & affordable broadband access	• 46% of older adults find paying for their monthly service difficult. • 8% have a dial-up connection, no connection at all, or (4%!) don't know where their internet connection comes from.
Access to devices and technical support	• 9% of older adults report not having enough devices for the household.
Digital skills	• Older adults feel less confident with all 12 digital skills in the survey, with the most significant difference in using social media and job searching. • Older adults in Maine are not "digital natives" and find it difficult to find digital skills support that meets their needs or starts where they are and uses language that works for them. • For older adults, digital skills training and technical support may be best-provided one-on-one.

Other	• Older adults are less likely to use the internet for work or education than other respondents: 56% use it to work or make money vs. 64% of all other respondents. • 97% use the internet to keep in touch with friends & family. • 56% of older adults are very concerned about internet safety vs. 50% of all respondents.

Aging Individual Responses by County





2,096 unique responses (64.5% of total)

NTIA definition: 60 years old or older

Survey analysis definition: Respondents that chose "55 to 64", "65 to 64", or "75 or older" on the question *What is your age?*

People with Language Barriers

Category	Barriers
Available & affordable broadband access	• Many individuals with low literacy levels are also low-income or rural and face barriers accessing and paying for internet service. • Technical jargon and legal terms in internet plans are intimidating, especially to those with limited English literacy; this population is at greater risk of upselling by internet service providers. • People with language barriers who are recent immigrants or asylum seekers are more likely to rely on a phone data plan, hotspot, and/or public wifi.

Access to devices and technical support	• For those with access to devices through adult education programs or because kids are in school, these devices must be returned in the summer or when classes are completed. This creates a gap in device access. • Technical support may only be offered in English. There is a significant lack of digital skills training, technical support, and ACP enrollment support in multiple languages.
Digital skills	• It is challenging to develop digital skills when one cannot read well. Seeking out digital skills training also requires disclosing one's literacy status, which an individual may not be willing to do (as they may feel ashamed.) This population needs tailored instruction in a supportive context to develop skills; even then they still face barriers with written text.
Inclusive Government Services	• Accessing government services over the web can require reading and completing extensive forms, which may be difficult or impossible for someone with low literacy levels to complete.
Other	• Native English speakers with low levels of literacy often conceal their status. As such, it is difficult to identify and connect to Native English speakers with low literacy levels. In fact, these individuals may avoid settings that could "out" them and as such end up avoiding core digital equity resources, such as libraries. • In general, written text is a poor method for reaching this population. Since text is a primary method of communication, these individuals face major barriers in every aspect of digital equity. • Very few government resources are offered in different languages or, for those with low literacy, in accessible languages. Most people we met in focus groups and community meetings noted at least some difficulty with accessing government forms or resources online. For those with language barriers, it's more difficult.

This population was not explicitly identified within our survey. These barriers are gleaned from focus group and community meeting findings, as well as outreach to local literacy organizations.

Incarcerated/Formerly Incarcerated People

Category	Barriers
Available & affordable broadband access	• In the county jail setting, access to devices, educational programs, and the internet may vary widely depending on space and device constraints, connectivity to the facility itself, and administration and funding decisions. • Access to the internet in state facilities is restricted due to security concerns; however, there appear to be enough devices for people to use and connectivity to a suite of educational opportunities. • People in reentry and long-term recovery struggle to gain access to the internet and to afford service, often because of a lack of credit or resources and/or unstable housing. • Incarcerated individuals may need to pay additional fees to make use of their internet service, for example, fees for making video calls. Individuals have no choice in services and must pay the cost for the option made available to them if they wish to use the service.
Access to devices and technical support	• People in reentry typically do not have the device they need because of cost barriers. When people are released, phones are critical, but most don't know how to use them. The reentry process supported by community organizations does not typically or consistently include any support for accessing devices or technical support. • When people need support accessing the internet or technical support, there are few options; the stress of technology challenges, on top of being in reentry or recovery, can be triggering.
Digital skills	• Lack of freedom makes it difficult to impossible to develop or maintain a digital presence. For example, someone who has a Google account may lose their account and all the respective files and records due to inactivity (per Google's policy to close inactive accounts after two years.) • Those who serve longer sentences face significant barriers preparing themselves with digital skills for life after incarceration. People in reentry feel significantly challenged in navigating the internet and a whole suite of things they need to do online: use apps for early release tracking, find housing, job search, browse for information or other resources.

Other	• People in reentry and recovery are worried that using the internet could get them in trouble if they click on the wrong link, which they always feel in danger of doing. Internet safety is a significant concern related to the fear of returning to jail/prison and feeling vulnerable online. • Those who receive early release through "drug court" must have a phone and use a specific tracking app; if they are not connected when they need to check in, they could violate the terms of release. There is no consistent source of support for getting the device or training individuals to use this app. • County jails have limited internet and device access, and experiences vary widely from facility to facility.

This population was not explicitly identified in our survey. These barriers are gleaned from focus group findings and insights from nonprofits that serve incarcerated or recently incarcerated individuals. MCA did not directly survey or meet with currently incarcerated individuals because of our Human Subjects Research restrictions; people in reentry were our primary focus.

Maine Tribal Nations & Tribal Members

Category	Barriers
Available & affordable broadband access	• 20% of the Native American population surveyed indicated that fitting their monthly internet bill into their household budget was very difficult, compared to 11% of the overall population surveyed. • *Note: More Native respondents reported having fiber internet service because a large proportion of the survey responses were generated in a tribal community where a fiber build has just been completed.*
Access to devices and technical support	• Native American individuals surveyed report **not having enough devices (26%)** to meet their needs at higher levels than the overall population surveyed (11%). • They also have a lower price point for affordable devices. 22% of Native American individuals surveyed indicated that $250 is too expensive for a computing device compared to 9% of the overall population surveyed.
Digital skills	• Native American respondents reported lower confidence in 11 out of 12 digital skills, with significant gaps in confidence vs. the survey overall in job searching, using email, word processing, and accessing government

	services.
Other	• Tribal members surveyed indicate much lower familiarity with protecting themselves online. Just 20% reported being very familiar, and 39% were not at all or not very familiar. • More tribal members reported enrolling in the ACP: 30% vs. 11% overall. For Tribal members, ACP enrollment is a challenge: many complete ACP enrollment only to find they are not receiving the full $75 tribal benefit, but often the $30 benefit.

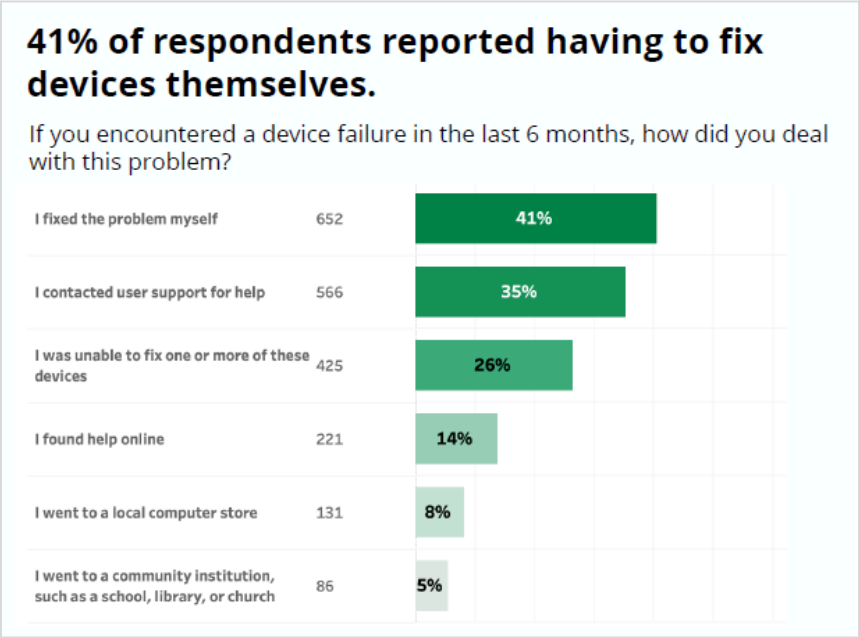
There are four federally recognized Tribes in Maine, and five tribal communities. This is an important population for Maine broadband and digital equity efforts, and MCA sought to conduct outreach and identify barriers specific to the tribal members and tribal communities.

Additional information from asset inventory interview: *Telehealth was identified as an area that would benefit from additional funding to support Maine's Tribes. Maine's tribal citizens often live in areas of the state removed from medical services. Funding to develop a sustainable model of telehealth would be of benefit to tribal communities.*

General Needs

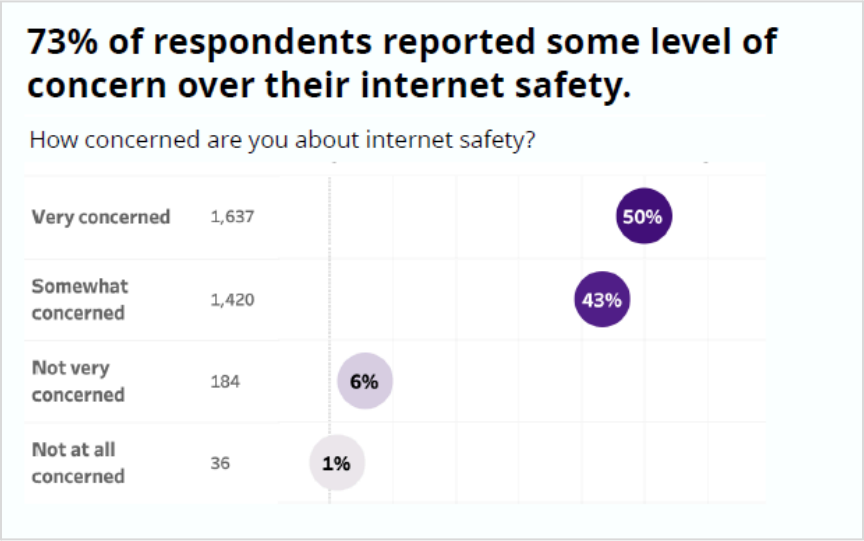
In the following areas, the barriers applied both generally and to the covered populations:

Technical Support - Most people rely on friends, family, and public libraries for technical support with their devices. Mainers generally expressed confusion about whether their technical challenges were related to the quality of their internet service, home Wi-Fi setup, or device. Technical issues may arise because, though people mostly feel they have enough devices, they may be attempting to do something on a phone or an older model tablet or computer. In many instances, the device may not be appropriate for the use, or the resource they're trying to access may not be



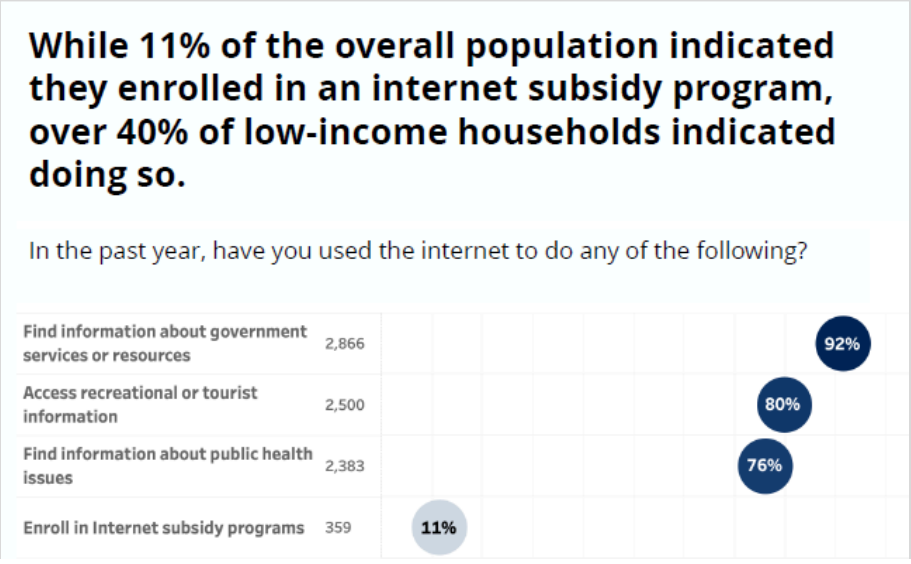
made accessible for a mobile device or have a complicated form or process that is more easily done on a larger device.
One-on-one support is a key need expressed by many with technical challenges. Some mentioned private tech support like Geek Squad; most mentioned public libraries or other trusted institutions as a place to find help. 41% of survey respondents who encountered a device failure in the last six months fixed the problem themselves, and 26% said they could not fix it. Just 5% said they got help from a local institution like a library, school, or church.

Internet Safety - 93% of survey respondents said they were at least somewhat concerned about internet safety, and a full 50% are very concerned. In focus groups and community meetings, people almost universally expressed concern about hacks and scams, their ability to protect their data and privacy online, and older family members and children staying safe online. Of all of the digital skills addressed in the survey, the ability to find tools to protect their data online was the one in which people had the least confidence.



15% said they are unfamiliar with ways to protect themselves online, and 46% are only somewhat familiar. Most people couldn't name a tool or source of information for support on this issue: a few key resources were identified as sources of information about internet safety, including news stories and, in some cases, local law enforcement.

Inclusive/Accessible State Resources - Language barriers, difficulty with navigation, and difficulty finding information online cause Maine residents to seek services in person or by phone. Though a high percentage (over 92%) of survey respondents report using the internet to access government resources or information, many participants in focus groups expressed discomfort and frustration



with state government websites,
especially when using a smartphone. When websites don't work for them, they resort to making phone calls and often sitting on hold for hours. Just 36% of individuals with a disability reported that government resources are accessible, compared to 44% overall. And just 26% of low-income respondents felt their search for government information or services met their needs, compared to 33% of overall respondents.

Limited Capacity & Expertise to Support Digital Inclusion in Existing Programs - Limited staffing capacity and expertise in digital inclusion services can slow down opportunities to reach people with programs they already access. For example, with ARPA and Cares Act funding coming into the state of Maine during the pandemic, there was a proliferation of device loan programs to respond to community members needing to access services and support remotely. Key informants indicated that while timely and helpful, organizations had to develop systems for loaning and servicing devices outside their usual programmatic expertise. In the affordable housing domain, resident coordinators, who are the most plausible point of support for resident needs, often don't have the time to focus on 35 in-depth technical issues.

Additionally, multiple key informants indicated that for programs that loan out devices, there is not always staff capacity to provide necessary assistance in device setup and ongoing technical assistance. Device access was the most frequently identified asset gap among the key digital equity and inclusion areas. For many individuals, cell phones are their only device and have limitations in supporting more in-depth educational or workforce-related needs. For two of the largest digital equity providers, NDEC and give IT. get IT., funding priorities included accessing funds to expand services that would allow them to partner with organizations to manage all aspects of device procurement, maintenance, and digital skills training.

Digital Equity Gaps Identified by Key State Agency Partners

MCA worked within our Interagency Broadband Working Group to identify gaps in programming or resources that impact digital equity of individuals and communities served by specific state agency partners. Some findings include:

- **Department of Education: Devices & Technical Support** - Less-resourced schools often have to keep devices in circulation before fixing or replacing them with newer models if the State does not cover the cost. Schools with fewer resources often lack personnel with specific technical skills to provide support; this puts these schools and students at a disadvantage because their devices may not be as up-to-date, or they may not be able to fix technical issues as they occur quickly.
- **Adult Education Programs -** These programs do not have enough devices for all students and need hotspots to help students connect at home. A program that could provide low-cost or free devices that students would have the option to purchase when their programs and classes are complete would be effective for ensuring these individuals have access to affordable devices for education and beyond.

- **Maine Department of Labor: Career Centers -** Not all career centers have devices or enough devices for individuals to use; the Department identified a need for a remote information center that could travel from center to center with laptops. Department staff could also benefit from having more availability of "hubs" in remote communities without a career center to provide a place where Department staff can meet with constituents closer to home.
- **Maine School and Library Network -** Though most libraries have hotspots to lend to patrons who need access to the internet at home, they note that hotspots do not work reliably in some areas. Some libraries would like to establish device lending programs but struggle with the cost of devices and staff time to manage the program. Many libraries need internal wiring upgrades to fully utilize connectivity through the Maine School & Library Network. Libraries also note that they need more staff training, particularly to provide internet safety education to older adults and digital citizenship classes for children. Placing digital navigators in libraries and increasing technical support capacity and training for library staff would help support digital inclusion activity across the state's library network. Lastly, libraries struggle to find space to provide support or establish more private spaces within the library building where programming can occur or patrons can take full advantage of public access to the internet and devices on site.

3.2.2 Broadband Adoption Needs

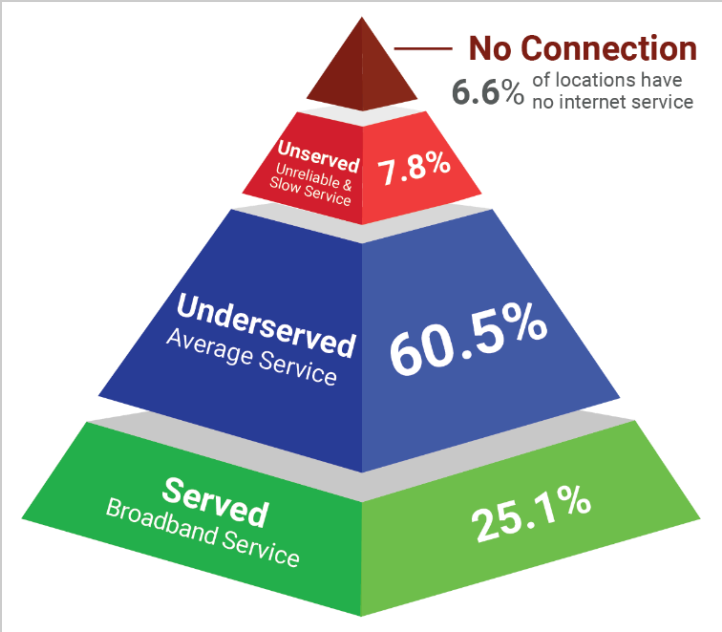
To improve broadband adoption across the State of Maine, the following barriers and needs must also be addressed. Maine residents need access to affordable devices, reliable technical support to achieve digital equity, and sufficient digital skills to troubleshoot when something goes wrong. Ensuring that low-cost device programs are available to all Mainers in need, and investing in skills and technical support programs, especially via trusted institutions already working in communities will support this work.

A shortfall of critical digital skills support is also a major barrier to digital equity in Maine. Without these skills, residents cannot fully leverage the internet to advance education and work goals. We will consider investing in workforce and educational programs that build on residents' adoption of civic and social uses to enable more Mainers to thrive and excel by working and learning online.

Internet safety is an urgent concern, particularly for the state's most vulnerable residents–and few know how to protect themselves online. Including digital safety resources and training as a critical component of skills, technical support programs, and online resources will allow us to better integrate these efforts, which must go beyond password basics to encompass multiple privacy and security aspects.

Language barriers, difficulty with navigation, and difficulty finding information online often cause Maine residents to seek services via in-person and phone encounters. MCA will perform a user-centered audit to improve online assistance services, ensuring they provide easy-to-find information on digital skills, device accessibility, IT support and internet subsidy programs.

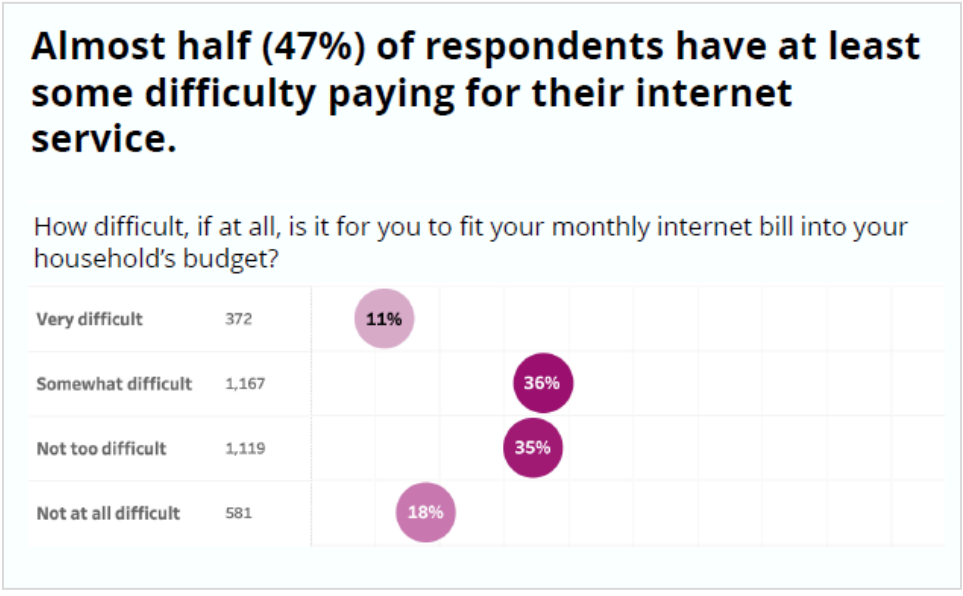
3.2.3 Broadband Availability & Affordability Needs



Internet availability and affordability are primary barriers to digital equity in Maine, especially for the state's most vulnerable populations. Based on December 2022 data from the FCC, approximately 42,000 locations in Maine have no broadband connection or service of less than 25/3 Mbps. These are considered with "no connection" and account for about 6.6% of the total locations statewide.

An additional 50,000 locations (7.8% of locations) are "unserved" by state definition, with service between 25/3 to 100/20 Mbps. A full 60.5%, or 393,000 locations, have service between 100/20 and 100/100 Mbps and will not be eligible for BEAD funding.

The high cost of reliable internet is a significant barrier, and many are unaware of the Affordable Connectivity Program. In Maine, 47% of survey respondents say they have at least some difficulty paying their monthly internet bill. It's even more of a strain for many covered populations: 77% of low-income households have difficulty, and 64% of racial and ethnic minority respondents have at least some difficulty. In focus groups and community meetings, we repeatedly heard about the frustration people experience in navigating their relationships with ISPs to get the service they want for a price they can afford. This includes not getting caught in high-cost "bundles," or contracts where prices increase or fees are added unexpectedly. 41% are paying anywhere from $60-$90 per month, and 34% are paying more than $90.



In addition to expensive monthly service, most survey respondents (40%) are dissatisfied with their internet because of the connection's speed, reliability, or quality. There is a general sense that those with internet access can't rely on it and take advantage of the benefits of being connected.

About 33% of eligible households in Maine are enrolled in the Affordable Connectivity Program, which means there could be as many as 160,000 eligible households not receiving this benefit. Very few people know of the ACP benefit in the survey, focus groups, and community meetings. Those who are aware often report difficulty getting through the enrollment process, providing eligibility documentation, or receiving the full tribal benefit of $75 in the case of many tribal members. In areas where targeted enrollment outreach is happening through trusted organizations, the percentage of people who have applied is higher than the 11% overall noted in the survey: 42% of low-income respondents to the survey said they enrolled in the benefit and 27% of racial and ethnic minority respondents.

The FCC has funded four organizations in Maine to support outreach and enrollment for the program. Many other organizations that have trusted relationships with eligible individuals and households do not have the capacity to do this type of engagement.

Maine's broadband availability and affordability needs include:

- More support for organizations to conduct ACP outreach and enrollment activities for eligible individuals and households to increase the number of homes with broadband service;
- More low-cost options for consumers as well as support and education to help consumers navigate their options;
- Additional options to help subsidize internet costs, such as local or state programs that provide emergency or ongoing assistance to the most vulnerable individuals and households;
- More places that are welcoming and inclusive for vulnerable populations - especially places where people already gather or go for other reasons - to provide public access to the internet and internet-enabled devices.

Looking at the Barriers & Needs Through the Lens of Digital Determinants of Health

It is clear from our outreach and engagement process that many Mainers identify as more than one of the covered populations addressed in the Digital Equity Act. It is difficult to present clear data about the intersectionality of multiple barriers and the impact on a person's connectivity. For example, if an individual is an older, disabled veteran living in a low-income household in a rural community, the person may face multiple compounding barriers to achieving digital equity. Though we developed focus groups to be representative of a particular covered population, participants were virtually always coming into the conversation with the experience of being a member of multiple covered populations.

MCA and our partners could consider these issues further by exploring the Digital Determinants of Health, or the impact of digital transformation and the importance of *full* access to the digital world in healthcare, education, housing, and employment.

An individual and population's health closely correlates to access to nutritious food, a safe place to live, educational opportunities, quality healthcare, and socio-economic status.

Access to affordable, reliable, high speed internet, as well as the skills, device, and ability to stay safe online are basic building blocks that are increasingly important in social determinants of health.

To the greatest extent possible, MCA will seek with the objectives in this plan to recognize the intersectionality of individuals' and communities' barriers and seek to address them in a comprehensive approach.

4. Collaboration and Stakeholder Engagement

4.1 Coordination and Outreach: Developing the Plan

MCA conducted significant stakeholder engagement during the development of the Digital Equity Plan, including:

- Formation and monthly engagement with six stakeholder groups (see below) including 117 partners and individuals
- Three Tribal Consultations with Tribal Chiefs of the Mi'kmaq Nation, Passamaquoddy Tribe at Sipayik, and the Passamaquoddy Tribe at Motahkomikuk
- 3,288 responses to the Maine Broadband Survey (12 language translations created)
- 16 Community Meetings (250 participants)
- 13 Focus Groups with covered populations (116 participants)
- Stakeholder presentations and meetings
- Regional and tribal coalition building and engagement, resulting in 180 digital equity coalition partners and 651 interviews with individuals with lived experience of the digital divide (covered populations) and organizational partners which support and represent the covered populations.
- (First ever) Digital Equity Workshop facilitated by National Digital Inclusion Alliance and MCA (100 participants)
- Interviews with 10 ISPs and an ISP roundtable with 17 participants
- Email and voicemail box established to collect feedback and ideas
- Open office hours
- Radio, social media, and earned and print media advertising to invite feedback and survey responses
- Reflections & Revisions: extensive 30-day public comment period involving numerous presentations and community and partner engagement sessions to invite and solicit feedback on the draft plan

The full local engagement tracker is available as Appendix A.

A number of important collaborators engaged in the development of the plan include members of the Digital Equity Taskforce and the Regional and Tribal Broadband partners, as well as the local coalition members, convened within each region of the state by those regional partners. Additionally, MCA has worked closely with our state agency partners through the Interagency Broadband Working Group.

Key members of the **Digital Equity Taskforce** (Appendix B) include the executive director of the National Digital Equity Center (who served as the Chair), the director of the Maine Adult Education program, and staff from the Maine Community College System, Maine Immigrant Rights Coalition, and Give IT Get IT. Membership also included representatives from several state agencies: Department of Labor, Department of Health & Human Services, Department of Economic and Community Development, Department of Education, Maine Housing, Bureau of Veterans Services, and the Maine State Library.

Also represented are a statewide food bank, local housing authority, tribal members and organizations, a community action agency, organizations working with and advocating for older adults, the University of Maine Center on Aging, and the New England Telehealth Resource Center. The group was formed to provide insight, advise MCA regarding the barriers that covered populations face and potential solutions, and help facilitate connections directly with those individuals and communities to inform the plan's development. The Taskforce has been meeting monthly since it was convened in June 2022.

MCA funds the **Regional and Tribal Broadband Partners** (Appendix C) to support community-driven broadband solutions and facilitate each region's digital equity coalition building and plan development. These partners are economic development and planning agencies, nonprofit organizations, and councils of governments (COGs), and a native community development financial institution (CDFI) provides support and capacity for the tribal communities.The Regional and Tribal partners have met monthly throughout the development of this plan, and the regional partners also had weekly open office hours with MCA staff and contractors.

4.2 Implementing the Plan

Throughout the implementation of the Digital Equity Plan, MCA will continue to collaborate extensively by maintaining partnerships with these key collaborators, building relationships with individuals and communities who are most impacted by the digital divide, and creating partnerships to advance our work in new areas such as internet safety.

MCA will need to leverage partnerships developed during the Digital Equity Plan development outreach and engagement process, particularly within our strategies to tackle affordability, reach more places and people with digital inclusion programming, and launch statewide education campaigns to bring partners together on issues like device refurbishment, internet safety, and telehealth best practices. We envision engaging the partner groups below in the following ways:

- **Digital Equity Taskforce** (40 partners) - The Taskforce members will continue to serve as important advisors to ensure that covered populations are served through the Maine Digital Equity Plan implementation. Many will also be directly engaged as implementation partners for specific strategies outlined in this plan. Some Taskforce members may also serve as grant decision-making or advisory bodies for Connectivity Hubs or other digital equity funding programs. These are important education partners and awareness builders about digital equity and digital inclusion programs and resources.
- **Regional and Tribal Broadband Partners** (13 partners, 180 regional coalition members) - These organizations are likely implementation partners for regional and tribal digital equity plans and important convenors for digital inclusion partners at the local and regional levels.

- **Tribal leaders** - MCA expects to partner with Tribal leaders and tribal organizations on implementation strategies for digital equity in Tribal communities and for tribal members statewide.
- **Broadband Working Group** (17 agencies) - Many members of the Working Group may be implementation partners, particularly for partnerships in ACP enrollment and other affordability strategies, digital skill building, affordable device access, inclusive government resources, and internet safety. State agencies are education and awareness builders, as well as partners with direct relationships with covered populations through their existing roles and programs.
- **Workforce Advisory Committee** (20 partners) - This Committee works with MCA's Workforce Development Manager to create and support education and training opportunities to solve the broadband workforce gap. Many will advise MCA and practitioners to ensure underserved populations are engaged in broadband workforce strategies.
- **Broadband Infrastructure Capital Markets Taskforce** (27 partners) - Though this Taskforce is devoted primarily to helping to solve gaps in funding for broadband infrastructure, they will also be engaged to support and advise on fundraising strategies for the Digital Equity Fund and other creative financing that may support digital equity.

Workforce, Labor, and Higher Education Partnerships

MCA has collaborated directly with workforce development practitioners, organizations and institutions of higher learning to understand the broadband workforce needs better and connect the workforce strategies to digital equity initiatives. The Workforce Advisory Group includes the Roux Institute at Northeastern University, the Maine Community College System, and Washington County Community College. MCA engaged Camoin Associates and its project partner, Thomas P. Miller and Associates, to conduct an assessment of Maine's broadband workforce to (1) determine which occupations will be most critical for deploying broadband across the state, (2) gauge the scale of any workforce shortages, and (3) craft strategies for how MCA should address employer needs and address barriers experienced by potential workers, particularly in underserved populations.

The analysis results determined that the state faces significant workforce gaps due to an increasingly tight labor market, which, without any level of investment, is likely to impede deployment. This workforce shortage is exacerbated by the early stages of developing formalized broadband training within the state. Coordination, communication, and partnerships will be crucial for Maine to successfully meet the challenges and opportunities broadband development presents. Maine's existing workforce development system is a key asset, as it operates effectively across the economy but will require specialization and capacity to support broadband sector buildout. Several key activities recommended by the workforce analysis are connected to our digital equity work and targeted to better engage underrepresented individuals, including covered populations, in broadband workforce training opportunities.

Additional higher education partners are also engaged through other stakeholder groups, such as the University of Maine Center on Aging on the Digital Equity Taskforce. Others also engaged with the regional digital equity coalitions, including the University of Maine at Augusta in Oxford County, Washington County Community College in Washington County, the University of Southern Maine in Cumberland County, and the University of Maine at Farmington in Franklin County.

Partnerships For Further Exploration

There are several areas of focus for outreach and partnership development that will be prioritized over the next few months that were identified but not fully explored during this planning process. These areas and partners include:

- **The Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous, and Maine Tribal Populations** could be a key collaborator relative to data, policy, and strategies to better connect historically disadvantaged racial, indigenous, and tribal populations.
- As we delve further into the experience of currently incarcerated people and individuals in reentry, MCA would like to connect more specifically with the **county jail administrators, Sheriff's offices, and staff and administrators working with people on probation**. Conversations with the Department of Corrections staff identified the network of thousands of people on probation as a key population that may face particular digital equity barriers. The planning process did surface barriers and disparity between county jail facilities, but further exploration and outreach are needed to map out a strategy and identify opportunities. Though there are approximately 2,000 people incarcerated in Maine, there are about three times that many on probation, many of whom likely face significant barriers to digital equity. MCA will prioritize engaging with the Department of Corrections to ensure that both the Digital Equity Taskforce and the Broadband Working Group include DOC representatives.
- Though the outreach and engagement period gathered information about the experiences of some individuals within the covered populations who have experienced unstable housing situations, MCA would like to specifically explore the **barriers and needs for unhoused individuals** so that specific solutions and partners can be explored to reach these individuals.
- Similarly, MCA gathered some information about **vulnerable youth,** such as those whose families may be unhoused, children in the foster care system, and young people who identify as LGBTQ+. More specific partnerships need to be developed and additional outreach conducted to better understand the assets and barriers for these young people.
- MCA must develop partnerships with **labor unions** as part of the broadband workforce strategy. Specifically, unions may help identify opportunities to engage with traditionally underrepresented individuals in workforce development and digital inclusion programs.
- Lastly, many people during the outreach and engagement period cited **local law enforcement and news media** as trusted sources of information about internet safety. MCA will work to explore and establish partnerships in both of these areas.

Outreach & Engagement Methods

We plan to have consistent outreach and engagement to build relationships with covered populations and the organizations that serve and represent them. These outreach and engagement strategies will include:

- **Events:** MCA will continue to hold a statewide in-person Digital Equity Workshop annually, as well as other digital equity-focused events such as a Digital Equity Start Summit as a way to identify innovative, creative approaches for systemic digital equity challenges. We will continue collaborating on the Maine Broadband Summit (an annual event hosted by the Maine Broadband Coalition) and various regional and local events. The annual workshop will be convened regularly to help update partners on progress toward the strategies and goals outlined in this plan, host shared learning opportunities, and explore best practices and models.
- **Community Conversations:** Community and partner meetings coordinated by MCA Digital Equity Manager in partnership with various stakeholders and new partners as they are identified. This outreach will allow MCA to better understand digital equity in particular communities and populations, identify new strategies and potential assets, and educate more broadly about digital equity.
- **Building Around the Digital Equity Asset Inventory:** Building and maintaining the asset inventory as an online resource for partners and the public will act as a field-building strategy. We envision developing and using this tool to identify new partners, keep organizations connected with others in the digital equity ecosystem, and provide a resource for digital navigators and a common place for the public to find information and support.
- **Tracking Impact:** MCA will conduct ongoing evaluation and progress monitoring on digital equity metrics, including additional surveys and focus groups in 2027 and 2030. Regular progress monitoring will happen annually as programs are implemented, and reporting is conducted. MCA will continue to use our website, newsletter, and partner meetings to communicate progress toward our goals.
- **General Public Input:** MCA will maintain our practice of holding open office hours and regular public meetings of our board, providing ongoing opportunities for public input. We will also provide opportunities for individuals and communities to provide feedback through regular surveys and feedback sessions. MCA will also work closely with our partners at the Maine Broadband Coalition to provide regular updates and solicit input through their weekly “Let’s Talk Broadband” open Zoom sessions for individuals, communities, and organizations.
- **Exploring New Partnerships:** MCA also needs to cultivate some new partnerships to accomplish our goals as noted above, specifically with law enforcement, media partners, labor unions and others. MCA is also working to establish regular communication with legislative staff and policymakers to facilitate collaboration with the Legislature on policy issues proactively and as they arise.

5. Implementation

5.1 Implementation Strategy & Key Activities

To advance digital equity in Maine, we must work together to build a foundation to sustain the work over time. Maine needs to focus on investing in places and people to:

- Provide resources in proximity to everyone and at a scale to meet the need, and;
- Ensure we reach people who face the most significant barriers to being connected no matter where they are.

Through MCA, the state must partner with others to create overarching educational and digital inclusion campaigns to help all partners share resources and best practices and tackle problems at scale. Everyone must pull together to make broadband more affordable to all Mainers by focusing on increasing enrollment in the Affordable Connectivity Program and exploring and piloting new strategies to reduce internet service costs. Lastly, we recognize that the Digital Equity implementation funding for the State of Maine will not be enough to reach everyone. We must bring all resources to bear to launch a Digital Equity Fund, more than doubling the resources available through NTIA to close the digital divide in Maine.

Strategy 1: Create the Basic Building Blocks to Advance Digital Equity

Maine must invest in the core capacity, tools, and resources to help advance digital equity across our state. These investments must include sustaining digital equity staffing at MCA and adjusting funding programs to ensure digital equity is used as a lens when making program decisions and prioritizing investments. The digital equity asset inventory, digital equity-focused events and education, coalition building, and tracking progress and impact are all important to ensure we sustain and grow this work over time. Another foundational element–establishing a Digital Equity Committee of the MCA Board to guide our efforts–has already been done.

- MCA is working now to apply a digital equity lens to infrastructure projects and other programs to prioritize investment where it makes the biggest impact. Adding various priority data layers to the **Broadband Mapping Platform** is one result of our combined BEAD and Digital Equity planning process.
- As part of our digital equity planning process, MCA hired the State's first **Digital Equity Manager** who will work directly with partners and help lead the implementation of digital equity programs outlined in this plan.
- The **Digital Equity Asset Inventory** will be an online resource to provide information about digital inclusion programs and resources for members of the public, digital navigators, and organizational partners. The resource will be augmented by a communications campaign and public service announcements to ensure Maine people can find the many existing digital inclusion resources.

- MCA will continue in the immediate term to act as a **coalition convenor**, providing structure to bring together the Digital Equity Taskforce, Regional and Tribal partners, the Interagency Broadband Working Group and others. This convening role is important to help facilitate shared learning and best practices and keep partners working in collaboration with one another. Longer term, MCA envisions serving as backbone support to a core group of leaders or steering committee members, providing administration, communication, and facilitation to help them achieve their goals.
- Digital equity-focused **events** such as an annual Digital Equity Workshop will be important gatherings to drive collaboration, support shared learning, monitor progress, and communicate impact. MCA will organize events regularly as needed and sponsor and participate in events hosted by other partners.
- **Ongoing measurement and progress monitoring** toward our digital equity goals by MCA will be a critical building block to ensure all partners remain aligned and program adjustments are made throughout the implementation process.

How Strategy 1 Addresses Gaps in Existing Efforts to Address Digital Equity Barriers

Before the research, outreach and engagement undertaken to create this plan, information about the state of digital equity in Maine was limited and had not been comprehensively explored. The tools and capacity to understand the digital divide and conduct outreach to ensure we can address it did not exist. In addition to the identifying needs for more digital inclusion support , we also discovered that many covered populations are unaware of digital inclusion programs that *do* exist to address their barriers to connectivity. Further, Maine has many organizations that are closely connected with covered populations, but not implementing digital inclusion interventions or sharing information about existing supports and resources. Connecting our partners across sectors and regions to learn and collaborate is critical to address greater engagement. Through this strategy, MCA intends to establish and build awareness of existing resources and to work with partners to evaluate, support, coordinate, and communicate digital inclusion work and advance digital equity to address these gaps.

Strategy 2: Leverage Partnerships to Reach Places & People

Maine has many organizational partners and networks that are significant assets to enable digital inclusion programs and activities. We need to work together to reach every corner of the state geographically and focus on people and communities facing more barriers to being connected. We can leverage the work of core digital inclusion organizations with partners serving particular regions or specific covered populations to share best practices and digital inclusion expertise, reaching more people and places. It will be important to embed and align digital inclusion activity into networks that already have relationships with covered populations.

- MCA will design **proactive grant opportunities and competitive funding programs** to support digital inclusion programs that will reach a broad geography and directly support the covered populations. Organizations and programs funded would contribute directly toward achieving the measurable objectives, addressing barriers identified in this plan within the elements of digital inclusion.

Three areas of specific opportunity are identified in this plan:

- **Regional/Tribal Partners:** Regional and Tribal Broadband Partners and digital equity coalition partners within each region have developed regional digital equity plans. MCA will support each partner to begin implementation of these plans in 2024 with existing Maine Jobs & Recovery Program (ARPA) funding committed for the second part of this two-year program. Beyond 2024, MCA will seek to fund regional partners to implement strategies identified in their plans that will have the biggest impact on covered populations in the region and can advance the measurable goals in this plan. Examples of activities proposed in the regional plans include digital navigators, ACP outreach, digital skills training, free and low-cost devices and technical support.
- **Covered Population Partners**: A key asset identified during the development of this plan, referred to as Networks of Opportunity, will be funded to support digital inclusion activity for covered populations. MCA will seek partners with existing relationships with covered populations that can be leveraged to include digital inclusion activities that will help advance measurable objectives in this plan. Examples include:
  - Community Action Agencies supporting low-income families
  - Maine Prisoner Reentry Network and regional community-based reentry partners supporting formerly incarcerated individuals and people in long-term recovery
  - Immigrant, refugee, and asylum seekers' support organizations supporting people facing multiple barriers to connectivity
  - Area Agencies on Aging and Age-Friendly Communities supporting older adults
  - Vet Centers and Maine Military & Community Network chapters supporting veterans
  - College access and career retraining organizations supporting underserved youth and adults
- **Core Digital Inclusion Partners**: MCA also intends to help fund and secure resources for partners providing core digital inclusion activity that will complement the regional, tribal and network approaches above. Examples include:
  - Libraries: especially rural and under-resourced libraries to provide digital skills or digital navigators, technical support, and access to affordable devices
  - Adult Education programs, especially to support vulnerable individuals in digital skill building and access to devices and technical support
  - Give IT Get IT: device refurbishment and technical support, digital skill assessments
  - National Digital Equity Center: digital navigators, digital skill training and on-site partnerships, Affordable Connectivity Program enrollment support, device distribution and technical support

    - DOL career centers: digital skill training, digital navigators, access to devices and technical support, internet safety training
    - K-12 schools: access to devices, especially for low-income families, potentially other digital skill training, internet safety education.

- MCA will fund a **Connectivity Hubs program** in 2024-2026 (CPF funded) to invest in facilities that support education, workforce, telehealth programming and public access to the internet, devices, and digital skills. This program will prioritize underserved geographic areas, covered populations, and other vulnerable individuals and communities with investments in broadband infrastructure, facility improvements, and devices. We are also exploring mobile connectivity hubs and digital equity buses to reach more remote locations. MCA will seek to complement investment in facilities, technology, and devices with the program investments we are making with partner organizations and seek to support both facilities and programs in areas where digital inclusion programs do not currently exist or are limited.

- MCA will support a **Tribal Broadband Initiative** to support connectivity and digital equity for the Tribes in Maine. We will seek to solidify relationships with the Tribal Nations through annual consultations with tribal leaders, helping to support tribal capacity for broadband and digital equity and working to complement tribal funding sources with state funding where gaps are identified. Tribal support will be funded with the Regional and Tribal Broadband Partners program in 2024. MCA will seek to complement tribal digital equity and infrastructure funding through the Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program (and other sources) with state Digital Equity Capacity Funding as well as BEAD funding

- MCA will establish a **Prison & Reentry Broadband Initiative** to further explore and understand the unique circumstances of those who are incarcerated and in reentry. This effort will include establishing and strengthening MCA's relationships with the Maine DOC, County Jails, and other community organizations and advocates for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals. MCA will also seek opportunities to support this population with the Connectivity Hub program and engage directly with education and workforce skill programs that work with the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated to collaborate on digital skill building, device access, and internet safety education.

How Strategy 2 Addresses Gaps in Existing Efforts to Address Digital Equity Barriers

The digital equity asset inventory revealed that Maine has numerous core digital inclusion partners that lack the capacity to scale programs to reach all geographic areas of Maine consistently and, in many cases, are not reaching the most impacted covered populations. We also discovered that Maine has strong networks of organizations and state agencies working closely with the covered populations that either don't currently offer digital inclusion support or don't have the resources or expertise to do so. As outlined on pages 54-56, there are significant gaps in the availability of digital skills training, technical support, and affordable device access.
Activities within this strategy aim to fill the need for more welcoming and inclusive support and programs for

covered populations, as noted on page 59. Through this strategy, MCA intends to fill these gaps by building partnerships, expanding expertise, and providing funding to 1) scale existing digital inclusion programs to consistently reach all parts of our State, and 2) focus on embedding digital inclusion into organizations and programs that already have trusted relationships with people most impacted by the digital divide.

Strategy 3: Focus on Affordability

Many Mainers find it a challenge to pay for internet service at home; the state needs to focus attention on strategies that can improve affordability, particularly for the covered populations for whom this is a significant barrier. These strategies will involve supporting the Affordable Connectivity Program enrollment for more eligible households, researching other local and policy solutions, and launching an apartment Wi-Fi program to better connect residents of affordable housing units across the state.

- MCA will continue to lead and expand the **ACP4ME Campaign**, which provides support statewide with materials, training for partners to conduct outreach and enrollment activities, and tracking progress toward reaching over 64,000 new households. The campaign will be expanded pending funding for ACP beyond 2024 with public service announcements and a media strategy, events, and collaboration with state agency partners to identify ways to integrate and align program enrollment with other programs already serving eligible households.
- MCA and its partners will also **explore best practices and other policy solutions, programs, and pilots** that could provide support if ACP is not funded beyond 2024. This may include:
    - Research and draft a state-level ACP alternative solution and middle-class affordability program
    - Profile and share best practices from existing local affordability solutions in Bremen and Motahkomikuk, including programs that defray the cost of installation and equipment to eligible households
    - Engage collaborators and the legislature to explore other policy interventions, such as adapting the General Assistance program to allow communities to provide broadband subsidy along with other support for housing and utilities
- MCA will work with the affordable housing community to research, launch, and fund an **Affordable Housing Connectivity Program.** One strategy to improve affordability is to ensure that the thousands of people living in affordable housing units in Maine have affordable access and the support they need to fully connect, including apartment wifi, digital skill training, affordable devices, technical support, and internet safety education.
- Provide support to **Maine Telecommunications Relay Services (TRS)** to enable individuals with disabilities who require assistive technology to transition from analog to digital by identifying individual locations that need access or providing ACP or other support to those individuals. MCA is actively supporting TRS by filling a named role on the Telecommunications Relay Services

Council to ensure that the deaf, late-deafened, hard of hearing and speech-impaired communities can fully access and participate in society as technology supports change.

- MCA will continue to refine existing infrastructure programs such as Connect the Ready, Reach ME, and Jumpstart to:
    - Enable a diversity of technologies to increase competition and options that lower costs
    - Include requirements for funded infrastructure projects such as low-cost options, middle-income options, proactive consumer outreach to share digital inclusion resources leveraging the digital equity asset inventory and regional and tribal partnerships
    - Add direct mail and other outreach strategies targeted at households that will be served by infrastructure projects to connect them with digital inclusion support

How Strategy 3 Addresses Gaps in Existing Efforts to Address Digital Equity Barriers

Affordability emerged as one of the most universal barriers to connectivity in Maine, identified by covered populations and Mainers generally in our outreach. Though the Lifeline and Affordable Connectivity Program are assets that support eligible low-income Mainers, awareness remains low, and the resulting percentage of eligible households enrolled is also low. Affordable housing and programs supporting Mainers with disabilities do not have resources and programs to ensure affordable internet access to these populations. Very few alternative local, tribal, and county-level strategies were identified that support affordability. Most Mainers have only one internet service option if they have access to service at home. Through this strategy, MCA intends to both expand affordable service options and increase awareness of and adoption of those options. Gaps this strategy addresses include those outlined on page 58, namely greater ACP awareness and outreach, more low-cost options, and additional programs to help subsidize internet costs for those most in need.

Strategy 4: Launch Statewide Education & Information Campaigns

Some critical campaigns need to be coordinated centrally by the State, providing a structure and tools for various partners to engage and participate. MCA will work with collaborators to design and launch statewide campaigns promoting internet safety and device refurbishment, providing practical tools and resources. The state will also leverage existing tools such as 211 to provide information about digital inclusion programs and resources and work closely with partners in Telehealth to promote and share best practices. Lastly, MCA will lead the development of an educational campaign with photographic and video storytelling to illustrate examples of the digital divide and the impact of digital equity on Maine people's lives.

- MCA will launch an **Internet Safety for ME Campaign**, creating various tools to be employed by trusted partners and leveraging media and law enforcement engagement. The campaign will include a monthly news series on what consumers should watch out for, tips and tools to protect themselves online, and support for partnerships between law enforcement and digital equity partners.
  This could include, for example, highlighting and replicating the Bath Housing Authority partnership

with local police for on-site internet safety education or a regular internet safety series offered by libraries throughout the state.

- MCA will work with partners to launch an **Affordable Devices for ME** campaign encouraging and enabling device donation for refurbishment and redistribution to covered populations. This campaign will research formal and informal policies by government agencies, institutions and private sector partners that may be barriers to donation. We will help build capacity with Give IT Get IT and other organizations. Further, the campaign will leverage partnerships with the state and regional chambers of commerce, institutions, media partners and state agencies to encourage and track device donations toward our goal of 25,000 donations.
- **Digital Equity Story series:** MCA will work with Regional and Tribal Broadband Partners, Digital Equity Taskforce members, core digital equity partners and networks of opportunity to identify a series of stories for a video and photographic series illustrating the impact of the digital divide, examples of digital inclusion programs, and the impact of digital equity on people's lives and communities. MCA will leverage these stories into outreach and presentations to Maine's organizations and companies to increase understanding about the value of robust web and mobile information and services, to share and learn best practices, to move into the 21st century for connecting with and remotely serving customers and the public in robust ways, and to adopt more digital innovation. MCA will work to leverage 211 Maine and the Digital Maine Library as broadband and digital equity resources, integrating the Digital Equity Asset Inventory and other MCA and partner programs supporting connectivity to ensure that Mainers can find what they need to support adoption. These online platforms will be augmented by Public Service Announcements and other communications campaign strategies to ensure public awareness.
- MCA and the National Digital Equity Center will partner to support a **statewide cohort of digital navigators** across organizations and agencies, hosting a central digital navigator training and sharing information and best practices, including leveraging and building the Digital Equity Asset Inventory.
- MCA will work with the Telehealth and Telemonitoring Advisory Group and other telehealth partners to support **telehealth education, best practices, and models** to decrease barriers for covered populations. This will focus on serving tribal members, older adults, veterans and individuals in remote and rural communities. MCA will also utilize data on medically underserved areas to prioritize other program investments, such as the Connectivity Hubs program.
- MCA will integrate **digital equity resources within the Community Resource Hub** currently under development to provide educational materials for communities and municipal officials, providing best practices and local models of digital inclusion programs and plans.
- MCA will work closely with state agency partners and the Broadband Working Group to **conduct a user-centered audit on state resources that are most important to covered populations** to access, resulting in action steps to improve the accessibility and inclusivity of these online resources.

How Strategy 4 Addresses Gaps in Existing Efforts to Address Digital Equity Barriers

Maine people responding to the survey and participating in community meetings and focus groups universally identified internet safety as a concern and had difficulty naming resources they draw upon to protect themselves. Similarly, impacted populations identified affordable devices as a barrier.
The asset inventory identified very few partners able to distribute devices at scale and only one active device refurbishing organization in the state. Interest in and commitment to utilizing telehealth to improve health outcomes for Mainers is high, but the barriers identified stifle the growth of this important programming and resource without additional learning and investment. Communities lack the resources and expertise to get everyone connected, and digital navigators are intermittently deployed to support digital inclusion interventions, often only as funding allows. The need for inclusive and accessible state resources, consistent internet safety education, and a sustainable system of devices and technical support within state agency programs contributed to this strategy, as outlined on pages 55-56. Through this strategy, MCA intends to leverage the state's unique role in providing universal support and a consistent framework that many partners, communities, and individuals can utilize.

Strategy 5: Sustain and Grow Our Investment in Digital Equity

Maine's commitment to digital equity means a significant commitment of resources. Sustain investments to prepare for a growing digital economy and potential divide. To put many of these strategies in motion, we will need to raise funding well beyond what may be available to our State from the Digital Equity Capacity funding from NTIA. MCA will seek to double the resources to support this work by creating and raising funds for a Digital Equity Fund, providing support for partners seeking other funding sources, and tracking the impact of our collective work to help make the case for further investment. With our partners, we will also endeavor to ensure the lasting impact of our efforts through policy changes that will be in place beyond the initial 5-year implementation period.

- MCA will more than double NTIA's investment in Maine by launching a **$15 million Digital Equity Fund** to support the strategies outlined in this plan. We will work with partners to secure resources from various partners, including private sector partners, ISPs, philanthropy, and additional state & federal funding sources.
- MCA and its partners will support **outreach and education to policymakers and staff** in the Maine Legislature. Ensuring digital equity and the elements of digital inclusion are considered in state policymaking and research will have a lasting impact on closing the digital divide. Examples include a requirement for device donation by state institutions or agencies or training and support for state agency staff on improving inclusivity and accessibility of online resources.

How Strategy 5 Addresses Gaps in Existing Efforts to Address Digital Equity Barriers

This plan identifies and details the significant need for digital inclusion programs and resources by covered populations in Maine. At the same time, it identifies assets we can leverage to address those needs and recognizes the limitations of those assets, particularly in capacity and expertise.
Through this strategy, MCA intends to provide resources to address these limitations beyond the initial

implementation support from NTIA state capacity funding, providing lasting funding and supportive state policy.

Maine's Digital Equity Plan as a Living Document

Maine's approach to implementing the Digital Equity Plan includes acknowledging that this plan is a living, breathing document that must be adapted and amended as conditions change. As each of the strategies outlined above is put into motion, MCA and its partners and stakeholders will employ the following practices to evaluate and update the plan:

- Progress Monitoring: MCA will establish a Digital Equity Dashboard on our website to reflect the status of each strategy and related activities. The Dashboard will be a resource for partners, policymakers, and the public to track implementation milestones and benchmarks and find links to additional information about each strategy.
- Refreshing the Data: As outlined in the implementation plan, MCA will work with our partners to conduct additional research, including surveying and focus groups, to update the data that informed this plan in 2027 (midpoint) and 2030 (end point of implementation period).
- Evaluating the Impact of Grants and Programs: In addition to evaluating the impact of digital equity strategies through additional data gathering with covered populations, grants and programs created in the five strategy areas will be evaluated through grant reports and partner interviews and surveys. These evaluations, combined with data about the impact on the covered populations, will help inform whether the strategies and activities should be updated.
- Prioritizing Outreach and Engagement: Regional and Tribal Partners, communities, Digital Equity Taskforce members, state agencies, policymakers, and Maine people will be engaged throughout the plan's implementation, creating a constant source of feedback about the strategies and activities.
- Annual Digital Equity Workshop: The first Digital Equity Workshop served as a capstone to outreach and engagement to finalize priorities for this inaugural Digital Equity Plan. MCA will continue to use this annual in-person event to share the 'state of digital equity in Maine,' propose adjustments, and gather feedback on proposed updates to the plan as it is implemented. Updates approved at the Workshop will be reflected in the amended annual plan and dashboard.

5.2 Timeline

MCA has proposed the timeline below for implementing the activities in each of the five digital equity strategies, recognizing that the availability and timing of digital equity funding and the collaborations outlined here will significantly impact the timeline.

Year / Stage	Activities
2024 Year Two of Regional & Tribal Broadband Partners Program	• Apply for State Digital Equity Capacity Funds • Launch Digital Equity Asset Inventory Online Platform • Fund Regional & Tribal Digital Inclusion Plans - Year One • Design & Launch Connectivity Hubs: Connectivity Hubs - Round 1 • Plan and continue Tribal Broadband Initiative • Host Second Annual Digital Equity Workshop & Digital Equity "Start Summit" • Digital Navigator Cohort Convened & Statewide Training • Partner with Maine TRS to support individuals analog-digital transition • Convene Internet Safety Partners • Convene Networks of Opportunity for Covered Populations • Multi-Criteria Decision Making Framework Applied to Funding Programs • Design Digital Equity Fund Priorities, Structure, Materials
2025 Year One of Digital Equity Implementation	• Establish Digital Equity Fund: Raise $3 million • Distribute Digital Equity Capacity Funding: ○ Round One: Funding for Networks of Opportunity & Core Capacity Partnerships + Competitive Funding for Regional/Tribal Partners • Interagency Broadband Working Group: audit of state resources • Connectivity Hubs - Round 2 • Third Annual Digital Equity Workshop (OR possibly host Net Inclusion!) • Launch Prison & Reentry Broadband Initiative • Launch Affordable Devices for ME • Launch Internet Safety for ME • Develop state-level affordability solution (ACP funding dependent) • Integrate digital inclusion resources into 211 & Maine Digital Library • Launch Affordable Housing Connectivity Program

Year / Stage	Activities

2026
Year Two
	• Digital Equity Fund: Raise $3 million
	• Fourth Annual Digital Equity Workshop
	• Activities to continue:
	  ○ Affordable Devices for ME
	  ○ Internet Safety for ME campaigns
	  ○ Affordable Housing Connectivity Program
	  ○ Advance state level affordability solutions as needed
	  ○ Implement accessibility improvements to key state government resources

2027
Year Three
	• Digital Equity Fund: Raise $3 million
	• Interim Impact Evaluation: Digital Equity Survey & Focus Groups, Connectivity Hub Impact measurement
	• Fifth Annual Digital Equity Workshop
	• Activities to continue:
	  ○ Affordable Devices for ME
	  ○ Internet Safety for ME campaigns
	  ○ Affordable Housing Connectivity Program
	  ○ Advance state level affordability solutions as needed
	  ○ Implement accessibility improvements to key state government resources

2028
Year Four
	• Digital Equity Fund: Raise $3 million
	• Sixth Annual Digital Equity Workshop
	• Activities to continue:
	  ○ Affordable Devices for ME
	  ○ Internet Safety for ME campaigns
	  ○ Affordable Housing Connectivity Program
	  ○ Advance state level affordability solutions as needed
	  ○ Implement accessibility improvements to key state government resources

Year / Stage	Activities

2029
Final Year of Digital Equity Implementation
	• Digital Equity Fund: Raise $3 million
	• Seventh Annual Digital Equity Workshop
	• Activities to continue:
	  ○ Affordable Devices for ME
	  ○ Internet Safety for ME campaigns
	  ○ Affordable Housing Connectivity Program
	  ○ Advance state level affordability solutions as needed
	  ○ Implement accessibility improvements to key state government resources

2030	• Impact Evaluation: Survey & Focus Groups • Eighth Annual Digital Equity Workshop

Ongoing Activities Following Milestones Above

Many of the strategies outlined in this plan will be ongoing activities, either throughout the five years of the plan implementation or ongoing after official launch dates noted in the table above. Additionally, infrastructure strategies targeted at Maine's access goals are more fully outlined in the Broadband Action Plan. MCA intends to host a Digital Equity Workshop annually; the first annual event was held in May 2023, which concluded the outreach and engagement period that led to this plan.

The training for digital navigators may be coordinated in conjunction with this Workshop depending on conversations with partners, though it is shown as a separate launch in 2024. In addition, the ACP for ME campaign is underway and will continue throughout the implementation period unless the program goes unfunded. We have noted in 2025 that a state-level solution may need to be developed and launched. Once launched in 2025, the ACP, affordable devices, and internet safety campaigns would continue throughout the implementation. MCA hired a Digital Equity Manager in February 2023, and that position will continue to be funded and filled.

6. Conclusion

We would like to take this opportunity to thank the many partners and collaborators who have been instrumental in helping to develop the vision, strategies, and goals outlined in the Maine Digital Equity Plan. We are grateful for the time and energy of so many partners and look forward to the opportunity to work with you to see this vision become a reality.

Creating the core capacity to sustain digital inclusion work across the state, funding partners who can reach the places and people most impacted by the digital divide, lowering costs for everyone, creating resources and tools for many partners to use, and raising funds to accomplish our goals: this will all have an enormous impact on making Maine's future a highly connected one for all of us.

Working together, we will ensure there is a place in our communities and economy for everyone to thrive.

7. Definitions & Key Terms

The following definitions are from the NTIA BEAD Notice Of Funding Opportunity and the NTIA Digital Equity Act Notice of Funding Opportunity.

Administering Entity—The term "administering entity" refers to the entity selected by the governor or equivalent official of each State to administer the Digital Equity Act Planning Grant and Capacity Grant programs. The administering entity shall— 1. Serve as the recipient of, and administering agent for, any grant awarded to the State under this program; 2. Develop, implement, and oversee the State Digital Equity Plan for the State; 3. Make subgrants3 to any entity described in Section 60304(c)(1)(D) of the Infrastructure Act that is located in the State in support of— a. The State Digital Equity Plan for the State; and b. Digital inclusion activities in the State generally; and 4. Serve as— a. An advocate for digital equity policy and digital inclusion activities; and b. A repository of best practice materials regarding the policies and activities described in clause (a).

Broadband; Broadband Service—The term "broadband" or "broadband service" has the meaning given the term "broadband internet access service" in Section 8.1(b) of title 47, Code of Federal Regulations, or any successor regulation, meaning it is a mass-market retail service by wire or radio that provides the capability to transmit data to and receive data from all or substantially all internet endpoints, including any capabilities that are incidental to and enable the operation of the communications service, but excluding dial-up internet access service. This term also encompasses any service the Commission finds to be providing a functional equivalent of the service described in the previous sentence or used to evade the protections outlined in this part.

Broadband DATA Maps—The term "Broadband DATA Maps" means the maps created by the Federal Communications Commission under Section 802(c)(1) of the Communications Act of 1934 (47 U.S.C. § 642(c)(1)).

Commission—The term "Commission" refers to the Federal Communications Commission.

Community Anchor Institution (CAI)—The term "community anchor institution" means an entity such as a school, library, health clinic, health center, hospital or other medical provider, public safety entity, institution of higher education, public housing organization3, or community support organization that facilitates greater use of broadband service by vulnerable populations, including, but not limited to, low-income individuals, unemployed individuals, children, the incarcerated, and aged individuals. An Eligible Entity may propose to NTIA that additional types of institutions should qualify as CAIs within the entity's territory. If so, the Eligible Entity shall explain why it has determined that the institution or type of institution should be treated as such and affirm that the institution or class of institutions facilitates greater use of broadband service by vulnerable populations, including low-income individuals, unemployed individuals, children, the incarcerated, and aged individuals.

Covered Household—The term "covered household" means a household, the income of which for the most recently completed year is not more than 150 percent of an amount equal to the poverty level, as determined by using criteria of poverty established by the Bureau of the Census.

Covered Populations—The term "covered populations" means: 1. Individuals who live in covered households; 2. Aging individuals; 3. Incarcerated individuals, other than individuals who are incarcerated in a Federal correctional facility; 4. Veterans; 5. Individuals with disabilities; 6. Individuals with a language barrier, including individuals who— a. Are English learners; and b. Have low levels of literacy; 7. Individuals who are members of a racial or ethnic minority group; and 8. Individuals who primarily reside in a rural area.

Digital Equity—The term "digital equity" means the condition in which individuals and communities have the information technology capacity that is needed for full participation in the society and economy of the United States.

Digital Inclusion— The term "digital inclusion" means the activities that are necessary to ensure that all individuals in the United States have access to, and the use of, affordable information and communication technologies, such as— a. Reliable fixed and wireless broadband internet service; b. Internet-enabled devices that meet the needs of the user; and c. Applications and online content designed to enable and encourage self-sufficiency, participation, and collaboration; and 2. Includes— a. Obtaining access to digital literacy training; b. The provision of quality technical support; and c. Obtaining basic awareness of measures to ensure online privacy and cybersecurity.

Digital Literacy— The term "digital literacy" means the skills associated with using technology to enable users to find, evaluate, organize, create, and communicate information. In this plan digital literacy is substituted with the term "digital skills."

Disability—The term "disability" means, with respect to an individual— 1. A physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities of such individual; 2. A record of such an impairment; or 3. Being regarded as having such an impairment.
Eligible Community Anchor Institution—The term "eligible community anchor institution" means a community anchor institution that lacks access to Gigabit-level broadband service.

Eligible Entity—The term "Eligible Entity" means any State of the United States, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, American Samoa, Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands or, in the case of an application failure, a political subdivision or consortium of political subdivisions that is serving as a Substitute Entity.

Extremely High Cost Per Location Threshold— an "Extremely High Cost Per Location Threshold" is a BEAD subsidy cost per location to be utilized during the subgrantee selection process described in Section IV.B.7 of this NOFO above which an Eligible Entity may decline to select a proposal if use of an alternative technology meeting the BEAD Program's technical requirements would be less expensive.

Funded Network—The term "Funded Network" means any broadband network deployed and/or upgraded with BEAD Program funds.

High-Cost Area—The term "high-cost area" means an unserved area in which the cost of building out broadband service is higher, as compared with the average cost of building out broadband service in unserved areas in the United States (as determined by the Assistant Secretary, in consultation with the Commission), incorporating factors that include— (I) the remote location of the area; (II) the lack of population density of the

area; (III) the unique topography of the area; (IV) a high rate of poverty in the area; or (V) any other factor identified by the Assistant Secretary, in consultation with the Commission, that contributes to the higher cost of deploying broadband service in the area. For purposes of defining "high-cost area," the term "unserved area" means an area in which not less than 80 percent of broadband-serviceable locations are unserved locations. NTIA will release further information regarding the identification of high-cost areas for purposes of BEAD funding allocations at a later date.

Location; Broadband-Serviceable Location — The terms "location" and "broadband serviceable location" mean "a business or residential location in the United States at which fixed broadband Internet access service is, or can be, installed."

Middle Mile Infrastructure — The term "middle mile infrastructure" (A) means any broadband infrastructure that does not connect directly to an end-user location, including a community anchor institution; and (B) includes—(i) leased dark fiber, interoffice transport, backhaul, carrier-neutral internet exchange facilities, carrier-neutral submarine cable landing stations, undersea cables, transport connectivity to data centers, special access transport, and other similar services; and (ii) wired or private wireless broadband infrastructure, including microwave capacity, radio tower access, and other services or infrastructure for a private wireless broadband network, such as towers, fiber, and microwave links.

Non-Traditional Broadband Provider—The term "non-traditional broadband provider" means an electric cooperative, nonprofit organization, public-private partnership, public or private utility, public utility district, Tribal entity, or local government (including any unit, subdivision, authority, or consortium of local governments) that provides or will provide broadband services.

Older Adult—The term older adult in this plan refers to NTIA's "aging individual" term, which means an individual who is 60 years of age or older.

Program—The term "Program" means the Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment Program.

Project—The term "project" means an undertaking by a subgrantee to construct and deploy infrastructure for the provision of broadband service. A "project" may constitute a single unserved or underserved broadband-serviceable location, or a grouping of broadband-serviceable locations in which not less than 80 percent of broadband-serviceable locations served by the project are unserved locations or underserved locations.

Reliable Broadband Service—The term "Reliable Broadband Service" means broadband service that the Broadband DATA Maps show is accessible to a location via:10 (i) fiber-optic technology;11 (ii) Cable Modem/ Hybrid fiber-coaxial technology;12 (iii) digital subscriber line (DSL) technology;13 or (iv) terrestrial fixed wireless technology utilizing entirely licensed spectrum or using a hybrid of licensed and unlicensed spectrum.

Rural Area—The term "rural area" means any area other than – 1. A city or town that has a population of greater than 50,000 inhabitants; 2. Any urbanized area contiguous and adjacent to a city or town that has a population of greater than 50,000 inhabitants; and 3. In the case of a grant or direct loan, a city, town, or incorporated area that has a population of greater than 20,000 inhabitants.

State—The term "State" means, for the purposes of the BEAD Program, any State of the United States, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico.

Subgrantee/Subrecipient—The term "subgrantee" or "subrecipient" means an entity that receives grant funds from an Eligible Entity to carry out eligible activities.

Underrepresented Communities—The term "underrepresented communities" refers to groups that have been systematically denied a full opportunity to participate in aspects of economic, social, and civic life, including: low-income households, aging individuals, incarcerated individuals, veterans, persons of color, Indigenous and Native American persons, members of ethnic and religious minorities, women, LGBTQI+ persons, persons with disabilities, persons with limited English proficiency, persons who live in rural areas, and persons otherwise adversely affected by persistent poverty or inequality.

Underserved Location—The term"underserved location" means a broadband serviceable location that is (a) not an unserved location, and (b) that the Broadband DATA Maps show as lacking access to Reliable Broadband Service offered with—(i) a speed of not less than 100 Mbps for downloads; and (ii) a speed of not less than 20 Mbps for uploads; and (iii) latency less than or equal to 100 milliseconds.

Underserved Service Project—The term "Underserved Service Project" means a project in which not less than 80 percent of broadband serviceable locations served by the project are unserved locations or underserved locations. An "Underserved Service Project" may be as small as a single underserved broadband serviceable location.

Unserved Location—The term "unserved location" means a broadband-serviceable location that the Broadband DATA Maps show as (a) having no access to broadband service, or (b) lacking access to Reliable Broadband Service offered with—(i) a speed of not less than 25 Mbps for downloads; and (ii) a speed of not less than 3 Mbps for uploads; and (iii) latency less than or equal to 100 milliseconds.

Unserved Service Project—The term "Unserved Service Project" means a project in which not less than 80 percent of broadband serviceable locations served by the project are unserved locations. An "Unserved Service Project" may be as small as a single unserved broadband-serviceable location.

Veteran—The term "veteran" means a person who served in the active military, naval, air, or space service, and who was discharged or released therefrom under conditions other than dishonorable.

8. Appendix

Appendix A: Maine Local Coordination Engagement Tracker

Appendix B: Maine Digital Equity Taskforce List

Appendix C: Regional and Tribal Broadband Partners List

Appendix D: Regional and Tribal Plans

Appendix E: Digital Equity Asset Inventory

Appendix F: HR&A Research & Engagement Analysis

Appendix G: Broadband Mapping Platform

Appendix H: Digital Equity As a Civil Right in Maine Report

Appendix I: MCA Digital Equity Data Sources Memo

Appendix J: Detailed Objectives, Impact & Timeline