Digital Equity Plan

City of Fitchburg 2025

Montachusett Regional Planning Commission
established 1968
Commonwealth of Massachusetts

MBI | MASSACHUSETTS BROADBAND INSTITUTE | at the MassTech Collaborative

Executive Summary

This executive summary provides an overview of the planning process, findings, and recommendations associated with the City of Fitchburg's Municipal Digital Equity Plan (2025). The summary provides a background on the Massachusetts Broadband Institute's Municipal Digital Equity Planning Program and a general introduction to digital equity planning. It outlines common values and practices associated with enhancing access to broadband internet, digital literacy, and digital technology and resources (Section 1 and Section 2), describes the planning and community outreach and engagement processes initiated by the City and its consultant, the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission (Section 3), evaluates the existing conditions of the City and region (Section 4), assesses community needs necessary to address or overcome identified challenges and barriers to digital access and inclusion (Section 5), and provides strategic recommendations through implementable goals and actions intended to enhance digital equity in Fitchburg (Section 6).

1 INTRODUCTION TO DIGITAL EQUITY PLANNING

Section 1 describes the Municipal Digital Equity Planning program and demonstrates the meaning and importance of digital equity, the digital divide, and digital inclusion. The section also introduces and defines the Digital Equity Act and the eight designated covered populations of the Act. Further, it provides a summary of the growth of broadband internet and digital technology in the 21st century to demonstrate the significance of technology to our everyday lives. Finally, it validates the importance of overcoming the digital divide and enhancing broadband internet access through increased availability, affordability, and adoption.

Below is a summary of important aspects and considerations of Digital Equity Planning:

- The City of Fitchburg aims to achieve digital equity through a Municipal Digital Equity Plan, focusing on access, affordability, and adoptability, the "Three A's".

- Over 4 billion people globally have internet access, highlighting the need for equitable digital opportunities.

- In 2024, daily data creation is estimated at 400 exabytes, emphasizing the growing reliance on digital technologies.

- Digital equity efforts target various populations, including lower-income households, aging individuals, and those with disabilities.

- The Digital Equity Act of 2021 establishes programs to empower covered populations and enhance broadband access and digital literacy.

- The vision for Massachusetts includes universal high-speed internet access for all residents, ensuring full participation in society and the economy.

- The digital divide presents challenges related to internet supply, demand, and digital literacy, affecting individuals' opportunities for success.

- Addressing digital inequity is essential for social and economic justice, as it impacts education, employment, and overall quality of life.

Digital Equity Defined...

"The condition in which all individuals and communities have the information technology capacity needed for full participation in our society, democracy, and economy. Digital equity is necessary for civic and cultural participation, employment, lifelong learning, and access to essential services."

National Digital Inclusion Alliance

Key components of digital equity include:

Internet Connection: Do all populations experience internet connection that is affordable, fast, and reliable? Can all populations access the internet?

Devices: Do all populations have devices that are adequate, needs-appropriate? Are devices affordable or otherwise accessible?

Literacy and Skills: Do all populations have the ability to use technology and the internet to achieve their needs? Do concerns around trust, privacy, and safety exist?

EQUALITY   EQUITY

NDIA

2 DIGITAL EQUITY VALUES & BEST PRACTICES

Section 2 discusses the purpose of digital equity planning and its guiding principles. The section introduces digital equity values, best practices, and strategic approaches for improving broadband access and digital equity and inclusion in Fitchburg. Further, it describes the importance of understanding and addressing the "Three A's" to narrow the digital gap and enhance digital inclusion and equity. To fully understand and address broadband access disparities among various demographic groups it is essential to understand the underlying principles, values, and best practices associated with improving digital equity and broadband internet access.

Below is a summary of several aspects of those guiding principles, or Digital Equity Values & Best Practices:

- The Digital Equity Planning process aims to assess community needs and develop a comprehensive action plan for improvement.

- Fitchburg's gaps in broadband access and digital inclusion are influenced by geographic, social, economic, and educational opportunity factors that are evaluated and assessed throughout this Plan; Adherence to the guiding principles and practices provided herein will allow the City to fully understand those factors and take measures to overcome challenges and barriers to broadband internet access and digital inclusion.

- Relative to broadband internet and digital literacy, the term "access" is inclusive of availability, affordability, and adoption of broadband internet and digital technologies, relative to broadband internet service, digital devices, digital technologies, and digital literacy skills and opportunities.

- Digital Equity Plans are intended to align with existing community development efforts to enhance digital inclusion and equity; An effective Plan should emphasize a complete evaluation of existing conditions and assessment of community needs and aim to establish measurable objectives to reduce the digital divide, focusing on Digital Equity infrastructure, programs, and services.

- The National Telecommunications & Information Administration's (NTIA) 'Internet for All' program's *Digital Equity Plan Guidance* document, recommends that digital equity plan objectives align with the objectives of existing community plans and goals,

Identify a core **team** of digital equity champions, **pursue increased funding,** and become a **leader in digital equity.**

Expand community **outreach** and strengthen partnerships.

Promote access to affordable devices and broadband internet.

specifically within: Economic Development; Education; Healthcare & Wellbeing; Civic and Social Engagement; Delivery of Municipal, Government, and Community Services.

- NTIA also recommends ongoing assessment using measurable objectives of broadband internet availability and affordability, online accessibility and inclusivity, digital literacy, online privacy, safety, and security, and device availability and affordability.

- Municipal leaders should consider investments in both infrastructure-based and programming- or service-based solutions.

- The plan provides a general list of best practices and strategic approaches for City leaders to implement the goals and objectives of a Digital Equity Plan most effectively.

- Municipal officials should implement policies and programs focused on digital access, affordability, and digital literacy.

- The FCC E-Rate program is a beneficial cost-saving program available to municipalities through public schools and libraries.

- Ongoing community engagement is essential to understand the digital equity needs of diverse groups and covered populations.

- Maintaining a map of unserved areas will help accelerate broadband deployment and identify strategic corridors for improvement.

- Public projects should incorporate high-speed internet infrastructure in all public projects and large-scale developments.

- A robust program for refurbishing digital devices can provide low-income households with necessary technology for digital access.

- Municipalities are encouraged to deliver online services to improve efficiency and reduce environmental impacts from vehicle trips.

- Coordination with state and federal legislators to adapt traditional funding mechanisms for community cable access television (CATV) programs in response to changing communication, news, entertainment, and digital media delivery and consumer access methods is critical to ensuring the future success and effectiveness of CATV and their service to the community.

- A committee or coalition of digital equity leaders and partners should be established to ensure successful Plan implementation.

- Establishing and building partnerships with local organizations, schools, and community centers is key to providing digital resources and Digital literacy training opportunities that address the needs of covered populations.

Strengthen digital literacy throughout the community

Provide targeted support for vulnerable segments of the community, including students, adults seeking jobs, and seniors.
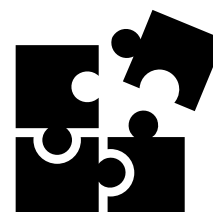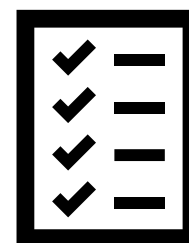
Track the local broadband market to advocate for consumers and **promote job opportunities** locally.

3 THE PLANNING PROCESS

Section 3 discusses the Municipal Digital Equity planning processes undertaken by the City and MRPC in the development of a Digital Equity Plan, which focused on community and stakeholder outreach, engagement, and input.

Below is a summary of several aspects of the Planning Process, including stakeholder and public outreach and engagement:

- A core team or advisory working group was established to guide and inform the process and Plan development.

- The Digital Equity Planning process involves local and regional partners to assess community needs and develop actionable strategies.

- A stakeholder questionnaire and interview process were initiated to gather information and input from essential stakeholders; Separate from Core Team and Focus Group meetings, over 20 individual stakeholders were interviewed as part of the planning process and 14 completed a stakeholder questionnaire.

- Several focus group meetings were also conducted to gather information related to certain covered population groups.

- Focus group meetings included the Fitchburg Public Library, School Department, Senior Center, Commission on Disability, Social Services Organizations and Businesses, Social Services Organizations serving Racial & Ethnic Minority Groups, Community Development, and Municipal Information Technology.

- According to information gathered at tech-help workshops conducted at the Fitchburg Library and Senior Center, Digital literacy training is an essential need, especially for aging adults.

- The planning process included extensive community engagement, with surveys translated into multiple languages to reach diverse populations.

- Focus groups revealed that veterans and low-income households face unique challenges in accessing digital services and devices.
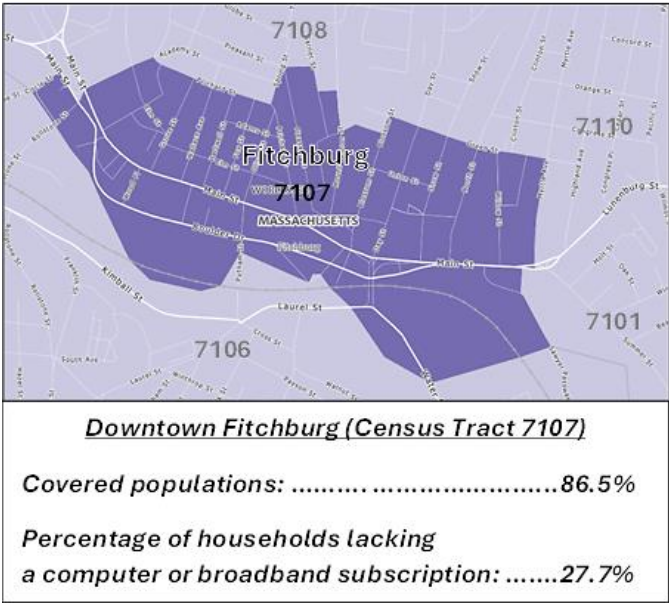
4 EXISTING CONDITIONS EVALUATION

Section 4 evaluates the existing conditions around digital equity, broadband access, and the demographics of Fitchburg's covered populations. In addition, the section identifies Critical Digital assets (i.e., a digital computer, communication system, or network that is a component of a critical Information System), Community Anchor Institutions, and Digital Hubs that support digital literacy and access in Fitchburg.

Below is a summary of Fitchburg's Existing Conditions relative to broadband internet access and digital equity and inclusion:

- Fitchburg faces significant digital equity gaps in broadband access, affordability, and adaptability, particularly among covered populations.

- Approximately 70.5% of Fitchburg's population belongs to one or more covered populations of the Digital Equity Act.

Downtown Fitchburg (Census Tract 7107)

Covered populations: 86.5%

*Percentage of households lacking
a computer or broadband subscription: 27.7%*

- Challenges and barriers are exacerbated within some areas of Fitchburg where "covered populations" of the Digital Equity Act are as high of 86.5% of the population, specifically within Downtown Fitchburg (Census Tract 7107).

- 93.3% of households have a computer, while 88.3% have a broadband internet subscription, but access varies significantly by neighborhood.

- In some Census Tracts, up to 27.7% of residents lack a computer or broadband connection, highlighting a notable digital divide.

- Fitchburg has a population of 41,946, with a median income of $65,963, and 13.9% living below the poverty line.

- 21.9% of households are classified as covered households, earning below 150% of the poverty level.

- The Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) was a crucial internet saving program that ended in June of 2024, resulting in increased internet costs for 3,576 households in Fitchburg.

- 15% of Fitchburg's population has one or more disabilities, with 37.2% in the Downtown area alone, a covered population that faces significant digital equity challenges.

5 COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Section 5 assesses digital equity needs associated with addressing or overcoming identified challenges or barriers affecting access to broadband internet and digital literacy, devices, and technology in Fitchburg, and among certain covered population groups.

Below is a summary of Community Needs relative to identified challenges and barriers:

- Increased access to digital devices (i.e., computers) and/or broadband subscription is needed, especially in areas with higher proportions of covered populations.

- More affordable internet is needed; The average internet cost in Fitchburg is $93.91, with 6.6% of respondents finding it "very hard" to pay for internet service.

- The Fitchburg Public Schools maintain 150 internet hotspots for eligible students, primarily those under the McKinney Vento program but more internet hotspots are needed for both the public schools and library.

- Digital literacy training is needed, specifically among aging adults over 60 and individuals with a language barrier.

- Tech help sessions may be more beneficial to aging adults than traditional digital literacy courses.

- Internet safety and security classes are needed, especially among aging adults and youth.

- Increased access to public internet, public computers/workstations, and public charging stations are needed.

- Access to reliable transportation can be a challenge or barrier limiting access to broadband internet and digital resources (including digital literacy classes) for many residents, particularly those who are members of a covered population group.

- Public transportation, accessible locations (geographic proximity to public transit and walkability, as well as ADA accessibility) and the possibility of online digital literacy training should be considered to provide equitable access to broadband internet, digital devices, and digital literacy training opportunities.

Internet Availability and Affordability   **Device Access**   **Digital Skills**

6 DIGITAL EQUITY RECOMMENDATIONS

Section 6 of Fitchburg's Municipal Digital Equity Plan provides a set of recommended goals and actions, and a compiled list of tools and resources necessary to enhance digital equity and inclusion within the City.

Below is a summary of the goals, actions, tools, and resources provided within Section 6:

- Fitchburg has the potential to become a regional hub for digital literacy and inclusion, and a statewide Digital Equity leader or Champion.

- Section 6 outlines seven Digital Equity Goals focused on increasing broadband internet access through increased availability, affordability, and adoption, and providing public internet and workspaces, and opportunities for digital literacy training, tech help, and skills.

    - Improve the effectiveness, efficiency, and quality of local initiatives that promote and enhance digital equity, literacy, and inclusion.

    - Increase access to affordable, fast, reliable internet.

    - Expand internet access and digital literacy through community engagement and inclusion to overcome existing barriers and challenges.

    - Further develop the municipality's technological resources and public digital workspaces.

    - Seek and secure funding opportunities for investment and long-term support of digital equity programs and services.

    - Become a municipal leader in digital equity through collaboration, inclusion, education, and programming.

    - Provide digital literacy training and skill building opportunities for people of all ages and abilities, and those that are part of a covered population.

- Section 6 presents an Action Plan Implementation Matrix that identifies and recommends 28 potential actions to achieve the seven established Digital Equity Goals.

- The Action Plan prioritizes public access to internet and new computer workstations at the library, senior center, Veterans center, and City Hall, digital literacy and tech help assistance, additional hotspots for public loan through the library, and recommends public wi-fi in outdoor spaces, including Downtown areas and parks and playgrounds.

- Fitchburg's Municipal Digital Equity Plan provides strategic guidance and recommendations for the City to enhance digital equity through increased access to broadband internet and digital devices, digital literacy and inclusion partnerships, and targeted support for vulnerable groups.

- The city aims to improve digital literacy and access through partnerships with organizations like UMass Lowell, MOC Youth Innovation Center, and MassHire, and ongoing collaboration with the Montachusett Regional Planning Commission (MRPC).

- Fitchburg is eligible for up to $100,000 in funding through the MBI Municipal Digital Equity Implementation Grant program to support these initiatives and additional potential funding through the MBI Launch Pad program.

- A comprehensive compendium of digital equity funding programs and resources is provided.

CONCLUSION AND DIGITAL EQUITY VISION & MISSION

Fitchburg's Digital Equity Plan identified several factors affecting digital equity and inclusion including gaps in reliable internet service, diverse socioeconomic demographics affecting income and opportunity, higher-than-average internet services costs limiting access and affecting affordability, and limited access to public internet and digital workspaces, affordable devices and technology, and digital literacy training and tech help. However, with a clearly defined **Digital Equity Vision** and **Mission**, Fitchburg has the potential to develop a municipal framework to better support digital inclusion and enhance digital equity and literacy, and to become a leader, and champion of digital equity and access.

City of Fitchburg Digital Equity Vision

> *The City of Fitchburg envisions itself as a Digital Equity and Inclusion Leader and will implement and promote the Goals and Actions of this Plan to champion initiatives and create and pursue new opportunities in a way that honors that commitment and is deserving of such recognition as "The City of Digital Equity and Inclusion".*

City of Fitchburg Digital Equity Mission

With thoughtful and inclusive planning, it is our mission, through the implementation of this Plan, to promote Digital Equity through increased access to affordable services and programs. We are confident that this mission can be accomplished by providing the City's residents and visitors with the tools, resources, programs, services, and opportunities needed to achieve higher levels of digital inclusion and literacy. We believe the City's vision and mission can be further advanced through the establishment of free, open, yet secure public access to reliable, high-speed internet and internet-connected digital devices and workstations and providing digital navigation and training services to advance digital literacy, safety, security, and individual levels of comfort and convenience among people of all ages and abilities.