



GREATER LOWELL DIGITAL EQUITY PLAN Executive Summary



A component plan of



**GREATER LOWELL
STRONGER TOGETHER**
2025-2030 COMPREHENSIVE
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY



Closing the digital divide is a key aspect of achieving equity. Access to the internet is a crucial tool, enabling access to education, healthcare, the economy, friends and family, civic participation, and much more. This 21st century reality—underscored by our post-COVID 19 remote and hybrid reality—means that municipalities throughout Greater Lowell increasingly believe in ensuring that all residents have affordable and reliable access to the internet, as well as the social infrastructure, technology support, and device access needed to engage online as a core civic responsibility. Vulnerable populations such as immigrants, non-English speakers, people with disabilities, communities of color, older adults, people who make lower-incomes, and others live in each of the region’s municipalities. This is why the nine communities of Greater Lowell: **the City of Lowell and the Towns of Billerica, Chelmsford, Dracut, Dunstable, Pepperell, Tewksbury, Tyngsborough, and Westford** came together to create a plan to confront disparities through the collaborative work of planning for digital inclusion.

WHAT IS DIGITAL EQUITY?

Before we dive into digital equity research and findings for the Greater Lowell region, we first need to establish what exactly we mean by the term "digital equity". The model used for the Greater Lowell Digital Equity Plan consists of three pillars:

Infrastructure for Reliable Internet Connections	Appropriate Devices and Access	Education and Digital Literacy
		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A fast, affordable connection to the home, with enough bandwidth for all devices and family members. • Fiber Optic Cables in the ground • Consumer choice for all households and neighborhoods. • Wi-Fi in public places. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adequate and appropriate devices for each user and their needs including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Router ○ Desktop Computer ○ Laptop ○ Tablet ○ Specialty/adaptive devices catered to the needs of those living with disability. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge of how to use technology • Skills to troubleshoot and maintain software and devices/equipment. • Media literacy to evaluate the quality of information and privacy risks • Confidence to overcome fear and shame due to lack of digital skills/knowledge • Programs/resources that are accessible for those with disabilities or language barriers

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The plan incorporates quantitative data from various sources including the US Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS), the FCC's Form 477, from internet speed test data providers like M-Lab and Ookla, and program data from the American Connectivity Program (ACP). Alongside these standard data sources, the plan also incorporates a region-wide digital equity survey, and qualitative data gathered via interviews, workshops, and focus groups with stakeholders, service providers, municipal officials, and people impacted by the digital divide. The methodology was informed by a planning approach that reflects best practices and the values of the Greater Lowell region.

This information was used to create six major strategies. Each strategy has a number of actions that can be found in Section 4, Recommendations. These strategies can be undertaken independently or together as a region.

STRATEGY 1: BUILD CAPACITY TO IMPLEMENT AND EVALUATE DIGITAL EQUITY PROGRESS

Digital equity is a relatively new domain for municipal governments and community-based organizations compared to issues like housing, recreation, or transportation. There is no "department" of digital equity, so to address the digital divide, communities and the region will need to build new capacity. Staff, budget, organizational structure, and other resources and capacities are needed to support broadband access, device access, and digital literacy, and to evaluate progress toward the implementation of the digital equity plan. In some cases, this may mean designating existing staff, departments, or organizations to include digital equity in their work and responsibilities, while in other instances new staff or structures will be needed to advance digital inclusion and measure impact. Crucially, building capacity includes building resources for addressing the digital divide, including pursuing state and federal grants.

STRATEGY 2: IMPROVE QUALITY, RELIABILITY, AND AFFORDABILITY OF BROADBAND SERVICES TO THE HOME, ESPECIALLY FOR PRIORITY POPULATIONS

At-home internet access is perhaps the most direct measure of the digital divide, and in Massachusetts, cost is the number one barrier. Municipalities can improve the quality, reliability, and affordability of at-home internet access through coordination with Internet Service Providers (ISPs), and through investments and policies to improve access and competition at the regional, municipal and neighborhood scale. Because the digital divide does not impact all populations equally, municipalities should also pursue, facilitate or support interventions that improve broadband access at specific housing sites serving priority populations, such as older adults, people living with disabilities, low-income households, formerly incarcerated individuals, and individuals experiencing housing insecurity.

Recommendations to improve at-home internet access at the regional or community scale include actions focused on improving ISP low-cost plan sign-ups or expanding ISP coverage and competition; providing public or open infrastructure to increase consumer choice by building on existing

municipal fiber networks or exploring open access networks through large scale infrastructure investment or through policies including dig-once policies and zoning and permitting reform.

STRATEGY 3: ENHANCE DIGITAL ACCESS IN PUBLIC SPACES AND FACILITIES

Local governments are often best equipped to ensure digital access in public spaces, like public parks and buildings. Freely available Wi-fi networks, computers, and other devices or equipment like digital screens/kiosks and charging stations, can provide numerous benefits to all members of the public and can provide a digital access safety net to the most vulnerable.

These recommendations focus on improvements to public facilities, including parks and open spaces as well as buildings, where municipalities can invest in network infrastructure, equipment or devices to provide free wi-fi, shared computer workstations, or otherwise enhance digital access.

STRATEGY 4: SUPPORT PROGRAMS AND SERVICES THAT REACH PRIORITY POPULATIONS AND ADVANCE ALL PILLARS OF DIGITAL EQUITY

Some residents lack access to a high-speed broadband connection or to appropriate devices at home or otherwise lack the digital literacy and tech skills needed to use a computer and take full advantage of the internet in ways that support participation in modern life. These residents need support, and often for multiple “pillars” of digital equity. To successfully meet the need, support services should layer internet access, device access, and digital skills training, and do so in ways that are accessible to diverse populations with different cultures, language needs, and with different schedules, habits, and access to mobility.

This means that support is needed from national, state, and local organizations that focus on the core pillars of digital equity: helping residents sign up for low-cost internet plans, distributing devices, providing skills training and tech support. It also means that support is needed from trusted local organizations and individuals who can meet priority populations where they are, in ways that understand local context, cultures, and language needs. Where organizations are already doing digital equity work in Greater Lowell, these programs often need more support to expand to meet resident needs. Where organizations are already reaching priority populations, these programs often have an opportunity to layer in culturally competent support for digital equity alongside existing services.

STRATEGY 5: COLLABORATE REGIONALLY TO EXPAND IMPACT AND UPLIFT EXISTING WORK

As research and outreach conducted during the planning process revealed, a number of organizations and initiatives are already doing great digital equity work in Greater Lowell. Coordinating, sharing, and regionalizing existing programs and resources is a key strategy for maximizing the impact of existing work, and expanding its reach to meet the needs of various communities and populations. For example, some residents aren’t aware of existing programs that could connect them to cheaper internet or a new device, and better outreach and promotion can help. Some libraries have tech support expertise that others lack and could share staff support,

program resources or expand service regionally to help. Similarly, programs and resources designed to support the general public, or English speakers could be catered to support a specific group, such as older adults, or translated to become accessible to Spanish speakers.

STRATEGY 6: PROVIDE INCLUSIVE MUNICIPAL DIGITAL SERVICES TO MAKE LOCAL GOVERNMENT MORE ACCESSIBLE AND USER FRIENDLY

In the 21st century, residents expect government services to be as reliable and easy to use as private sector services, and accessible in the same place where they have come to expect everything else in their lives: online. Municipal websites and other online tools provide greater access to local government—including greater access to information and opportunities for engagement and feedback, as well as access to government services themselves via program enrollment intake forms, permit applications, etc. Known collectively as “digital services” these online approaches to local government are crucial for advancing digital equity, as they make civic engagement easier for populations who may speak English as a second language, have disabilities, or face other historic barriers. At the same time, putting services online alone is not enough. Local governments should also continuously evaluate and improve digital services to ensure that they are working through processes known as “user centered design”. And, as more and more services move online, municipalities should also ensure support for residents experiencing the digital divide. This means offering customer support for online interfaces and continuing to provide in-person and paper-based options alongside digital options.



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MUNICIPAL PARTNERS

Jane Merrill – Interim Senior Planner, Town of Billerica

Katherine Malgieri – Director of Planning and Community Development, Town of Billerica

Jen Melanson – Community Services Coordinator, Town of Chelmsford

Dan Phelps – Economic Development Project Planner, Town of Dracut

Christine Muir – Library Director, Town of Dracut

Jason Silva – Town Administrator, Town of Dunstable

Ali Carter – Director of Economic Development, City of Lowell

Camilo Espitia – Deputy Director of Planning and Development, City of Lowell

Sarah Brown – Chief Design Planner, City of Lowell

Jesse Strod – Neighborhood Planner, City of Lowell

Ineabelle Dominguez – Chief DEI Officer, City of Lowell

Melissa Desroches – Executive Assistant, City of Lowell

Andrew MacLean – Town Administrator, Town of Pepperell

Alex Lowder – Community/Economic Development Planner, Town of Tewksbury

Colin Loiselle – Town Manager, Town of Tyngsborough

Mike Wells – Director of the Technology Department, Town of Westford

COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Sam Gruca – THRIVE Communities

Kim Yeasir – THRIVE Communities

Leanne Winchester – Tyngsborough Commission on Disability

Sothea Chiemruom – Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association

Manoka Y – Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association

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Stephen Themelis – Town of Pepperell Economic Development Committee

Lesley Kimball – Chelmsford Library

Kathryn Grownay – Tyngsborough Library

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Brent Carney – Lowell
Community Health Center

Gary Meuse – Dracut Access
Television

Brian Dorrington – Tewksbury
Telemedia Department

Rony Camille – Tyngsborough
Media

Nancy Albertson – Billerica
Access Television

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Greater Lowell

Laura Watts – Lowell Housing
Authority

Kirk Fulton – Chelmsford
Housing Authority

Nate Robertson –
MassDevelopment

Ryan Cobleigh – Westford
Veterans Service Officer

Adriana Giraldo – Frederick
Assad Abisi Adult Education
Center

Kevin Coughlin – MassHire
Greater Lowell Workforce
Board

Shannon Norton – MassHire
Career Center Lowell

Bridget Cooley – Pollard
Memorial Library in the City of
Lowell

NMCOG STAFF

Jennifer Raitt – Executive
Director

Kelly Lynema – Deputy Director

Isabel Emmet – Regional Land
Use Planner II, Project Manager

Christopher Glenn Hayes –
Housing and Economic
Development Manager

Carlin Andrus – GIS and Data
Program Manager

Sara Schreiber – Finance and
Benefits Manager

MAPC STAFF

Anagha Devanarayanan –
Digital Equity Planner

Will Pfeffer – Civic Technologist

Abigail Cohen – Lead for
America ACC Fellow

Emily Wanzer – Lead for
America ACC Fellow

Najee Nunnally – Community
Engagement Specialist

Alexa DeRosa – Regional
Planning Data Analyst

Stephen Larrick – Digital
Services Manager

Jessie Partridge Guerrero –
Research Manager / Director of
Data Services

Camille Jonlin – Economic
Development Planner II

Gurdeep Kaur- Senior
Economic Development
Planner

Claire Hoffman- Senior Public
Health Planner

Carlos Javier Montanez –
Principal Planner

Gwendolyn Hellen-Sands –
Regional Housing Planner II

ADDITIONAL SPECIAL THANKS

Allison Lamey – Former
Executive Director, Lowell
Development & Financial
Corporation and Lowell Plan

Ann Vandal – Former Town
Manager, Town of Dracut

Austen Torres-Davis – Former
Transportation Planner II,
NMCOG

Erika Jerram – Former Director
of Planning and Community
Development, Town of Billerica

Katharine Foster – Former
Assistant Town Manager, Town
of Tyngsborough

Yun-Ju Choi – Former Executive
Director, Coalition for a Better
Acre

Tom O'Donnell – Former Senior
Director of Innovation and
Workforce Development
Initiatives, University of
Massachusetts Lowell

STATEWIDE AND NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Internet Access Task Force

Mass Broadband Institute
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