

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Digital Equity means that everyone has access to the internet, along with the computer devices, online opportunities, and resources that they need, regardless of their socio-economic status or neighborhood. When fully realized, digital equity ensures that every member of the community can participate in society and the other essential functions.

Unfortunately, the City of Quincy, like many U.S. cities, faces stark challenges when it comes to digital equity. While the vast majority of residents possess high-speed home internet access, modern computing devices, and digital skills, too many of the city's most vulnerable still lack the resources and support needed to fully participate in modern online life, experiencing what is known as the "digital divide". To address this challenge, digital equity efforts led by Quincy Technology Integration, and Support (CTIS), in the Office of the Mayor, Thomas P. Koch, formed to close the digital divide, in Quincy, services as a focal point for a diverse set of digital equity programs, projects, and infrastructure.

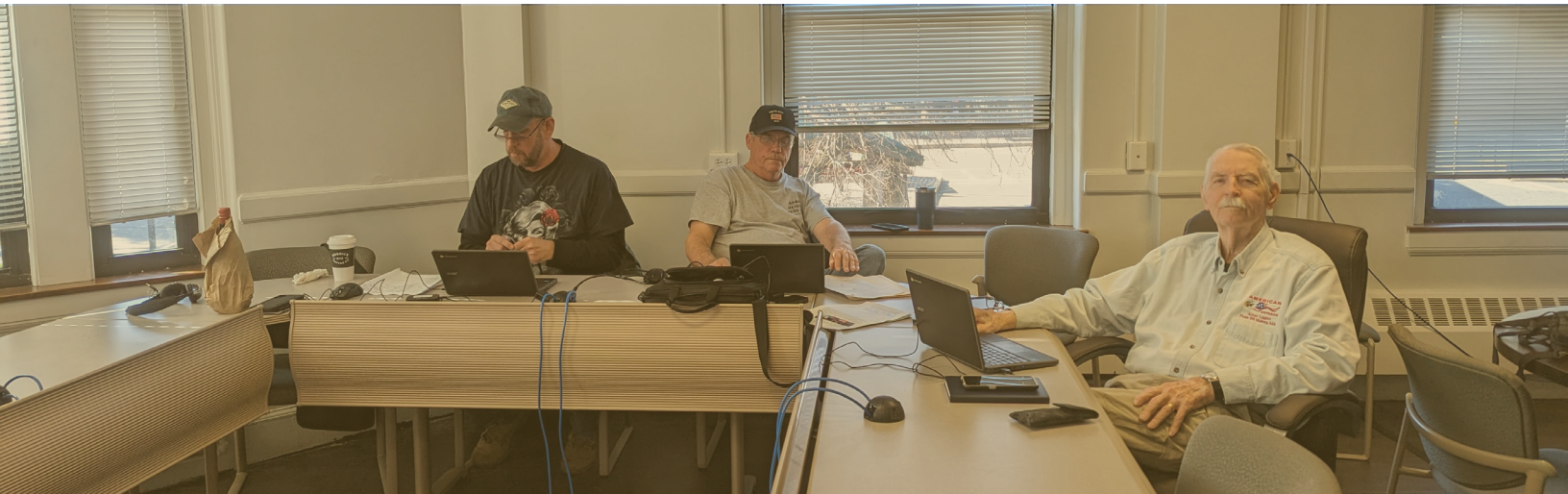
Quincy Digital Equity Plan | Executive Summary

In 2022, CTIS looked into, and researched to identify potential funding resources and grant opportunities, that were available to support solutions to defeat the digital divide.

CTIS was awarded funding by the Massachusetts Broadband Institute (MBI) to develop a Quincy Municipal Digital Equity Plan, and selected the Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) in the development of the city's first Digital Equity Plan.

In analyzing digital equity needs in Quincy, this plan adopted the common framework of the "three pillars" of digital equity – internet access, device access, and digital literacy. This framework acknowledges that access to the internet is more than just a broadband connection. MAPC's planning approach for Quincy's Digital Equity Plan was grounded in exploring these three pillars by taking insights from quantitative data while centering community voices through resident surveys and focus group discussions.

The plan also explores the reality that digital equity is not an isolated issue but is instead



interrelated to several of the core challenges that residents in Quincy face. The COVID-19 pandemic spotlighted the internet's impact on a variety of facets of modern life when medical appointments, school, and many jobs moved online and made digital access vital to meeting daily needs associated with health outcomes. By addressing the digital divide and its disproportionate impacts on the most vulnerable Quincy residents, this plan seeks to identify opportunities to drive positive impact in other intersecting domains, including, but not limited to: housing; economic development; public health; education and civic participation; and language access.

Ultimately, the goal of this Digital Equity Plan is to set the foundation for future projects and program implementation. Tangible recommendations are outlined that connect Quincy's digital needs to actions, programs opportunities, and possible funding sources. MAPC does not approach issues in a vacuum; the planning process and recommendations are designed for Quincy to learn from and collaborate with neighboring municipalities through regional strategies in digital equity service delivery.

Summary of Key Findings

Internet Access

In our focus group discussions, many Quincy residents shared that they don't have access to the internet at home. Eight percent of the survey respondents (n = 38) reported not having internet access in their home. Residents who don't have at-home internet frequently use community resources and community anchor institutions to use the internet. We heard residents share that they use the public library, YMCA, the Council of Aging, and local businesses such as restaurants, cafes, and bookstores to meet their technology and internet needs.

To enable residents to benefit from all online services, access to internet services that are stable, fast, and affordable is critical. Currently, Quincy residents who are more vulnerable to the consequences of the lack of digital access experience barriers to enjoying good quality internet service; survey respondents (28.9%) shared that their home internet services are not good enough to meet their household needs. Many residents shared that they frequently experience unstable internet service and shared frustrations with maintenance. Quincy residents often must choose a stable and fast internet service or a service that is affordable. Survey respondents (34.2%) shared that it is "somewhat hard" for them to pay their internet bill and 7.9% shared that it is "very hard" to pay their internet bills. Some residents also shared that they rely on affordable subsidy programs to meet the costs of their internet connection.

Device access

Some residents in the focus group discussions shared that they don't have access to devices. The impact of lack of devices is pronounced for homeless individuals who need additional assistance in getting connected to technology. The residents who are most impacted by digital inequity expressed unmet needs with their current devices. More than one third of survey respondents reported having access to the internet only through a data plan for their smartphone, hotspot, or tablet. Non-English-speaking residents in our focus group discussions expressed their dependence on phones for accessing various online services and information. Not having the adequate device poses a barrier for residents' access to numerous services, whether private or social services like SNAP, Medicaid, housing and fuel assistance, etc.

Digital literacy

In our resident engagement process, we learned that residents are interested in training programs to confidently and efficiently use technology. Nearly forty-five percent of survey respondents reported being "very concerned" and 28.9% reported being "somewhat concerned" when navigating the internet for their needs. The survey data showed residents are interested in digital skill support for telehealth services and searching and applying for jobs.

Residents in Quincy often depend on help from close family and friends to address their internet and technology-related issues. This underscores a need for a technological support system that is reliable and trusted where residents feel comfortable asking for help when needed. For many residents, the technological support need is embedded into and interconnected with a bundle of services like shelter, food access, social services, etc.

Residents also raised concerns regarding safety and privacy while using the internet. Roughly forty-four percent of survey respondents reported being “very concerned” and 28.9% reported being “somewhat concerned” about internet safety. Furthermore, 65.8% of survey respondents are concerned about their data getting stolen or used, 47.4% are concerned about being tracked, and 36.8% of the survey respondents are concerned about a loved one being harassed or abused online. Focus group participants shared that they are concerned about financial safety during internet transactions and raised concerns about identity theft and their medical data compromise.

Summary of Recommendations

Building Quincy’s Digital Equity Community and Network

- Improve and expand information about the City of Quincy’s existing municipal digital equity programs online and in print.
- Expand CTIS administrative capacity to streamline operations and maximize impact.
- Convene a Digital Equity Advisory Council to facilitate two-way feedback and coordinate digital inclusion efforts in Quincy.
- Continue digital equity planning work to maintain an up-to-date picture of current digital equity needs in Quincy.

Amplify Existing Programs

- Continue to invest in CTIS’s ongoing Technology Instruction program.
- Provide hotspot and device lending and ownership programs in partnership with Quincy Public Schools, Quincy Public Library, and the Quincy Housing Authority.
- Provide flexible device access programs to better meet diverse resident needs.
- Provide multi-lingual technology instruction and individualized device access for organizations serving unhoused individuals.

Infrastructure

- Pursue Apartment Wi-Fi and residential retrofit programs in partnership with the Quincy Housing Authority.
- Evaluate performance and impacts of the Municipal Broadband pilot.

New Initiatives

- Develop technology instruction and technology support “Train the Trainer” program.
- Provide multi-lingual resources for non-English technology instruction.
- Offer safe and secure Wi-Fi in public spaces.
- Funding and technical support for community computer labs hosted by community-based organizations and community anchor institutions, such as schools, libraries, YMCA, and the Council on Aging.
- Plan for targeted expansion of Municipal Broadband pilot, to continue serving high-need neighborhoods first.



Read more at: mapc.ma/quincydigitalequity