Digital Equity Plan Template
Regional & Tribal Broadband Partners

MAINE CONNECTIVITY AUTHORITY

All fields are required unless otherwise specified.

1. Enter the name of the Regional or Tribal Partner submitting this plan

GrowSmart Maine; Hildie Lipson

2. Specify the region this plan covers

Kennebec County

3. List the Regional Digital Equity Coalition team members and the agency/organization they are affiliated with.

Include any organizations/individuals who attended coalition meetings and/or conducted outreach to inform the plan.

Digital Equity Coalition Team Member	Agency/Organization Affiliation
Virginia Marriner, Executive Director	Literacy Volunteers of Kennebec
Sarah Miller, Administrative Director	Bridging the Gap
Jim Darroch	GiveIT Get IT
J. Richardson Collins	Resident of Augusta
Amy Davidoff	Vassalboro Broadband Committee
William Rosenberg	Mt. Vernon Broadband Committee
Chris Gibson, Systems Librarian	Lithgow Library, Augusta
Peggy Shaffer	Town of Vassalboro
Hildie Lipson	GrowSmart Maine

4. What is your region's Vision Statement?

The introduction to the plan is a great place to outline the overarching vision for what you want to achieve in your region. What is unique about your region, especially in terms of assets, barriers, culture, and ways the region can lead? What could connecting everyone in your region mean? If you have also developed a mission statement describing how you will accomplish the vision, include it here. Here is an example from [Franklin County, Ohio regional coalition](.).

All residents of Kennebec County will have access to high-speed, reliable, affordable, and secure internet, an affordable device, and the ability to use it effectively.

The overall goals will be to implement outreach programs for affordable connectivity and devices, digital training, and deployment of digital navigators throughout the county.

Short-term goals for this year and next will include continued outreach to anchor institutions and the development of an awareness campaign for the ACP, as well as outreach to towns to provide information for programs designed to defray costs of connectivity and devices and provide technical assistance. We will also plan and implement a pilot project focused on low-income seniors involving a combination of technical support, training, and ACP enrollment.

Intermediate goals include conducting a systematic gap analysis of covered populations throughout the county in order to fully understand the needs of people, and what resources are available or are needed, such that a comprehensive plan can be developed.

5. Does the region have any existing goals or vision that could be supported by broadband and digital inclusion programming and investment? (*Optional*)

If your digital inclusion plan directly connects to other existing work across your region, insert a brief overview of how the regional or tribal Digital Equity Plan is aligned with or will help support priorities and other existing or planned efforts in the region. For example, are there educational, workforce, economic development, or other goals or plans in the region that can be achieved with broadband and digital inclusion activities?

This is an optional section that may not apply to all regional/tribal partners but may be useful for talking with partners or community leaders in your region about why broadband and digital equity are important issues. If you have not discovered any goals in your region that can be aligned with your broadband work, please leave this blank.

Yes. Several years ago, more than 80 community leaders from business, nonprofit, and government sectors agreed to pursue a highly coordinated collaborative effort, led by the United Way of Kennebec Valley, to establish 10-year goals in health, education, and financial stability for Kennebec County residents with a shared vision: **Impact2032**. https://impact2032.org/ It is a 10-year initiative to establish measurable and achievable community-wide goals that will lead to long-lasting positive impacts.

GrowSmart Maine, as a host to the Regional and Tribal Broadband Partner (RTBP) in Kennebec County has endorsed this vision. The goals of BEAD/Digital Equity most closely align with Impact 2032's third goal that adults and families in Kennebec County will have employment, income, and resources to achieve financial stability.

In the process of completing Kennebec County's digital equity plan, we will be mindful of finding where our goals align and develop digital equity strategies that contribute to the key performance indicators set for this initiative. Several of the organizations on the Kennebec County Broadband Working Group are also supporters of and involved with Impact 2032. We all want to be paddling in the same direction to ensure that everyone in Kennebec County can meet their basic needs, and has access to education, training, and economic opportunities. The RTBP in Kennebec County will help provide implementation for digital equity and inclusion as part of meeting the goals of Impact 2032, especially as they overlap with the timing of the budget projections for this plan.

6. Current State of Digital Equity: General Summary of Barriers and Assets

In this section, please generally summarize the barriers and assets that exist or that you discovered in your region during the planning process. This is an introduction to more detail in the following sections, so what we're looking for is a general statement of the digital equity challenges in the region.

Barriers: *This is where you could insert data from the regional snapshots created by HR&A Advisors for each county. What elements of the data for your region jump out at you? Do you have higher percentages of particular covered populations? Are some covered populations less likely to have internet service at home or a device at home? Are there income, employment, or educational attainment disparities that could be addressed with digital inclusion strategies?*

Based on the data presented by the HR&A Advisors, Kennebec County (KC) has a population of 123,300 with a total number of households of 52,800. The demographics of Covered Populations are similar to the State's demographics with a couple of noted differences, i.e., a greater percentage of the population is disabled (KC is 20% vs ME is 17%). Most of the population lives within Augusta (15%) and Waterville (13%) or nearby surrounds (7% and 11%, respectively), with KC-wide population of those over age 60 of 18%, and Veterans 10%. The number of households with limited English is 1% and households below the poverty rate are 12%. Although the unemployment rate trends slightly below the State annual (even during the COVID years of 2020-2021) the poverty rate is consistently slightly above the State, and the median income is consistently below the State (by ~10%). It is estimated that the population of KC will increase by 1.1% per year, over the next 5 years (ME Pop Outlook Report 2021). Collectively, there are approximately 67,000 individuals and 7,000 households that fall within our covered populations.

 A common theme consistent throughout our population is affordability for available internet service, usable devices, subscriptions/applications, and upgrades/repairs. There are areas/pockets of the County that do not have access to any wired high-speed internet service and often have poor cell coverage as well. **Digital equity can only be achieved when every household has access to high-speed internet infrastructure–the ability to connect from home.**

Barriers to accessing the internet also include a lack of basic technical skills, thus limiting the utility of online learning (including for those with language barriers, and those with unstable housing). Access to adaptive devices and subscriptions to those with special needs (i.e., intellectual or physical disabilities) has additional barriers. Barriers such as illiteracy and inequalities of access to educational resources were also noted.

In addition, **transportation** was cited as a barrier to accessing training or publicly available computers, or accessing them during normal operating hours, which may not align with individuals' schedules. Kennebec County does not have a robust public transportation system.

Assets: *What assets were identified in your region in the asset inventory? What additional assets did you identify with your coalition or during your planning process? Were there significant resources in the region in any of the five elements of digital inclusion? Were there significant gaps in any of the elements of digital inclusion?*

o *Availability of broadband: specifically where can people access the internet in the community if they don't have it at home.*

For the 11% of households in Kennebec County (KC) that don't have internet, there are limited places to find free, publicly available internet. These include coffee shops and local businesses, as well as 17 public libraries in KC and the Maine State Library. University of Maine in Augusta has computers in its library/computer labs for student use. Most school libraries also have some internet/computers available for their students (but not typically available to the public). People told us that if they did not have the internet at home they said they only used their cell phone as a device (when they had cell coverage or public WiFi) or went to the library to use computers and/or WiFi. A few towns, such as Waterville, offer public Wi-Fi in the outside downtown area.

One innovative program is offered by Lithgow Library in Augusta. **They loan out digital hotspots**, (i.e., tablets with a data plan), to library cardholders. They have 6 devices and loan them out in two-week increments and they are always in demand. They could use many more. The library developed a simple list of guidelines and FAQs that are provided with the loaned device. During our inquiry regarding this plan, we found that many libraries don't offer these devices either from a lack of knowledge of how to administer such a program, lack of funding, or just not knowing that these devices are available. The ability to get a loaned hotspot from a public library doesn't solve the digital divide, but it helps those who are not connected either due to affordability or lack of infrastructure (but have cellular coverage).

Literacy Volunteers of Kennebec (LVK) established a program in 2021 that provides devices to learners and tutors that are configured the same and uniform in their functionality. This entails that the devices used by tutors and learners are set up with the same operating system, hardware, and applications. LVK grants learners their devices after a year of tutoring to enable them to continue to use/develop digital competency even after they have finished their tutoring, This type of reward system incentivizes learners to stay with the program.

o *Affordability of broadband: what programs and supports are helping people with the expense of broadband service?*

Overall in Maine, 32% of those eligible have enrolled in the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP). In Kennebec County the adoption rate is only 15%, however, some towns have enrollment rates better than the Maine average. For example, in Augusta, 51% of eligible households have enrolled in

ACP. In Gardiner 37%, Hallowell 33%, and in Waterville 59% of eligible households have enrolled [(data from Education Highway dashboard)](). Clearly, there is plenty of room for additional eligible households to be enrolled, especially in areas with lower population densities and fewer ISP options. A library director we spoke with said that "Our area needs ACP enrollers–people to help people sign up." The Kennebec County Broadband Working Group will explore developing an outreach and sign-up plan to implement this year.

o   *Affordable devices & technical support: are there any device lending programs or free devices available through programs and organizations in your region?*

The primary place for organizations and individuals to purchase discounted devices is right here in Kennebec County. give IT get IT. is located in Waterville and works with many nonprofits to provide low-cost devices. Literacy Volunteers of Kennebec (LVK) annually purchase 10 tablets per year for their learners. They could use 15 or more per year. Some learners keep their devices at LVK because they are unhoused. They learn to use the devices while they are improving their literacy levels. LVK also contracts with a Technology Consultant to resolve any technology issues. They also subscribe annually ($250) to *AnyDesk,* to allow for remote access to a device by the technology consultant.

Augusta Adult Education rents devices to academic learners for a semester. They don't have enough devices to fulfill current needs. Public libraries have computers for use by patrons, but only during operating hours.

A recovery organization in Augusta, Groups Recover Together, sometimes offers smartphones with limited data for people coming out of recovery programs or jail so they can attend their required online counseling sessions. Those people in this population who are older than 60 have an especially hard time not having the technical knowledge or devices needed to apply for benefits or jobs.

Through our interviews, we mostly heard about the lack of affordable devices (especially for non-traditional college students and others), the expense of getting devices fixed (and not knowing where that can be done), or having a device with an operating system that could no longer be updated.

o   *Digital skills training: are there any organizations and programs offering digital skills training of any kind?*

Lithgow Library in Augusta, Age-Friendly Communities of Lower Kennebec, Maine Cancer Foundation - Maine General, Maine General Horizons, Maine General Tele-me-more, Vassalboro Public Library, and Literacy Volunteers of Kennebec currently offer digital education and training. Informal training happens at various age-friendly group locations. Digital skills literacy is required for

the HiSet exam and Augusta Adult Education, and other Adult Ed programs in Kennebec County offer classes for academic learners and community members.

When asked how they would best like to learn how to use devices, most people preferred one-on-one help, with the student "driving" and the educator "at my shoulder." Some people said they wanted to learn more but learning online doesn't work for them. For example, online instruction may be too confusing to navigate because of a lack of computer literacy, intellectual challenges, or accessibility tools for their computer (e.g., to accommodate sight, mobility, speech, or other disability). **Small group, in-person classes, with a lot of individual attention is recommended.** Computer educators need to be paid positions and we do not recommend relying on volunteers, exclusively, to fill this need. Classes should be offered where the people live or receive services, or in other trusted, public places like libraries or Adult Ed programs. Lack of transportation can be a barrier to attending classes in public locations in areas without a robust public transportation system.

o   *Online accessibility and inclusivity of public resources and services: are there any partners or programs in your region helping people access government resources or information online?*

Bridging the Gap helps people apply for government benefits when they are receiving other services at the center. Kennebec Valley Community Action Program (KVCAP) and other direct service organizations also provide this service. Maine Equal Justice, a statewide civil legal aid and economic justice nonprofit in Augusta, assists people living with low-income access to public benefits for which they are eligible or when they have trouble with the DHHS website (mymaineconnection.gov) or other barriers.

To access SNAP benefits or MaineCare, people must have an email address and apply online. Caseworkers at KVCAP reported that if a person did not have a computer or an email address they need to go to a Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) office in person and wait to be seen. People have experienced hours-long wait times on the phone or in person. In several instances, a person drove over two hours to a DHHS office but was not seen after waiting all day because there were not enough employees (or time in the work day) to service everyone waiting to be helped. This situation is obviously not efficient for anyone. Access to government services online must be made available to everyone who wants it, with more public options.

o   *Internet Safety: are there any resources or supports in your region helping people stay safe online*

Not nearly enough. In any form. Across people we interviewed, there was consensus that it is difficult to ascertain whether a website is legitimate and whether information is safe from

third-party access to data. Website and email scams are of particular concern.

LVK has tablets set up so that learners will have restricted access to the settings of the device. This serves a dual purpose. It limits the device use only in ways that LVK deems appropriate. Additionally, locking the device down ensures that learners have a reduced likelihood of accidentally altering device settings. There is normally a standard set of applications that cover the basic functions of the tablet. If additional applications are required to accommodate the specific needs of certain learners, applications are screened by the support technician to ensure proper security and compatibility.

7. List the specific barriers for the Covered Populations that were discovered during the teamwork done by your Coalition.

In the summary above, you have identified barriers to digital equity faced generally by the region's population, and in this section, you should specifically address barriers you've discovered for each covered population in the region. This will serve as the baseline to understand where the region stands, so it can plan what is needed to achieve the vision. Some of these barriers may be gleaned from the data, and some may come from conversations with your coalition partners, survey results within the region, interviews with other organizations or individuals, community meetings, or focus groups. If there were covered populations for which you were not able to identify specific barriers or insight, simply note that in each section below.

Low-income households

Category	Barrier
Available/affordable broadband access	There are 11% of households in the county without an internet subscription, a bit higher than the state average of 10%. If an individual is housed, the most common barriers to internet access involve costs of a subscription from ISP or a significant amount of cellular data, and/or available wired or wireless signals. If unhoused or housing insecure, the only option (i.e., cellular data) is difficult to afford. Public access to the internet/WiFi is limited to some libraries, Adult Education facilities, and a few public areas, which are often inaccessible to this population, because of distance, transportation, lack of mobility, child care, and more.
Access to devices and technical support	Just under 5% of the households (2638) in Kennebec County

	do not have a computer at home (with a disproportionately higher percentage of Native Americans (9%) and Asians (10%)). Approximately 7% of households (3696) only have access to the internet via a smartphone, but often with limited cellular data. Limited access to computers is primarily due to the purchase price, but also the cost of updating or fixing devices. There is limited technical support available, whether it involves using a device or specific applications, and/or searching for information on the internet. Many expressed concern about information security when using public wifi or devices (e.g. if trying to apply for assistance). The most common need for technical assistance is for one-on-one support (i.e., online learning is not for most).
Digital skills	Often limited to cell phones for the purpose of communication, rather than searching for information, applying for services, etc… Need individual assistance, especially for getting beyond calls and texting. The elderly most need someone to come to their home for setting up a new device and how to use it (e.g. Smart TVs). Younger population may not have time to access public technical help because working too many hours/day, the time of work days does not coincide with available help, childcare constraints, etc…
Other	Kennebec County is estimated to have 12% (6,330) of households living in poverty, out of 52,800 households. Kennebec County's median income is $58,100, under the state's median by $5,000, and well under the national median. Kennebec County counts 20% of residents with a disability, and 18% age 60 or older.

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Regional & Tribal Broadband Partners

Rural inhabitants

Category	Barrier
Available/affordable broadband access	Internet unaffordability is a major barrier for many living in rural areas, mostly because there is either only one carrier (i.e., no competition thus expensive) or no wired options because population density is too low for ISPs to bother with the area. The lack of wired internet options is found in specific areas of a town (not necessarily the entire town) and/or the last-mile connections. Cellular data is often not an option because of poor signal strength.
Access to devices and technical support	Utilizing technical support at anchor institutions (such as libraries or Adult Education Centers) or public enterprises can be prohibitive because of travel distances or time of day when assistance is needed.
Digital skills	For most people who lack digital skills, they rely on family members for help, but this usually involves communications, rather than utilizing other services (e.g., public assistance programs, job applications, telehealth).
Other	[Estimated that 23 or the 29 municipalities in KC are considered rural based on the definition of <5,000 residents, which involves ~50% of the population] Satellite signal access is very expensive and the signal is not reliable, but often this is the only option for those who can afford it. **Service interruption is particularly onerous when a user is taking a live course/training session, engaged in transactions, or filling out online forms.**

Veterans

Category	Barrier
Available/affordable broadband access	We interviewed one veteran who does not have wired internet access because there is no provider available.
Access to devices and technical support	
Digital skills	In a conversation with a Program Specialist at Togus VA who works in Vocational Rehabilitation, he gets 4-5 calls a year from a veteran needing help "to check my email" or "how to use my smartphone." This program generally refers people to higher education opportunities at UMA or technical colleges or refers them to the Career Center for training opportunities.
Other	[Estimated 10% (12,329) of KC population] In our initial inquiries, we did not find any particular services directed exclusively to veterans. But we will continue to seek out services for veterans.

Racial/ethnic minorities

Category	Barrier
Available/affordable broadband access	For some immigrants, who are not yet able to work, payment for broadband is controlled by another entity, such as an immigration service and if bills are not paid - they have no services at no fault of their own.
Access to devices and technical support	Having someone who speaks the learners' native language as a teacher is very important to the success of learning, especially for digital skills.
Digital skills	Immigrant families are often skilled in using things like Google Translate, but have difficulty with completing required forms.
Other	[Estimated 6% (7,960) of KC population]

People with disabilities

Category	Barrier
Available/affordable broadband access	Limited affordability of internet services and devices is similar to other populations described but more pronounced because technology interfaces will be more specialized than what is typical for the general population (see the section below).
Access to devices and technical support	The barriers for people with intellectual/physical disabilities (either acquired or congenital) are compounded by limited access to devices that accommodate their challenges (i.e., adaptive devices/assistive technology). Low literacy and cognitive skills often coincide with intellectual disabilities, and physical constraints may be associated with restricted mobility, or visual/auditory impairments.
Digital skills	Caregivers (often parents) of disabled children or adults may also be challenged with inadequate digital skills to help with access to special services and assistive technologies. In addition, many public institutions (social services, libraries, Adult Education centers) are not well-versed in specific technologies/resources that are currently available.
Other	[Estimated 20% (24,659) of KC population] There is a need for public programs and IT educators to be trained in and adopt Web Content Accessibility Content (WCAG) standardization, which would enable assistive technologies to utilize built-in features of applications and various operating systems and provide technical services for those in need.

Incarcerated/Formerly Incarcerated People

Category	Barrier
Available/affordable broadband access	
Access to devices and technical support	People coming out of recovery programs or incarceration need a digital device to attend counseling or other required online meetings.
Digital skills	People have trouble accessing information (i.e., regarding housing, work/training opportunities, social services), applying for jobs (i.e., resume writing, uploading documentation), and even at Career Centers when they lack basic computer skills.
Other	

Older Adults

Category	Barrier
Available/affordable broadband access	Fixed/limited income is a predominant barrier, especially because the carrier costs often increase over time.
Access to devices and technical support	Confusion over which device to use and which are needed for various activities is an issue, mostly for the elderly who are unfamiliar with technology (other than a cell phone).
Digital skills	Many in this sector do not have the knowledge/understanding about how to access information (including connections among devices), and/or how to safely navigate the web. Cybersecurity is a top priority for many. Most need individual instructors to come to the residencies for one-to-one instruction, and who are patient and empathetic.
Other	[Estimated that 18% of the population in KC are over 60 years old] At the community meeting, we heard from one older, disabled

	woman who said, "I am paying $20 a month for Spectrum and I don't even know what for." She lives in an apartment building for income-eligible older adults. She barely understands how to use her cell phone. But she wants to learn. Her mobility is extremely limited, so it is difficult to seek help at a public facility (e.g., a library, or Adult Ed center). There are likely many more like this woman who wants to learn. They may not have children or other relatives to rely on. They need someone who they can trust to help them navigate an increasingly complicated digital world.

People with Language barriers

Category	Barrier
Available/affordable broadband access	Limited English makes finding an affordable carrier a very difficult chore and finding resources to defray costs to a provider.
Access to devices and technical support	Language barriers significantly reduce the likelihood that those who need help will be able to seek it. One interviewee was apprehensive about asking for help because of their immigration status. People who seek help but are unhoused need a place to store, charge, and use their device. Most often, this happens at the service organization if available and being utilized (i.e., Literacy Volunteers of Kennebec).
Digital skills	It is important for English Language Learners in Adult Education programs to have a native speaker lead the class (or be available), since instructions for online programs are often only in English.
Other	[Estimated that 1% of the households in KC have limited English language skills]

7a. Inclusive/Accessible government resources: did you discover any specific government resources, processes, forms, etc., that are not accessible to the covered populations?

This could be municipal, county, or state government processes or information. We'd like to better understand whether the covered populations are finding any specific digital resources difficult to access. For example, you may have discovered that residents find it difficult to access the town meeting online, face barriers in filling out certain forms such as benefit applications online, or things like filing taxes or trying to renew a license or permit from a government entity are difficult. If any of this feedback emerged in your organizational interviews or interviews with lived experts who are members of the covered populations, we encourage you to share them here.

One person we interviewed was a rural, disabled person with low income, and said they had trouble finding free tax help online or in person.

A number of people (particularly the elderly) want to access State information, but either don't know how or found the Maine.gov website to be difficult to find specific information (especially if search terms were not precise). Access to municipal meetings would substantially increase engagement of all ages and abilities.

Literacy Volunteers of Kennebec learners report applying for benefits and completing required unemployment forms can be confusing and even more difficult when also learning technology.

7b. Internet Safety: did you learn anything about internet safety concerns from your organizational partners or lived experts? Did they share any concerns they have about protecting themselves online, including online privacy, being able to protect themselves and their data, or not falling for internet scams/phishing attempts?

Use this space to record any concerns you may have heard from partners or individuals about internet safety.

People of all ages expressed concern about internet safety. Of note, a group of elders was also worried about AI. Seniors told us that they don't know what websites to trust when searching online. Some don't trust online banking. Some don't understand two-factor authentication and have password access problems. One community meeting attendee told about a State of Maine employee Zoom meeting being hijacked with indecent material, and thus her caution about online platforms.

A 2022 internet and computer use survey of Mt. Vernon residents found that 25% of respondents (55 people) wanted to take online courses and 24% wanted to take online courses specifically in 'Protecting My Online Presence, Identifying Frauds and Scams, and Internet Safety'.

A few people expressed concern with using public WiFi for fear of being hacked.

8. What assets have this coalition discovered that would be helpful for digital inclusion efforts, and should be included in the regional plan?

Please review the first draft of the asset inventory created by the University of Maine. Refer to the assets identified in your region as a starting place. Use your coalition partners and other meetings, interviews, and research to identify additional assets in your region.

Describe any assets you've identified that support specific covered populations or the general public. Are there existing digital skills training offered in the region? Are there programs or institutions to support affordable device access or public access to devices? Are there partners doing outreach and enrollment support for the Affordable Connectivity Program? Are there other affordability funds to support people within the region? Can people get technical support? Are there any organizations providing internet safety awareness or support?

One way to organize is using each of these categories: detail assets that you have identified in your reach that address each of the digital inclusion elements below. If you didn't discover any assets related to a particular element below, simply note that.

- *Availability of broadband: Where can people access the internet in the community if they don't have it at home?*
- *Affordability of broadband: What programs and supports are helping people with the expense of broadband service?*
- *Affordable devices & technical support: Are there any device lending programs or free devices available through programs and organizations in your region?*
- *Digital skills training: Are there any organizations and programs offering digital skills training of any kind?*
- *Online accessibility and inclusivity of public resources and services: Are there any partners or programs in your region helping people access government resources or information online?*
- *Internet Safety: Are there any resources or supports in your region helping people stay safe online?*

Low-Income households

Category	Assets
Available/affordable broadband access	ACP program; public access at 17 public libraries; Hotspot devices loaded with cellular data at Lithgow Library (Augusta).
Access to devices and technical support	give IT. get IT. is a statewide source of low-cost devices for nonprofits and for individuals with low income. Rentals during the semester for Adult Ed students in Augusta, and low-cost devices available; Literacy Volunteers of Kennebec provides devices to learners for use during training, and to keep after 1 year of training is completed.
Digital skills	In collaboration with NDEC, classes are offered at several places currently in KC (detailed on Kennebec County Digital

	Asset Inventory);
Other	

Rural inhabitants

Category	Assets
Available/affordable broadband access	ACP program; public access at 17 public libraries;
Access to devices and technical support	give IT. get IT. is a statewide source of low-cost devices for nonprofits and for individuals with low income. Rentals during the semester for Adult Ed students in Augusta, and low-cost devices available; Literacy Volunteers of Kennebec provides devices to learners for use during training, and to keep after 1 year of training is completed.
Digital skills	In collaboration with NDEC, classes offered at several places currently in KC (detailed on Kennebec County Digital Asset Inventory);
Other	

Veterans

Category	Assets
Available/affordable broadband access	
Access to devices and technical support	
Digital skills	
Other	

Racial/ethnic minorities

Category	Assets
Available/affordable broadband access	
Access to devices and technical support	
Digital skills	Adult Ed programs are available, but native non-English speakers are needed to lead classes.
Other	

People with disabilities

Category	Assets
Available/affordable broadband access	
Access to devices and technical support	
Digital skills	
Other	Maine CITE program offers assistive technology for all ages and abilities; Goodwill NNE also offers assistive technology.

Incarcerated/Formerly Incarcerated People

Category	Assets
Available/affordable broadband access	
Access to devices and technical support	Groups Recover Together offers devices to people coming out of recovery programs and sometimes to those previously incarcerated.
Digital skills	

Category	Assets
Other	

Older adults

Category	Assets
Available/affordable broadband access	
Access to devices and technical support	
Digital skills	Courses available at municipal Libraries, Adult Education Centers
Other	

People with Language Barriers

Category	Assets
Available/affordable broadband access	
Access to devices and technical support	Literacy Volunteers of Kennebec (LVK): Applications (Apps) and software will be addressed in two tiers. The first is administrative. The tablets will be set up so that learners will have restricted access to the settings of the device. This serves a dual purpose. For starters, it limits the device to be used only in ways that LVK deems appropriate. Additionally, locking the device down ensures a reduced likelihood of a learner accidentally altering device settings. By knowing that these devices are properly maintained, it can reduce the likelihood of learners feeling stressed about working with their tablets. Other administrative software could include technical support tools and filtering software. The second tier involves apps that the learners will be using directly, which will include web browsers, social media, video conferencing software, and ones that are unique to the learner (i.e., reading, math, language). In essence, there will be a standard set of apps that cover the basic functions of the tablet. If additional apps are required to accommodate the specific needs of certain learners,

	applications are screened by the support technician to ensure proper security and compatibility.
Digital skills	
Other	English language tutoring is available at Capital Area New Mainers Project. They need devices for people to use at the center and to be able to take home. Tablets or laptops with data plans would be useful to English Language Learners.

8a. Accessibility/inclusivity of government resources: Did you learn anything about specific government resources, processes, or forms that partners or members of the covered populations find accessible and easy to navigate?

Use this section to share anything you've discovered about accessible/inclusive government resources or processes that might be considered assets for serving the region or covered populations. For example, the City of Presque Isle created an online form for permit applications, has tablets onsite to help people access the form when they come to city hall, and staff are on hand to help assist people in navigating the application.

We will continue to assess the accessibility of government resources by people in our region.

8b. Internet Safety: Did you discover any trusted sources of information or training in your region that are helping people and organizations better protect themselves online?

Use this space to identify assets that may be helping provide tools for internet safety. For example, the Bath Police Department regularly visits the Housing Authority to provide information and training to residents about online scams and how to protect themselves from scammers.

There is a huge need here. People reported being very concerned about online safety but not knowing where to go for help and information. Elders told me that when they search they don't know which sites to trust. One elder said he did take a class online about internet safety, but this was not a typical finding. At the same time, elders did use online banking and paid bills online. They also expressed general concern about AI. The Wayne Aging at Home group shares online and other scam information to their listserv. We didn't find unique services or training on this issue in our area.

Literacy Volunteers of Kennebec incorporated a system to address security for those with more limited knowledge of digital programs. For example, LVK has tablets set up so that learners will have restricted access to the settings of the device. This serves a dual purpose. It limits the device use only in ways that LVK deems appropriate. Additionally, locking the device down ensures that learners have a reduced likelihood of accidentally altering device settings. There is normally a standard set of applications that cover the basic functions of the tablet. If additional applications are required to accommodate the specific needs of certain learners, applications are screened by the support technician to ensure proper security and compatibility.

9. Recommendations and Goals

Now that you've identified the barriers to digital equity and the assets available to your community members in your region, it's time to design recommendations to address the barriers and build on existing assets. Some examples might be: digital skills for people of all ages, access to devices and technical support for anyone who needs them, and embedding connectivity, digital skills, and devices into other plans and systems within the region. There may be multiple areas of focus and smaller recommendations within each, but try to identify big ideas or areas of focus that are the essential components of how you propose to address digital equity in your regions, given your unique characteristics and opportunities.

Outline recommendations that make sense to be implemented in your region, and feel free to identify, and in the next section, you can make recommendations that you and your coalition partners think should be implemented at the state scale. This is where you want to reflect recommendations from your organizational and lived expert interviews, including how the recommendations will help meet the region's vision. Please be sure that your recommendations address the five elements of digital inclusion. We haven't broken this section into tables for recommendations for specific covered populations, and general recommendations. Please specify general recommendations and recommendations for specific covered populations as needed.

Digital equity is no longer optional. Our way of life is now built around our devices. Without a device or knowing how to use it, or being unable to access the wireless technology that makes it all work, it is hardly possible to get government help, access health care, or get a job. Locally, there is a great need for accessible, affordable, easy-to-use devices, and the training to use them. Digital access is necessary to be able to maintain employment, access education, and have financial security. Digital equity and inclusion is part of a larger vision for Kennebec County centering on the goals of health, education, and financial stability of its residents.

It is important to have those who are affected by the issue be part of planning for the solutions. Our recommendations for digital equity and inclusion include building on the initial work of the Kennebec County Broadband Working Group by bringing more people and organizations into the process, especially those who are lived experts or those who work with the covered populations, to help guide the work.

Based on the findings of the Working Group during our initial discovery and interview period, we will work to address digital equity in Kennebec County through the following five elements: 1. affordable broadband 2. affordable devices 3. digital skills training 4. technical support, 5. Online accessibility.

We recommend the following strategies and investments to reduce historical, institutional, and structural barriers to accessing and using technology:

1. Make sure to target solutions to specific audiences. One way will not work for everyone.
2. Ensure that digital information is available to all types of navigators (employment, workforce development, public benefits, career coaches, direct service organizations,) and public officials like town offices, fire departments, libraries, and schools.
3. Create and launch in 2023 and continue in 2024 a local public awareness and outreach campaign for the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP). [Affordable Broadband, All populations]
4. Connect people to affordable devices either through give IT. Get IT. or purchase devices on behalf of direct service organizations (e.g., for use in Adult Ed, Literacy programs, and libraries). [Affordable devices; All populations]
5. Purchase tablets with cellular data (i.e., hotspots) to serve as a loanable library resource. [Online accessibility; rural populations]
6. Advocate for assistive technologies (which include adaptive devices) for differently-abled individuals.
7. Hire a digital educator to provide training at trusted, public locations within Kennebec County. Trainings targeted to the needs of the learner and for various levels and interests [Digital

Skills Training, All populations]

8. Hire a digital navigator to provide technical support on an on-call basis or scheduled at trusted, public locations.[Technical Support; All populations]
9. Provide technical help at locations where there are already relationships—Meals on Wheels, food pantries, libraries, Adult Ed, Age-Friendly town groups, and direct service organizations. [Technical support; All populations]
10. The development of a recommended list of easy-to-use devices readily available at stores, already installed with basic software like Zoom, mail, search, and password managers.
11. In the development of any education or outreach program ensure that the language is accessible and grade six reading level.
12. Create and launch a sustainable public awareness and outreach program for accessing digital resources for the duration of the plan.
13. Implement pilot projects as needed and as advised by the Working Group, including exploring cross-generational training (i.e. Boys and Girls Club of Augusta with Cotton Mill apartment residents); schools/colleges design and implement projects/internships to bridge digital skill gaps with elders.
14. Work collaboratively with towns in the county to expand broadband infrastructure.
15. Continue to bring more voices into the work to represent the covered populations to make sure we are addressing the greatest needs.
16. Continue to build out this plan with detailed objectives, goals, strategies, and budgets to meet our vision.

10. Identify any strategies that you recommend as state-level strategies, rather than being implemented region by region.

1. give IT. get IT. is a nonprofit organization located in Waterville that serves the entire state of Maine. It connects people in need with computers, training, and technical support to go back to school, train for a new job, start a business, access healthcare, or stay connected to family and friends. As a certified electronics reuse and recycling organization, they provide refurbished desktops and laptops that suit the needs of more than 99% of the people who request a device, as well as new tablets and computers.

   They work to fulfill their mission to promote digital inclusion by providing affordable computers with free training and technical support for those in need. They partner with nonprofits directly, and eligible individuals apply online for a device that suits their needs. give IT. get IT. serves as a digital navigator, directing the client to the best device for their particular needs, and provides ongoing technical support. give IT. get IT. offers electronic recycling services to businesses from all over New England, and acquires thousands of high-quality desktop and laptop computers every year. They thoroughly digitally scrub and refurbish the computers, and install the needed software. The participation fee varies depending on the type of computer a person gets.

   As a source of low-cost devices, this service should be widely known and used throughout Maine, and by all kinds of navigators–not only digital– and those organizations providing direct services. give IT. get IT.'s cost per participant is higher than what the participant pays, however. In 2022 the average participant out-of-pocket cost was $252, while the total cost per participant was $1500 (i.e., costs of operations, management, device, user support, and training). To expand its service and provide devices to more than 5000 homes per year, give IT. get IT. would need an assistance fund to support its program.

2. In our interviews we learned of a **hotspot loan program** offered by Lithgow Library in Augusta. Like any other library material, a digital hotspot is offered as a device with cellular data loanable for two weeks. There is always a waitlist for the six devices offered at the library and they said they "could use 10 more." They are used often by people who don't have the internet at home either because they can't afford it or live in an unserved area. Not many libraries are providing these devices to the public (as verified by the Maine State Library) but it could be an interim, partial solution for some people to get connected, even for a short amount of time. The devices cost about $200 each and each must have a data plan, which the library purchases at a pooled rate of $39 each per month for unlimited data.

   The library developed a FAQ (policy for use) document to which library users agree. At checkout, they receive a Quick Start Guide with password instructions. For libraries, this is an annual added expense to the budget, and not all libraries have the funding to support offering these devices. We have included the purchase of 20 devices in our plan for libraries. The Maine State Library could perhaps administer a program for the libraries in the state that

includes training in how to use them and implement a loan program for librarians. These devices should be more readily available through libraries in Maine. (These devices may not work in locations that have poor cell coverage, in addition to having no internet, so they may not work in all locations).

3. We recommend that digital support resources be included in the State's 211 Maine program, where people can phone, text, email, or search online for helping resources of all kinds. Or establish a central location for digital inclusion resources. All types of existing navigators that help people should also be trained and informed about digital resources available statewide, and in the region they serve.

11. List the individuals and organizations that your team interviewed during the teamwork done by your Coalition. Summarize your engagement efforts. Click here to access your outreach tracker Google Sheet.

This is the section where you should summarize your outreach strategy: including the number of coalition partners you have and how you engaged with them, how many and which other organizations and individuals you conducted outreach to, and strategies you used to gather input into the regional plan. For example: we conducted monthly meetings with our 15-member regional digital inclusion coalition between January - April, conducted 10 interviews with community organizations/anchor institutions/employers, talked to a lived expert within each covered population, held a community meeting to gather feedback from the public, and distributed and collected 100 hard copy surveys within the region.

We conducted weekly meetings with our 9-member Kennebec County Broadband Working Group from mid-March to late April, and conducted interviews with organizations and individuals, in groups and one-to-one. In all, the Working Group conducted 47 interviews. Some of these were group interviews and counted as one interview. For example, the Kennbec Broadband Partnership Coordinator (KBPC) attended a group meeting of 10 seniors who gathered at Wayne Aging at Home, and the KBPC and a volunteer attended a group meeting of caseworkers at Kennebec Valley Community Action Program (KVCAP) in Waterville. The KBPC conducted 22 individual interviews with clients at Bridging the Gap and they all completed a paper copy of the survey. We interviewed 'lived' experts in the following covered populations: elders, people with low income, people with disabilities, rural residents, and people with limited literacy. We interviewed organizations that work with the following covered populations: elders, people with low income, people with disabilities, rural residents, English Language Learners, veterans, and racial and ethnic minorities. Kennebec County held a community meeting on April 11th at the Augusta Multicultural Center to gather feedback from the public with 15 people attending. We distributed and collected 46 hard-copy surveys. We distributed via email the link to the survey to all 29 town managers or lead select people in Kennebec County, Kennebec County legislators, United Way of Kennebec County, KVCAP,

libraries, and many other nonprofit organizations serving Kennebec County. We posted on social media and sent press releases about the survey. The KBPC continues to make contacts with organizations and town broadband committees to bring more voices into the work.

12. What other Anchor Institutions/industries/organizations have you not reached out to, but could be important assets or partners for digital inclusion activities?

Describe any partners who were not engaged but might be helpful in this work moving forward. Were there partners serving particular covered populations that were not at the table that could be engaged moving forward? Are there anchor institutions that could be engaged as assets and part of the solutions? **See the chart below.**

Anchor Institutions in Kennebec County	Notes	Next steps
University of Maine Augusta	interviewed a faculty member;	need to connect with student services to assess the need for devices and affordability; connect with Prison Education Partnership.
MaineGeneral Hospital	several programs provide tech help;	need to connect to understand additional education and training needs or accessibility needed.
Togus VA	spoke with reps from Veteran Readiness and Employment. Referred me to DOL Career Services.Left messages for Career Services to find out services for Veterans.	
Maine State Library	At the heart of digital equity.	Continued collaboration.
Maine State Government		
Riverview Psychiatric Center	No initial contact.	Need to contact
give IT. get IT.	A representative from org served on the Working Group	Continued Collaboration https://www.giveitgetit.org;
Kennebec Valley Community College	No initial contact.	Reach out to TRiO program.
MaineGeneral--Thayer (Waterville)	No initial contact.	
Colby College	No initial contact.	
Thomas College	No initial contact.	
U Maine Cooperative Extension, Kennebec	No initial contact.	
Maine Dept of Labor Career Center	Left messages to understand their services	Need to contact

Northern Light Inland Hospital (Waterville)	No initial contact.	
Libraries (17 public/town libraries in KC)	Sent info on Survey and Community Meeting	Follow up individually with each library to understand their services and what their needs are for training and devices
Food banks	Contacted Winthrop Food Bank as a potential partner.	KVCAP provided a list of all 29 food panties in Kennebec County. Follow-up needed.
churches/synagogues/mosques	No initial contact.	
Adult Ed programs (5 in Kennebec County)	Interviewed Augusta Adult Ed Executive Director	Continued collaboration and will ask to serve on Working Group
Health Centers	Contacted Maine Primary Care Association and referred us to Healthy Communities of the Capital Area	Supportive but not able to serve on the Working Group. Continued collaboration.
United Way of Kennebec Valley	Impact 2032	Continued collaboration
Mid Maine Chamber of Commerce	Supportive	GrowSmart Maine holding its annual summit in Waterville in Oct 2023
TRIO program at KVCC	emailed 4/14/23	Follow up in mid- May
MaineHousing	no initial contact	
DHHS	no initial contact	
Older Adults Technology Services (AARP endorsement)	Digital Equity resources	https://oats.org
Capital Area New Mainers Project	Held community meeting there; interviewed one of their teachers and ED	Continued collaboration
Local fire departments	No initial contact	Recommended by an interviewee who serves on the town's Fire Auxiliary.
University of Maine Cooperative Extension	no initial contact	Need to call
Maine CITE	no initial contact	Augusta (UMA). Assistive technology for all ages and abilities; run by the Maine Dept of Education and funded by the Administration for Community Living. www.mainecite.org
New Ventures Maine	no initial contact	Need to contact https://newventuresmaine.org/

12a. Did you identify any vulnerable populations in your region that are not technically "covered populations" as defined but should be prioritized in your plan or the state's plan?

Traditional and Non-traditional college students.

Caregivers for elderly or disabled people who may need help identifying resources (for telehealth, for example).

13. Timeline

Please include a timeline for plan implementation. The timeline could begin with year two activities in December 2023, and anticipate additional implementation funds from the Digital Equity Act starting in 2025. We recommend a five-year timeline through 2029 to reflect the state's five-year Broadband Action Plan. These specific activities you recommend can be bulleted lists within each year. <u>These do not need to be activities conducted specifically by your organization, but can and should include activities that you think will address digital equity needs in the region and might be implemented by other coalition partners.</u>

Year / Stage	Activities
2024 Year Two of Regional & Tribal Broadband Partners Program	Build out a plan for the county to offer training, access to affordable devices, the ACP (if available), and technical assistance for Kennebec County, using existing regional resources, organizations, and systems. Continue to add partners to the Working Group targeting additional representation of covered populations, including small rural communities and food banks. Implement a pilot digital training project in Kennebec County.
2025 Year One of Digital Equity Implementation	Advertise for and hire a digital navigator and digital educator for Kennebec County. Launch a public information campaign. Continue with ACP sign-up if funds are available. Implement the plan for digital inclusion, build on pilot projects, and continue to adapt the DEDI plan for updated needs. Establish key performance indicators to measure change and effectiveness.

2026 Year Two	Evaluate year one. Make adjustments to the plan; Working Group continues to meet and oversee the program; hold community conversations to understand how the program is working and what changes or additions need to be made. Review KPIs and track accomplishments.
2027 Year Three	Evaluate year two. Make adjustments to the plan; Working Group continues to meet and oversee the program; hold community conversations to understand how the program is working and what changes or additions need to be made. Review KPIs and track accomplishments.
2028 Year Four	Evaluate year three. Make adjustments to the plan; Working Group continues to meet and oversee the program; hold community conversations to understand how the program is working and what changes or additions need to be made. Review KPIs and track accomplishments.
2029 Final Year of Digital Equity Implementation	Final evaluation of the program, track results, track digital equity data points for progress.

14. Budget

Please include a budget estimate for activities and strategies on the timeline. This is for estimating purposes only and may change as we collaborate to identify statewide versus regional strategies. **Click here to complete your budget in the external spreadsheet**.

Kennebec County's budget for the five years totals about $3.6 million. We have included areas of funding for programs including Affordable Broadband, Affordable Equipment, WiFi Hotspot Devices, Digital Skills Trainers, Digital Navigators, RTBP Digital Equity & Digital Inclusion Plan Management, and a Public Outreach and Awareness Campaign.

15. Executive Summary

Please include a brief summary of the Regional or Tribal Digital Equity Plan, restating the purpose and key points of the plan. 1-2 paragraphs are fine. Please complete this section last, after you have completed all of the other sections. <u>Think of this section as what you might present to the other stakeholders or regional partners as a brief description at the May 3 Workshop!</u>

The goal of the Kennebec County Digital Equity and Digital Inclusion Plan is to close the digital divide for its citizens. The digital divide is the gap between those who have affordable access, skills, and support to effectively engage online, from those who do not. Digital equity is no longer optional. Lack of access to the digital world disproportionately affects people of color, Indigenous peoples, households with low incomes, people with disabilities, people in rural areas, those with limited English or literacy, and older adults.

To bridge the digital divide in Kennebec County, we will connect people to affordable devices through give IT. get IT, develop outreach plans for enhancing ACP enrollment and knowledge of available digital assets, launch digital education and digital navigator positions to serve people throughout the county, and work collaboratively with towns in the county to expand broadband infrastructure. This work will be guided by the Kennebec County Broadband Working Group based on a continually evolving and refined digital equity and inclusion plan. As technology continues to evolve and change, so must our approaches to digital equity and inclusion.