




KENNEBEC COUNTY DIGITAL
EQUITY PLAN

V I S I O N



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.

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executive summary

Digital equity is a 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 such as telehealth.

The Regional & Tribal Broadband Partners Program was created to help deploy, sustain, and maximize the benefits of broadband infrastructure investment in all state regions. Each partner will build and lead digital inclusion efforts in their region and tribe while also providing support for community and regional-scale broadband infrastructure solutions and investments. Regional & Tribal Broadband Partners receive funding and support provided by the Maine Connectivity Authority in partnership with the Maine Broadband Coalition (MBC) and National Digital Equity Center (NDEC). The program goals are to support community-driven broadband solutions that ensure universal connectivity, strengthen and grow the number of partners thinking about digital equity and inclusion, and create alignment and coordination between communities, regions, and the state.

In the process of completing Kennebec County's digital equity plan, we are 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.

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.

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 support Kennebec County in reaching achievable solutions, this plan presents a broad perspective with concentrated emphasis on individuals in covered populations.





current state

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.

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.

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 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.



activities timeline

| 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. |

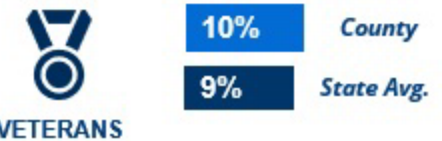
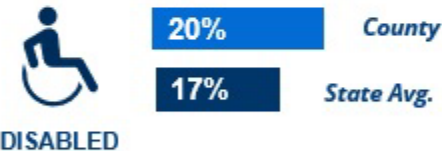
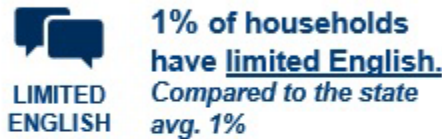
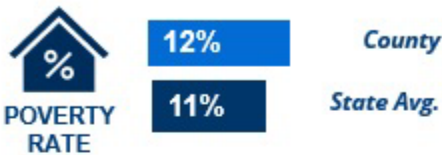


focus areas

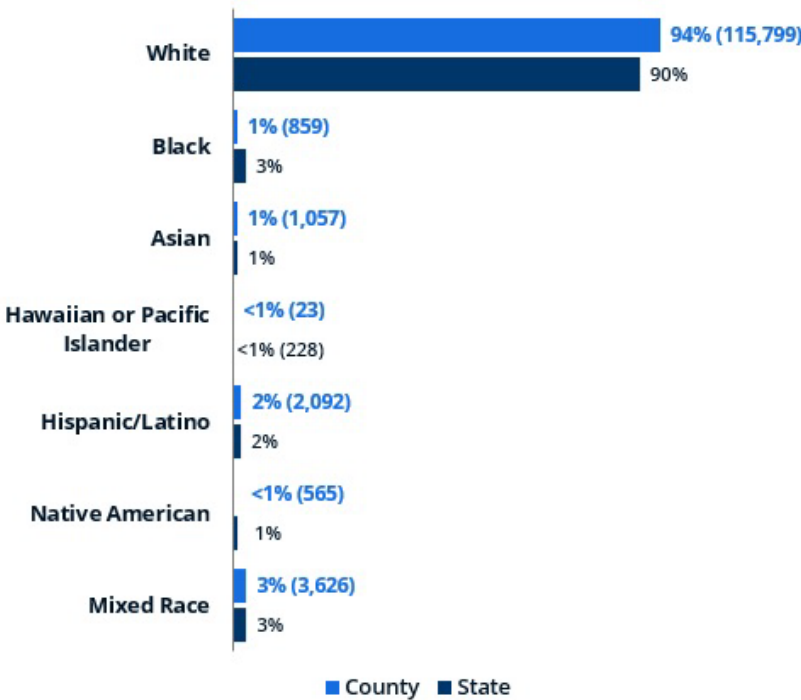
Addressing covered populations is crucial in digital equity efforts and plans, as ensuring equal access and opportunities for underrepresented and marginalized groups not only fosters social inclusion, but also drives innovation, economic growth, and a more equitable society. In its Digital Equity Act statute, the National Telecommunications and Information Administration names 8 Covered Populations as key beneficiaries of Digital Equity planning and implementation:

- Low-income households (up to 150% of federal poverty threshold).
- Aging individuals (60 and up).
- Incarcerated Individuals, other than those incarcerated in a federal facility.
- Veterans.
- Individuals with disabilities.
- Individuals with language barriers, including English learners and those with low levels of literacy.
- Racial and ethnic minorities; and
- Individuals who primarily reside in a rural area.

Covered Populations



Race & Ethnicity





state level strategies

The following state level approaches are being advocated and county officials should contribute their voices to endorse and bolster these strategies.

[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 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.

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).

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.



appendix A -Regional Digital Equity Coalition

| 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 |

appendix B -Kennebec County Digital Equity Snapshots



How to use the Digital Equity Snapshots

These Snapshots provide baseline information for Regional Partners to start data gathering for the Digital Equity Planning Process. Your work will help **fill in gaps** in what we know, especially with regard to **Covered Populations*** in your region.

* In its Digital Equity Act statute, the NTIA names 8 **Covered Populations** as key beneficiaries of Digital Equity planning and implementation :

- Low-income households (up to 150% of federal poverty threshold);
- Aging individuals (60 and up)
- Incarcerated individuals, other than those incarcerated in a Federal facility;
- Veterans;
- Individuals with disabilities;
- Individuals with language barriers, including English learners and those with low levels of literacy;
- Racial and ethnic minorities; and
- Individuals who primarily reside in a rural area.

Overview of Covered Populations – Percentage Comparison

| | | Aging (60+) | Veterans | Limited English (Households) | Disability | Poverty Rate (Households) |
|------|------------------------|-------------|------------|------------------------------|------------|---------------------------|
| | Androscoggin County | 16% | 9% | 1% | 21% | 12% |
| ●● | Aroostook County | 22% | 10% | 2% | 23% | 13% |
| | Cumberland County | 17% | 7% | 1% | 12% | 8% |
| | Franklin County | 22% | 10% | <1% (4) | 18% | 12% |
| ● | Hancock County | 23% | 9% | <1% (24) | 12% | 10% |
| | Kennebec County | 18% | 10% | 1% | 20% | 12% |
| ● | Knox County | 23% | 8% | <1% (72) | 13% | 9% |
| ●● | Lincoln County | 26% | 11% | <1% (50) | 16% | 11% |
| ●● | Oxford County | 21% | 10% | <1% (36) | 21% | 14% |
| ● | Penobscot County | 17% | 9% | <1% (209) | 21% | 14% |
| ●●●● | Piscataquis County | 27% | 11% | <1% (3) | 28% | 16% |
| ● | Sagadahoc County | 21% | 11% | <1% (17) | 9% | 11% |
| ●●● | Somerset County | 21% | 11% | <1% (44) | 24% | 18% |
| | Waldo County | 22% | 8% | <1% (25) | 18% | 13% |
| ●●●● | Washington County | 24% | 12% | <1% (29) | 25% | 19% |
| | York County | 19% | 10% | 1% | 16% | 8% |
| | Maine | 19% | 9% | 1% (3,362) | 17% | 11% |
| | United States | 14% | 7% | 3% | 14% | 13% |

Within each category the counties with the 5 highest percentages above the state average are highlighted **blue**.



A dot represents a high proportion in one of the categories.

Counties with more dots have a high percentage of covered populations.

3

Kennebec County

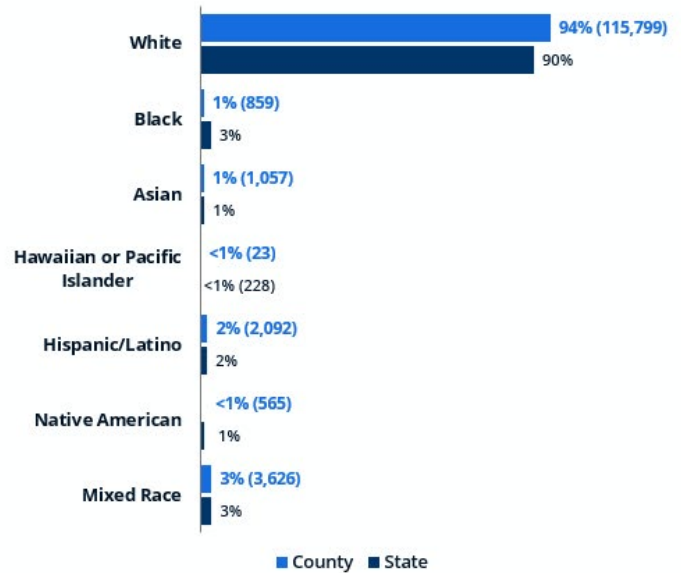
Total population: 123,293

Total households: 52,752

Nonwhite population: 6%

ACP enrollment: 15% (7,960)

Race & Ethnicity



4

Kennebec County | Demographics

| | County | State | National |
|-----------------------------|--------|-------|----------|
| Demographics | | | |
| Female Population | 51% | 51% | 51% |
| Male Population | 49% | 49% | 49% |
| Age | | | |
| Under 18 | 19% | 19% | 23% |
| Ages 18 - 34 | 20% | 20% | 23% |
| Ages 35 - 64 | 41% | 41% | 38% |
| Ages 64+ | 20% | 21% | 16% |
| Education Attainment | | | |
| Less than Highschool | 6% | 6% | 11% |
| Highschool Graduate | 34% | 31% | 36% |
| Some College | 30% | 29% | 33% |
| Bachelors or more | 30% | 34% | 23% |

Covered Populations



12%

County

11%

State Avg.

POVERTY RATE



LIMITED ENGLISH

1% of households have limited English. Compared to the state avg. 1%



DISABLED

20%

County

17%

State Avg.



AGING

18% are 60 yrs. +. Compared to the state avg. 19%



VETERANS

10%

County

9%

State Avg.

5

Kennebec County | Digital Inclusion

| | County | State | National |
|-------------------------------|--------|-------|----------|
| Internet Subscriptions | | | |
| Dial-up | <1% | 1% | <1% |
| Cell Data only | 8% | 8% | 11% |
| Broadband/Fiber/Cable/DSL | 76% | 74% | 72% |
| Satellite | 3% | 5% | 7% |
| Internet but no subscription | 2% | 3% | 3% |
| No internet access | 11% | 10% | 10% |
| With a computer | | | |
| Broadband | 86% | 85% | 86% |
| Dial-up | <1% | 1% | <1% |
| No internet access | 6% | 6% | 7% |
| Without a computer | | | |
| White | 5% | 5% | 4% |
| Black | <1% | 4% | 6% |
| Native American | 9% | 6% | 9% |
| Hawaiian or Pacific Islander | <1% | 15% | 5% |
| Asian | 10% | 3% | 2% |
| Hispanic | 4% | 3% | 4% |
| All Households | 5% | 5% | 4% |



7% of households have a smartphone only, compared to Maine's average of 6%.



1% of households have a tablet only, compared to Maine's average of 1%.



79% of households have a desktop or laptop, compared to Maine's average 80%.

6

Kennebec County | Barriers

| | County | State | National |
|----------------------------------|----------|----------|----------|
| Household Median Income | \$58,100 | \$63,200 | \$69,000 |
| Housing Cost Burdened Households | 41% | 42% | 46% |
| Poverty Rate | 12% | 11% | 13% |
| Childhood Poverty Rate | 7% | 7% | 9% |
| Unemployed | 3% | 3% | 4% |

Notes:

- "Housing Cost Burdened" means more than 30% of total income is spent on housing
- Poverty Rate is calculated at 150% of the poverty line

Data Sources and Notes

Data in the Snapshots is drawn from the Census Bureau's 2021 American Community Survey (ACS).

- **Note: ACS does not capture population for tribal land tracts**
- "Poverty" is shown as at <= 150% poverty level per NTIA definition
- "Housing cost burdened" is defined as more than 30% of household income spent on housing
- Percents are rounded to nearest 1 to account for margins of error

Notes on other Covered Populations not represented in Snapshots:

- Incarcerated individuals, because data is recorded at the state level only, not by the Census Bureau
- "Racial and ethnic minorities", because the Census does not define this category, and it is probably best targeted by regional partners' local understanding; however, general population information is shown in the County Overview Snapshots
- "Rural", because the Census defines rural tracts as areas with less than 5,000 residents, but regional partners' local understanding is more useful for targeting