

City of Cambridge Digital Equity Update

April 28, 2026

To the City Manager:

The Public Library Department, in collaboration with the Department of Human Service Programs and the IT Department, has prepared this response to Council POR 2026-08 that the City Manager be and hereby is requested to direct the appropriate departments to review the city's digital equity work to date, including the study recommendations and all steps taken since the study conclusion in order to update the evaluation of existing internet access programs, assessing whether residents' digital needs are or could be better provided for and to propose how we can better meet their needs and to report back to the Council.

Introduction

Over the past five years, there have been significant efforts to assess and meet the digital equity needs of Cambridge residents. Two Digital Equity studies have been completed, the [first in 2021](#) and an [update](#) in 2025. **Key recommendations** from 2025 are to: 1. **retain digital navigators** to meet the needs of low-income Cambridge residents to the extent funding allows; 2. support efforts by **affordable housing providers to pursue strategies for providing enhanced connectivity and meeting device needs** of residents; and 3. **purchase devices to support city direct services**.

The City, in partnership with community organizations, affordable housing providers, and the Cambridge Public Schools, has acted on the studies' recommendations through a combination of new programmatic work, pilot initiatives, cross-departmental collaboration, and significant leveraging of federal, state, and philanthropic funding. Resident feedback and response to the pilot programming have been overwhelmingly positive and has underscored the importance of individualized instruction and the necessity of translation and interpretation services for our Digital Equity offerings.

The digital equity landscape remains fluid with rapid significant changes to federal funding priorities having downstream effects on the needs presented in the community

and the programs designed to address them. Funding for most of these programs has come through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), Massachusetts Broadband Institute (MBI), or other grants. A challenge that we are facing is that many of these funding streams, both to our direct programs and other community organizations, are ending.

The following report contains updates on work stemming from the Digital Equity studies, an overview of the current state of digital equity resources available to residents, and a proposal to continue one FTE Digital Navigator at the Cambridge Public Library for up to three years (see page 10) to continue to address the gap facing low-income residents in access and skills.

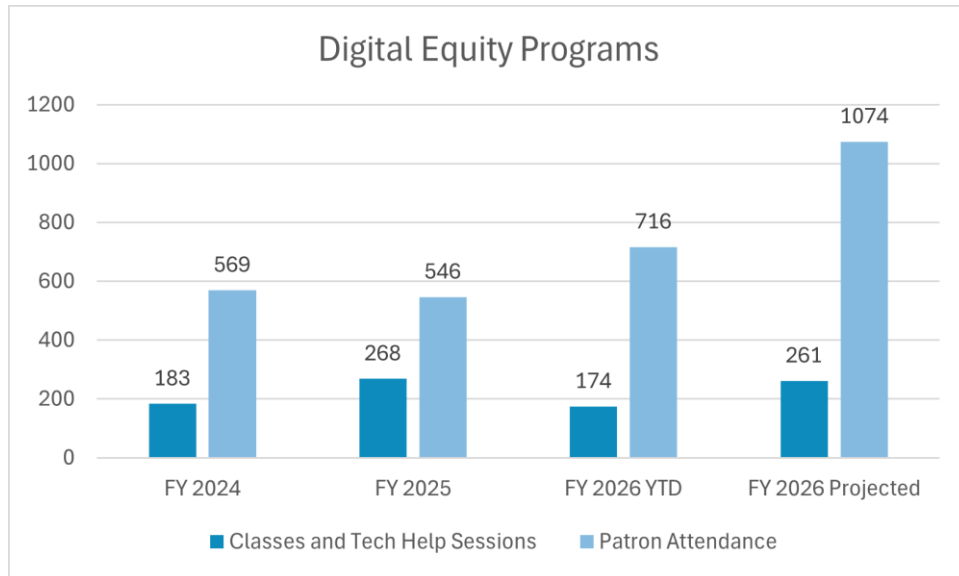
A Coalition is Formed

A coalition of City Departments: Information Technology (ITD), Department of Human Service Programs (DHSP), Cambridge Public Library (CPL), Cambridge Public School District (CPSD) and local non-profit organizations: Cambridge Housing Authority (CHA), Homeowners Rehab Inc (HRI), Just A Start (JAS), and Cambridge Community Television (CCTV) was convened in 2023 and has been meeting monthly to organize Digital Equity efforts across the City including a digital navigators pilot. This coalition has focused on access to technology and teaching and learning how to use technology, especially for low-income residents, rather than a universal fiber-to-the-premises network, which would be quite costly. Funding for these efforts comes from a variety of sources including ARPA, grants, salary and wage lines for positions at CPL and DHSP, and Library operating (OOM) for collection materials including circulating Chromebooks and Wi-Fi hotspots.

Building a Structure for Direct Services

Dedicated staff positions at the Library and Community Learning Center have been created to perform digital equity work.

In FY23 the Cambridge Public Library hired a full-time Digital Equity Manager and in FY25 hired a full-time Digital Equity Specialist. They and the Digital Navigator placed at the Library (see page 5), focus on direct service to residents. Team members have had a profound impact working with community members to directly improve their lives through access to and training on using technology. Team members work closely with other Library staff as well as City and non-profit partners to offer a variety of services including classes and Tech Help Sessions. The number of classes, tech help sessions, and participants are growing over time (see bar chart):



Additionally, the Department of Human Service Programs has recently hired a second full-time Technology Aide at the Community Learning Center to work directly with adult learners to ensure they have the tools and skills to participate in digital instruction, including occupational skills training.

Digital Navigator Pilot

Cambridge residents have had access to digital navigators through a pilot program funded with regional and municipal ARPA funding since June 2024. The cohort of seven digital navigators across the city have directly engaged with residents who have persistent technological needs that prevent them from fully engaging with life and limit their ability to access necessary services. **Cambridge Digital Navigators have completed 2,775** service tickets, each one making a difference in bridging the digital divide for a resident.

Digital Navigators work directly with residents in a variety of service models designed to bridge gaps in access, skills, and abilities through a community-based approach to meet complex needs including scheduled one-on-one appointments, advertised drop-in hours, single session workshops, and multi-week courses to build skills. The most common service interactions handled by Digital Navigators during the pilot were access to a laptop, assistance with job searching or applications, assistance with software, assistance using a device, access to internet, assistance learning email or other communication tools, assistance learning how to save, edit, move, and share files, and assistance with online banking or other online transactions.

Two MassHire workforce regions, Metro North and North Shore, have led the Digital Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (JEDI) Consortium work since 2023 to dismantle

systemic inequities in technology access across the regions. This collaboration centers the needs of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), immigrant, and low-income communities. The Digital JEDI Consortium supports the management, training, and device distribution infrastructure that powers the Cambridge Digital Navigator Pilot Program. Enhancing the skills and employability of the navigators through the pilot and paying a living wage were core to the program's design. Regional funding for the Digital Navigator Pilot Program ends on June 30, 2026, for the majority of partners.

The Digital Navigator cohort originally consisted of seven Digital Navigators across the City. After June 2026 there will be 2.5 FTE Digital Navigators remaining and their services will only be available to people who live in an HRI or CHA building, or at 402 Rindge Ave. We have a proposed plan to continue one FTE Digital Navigator at the Cambridge Public Library for up to three years (see page 10).

- HRI funded a permanent Digital Navigator once their ARPA funding ran out in March 2026. They are the only pilot program partner who has secured permanent funding.
- CHA identified funding for one additional year of Digital Navigation once ARPA funds ran out in April 2026.
- JAS no longer has a full-time Digital Navigator after their grant funding ran out in January 2026. JAS has secured an MBI grant to support a part-time navigator who will serve residents at 402 Rindge Ave through December 2026.
- CCTV's current grant funding expires on June 30, 2026.
- ARPA funding for the CPSD Digital Navigator and the CPL Digital Navigator ends on June 30, 2026.

Expanding Our Technology and Training Reach

In addition to the Digital Navigator Pilot, the City has partnered with many organizations that provide free or low-cost devices to residents as well as training and resources to safely and effectively use them.

CPL is distributing 133 Windows laptops and 148 pre-paid Wi-Fi hotspots with support from the **Cambridge Public Library Foundation through the [Tech for All program](#)**. The Library is thankful for the generous support of local philanthropic organizations, corporate giving, and individual donors in support of Digital Equity.

The Community Learning Center (CLC) recently received over 300 devices for student use during CLC programs through a grant from the **Mass Broadband Institute**. These devices expand the number of students who have access to the equipment and

training they need to fully engage in classes and are also available for long-term loan for students engaged in skills training or Bridge to College classes.

CPL, CLC and CHA partnered with **Tech Goes Home** to deliver multiple series of structured, 15-hour foundational digital literacy curriculum to cohorts of library patrons. Upon successful completion, participants received a free laptop and mobile hotspot. Unfortunately, Tech Goes Home ceased operations in 2026 due to funding challenges.

CPL is a licensed Senior Planet partner through **AARP's Older Adults Technology Services (OATS) program** offering older adults a dynamic and evidence-informed curriculum spanning financial security, health and wellness, social engagement, creative expression, and civic participation. Staff have completed train-the-trainer professional development, enabling CPL to deliver both Tech Help drop-in support and structured Tech Classes tailored specifically to the learning needs and goals of older adults.

The Council on Aging partnered with **The Somerville-Cambridge Elder Services' Tech Access Program (TAP)** helping older adults and their families use technology to reduce isolation and loneliness and strengthen connections with their communities. Through ARPA funding, TAP offered services at the Cambridge Senior Center to older adults seeking support with skill building workshops and opportunities for socializing. ARPA Funding for this program ended in 2025.

CPL collaborates with the Division of Digital Psychiatry at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, a Harvard Medical School affiliate, to bring the **DOORS (Digital Outreach for Obtaining Resources and Skills) program** developed by a multidisciplinary team of clinicians, engineers, and researchers to library patrons. DOORS is a community-oriented, research-backed digital literacy program teaching essential laptop and smartphone skills to individuals who face disproportionately high rates of digital exclusion. Class offerings span foundational technology skills alongside timely and relevant topics including navigating MyChart, AI safety, and the intersection of artificial intelligence and mental health.

The Library partnered with the **African Bridge Network**, an organization dedicated to helping skilled immigrants translate their professional experience into career opportunities in the United States, to offer a four-week *AI for Job Seekers* series. The program equips job seekers with practical, responsible AI literacy, teaching participants to leverage generative AI tools to strengthen job search strategies, optimize resumes, and prepare for interviews, while emphasizing ethical use and awareness of algorithmic bias.

Community Impact

The time, care, and expertise that our Digital Equity specialists bring to their work is having a meaningful impact on community members. Here are three examples of many:

A resident shared:

“The Library laptop program and navigator have been a tremendous benefit for me. As a person struggling with precarious housing/homelessness, having a computer significantly reduces some of the general barriers to accessing resources that can materially benefit me and help me in my day-to-day life.”

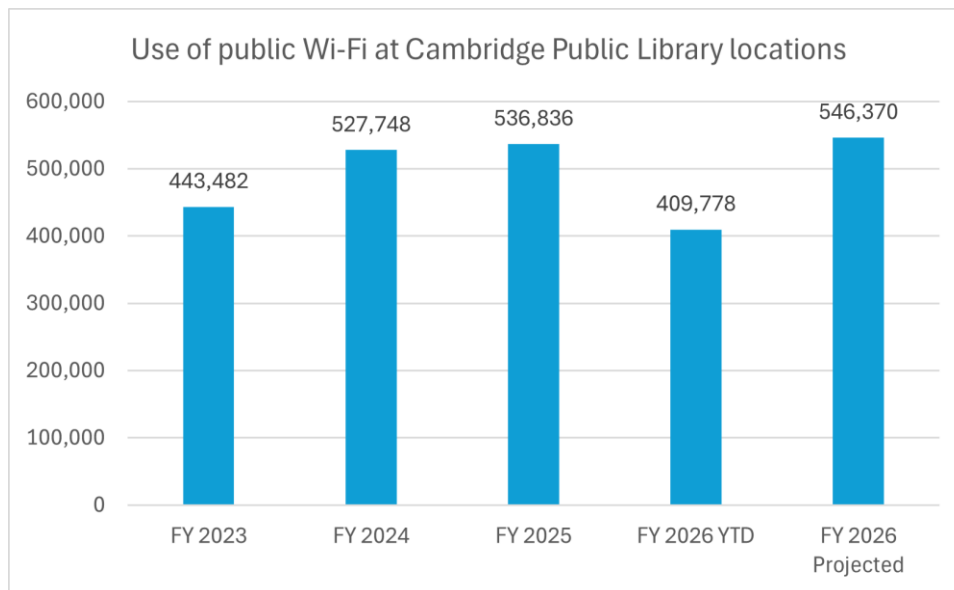
A community member who is currently experiencing homelessness heard about our program through someone she met at the local Warming Center. She is a graduate from a university with a career background in biomedical engineering. She developed an illness that caused her to lose everything and is just trying to get back on her feet. CPL’s Digital Navigator coordinated an appointment and helped her to apply for a laptop and hotspot. She mentioned that it is extremely hard living on the street and that people typically do not treat her with decency. She was so glad to be able to talk to someone about career aspirations and more and to sign up for technology that will enable her to search for jobs without having to travel. She highlighted that when you are traveling with all of your belongings on your back and no money, a simple trip to the library can be an hours-long task, and the same goes for other social services. Having a laptop and mobile internet will help to address these barriers.

And another community member shared that at a recent One-on-One Tech Help session, a digital equity team member supported a first-generation college student gain access to a free refurbished laptop, hotspot, and LinkedIn Learning access, enabling him to sustainably complete his coursework while pursuing his dream of launching a Tech Empowerment and Social Justice small business to uplift his community.

Increasing Internet Access

In 2023, the City contracted with CTC Technology and Energy to perform a [Municipal Broadband Feasibility study](#). A major finding is that for the City to construct a sustainable municipal fiber-to-the-premises (FTTP) service network—a significant public contribution would be required including an upfront public capital contribution of \$150 million with no expectation of a financial return. Coalition partners chose to focus on access to technology and skills building opportunities for low-income, immigrant, and diverse residents to learn how to use technology.

In addition to the hotspot distribution programs outlined on page 5, the City operates free public [Wi-Fi in 41 locations](#) including libraries, schools, youth centers, parks, and fields for the benefit of the community. For example, public Wi-Fi usage at Cambridge Public Library locations is extensive and has increased each year:



In order to facilitate access to affordable internet, the City promoted sign-ups for the Emergency Broadband Benefit and Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) federal benefit programs through in person events, fliers, and tech help sessions. Federal funding for these programs was exhausted in 2024 and the programs have ended. At the end of the ACP program, 26.9% of eligible households in Cambridge had enrolled.

Starry and the Cambridge Housing Authority entered into a 3-year program approved in December 2024 to **provide low-cost service internet at Frank J. Manning, Washington Elms and Newtowne Court** apartments. Fiber internet is fully installed and available at all 205 units at the Manning Apartments. There are two speed and price options available, 1gbps down/1gbps for \$30/month or 50mbps down/25mbps up for \$15/month. The Newtowne Court and Washington Elms projects are currently paused pending approval of agreements to use fiber lines owned and operated by MIT. This agreement is under review.

Status of Recommendations

The primary recommendation of the 2025 study was to continue support for a network of digital navigators across the city. While funding is challenging as ARPA and grant funding for these positions approaches an end in an uncertain economic climate, the

City has invested in digital equity positions as outlined on pages 2 and 3 and we are proposing an extension of a Digital Navigator position at the Library (see page 10).

Secondary recommendations of the study included ongoing support to affordable housing providers and procurement of devices to support City services. CHA, HRI, and JAS continue to explore options for supporting residents of their buildings and remain engaged with the coalition of City staff working in this area. Cambridge continues to support City Departments with technology needs through ITD funding for staff devices. Cambridge also supports devices for resident use related to services provided by departments such as CPL and DHSP through OOM funding from those departments.

Cambridge successfully pursued a \$100,000 Digital Equity Study Implementation grant. The grant was awarded on 10/23/2025 and must be expended by 10/30/2026. \$54,000 of the grant will be used to refurbish and distribute laptops and pre-paid Wi-Fi hotspots to eligible residents through a partnership with Mass Association for Computer and Internet Resources (MACIR). \$46,000 of the grant will support wages of two Digital Navigators through CCTV. One navigator is placed at CPSD, and one navigator is placed at CPL. The grant will fund these positions through 6/30/26.

And as referenced earlier, the CPL Foundation also secured donor funding for laptop and hotspot giveaways to qualifying residents. Providing residents with devices to keep has enabled them to meet long term needs in support of education or employment. Library staff and Digital Navigators from the pilot program are actively pairing community members with a device and training sessions on how to use them.

Carrying the Work Forward to Meet Residents' Needs

Our assessment points to digital equity specialists including Digital Navigators to carry out access and teaching and learning programs to best meet residents' digital equity needs. Digital Navigators providing direct service to residents has proven to be an effective method for supporting Digital Equity. They are able to assist residents with a wide range of services including access to devices, access to internet, navigating reduced-cost service benefits, learning technology skills, and to help residents feel more confident in their ability to use technology wisely and safely.

Some of our strongest touchpoints are where the City is already interacting with residents, especially through DHSP and CPL. The Library is a natural focal point for City Digital Equity services. CPL operates seven locations, 359 hours per week across the city, has regular night and weekend hours, enjoys a high level of resident trust, and welcomes all.

As the Digital Navigator and JEDI pilot program concludes in June, the Library will remain a strong and trusted community resource, continuing the work of ensuring community members have access to low-cost home internet options, hands-on technology support, and digital skills classes. Our Tech Help program provides 20–30-minute appointments, as well as walk-in support, to help community members confidently navigate today’s digital world. CPL will also continue to partner with City and local organizations to reach vulnerable residents and cultivate a strong referral network to deliver community-driven services.

Data from the pilot program supports this conclusion. Statistics from the pilot program cohort of seven digital navigators across the City prove the effectiveness of the Library as a site for digital navigation. **2,618** service tickets were closed from August 2024 through January 2026. The **CPL digital navigator** holds the largest share of those with **806** tickets, 30.8% of the total tickets closed by the cohort of seven digital navigators.

The data also shows the effectiveness of the Digital Navigator model at reaching underserved communities. The percentage of community members served by racial identity as of 4/9/26 is:

- Black or African American: 47.08%
- Asian: 20.37%
- White: 18.53%
- Hispanic/Latino: 8.51%
- Prefer to Self-Describe: 3.34%
- Middle Eastern or North African 1.67%
- American Indian or Alaskan Native 0.33%

The data from service ticket categories shows a wide range of needs being addressed. Skilled Digital Navigators, with the expertise and ability to address a wide variety of resident needs, provide the flexibility and individual support necessary for skill building. The service category percentages as of 4/9/26 were:

- Tech Support: 52.55%
- Device Distribution: 23.86%
- Community Care Resources: 9.53%
- Digital Literacy: 4.35%
- Other: 5.21%
- Internet Access: 4.5%

As grant funding for the CPL's Digital Navigator expires on 6/30/26, **we propose to use Comcast funds from a negotiated one-time contribution of \$312,000 as part of the 2024 cable tv license renewal. The use of these funds could support one full-time Digital Navigator at the Cambridge Public Library for up to three years.**

Several resource gaps remain. Affordability of home internet service, lack of free or low-cost access to computer ownership, and demand for technical assistance and digital skills training beyond the capacity of current permanent dedicated Digital Equity staff (2 Library FTE and 2 DHSP FTE) all need to be considered across the needs of our community.

Conclusion

Life-changing work is being done by City partners on deepening and broadening access to technology and learning opportunities for the Cambridge community, especially for residents who face barriers to access. Partners are passionate in our efforts to close the digital divide and level the playing field for Cambridge residents who have been left out of opportunities due to the inability to leverage technology to further their career and life goals. While funding has been challenging in the current fiscal environment, we have made great strides in partnership, access and learning opportunities for especially low-income community members. We are thankful to the digital equity workers, including Digital Navigators, for their outstanding efforts and impacts across the City. As partners, we are committed to continuing this vital work.

Sincerely Yours,

Maria McCauley, Director of Libraries

Sue Walsh, Assistant Director Adult and Family Services

Jay Fusco, Chief Information Officer

Appendix I: Background on Internet Access Programs

Every residential unit in Cambridge has access to cable broadband through Comcast. The lowest priced offering that meets broadband speed criteria is \$30/month (as of June 2025) and eligible only to low-income residents who meet certain additional criteria. Offerings available to all residents that meet broadband speed criteria range in cost from \$93-\$123 per month (as of June 2025) after initial promotional offerings are exhausted. 95% of residential units in Cambridge additionally have access to at least one licensed fixed wireless internet provider through Starry, Verizon, T-Mobile, or AT&T. Offerings that meet broadband speed criteria cost from \$45-\$85 per month (as of June 2025). About 10% of residential units in Cambridge also have access to a fiber internet provider. Offerings that meet broadband speed criteria cost from \$60-\$100 per month (as of June 2025).

Older definitions of the “digital divide” focused on lack of infrastructure preventing individuals from having an available internet provider. This is not an issue in Cambridge as every residential unit has at least one provider available. Affordability is the primary challenge Cambridge residents face in securing internet access. Access programs that focus on affordability are constantly changing and navigating requirements can be a barrier to utilization. With the end of federal funding for the ACP program in 2024 the remaining low-cost options are dependent on voluntary participation by internet service providers, and each has their own requirements and qualifications.

The current federal program for internet subsidy is USAC Lifeline. Internet service providers are not required to participate in this program, and Cambridge does not have a participating cable internet provider, so it is not an option for residents. In areas with a participating provider the program provides a monthly discount of \$9.25 with individuals responsible for costs beyond that amount. This benefit is only available to eligible individuals at or below 135% of federal poverty guidelines (\$44,550 for a family of four).

The Broadband Equity Access and Deployment Program (BEAD) is a federal grant program with awards made to states in order to pursue partnerships with companies to create physical infrastructure for internet access in locations that are not currently served by any internet provider. Funding from BEAD covers the creation of internet utility infrastructure where it did not previously exist but does not provide cost relief to individual residents. The focus of the BEAD program is to ensure that all residential locations have an available internet utility provider, but it does not address affordability or costs.

Appendix II: Sources

Cambridge Public Internet Wi-Fi Access Points Map:

<https://www.cambridgema.gov/~media/Files/GIS/allmapsandatlas/WirelessAccessPoints.pdf>

Digital Equity in Cambridge: Data and Strategic Recommendations was released in March 2021 and is available at this link: <https://www.cambridgema.gov/~media/Files/citymanagersoffice/cityofcambridgedigitalequitystudymarch2021.pdf>

Digital Navigator Pilot Program report to the Transportation and Public Utilities Committee was released in 2024 and is available at this link:

<https://www.cambridgema.gov/~media/Files/cambridgepubliclibrary/Muna/april2024publicutilitiescommitteemeetingreport.pdf>

Municipal Broadband in Cambridge: Feasibility and Business Model Options was released in March 2023 and is available at this link:

<https://www.cambridgema.gov/~media/Files/citymanagersoffice/files/broadbandtaskforce/2023municipalbroadband/municipalbroadbandincambridgefeasibilityandbusinessmodeloptionsfinal20230315.pdf>

Municipal Digital Equity Plan was released in 2025 and is available at this link:

[Cambridge Municipal Digital Equity Plan - 20250625.pdf](#)