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Digital Equity in Maine

Cabinet on Aging | April 2024
Jessica Perez, Digital Equity Manager
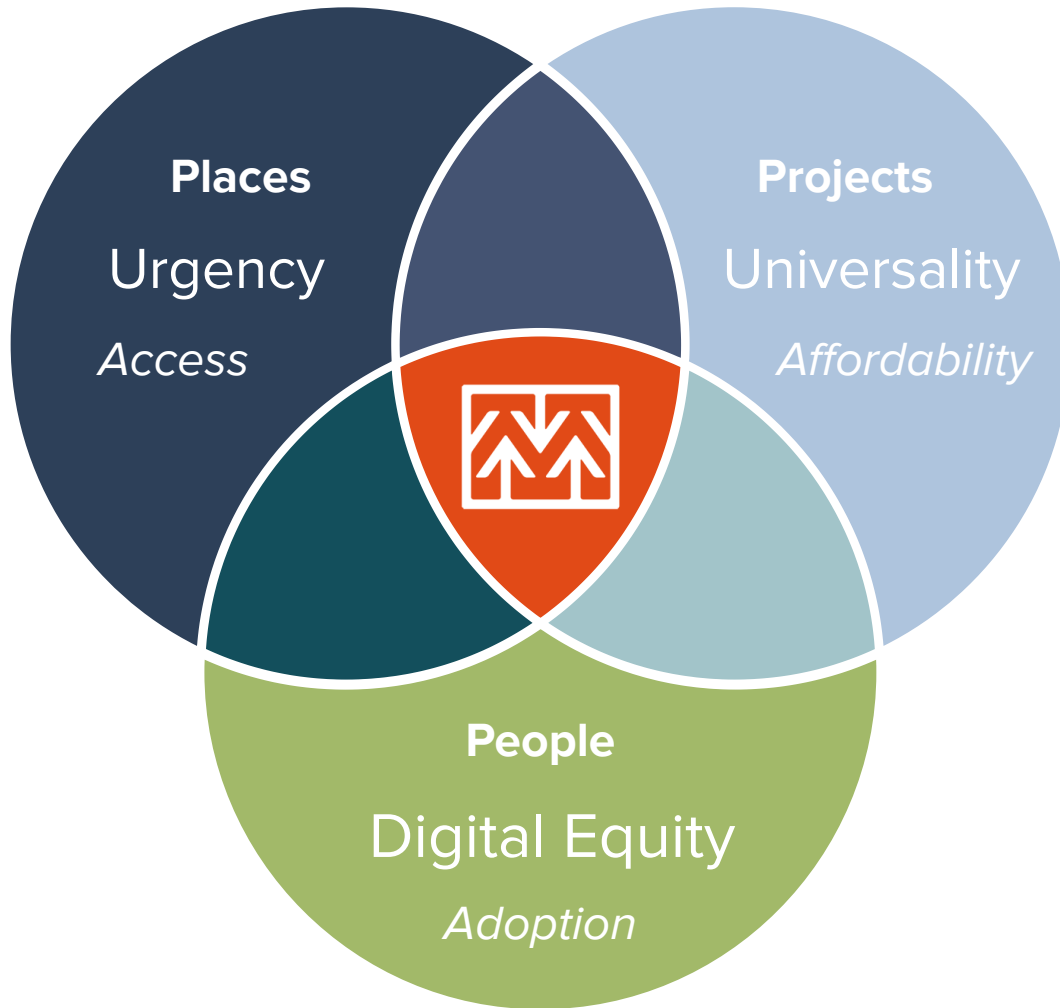
All-In to Connect Everyone. We CAN get there from here!

About MCA

- MCA was founded in 2021 as a quasi-governmental entity to be the primary broadband agency for the state of Maine.

- MCA has three statutory goals:
  - That effective, accessible connectivity be universally available in the state.
  - That Maine has secure, affordable, reliable, competitive, sustainable and forward-looking infrastructure that can meet future needs.
  - That all residents, businesses and institutions in Maine be able to take full advantage of the economic, health, educational and other opportunities available through connectivity services.

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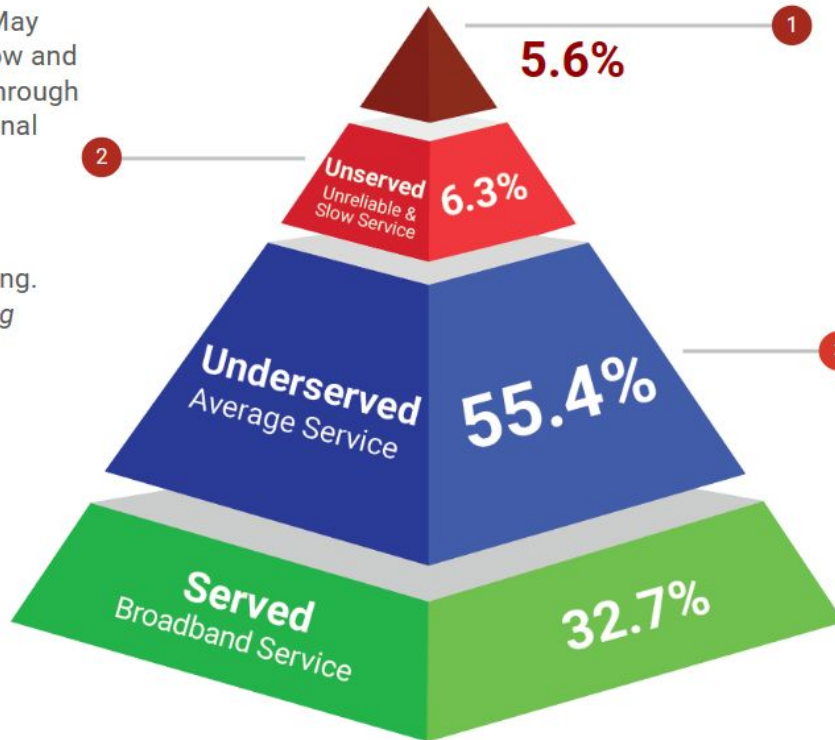# MCA's Priorities

Places
Urgency
Access

Projects
Universality
Affordability

People
Digital Equity
Adoption

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The Connectivity Challenge

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The Scale of the Problem *(Dec 2023)*

Most Critical / No Connection

Est. 5.6% of locations. Updated data to target and prioritize in grants and special deployments as needed including wireless.

Decisions and deployment by end of 2024.

Unserved

Est. 6.3% of locations. May have connection, but slow and unreliable. To address through community-driven, regional scale Public Private Partnerships.

Deployments underway currently via ARPA funding.
The % may be increasing

Inadequately Served

Est. 55.4% of locations. May have connection but affordability and speed issues remain. BEAD funding limited. Will need to leverage private funds.

1 — 5.6%

2 — **Unserved** Unreliable & Slow Service — 6.3%

3 — **Underserved** Average Service — **55.4%**

Served Broadband Service — **32.7%**

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Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act Funding Initiatives

BEAD Program

- The Broadband, Equity, Access and Deployment (BEAD) program provides $42 billion to expand high-speed internet access by funding planning and infrastructure development

- Maine received **$5 million** in BEAD Initial Planning Funds in November 2022.

- Maine's BEAD Allocation is **$272 million**.

The Digital Equity Challenge

Once everyone in Maine has access to high-speed, reliable internet have we closed the digital divide?

The Digital Divide

- Lack of connectivity

- Unable to afford connectivity

- Don't have a device

- Don't have the right device

- Don't know how to use your device

- Don't know how to fix your device

- Don't know how to stay safe online

- Don't know how to access important services

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The Problem, the Work, and the Goal

Digital Divide

The gap between those who have affordable access, skills and support and those who don't.

Digital Inclusion

Activities to ensure that all individuals and communities, including the most disadvantaged, have access to and use of information and communication technologies.

Digital Equity

All individuals and communities have the information technology capacity needed for full participation in our society, democracy, and economy.

Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act Funding Initiatives

Digital Equity Act:

- The Digital Equity Act provides grants that aim to ensure that all people and communities have the skills, technology, and capacity needed to reap the full benefits of our digital economy

- Maine also received **$542,000** in Digital Equity Planning Funds in November 2022.

- Digital equity implementation funding will be a portion of the total $1.44B allocation (formula TBD).

Digital Equity Act: Who & What

WHO *Covered Populations*

- Low Income Households
- Older Adults
- Incarcerated, formerly incarcerated
- Veterans
- Individuals with disabilities
- Individuals with language barriers
- Individuals who are members of racial & ethnic minority groups
- People who primarily reside in rural areas

WHAT *Elements of Digital Equity*

- Affordable Access
- Digital Skills
- Affordable Devices & Technical Support
- Accessible, Inclusive Public Resources & Services
- Internet Safety

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Digital Equity Planning

- A statewide Maine Broadband Survey in **13 languages with 3,288 survey responses**

- **16 community meetings** convened with our Regional and Tribal Broadband Partners and the Maine Broadband Coalition

- **13 facilitated focus groups** with important audiences completed

- Convened a **Digital Equity Task Force** composed of organizations serving important audiences

- **Regional and Tribal Digital Equity Visions & Plans**

- Print **advertising** in multiple outlets, focusing on publications that serve **non-English speaking audiences**

- Radio advertising, social media, earned media, and speaking engagements

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Regional & Tribal Broadband Partners

- MCA has 13 Regional & Tribal Broadband Partners that help **deploy, sustain and maximize the benefits of broadband infrastructure investment** in all state regions.

- Each partner **leads digital inclusion efforts** in their region and tribe, while also providing support for community and regional-scale broadband infrastructure solutions and investments.

- The partners are receiving funding and support from MCA in partnership with the **Maine Broadband Coalition** and **National Digital Equity Center**.

- Partners include non-profit organizations, Indian Tribal governments, planning commissions, economic development agencies and councils of government.
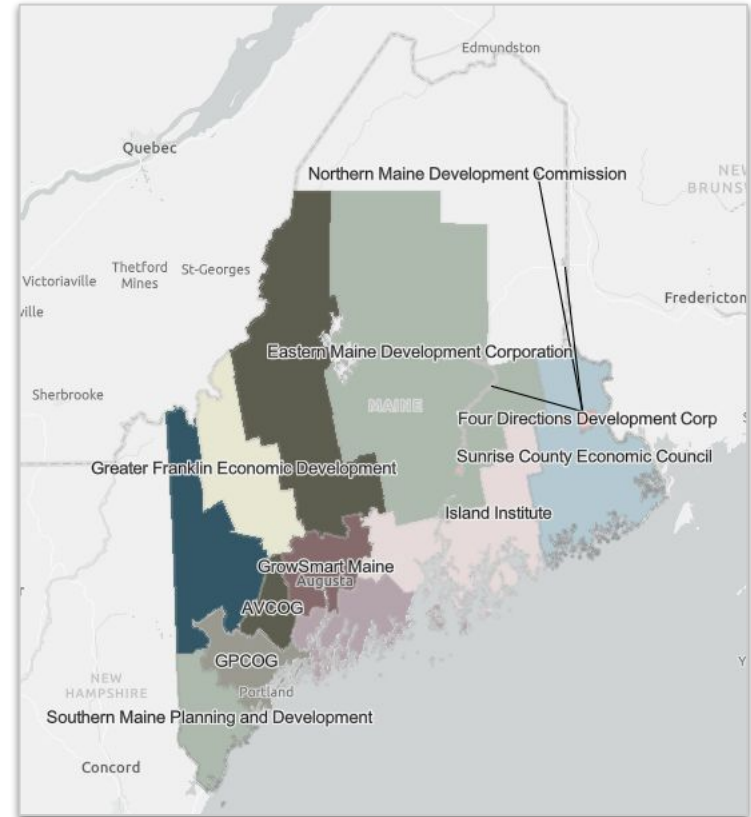
Regional & Tribal Organizing

13 Regional and Tribal Plans

- Vision for digital equity
- Barriers & assets
- Recommendations
- Areas to explore

180 Partners

- Regional and tribal coalitions formed for the first time

651 Interviews with Individuals & Organizations

- Lived experience
- Organizations closest to the challenges and opportunities

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Maine's plan is first to be approved!

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Key Learnings

- **Internet availability and affordability** are primary barriers to digital equity in Maine, especially for the state's most vulnerable residents.

- Maine residents need access to **affordable devices and reliable technical support** to achieve digital equity, as well as sufficient digital skills to troubleshoot when something goes wrong.

- A shortfall of critical **digital skills support is a major barrier;** without these skills, residents are less able to leverage the internet to advance education and work goals.

- **Internet safety is an urgent concern**, particularly for the state's most vulnerable residents – and few know how to protect themselves online.

- **Language barriers, difficulty with navigation, and difficulty finding information online** cause Maine residents to seek services via in-person and phone encounters.

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Older Adults

- **Using the internet more regularly for health care and government services** than other respondents. Less for work and education.

- Older residents are less comfortable using the internet to do **job searching, using social media, using video applications like Zoom.**

- In general we heard older adults especially express **lack of comfort and confidence attending digital skill classes** because they didn't start where they were comfortable or were not targeted specifically for their needs.

- **Internet safety is a bigger concern** for older adults than other respondents.

- **Older adults are more likely to be stuck in higher cost bundles** and report difficulty navigating their relationship with the provider, understanding their options, and getting what they want without overspending.

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Digital Equity Strategies

01	**Foundation**	Invest in the core capacity, tools, and resources to help advance digital equity across our state
02	**Partnerships**	Leverage partners and networks that are significant assets to enable digital inclusion programs and activities
03	**Affordability**	Focus attention on strategies that can improve the affordability of internet service, especially for covered populations
04	**Education**	Coordinate education and engagement campaigns, providing a structure and tools for various partners to participate
05	**Sustain & Grow**	Identify and secure ongoing diverse sources of investment to stretch funding and enable impact

Alignment with Healthy Aging Goals

Healthy Aging Goals

- Help older adults age in place
- Combat social isolation
- Allow greater access to healthcare and online resources

Alignment in Digital Equity Plan

- Increasing broadband access
- Improving affordability
- Access to affordable devices
- Improving digital skills
- Helping people stay safe online

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Digital Equity Goals

- **Reach 50,000 underserved Mainers** with affordable devices, digital skills, internet safety education and tools

- 100% of devices provided **come with technical support**

- Enroll an additional **84,000 eligible households** in the Affordable Connectivity Program

- Explore & expand connectivity (wifi & wired) of **41,000 subsidized affordable housing units**

- Generate **25,000 donated devices** for refurbishment

- User-centered audit on **top ten state resources/programs** used by covered populations

- Raise **$15M Digital Equity Fund** (to complement federal funding)

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Implementation Under Way

- Regional and Tribal Broadband Partners

- Affordable Connectivity Program

- Connectivity Hubs

- Digital Equity Workshop (May 22)

- Digital Equity Tech Help Tool

- Start Summit: Digital Equity for Older Adults (October 4 & 5)

- Digital Navigator Capacity Building

- Refurbished Devices Capacity Building

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Thank you!

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Appendix

Digital Equity Timeline

- September 2023: MCA submits Digital Equity Plan
- December 2023: Early Implementation Begins with Existing Partners and Funding Sources
- **February 2024: Maine is First State in the Nation to Have it's Digital Equity Plan Approved**
- March 2024: Notice of Funding Opportuning (NOFO) Expected State Capacity Funds
- Spring 2024: State Applies for Capacity Funds
- 2025: State Implementation Programs Launch

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What is the Scale of the Problem?

Maine State Definition	Working / Colloquial Definition	BEAD Definition	Number of Locations	% of Locations
No Connection *< 25/3 Mbps*	**No Service**	**BEAD Priority** *Eligible*	**42,264**	**6.6%**
Unserved *25/3 to 100/20 Mbps*	**Unreliable & Slow Service**	**BEAD Secondary** *Ineligible, until all eligible are served*	**50,289**	**7.8%**
Underserved *100/20 to 100/100 Mbps*	**Average Service**	**Ineligible**	**393,210**	**60.5%**
Served *>100/100 Mbps*	**Reliable & Fast Service**		**155,247**	**25.1%**

Where Is the Problem?

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Chaleur Bay

NEW BRUNSWICK

Quebec

Trois-Rivieres

Fredericton

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Sherbrooke

Bay of Fundy

Augusta

Montpelier

VERMONT

NEW HAMPSHIRE

Concord

Boston

Springfield

Lowell

All Connections   Priority Connections   Selected features:0

Esri Canada, Esri, HERE, Garmin, FAO, NOAA, USGS, EPA, NPS, NRCan, Parks Canada   Powered by Esri
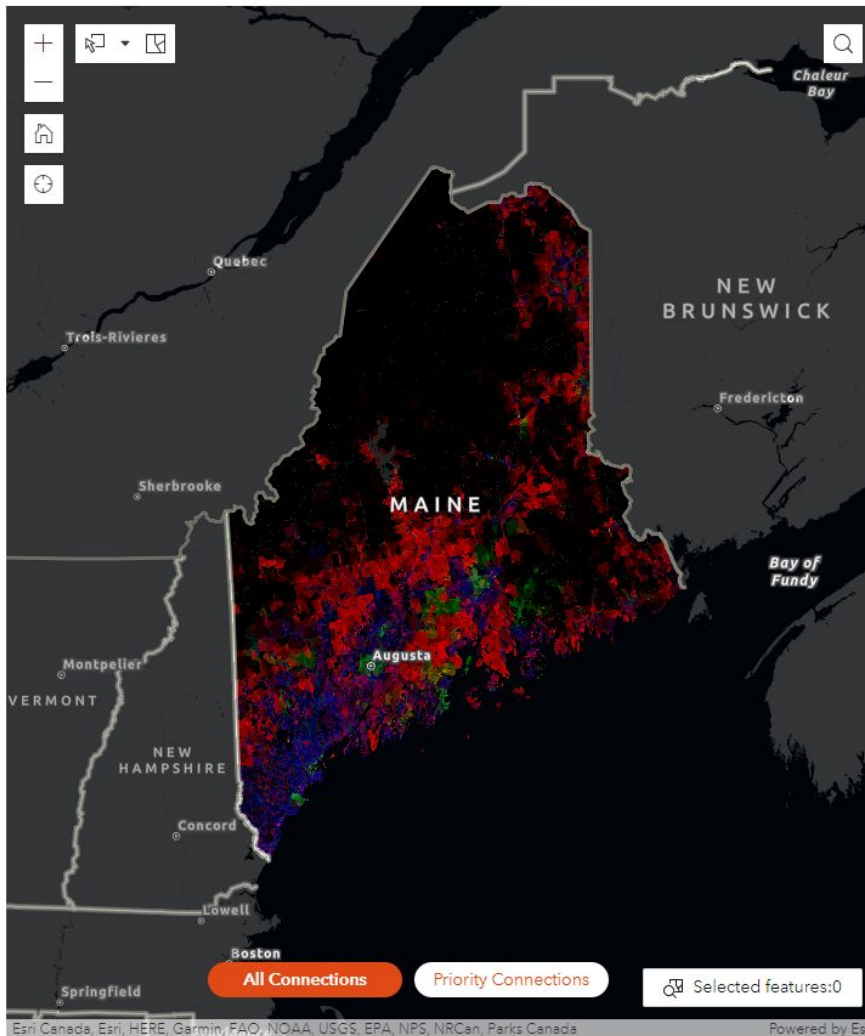
This map shows the concentrations of locations by service availability

Red areas have more unserved locations (speeds below 100/20)

Purple/pink areas have a high concentration of unserved AND underserved locations

Yellow/orange areas have a high concentration of unserved AND served locations

Blue areas have more underserved locations (speeds above 100/20 but below 100/100)

Green areas have more served locations (speeds above 100/100)

Cyan areas have a high concentration of served AND underserved locations

*Color intensity represents the concentration of the service types. Areas in gray and **black** have fewer locations.*

Connectivity Comparison

Current View: 5 | 13 | 72 | 10

Statewide: 5 | 13 | 72 | 10

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100
Percent

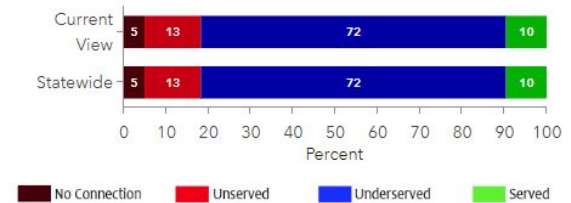■ No Connection   ■ Unserved   ■ Underserved   ■ Served

Chart compares connectivity rates of the current map view to statewide connectivity rates.

Affordability - ACP4ME Campaign

- In Maine, **238,710 households are eligible** for the ACP. As of February 2024 - approximately 98,000 households signed up

- The **ACP4ME campaign** is MCA's statewide initiative to increase awareness of and enrollment in the ACP.

- While the program appears to be concluding there is clear evidence of the need to reduce costs.

Maine ACP Adoption
238,710 eligible households

ENROLLMENT | NATIONAL | ENROLLMENT OVER TIME

65,379 enrolled
173,331 not enrolled

27% | 29%
Maine | National

65k, 62k, 59k, 56k, 52k, 48k, 44k, 39k, 36k, 35k, 32k, 29k
Jan Feb Mar Apr May Jun Jul Aug Sep Oct Nov Dec

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