

Enhancing Digital Literacy for Older Adults

Playbook





Table of Contents

Executive Summary	03
Digital Inclusion and Working Towards Digital Equity	04
The Newest Effort: Enhancing Digital Literacy for Older Adults (EDLOA)	05
EDLOA Lessons Learned	09
Programming Locations	15
Staffing	17
Findings	21
A Guidebook	28
In Summary	35
Appendix A	36
Appendix B	40



Executive Summary

The *Enhancing Digital Literacy for Older Adults (EDLOA) Playbook* captures the lessons, practices, and resources that emerged from a two-year initiative aimed at bridging the digital divide for older adults in Massachusetts. Funded through the American Rescue Plan Act and administered by the Executive Office of Aging & Independence, the program supported 24 Councils on Aging and partner organizations across rural towns, Gateway Cities, and diverse communities.

This playbook is both a reflection of that work and a practical guide for others. It highlights:

- **Context and Rationale:** Why digital equity matters for older adults and how the EDLOA initiative was structured.
- **Lessons Learned:** Common themes identified across local programs, such as the role of partnerships, intergenerational collaboration, programming design, and accessibility.
- **Implementation Details:** How grantees approached staffing, program locations, and device procurement to meet older adults where they are.
- **Findings and Impact:** Stories and data that demonstrate how digital literacy fosters agency, social connection, and resilience among older adults.
- **A Guidebook for Replication:** Actionable recommendations, resources, and partner models to support communities looking to build or expand digital inclusion programs.

Readers can use this playbook in two ways: as a record of Massachusetts' EDLOA initiative and as a practical resource for shaping digital equity efforts in their own communities. The goal is not only to share what was accomplished, but also to inspire sustainable, flexible, and locally responsive approaches that ensure older adults remain connected and empowered in an increasingly digital world.

Digital Inclusion and Working Towards Digital Equity

Work aimed at bridging the digital divide is referred to as **digital inclusion**. The [National Digital Inclusion Alliance \(NDIA\)](https://www.digitalinclusion.org/definitions/) defines this as “the activities necessary to ensure that all individuals and communities, including the most disadvantaged, have access to” the digital age¹. Such efforts are crucial to elevating older adult voices in the digital world. Digital inclusion work aims to provide new learners with the time and supportive environment needed to ask questions, practice skills, and build the confidence needed to actively engage with the digital world in daily life. Digital inclusion work encompasses a range of key themes:



Digital skilling: Older generations in the United States have unique experiences and histories and cannot be categorized as one monolithic group. Their digital skills are also varied. Digital inclusion practitioners empower individuals by offering social and technological expertise in a calm and person-centered manner.



Digital usability: All undergo physical changes with age, which can necessitate the use of certain accessible and assistive measures to ensure wellbeing, which includes digital considerations. Digital inclusion practitioners empower individuals to be their best advocates and determine what accessibility measures would help them engage more meaningfully with the digital world.



Digital affordability: Technological products and services are often priced out of the budgets of those who have limited financial means, including certain older adults. Digital inclusion practitioners can produce and sell refurbished devices at more modest prices. They can also take action to make broadband or cellular connectivity costs more affordable to all.

1. <https://www.digitalinclusion.org/definitions/>

The Newest Effort: Enhancing Digital Literacy for Older Adults (EDLOA)



A recent initiative in the ongoing effort to elevate digital inclusion among older adults was the Enhancing Digital Literacy for Older Adults (EDLOA) grant, provided by funding from the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021. Administered by the Massachusetts [Executive Office of Aging & Independence](#) (AGE) from August 2023 to February 2025, the grant was supported with technical assistance from the [Massachusetts Healthy Aging Collaborative](#) (MHAC).

In total, \$1.8 million was administered to 24 grantees:

69

Municipalities were
covered by grant funding

5

Gateway Cities were
covered by grant funding

9

Small and rural
communities were
covered by grant funding

4

Grantees offered services
in a language other than
English

3,045

Older adults were served
by grant programming

1,311

Older adults received
devices through grant
programming

The grant provided valuable funds to participating Councils on Aging (COAs) located in Massachusetts in two main categories:

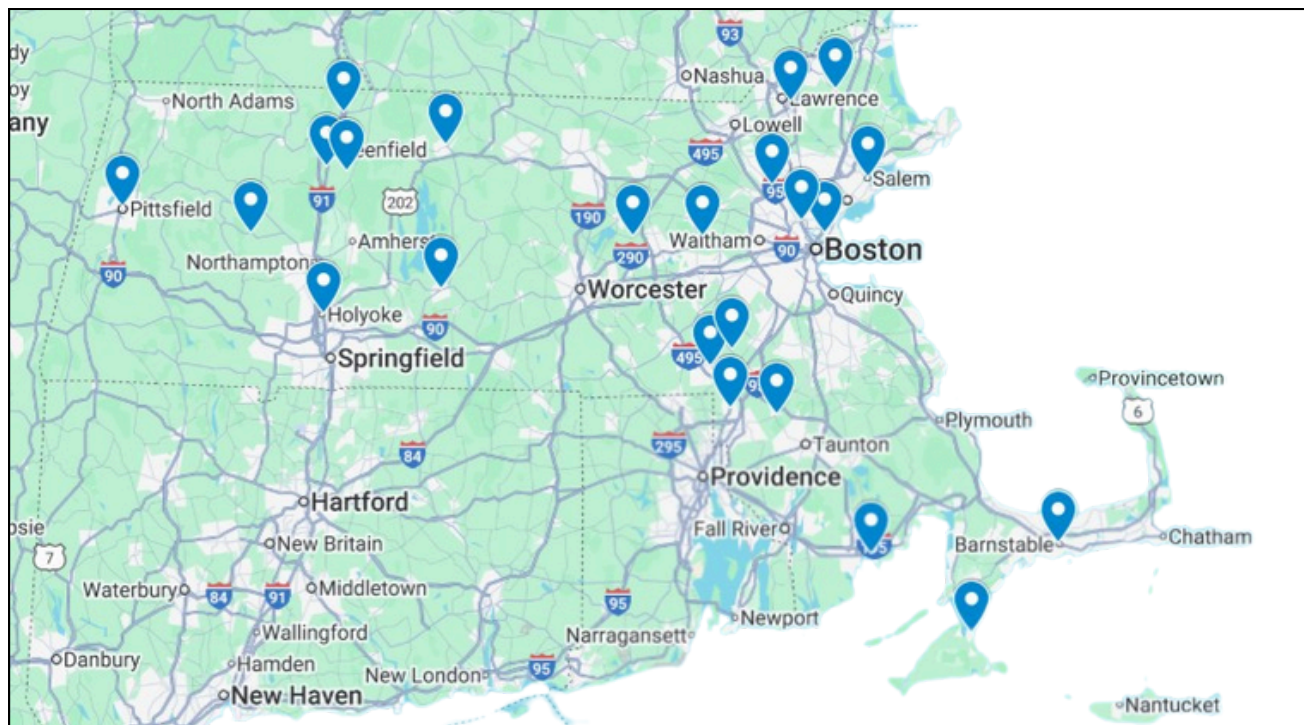
- 1 Technology training
- 2 Support and technology purchases

The EDLOA grant application process prioritized the following criteria:

- Programs located in Gateway Cities
- Programs located in rural communities
- Programs that included the provision of in-person digital literacy support

Applicants who demonstrated well-structured program planning and avenues for sustainability were viewed favorably. In total, 53 applications totaling \$3.3+ million in grant funds were considered, and 24 grants totaling \$1.8 million were awarded.

Map of grantees



Grantees demonstrated distinctive, locally responsive, and creative approaches to programming. They leveraged neighboring community resources and expertise to address the digital needs of older adults constituents, creating new and unexpected partnerships in the process. Grantees were also nimble to pivot as new discoveries were made. Overall, these varied approaches, mindsets, and histories allowed the EDLOA grant to take an innovative and broad look at digital literacy programming for older adults throughout Massachusetts, revealing exciting and insightful findings.

Percentage of adults aged 60+ who used Internet in past month broken down by community

67%	Athol	64%	Holyoke
82%	Barnstable	55%	Medford
77%	Berlin	67%	Montague
67%	Bernardston	76%	Norfolk
60%	Burlington	84%	North Andover
60%	Chelsea	78%	North Attleboro
70%	Chesterfield	78%	Norton
67%	Deerfield	60%	Pittsfield
59%	Fairhaven	63%	Salem
78%	Franklin	82%	Sudbury
84%	Georgetown	64%	Ware
67%	Greenfield		

Note: The above data was taken from the 2025 Massachusetts Healthy Aging Data Report. For noted information on other Massachusetts towns and cities, navigate [here](#).



Older adults in rural areas, who noted their struggle to find sufficient broadband connection for digital literacy programming, were able to find better connectivity through hotspots funded by the grant. When working alongside patient digital inclusion practitioners, the grant provided older adults in rural communities with a safe place to ask questions and have their curiosities intrigued, building confidence and agency.

Additionally, grant programming brought together community members and local partners to address the task at hand. The findings and practices outlined on the following pages are provided as a resource to all those interested in advancing digital equity and inspiring the inclusion of older adults, either as a focus of programs and policies or as part of a broader effort.

The themes that emerged during the EDLOA grant period will be examined in greater detail in the following section, illustrated by grantee learnings and case studies.



Images courtesy of the Medford Council on Aging





EDLOA Lessons Learned

Each grantee's approach to digital literacy programming was unique and varied based on local community needs and available resources. Despite their differences, grantees were able to pinpoint similar lessons learned and findings that can be assessed collectively. These findings illuminate the cultural and societal significance behind digital literacy work for older adults.

Approaches to Digital Literacy

1. Partnerships

Several grantees found it beneficial or even essential to collaborate with neighboring COAs to pool resources and enhance their reach. Similarly, many COA grantees identified external community partners that enabled them to more effectively address the digital needs of older adults. By partnering with professionals from different fields carrying different skillsets and viewpoints, COAs diversified and ultimately strengthened their approach to digital literacy. Noteworthy partnership examples include:

Libraries

Libraries are invaluable centers for community-based educational services, including digital literacy. Many of the grantees recognized the value that libraries provide in educating older adults on technology. In fact, 42% of grantee COAs partnered with their local library during the grant term. Like other community institutions, libraries enhance digital literacy programming by providing staffing, physical spaces, and devices for digital literacy training. This was crucial for grantees in smaller and rural communities that often lack a distinct physical space for the senior center/COA.

Berlin is a small town in Central Massachusetts with a population just over 3,000, a quarter of whom are over the age of 65. With no dedicated COA building, finding an accessible physical location to host digital literacy classes was identified as a challenge.

Partnering with the Berlin Public Library opened the doors to new ideas and possibilities, increasing the reach and impact of Berlin's grant project. Library staff played an active role in their drop-in tech support sessions where older adults could ask tech questions on a personalized one-on-one basis. Participants were also taught how to navigate library services online, thereby synchronizing digital literacy training and raising awareness of the library's digital services. Their partnership refined Berlin's approach to programming. The result of the Berlin grant program's person-centered approach is reflected in the personal story of a participant:

“

One of our learners was able to download the Uber app, schedule a ride, and use Google Maps to navigate to Boston to meet a family member for lunch in the city. Without having somebody help them understand the apps, they said they would not have been able to spend that time with their family.

This individual's ability to take advantage of ride-sharing services demonstrates the ability for digital literacy to enhance one's social wellbeing. Improving social wellbeing should be one of the ultimate goals of digital literacy training for older adults in Massachusetts.

Berlin's EDLOA grant at a glance

60%

of the older adults served
in the program were new
to tech

20%

of program enrollees
received devices

25

hotspots were distributed
through the program



Schools & Higher Education

Another effective and replicable model of digital literacy programming is when “digitally-native” youth provide training for older adults. Regardless of their level of technological expertise, younger individuals who wish to work with older adults must first be trained to engage with patience and support. Grantees pointed out that being technologically literate does not necessarily translate to being able to teach. With proper training, multigenerational collaboration can be a rewarding and fruitful method of digital literacy training.

Some grantees turned to local high schools and colleges for trainers. Greenfield, for example, engaged with Greenfield Community College through Cyber Seniors²; Montague had Franklin County Technical School students serve as tech volunteers; and Tufts University students provided multilingual support in Medford. Intergenerational approaches to digital literacy training for older adults makes use of different generations coming together to address a social problem. It also represents a small step towards dismantling ageist values by bringing down perceived age barriers and building intergenerational solidarity. When done well, this approach can foster empowering and affecting situations and relationships for younger and older adults alike.



Being technologically literate does not necessarily translate to being able to teach.

A collaborative and intergenerational approach involving high school students and older adult participants had profound effects on everyone involved in Montague’s digital literacy grant program. According to reports from April 2024 and January 2025 in the Montague Reporter^{3,4}, the high school students appreciated learning hands-on with older adults. The program allowed them to put into practice what they may be learning in school. Similarly, the older adult participants

2. <https://cyberseniors.org/>

3. <https://montaguereporter.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/April-11-2024.pdf>

4. <https://montaguereporter.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/january-9-2025.pdf>



appreciated having someone and somewhere reliable to go to have their technology questions answered. As noted in both the news reports and in program feedback, the older adult participants reported that they valued the high schoolers' warmth and patience.

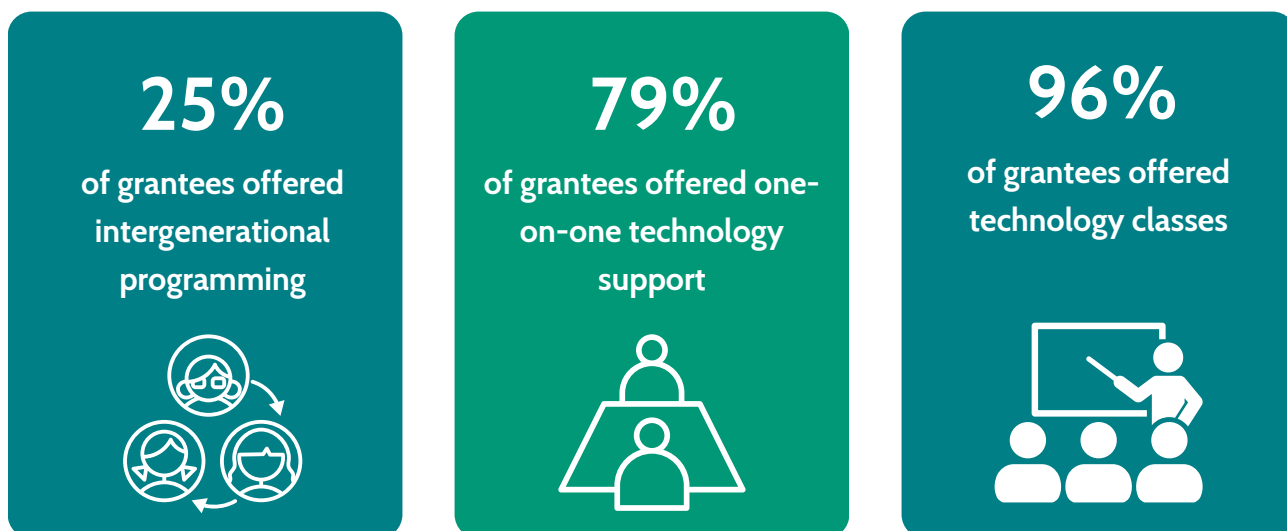
To celebrate one year of the program, an exciting "Stump the Student" tech event was held. Older adults posed tech questions and the Franklin County Technical School students were awarded points based on their answers. It was a memorable event that celebrated all the work put in to make the grant a success.

The technical school students' instructors noted how these intergenerational experiences will stick in the minds of their students and help them become empathetic professionals in technological support and development. In learning to understand each other's needs, both age groups slowly broke down age stereotypes. These facets of multigenerational collaboration greatly enhance digital literacy training by not only educating older adults on technology, but also teaching future tech professionals to be conscious of the needs of different generations.

2. Programming Topics

Like partnerships, programming topics were identified based on older adults' questions and digital literacy goals. Grantees worked with community partners to determine what tech topics they could offer for the grant. Most EDLOA grantees (75%) reported incorporating some form of elementary training in their digital literacy programming, such as basics of computers, basics of iPads, and basic emailing. This reflects the importance of level-setting with participants at the beginning of each program. More advanced topics included online safety and privacy (58%), social media & connection with friends and family (58%), telehealth (54%), and e-commerce (25%). Some grantees even taught classes on emerging technologies like artificial intelligence (AI) (17%). Advanced discussions of the digital world in digital literacy programming demonstrate the ever-changing tech concerns, needs, and priorities of older adults.





The format of grantees' digital literacy programming catered to the needs of older adults in each grantee's community. Some strictly provided programming through structured instructor-led classes. Barnstable, for example, provided programming through AARP's Older Adults Technology Services (OATS) provided by Senior Planet⁵.

Others offered personalized one-on-one support. Oak Bluffs conducted home visits and drop-in tech sessions at each of Martha's Vineyard's four island COAs through their "Call the Tech Pro" program.

Many grantees balanced both options. Franklin, while still offering classes, also provided one-on-one support options when staff was limited.

When reflecting on these experiences, some older adults preferred the structure and timeliness of organized classes. Others learned better working personally with a trainer in a safe and controlled environment. Every person has different preferences, and digital literacy services must cater to their needs. Grantees understood this and planned accordingly.

It is important to leverage community resources to provide programming services that accommodate the variety of choices, asks, and preferences of older adults.

5. <https://seniorplanet.org/>



Through continuous feedback and program refinement, this ensures that a safe and nurturing environment can flourish in digital literacy programming whereby older adults feel empowered to learn and have their questions answered. A digital literacy instructor in Franklin noted:

“

[The participants] joke that their children and grandchildren will finally get a break from their questions because they now know more than they ever have.



Image courtesy of the Franklin Council on Aging

Different programming choices also allowed for greater variability and flexibility. According to grantee reports, when requesting feedback, older adults valued having the choice of different approaches like one-on-one support and structured classes. This gave them agency because they were empowered to engage according to their own terms and preferences.

Given that older adults' needs are often not considered in the development of new technological systems, products, and services, granting them agency in the digital literacy space is even more important.



Programming Locations

Grantees sought out locations that were safe learning spaces where participants would feel comfortable engaging and being heard. Spaces had to be physically accessible to everyone involved, including both participants and staff. Though 79% of grantees were able to offer digital literacy programming in-house at their COAs, some noted difficulty finding a dedicated space at the COA for services. It is important that digital literacy programming takes place in a quiet and relaxed atmosphere, away from louder meal and event spaces. With smaller COAs where there was no physical space available, local partnerships were necessary to leverage new locations for digital literacy programming.

Through community partnerships, many grantees were able to leverage new locations for digital literacy programming. For example, Chesterfield partnered with a local elementary school to host their TechConnect Fair, bringing together different community members and institutions at a new common space. In addition to grantees like Berlin who held trainings at libraries, 17% of grantees provided services at affordable senior housing complexes, 25% performed home visits to provide in-person training, and 13% provided support over the phone. Other locations that



Different locations utilized by grantees for digital literacy programming

grantees utilized include, but were not limited to, community centers (e.g., Barnstable), city/town administrative spaces (e.g., Berlin), local YMCAs (e.g., Bernardston), community colleges (e.g., Ware), general stores (e.g., Chesterfield), and coffee shops (e.g., Chesterfield). Grantees made great efforts to accommodate the needs and preferences of participants with regard to programming locations and methodology. It was this level of creativity and dedication that participants valued and allowed such innovative ideas to flourish.

Providing a variety of digital literacy program location options is respectful of participants' individual needs and comforts and allows for greater participation. For example, an individual with questions about technology who is unable to access their local senior center may find the local library to be more convenient, familiar, or welcoming. Similarly, opportunities for in-home digital literacy services are critical if an individual does not have the means to travel, often due to health reasons or caregiving responsibilities. However, grantees found that traveling to a person's home was not always logistically feasible. Additionally, rural grantees noted the difficulty in organizing programming at multiple locations due to complicated planning logistics.

Therefore, while leveraging community resources is crucial to the success of a digital literacy program, it is also fundamental to examine the ideal locations that could prevent progress in digital literacy work for older adults. Consider how the infrastructure itself plays a role in logistics and how it could be improved to provide better digital literacy services to the community.



Image courtesy of the Northern Hilltowns Consortium of Councils on Aging



Staffing

The roles that staff played in the grants were based not only on the needs of older adults, but also on the preexisting capacities of COAs and their partner organizations.

25%

of grantees hired staff explicitly to help with program marketing and program coordination



50%

of grantees brought on private instructors



54%

of grantees worked with volunteers



Grantees noted that paid digital literacy instructors provided dedicated and reliable services, but they came with a fixed cost and schedule. On the other hand, while volunteers can be more cost-effective and flexible with their time, their availability may fluctuate according to their different commitments and conflict with senior center operating hours. For example, many grantees observed that when high school student volunteers are available after classes in the afternoon, senior center programming is winding down. The two groups often do not have availability that coincides, restricting their ability to connect.

38% of grantees worked with municipal IT departments or local companies for device procurement. Grantees found it helpful to have additional technological expertise provided by the IT professionals when deciding on technology purchases. This was especially important when considering different municipal regulations and processes, as older adult preferences should guide what purchases are made.

Other community institutions that may not traditionally partner with senior centers also played important roles in grantee's digital literacy programming. The Franklin Police Department and Norfolk District Attorney's Office provided programming to help educate participants on the latest scams. Additionally, for the first half of Ware's grant, the Ware COA partnered with a local bank to have an IT professional volunteer teach digital literacy classes.

In digital literacy programming for older adults, all community resources should be considered when addressing the digital needs of older adults. As illustrated previously, this can apply to grant administration and grant programming logistics alike. It is clear that when the right people and community groups are involved, programming can have a profound positive effect on participants. Georgetown shared:



Image courtesy of Sudbury Council on Aging

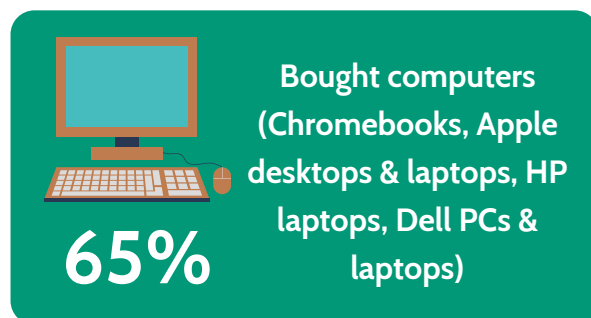
“

One participant has recently lost her husband and he was the only one who used the computer. All their information is now digital and she wasn't able to access it. The assistance from [the volunteer] was instrumental in helping her find important information.



Devices

Grantees also used funds to purchase devices for digital literacy programming. Almost all (96%) of grantees used funding to purchase devices and relevant technology. Of them:



Other devices purchased included hotspots, virtual reality (VR) headsets, televisions, and digital magnifiers. Some grantees bought auxiliary tech to facilitate digital literacy programming. These items included HDMI cables, device stands, mice, keyboards, projectors, and software licenses.



Image courtesy of Medford Council on Aging



Image courtesy of Chelsea Council on Aging

Devices purchased through the grant were used in a variety of ways. Some grantees specifically used them to complement digital literacy programming. For example, Bernardston collected data from Claris Companion tablets not only to assess device utilization, but also to learn how older adult users prefer to utilize the tablets. Others established a “lending library” in which older adult participants could temporarily borrow the devices for personal use. Grantees such as Ware used the



new devices to refresh the COA's own technological infrastructure, providing better and more accurate digital literacy programming. As for the auxiliary technology, grantees used it to streamline and improve programming.

Grantees understood the importance of purchasing devices as a tool to enhance digital literacy programming. Older adult participants benefited from having more tech options to choose from, while grantees benefited from having the opportunity to update their own digital equipment in order to provide better services. They also understood the nuance of different devices being accessible for different people when considering their purchases.

Overall, the EDLOA grant provided valuable funding for grantees to obtain state-of-the-art devices to enhance their digital literacy programming infrastructure to benefit older adult users for years to come.



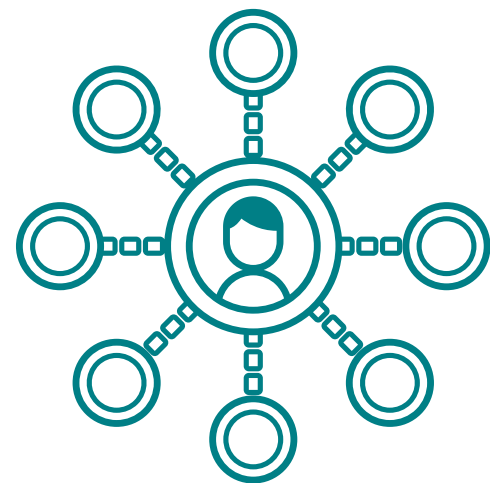
Findings

Grantees employed a wide variety of approaches to digital literacy programming. They also learned valuable lessons that help advance the state's understanding and delivery of digital literacy support for older adults.

Building Agency and Curiosity

This grant demonstrated that digital literacy programming often inspires agency and curiosity in older adult participants. Regardless of their specific approach to programming, grantees found that person-centered training created environments where older adults felt safe to ask questions and learn according to their own preferences. These kinds of environments empowered participants to gain agency by giving them the tools to continue asking and learning.

When reflecting upon their digital literacy programming, grantees understood the value of putting older adults at the center of tech support. When a participant came to ask a tech question, they knew that something was not right because their technology wasn't functioning as usual. They may have felt that they were at fault and came to digital literacy programming with the mindset that they are the one in the wrong. As was the case for many grantees' programming, a volunteer who was hosting a drop-in tech session warmly welcomed the participant. Using their technological expertise and warm disposition, the volunteer worked together with the participant to understand the problem.



The problem was slowly demystified to the participant, and the next steps towards a solution became clear. The question itself may not always be solved on the first visit, but the participant rests assured that they can attend another session to continue working on the problem. Norton illustrates this process effectively:

“

Jane [age 78] found herself grappling with the challenges of arthritis, making it increasingly difficult to type text messages on her phone. She was extremely frustrated by her inability to communicate easily with her daughter, who works full-time and lives several hours away. Through an iPhone class at the senior center, she learned about the voice-to-text feature. Soon, Jane found herself comfortably dictating messages, practicing daily by sharing updates with her daughter. Through perseverance and technological adaptation, Jane not only overcame the barriers imposed by arthritis, but also deepened her connection with her daughter.

Ideally, participants and staff work together to solve tech problems. It would be much less effective to have a staff member working on the problem alone; collaboration is key. As illustrated in the previous example, working collectively brings participants like Jane up to the same level as the staff. With gentle questioning and assurance, staff can help participants refine what it is they are seeking.

Putting participants on a level playing field puts the power into their hands when trying to solve problems. This boosts the confidence of both participants and staff alike. Such an inviting atmosphere may also prompt deeper and more relevant tech questions from participants, leading to even greater opportunities for learning and support.

Some older adults who felt gratitude for the grant programming chose to recommend it to friends, thus enhancing the network of participants. These



findings were illustrated and appreciated in multiple grantee stories. Through continuous effort and trust-building, this approach to programming allows older adults to build agency and curiosity while working on their digital skills.

A participant of Montague's grant program shared:



Images courtesy of Montague Council on Aging

“

Among our vulnerable population, we seniors are at risk in terms of our health, financial security, and falling victim...to online scammers. Avoiding technology is no longer tenable as a response as our culture expects us to navigate and communicate online. How can we detect the difference between an authentic email from Medicare and a phony one? How can we keep our computers free of phishing expeditions, spam and computer viruses? Who can we trust to help us navigate this brave new world which now includes Artificial Intelligence (AI)? And with limited incomes, how can we afford to acquire honest consultations from experts in these areas of concern? The good news is, thanks to a partnership with Franklin County Technical School and the Gill-Montague Council on Aging (Senior Center), we senior citizens can gain some 'agency' in digital literacy.



Improving Social Connection

In addition to greater confidence and curiosity, participants also used the welcoming space of digital literacy programming to help others. A Fairhaven staff member shared:

“

A participant waiting for their turn at the Drop-In Tech Café stepped in and successfully helped a fellow participant resolve their tech issue, demonstrating how the program is fostering both skill-building and peer-to-peer support.

By bringing the community together, digital literacy programming goes beyond the instructor-student dynamic. By making the effort visible to the community, it signals that everyone has a role in expanding digital literacy.

In North Andover, participants were interviewed to gather more intricate qualitative data and anecdotes:

“

One client said the Chromebook allows her to stay connected with her job that she retired from....turns out she was a researcher and she can now continue to follow the research she had started and other research her company is doing now. To us that's huge, it signifies a deeper connection in her life and connection to her community.

Stories like North Andover's signal that digital literacy programming can spark new ideas to help older adults to accomplish their goals.



Greenfield Senior Center built a partnership with the Greenfield Community College Cyber Seniors Program for the grant. This partnership created an environment in which student mentors and older adult participants bonded beyond the scope of digital literacy training. The work culminated in a Multigenerational Film Festival that highlighted the accomplishments of the grant. Student mentors and older adult participants worked together to create short films that documented the flourishing intergenerational friendships that grew out of the program.

Digital literacy as a topic was also featured in one film that tells the story of a young student and an older adult participant who realized through tech training that they shared a common love for cooking. Grateful for the help the student provided, the older adult taught them how to cook a cherished family dish. In their film, as they sat next to each other on armchairs, they stated that they would not have learned so much from each other had they not participated in the program.



Image courtesy of North Attleboro Council on Aging

Though Greenfield's programming featured younger and older adults working together, the intergenerational model is open to all ages as a fruitful model of community connection. When people of all ages come together to have a candid conversation, everyone is brought to the same level. Collaboration between people of different ages can have a profound effect on everyone involved. It strengthens community ties and builds social connection.



Rural Connectivity Divide

When it comes to broadband connectivity, many rural regions of Massachusetts lag behind suburban and urban areas. Many rural grantees highlighted the struggle to provide a better digital ecosystem for older adults due to differing and often conflicting broadband infrastructures. Chesterfield reflected:

“

The primary challenge we encountered is internet access. This challenge resulted from several realities we encountered. These conditions include the loss of [the Affordable Connectivity Program], inability to identify households lacking access to high-speed internet due to unavailable infrastructure, inability to facilitate access due to low-income households without resources to subscribe to affordable internet service (four of our towns offer only one level of service at a cost of \$85) and Comcast subscribers without a reasonable option of lowering their internet service to more affordable Internet Essentials/plus packages (available only if they give up current service for three months).



Image courtesy of Chesterfield Council on Aging

Additionally, the presence of locally-based Internet Service Providers (ISPs) such as Whip City Fiber by Westfield Gas & Electric provided greater variation in consumer options for broadband services as well as the ability for ISPs to provide resources and support for digital literacy programming and digital equity work for older adults.

To mitigate rural connectivity issues impacting older adults, four of the nine rural EDLOA grantees purchased and provided hotspots to participants after ACP ended during the grant period. Hotspots acted as an agent of broadband services. Berlin shared:

“

We had 3 participants that did not have internet/Wi-Fi in their home. They may be interested in getting internet services in their home for personal use and expressed interest in checking out the mobile hotspot as a trial.

EDLOA grantees employed a variety of innovative ideas, services, and programs based on each community's unique needs and available resources. They established fruitful partnerships with community organizations, learned from older adult participants, and pivoted programming scope and content when necessary.

It is clear how life-changing this digital literacy programming was for both grantees and older adult participants. The warm anecdotes and stories of the grant work highlight the impact of the grantees' work and the foundation each grant project set for digital inclusion work for older adults.



Image courtesy of Chesterfield Council on Aging





A Guidebook

The intention of the EDLOA grant and this playbook were to inspire individuals and communities to think about and address digital inequities impacting older adults. Below is a summary of the insights and lessons learned by the EDLOA grantees. This is presented in an effort to support others who are looking to create or enhance digital inclusion work for older adults in their community.

1. Understand the local digital equity landscape

The beauty of digital inclusion work is that it does not fall into one distinct field or discipline. Living in a digital world means that every aspect of daily life is affected by it to some degree. Digital inequities that arise should be tackled according to the situation and local context.

Older Adults

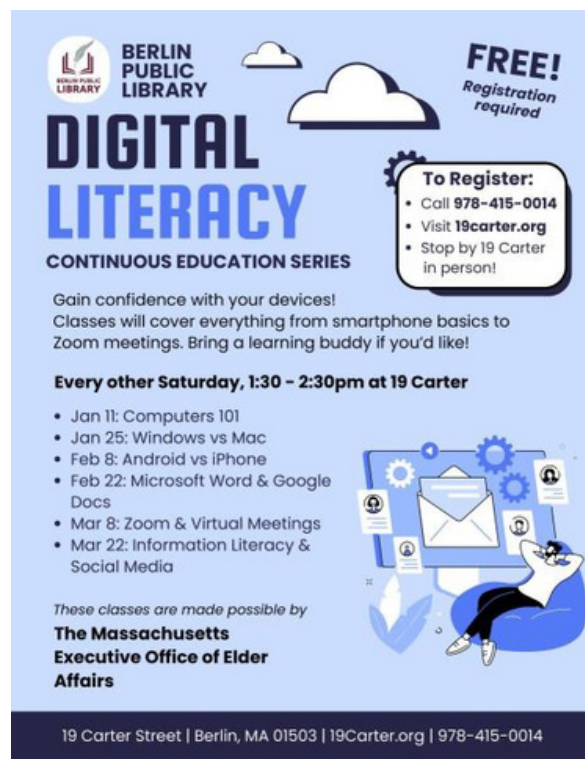
It is equally important to understand older adults' struggles and questions related to the digital world. EDLOA grantees took stock of their patrons' digital literacy skills by conducting pre-course surveys. Feedback was continuously received and used to tweak programming. Grantees found it helpful to conduct listening sessions to gather unfiltered and honest feelings about their digital literacy offerings, feedback that was useful when planning future programming.

There is an important need to teach new older adult learners about the digital world in an educational and meaningful way. This will help new learners become more comfortable navigating the digital world and thus have access to important services in their communities. This empowers new learners to become part of broader digital equity efforts for older adults.

Communities looking to engage with older adults can start through conversations with a local COA. Other forms of obtaining feedback from older adults such as surveys or informal discussions could generate better ideas as to what the pertinent digital needs are and in what places they would feel comfortable engaging.

Organizations

Nearby organizations may already be mobilized to address the issue. For instance, Mystic Valley Elder Services has incorporated tech support into older adults' home visits. Benefits specialists that visit older adults' homes may have to set aside a few minutes of a consultation to address a tech question raised by a consumer. It is highly likely that community members and local organizations have encountered the issue of digital inequity in their own disciplines independently. Initiatives like Massachusetts Broadband Institute's (MBI) Digital Equity Partnerships Program further enhance community mobilization for digital equity efforts through strategic leadership organization. For this, a listening tour of neighboring organizations can be useful to collect those independent findings for greater use and understanding.



Sample flyer courtesy of Berlin Council on Aging

Data Sources & Strategic Planning

It would also be beneficial for digital literacy program planning to pull from various data sources that shed greater light on the digital needs of older adults and showcase preexisting initiatives or infrastructure. Examples include:

- American Community Survey
- Massachusetts State Digital Equity Plan



2. Identify potential partnerships and collaborations

General knowledge building – “what do I need to know?”

EDLOA grantees who were engaging in digital equity work for the first time, as well as those who were expanding their reach, were conscientious not to reinvent the wheel, but rather lean on the lessons of others who had already started this work. The following organizations offer a wealth of knowledge for those looking to start or expand their work in this space:

- The [Alliance for Digital Equity](#) works collectively with 100+ community-based organizations to deploy digital equity programs including digital skills training, device distribution, and affordable Internet solutions in order to assure equitable Internet access to all. The Alliance serves western Massachusetts and includes the working group “Older Adults and Digital Equity”.
- [AARP’s Older Adults Technology Services \(OATS\) through Senior Planet](#) aims to empower older adults with the tools and training necessary to take advantage of today’s technology and use it to enrich their lives. OATS through Senior Planet is a go-to resource for older adult digital inclusion work. They provide a library of resources and offer structured digital literacy training through their own curriculum.
- [Cyber Seniors](#) is a non-profit organization [that] provides older adults with tech-training using an intergenerational, volunteer model. Young people are provided with lessons and learning activities to train them to act as digital mentors and older adults gain access to effective technology training and intergenerational communities that keep them socially connected and engaged. They foster the belief that digital literacy support can be greatly enhanced when all ages collaborate to address the task at hand.
- [Essex County Community Foundation](#) inspires philanthropy that strengthens the communities of Essex County by managing charitable assets, strengthening and supporting nonprofits, and engaging in strategic community leadership initiatives. They use their supportive financial management work in digital equity by focusing on efforts that empower all residents with the access, education and equipment necessary to successfully navigate our increasingly digital world.



- [Massachusetts Broadband Institute \(MBI\)](#) works closely with the Administration, the state legislature, municipalities, broadband service providers, and other key stakeholders to bridge the digital divide in Massachusetts. MBI was created as a division of the MassTech Collaborative when the Broadband Act was signed into law by then-Governor Deval Patrick in August 2008. MBI can help answer questions on broadband affordability and connectivity.
- [Massachusetts Healthy Aging Collaborative \(MHAC\)](#) is a network of leaders in the community, health and wellness, government, advocacy, research, business, education, and philanthropy who have come together to advance healthy aging. In addition to having provided technical assistance to EDLOA grantees, MHAC also co-hosts the Technology Learning Collaborative for Healthy Aging quarterly meeting series with AGE.
- [Massachusetts Law Reform Institute](#) provides statewide advocacy and leadership in advancing laws, policies, and practices that secure economic, racial, and social justice for low-income people and communities. They host Massachusetts' statewide digital equity coalition.
- [National Digital Inclusion Alliance \(NDIA\)](#) is a national nonprofit that combines grassroots community engagement with technical knowledge, research, and coalition building to advocate on behalf of people working in their communities for digital equity. Older adult digital inclusion practitioners show up to NDIA meetings and are active contributors to the pool of knowledge. Getting involved with NDIA will provide access to a baseline network of digital inclusion work and connections with like-minded individuals.
- [Tech Goes Home](#), working in partnership with schools, healthcare providers, and community organizations, provides curated support - including access to digital devices, network connectivity, and robust training in how to utilize digital resources - to help individuals and families pursue economic mobility, support academic achievement, access critical resources, and engage with their community and loved ones.



Local partners – “with whom can I work?”

The same process can be applied to finding local partners. Use MBI’s Digital Equity Asset Inventory⁶ to see the organizations working on digital equity efforts and scout potential partners and their missions to determine project alignment. View MBI’s Municipal Digital Equity Planning Program⁷ to learn if a nearby municipality has either planned or implemented a local digital equity plan that could enhance program planning.

EDLOA grantees had great experiences partnering with the following:

- School districts, high schools, universities/colleges
- Public libraries
- Third-party tech instructors
- Local IT departments
- Local public safety
- Local businesses
- Housing departments
- Local government for civic engagement
- Other community-based organizations (e.g., YMCAs)
- Local tech-savvy heroes

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The Purchasing Agent...helped procure equipment via city contracts with state-approved vendors. The City IT Department advised us what to purchase; Chromebooks and iPads that they thought were reliable and senior friendly products.

--Salem Program Staff

Each option comes with its pros and cons, so think about how to leverage existing projects or ideas. Intergenerational cafés, library and community center programming, and sports virtual watch parties are all examples of programming that could integrate some form of digital inclusion for older adults.

6. <https://airtable.com/apppYdKn8YlQhyAVj/shrYfrxtlmegzUIhs/tblZJk7trvcQKW17l>

7. <https://broadband.masstech.org/municipal>



Program strategizing – “how do I go about this?”

Once general knowledge is gathered and local partners have been identified, use this playbook to guide program strategizing and implementation. Identify curricula or other teaching methods that work best for the target older adult population. Identify best ways of capturing participant feedback and improvement through pre- and post-program survey tools or interview methods. Identify the most relevant devices that the target older adult population would benefit most from using.

MBI's Digital Equity Resource List provides a comprehensive list of organizations involved in digital equity efforts in Massachusetts. Missions include, but are not limited to, digital literacy, device refurbishment/distribution, community outreach, and Wi-Fi & Internet modernization efforts.

3. Document your work, regardless of success or failure

Once the implementation of plans is underway, or following the completion of one programming cycle, the work should be shared. This may be accomplished through a formal venue such as a conference presentation or through a more informal medium like a blog post. Sharing opinions, challenges, or successes with fellow practitioners provides valuable opportunities for constructive feedback and supportive communities. Such insights can serve as important lessons learned and sources of inspiration for others facing similar circumstances.

4. Continue iterating

The process of identifying effective and ineffective approaches to digital literacy should continue, incorporating feedback from both older adult participants and instructors, while maintaining active involvement in this collective effort.

Flexibility is Key

As programming evolved, grantees found that maintaining flexibility and agility proved beneficial. The digital needs of older adults may change throughout the duration of programming. Emerging technologies like AI may become increasingly relevant to older adults, prompting more questions. A particular group of reserved



participants may find it challenging to learn in a structured class setting, prompting the accommodation of their needs through the introduction of personalized one-on-one support. In terms of outreach, it may become apparent that some individuals have technology-related questions but lack the means to attend in-person programming, necessitating more innovative approaches to service delivery. When considering the different seasons in Massachusetts, approaches effective during the summer may prove unsuitable in harsh winter conditions. Therefore, flexibility in programming is essential.

Oak Bluffs' EDLOA program demonstrated this flexibility well during the grant term:

“

After two months of program activities, it became clear that a more efficient means of gathering data was necessary. We then explored IT ticketing software and decided to use FreshDesk. This allowed us to centralize communications with referring COAs, Tech Pros, program participants, and program manager and also to efficiently compile program data regarding visits, assistance topics, and program participants.



In Summary

The digital landscape is evolving rapidly, presenting challenges for many individual digital literacy programming efforts. However, collaboration with neighboring institutions opens doors to new possibilities and opportunities. Through collective action, a more equitable digital world can be established for older adults in Massachusetts going forward.



Image courtesy of Chelsea Council on Aging

Of course, not all insights were able to be packaged and presented effectively in this playbook. We cannot do justice to the wonderful work grantees did. As such, we invite the reader to look further into anything of interest that has appeared in this playbook and make further connections and determinations from there.



Appendix A

Brief summary of each EDLOA grantee's program:

Grantee	Program Summary
Athol	Providing digital literacy support in the North Quabbin region, Athol partnered with their library to enhance the digital literacy skills of older adults. Hotspots proved to be crucial in helping rural older adults access the Internet.
Barnstable	Forming a partnership with Dennis, Barnstable used AARP's OATS through Senior Planet program to conduct digital literacy sessions. Older adults worked with a licensed instructor in structured classes to enhance their digital literacy skills.
Berlin	Berlin partnered with their local library for digital literacy programming. Older adults improved their digital literacy skills in structured classes and received hotspots for their broadband connectivity needs.
Bernardston	Bernardston obtained Claris Companion tablets, "grandparent-friendly" technology. Older adults were able to use devices that fit their needs, and the COA learned through device use how programming could be molded in-house.
Burlington	Burlington provided structured classes as well as one-on-one support. Digital literacy sessions ranged from beginners who were new to technology to advanced classes which provided instruction on telehealth and cybersecurity.

Chelsea	Chelsea was able to provide crucial culturally-sensitive digital literacy programming to multilingual older adults. They partnered with unique organizations such as Chelsea High School and Chelsea's Department of Public Works.
Chesterfield	An effort produced for the Northern Hilltowns Consortium, Chesterfield provided crucial digital literacy support for older adults in rural areas. This versatile and exciting program met older adults where they were by providing digital literacy skilling, device distribution, and broadband connectivity.
Deerfield	Deerfield worked with a private instructor to produce digital literacy support for older adults. Participants received internet stipends and iPads to help them enhance their digital literacy skills.
Fairhaven	Fairhaven utilized both structured classes and one-on-one support for digital literacy programming. Digital literacy topics ranged from basic computer and Internet use to topics such as social media, online shopping, and online safety.
Franklin	Franklin utilized an intergenerational model to facilitate digital literacy programming. High school students provided a relaxed and enjoyable environment to help older adult participants navigate topics such as online safety, social media, emerging technologies, and navigating senior center programming online.
Georgetown	Georgetown partnered with their library and a private instructor to deliver digital literacy programming. Older adult participants found value in participating in structured classes, leading to waitlists for classes.
Greenfield	Greenfield offered a partnership between the senior center and Greenfield Community College for digital literacy programming. Through CyberSeniors, older adults and young students collaborated to solve tech problems, breaking down age barriers through multigenerational connection.



Holyoke	Holyoke partnered with their local media station to provide digital literacy programming. Their digital navigator provided crucial classes and one-on-one to address the digital needs of older adults.
Medford	Medford provided digital literacy support in English, Chinese, Haitian Creole, Spanish, and English as a Second Language (ESL) for older adults. Through partnering with Tufts University, maintaining cultural sensitivity, and providing a multitude of training topics, Medford's program was effective, producing high levels of satisfaction amongst the older adults they served.
Montague	Working together with the town of Gill, Montague provided both structured classes and one-on-one support for older adults. Franklin County Technical School students provided their technological expertise as volunteers, and the intergenerational model of digital literacy programming proved to be exceptional for all involved.
Norfolk	Norfolk worked with private instructors to deliver digital literacy programming through structured classes. Their local IT department was instrumental in determining what devices could be purchased and used for programming.
North Andover	North Andover utilized both structured classes and one-on-one support for digital literacy programming. Through a variety of local partners, programming topics included discovering new apps, online Social Security, banking, and AI.
North Attleboro	North Attleboro worked with a private instructor and high school students to deliver digital literacy programming to older adults. Older adults valued their newfound skills working in structured classes and having younger people personally assisting them in one-on-one sessions.



Norton	Norton provided both structured classes and one-on-one support for digital literacy programming. Their partnership with The Literacy Center proved instrumental in finding a digital literacy instructor who provided excellent person-centered digital literacy support for older adults.
Oak Bluffs	A cross-island effort for Martha's Vineyard, four COAs partnered to provide digital literacy programming. Older adults "called the tech pro" for home visits to have their questions answered.
Pittsfield	A collaborative effort through multiple towns in the Berkshires, Pittsfield worked with CyberSeniors to deliver digital literacy programming. Older adults appreciated in-person training that allowed them to have their personal tech questions answered.
Salem	Through a partnership with Lynn, Salem provided Chromebook training and Chromebook devices to older adults. Using private instructors and digital navigators, respectively, Salem & Lynn provided an excellent partnership in digital literacy programming for older adults.
Sudbury	Sudbury utilized a number of private instructors to facilitate digital literacy programming. Additionally, a motivated volunteer who wanted to expand the reach of programming topics significantly enhanced offerings, demonstrating the importance of collaboration in digital literacy programming for older adults.
Ware	Through a partnership with the towns of Warren and Barre, the three towns provided direct digital literacy support for older adults in this rural area. Collectively, the COAs of each town harnessed surrounding organizations for digital literacy programming, pivoting as the digital needs of older adults evolved.





Appendix B

B-1: The following is a list of digital equity resources:

- [NDIA's Digital Inclusion Resource Library](#): a comprehensive library of digital inclusion resources including manuals, research, toolkits, slides, tools and inventories.
- [OATS by Senior Planet's Glossary of Technology Terms](#): a glossary of technology terms for learners to study from. A good resource for digital inclusion educators teaching older adults about technology terms and concepts.
- [Alliance for Digital Equity's Advocacy Work](#): a snapshot of digital inclusion legislative work that the Alliance has been working on. Includes a bill on a low-cost Internet bill and a statewide credentialing program commission for digital navigators.
- [MA Digital Equity Coalition's Website](#): the central hub for MA Digital Equity Coalition.
- [Aspen Digital, Aspen Institute - Older Adults & Digital Equity \(2024\)](#): a playbook written by Aspen Digital at the Aspen Institute on older adults and digital equity.

B-2: Glossary/index of Used Terms:

- **American Community Survey (ACS)**: an annual survey conducted by the United States Census Bureau to collect demographic information from the public. It includes information on broadband and device access by region.

- **Broadband adoption:** defined by the National Digital Inclusion Alliance as “daily access to the Internet” that functions “at speeds, quality and capacity necessary to accomplish common tasks, with the digital skills necessary to participate online, and on a personal device and secure, convenient network.”
- **Cyber Seniors:** a national nonprofit that trains high school and college students to serve as tech “mentors” for older adults. Organizations like high schools and colleges partner with institutions serving older adults (like senior centers) to provide technology support through the Cyber Seniors model.
- **Digital divide:** defined by the National Digital Inclusion Alliance as “the gap between those who have affordable access, skills, and support to effectively engage online and those who do not. As technology constantly evolves, the digital divide prevents equal participation and opportunity in all parts of life, disproportionately affecting people of color, Indigenous peoples, households with low incomes, people with disabilities, people in rural areas, and older adults.” Some believe that the digital divide can be bridged, while others argue it’s too hard to hit such a fast-moving target.
- **“Digitally-native” individuals:** the perception that those who have been born into digital systems are more savvy using them, labelling them as “digitally-native”. However, while younger people may be more familiar with digital systems, it doesn’t mean that they also understand what they mean and how they are used.
- **Digital navigators:** defined by the National Digital Inclusion Alliance as “trusted guides who assist community members with ongoing, individualized support for accessing affordable and appropriate connectivity, devices, and digital skills.” They have been described as “tech social workers”.
- **Gateway Cities:** defined by MassINC as “midsize urban centers that anchor regional economies around the state. For generations, these communities were home to industry that offered residents good jobs and a ‘gateway’ to the American Dream. More recently, Gateway Cities have been reinventing themselves—at times in the face of considerable economic and social challenges.” Investment in Gateway Cities is crucial in supporting their local economies following historical investment in their industries.



- **Intergenerational collaboration:** the principle that people across different generations can challenge perceived age barriers to collaborate on a particular task they have in common. Training high school and college students to work with older adults on technology support embeds intergenerational collaboration within (not only do younger people learn how to work with their older neighbors, but they also learn to recognize and challenge understood age and age-related biases). While intergenerational collaboration might initially steer towards collaboration between young and old, it involves cross-age collaboration at all levels (i.e., a kindergartner working together with a 2nd grader on homework, a high school freshman getting school tips from a senior, a worker in their 40s working through a workflow problem with their colleague in their 50s, etc.). The idea is that age stops becoming a determining factor in the approach to the task at hand, and instead the differences are embraced to produce an innovative and creative solution that challenges perceived age stereotypes.
- **Senior Planet:** a digital platform by AARP that serves as a learning hub geared towards supporting older adults and their day-to-day lives. In addition to OATS mentioned throughout playbook, Senior Planet also offers support in financial literacy, healthy aging & wellness and technology trends.

