Cybersecurity is not a new focus area, but the increase in threats takes on an even greater importance since March. Last month, across the commonwealth, organizations came together to sponsor virtual panels, host learning sessions, and offer trainings as part of the Massachusetts Cybersecurity Month, an effort organized by the MassCyberCenter at MassTech to bring attention to this critical area. During the month, the commonwealth announced a new grant for the Cyber Center that will launch a statewide cybersecurity conference for municipal leaders and public safety officials in 2021. While the MassCyberCenter has been around since 2017, its work has grown in importance as threats have increased. According to the Department of Homeland Security’s cybersecurity division, reports of phishing and business email scams were up 600 percent since the start of the pandemic. That report made it clear that cyber criminals are working under the cover of COVID-19 to exploit people through phishing emails, business emails, and stimulation check scams. The primary tool to combat these threats is cybersecurity. But what exactly is cybersecurity, and how can it help you? In trainings the MassCyberCenter has recently offered to municipal leaders, we note that cybersecurity is comprised of these key components: • People: make decisions about how to use and protect these systems. • Processes: are actions and steps put in place to help maintain cybersecurity, such as changing passwords or downloading software patches. • Technology: is your anti-virus software or the automated system you use to handle a suspicious charge was made or your account password was changed. Cybersecurity is not just having the hardware up to date or pieces of software. It takes each of the pieces — people, processes, and technology — working together to secure your company or division and protect your data. People need to be trained, processes need to be clear, and technology needs to be up-to-date in order to do real work. • Massachusetts benefits at the home to 176 cybersecurity companies, 129 research and R&D centers, which provide support to our overall cyber ecosystem. Even with that homegrown knowledge, cyber attacks are a real drain on our economy, as citizens and municipalities feel the impact. It is paramount for cybersecurity to be a priority for everyone in the commonwealth, which is why Gov. Charlie Baker announced October as Massachusetts Cybersecurity Month. The theme of the Month — “Collaborating for a Secure Future” — recognized the fact that cybersecurity is a shared responsibility among colleagues, family members and roommates. So what are some simple things everyday citizens can do to improve their cybersecurity? MassCyberCenter.org lists a few easy tips. • Improve the strength of your passwords by adding punctuation, which increases their complexity. If anyone can guess your password, that’s not a good idea. • If available, activate multi-factor authentication on your devices or software. • Check for software updates regularly to keep your computer and ecosystem properly protected. • Learn to identify suspicious emails or phone calls you may receive. • Be on guard around friends and family, and share best practices with them. Cybersecurity Month is May for your a town or official, there are additional things you can do to encourage cyber awareness among all. • Talk about cybersecurity with your managers and employees, and help make cybersecurity a priority at work. • Incorporate cybersecurity in your training programs. • Create a response team to deal with cybersecurity crises in advance of an incident. • Talk about cybersecurity with your friends and family, and share best practices with them. • Join collaborative groups such as a cyber security and incident management team. Each step we take from those outlined above will improve our readiness and make us more resilient to cyber threats that are here today and the threats that will be here tomorrow. 

Sherry Zitter, Executive Officer of Housing and Economic Development and Stephanie Holm, director, MassCyberCenter at MassTech