



Digital Solutions that Bridge the Divide

Summary Results, 2023-2024

August 2024

Special thanks to our funders



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This report was prepared by Sharp Insight, LLC on behalf of Story Tapestries.

August 2024

Program Background

The Story Tapestries digital inclusion and workforce development initiative reaches community members who are experiencing economic hardship and wish to learn skills that will expand their income-earning potential by leveraging the tools of digital literacy, social media training, public speaking, and critical/creative thinking skills.

In the post-pandemic world, communities are adjusting to the expanding digital landscape and subsequent changes in the work environment. People who were already behind technologically are now even further behind, yet the expectation to understand tech-based concepts and have access to tools such as a computer and internet continues to grow. Montgomery County, Maryland, while richly diverse, also presents significant inequities in access to resources related to digital literacy, access to equipment and to the arts as a tool for personal and community development. **Digital Solutions that Bridge the Divide** works with black, brown, and indigenous community members 16 years and older who are experiencing economic hardship and wish to expand their income-earning potential and/or create deeper community connections through digital literacy. Through this program, a Digital Fundamentals course is offered at five partner sites chosen to maximize impact on the target population of those living in poverty.

Program and Evaluation Participation

During the 2023-24 program year, the Story Tapestries Digital Solutions that Bridge the Divide program reached **114 participants** across the following **5 program sites** in Montgomery County, Maryland:

- Latin American Youth Center (LAYC): Wheaton
- Latin American Youth Center (LAYC): Silver Spring
- Montgomery County Coalition for the Homeless (MCCH) Nebel Street Men's Shelter
- Montgomery Village Foundation for Seniors
- Poolesville Seniors

For additional site context, the two Latin American Youth Center sites in Silver Spring and Wheaton serve 16–24-year-olds engaged in GED, workforce development training and case management. Nearly all (99%) of their program participants are low-income and typically 50% identify as African American, 40% as Latino and 5% as mixed race or other. The population includes youth recently incarcerated, those unhoused and/or coming from homes with food insecurity and/or other barriers. The Montgomery County Coalition for the Homeless program site is a facility that serves men who have lost jobs or have jobs that don't provide enough income to pay for housing. Many have not had the education or job positions that would allow them regular access to a computer, and therefore, lack basic computer skills including how to use email, perform a job search, prepare a resume, or participate in online interviews and meetings. The Montgomery County Coalition for the Homeless and Latin American Youth Center have shared a need for innovative approaches to supporting their constituents in developing workforce readiness skills. Montgomery Village Foundation for Seniors and Poolesville Seniors provided programming specifically geared toward older adults experiencing economic hardship and/or who are feeling isolated. Feelings of isolation have a significant impact on

health and wellness, and often a lack of understanding of how to use technology to connect with loved ones and the wider community exacerbates this feeling of disconnectedness.

To support the evaluation of this initiative, Story Tapestries engaged Sharp Insight LLC, an external evaluation firm. In 2023-24, a mixed-methods evaluation approach was implemented, grounded in the following methods:

A participant program survey was used to assess the extent to which skills are learned/gained, explore program satisfaction, and capture social identity. This survey obtained 145 respondents over the year, with the recognition that participants attending more than one program had the opportunity to complete this tool multiple times.






A focus group moderator’s guide for participants and site partner staff was implemented to capture key successes and suggestions for improvement. Seventeen discussion groups were carried out with a total of 85 participants. Six staff focus groups represented eleven staff members and eleven participant focus groups represented 74 participants/clients.

A Site Partners and Artist Program Survey captured process measures, feedback, and stories/examples of program impact. Seventeen program surveys were filled out during 2023-24 by Story Tapestries staff.

In addition to the above tools, Story Tapestries provided Sharp Insight with program data such as information about program attendance and sites. The following report provides a summary of the Digital Equity evaluation findings, including program satisfaction, outcomes, and recommendations.

Grant Measures

In 2023-24, Story Tapestries established five grant measures for the Digital Solutions that Bridge the Divide program. As presented below, four out of five of these were exceeded and the final one is in progress with plans for quantitative measurement in 2024-25.

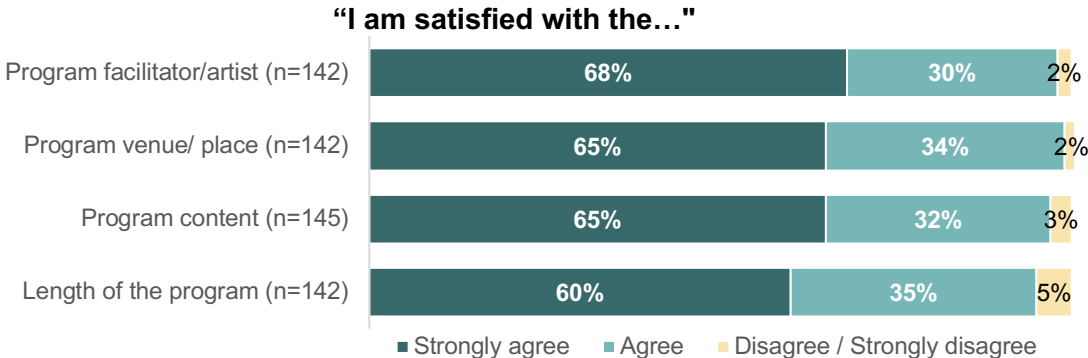
Grant Measures	Results
MET: Participants will connect to devices (<i>laptops, tablets, or computers distributed to or accessed by participants</i>)	 8 devices reported on surveys, with numerous more provided in the course
MET: 60 participants will receive basic and mid-level digital skills training	 114 participated in the Digital Fundamentals course
MET: 80% of participants will show growth or proficiency in digital skills	 97% reported they learned new information / skills
MET: 80% of participants will show growth or proficiency in transferable career readiness skills	 98% reported they plan to use the skills learned in the next 1-3 months
IN PROGRESS: 50% of participants will increase their professional network, coaches, or mentors to leverage employment opportunities.	 <i>Qualitative exploration completed in 2023-24; quantitative assessment planned for 2024-25</i>

Satisfaction with Digital Equity Programming

Participant Satisfaction from Program Surveys

Participants were surveyed about their satisfaction with aspects of the program. In fact, 99% of participants agreed or strongly agreed they would recommend the Story Tapestries program. Most strongly agreed or agreed they were satisfied with the program facilitator, venue, content and length. Very few participants were not satisfied with any of these aspects.

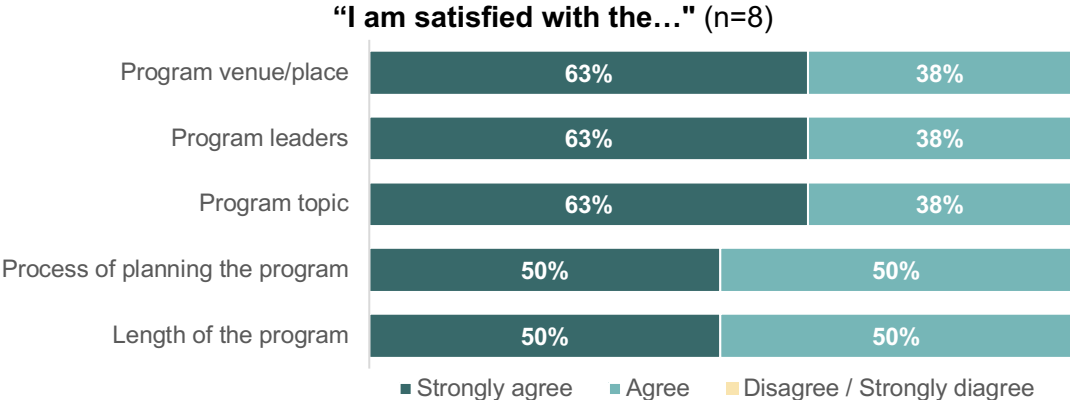
99% of workshop participants they would recommend the Story Tapestries Digital Solutions that Bridge the Divide program (n=140)



Staff Satisfaction from Program Surveys

Staff were surveyed about their satisfaction with aspects of the program. All eight agreed or strongly agreed they would recommend the Story Tapestries program. All eight respondents also strongly agreed or agreed they were satisfied with all the aspects of the program, including the program venue, leaders, topic, process of planning, and length.

100% of staff representatives would recommend the Story Tapestries Digital Solutions that Bridge the Divide program (n=8)



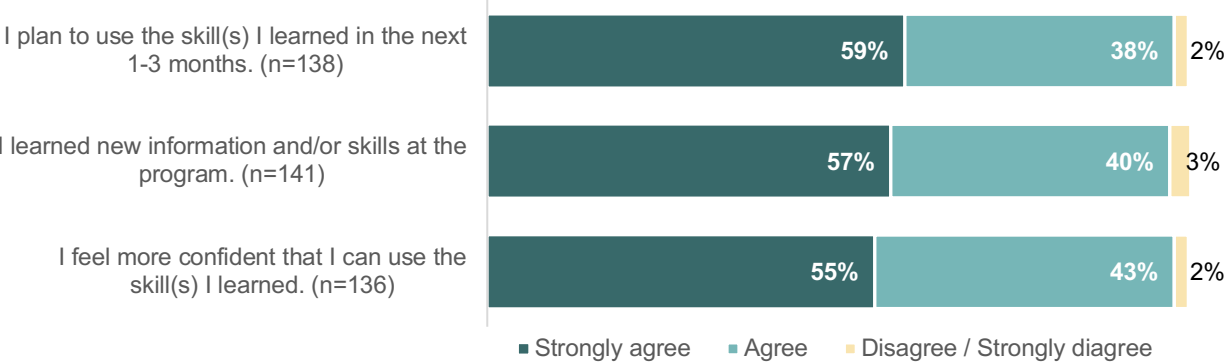
Digital Equity Program Impacts on Participants and Staff

Participant Perspectives on Impacts from Program Surveys

On their program surveys, participants were asked about the impacts of taking part in the program. Most respondents agreed with the three outcome statements, including that they planned to use the skills learned within the next 1-3 months, that they learned new information and/or skills at the workshop, and they felt more confident that they could use the skills they learned.

97-98% of participants reported attainment of the three program outcomes measured, ultimately **exceeding performance measures** for the year.

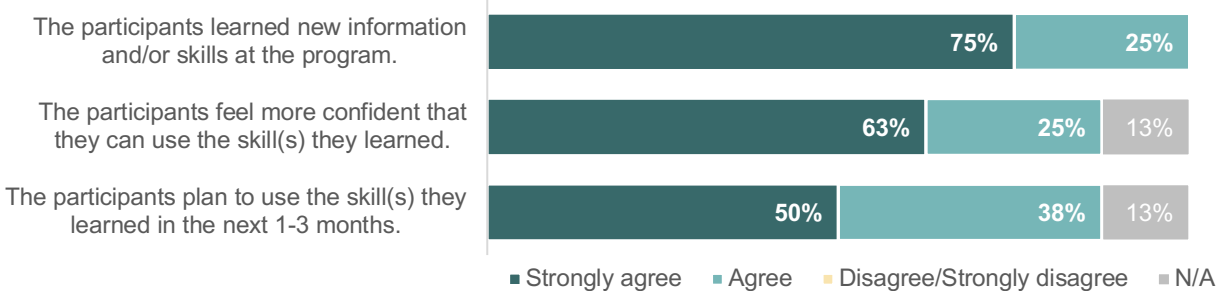
“How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the Story Tapestries program?”



Staff Perceptions of Participant Impact from Program Surveys

Eight staff representatives answered survey questions about the Story Tapestries program and its impact on the participants. All strongly agreed or agreed with each of the statements including that the participants learned new information and/or skills at the program, they felt more confident they could use the skills they learned, and that the participants would use the skills they learned in the next 1-3 months.

“How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the Story Tapestries program?” (n=8)



What Comes to Mind When You Think of Story Tapestries: Participant Focus Groups

When asked during the focus groups about what comes to mind when you think of Story Tapestries, participants provided a range of responses. Key themes include “creativity”, learning”, and “art”.



Participant Perspectives on Most Useful Activities from Focus Groups

During the discussion groups, participants were asked, “What program activities did you find most helpful or useful?” Participant comments were positive in nature. Key activities discussed were related disaster preparedness, camera use and photo development, and resume writing and interview skills. Participants also reported that the program staff themselves were helpful and provided perspective and expertise.







"Everything was useful!"

"It was important for me to learn how to protect my personal information online and avoid financial disaster."

"I liked that different artists came in to provide different topics of expertise and perspective"

Participant Perspectives on Impacts from Focus Groups

During the discussion groups, participants were asked, “how Story Tapestries made a difference to you?” Participants reported positive change and improvement across various skills. Skills mentioned were related to professionalism, technology, creativity and innovation, and self -growth. Firstly, with regards to professionalism, participants mentioned change in their interview skills, resume building, and LinkedIn profile design. Secondly, related to technology skills, participants shared that Story Tapestries improved their digital security and threat awareness, increased their ability to navigate YouTube, Google, Microsoft Office, and boosted their general confidence in browsing the internet. Changes in creativity and personal growth were also shared.

Theme	Illustrative Quotes
Professional skills 	<i>"[The instructor] taught me how to spin my personal narrative on LinkedIn."</i> <i>"It was important for me to learn how to protect my personal information online and avoid financial disaster."</i>
Technology skills 	<i>"I have less anxiety with the web... I feel less threatened and more relaxed."</i> <i>"The sessions helped with so many parts of the phone and internet."</i> <i>"It was important for me to learn how to protect my personal information online and avoid financial disaster."</i>
Creativity/Innovation 	<i>"Practicing writing to myself more often"</i>
Self-growth 	<i>"I came with fear and left with confidence."</i> <i>"It's kinda helped me feel more confident in how to express myself through uncommon ways!"</i>

Staff Perspectives on Impacts from Focus Groups

Staff were asked to reflect on the impact they believe Story Tapestries has made on participants. Staff mentioned that they saw a general improvement in participants' confidence. At the beginning of the session, some participants were reluctant to share verbally, heavily relied on the chat feature, and/or were hesitant to “touch” or “click” on icons during the web-learning series. As sessions continued, participants generally became more comfortable with the staff and their peers, leading to increased engagement with session activities.



"I think the project was very beneficial towards the students, and it helped them to express their feelings and emotions better."

"The artist focused less on 'right vs wrong' and allowed the participants to be who they are."

"Great to see lightbulbs go off for participants during role play w/ topics the participants themselves provided and could relate to around communication, public speaking and coping skills."

Staff Perspective: Impact on Organization or Organizational Staff from Focus Groups

Staff were asked to share their thoughts on how Story Tapestries made a difference in their work. Staff responses varied and covered a wide range of topics. One key topic was the usefulness of art in relaying a message or in teaching difficult topics. Staff shared that everyone learns differently, and that Story Tapestries showed them how useful art and music can be when teaching their participants. Staff also highlighted that Story Tapestries showed them the importance of being flexible, accessible, and not afraid to reintroduce topics or breakdown topics even further for participants.



"The program reminded me of the need to be flexible because individuals learn differently and that the arts are an essential tool to translate information."

"We look forward to partnering with Story Tapestries again to expand on the programming we've started and explore new topics."

"The artist had a super positive effect & energy on staff as well as students, especially in the morning hours."

Suggestions for Program Improvement

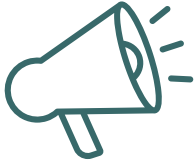
Participant Suggestions for Program Improvement from Program Surveys

Participants were also asked what they would improve about the program on their surveys. Of the 57 responses shared, most mentioned they would like additional sessions or more time. Four participants each suggested that the classes be divided by skill levels, that there be additional hands-on activities and arts, and more one-on-one time with the teacher. Other unique improvement suggestions were made and can be found in the summary Excel sheets.

Participant Suggestions for Program Improvement from Focus Groups

Participants provided a wide range of recommendations to improve Story Tapestries. One suggestion mentioned was that new lessons should build off old lessons. This was especially emphasized for senior participants. Participants noted that offering a refresher course before diving into new material is important for that age group. Additionally, senior participants emphasized the importance of staying physically active as they age. As such, senior participants suggested incorporating visual art activities and field trips into session topics.

Other topic suggestions include incorporating additional sessions that cover budget and finance basics, digital security, and the relationship between body language and storytelling. Participants also suggested extending the session time and/or offering more sessions to students.



"We need to understand more about how body language impacts the impressions we make."

"Maybe an additional helper, to help with more people and (to have) a different person's perspective"

"We appreciate being asked what we want to learn and realize that we may need to offer options for participants to self-select program topics by level (beginner vs advanced)."

Staff Suggestions for Program Improvement from Program Surveys

Of the eight staff members who provided suggestions for improving the program, four responded positively. Two wanted more time for planning, and one each noted: *"Less personal information/stories required of the student,"* and *"more methods for virtual facilitation."*

Eight of the nine staff who filled out the program survey made suggestions for how to adjust planning or execution of the program. The following suggestions were made:

- Hold a two-hour class
- Hold more classes
- Hold the class in the actual classroom.
- More photography, less focus on social media.
- Weave in GED related topics / tie to GED classes
- Help the youth understand why we are there
- Start earlier in the fall
- Have 2 artists
- Incorporate art into every digital lesson (mentioned twice)
- Address inconsistency in attendance and people coming and going (maybe offer incentives to youth) (mentioned twice)
- Split the class into two – basics and advanced class
- Develop a project so participants can apply and practice their skills

Staff Suggestions for Program Improvement from Focus Groups

Staff were asked to share how Story Tapestries can improve. Staff responses varied and covered a wide range of topics. One key topic was increasing time and clarity around general session logistics. Specifically, staff requested clearer descriptions of program content and to increase the length of the session (i.e., preplanning time and session time). With regards to the content itself, staff suggested that the artists increase their number of one-on-one interactions with students. Doing so will help the artist become more relatable to students, increasing a sense of trust and comfort within the group. One staff member shared that some of the questions asked to students (i.e., "when did your dad leave" and "what was a bad experience

you had”) were too personal and made the students uncomfortable. As such, Story Tapestries should focus more on positive experiences. Lastly, staff reported limited budget as a barrier to program operation, and suggested that Story Tapestries explore additional community-based resources to provide supplemental funding to support desired expansion of the program



"Providing more clarity around the program content will help us to better target promotion to audiences based on experience and interest."

"I wish more of the conversations/songs around the youths' feelings were positive, instead of focusing on the trauma the youth may have had. Also, asking youth personal questions such as 'when did your dad leave' or 'what was a trauma or bad experience you had' is too personal, in my opinion. Some youth are not comfortable discussing these issues."

Conclusion

During the 2023-24 program year, the Story Tapestries **Digital Solutions that Bridge the Divide** program supported 114 participants experiencing economic hardship. Through a digital literacy course, Digital Fundamentals, these individuals increased their income-earning potential (including two known job placements) and/or created deeper community connections through digital literacy. The course was held in five partner sites in Montgomery County, Maryland, and intentionally expanded to increase course participants over 55 years old. This expansion supported older adults to better understand ways that technology can reduce isolation and increase their sense of connection to family and the community.

Evaluation data highlighted multiple successes of the Digital Solutions that Bridge the Divide program. Four of five grant outcomes were exceeded, with a fifth one in progress for quantitative measurement in 2024-25. Program surveys revealed very high levels of participant outcome attainment and both participant and staff satisfaction. Focus group data supported these positive findings, with participants highlighting skill attainment and staff emphasizing participants' increased levels of confidence and comfort related to digital literacy. Participants and staff also shared program improvements, including requests for additional course and planning time, session-specific suggestions related to content and course flow, and other nuanced course logistics.

Looking to the future, Story Tapestries will be developing additional course options to support varied levels of desired student engagement, such as choosing to attend drop-in sessions or choosing deeper engagement through a certificate program. For those opting for the certification program, the certificate will serve as a credential to further increase job attainment, which aligns to the ultimate goal of the Digital Solutions that Bridge the Divide program.