STORY TAPESTRIES

Digital Solutions that Bridge the Divide

Summary Results, 2024-2025

July 2025

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SharpInsight

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

July 2025

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 and with continuous developments in AI technology, 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 community members 16 and older who are experiencing economic hardship and wish to learn both hard and soft skills to expand their income-earning potential leveraging the tools of digital literacy, social media training, public speaking, and critical/creative thinking skills. The schedule and cadence of workshops is determined with each site partner to best accommodate participation.

Digital Solutions includes highly personalized workshop sessions that use an inclusive approach to learning through a variety of arts mediums that result in participants learning how to: use digital equipment like a phone, tablet or computer; navigate using a touch screen, keyboard, mouse or trackpad; software such as Google and Microsoft to create spreadsheets, presentations and documents; and create a profile, search and apply for jobs on LinkedIn and Indeed. Participants also build transferable career readiness skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, and interviewing, and have access to the tools, equipment, and coaching support to develop a digital portfolio that has led past participants to new job placements and career advancement opportunities. Custom-designed instruction includes one-on-one and small group coaching sessions and introduction to mentors from community partner organizations (fellow Germantown-Gaithersburg and Maryland Hispanic Chamber of Commerce members, Leadership Montgomery CORE graduates, entrepreneurs, representatives from Comcast and other local businesses). Guest speaker presentations are posted on our YouTube Channel whenever possible.

Program and Evaluation Participation

During the 2024-25 program year, the Story Tapestries Digital Solutions that Bridge the Divide program reached **654 participants** across the following **6 primary program sites**:

- Latin American Youth Center (LAYC) - Wheaton, Silver Spring, and Washington DC
- Montgomery County Coalition for the Homeless (MCCH)
- Wheaton High School
- 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 2024-25, a mixed-methods evaluation approach was implemented, grounded in the following methods:

A **program survey** was used to assess the extent to which skills are learned/gained, explore program satisfaction, and capture social identity. This survey obtained 150 participant responses over the year, with the recognition that participants attending more than one program had the opportunity to complete this tool multiple times. Additionally, nine teaching artists, four site staff, and three site administrators provided their perspective by completing this survey.

A **focus group moderator's guide for participants, teaching artists, and site partner staff** was implemented to capture key successes and suggestions for improvement. Sixteen discussion groups were carried out with a total of 57 participants. Six participant focus groups represented 38 participants, one teaching artist group with three attendees was conducted, and nine staff focus groups represented 16 staff members.

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 Solutions evaluation findings, including program satisfaction, outcomes, and recommendations.

Grant Measures

In 2024-25, Story Tapestries established six grant measures for the Digital Solutions that Bridge the Divide program. As presented below, all six of these were met/exceeded.

Grant Measures	Results
MET: Participants will connect to devices *(laptops, tablets, or computers distributed to or accessed by participants)*	**8** devices reported on surveys, with numerous more provided in the course[1]
MET: 40% will complete the certificate program	**654** participated in Digital Solutions workshops **318** participated in the Digital Fundamentals course **73%** completed the certificate program
MET: 85% of participants will show growth or proficiency in digital skills	**98%** reported they learned new information / skills
MET: 85% of participants will show growth or proficiency in transferable career readiness skills	**99%** reported they plan to use the skills learned in the next 1-3 months
MET: 100% of participants will be paired with a mentor or coach	**100%** were paired with a mentor or coach
MET: 85% will report they've increased their professional networks to leverage employment opportunities	**100%** expressed appreciation for being connected with employment opportunities and reported to staff that the program gave them the opportunity to increase their ability to get a job.[2]

[1] Throughout the course, every student used a device to complete the tasks; students used up to 3 devices per person using computer, cell phone, and a digital camera

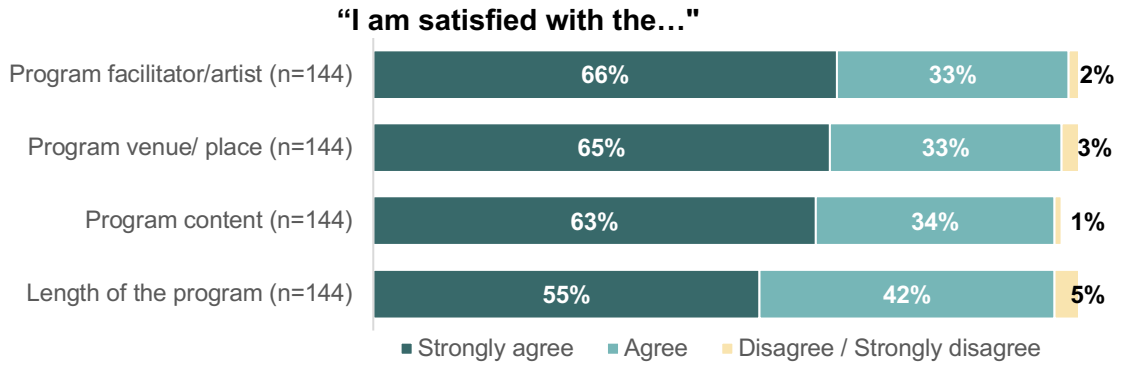
[2] Although 318 individuals participated in the course, 125 were connected to Wheaton HS and did not participate in the professional employment opportunities. Another 60 were seniors and not looking for employment opportunities. Thus, n=133 for this data point.

Satisfaction with Digital Solutions Programming

Participant Satisfaction from Program Surveys

Participants were surveyed about their satisfaction with aspects of the program. In fact, 98% of participants agreed or strongly agreed they would recommend the Story Tapestries program. The vast majority (>95%) 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.

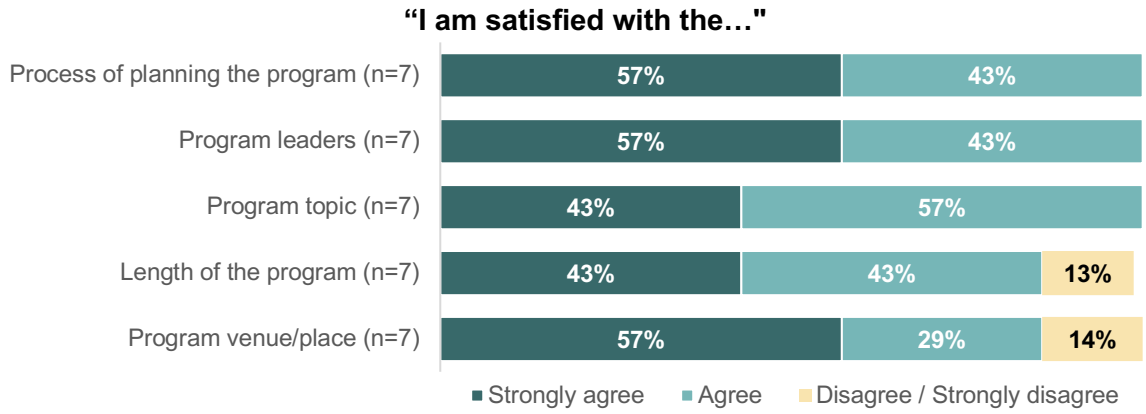
98% of workshop participants said they would recommend the Story Tapestries Digital Solutions that Bridge the Divide program (n=141)



Staff/Site Partner Satisfaction from Program Surveys

Site staff and site administrators were surveyed about their satisfaction with aspects of the program. All seven agreed or strongly agreed they would recommend the Story Tapestries program. All seven respondents also strongly agreed or agreed they were satisfied with the planning process, the leaders, and the topic. There was some dissatisfaction with the length of the program and the venue.

100% of site staff and administrators would recommend the Story Tapestries Digital Solutions that Bridge the Divide program (n=7)

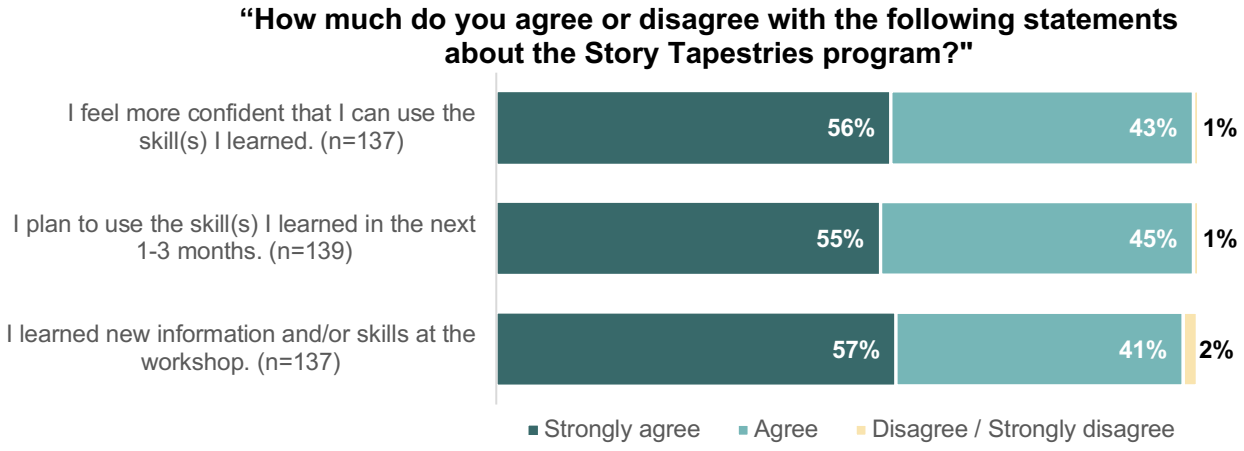


Digital Solutions Program Impacts on Participants and Staff

Participant Perspectives on Impacts from Program Surveys

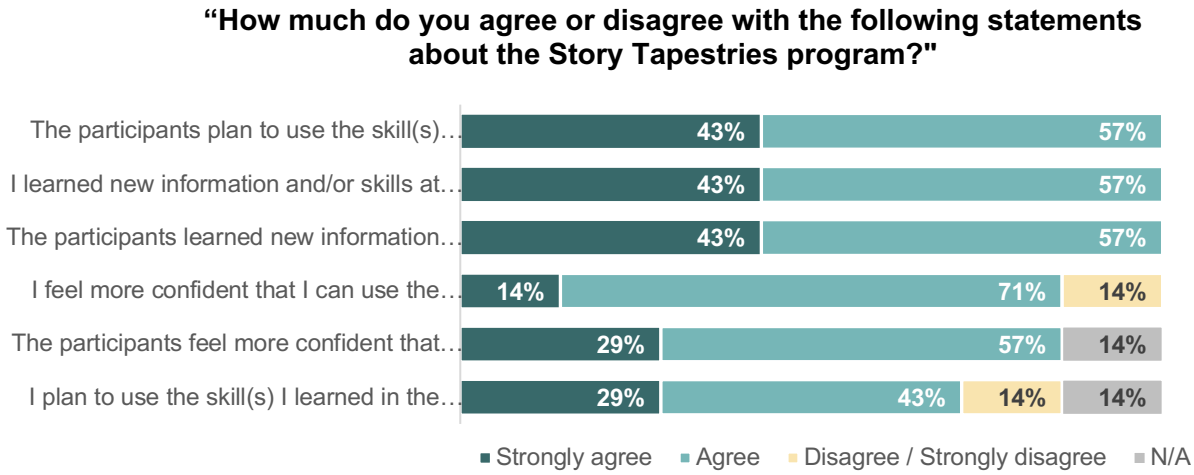
On their program surveys, participants were asked about the impacts of taking part in the program. Most respondents agreed with the three outcome statements, including that they felt more confident that they could use the skills they learned, they planned to use the skills learned within the next 1-3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

98-99% of participants reported attainment of the three program outcomes measured, ultimately **exceeding performance measures** for the year.



Staff Perceptions of Participant Impact from Program Surveys

Seven site staff/administrators answered survey questions about the Story Tapestries program and its impact on the participants. All strongly agreed or agreed with three of the statements, including that the participants plan to use the skills they learned within the next 1-3 months, the participants learned new information/skills. They also agreed that they learned new information/skills but were less likely to agree that they plan to use the skills they learned in the next 1-3 months.



Participant Focus Groups

What Comes to Mind When You Think of Story Tapestries?

When asked what comes to mind when you think of Story Tapestries, participants provided a variety of words, most common being "skills", "helpful", and "photos".



Participant Perspectives on How Story Tapestries Makes a Difference

Overall, participants expressed satisfaction with their program. Participants described the program as "helpful" and found the program directly applicable to their personal and professional lives. The program covered a range of hard skills including photography and photo editing, resume building strategies and LinkedIn exploration, artificial intelligence (AI) utilization, and password security and management. Beyond technical knowledge, participants reported meaningful personal changes, namely increased confidence in their digital abilities and reduced fear as it relates to technology.

Some participants also noted how the program helped them make behavioral changes and improved their social skills. Other participants noted a shift in how they viewed technology, particularly shifting from apprehension to curiosity, thus demonstrating the impact the program has on how participants view digital skills.



"I overcame fear of AI, turned to curiosity; I feel empowered to use technology."

"The Digital Solutions program helps me keep my composure and stay levelheaded."

"The Digital Solutions program taught how to socialize with people better."

Participant Perspectives on Most Useful Activities

Participants found a wide range of program activities both helpful and engaging. In terms of professional development, they valued the interview do's and don'ts sessions, LinkedIn training, and career advice from guest speakers. The digital skills components proved particularly useful, with participants reporting that they enjoyed the photography lessons and software training in Canva, PowerPoint, and Google Slides. These hands-on technology sessions were described as both useful and fun. Communication activities also received strong positive feedback, including the public speaking exercises that built confidence and peer-to-peer discussions that created valuable support networks. These group conversations allowed participants to openly share their fears and challenges while encouraging one another.



"It was most useful learning how to use professional cameras. I feel like it's a skill a lot of people should know how to use - how to zoom in and out correctly, and how to change their focus points."

"My favorite activity was the sock game."

Staff Focus Groups

What Comes to Mind When You Think of Story Tapestries?

When asked what comes to mind when you think of Story Tapestries, center staff provided a variety of words, most common being “learn”, “great”, and “digital literacy”, and “patience”.



Impacts on Organization or Organizational Staff

Center staff were asked to share how Story Tapestries made a difference to their work. Center staff expressed appreciation for their collaborative partnership with program staff. They described the program staff as effective instructors whose teaching approaches influenced their own methods, particularly the understanding that each person learns at their own pace. Center staff noted that the sessions also enhanced their knowledge of professional platforms like LinkedIn and other digital tools, and they planned to integrate these learnings into their own professional development. Center staff also noted the significance of seeing participants grown in confidence and form meaningful connections with each other. They learned valuable techniques from program staff about using hands-on activities and storytelling to make lessons more engaging and foster stronger relationships amongst participants.



“You showed me everyone learns at a different pace. That helped me.”

“Not only did the young men learn something—I did as well. I learned a lot... Even though I do resume and employment specialist [work], you still shared some things that I use... like LinkedIn & AI, all those things you showed me. And a lot of the slides you sent out, I kept for myself as well."

Impacts on Participants

Overall, center staff reported that the program enhanced participants' awareness and proficiency with various digital technologies and platforms. Staff observed that participants particularly enjoyed the hands-on experience of learning how to operate a camera, with outdoor photography sessions focusing on nature subjects as being especially well-received. These activities not only developed technical skills but also provided engaging, practical applications of digital tools.

In terms of broader digital literacy, center staff noted improvements in participants' understanding of social media platforms and AI programs. Importantly, participants learned how to use these digital tools strategically for professional growth. Center staff noted that the public speaking activity was successful as It resulted in increased confidence for the participants.

Beyond skill development, center staff emphasized the collaborative nature of the program fostered meaningful connections among participants. The group-based learning approach facilitated relationship building and peer support, creating a supportive learning environment.



“They are better at public speaking now, than before [the program].”

“Participants gained confidence and excitement through hands-on photography experiences. Some had never used a camera before, while others refined their skills.”

“First thing I think of is a way of using digital literacy and photography to expand the group’s knowledge of [the] outdoors, and create good memories.”

“Students learned how to create resumes, cover letters and LinkedIn profiles.”

“Story Tapestries allowed them to be themselves. They were able to share their emotions, and you listened - you didn't judge.”

Teaching Artist Focus Group

What Comes to Mind When You Think of Story Tapestries?

When asked what comes to mind when you think of Story Tapestries, teaching artists stated “accessibility” “enhanced communication”, and a “healthy challenge.” Because one teaching artist was conducted, a word cloud is not provided for this group.

Impacts on Participants

The teaching artists, who primarily worked with seniors, observed that participants gained confidence, found opportunities for self-expression, and developed public speaking skills through the program. As a result, participants enhanced their professional skills, with some receiving job interviews and two participants securing job offers.



“One introverted participant gained confidence in interviewing & public speaking; another participant was able to give shape to a traumatic story and emotions.”

“All participants landed interviews, 2 landed jobs, one was offered a prestigious position.”

Impacts on Teaching Artists & Center Staff

The teaching artists shared that they enjoy working at different sites. Working at different sites allows them to work with different populations of people, building their interpersonal skillset. While there were challenging moments, the teaching artist shared how those moments positively influenced their self-growth, and forced them to adapt their teaching techniques.



“The work builds my repertoire and confidence as a teaching artist in different spaces, working with different groups.”

“Learning different ways to reframe curriculum and try new methodologies challenges self-growth.”

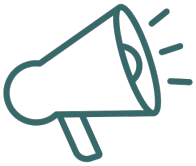
Suggestions for Program Improvement

Participant Suggestions for Program Improvement from Program Surveys

Participants were also asked what they would improve about the program on their surveys. Of the 122 responses shared, the vast majority were positive non-responses (e.g., “N/A” or “I like it the way it is”). Of those with specific suggestions, most mentioned they would like additional sessions or more time. A handful also mentioned a desire for varying levels of sessions based on the skills people are coming in with. 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 several suggestions for improving the Story Tapestries program. Related to the scheduling of the program, the program time received mixed sentiment. Some participants suggested extending their program time, while others wished the program was shorter. Some participants suggested serving food either during or at the end of the session. For technology skills, some participants wanted expanded photo editing instruction, including photo library management and uploading images to professional profiles. Related to professional skills, one discussion group suggested providing more interview preparation time, specifically focusing on appropriate responses and what to avoid saying during interviews.



“More time – I would say, there wasn’t enough time.”

“Instead of 2 hours, make it one hour.”

“We could have done more interview practice — prepare ourselves for what to say and what not to say.”

“Learning how to edit [the photographs] and how to upload it to the internet, and then learn how to upload this information to our professional account”.

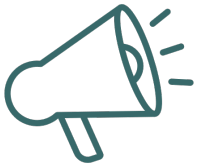
Staff Suggestions for Program Improvement from Program Surveys

Of the seven staff members who provided suggestions for improving the program, two provided positive non-responses. The other five responses mentioned:

- The importance of a supportive communication tone in fostering engagement and trust with the youth
- Logistical changes (e.g., fewer sessions in the series, flexible scheduling)
- Planning suggestions (e.g., clearer expectations around staff roles and communication, involving the youth in the planning process)

Staff Suggestions for Program Improvement from Focus Groups

Center staff offered several suggestions for improving the program. Some staff recommended extending the program duration and offering more frequent session times throughout the week, as increased frequency may improve participant attendance. Regarding session length, some participants suggested extending sessions from one to two hours, while others proposed a hybrid model to increase attendance.



"They expressed a desire to bring in instructors with deeper digital expertise to better support older adults."

"Prioritize interactive, discussion-driven formats where participants problem-solve together."

"I wish it could have been longer […] Multiple times a week because they have to wait a whole week for Story Tapestries to come again – then we could get more people to participate."

"Have a simple feedback survey with youth at close of each session and debrief w/ staff; incorporate feedback in next session."

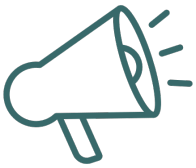
Teaching Artist Suggestions for Program Improvement from Program Survey

Of the eight teaching artists who provided suggestions for improving the program, two provided positive non-responses. The other 6 responses mentioned:

- Logistical changes (e.g., the need for more time, ability to go off-site, more time between sessions, embedding Digital Solutions within another program)
- Find ways to bolster consistent attendance
- More photography classes

Teaching Artist Suggestions for Program Improvement from Focus Group

The teaching artists suggested several ways to improve Story Tapestries. First, they identified consistent attendance as a challenge and recommended increased promotion of the program. Second, the teaching artists emphasized the importance of feedback, noting that they should receive regular input from participants to incorporate into subsequent sessions. Third, they suggested offering a series of courses (such as memoir writing) rather than one-off topics, which they believed would also promote more consistent attendance. Finally, the teaching artists recommended incorporating more guest speakers into the program.



"Maybe bring former participants back to speak about benefits and successes [to encourage attendance]."

"How can attendance be increased through promotion?"

Conclusion

During the 2024-25 program year, the Story Tapestries **Digital Solutions that Bridge the Divide** program supported 654 participants, including 318 participants experiencing economic hardship who participated in a digital literacy course, Digital Fundamentals. These individuals increased their income-earning potential and/or created deeper community connections through digital literacy. The course was held in six partner sites in Montgomery County, Maryland, including a recent expansion 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. All six outcomes were met or exceeded. 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, staff, and teaching artists also shared program improvements, including requests for additional course and planning time, as well as session-specific suggestions related to content and 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 the certificate program. Story Tapestries is in the process of connecting with other partners for 2025-26 with hopes to expand the certificate program. The nature of the programs at some of the current sites make it challenging for participants to meet the existing requirements for attaining the certificate. Story Tapestries is also considering if the requirements need to be adjusted. For those opting for the certification program, the certificate serves as a credential to further increase job attainment, which aligns to the ultimate goal of the Digital Solutions that Bridge the Divide program.