

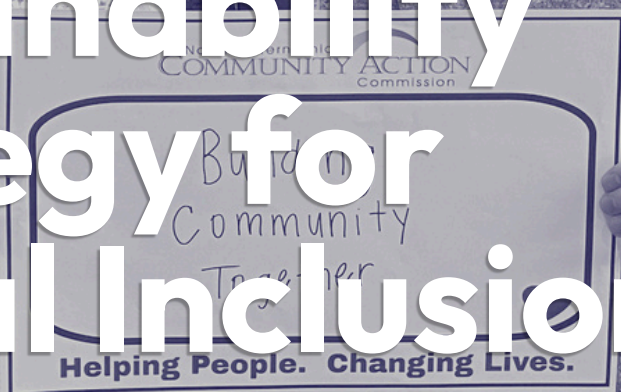


# Growing Stronger: Sustainability Practices for Digital Inclusion Programs

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# Storytelling as a Sustainability Strategy for Digital Inclusion





# Introduction

In today's digitally driven world, access to technology, connectivity, and digital skills has become a prerequisite for equitable participation in virtually every facet of life—education, employment, healthcare, and exercising civic rights. Yet, millions of individuals and communities remain excluded from these opportunities due to barriers to digital inclusion. Programs that expand broadband access, provide digital skills training, and distribute devices—are essential to closing this divide.

However, to ensure their long-term sustainability, these programs must do more than deliver services; they must inspire understanding, empathy, and investment. Storytelling is a powerful sustainability strategy that helps communities, partners, and stakeholders grasp the human and societal value of digital opportunity. By transforming data and outcomes into compelling narratives, storytelling can make the invisible visible, bringing to life the people, communities, and possibilities behind digital inclusion efforts.

# The Power of Storytelling in Digital inclusion

## 1. Building Understanding and Awareness

Storytelling bridges the gap between data and lived experience. While data points illustrate scale, stories humanize impact. When an older adult shares how digital skills training reconnected her with distant family, or when a student in a rural school describes how reliable internet access expanded life-changing educational opportunities, audiences connect emotionally. This connection deepens understanding of why digital inclusion matters—not as a technical issue, but as a human rights and social equity imperative.

## 2. Sustaining Engagement and Partnerships

Narratives that highlight the transformative ways in which access and skills lead to empowerment motivate stakeholders to continue supporting digital inclusion efforts. Stories build trust and credibility with funders, policymakers, and community members by showcasing transparency, progress, and tangible results. Moreover, compelling stories attract cross-sector partnerships, from private firms to local nonprofits, who see their shared values reflected in these narratives.

## 3. Demonstrating Measurable Impact

Storytelling complements quantitative evaluation by providing context for outcomes. A report may state that 500 residents completed a digital skills program; a story reveals that one participant used those skills to start a small business, advancing both personal stability and community economic development. Such stories demonstrate return on investment and position digital inclusion as a catalyst for sustainable growth and resilience.

# Strategies for Developing Impactful Digital Inclusion Stories

## 1. Center the Human Experience

Compelling stories focus on the individuals and communities most affected by a lack of access, skills, and support to engage online effectively. Begin by asking: Who benefited? What challenges did they overcome? How did digital inclusion change their lives?

Use authentic voices and direct quotes where possible, allowing participants to speak for themselves. Avoid jargon—speak in relatable, human terms that connect emotion to action.



## 2. Structure Stories for Maximum Engagement

A compelling digital inclusion story follows a clear narrative arc:

- **Challenge:** Describe the barrier faced (e.g., lack of internet access, limited digital skills, economic exclusion).
- **Action:** Highlight how the program or partnership intervened (e.g., training, device distribution, broadband expansion).
- **Transformation:** Demonstrate the tangible and emotional outcomes, such as greater independence, employment, community or family connection, or empowerment.
- **Impact:** Connect the individual story to broader change, reinforcing how digital inclusion contributes to sustainability and opportunity.

### 3. Use Multiple Formats and Platforms

To reach diverse audiences, storytellers should utilize a range of media types, including written profiles, short videos, podcasts, infographics, and social media posts, to effectively convey their message. Visual storytelling through photography or short films can be especially powerful in illustrating the contrast between isolation and empowerment that digital access creates. Using different platforms ensures stories resonate across generational and cultural lines.

### 4. Integrate Data and Emotion

Balance storytelling with evidence. Pair personal narratives with supporting data that demonstrate scope and success. For example, combine an individual's story about receiving an affordable device with statistics about their rural community's overall lack of access to devices and infrastructure. This dual approach—heart and mind—strengthens credibility and persuasive power.



### 5. Empower Community Voices

Engage community members as co-creators, not subjects. Provide opportunities for participants to share their own stories through digital storytelling workshops or community showcases. This participatory approach fosters agency, builds local capacity, and models the very inclusion these programs seek to achieve.

# Ethical and Inclusive Storytelling Practices

## 1. Obtain Informed Consent

Always ensure that storytellers understand how their stories, images, or quotes will be used. Explain potential audiences, platforms, and longevity of the content. Consent should be informed, voluntary, and revisited if circumstances change.

## 2. Present Participants as Active Change Agents

Ethical storytelling emphasizes dignity, resilience, and collaboration.

## 3. Ensure Comprehensive Storytelling

Stories should strive to represent the totality of all populations being served.

## 4. Practice Transparency and Accountability

Share how stories are selected, edited, and disseminated. Involve participants in reviewing drafts or videos to ensure accuracy and comfort. Transparency fosters trust and models ethical communication practices.

# Storytelling as a Tool for Empathy and Collective Action

At its best, storytelling transcends communication. It becomes a catalyst for social change. When people hear firsthand how digital inclusion transforms lives, empathy turns into action. A policymaker who hears a story about a family finally accessing online healthcare may advocate for broadband funding. A local business learning about a graduate from a digital skills program may become a new employer or sponsor.

Storytelling nurtures community connection by revealing shared struggles and aspirations, transforming abstract policy goals into tangible human experiences that rally collective commitment toward opportunity and inclusion.

# Recommendations for Sustaining Storytelling Efforts

## 1. Integrate storytelling into program design.

Collect stories continuously, not just during evaluation.

## 2. Build staff and volunteer capacity.

Train teams in ethical storytelling, interviewing, and multimedia documentation.

## 3. Create a storytelling calendar.

Align stories with awareness campaigns, funding cycles, and community events to maximize impact.

## 4. Measure storytelling impact.

Track engagement metrics, stakeholder responses, and partnership outcomes.

## 5. Foster long-term relationships.

Revisit storytellers to follow up on progress, showing that their voices remain valued.



# Tools for Storytelling

There are a wealth of online tools and resources available to aid you in your storytelling. Below are a few to get you started.

## Collection and Organization:

- [MemoryFox](#): Helps ethically collect, organize, and share stories from community members with built-in consent.
- [Evernote](#): A note-taking app that allows you to capture and categorize information, record audio, and keep a record of stories on the go.
- [Storly.ai](#): Designed for nonprofits, this platform helps create and publish stories with customizable, user-friendly features to support donor acquisition and engagement.

## Design:

- [Visme](#): A tool for making infographics, presentations, reports, and other visual documents.
- [Canva](#): Offers templates for creating a wide range of visual content like infographics, presentations, and social graphics.
- [WeVideo](#): A platform for creating videos with a user-friendly interface.

## Resources:

- The Commons Social Change Library: Offers a “[Dignified Storytelling Handbook](#)” and other resources for practicing ethical storytelling.
- Nonprofit Hub: Provides a free downloadable “[Nonprofit Storytelling Guide](#).”
- Bloomerang: Offers another free guide, “[Nonprofit Storytelling: The Quick and No-Nonsense Guide](#).”

## Visual Assets:

- [Pexels](#): Offers a large, well-curated collection of free photos and videos with a user-friendly interface. Content can be used for free, though attribution is appreciated but not required.
- [Pixabay](#): Provides a huge library of free images, videos, and other media, like illustrations and music. Their content is free for commercial and non-commercial use without attribution, though it is welcomed.
- [Unsplash](#): Known for its vast collection of high-resolution, free photos.
- [Canva](#): Canva also houses its own collection of stock photos and videos.

# Conclusion

Impactful storytelling is more than a communications tool—it is a sustainability strategy that strengthens digital inclusion efforts by deepening understanding and inspiring commitment. Through ethical, authentic, and community-centered storytelling, organizations can ensure that the actual value of digital inclusion is seen, felt, and supported.

When stories highlight real people and real change, they remind us that the digital divide is not merely about technology; it is about human potential, shared opportunities, and the collective power to build a more connected and inclusive future.

## **ABOUT THE SERIES:**

This three-part series, “Growing Stronger: Sustainability Practices for Digital Inclusion Programs,” provides the digital inclusion community with practical guidance and tips on field-based sustainability best practices. The three briefs that are part of the series include:

- [Best Practices for Ensuring Digital Inclusion Program Impact](#)
- [Storytelling as a Sustainability Strategy for Digital Inclusion](#)
- [Advancing Digital Inclusion Program Sustainability Through Data Collection and Evaluation](#)

Check out our full-length guides to dive deeper and access tools and templates: [Digital Inclusion Program Manual](#), [Digital Navigator Program Toolkit](#), [State Digital Equity Implementation Manual](#), and the [Digital Inclusion Impact Aggregator Data Collection Guide](#).

# About NDIA

The National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA) is a national 501(c)3 nonprofit coalition of more than 2,000 affiliates, including public libraries, schools, Tribal organizations, senior centers, housing authorities, local governments, grassroots nonprofits, and other institutions working to ensure that everyone has affordable internet, devices, and the skills to use them. Our affiliates are embedded in communities in all 50 states, D.C., territories, and Tribal nations. Together, they reach millions of people every year with community-based digital skills education, connectivity, and devices. To [become an affiliate](#) or learn more, visit [digitalinclusion.org](http://digitalinclusion.org).

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