

Storytelling with Data: The Five Elements of Storytelling

Part One

PURPOSE

This guide is designed to help nonprofit and social impact organizations communicate evaluation findings clearly, meaningfully, and accessibly. It offers practical guidance for turning data, stories, and community voice into communication products that support learning, decision-making, accountability, and action.

Use Case

- ▶ You want to communicate impact more clearly using both numbers and stories.
- ▶ You are creating a report, one-pager, dashboard, donor update, slide deck, or other evaluation product.
- ▶ You want to make findings easier for funders, partners, staff, board members, or community members to understand.
- ▶ You need help moving from “here is the data” to “here is what it means and why it matters.”



ABOUT BSRI

BSRI was created to support informed and effective decision-making for our partners with tools, resources, and data for action. As we wind down operations, we are creating these resources for the community to continue the work. We use our guiding principles in engaging with partners and communities, putting people first through accountability and reciprocity, communicating transparently, and sharing our knowledge widely.

ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

BSRI developed this guide based on our experience helping organizations translate evaluation findings into clear, useful, and action-oriented communication products. Data storytelling is not only about charts or numbers. It is about helping people understand what happened, why it matters, and what can happen next.

This resource introduces core elements of data storytelling and offers practical examples of formats organizations can use to communicate findings, including one-pagers, impact reports, donor updates, and dashboards.

USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)

Our organization utilizes artificial intelligence (AI) tools to enhance efficiency, support data analysis, and strengthen evaluation practices. We also encourage our partners and clients to thoughtfully explore AI as a means to build future-ready evaluation capacity. All AI use is governed by strict data privacy and ethical standards. We do not input any personally identifiable information (PII), protected health information (PHI), or other sensitive data into AI systems in a manner that would violate HIPAA or other applicable privacy regulations.

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BACKGROUND

At BSRI, data storytelling is more than simply presenting findings or reporting for the sake of reporting. It is a process of creating meaning, elevating community voice, and translating information into learning that can guide decisions, strengthen programs and processes, and support lasting impact.

Social impact organizations collect data every day through surveys, interviews, focus groups, attendance records, community conversations, and program reports. However, data becomes most powerful when it is transformed into a story that helps people understand what happened, why it matters, and what actions should come next.

This Guide Helps Organizations	Through Practical Guidance On
Present evaluation findings clearly and accessibly	Turning evaluation findings into clear visuals and narratives
Communicate impact using both data and stories	Using stories to help audiences understand impact
Translate findings into actionable communication products	Communicating findings clearly across reports, dashboards, one-pagers, and donor materials

Data storytelling is a bridge between evaluation, learning, and action. Effective storytelling goes beyond charts and statistics. It helps organizations interpret findings, center community experiences, and use data to strengthen programs, partnerships, and systems.



Before Developing a Data Story

Organizations should have a clear understanding of their activities, intended outcomes, and the connection between their work and the impact they hope to achieve. If those foundational pieces are not yet clear, we recommend starting with BSRI's Logic Model and Theory of Change resource to help strengthen the foundation of the story. In our experience working alongside nonprofit and social impact organizations, these tools are essential for making evaluation findings meaningful, actionable, and connected to long-term impact.

While every organization's story is different, we have found that effective data storytelling consistently relies on a few key practices. Based on our experience supporting organizations across a range of

evaluation and learning efforts, BSRI uses five core elements of data storytelling to help transform data into communication that is clear, accessible, and action-oriented.

BSRI's Five Elements of Data Storytelling

1. Start with the people who will use the story
2. Ground the data in context
3. Be clear about the purpose
4. Make the story clear, focused, and accessible
5. Emphasize the “so what?”

1. Start with the People Who Will Use the Story

In our work, data stories are rarely created for just one audience. A single evaluation finding may need to speak to funders, program staff, community partners, board members, and the people most impacted by the work.

Before creating a data story, we should ask:

- ▶ Who needs to understand this information?
 - ▶ Different audiences may need different levels of detail, language, or examples. Identifying the audience early helps shape how the story is communicated.
- ▶ What decisions, reflections, or conversations should this story support?
 - ▶ A data story should help move people toward action, learning, or reflection. Clarifying this purpose helps determine what information matters most.
- ▶ What does this audience already know?
 - ▶ Understanding the audience's familiarity with the program, community, or topic can help avoid confusion, unnecessary detail, or missing context. If you are unsure what your audience already understands, ask them.
- ▶ What language will feel clear, respectful, and accessible?
 - ▶ Data stories should be understandable to a broad range of audiences. Using plain language and avoiding unnecessary jargon helps more people engage with the findings.
- ▶ What information matters most to community members, partners, or funders?
 - ▶ Different audiences may prioritize different types of information, such as outcomes, lived experiences, implementation challenges, or long-term impact. Identifying those priorities can help keep the story focused and relevant.



BSRI Lens

Data storytelling should be people-centered. The goal is not just to share information, but to ensure it is useful, understandable, and connected to the people who need it.

2. Ground the Data in Context

Numbers do not speak for themselves. A percentage, survey result, or participation count becomes more meaningful when it is placed in context.

For example, reporting that “75% of participants felt more confident” is useful, but it becomes stronger when paired with information about who participated, what the program was designed to do, what barriers existed, and what changed over time.

Organizations can strengthen context by including:

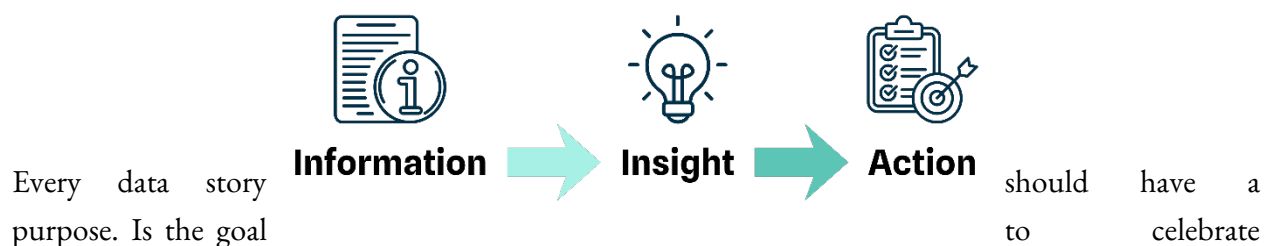
- ▶ Program goals
- ▶ Community needs
- ▶ Participant characteristics
- ▶ Implementation challenges
- ▶ Historical or structural factors
- ▶ Narrative feedback or participant voice
- ▶ Comparison points, when appropriate



BSRI Lens

Context helps protect against oversimplifying community experiences. It allows organizations to tell a fuller and more honest story about what happened, why it matters, and what conditions shaped the results.

3. Be Clear About the Purpose



progress? Support a funding request? Guide program improvement? Share lessons learned? Prepare for an internal strategic planning conversation? Inform discussions or strategic decisions with your board? Post on social media?

Being clear about the purpose helps determine what information to include, what details to leave out, and how the story should be framed. A data story created for a funder may focus on outcomes, reach, and sustainability, while a story created for program staff may focus more on lessons learned, participant feedback, and opportunities for improvement. When the purpose is clear, the story becomes easier to follow and more useful to the people reading or hearing it.

Before developing the story, ask:

Guiding Question	Why It Matters
What do we want people to understand?	Helps identify the main message or takeaway.
What decision, conversation, or action should this support?	Connects the story to a clear next step.
Who will use this information?	Helps shape the tone, level of detail, and format.
What information (e.g., context) is most important for this purpose?	Keeps the story focused and prevents information overload.
What do we want the audience to remember?	Helps center the story around the strongest insight.



BSRI Lens

A strong data story should move people from information to insight, and from insight to action.

4. Make the Story Clear, Focused, and Accessible

Nonprofits often collect a large amount of data, but not every piece of data is relevant to the final story. A strong data story should highlight what matters most without overwhelming the audience.

This means:

Do's	Don'ts
Choose at least 3 key points your audience needs to understand.	Do not include every data point. Too much information can make the story hard to follow.
Use plain, accessible language. Write in a way that staff, partners, funders, and community members can understand.	Do not overuse technical terms or complex wording. Avoid language that may exclude people from understanding the message.
Use visuals that support the story. Charts, graphs, and images should help explain the finding, not complicate it.	Do not use visuals just to make the resource look full. Every visual should have a clear purpose.
Keep each section or visual focused on a clear message.	Do not overload one page, slide, or section with too many ideas. If everything is highlighted, nothing stands out.
Connect the data to why it matters. Explain what the finding tells us and why it matters.	Do not assume the audience will interpret the data on their own. Guide them toward the key insight.
Include community voice when appropriate. Quotes, examples, or stories can help humanize the data.	Do not let numbers stand alone when lived experience can add important context.
Make the layout easy to scan. Use headings, short paragraphs, bullets, and white space.	Do not create dense pages of text. A crowded layout can discourage people from engaging with the information.
Check for reader accessibility. Use readable font sizes, clear labels, and strong contrast.	Do not rely on color alone to explain a chart or finding. Some readers may not be able to see or interpret color differences.



BSRI Lens

Clarity is an equity practice. When data is presented clearly and understandably, more people can participate in reflection, decision-making, and learning.

5. Emphasize the “So What?”

The most important part of a data story is the meaning behind the findings. Organizations should help their audiences understand why the data matters and how it connects to impact, improvement, sustainability, or community change.

A strong “*so what*” may answer:

- ▶ What did we learn?
- ▶ What changed for participants, families, staff, or partners?
- ▶ What strengths should be continued?
- ▶ What challenges need attention?
- ▶ What recommendations emerged?
- ▶ What should happen next?
- ▶ How does this support the organization’s mission?

When presenting your data story, don’t be afraid to say “so what?” or something similar. Clearly signaling your “so what?” makes sure no one misses the message.



BSRI Lens

Impact is not only about outcomes. It is also about learning, relationships, systems change, community voice, and the ability to adapt based on what the data shows.

When done well, data storytelling helps organizations move beyond reporting requirements and toward deeper learning. It helps teams celebrate progress, name challenges, identify opportunities, and communicate impact in ways that are meaningful to funders, partners, staff, and communities.

The BSRI Data Storytelling Checklist

A quick tool for reviewing whether a report, slide deck, dashboard, blog post, case study, or other reporting product tells a clear story with data.

How to use this tool: Read through each section, check what is already strong, and use the notes column to identify what needs to be clarified, added, or simplified before sharing.

Checklist Item	Review Question	Reflection Prompt	Notes/Action
Audience	Who is the audience?	What does this audience care about?	
Purpose	What is the purpose of the story?	Why would this story matter to this audience?	
Context	What context needs to be shared?	What does this audience need to know about this work that they don't know already?	
Key Findings	What are the top findings that need to be shared?	If I had to condense this into 3 main points, what would matter, and how does it connect to organizational impact?	
Visuals	What visuals will help	Is what we are reporting better captured with a graph, a visual, or just a number?	
Community Voice	What community voice should be included?	Did we just report numbers? If so, how can we include community voice that supports our findings?	

Checklist Item	Review Question	Reflection Prompt	Notes/Action
The “So What?”	What is the “so what?”	Why would this audience care? How does it connect to the bigger picture, goal, or impact?	
Next Steps	What action or learning should come next?	After the story is created, what action steps should be taken next? Who needs to be included in the action? Who else should the story be told to who has not heard it? How did the story land, and what improvements can be made?	

Final Readiness Check

- ▶ The main message is clear.
- ▶ The story flows.
- ▶ The story explains why the data matters.
- ▶ The format is easy to digest.
- ▶ The next step(s) are clear.



Remember

Clarity is an equity practice. When data is easy to understand, more people can participate in learning, reflection and decision making.

Storytelling With Data: Turning Data into Actionable Communication

Part 2

PURPOSE

This guide is designed to help nonprofit and social impact organizations communicate evaluation findings clearly, meaningfully, and accessibly. It offers practical guidance for turning data, stories, and community voice into communication products that support learning, decision-making, accountability, and action.

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Turning Data into Actionable Decisions

This is Part 2 of BSRI's Storytelling with Data series. Part 1 introduced the five elements of data storytelling. This guide focuses on how to put those elements into practice by choosing the right format for your audience.

Knowing what your data means is only half the work. The other half is deciding how to share it.

Different audiences engage with information in different ways. A program manager tracking weekly progress needs something different than a funder reviewing year-end outcomes. A board preparing for a strategic decision needs something different than a community partner learning about services for the first time.

Part 2 of this guide introduces data communication products organizations can use to share findings clearly and effectively: **one-pager reports, donor updates & donor decks, impact reports, and dashboards**. Each one serves a different purpose, reaches a different audience, and works best under different conditions.

Use this guide to figure out which format fits your situation — and how to make it work.

Choosing a Data Storytelling Deliverable

Deliverable	Main Purpose	Best Audience	Tone	Best Use Case	Typical Content	Key Questions Answered
One-pager report	Distill key findings into a fast, precise snapshot	Busy decision-makers, partners, internal staff	Precise, concise, analytical	A quick brief, leave-behind, or at-a-glance summary	One to three headline metrics, one key visual, a short takeaway	What do I need to know right now?
Donor updates and decks	Show donors what their investment made possible and make the case for continued or expanded funding	Individual donors, recurring supporters, foundations, sponsors, and major funders	Appreciative, persuasive, relationship-centered	Stewardship touchpoints, renewals, and funding pitches or board presentations	Headline outcomes, a story or quote, visuals, and a forward look or ask	What did my support make possible, and why keep investing?
Impact report	Document the full story of performance, learning, and outcomes over a period	Funders and grant officers, boards, partners, and oversight bodies	Balanced, credible, evidence-based	Year-end or grant-close reporting and strategic review	Goals, outputs, outcomes, demographics, lessons learned, recommendations	What happened, why, and what now?
Dashboard	Track performance in near real time and monitor trends	Program staff, managers, data-engaged funders	Functional, neutral, data-forward	Ongoing monitoring and quick course-correction	Live metrics, trend lines, filters, status indicators	How are we doing right now, and where do we need to act?

1. One-Pagers

A one-pager is a single-page document (or one page front and back) that communicates the most important information about a program quickly and clearly. It is designed for audiences who need to understand what a program does, who it serves, and what difference it is making — without reading a lengthy report.

One-pagers work best when the goal is to share progress, build awareness, or support a conversation with funders, partners, board members, or community stakeholders.

Best For:

- ▶ Funder and partner updates
- ▶ Community share-outs
- ▶ Board presentations
- ▶ Advocacy and outreach
- ▶ Program highlight summaries

What to Include in your One Pager:

Element	Purpose
Program description	Briefly explains what the program does and who it serves
Key statistics	3–5 numbers that show reach, participation, or outcomes
Who was served?	Demographics or community context that adds meaning to the numbers
Community or participant voice	A quote, reflection, or satisfaction result that humanizes the data
Call to action or next step	What you want the reader to do, learn, or remember



Pro Tip

How to keep a one-pager to one page:

- Lead with your strongest finding, not background information
- Choose 3–5 data points that matter most — not everything you measured
- Let visuals do some of the work; a simple chart or icon can replace a paragraph
- Use short sentences and plain language, your audience will recognize



BSRI Lens

A one-pager is not a summary of everything — it is a carefully chosen window into what matters most. The goal is for someone to pick it up, read it in two minutes, and walk away understanding what changed and why it matters.

2. Donor Updates and Donor Decks

Donor updates and donor decks show funders, sponsors, and supporters what their investment made possible. Where a one-pager is built to be precise, concise, and analytical, distilling findings into a quick-reference snapshot, a donor update or deck is built to be persuasive, relationship-centered, and impact-focused. The goal is not simply to report activities or outcomes. It is to help donors understand the value, meaning, and future relevance of their support: what changed because they gave, who it changed for, and why their continued partnership matters. A strong donor update connects evidence to people, frames progress as shared progress, and leaves the reader confident that their investment is working and worth sustaining.

The Most Important Thing to Know:

The same organization may need more than one version of its donor update. A government funder, a foundation, and an individual donor all care about different things — and the story should reflect that.

Audience	What They Typically Care About
Government funders	Compliance, cost-effectiveness, scalability, alignment with policy, and sustainability
Foundations	Equity, systems change, long-term outcomes, community impact, and sustainability
Individual donors	Personal stories, emotional connection, and knowing their gift made a difference
Corporate sponsors	Community visibility, reach, and return on investment

Best For:

- ▶ End-of-grant or annual funder reports
- ▶ In-person or virtual funder presentations
- ▶ Cultivation and stewardship of new donors
- ▶ Social media posts that communicate impact to a broader audience

What to Include:

Element	Purpose
Opening hook	A number, story, or question that immediately connects the donor to the impact
Program context	A brief explanation of what the program does and who it serves
Key outcomes	3–5 findings that show what changed because of the investment
Community or participant voice	A quote or story that makes the data human
What investment made possible	Translate numbers into real-world meaning — what did this funding actually do?
Call to action or next step	What you want the donor to do, give, or understand next



Pro Tip

- Lead with impact, not activity. Donors care less about what you did and more about what changed because of it.
- Pair major numbers with a person or story so the data feels real.
- Be appreciative and persuasive, but stay credible. Do not overstate results or imply outcomes the data cannot support.
- Match the tone to the relationship — a longtime individual donor needs a warmer, more personal tone than a first-time foundation contact
- Keep decks short — 6 to 10 slides are enough for most donor presentations



BSRI Lens

A donor update is not just a reporting requirement — it is a relationship-building tool. When donors can clearly see what their investment made possible, they are more likely to stay engaged, give again, and advocate for the work. The goal is not to impress — it is to connect.

3. Impact Reports

An impact report is the complete, evidence-based account of what a program accomplished over a defined period, usually a full grant or fiscal year. Whereas a one-pager delivers a precise snapshot and a donor update makes a persuasive, relationship-centered case, an impact report is built to document, explain, and inform: it answers not just what happened, but why it happened and what should come

next. The goal is not to highlight wins alone. It is to present a balanced, credible record that connects activities and outputs to real outcomes, names challenges honestly, and turns a year of work into a foundation for accountability, learning, and the decisions ahead.

Best For:

Documenting a program's full performance at year-end or the close of a grant period; reporting progress against goals and objectives for funders, boards, and oversight bodies, and producing the source material that shorter products like one-pagers and donor updates draw from. Think of an impact report for:

- ▶ Annual reporting
- ▶ Funders and boards
- ▶ Strategic planning
- ▶ Organizational learning
- ▶ Program evaluation summaries

What to Include:

Element	Purpose
Project Overview	Goals, objectives, and intended results, so progress can be judged against a clear standard
Outcomes and progress	Successes and challenges stated plainly and given context
Data tables and figures	Clear visual summaries of key indicators, trends, and outcomes that make progress easy to understand and compare
Demographics and equity data	Who was served, and how well reach matched the intended population
Community Voice	A quote or qualitative insight that grounds the numbers in lived experience
Recommendations and next steps	Findings translated into specific, evidence-based priorities for the year ahead



Pro Tip

- Lead with the goal, then the result. Framing each number against its objective is what keeps the report readable rather than a data dump.
- Show the shortfalls. Credibility comes from presenting successes and challenges side by side, not from a highlight reel.
- Interpret, do not just display. Every table and figure should be followed by what it means and why it matters.
- Move from outputs to outcomes to "so what?" Readers should be able to trace what was delivered, what changed, and what you recommend as a result.
- Build it to feed other products. A strong report is the well that one-pagers, donor updates, and decks draw from all year.



BSRI Lens

At BSRI, we see impact reports as tools for learning, transparency, and accountability. Accountability does not mean blame; it means being clear about what was promised, what was done, what changed, and what still needs attention. It also means asking, "accountable to whom?" — funders, boards, staff, community partners, and most importantly, the communities the work is intended to serve. A strong impact report connects data, community voice, challenges, and recommendations so organizations can tell a credible story of progress while using what they learn to strengthen future work.

4. Dashboards

A dashboard is a live, interactive tool that displays data in real time. Unlike a one-pager or donor update, which captures a moment in time, a dashboard updates as new data comes in — giving organizations an ongoing view of what's happening rather than a single snapshot.

Why Use Dashboards?

Dashboards support ongoing monitoring and near real-time decision-making. They help organizations track progress, spot trends early, and respond to emerging needs as they come up, rather than waiting for the next report.

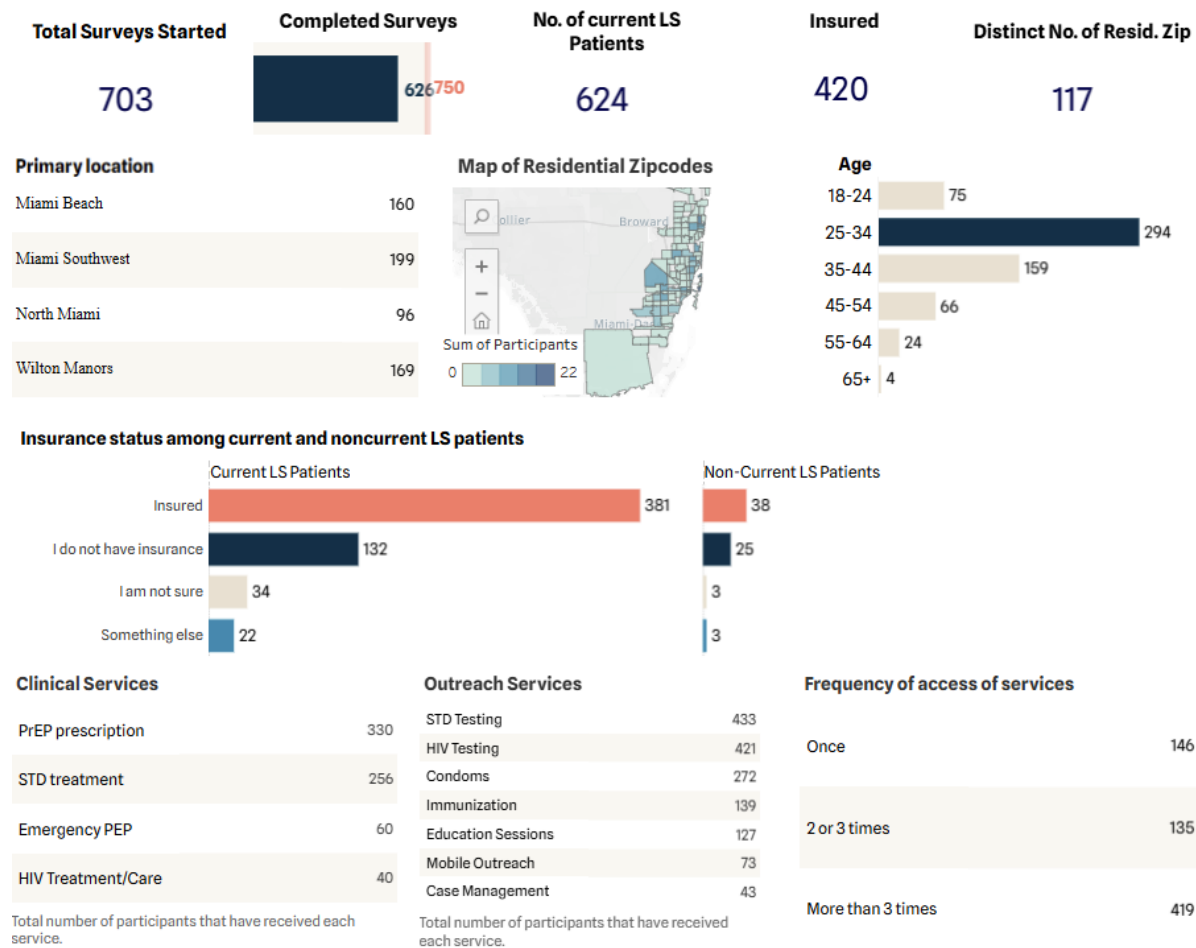
Best For:

- ▶ Internal decision-making
- ▶ Ongoing monitoring

- ▶ Leadership teams
- ▶ Program management
- ▶ Cross-program learning

What a Dashboard Can Show:

The example below is a real BSRI dashboard, built in Tableau, used to monitor a prevention and health services program. A few things to notice:



- ▶ Reach and volume — Total surveys, completed surveys, and patient counts give a quick read on scale
- ▶ Where participants are located — The zip code map shows geographic spread at a glance
- ▶ Who is being served — Age breakdowns and location data show participant demographics
- ▶ Insurance and service access — Comparing current and non-current patients highlights gaps that may need attention

- ▶ Service utilization — Clinical and outreach service counts show what people are actually using
- ▶ Engagement patterns — Frequency of access shows whether participants are returning once or staying engaged over time

A dashboard like this can help organizations quickly answer questions such as:

- ▶ Who is being served?
- ▶ Which services are most utilized?
- ▶ Where are participants located?
- ▶ Are there disparities across groups or locations?
- ▶ How frequently are participants accessing services?



BSRI Lens

A dashboard is only as useful as the questions it's built to answer. Before building one, get clear on what your team actually needs to monitor and decide — not just what data is available. A dashboard full of numbers no one uses to make decisions isn't serving a purpose.

A Practical Note

Dashboards require more technical skill to build and maintain than a one-pager or donor update. Creating one typically means having a team member with dashboard-building experience, or working with a consultant who can build and maintain it for you. This is worth planning for early, since dashboards are an investment in infrastructure, not just a reporting format.

Beyond Reporting

Data storytelling isn't about rattling off numbers or outputs. It's about helping people actually understand something. When findings are shared clearly with intention, they become the foundation for learning, better decisions, accountability, and real action.

At BSRI, data matters most when it helps organizations figure out what's working, adjust their approach, and make a genuine difference. The goal is simple: **help people understand what happened, why it should matter to them, and what to do next.**

