

Case study

Digital strategies from the Centre



Community Housing
Transformation Centre

Centre de transformation
du logement communautaire



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Case Study:

Digital Strategies from the Centre

Community housing organizations are operating in an environment of sustained crisis, limited organizational resources (and time!) while managing limited staff capacity and constrained operating budgets.

This document is not intended to be a comprehensive rulebook or a definitive guide to digital communications. Rather, it brings together a set of practical best practices that the Community Housing Transformation Centre has developed through experience, experimentation, and trial and error while working with organizations across the sector. Its goal is to lighten the operational burden on community housing organizations by offering clear, achievable approaches to strengthening their digital presence. By helping individual organizations expand their reach and effectiveness online, the broader aim is to support a stronger, more visible, and more connected sector as a whole.

Digital presence is no longer a communications add-on. It is **core infrastructure**. When done well, it:

- Improves access for tenants and applicants
- Reduces frontline staff workload through clear, self-serve information
- Strengthens credibility with governments, funders, and partners

Here, we will outline **practical, low-resource** digital initiatives grounded in the realities of Canadian nonprofits. We aim to support informed governance decisions while providing staff with realistic tools they can implement. The Centre's role is not to promote technology for its own sake, but to help the sector build shared digital capacity by providing context, technical expertise, and practical guidance.

A strong digital presence improves access, trust, and system efficiency. Public understanding of community housing remains limited—yet support rises from 50% to 73% when the sector is clearly explained, according to a **CHF Canada sponsored study**.

This guide helps organizations expand their reach and strengthen their message online.

Small, intentional improvements compound over time and contribute to the shared goal of **growing community housing to 20%** of Canada's housing stock. This document serves as a companion piece to **Strengthening digital strategy, amplifying sector impact: Lessons from the Centre's practices**.



1. Establish the foundations of your digital presence

Your digital foundation: A clear, functional website

What your website is (and is not)

Your website is not a bulletin board. It is a reflex to use your website as an advertisement platform for your services and it works when you have a limited offering. But it is a simplistic view of the tool. The Center's website grew to look like one as its services expanded. The more we added services, programs, funds, the more the website was complicated and confusing. We had to take a step back and reassess its whole structure and user experience.

We had to:

- Explain who we are and who we serve
- Make next steps obvious
- Reduce confusion and unnecessary contact
- Make it obvious how we could make a difference in our audiences' lives

Step-by-step flow

1. Ouvrez votre page d'accueil.
2. *Ask: Would a first-time visitor understand our role in 5 seconds? Would they understand what's in it for them?* Identify the main action on each page.
 - 2.1 Identify the main action on each page
 - 2.2 Remove secondary distractions
 - 2.3 Check for accessibility basics
 - 2.4 Break processes into steps, repeat for each page.
3. Update your opening headline to clearly state:
 - Who you serve
 - Where you operate
 - What you provide and **how it makes a difference for them**



4. Simplify navigation to **4–6 core items**. The more you have services, these items should be clear categories of services
 5. Check your site **mobile devices**
 6. Move critical information from **PDFs onto web pages**
- 7.0 OPTIONAL, BUT RECOMMENDED:**
Get out of your head. Have your staff that's not involved directly in the process review the site and give you feedback. Have your partners, friends and family do the same – you don't need a focus group, **just extra eyeballs** will help.

Best practices

- Plain language, short paragraphs
- **Mobile-first** layout (20–40% of web traffic is on mobile-devices)
- Regular small updates (news, notices, blogs)

Example: strong homepage headline

"We provide community housing and tenant supports for low- and moderate-income households in Hamilton."



2. Accessibility is foundational

Accessibility is foundational

Accessibility means designing services so people—especially those under stress or dealing with complex systems—can use them effectively. In Canada, this is crucial because **over 1 in 4 Canadians (about 27% or 8 million people aged 15+) live with a disability**. Many face barriers online: **17% struggle to use the internet for essential tasks**, and **about 15% do not use it at all**, often due to accessibility challenges.

People with long-term conditions frequently find everyday technologies difficult, and **about 25% encounter communication barriers online** caused by poor design, limited settings, or restrictive forms. These issues contribute to social and economic exclusion.

To address this, the **Accessible Canada Act** aims to create a **barrier-free Canada by 2040**, positioning digital accessibility as a core priority for inclusion, service delivery, and policy. Beyond inclusion, **accessible digital practices can also improve visibility**, as many platforms' algorithms favor accessible content and rank it higher.



Step-by-step flow

1. Review one key page (e.g., Apply for Housing)
2. Shorten sentences and remove jargon
3. Add headings and bullet points
4. Test the page on a phone

Best practices

- **Grade 6–8** reading level
- Clear headings
- Captions on all videos

Example: plain language rewrite

Instead of:

"Applicants must demonstrate eligibility pursuant to municipal criteria"

Use:

"To apply, you must meet your municipality's eligibility rules."

How to check accessibility (simple, realistic methods)

Ask:

- Can I understand this page quickly?
- Is the next step obvious?
- Can I use this page on my phone with one hand?

If it's confusing to you, it's inaccessible to others.



Use free online tools

You don't need expensive software.

Recommended tools:

- **WAVE Accessibility Checker**
<https://wave.webaim.org/>
(Paste in a URL, review errors and warnings)
- **Google Lighthouse** (built into Chrome)
Right-click > *Inspect* > *Lighthouse* > *Accessibility*

Focus on **patterns**, not perfection.

Test with a keyboard

1. Try navigating your site using only the **Tab key**.
2. Can you reach links, buttons, and forms?
3. Can you see **where you are on the page**?

If you get stuck, so will others.

Use built-in read aloud tools

- Use screen reader previews or "**Read Aloud**" tools
- Listen for confusing headings or unclear links like "**click here**"

Links should describe what they do:

-  Click here
-  Use "Apply for housing in Peel Region"

What to prioritize first:

If capacity is limited, start with:

1. **Application and eligibility** pages
2. **Contact and service** pages
3. **Forms and PDFs used most often**

Accessibility improvements **compound quickly**.



3. Being found

Local search and SEO

For most people, **Google is the first point of contact**.

Step-by-step flow: Local search engine optimization

1. Create or update your **Google Business Profile**:
<https://www.google.com/business/>
2. Add **accurate services**, **service area**, and **contact details**
3. Post **occasional updates** (deadlines, notices)
4. Create a **high-intent service page** on your website

Here's a short, simple list of free SEO tools with links:

- **Google Search Console**
<https://search.google.com/search-console>
Tracks how your site performs in Google search and shows which keywords bring visitors.
- **Google Analytics (GA4)**
<https://analytics.google.com>
Analyzes website traffic, visitor behavior, and where users come from.
- **Ubersuggest (Free tier)**
<https://neilpatel.com/ubersuggest>
Helps with keyword research, competitor insights, and basic SEO audits.
- **Google Keyword Planner**
<https://ads.google.com/home/tools/keyword-planner/>
Finds keyword ideas and shows search volume using Google data.
- **Google Trends**
<https://trends.google.com>
Shows trending topics and how search interest changes over time.



- **Ahrefs Webmaster Tools**
<https://ahrefs.com/webmaster-tools>
Provides site audits and backlink analysis to improve SEO.
- **Yoast SEO**
<https://yoast.com/wordpress/plugins/seo/>
A popular WordPress plugin that helps optimize pages and posts for SEO with real-time suggestions

Example: Good SEO Page Title

“How to Apply for Community Housing in Thunder Bay”

Example: What Good SEO Content Looks Like

- **Clear heading** – Apply for Community Housing in Thunder Bay
- **Step-by-step process** – **ideally laid out in bullets** of a form format.
- **Short FAQ section**
- **City name mentioned naturally and repeatedly through the page.**



4. Digital marketing 101

Google Ad Grants can be one of the most effective digital tools available to community housing providers, but only when set up and managed realistically.

This section goes deeper into how Ad Grants actually work, how to structure campaigns, and how to adjust them over time without needing advanced marketing expertise.

Required setup path (plan for time)

In Canada, access to **Ad Grants** is not instant and requires planning, and some time.

Step-by-step flow:

1. Register with **TechSoup Canada**
(*Verification can take several weeks.*)
2. Apply for **Google for Nonprofits**
<https://www.google.com/nonprofits/>
3. Create a **Google Ads** profile if you do not have one.
4. Activate **Google Ad Grants**
Up to **USD \$10,000/month** in free search ads across Google platforms.

Important: Ads will not run until your website meets Google's quality requirements (clear content, working links, useful and accessible pages).



How google ad grants actually work

Google Ad Grants show text-based search ads to people who are actively looking for information.

This means:

- You are not interrupting people
- Ads appear only when someone searches for relevant terms
- You are competing with other nonprofits (and sometimes paid advertisers)

Google's algorithm prioritizes:

- **Relevance** (how closely your ad matches the search)
- **Page quality** (how useful and clear your website page is)
- **Expected engagement** (whether people click and stay)

Clear, helpful content almost always outperforms clever wording.

Building multiple campaigns (strongly recommended)

One large campaign rarely works well. Multiple focused campaigns perform better and are easier to manage.

Recommended Campaign Structure

Create separate campaigns for each major goal:

1. **Housing Applications**
Keywords: *apply for housing, community housing [city], affordable housing application*
2. **Eligibility & Waitlist Information**
Keywords: *housing eligibility [city], housing waitlist [region]*
3. **Organization Awareness** (Limited use – the algorithm favours more actionable calls to action so purely informational content gets pushed down.)
Keywords: *organization name, housing provider [city]*
4. **Hiring / Board Recruitment / Advocacy**
(As long as you have a clear call-to-action like Apply Now or Donate.)



Each campaign should:

- Have its own budget
- Point to a specific, relevant web page
- Use tightly related keywords

This helps Google's AI understand your intent and improves performance.

Bidding strategy: keep it simple

Ad Grants use automated bidding, guided by Google's AI.

Meilleure approche pour les enchères

- Use **Maximize Conversions** or **Maximize Clicks** (depending on setup – if you opt for conversions, i.e. people signing up to something, or general browsing through your site. You can determine your objective for each campaign during the setup phase)
- Avoid manual bidding unless you have experience, as it is quite time consuming. You will have to do it almost daily, and the return is negligible.
- Let campaigns run long enough for learning (**2–4 weeks**), the Centre tried to promote and boost attendance to last minute webinars and this led to limited results as Google's AI simply didn't have the time to find enough people to show the campaign to.

Key principle: Google's system improves with consistent data. Frequent resets slow learning.

Writing ads that work for housing providers

What Google rewards

- Clear headlines
- Local relevance (*You can select to tag by Country / Region / Province / City and in some cases Postal Code / Neighbourhood.*)
- Alignment between ad and landing page – if the keywords on the page do not match the campaign, this will hurt it's ranking with Google. Or, if there are too many topics on one page – this will also hurt.



Example: Strong Housing Ad

- **Headline:** Apply for Community Housing in Regina
- **Description:** Learn who is eligible, how to apply, and what to expect. Clear steps. Local support.
- **Landing page:** A plain-language page explaining the application process step by step.

Avoid:

- Generic messaging (“Learn more”, use precise terms instead such as **“Learn more about Halifax and its history with Black Housing”** – this leads to a better ad ranking from Google, making your ad more likely to be shown
- Ads pointing to PDFs – Google cannot read attachments.
- Pointing multiple campaigns to the same landing page – this will devalue all campaigns exponentially.

How Google’s algorithm learns over time

In the first few weeks, performance may be uneven. This is normal.

Google learns by:

- Seeing which searches trigger your ads
- Tracking which ads people click
- Measuring what happens on your website

Improvements come from:

- Clear keywords
- Strong page content
- Consistent structure

Important: Short-term pauses or constant changes reset learning.



Reporting: what to watch (and what to ignore)

You do not need advanced dashboards

Review periodically.

Focus on:

- **Clicks** (Are people finding you? Are they going to multiple pages or are the clicks just robots referencing each page of your site.)
- **Search terms** (What are people actually looking for? What terms do you think are missing and what terms are your competitors ranking on that you are not?)
- **Top-performing ads and keywords** — leverage what works instead of trying to fix what isn't.

Do not obsess over

- Daily spend
- Minor fluctuations
- Using the full **10 000 \$** budget

Unused budget is common and acceptable.

Adjusting campaigns over time

What to adjust first

1. Pause keywords that are too broad or irrelevant
2. Improve landing pages before changing ads
3. Refresh ad text every **1–2 months**, this keeps the ad copy fresh and may convince people who have seen your past ads to click. Google also re-ranks ads with updated copy, as they are considered fresher.



What to avoid

- Shutting campaigns down too quickly – as mentioned, Google needs time to find your audience. **2–4 Months** work best to know if a campaign will succeed.
- Running short-term campaigns only also hinders its success, as noted above.
- Pointing ads to outdated pages

Ad Grants are most effective when treated as ongoing infrastructure, not short-term promotions. When integrated into an organization's broader communications plan, they can consistently amplify key messages, drive traffic to essential information, and support priority initiatives such as tenant services, advocacy campaigns, and funding announcements. Rather than functioning as occasional marketing boosts, Ad Grants can become a steady channel that increases visibility, improves access to resources, and helps organizations reach audiences who may not otherwise find them. Over time, this sustained digital presence strengthens public awareness and reinforces the organization's credibility with partners, funders, and communities.

Practical reality check

Google Ad Grants require:

- Some initial setup effort
- Ongoing light maintenance
- Patience while the system learns

They do not require:

- Marketing expertise
- Daily management
- Perfect performance

When aligned with clear content and realistic expectations, Ad Grants can significantly improve access to housing information while reducing staff workload.



Sample Google Ad Grant search ad (for Advocacy & Awareness)

- **Headline 1:** Support 20% Community Housing
- **Headline 2:** Canada Needs Community Homes
- **Headline 3:** Learn the Plan & Join Us

Description:

We're mobilizing to reach a 20% community housing target in Canada. Discover why it matters and how you can help build equitable, sustainable housing.

Call-to-Action (CTA):

Learn More

Final URL:

<https://centre.support/reaching-the-20-target/>

Optional variants you could rotate

Variante A – Focus on urgency:

- **Headline:** Canada Housing Crisis Needs Action
- **Description:** Community housing must grow to 20% of the supply to ensure affordable homes for all. Read the strategy now.
- **CTA:** Join the Movement

Variante B – Focus on partnership and sector voice:

- **Headline:** Join Community Housing Advocates
 - **Description:** Together we can scale community housing to 20% and shape policy that supports inclusion. Get involved.
 - **CTA:** Join the Movement
-



Variante C – Focus on education:

- **Headline:** What Is 20% Community Housing?
 - **Description:** Understand why community housing must be 20% of total stock and how it tackles Canada's housing crisis.
 - **CTA:** Understand the Solution
-

Keyword Themes to Target (Examples)

(use keywords relevant to advocacy and awareness)

- "community housing Canada / PROVINCE / CITY / REGION"
- "community housing policy"
- "affordable housing advocacy"
- "20% housing target Canada"
- "housing crisis solutions Canada"

Targeting these will help your ad *show up when people search for solutions and housing policy context*, not just organizational pages.



5. Video & YouTube for Nonprofits

Video explains complex processes once, clearly and consistently.

Step-by-step flow

- a) Identify one common question
- b) Record a **1–3 minute** video (*phone is fine*)
- c) Upload to **YouTube** with clear title and description

Example Video Title

“How to Apply for Community Housing in Sudbury”

Best practices

- Informal and human
- **Captions required**



6. Newsletters that command attention

Step-by-step flow

1. Decide one main purpose per issue
2. Write a plain-language subject line
3. Link to web pages for details

Example subject line

"Housing Application Updates – June 2026"

Best practices

- Monthly or quarterly cadence. Consistency matters more than frequency. Publish at a pace you can sustain.
- Short, scannable sections



7. Social media: Useful, not noisy

Step-by-step flow

- a) Choose **1–2 platforms** you can sustain and tailor them to the audience you are trying to reach. Is your content visual? Opt for **TikTok** if your audience is younger. **Instagram** if slightly older. Is your message outward facing? **Facebook**, **BlueSky** or **Threads** might be right for you. If you deal with other organizations or want to expand your sectorial network, then **LinkedIn** is where you should be. Experiment, then focus!
- b) Post **1–3 times per week**, quality and commitment are more important than quantity.
- c) Include **a clear next step**

Example: Strong social post

Applications for community housing in Kingston open **May 1**.
Learn who is eligible and how to apply: [link]

Best practices

- **Short text**
- **Real photos** — stock photos tend to turn the audience off, real photos humanize your organization and make you more relatable.
- **Video when possible** — video content tends to generate **30–55% more engagement**.



8. Google Analytics

Analytics are not about detailed marketing reports. They are simply a way to check whether people are finding your information and using it as intended.

Step-by-step flow

1. Set up Google Analytics

Connect Google Analytics to your website once. This gives you a basic view of how people arrive at your site and what they look at. Setup can usually be done in under an hour.

2. Track a small number of useful indicators

Focus on:

- **Where visitors come from** (Google search, direct, referrals)
- **Your most visited pages**
- **Key actions**, such as contact form submissions or resource downloads

3. You do not need to track everything, only what helps you understand if your site is working.

Use a simple reporting template

Avoid building custom dashboards. A **basic monthly template** that shows a few numbers and short notes is enough to support decision-making and reporting to leadership or boards.

4. Review once per month

Set a recurring monthly check-in. This keeps analytics from becoming overwhelming and helps spot gradual changes over time.

Best practices

- Focus on **trends**, not daily or weekly numbers
- Look for **patterns**, such as steady growth or repeated interest in certain topics
- Use analytics to guide **small improvements**, not to judge performance

The goal is **confidence and clarity**, not perfection or constant monitoring.



9. A Realistic implementation roadmap

This roadmap is designed to be **simple, realistic, and flexible**. It prioritizes actions that deliver the greatest impact with limited staff time and resources. Organizations can move through these phases at their own pace.

Phase 1: Establish the foundation

It took us roughly a month, your time may vary

Focus: Clarity and access

Actions:

- Review your homepage and confirm that your role, service area, and audience are clear **within five seconds**
- Ensure contact information and application links are **current and easy to find**
- Test key pages on **a mobile phone**
- Identify **one page to simplify** using plain language

Visitors should now understand **who you are, what you do, and how to take the next step.**

Phase 2: Improve accessibility and usability (Weeks 4–8)

Focus: Reducing barriers

Actions:

- Rewrite **one high-traffic page** to a **Grade 6–8** reading level
- Add **headings and bullet points** to improve scanning
- Add **captions to any existing videos**
- Begin using **alt text** for images on your website and social media

Now, your content is **easier to understand, easier to navigate, and more accessible** for tenants and applicants.



Phase 3: Increase discoverability (Months 2–3)

Focus: Being found

Actions:

- Create or update your **Google Business profile**
- Publish **one high-intent service page** (for example, *“How to apply for community housing in [City]”*)
- Vérifier que les **titres des pages mentionnent clairement votre emplacement et vos services**

Your organization **is easier to find** through search and local referrals.

Phase 4: Expand reach with free tools (months 3–6)

Focus: Visibility and efficiency

Actions:

- Register with **TechSoup Canada**
- Apply for **Google for Nonprofits**
- Prepare your website to meet **Google Ad Grant requirements**
- Draft **one simple Google Ad** focused on applications or eligibility

You are positioned to use **free tools to reach people actively searching for housing information**.

Phase 5: Strengthen ongoing communication (ongoing)

Focus: Consistency

Actions:

- Send **a newsletter monthly or quarterly** with one clear purpose
- Post **one to three times per week** on one or two social platforms
- Relier les publications et les courriels à **des pages web claires et accessibles**

Your audience **receives timely, reliable updates without increasing staff workload**.



Phase 6: Review, learn, and adjust (ongoing)

Focus: Continuous improvement

Actions:

- Review **website and campaign analytics** monthly
- Identify **top pages and common exit points**
- Adjust **content clarity, accessibility, or calls to action** as needed

Your digital presence evolves **evolves in response to real community**, needs rather than assumptions.

See **addendums for printable checklist Roadmap**.



10. Final takeaways

- Digital visibility is core infrastructure
- Canadian nonprofit realities require planning and patience
- Small, sustained improvements compound
- Sector-wide progress depends on shared learning



About The Centre



The **Community Housing Transformation Centre** is a nonprofit organization dedicated to making community housing a key player in reshaping Canada's housing landscape. Its ambition is to expand the sector's share to 20% of the entire housing market.

How the Centre works toward this goal

To support the sector's actors, the Centre provides:

- Funding to back impactful projects
- Services to help organizations adapt, innovate, and thrive
- Tools to build capacity and improve management practices
- Partnerships to foster collaboration, share expertise, and access new resources

The Centre believes that transforming the sector requires boldness and initiative. Success comes from concrete and collective action.



Addendum

Digital capacity checklist for community housing organizations

Use this checklist to track progress over time. You do not need to complete everything at once.

Phase 1: Establish the Foundation

- ☐ Homepage clearly explains who we serve, where we operate, what we provide, and what difference it makes in our audiences everyday lives
 - ☐ Contact information is accurate and easy to find
 - ☐ Application or service links are current and visible
 - ☐ Key pages work well on a mobile phone
 - ☐ At least one page has been simplified using plain language
-

Phase 2: Improve Accessibility and Usability

- ☐ One high-traffic page rewritten to a Grade 6–8 reading level
 - ☐ Headings and bullet points added for easier scanning
 - ☐ All videos include captions
 - ☐ Images on the website include alt text
 - ☐ Alt text and captions are used on social media posts
-

Phase 3: Increase Discoverability (Search & SEO)

- ☐ Google Business Profile created or updated
- ☐ Services and service area clearly listed on Google profile
- ☐ At least one high-intent service page published (e.g., “How to apply for housing in [City]”)
- ☐ Page titles clearly reference location (if appropriate) and services
- ☐ Website content answers common questions clearly



Phase 4: Expand Reach with Free Tools

- ☐ Registered with TechSoup Canada
 - ☐ Approved for Google for Nonprofits
 - ☐ Website meets basic quality requirements (clear pages, no broken links)
 - ☐ Google Ad Grant account activated or ready
 - ☐ At least one Ad Grant campaign drafted (applications or eligibility)
-

Phase 5: Strengthen Ongoing Communication

- ☐ Newsletter sent monthly or quarterly
 - ☐ Each newsletter has one clear purpose
 - ☐ Newsletter links point to web pages (not PDFs)
 - ☐ Active on one or two social platforms only
 - ☐ Social posts include a clear next step (link, deadline, action)
-

Phase 6: Review, Learn, and Adjust

- ☐ Google Analytics set up
 - ☐ Website traffic reviewed monthly
 - ☐ Top pages and common exit points identified
 - ☐ Content updated based on real user behaviour
 - ☐ Accessibility and clarity reviewed regularly
-

Reminder

You do not need to:

- Redesign everything
- Use every platform
- Spend money to see improvement

Small, consistent actions build stronger access, trust, and efficiency over time.