

Putting Human Needs on the National Radar Screen

A BRIEF ON MESSAGING FOR HUMAN SERVICE AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS

JULY 2011

Why This Report

Human services and community development efforts build or rebuild the fabric of community, especially for individuals and families that are vulnerable and lack the mobility and opportunity of their better-off neighbors. Yet, with states in fiscal crisis and the federal government cutting spending with potentially unprecedented severity, human service and community development programs across the country have been cut dramatically over the past few years and face far deeper, potentially devastating cuts. These programs are little known or understood by the general public and policy makers. They are often perceived as discretionary or as “charity” when, in fact, they are more about providing opportunities for citizens to become fully functioning and contributing members of society. And for our most vulnerable

citizens—young children, the frail elderly, people with disabilities and fragile families—there are programs that provide engagement and protection.

Proposed cuts are so sweeping that they may leave millions in far more desperate conditions than the disadvantages they now experience.

Organizations and subsectors (e.g., youth, aging) are fighting for the programs needed by the people they serve as they always have, but times are different now. Proposed cuts are so sweeping that they threaten the infrastructure of community and may leave millions in far more desperate conditions than the disadvantages they now experience. Even as organizations



and advocates seek to sustain funding for particular programs, those in and supportive of our human development–community development system are called upon to begin the longer range process of raising awareness of the crisis and positing big-picture solutions.

People who favor deep budget cuts across the board may not know that programs and agencies they value will be cut or eliminated.

The language we use in making the case for human services and community development is a part of the challenge, and this document, which is based on a scan of relevant literature (including neural research on how people build perceptions), suggests language as an important element of the solution. In the end, though, new shared language is one component of what could and should be unprecedented collaboration, which holds the greatest potential for producing changed perceptions of human services and community development.

**The Situation;
The Challenge**

We are in an era where ideology trumps legitimate problem-solving; where unsubstantiated perceptions trump facts and where unwise decisions are made as a result. This document approaches this problem set from the vantage point of human service and community development programs, programs which help children develop to their full potential, enable people with disabilities and older adults to be assets not liabilities, provide pathways for low-income families and immigrants to climb the economic ladder, build communities, prevent and address problems associated with a host of social ills, from abuse to criminality and its effects. And yet these programs, which comprise by some estimates just twelve percent of federal expenditures, are among the first to be

cut in times of austerity. The problem is made much worse by the fact that over forty of the fifty states are in fiscal crisis and cutting human service and community development programs as well.

Are these programs, many of them delivered by community-based nonprofit organizations, driving state and federal deficits? There is little or no evidence that they are.

> *The Washington Post* on June 4, 2011 reported that there were three “votes that pushed us into the red”—the three were legislation authorizing tax cuts and spending for wars and economic stimulus. As the costs of these three escalated the deficit deepened.

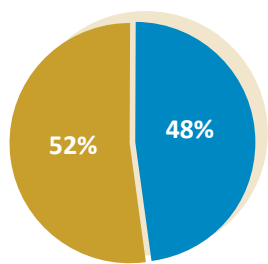
> It is assumed or asserted by some that entitlements are driving the deficit. While health care costs associated with Medicare and Medicaid are of concern to most and the numbers of people eligible for Social Security is rising due to demographic realities, increases in entitlements do not have the same level of impact on the economy as other factors, such as loss of revenue due to tax cuts and bail-outs. Entitlements are actually “renewable resources” in the sense that qualified people receive them and turn around and spend those dollars locally in their communities.

While there are advocates for individual programs, for various sets of programs and for programs for specific populations, the human development/community development sector lacks a clear voice and message. Important, individual organizations may be recognized but the fabric these various organizations and programs weave—the fabric that holds families and communities together—is invisible to many in the public and to policy makers.

Still thought of as charities, these community-based agencies and household names of caring in America have for decades now represented the best of privatization and public-private venture, a story little told and even less understood. While it is true

The Economic Health of the Nonprofit Sector Depends Upon Maintaining Diverse Sources of Revenue

- Government Grants, Contracts and Fees for Service
- Service Fees, Charitable Giving, Investment and Other Income



Source: Independent Sector

that these local organizations leverage irreplaceable support through charitable giving and volunteerism; on the whole, these sources of support are dwarfed by state and federal dollars—dollars by which the government has elected to deliver services through community-based organizations rather than public agencies.

In the communities hardest hit by the economic downturn and slowest to recover, human service and community development programs that nourish, sustain and develop people and communities are already in crisis. Overall, the cuts of the 2011 budget stung; proposed cuts for 2012 and 2013 could be devastating.

In short, the human service–community development sector is nearing a state of crisis and that does not bode well for individuals and communities who lack the opportunities and resources that many Americans enjoy.

Advocates for human and community development must use this pivotal moment as an opportunity to talk about what we do in new ways, eschewing the current “all or nothing” approaches in favor of more nuanced solutions. These solutions must be primarily based on policy options that break new ground, and also on innovative and more effective messaging. Not political spin, but knowledge-based assertions that appeal to a wide audience and that strive to our highest and most realistic aspirations for our fellow citizens and our way of life with adequate and appropriate levels of government investment.

Framing: A Potential Solution

Much like cherished memories are stored in the complex neural networks of the brain, so too are personal preferences and moral values. These, in turn, significantly affect what observers “hear” in public discourse. Recent advancements in brain imaging have allowed more precise observation



of the human brain as it thinks, in real time. This research offers important insights into how people process information. Of particular relevance to professionals that use data, facts and evidence to advocate in the policy arena, the findings indicate that people interpret incoming data in line with information previously stored in their long term memory. In other words, data that is similar to what the individual has already been exposed to tend to be reinforced, and contradictory data, counter-intuitively, only reinforces what one previously thought as well. Increased understanding of these core concepts associated with neural processing of information can be instructive as organizations and advocates seek the understanding of both the American people and policymakers.¹

The essential concept that can inform efforts to more effectively message the work of the human and community development sector is *framing*, whereby established neural networks in the brain are used to sort through words and other stimuli from the outside world. Frames are physical systems of neural circuitry which house concepts and points of view. They help individuals decide which aspects

of incoming information “fit” with current concepts an individual agrees with (e.g., one’s religious beliefs), and ultimately play the role of gatekeeper in assuring that information in support of a rival point of view is not allowed to gain traction and influence beliefs. Usage of frames to understand the world is one of the most fundamental ways that humans process information.²

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These intricate neural frames which store patriotism, faith, and political affiliation react much like the body does to exercise; the more one physically exerts parts of the body, the stronger they become. The same formula applies in the mind, where neural circuitry is strengthened through use and, in many cases, made permanent over time through exposure to reinforcing words and other stimuli. Once a central concept becomes deeply ingrained in the mind, it is difficult to dislodge, as any language around that concept merely strengthens the overarching frame.

The degree to which one agrees with a certain point of view translates into the size of the neural network housing that belief. For example, as agreement with a philosophical argument becomes stronger as a result of persistent messaging, the corresponding neural network becomes denser. Conversely, the network housing a

contrasting point of view becomes weaker. The ramifications of this are that the dominant network will influence incoming information and dictate which aspects are allowed to enter the subconscious. It becomes necessary to understand the frames of message recipients—different prevailing points of view, therefore—to effectively communicate.

Framing and Language

Words activate frames. Therefore, it is essential to carefully consider how language used will interact with the frames of the audience. When coming into contact with external stimuli from the outside world, the “gut reaction” is determined by a tally of past associations with similar words, sights or sounds. These previous experiences help to translate newly received information into cues that trigger emotions. Assuring a positive first impression with the audience of a messaging effort means generating the right emotions in their minds. This, in turn, activates particular frames which dictate our cognitive response to a given issue.³

Human brains process emotional responses faster than thoughts,⁴ meaning a new messaging campaign may fail to resonate due to negative emotions occurring early on in response to the language used. Political ads from rival parties can evoke anger or frustration, triggering political frames to disregard the ad’s information as false or ridiculous. The examples at left, drawn from a number of polls and studies (e.g., Lake, Gould in following Sources list), represent efforts to transition from words which produce negative feelings in particular audience demographics to more positive emotional responses. The use of such terms allows messaging efforts to get a foothold with the audience’s subconscious. The positive emotional response to the terms allows a seed to be planted for a larger frame to grow over time and reshape the audience’s point of view on a particular issue.

Examples of Framing

- > “Solutions” vs. “problems”
- > “Opportunity” vs. “poverty”
- > “Vulnerable populations” vs. “poor”
- > “Economic security” vs. “safety net”

The Framing Paradox

Evidence has shown that because words activate frames, there are roadblocks that can detour well-intentioned messaging. Studies conducted at the University of Michigan found that repeated language around denying or clarifying contentious issues can paradoxically strengthen peoples' current beliefs. In the Michigan studies, fact sheets aimed at correcting commonly held myths on the flu vaccine were distributed. For both older adults and younger responders, the outcomes were similar: people remembered the myths as factual over time. Explanations point to the subconscious nature of framing, and the extent to which established, yet incorrect, concepts can *feel* right.

Members of the nonprofit community face frequent struggles over explaining their sector and its significance, and intuitively fight back against misinformation and stereotypes with facts and counter-arguments. However, framing principles suggests that each time messaging incites a contentious issue such as federal benefits; simply

counter-arguing with facts strengthens the frame housing the incorrect information. Furthermore, the fact that an area needs to be countered highlights that a particular frame is *already* ingrained in the audiences mind. The neural circuitry housing the myth or stereotype is dense, and requires counter-arguments based on a new narrative—not dispelling myths or inaccuracies.

Recommended Strategies for Human Service–Community Development Messaging

Bolstered by knowledge of language and framing, targeted messaging efforts can lead to effective advocacy efforts, even in a challenging political climate. As research indicates, this is particularly important when approaching a politically diverse audience. With many Americans unconsciously wary of certain frameworks, human and community development organizations would be well advised to employ depoliticized language in their communications.



While this strategy presents some clear advantages, it is critical to ensure that the substance of a message is not lost in an attempt to appeal to a wider audience. For example, during the 2010 political debate over healthcare reform, Congressional Democrats and the Obama administration attempted to court conservative voters and legislators by employing conservative talking points and watering down key provisions of the healthcare reform bill. They succeeded in passing the legislation, but lost what some Democrats held to be important provisions of the law.

Use of jargon reinforces old frames and is therefore not helpful when seeking to change perceptions. In addition, rather than positioning the field as a sector, organizations should make clear that their mission is bigger than their brands, and that their ultimate goal is *society's* wish to care for and protect the vulnerable and to provide pathways and opportunities for the disadvantaged to become contributing members of the community.



Literally changing the conversation around a contentious issue is also an area of potential advantage for the nonprofit community. With research suggesting that denials merely strengthen certain frames, creating new narratives which speak of particular demographics (e.g., children, older adults, and people with disabilities) can force rivals to begin denying or counter-arguing the story and its concepts. Thus, those who lead have the advantage over those who respond. Appealing to an audience through a new narrative route can bypass the dominant frames acting as roadblocks. A fresh interpretation raises few red flags in the audience's subconscious frames, and allows human and community development organizations to begin building new perceptions around their work.

Messaging to Constituents and Policymakers

Given the politically polarized nature of the nation's electorate and policymakers, it is also important to appeal to both conservative and progressive values. With regard to human services, key differences lie in frameworks through which people view American society.

Individuals more aligned with the left of the political spectrum tend to view American society as a vast network of social, cultural, and economic systems that connect all citizens. According to this lens, the wealthiest and healthiest among us are directly connected to the poorest and weakest among us, and society has a responsibility to support those in need.

In contrast, perspectives on the political right tend to see personal responsibility as the critical determinant of one's life chances in America. This perspective views one's position in society as the result of personal choices, although it acknowledges that not all people are born into situations conducive to optimal decision making.

Using only one of these two frames will rarely be effective in reaching both groups, however carefully incorporating elements of both can lead to success.⁵ And, certainly, for most involved in human services and community development, the interconnectedness of people and personal responsibility are compatible.

IDENTIFYING THE FRAME

Beyond the very broad “political” frames suggested above (connectedness, personal responsibility), what is the alternate frame—the more representative picture of reality—you would like constituents at all levels to know, appreciate and believe? If you and your cohorts are trying to project that what you are doing collectively to help fragile families or to ensure that more children succeed or to enable more older adults to live long and prosper, develop a way of talking that resonates with people not caught up in the day to day of service delivery. The “new” picture—the frame—is not a vision or a set of aspirations; it is reality put in a way that fills gaps in understanding and connects with values that most Americans share.

CONSTITUENTS

Although most Americans have been exposed to human service and community development efforts in their own lives, there is a widespread lack of knowledge about the field in the general public. There are a number of strategies that have been employed in other settings that can be applied here in an effort to effectively communicate with Americans.

> **Employ Facts:** Employing one or two strong, even surprising, facts that elicit attention can have a significant impact on listeners of all political stripes.



However, attaching more than a couple of facts to a message can reduce its efficacy. Additionally, “myths vs. facts” lists are to be avoided, as presenting false information does not necessarily debunk myths and can often reinforce them. A solid example comes from The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, which has brought together a number of national stakeholders to close the reading achievement gap between low-income students and their peers. Armed with comprehensive data, the campaign has targeted third-grade reading proficiency, which it identifies as a key indicator of life chances. This focused approach presents one basic fact as a potential solution, and has begun capturing attention as a result.⁶

> **Take a Broad Focus:** Addressing wider community impacts instead of citing a specific group allows all listeners to identify with the issue at hand, regardless of religious, ethnic, or socioeconomic group. More general language makes issues more accessible and relatable to audiences of different backgrounds. This approach also avoids scapegoating and

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the reinforcement of negative stereotypes that often evoke negative responses.

- > **Focus on Solutions:** Problems need to be clearly defined, but they should only be the subject of relatively brief discussion while the focus remains solutions-oriented. Providing a laundry list of issues is rarely as effective as sharing action items or ideas that can be used to create positive change. Focusing on a single organization or strategy can come across as self-serving and add to the confusion, e.g., the listener may wonder how to incorporate organizational specific ideas when there are so many other great agencies competing for attention.
- > **Avoid Judgmental Language:** Depending on the issue being discussed, value judgments can be alienating to different populations. Adjectives like *immoral*, *unjust*, and *unconscionable* may be effective appeals for certain groups, but in challenging fiscal environments they may not always make a compelling case.

POLICYMAKERS

Communicating with people in government across partisan lines is a challenge, given the current divisions across the various camps. However, there are a few key strategies that may prove effective with both sides of the political aisle:

- > **Evidence-Based Results:** With increasingly scarce resources, policymakers

want to ensure that strategies they fund are proven to be effective. Supporting efforts with substantive research helps make a stronger case for particular policies and programs. Comprehensive, quantitative data can bolster claims of effective programming and often make a case for scalability.

- > **Return on Investment:** Beyond demonstrating effectiveness, a successful advocacy effort would also indicate that near-term resource investments will result in long-term gains. For example, in addition to reducing long-term public costs for treatment, rehabilitation, and incarceration, human service and community development programs create real value by providing members of society with opportunities to contribute to the economy.
- > **National Prosperity and Competitiveness:** As our nation's leadership and education advocates have emphasized in recent years, the state of a nation's children is a strong indicator of its long-term prospects for global competitiveness. An educated workforce is essential to leadership on the international stage, and American youth are currently being outpaced by their global peers according to a number of indicators.
- > **Pay Now or Pay Later:** Investing in certain supports for Americans of all ages now can prevent serious costs in the future. Excessive idle time and lack of supervision will ultimately cost young people, their families and society more than child care and youth development programs. Similarly, the lack of reading skills in the early grades and lack of community mental health services result in much greater costs in public safety, incarceration, etc. than adequate services in childhood and young adulthood. On the other end of the services spectrum, older citizens without adequate housing options and community-based care incur much greater expenses, often on society's dime, than if they had been able to age in place.

Amplifying the Message

Informed by recent challenges and missed opportunities, nonprofit organizations can employ these strategies to further their work and create a paradigm shift in the field. Here are a few key ways that groups can partner to accomplish this goal:

> **Communicate Interdependence:**

There is a direct connection between the future success of Americans and the services human and community development organizations provide. With the array of issues facing children, families, and communities, it is often necessary for a number of agencies with different specialties to work in tandem to achieve the desired results for a family or individual. The fact that the work of multiple agencies is greater than the sum of its parts is a frame-breaking message.

> **Maintain a Coherent Narrative:**

Messages on human services and community development must be clear and consistent across agencies. Organizations should be proactive and intentional about raising awareness and influencing public perceptions of the impact of their work on individual, community and family well-being. This would include collaborative framing and messaging strategies.

> **Build a “Big Tent”:** Break organizational silos and develop partnerships with a wide range of organizations serving similar populations. Allies from different areas in the field can collaborate to present a united front against threats to funding. By contextualizing the work of individual agencies against the backdrop of strategies writ large, supporters of this work can avoid being pitted against colleague organizations by lawmakers and funders.

> **It’s Bigger than the Brand:** Ensure that individual agency interests do not impede collaboration. Unlike for-profit businesses that often take competitive stances against one another for strategic reasons, nonprofit human service and community development agencies are created to address specific social issues. While

all organizations must look out for their own interests, they should also prioritize their greater mission and vision, which, more often than not speaks to the greater good rather than the singular success of a given organization.

> **Kick It Up a Notch:** By focusing on integrated service delivery (e.g., multi-agency approaches by which services and other supports are linked for maximum impact) and other “macro” level changes, human service agencies of all kinds can help policymakers appreciate that there are solutions besides all or nothing cuts. Lift the conversation from saving programs to strategies for meeting needs we know we must in ways that acknowledge fiscal and political realities.

Be bold, be visionary. No one is better equipped to propose better, more efficient and more rational approaches to human needs, human development and community development than those who toil in those very vineyards. Based on the best available research and the shared experience of your own and colleague organizations in your given realm of service (e.g., youth, aging, disabilities, families), give policymakers alternatives—alternatives to cutting as a solution, alternatives that build caring and productive citizens and communities and that connect with and complement other necessary public investments (e.g., education, infrastructure).

It should perhaps go without saying, but put a human face on it. Share evidence of success and stories of real people.

And engage clients, volunteers, board members and donors in understanding and communicating new and improved messaging.



Getting to a New Narrative for the Needs Your Organization Serves

Instructions: These pages are intended as worksheets to get you started on establishing a new or better narrative for the needs and services your organization and sub-sector addresses. The prompts provided below are just that, prompts, to get you started on a more intensive process. That said, given the budget challenges the human service and community development sectors face, time is of the essence.

We suggest this kind of process be approached from the standpoint of a service system or subset of human services or community development, not from that of a particular agency or program. The service system or subset of human or community needs is as you and your colleagues define it. Examples are child and youth development or early child development and positive youth development within that broader system; families; aging; disabilities; mental health; community development. The point of a narrative is to present a compelling, well-researched, achievable vision of how a set of human needs can be addressed more efficiently and effectively than current fragmented, siloed funding and approaches now allow.

While an individual reader or organization might get started on this kind of process, as the brief suggests, it is best for those who share a common service “space” to develop and employ the same narrative. As such, this process is best done in collaboration with others in the space your organization occupies.

Consider the following questions.

Do you know how people outside your circle of clients and supporters perceive the needs your organization represents? Look to research and polls on perceptions relative to meeting the needs of disadvantaged youth, older adults, people with disabilities, or whatever population and needs your organization serves. Bear in mind that you are looking for how the general public understands and “frames” what agencies in your area of need do, not how well recognized or valued your brand. Summarize what you find here.

If you captured a truly objective sense of how those who do not know you well perceive the needs your organization and its allies address, add to that how the general public and public officials feel about using public funds to meet those needs. Summarize that here, based on your reading of the NHSA brief and other evidence you observe yourself, e.g., how is public funding for x needs faring, what have researchers and other writers observed about how human services and community stack up in public priorities? Are they, as the brief suggests, below the public “radar screen” or do you see evidence that the needs your organization serves are seen another way? And as the paper suggests, consider how the left and right view using public funds to meet these needs. Summarize that in your own words.

Combine the two and you have defined the current frame for feelings about the needs your subsector (of the larger human service–community development sector) addresses. Test that frame on associates and colleagues (perhaps even some public officials) to see if they think you’ve got it right.

Organizations are funded to do certain things in certain ways, but what is the vision or the prevailing wisdom of how things should be in terms of meeting the needs your organization is associated with? Maybe the funding goes to institutional care, for example, but you and others in the subsector know that providing certain supports and incentives to families and engaging clients in certain ways would lead to far more cost effective solutions and better results (enabling older adults to age in place...with supports and family involvement, for example). What is that big idea, how does it require better connections with now-siloed other sectors (e.g., education, health care). How is it more efficient and effective than current practice and policy?

What other kinds of organizations and sectors are crucial parts of the big idea or solution? Work with them in developing this new narrative.

What role does public funding play in moving from current practice and policy to this bigger, newer vision? What about clients' own resources, third party payors, philanthropy? What is the necessary configuration of these various sources to make it work?

Take a shot at writing a high-level version of this new narrative, one that appeals to values that Americans tend to share, that uses language as suggested in the brief, that demonstrates to policymakers the importance of meeting the needs in question AND demonstrates to them that there are alternatives to just cutting funding.

Determine with your partners how to engage strategic policy makers and publics who can help tell the story, including clients, board members, volunteers, and supporters, i.e., what are some of the key steps to getting your new narrative on the radar screen?



Conclusion

The literature suggests that speaking of opportunity is better than decrying poverty and disadvantage, that suggesting solutions is better than enumerating problems, that appealing to our common interests simply and in precise language is an advantage, that myth-busting is myth-enforcing. At a time of dramatically shifting sands, messaging and collaboration matter. Fighting parochial battles individually can yield some wins but lose the war. Messaging that:

- > better resonates with the public and policy makers;
- > is tested and consistent with the concept of framing;

- > speaks to the greater good valued by most Americans;
- > reflects the inter-dependence of resources and approaches;
- > changes narratives in new and constructive ways; and
- > is presented collaboratively across what might otherwise be seen as “vested interests” ...

holds greater potential for changing perceptions and developing greater appreciation of the important role of human services and community development.

Endnotes

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