



REFRAMING PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR HUMAN SERVICES

HOW A NEW INITIATIVE IS REENGAGING THE PUBLIC AND BUILDING UNDERSTANDING FOR HUMAN SERVICE PROGRAMS

BY ILSA FLANAGAN

As leaders in the field, you understand the vitally important role that human services plays in creating a thriving society. You have first-hand knowledge of the prevention programs that build a foundation for long-term success. You understand the breadth and variety of services that people need throughout their lives. You identify and address systemic challenges that contribute to inequities in well-being.

And yet, despite all that we know about the value of human services and our best attempts to articulate that value, over the last decade the sector has experienced deep cuts in public and private funding. What we're seeing is a disconnect between what we as a sector know to be true about human services, and what the public understands.

The challenge of engaging the public as allies and supporters of human services prompted the National Human Services Assembly (the Assembly) to

step back and consider a critical question: *How can we communicate the value and rich potential of human services in a way that resonates with the public?*

With generous support from the Kresge Foundation and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Assembly launched the *National Reframing Human Services Initiative* to help answer that question. The initiative seeks to build public understanding of human services to encourage more vibrant civic participation and deepen support for effective programs. We engaged the FrameWorks Institute (FrameWorks), renowned for their rigorous, evidence-based approach to communications, to take our field through their *Strategic Frame Analysis*[®] process. In doing so, FrameWorks uncovered the deeply held assumptions that people rely on to think about human services, and identified an effective narrative that the sector can use to elicit deeper engagement from the public.

“As a field, we must immerse ourselves in the Frameworks research and begin to apply it if we are to have a more effective narrative for the human service sector. We have a compelling story to tell of how human services supports the building of the well-being of all children and families, and leads to stronger communities. As we get better at sharing why our work matters, our ability to present solutions and impact policy will improve.”

—Tracy Wareing Evans,
Executive Director, APHSA

UNDERSTANDING THE CURRENT HUMAN SERVICE STORY

As a first step in our reframing initiative, FrameWorks undertook a series of studies to gain a comprehensive understanding of how the public currently views human services. Through interviews with leaders in human services and members of the public, researchers identified and distilled key differences between how the field and how the public understand human services.

Leaders in the field understand the term “human services” as encompassing a complex and vibrant set of approaches that ultimately benefit every member of society. We include in our definition services and policies that are designed to promote well-being at every stage of life. We define “well-being” holistically, including physical, emotional, spiritual, social, and financial factors.

The general public, on the other hand, has a much more narrow view of the work of the field. To the public, “well-being” is limited to physical health or financial security and understood to be something that

Figure 1: What will it take to reframe human services?

A FrameWorks Institute analysis of public vs. expert thinking revealed key goals for redefining public perceptions of the sector.

AVOID	ADVANCE
Leaving “human services” for the public to define	Broader, fuller picture of the sector: research, advocacy, direct services
Charity work	Skilled, essential profession
Safety net for the vulnerable	Varying supports for all kinds of people
PROBLEM, PROBLEM, PROBLEM solution?	problem SOLUTIONS, SOLUTIONS, SOLUTIONS

Figure 2: Outline of the Building Well-Being Narrative

A FrameWorks Institute analysis of public vs. expert thinking revealed key goals for redefining public perceptions of the sector.

I. WHAT IS AT STAKE?



Human Potential

Lead with the **Human Potential** Value to help people recognize that everyone needs support and that human services benefit us all

II. WHAT KIND OF SUPPORT DO PEOPLE NEED?



Construction

Use the **Construction** Explanatory Metaphor to explain what well-being is and how it is shaped

III. WHAT THREATENS WELL-BEING?



Construction

Use extensions and implications of the metaphor—like spotty construction and unpredictable weather—to explain how context affects outcomes

IV. HOW DO WE ENSURE WELL-BEING FOR ALL?



Construction

Use the **Construction** Explanatory Metaphor to help people reason about the different ways that human services support well-being



Life Cycle

Use **Life Cycle** examples to give people a concrete understanding of the full scope of human services

Source: FrameWorks Institute



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individuals are responsible for crafting themselves, through good choices and willpower. Working from these two mental models, people come to a limited range of conclusions. Human services are only “for” a limited set of people who are failing to meet their own needs. Any support should be temporary, lest individual willpower be weakened further through dependency. Individual acts of charity are

adequate substitutes for a robust public human service sector.

FrameWorks’ findings, released in July 2013,¹ confirmed what many of us in the field suspected. If we want the public to appreciate the value of human services, our field needs a bold new communications strategy that offers a better definition of our work. Figure 1 summarizes some of the key tasks that any redefinition must accomplish.

BUILDING WELL-BEING: A NEW NARRATIVE FOR HUMAN SERVICES

Armed with the knowledge of the public's view of human services, the Assembly again partnered with FrameWorks, this time to identify a new narrative for human services that captured and conveyed the rich and complex work of the sector. Between February and July 2015, FrameWorks developed a set of potential reframing strategies and systematically tested them. Researchers conducted qualitative and quantitative experiments with close to 5,000 Americans across the country to validate a new frame for human services.

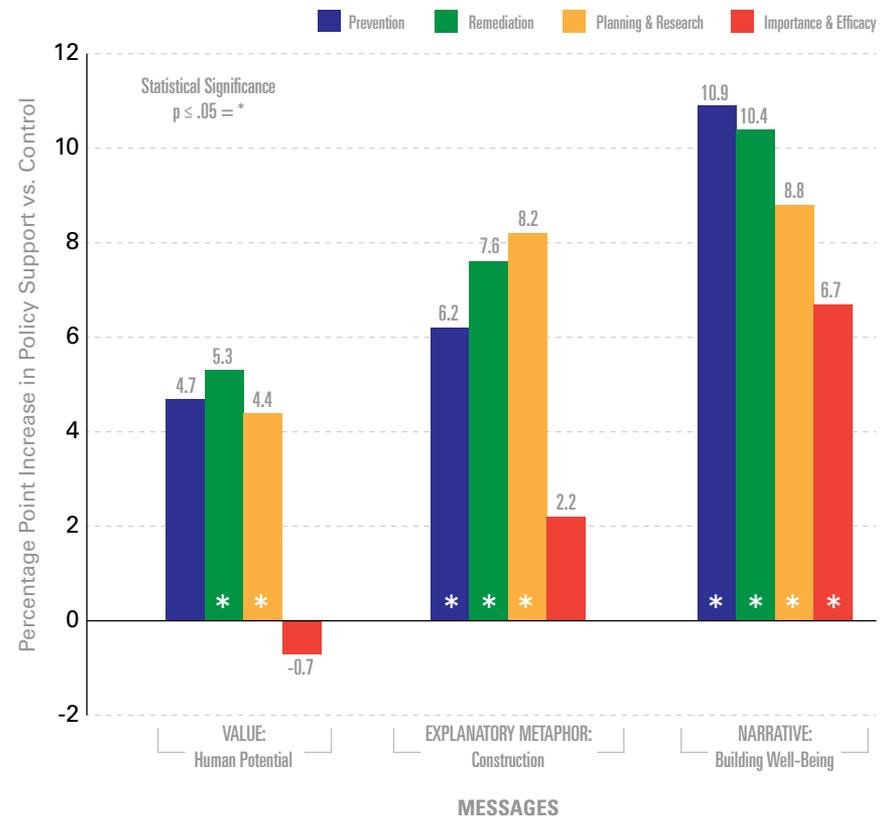
Through this rigorous process, FrameWorks identified an overarching story that significantly improved the public's understanding of what human services are and why they are important. We call it the *Building Well-Being Narrative*.

According to Strategic Frame Analysis, an effective story on a social problem “widens the lens” beyond individuals. Instead of seeking to merely “put a face on the issue,” a reframing narrative “puts a frame on an issue.” It establishes why an issue matters to society by invoking a widely held value that connects people to the issue in a productive way. It uses explanatory techniques such as metaphors and examples to fill in public thinking on an issue, making expert assumptions accessible to the ordinary person. FrameWorks research has shown definitively that when deciding which value, metaphor, or example to use, the question should not be left to guesswork. Instead, the framing studies sponsored by the Assembly lead us to these strategies and themes:

Open with an appeal to the Value of Human Potential, which taps into the belief that communities thrive when all people can realize their full potential.

Expand the frame for human services beyond “bare basics for the deserving poor” by using the Explanatory Metaphor of Constructing Well-Being, which identifies well-being as something that is built, drawing on a common understanding of the range of materials, resources, and expertise required

Figure 3: Reframing is Most Effective with a Complete Narrative



Source: FrameWorks Institute

to plan, construct, and maintain a building, dwelling, or community.

Reframe the assumption that human services should be temporary by drawing on Explanatory Examples that come from across the Life Cycle.

Communicators should use examples of how human services support people in at least three stages of life—childhood, adulthood, and older age—to advance the understanding that human services is about fostering healthy human development.

ACTIVATING THE NEW FRAME FOR HUMAN SERVICES

Now that we have a research-based approach to reframing human services, here are some guidelines to help you implement the *Building Well-Being Narrative*.

First, FrameWorks' research shows that the frame elements should be used together as a complete Narrative in order to see the full benefits of the reframing.

“When we keep in mind that we are testing very brief frames in these experiments—sometimes the frame that we are testing consists of only 10–15 words—it’s amazing that we see measurable

differences in how these messages move public opinion. The results from the Building Well-Being Narrative are among the most robust frame effects we’ve seen in our research across social issues over the past 15 years.”

—Dr. Nat Kendall-Taylor,
CEO of the FrameWorks Institute

Second, the order in which we introduce various points matters almost as much as the messages we use. In our field, we have been conditioned to state the problem upfront, define the magnitude of the problem, and then shift toward solutions. The framing research tells us that it is more effective to establish two preconditions before introducing the problem at all. First, people must understand why the problem should be understood as a public issue that concerns us all. This is the work that the frame element of Values can do. Second, people must have a productive way to conceptualize an issue that lets them think systematically. This is the work that Explanatory Metaphors and Examples can do. If we do not actively promote a productive

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practices, and provides technical assistance to workforce development organizations and systems.

SJI has become a leading expert on SNAP Employment and Training (E&T). For more than a decade, SJI has been an integral partner in the development and expansion of Washington State's highly successful SNAP E&T program, the Basic Food Employment and Training Program (BFET). The organization is currently partnering with the National Skills Coalition to assist other states in developing and operating skills-based SNAP E&T programs. SJI also raises awareness about and advocates for the critical need of low-income and low-skilled individuals for greater access to the training and education they need to advance in their career and bring their families out of poverty.

SJI is proving to be a leader in transforming the workforce development system. Aside from offering expertise on SNAP E&T programming, SJI has developed a comprehensive system of best practices for case management, job readiness, and job development.

It conducted original research to define and advocate for the function of "career and college navigation," community-based support for low-income and low-skilled individuals to continue in community college and secure gainful employment. This function is gaining traction in the field. SJI has also developed a training model with community colleges that works well for low-income and low-skilled adults and has been shown to lead to higher rates of job placement and retention.

Today, SJI has sharpened its focus on significantly increasing its impact by developing and sharing expertise in workforce development with government, nonprofit, and other agencies and organizations to help them increase their effectiveness in assisting low-income individuals and populations to advance from poverty to self-sufficiency.

SNAP E&T Center of Excellence

In October 2015, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)

announced that it had chosen SJI to establish and operate the SNAP E&T Center of Excellence. SNAP E&T is a critical, but often underutilized, tool in states' workforce development systems. The Center of Excellence will build on best practices that help low-income workers acquire skills and attain gainful employment that can lead to greater economic stability and opportunity for themselves and their families. Through the Center of Excellence, SJI will support, guide, and empower a number of states to build stronger job-driven E&T programs for SNAP consumers. It will develop tools and resources that states can use to expand and improve their SNAP E&T programs. It will be responsible for developing a virtual hub for the exchange of ideas, best practices, and relevant research. It will also offer enhanced technical assistance to a targeted group of states. 

Mary Brodgon was APHSA's assistant director of strategic initiatives at press time.

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definition of our work, we risk having our audience default to inaccurate, but culturally dominant, ideas about our sector. The upshot: Spend more time establishing the public nature of the problem and the broad frame needed to think about solutions—before introducing statistics or other illustrations of the extent of the problem.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

In collaboration with the Assembly, FrameWorks developed a robust set of free tools to better equip human service professionals as they integrate this new narrative into their communications strategies. *The Building a New Narrative on Human Services Toolkit*² includes talking points, tips for professionals looking to increase their comfort level with communicating

within the new frame, FAQs, and background information on the research informing the reframing recommendations. Communicators can also refer to *Talking Human Services: A FrameWorks Multi-Media Message Memo*,³ which synthesizes the research that informed the development of the new frame and offers recommendations for the human service field to utilize the frame to more effectively communicate the scope and value of their work.

The power of the new narrative is greatest when its use is ubiquitous and consistent. Together, we can use these concrete, actionable tools to establish a collective and resonant voice that clearly articulates the value of the human service sector, and ensure that everyone thrives across generations and circumstance. 

About the National Human Services Assembly: As the collective voice for the nation's leading human service organizations, the National Human Services Assembly seeks to cultivate a society that provides the necessary foundation and supports for everyone to reach their full potential and fully contribute to our communities.

Reference Notes

1. Baran, M., Lindland, E., Kendall-Taylor, N., & Kohut, M. (2013). *Handed to Them on a Plate: Mapping the Gaps Between Expert and Public Understanding of Human Services*. July 2013. <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/humanservices/NHSAMaptheGaps-Final7-31-13.pdf>
2. Available at <http://frameworksinstitute.org/toolkits/humanservices>
3. Available at <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/pubs/mm/talkinghumanservices>