White paper

Changing the conversation about human services

How to reframe your message to improve public understanding and enhance fundraising

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About the author

Ms. Bridget Gavaghan is helping communities across the country tell the public a new story about human services. She has spent her career promoting effective strategies designed to yield significant societal benefits. Prior to joining the National Reframing Initiative, she led Prevent Child Abuse America's public policy program. She began her career at United Way of America, where she co-chaired national coalitions and engaged the organization's network in advocacy on behalf of a range of public policy priorities, including 2-1-1, federal human service funding, and charitable giving tax incentives. Previously, Bridget directed advocacy communications projects at Sustain, a national nonprofit that was dedicated to environmental and social justice issues.

Human service community-based organizations (CBOs) strive to foster physical, emotional, financial, and social well-being at every stage of life. Fundraising and advocacy are critical to this goal. Yet many CBOs struggle to attract meaningful, sustained support resulting in the following common challenges:

1. Stagnating public and private funding that hinders CBOs' ability to address community issues and priorities and can lead to cuts in services and supports over time;

2. The CBO workforce's value and expertise are not well understood, making it difficult for CBOs to get a seat at the table when important decisions are made in our communities;

3. Misperceptions about who benefits from human services and why human services are necessary can get in the way of building support for effective solutions.

The National Human Services Assembly's (NHSA) Reframing Initiative is a communications approach designed to overcome these disconnects. It is based on research from the FrameWorks Institute, a renowned communications think tank, that examined not just what the public thinks about human services, but why and how culture influences public decision-making on human services.

Public perceptions of well-being

The FrameWorks Institute began their research into human services by assessing the public's view on well-being. Through focus groups and interviews they asked members of the public a range of questions designed to uncover deeply rooted and widely shared views about human services, like:

- **What does it take to do well in life?**

- **If somebody is not doing well, why?**

- **What kind of support might somebody need throughout life?**

FrameWorks found the public's number one criteria for defining well-being is financial self-sufficiency, though physical health was also important. In short, if you have a job and you're not sick, then you're probably doing okay!

Other aspects of well-being considered essential by human service leaders, like social connections and emotional and mental health, were largely missing from the public's responses. When asked to consider what it takes to do well in life, the public pointed to individual attributes and behaviors that contribute to financial self-sufficiency and physical health. Grit. Motivation. Determination. Willpower. A strong work ethic. If someone needs support, the public assumes that person probably isn't trying hard enough.

Public perceptions of human services

When the public is asked about human services, they typically think about food, shelter, and clothing — basic needs provided on a temporary basis to people in acute crisis. And while addressing hunger and homelessness are critical aspects of human services, the public sees the sector's response to these issues in a limited way – a cot for a night in a shelter or a meal at a soup kitchen. When asked to consider who provides these services, the public identifies the sector's workforce as kind and compassionate, but rarely sees the professionalism, education, training, business acumen, and public policy expertise involved in their work.

Recognizing the gaps in public understanding of human services

FrameWorks also asked leaders in the field to answer the same questions posed to the public. By comparing these answers, important information gaps emerged, including:

1. **The scope of human services.**
    Most people only see the direct services provided to people in crisis. Human service leaders identified a much broader scope that includes strategies like advocacy, prevention, research, evaluation, planning, and collaboration.

2. **The causes of social problems.**
    The public points to individual attributes like bad behavior or a lack of effort as the cause of challenges. Human service leaders had a broader context, identifying social determinants, inherited community conditions, economic downturns, and personal catastrophes as the cause of many of the social ills.

3. **The responsibility.**
    Since the public believes individuals have put themselves into a situation where they need support, the public also sees the individual as responsible for getting out of that situation. Human service leaders on the other hand see the need for civic, collective action to address the underlying conditions.

4. **The beneficiaries.**
    This narrow view of human services and the cause of social problems leads the public to see beneficiaries of human services as a narrow slice of the population rather than as a social good that all people benefit from.

Communications implications of the gaps in understanding

Because common public perceptions are in sharp contrast to the everyday experience of most human services professionals, we often craft messages that can backfire with the public. For example, consider an appeal like this:

"In these tough times, people need more support, not less. This is not a time to cut funding to human service issues."

The public doesn't have the information they need to know if that's a good idea or a bad idea. So they're much more likely to think of it in these terms:

"Yeah. These are tough economic times. People who are getting those programs have a better quality of life than the rest of us. Must be nice to have someone else pick up the tab."

The sample appeal assumes the public understands that systemic challenges, often the result of the institutions, policies, and environment, are the driving force behind why more support is needed. Because the example message fails to fill in the gaps for the public, the public relies on what they believe they know to be true – that human services are for people in crisis, and that people are in crisis because of their own decisions and actions.

From this perspective, it's very easy for the public to see human services as a zero-sum game where the dollars of hard-working people go to those who are not trying hard enough. This can lead to resentment of human services and the people who receive them.

Common cultural models

Human beings are presented with a lot of information at once. We cannot possibly make rational, intentional decisions about everything that comes our way. So we use cultural models to process information. These mental shortcuts rely largely on our beliefs to make decisions quickly, without a lot of conscious reasoning. These beliefs are very powerful. People are more likely to reject facts and data that do not align with their beliefs, rather than reject the beliefs.

These cultural models are shared patterns of understanding across the society, based on the stories that we have told ourselves — in some cases for generations and centuries — about who we are and what is important to us. Here are two cultural models that FrameWorks identified as dominating the way many people process information about human services.

Individualism

The cultural model of individualism can be summed up this way: if you work hard enough, you can do anything you want on your own. You don't need support, you need grit and determination.

When we present our clients to the public as victims, with labels like "vulnerable" or "at-risk," we unintentionally trigger this model of individualism that can neutralize the effectiveness of our appeals. These conditions are seen as the result of poor choices and a lack of effort.

Fatalism

Non-profits are taught to bring high levels of urgency to fundraising and advocacy appeals. This leads to a lot of crisis language where we talk about how enormous the problems are in order to generate action. Unfortunately, this constant state of crisis creates the opposite of action, paralysis. The public soon believes the problem is too big to solve.

Fatalism also leads to skepticism over time. When people constantly hear that the doors are going to close, or the community is going to suffer, and then life feels basically the same on a day-to-day basis, people start to wonder what's really true.

The Swamp

Individualism and fatalism can defeat our messaging if we are not conscious of them. They create a "swamp" of negative perceptions that are difficult to overcome. To move people out of the swamp, you must reframe the way the public answers these four questions.

What is well-being?

Your communications must help the public see well-being as more than financial self-sufficiency or physical health. Security, mental health, and fulfillment are all part of personal well-being and healthy communities.

What threatens well-being?

Personal crises can happen to anyone, and they are the result of more than just lack of willpower, or uncontrollable problems like poor parenting or dangerous communities. Social determinants of health and other factors within the control of a community play a role in the hardships people face. We must foster a healthy way for people to think about the importance of collective responsibility.

How do we improve well-being?

Many in the public believe that government is too inept and corrupt to play a role in fostering well-being. When human service advocates are critical of law makers, rather than having productive dialogue about how to improve policy, we play into this concept.

What are human services and how do they work?

The public will naturally fall into the cognitive hole that human services are simply one-off acts of charity that meet basic human needs on a temporary basis. It is essential to provide a fuller, richer picture of the research-driven, outcomes-based professionalism human service staff bring to their jobs every day.

Communications traps

Some of our most embedded communications habits are the very triggers that pull public thinking into the swamp. These traps include:

"Othering"

We often label people as vulnerable. At risk. Needy. These are conditions no one wants to be associated with. These labels make it easy for the public to say, "That's somebody else, that's not me." Othering also minimizes the obvious conditions in society that create vulnerability and risks, and makes hardship a personal attribute.

Well-meaning advocates will often try to flip this around by highlighting the worthiness of the people we're helping with statements like, "They're just children," or "These are hard-working families." Such ideas may be true, but they reinforce the notion that there are other unworthy people. And it's those "unworthy people" that the public thinks benefit most from these services.

Focus on financial well-being

We often use language like "self-sufficiency" and "independence" to drive appeals. Again, this makes it easy to fall back on cultural models that suggest people simply need to pick themselves up and get a job.

Human service stereotyping

We also undermine our own cause when we emphasize charity and compassion, or when we wear out the public's attention by playing up crises. We reinforce negative perceptions with outdated metaphors like the "safety net," which defaults to basic needs for people in crisis. And we tend to use a lot of jargon and terms that the public doesn't understand, which makes it more likely they will shut out what we're saying.

Why does this matter?

The public's perception of human services influences everything we do. The scope, quality, and outcomes of services are all dictated by the funding and public support we earn. That funding also determines whether our workforce can expect a decent income,

cost-of-living adjustments, and our organizations receive reimbursement for things like indirect costs.

Our messaging also directs how public policy is shaped and developed. Onerous work and drug testing requirements in order to access benefits are examples of "swamp" thinking that tend to ignore the importance of long-term stability in working through challenges like chronic unemployment, substance use, or mental health concerns.

The solution: Reframing the narrative

People will respond differently to the same core idea depending on how it is presented to them. Reframing is a process of making intentional decisions about the information we share, to help people think more productively about an issue. This is much more persuasive than simply demanding they agree with us.

In its research, FrameWorks surveyed close to 5,000 adults to identify a narrative — or storytelling process — that would reframe human services in order to improve public attitudes about the sector, increase knowledge of the breadth and scope of those services, and fuel support for policies that add value to human services. The result of their research is what we call the "Building Well-Being Narrative", outlined below.

Step 1: Start with a broadly shared value

FrameWorks' research identified the shared value of "human potential" — that human services help people reach their potential so they can fully contribute to our communities — as the most effective starting place for communications with the public. Starting with a shared value, rather than listing specific programs, populations served, or challenges the organization is experiencing, primes the public to see the broader societal stakes of an issue.

Human potential works well as a starting place for a reframed story for a number of reasons. People can easily see the intrinsic value of everyone reaching their potential, that we all want to live in a community where the people around us are living up to their potential. Potential is also seen as more than just financial success. It's inclusive of a range of interests and abilities. The public can imagine all types of gifts and talents being activated in their communities around this idea of potential. The public can also

understand that external factors are involved in reaching potential. It takes systems and institutions in a community to fulfill potential.

Here is an example of how the Human Services Council in New York (HSC) reframed their mission statement to rely on the value of human potential rather than the traditional "vulnerable" message:

Before reframing

HSC strengthens the not-for-profit human services sector's ability to improve the lives of New Yorkers in need.

After reframing

HSC strengthens New York's nonprofit human services sector, ensuring all New Yorkers, across diverse neighborhoods, cultures, and generations reach their full potential.

HSC's former mission statement used "othering" that reinforced negative perceptions that their mission was only for those in need. Now their mission ensures all New Yorkers reach their full potential. It's inclusive, hopeful, and inspiring.

Step 2: Explain how human services work

When you promise to fulfill human potential, people want to learn more about your work. This is where the power of explanatory metaphors comes into play. Metaphors help us understand a concept we know very little about by associating it with a concept that we already understand. We know we have significant gaps to fill for the public so that they have a more accurate and complete picture of human services, so finding the right metaphor is essential to the reframing process.

FrameWorks tested several metaphors to explain human services and found that comparing the process of building well-being to constructing a building helped people understand what human services are and how they work. Here are some examples of how the "construction metaphor" can address the public's gaps in information.

- People generally understand what a construction process looks like. There needs to be a blueprint followed by everyone on the construction team. It also takes experts — like architects, carpenters, and electricians — to build a house. In the same way, human services rely on thoughtful planning and expertise to build well-being so people can reach their potential.

- Buildings need a solid foundation and durable materials to withstand the test of time. Similarly, we all need sturdy structures of well-being, like a stable home, timely health and mental health services, and healthy relationships to thrive.

- Buildings require ongoing maintenance and repairs over time, just like the structures of well-being will need to be maintained and may need repairs.

- Structural challenges in a building, like a shaky foundation, will lead to larger problems down the road, making prevention and early intervention essential.

- Unpredictable external factors, like really bad weather can do serious damage to a building. In the same way, social determinants, inherited community conditions, economic downturns, and personal catastrophes outside of an individual's control can all impact well-being.

Here is how Caritas of Austin reframed their "About Us" statement to incorporate the construction metaphor:

> *Caritas of Austin believes that when every person has a stable place to call home, they can realize their **full potential and contribute to our community.** We build well-being by making sure that people have a safe home, access to healthy groceries, jobs that provide a reliable living wage, and educational opportunities to learn life skills. **All of us need a sturdy foundation and layers of support in our lives to thrive; that's what creates a strong community.** Our innovative, personalized and proven approach to building well-being and ending homelessness creates a more vibrant Austin for everyone.*

It's an easy connection for the public to see that a stable home is essential for someone to realize their full potential and contribute to the community. And saying that everyone needs a sturdy foundation and layers of support in our lives is inclusive. It's not about somebody else.

Step 3: Justify the need for lifecycle support

Now that you have established the value of human potential and given people a construction metaphor that explains how to achieve that potential, you want to get more specific. Reminding the public that we all need support at different points in our lives, or "lifecycle examples" normalizes the idea that human services and support are essential to healthy people and a healthy community and helps us navigate around narrow stereotypes and biases that the public might hold unintentionally.

A blueprint

This outline gives you an example of how to tie these steps together.

Step	Message
1. Human Potential Your communications will be most effective when you start with human potential. Your opening sentence is prime real estate.	When we support well-being, we make sure that everyone can reach their potential and fully contribute to our community. In turn, maximizing potential helps our community thrive and remain a vibrant place to live, work, and play.
2. Construction Explain how your organization builds potential, with a plan, a team of experts, and good materials.	Well-being is something we build. And like any structure, it requires materials and a team to build it. This is the role of human services in general, and what we do at Human Services Inc. in particular.
3. Lifecycle Walk your reader through examples of what human services and supports might look like throughout life.	This includes delivering services in early childhood that establish a solid foundation for health and development, providing the safe places and social resources that young people need to thrive, making sure that adults have access to good jobs and affordable homes, and ensuring that older adults are able to remain connected to their communities.

Reframing is the art of storytelling

The "Building Well-Being Narrative" is about telling a particular story in a particular order. Start big — explain why this matters. As the conversation continues, you can get more specific. Avoid the temptation to start with specifics, assuming that people already understand your cause, how it works, and why it's important. These demands on the reader's understanding can trigger the mental shortcuts of individualism and fatalism you want to avoid.

The results

FrameWorks researched the effectiveness of messages that only use the value of human potential, without the construction metaphor. They saw modest increases in public support for prevention, remediation, planning, and research.

FrameWorks then researched messages that added construction metaphors, giving people a general idea of how well-being is built and the role of human services. This led to significant increases in public support for prevention, remediation, and planning and research, as well as a bump in public belief that human services should be a priority.

Finally, FrameWorks researched messages that put the full "Building Well-Being Narrative" together, starting with the value of human potential, using the construction metaphor to give people a general idea of how it works, and then adding lifecycle examples to normalize for people how we all need support throughout life. These messages resulted in tremendous increases in public support for prevention, remediation, planning and research, and the perceived importance and efficacy of human services.

Messages to avoid

Certain metaphors can be harmful to human services. The **safety net** allows people to think very narrowly about our work. It's strictly for people who have fallen into a crisis moment, and we had to be there to catch them. This is not an accurate description of human services.

FrameWorks also tested what they call **"journey"** metaphors. Pathways to success, roads, and ladders. These are also unhelpful as they still focus on the individual and the steps they take. It creates the expectation that each person's unique, complex recovery process is a linear, predictable, scheduled process. These metaphors also don't help to explain context and environment.

As mentioned earlier, avoid messaging that allows the public to narrowly define human services as charity work performed thanks to benevolent donors and kindly volunteers.

⇨ **View the recorded webinar!**

Affirm the value of human services

Human services is a skilled, essential profession, with experts who should be at the table when decisions are made in our communities. Your messaging should provide a broader, fuller picture of human services — that it includes research, advocacy, prevention, remediation, community planning — in addition to the direct services.

Finally, shift the focus away from problems to solutions. Of course you must articulate the challenges, but highlight the achievable solutions and collective responses that will meet those challenges.

Get Involved

Sign up for the Reframing Network Newsletter.

Request a presentation, workshop or consultation.

The National Assembly

The National Human Services Assembly (National Assembly) is a leading voice in the human service sector and promotes collaboration among engaged organizations to advance the collective power, knowledge, strategy, and systems that build well-being within individuals and our communities. The National Assembly is a Washington, DC-based association comprised of some of the largest national nonprofit human service organizations in the United States. In aggregate, members and their affiliates and local service networks collectively touch, or are touched by, nearly every household in America—as consumers, donors, or volunteers.

In a role of member developer, National Assembly focuses on providing members with a robust set of programs, resources, and tools to strengthen organizations and to support the human service experts on staff. It is also committed to driving change in the human service sector through its public policy work and other initiatives. To stimulate shared learning and collaborative action, National Assembly convenes human service sector professionals in multiple national collaborations, initiatives, learning events, group purchasing, and more. Learn more at NationalAssembly.org.

WellSky

WellSky is working to realize care's potential for everyone. Our technology connects the care continuum, so that communities can address the social determinants of health that lead to stable lives and vibrant families. Our software enhances vital health and human services at every stage of life, from child welfare to hospice.

WellSky clients help children and adults with disabilities achieve the greatest possible independence. They provide physical, mental, and vocational rehabilitation that give people a fresh start. We empower social workers to bring hope to those experiencing homelessness, substance use, abuse, and mental health challenges. And we assist caregivers, nurses, and facilities who allow seniors to live full, independent lives though home and community based services, home health, and long term care. WellSky clients ensure the safety of our blood supply and turn stem cell research into cures for people with life-threatening conditions.

Reframe your story with data. Find out how WellSky® can help you collect the information to build a powerful narrative.

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