

# Why These Themes?

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*FrameWorks Institute responds to human services advocates' questions about reframing.*

***Q: Those of us in the nonprofit field have used the metaphor of the social "safety net" for years. Why don't we see it here as part of recommended framing?***

Good question. The short answer is that the "safety net" metaphor narrowly defines human services and many potential supporters have a negative, partisan reaction to it.

What's wrong with narrowly defining human services? When focusing on direct, short-term services that invoke a narrow definition of human services, we miss an opportunity to define human services more broadly, to include advocacy and prevention. As long as human services are understood as only providing the "basics," it will be exceptionally difficult to build support for requests to professionalize staff, obtain funding for research, advocate for structural change, or to expand prevention services, because these types of initiatives are outside the scope of "basic necessities."

Also, and perhaps more importantly, the metaphor has been so often used that it now is likely to convey a partisan stance. In turn, this casts a communication as mere 'politics as usual' which causes many people to disengage.

***Q: When we're advocating against budget cuts, we often argue that our services "lift people out of poverty," or that they will "save taxpayer money in the long run." These are more concrete than "promoting well-being," which seems pretty abstract by comparison. We can even quantify some of these benefits. Doesn't that matter more, when we want to be convincing?***

When the facts don't fit the frame, the frame stays, and the facts go. So, it's important for advocates to establish a strong, reliable, and thoroughly tested frame that has been shown to favor the kinds of policies they wish to advance. The *Building Well-Being Narrative* recommended here does just that.

That's not to say that the frame element of Numbers can't play a role. But, the frame element of Order matters quite a bit. Start out by evoking the shared benefits of maximizing *Human Potential*; then, establish a broad goal for human services through the metaphor of *Construction*; and show how human services are relevant by using examples from across the *Life Cycle*. After this frame has been established – if even briefly – the facts and data you provide stand a better chance of being interpreted in the way you intended.

Advocates on every issue should also always think about the extent to which they are playing into frames that, ultimately, undermine their cause. "Saving taxpayer money" only invigorates the currently dominant individualist narrative on public budgets. "Building self-sufficiency" reinforces the idea that access to services should be temporary, limited, and targeted toward the goal of not needing them anymore. These patterns of thinking limit support for investments in human services and other aspects of the public good. Are there other indicators of successful outcomes that could help to make the case and enhance a more expansive frame on the issue?

***Q: Our organization provides job training and career readiness for people who've faced a lot of challenges, such as lack of education, teen parenting, being in and out of the justice system, and multiple evictions. Doesn't talking about those challenges show how great their need is, and establish why it's so important to provide them with extra services if we expect them to climb out of poverty?***

Leading with descriptions about the enormous challenges faced by people in communities is discouraging to potential supporters and discourages them from seeing how all of us need to help create systemic change.

It's true that listing those challenges gives people a concrete sense of what the population you serve struggles with. But it's important to remember that unless you frame the discussion, they're going to perceive those challenges very differently than you do. Without help from framing, they will rely on the dominant cultural belief in Individualism. Reasoning from this model, they're not going to interpret the challenges as problems that need a systemic response, but rather, as evidence that the individuals in question made poor choices over and over again. For example, "They chose to drop out of school," "They chose to get pregnant as teens," "They chose to commit crimes that got them arrested even though they knew right from wrong," "They should've worked three jobs so they could pay their rent and not get evicted," and so on. And if you pile all these challenges up, people will likely feel overwhelmed and Fatalism will come into play: "There's no point in trying to help them," and "You can't help those who won't help themselves."

That's why it's important to use a frame that tells a more hopeful story, and one that leverages a view of the problem as systemic, where the responsibility for solving the problem lies with the community as a whole, rather than the individual. The *Building Well-being* Narrative does just that.

***Q: We focus our services on one population. We already talk a lot about nurturing and capitalizing on their potential, and about supporting their well-being. Why can't we just talk about them instead of giving examples of other populations helped by human services throughout the whole life cycle? It's obvious that our target population needs assistance, and we can even use examples of our planning and prevention work as well as direct services.***

Not to worry – the bulk of your communications will be focused, as usual, on your target population(s). But whenever you are framing a discussion and using the human services narrative, we strongly encourage you to use examples from the whole *Life Cycle*.

Remember that you're working against a powerful, deeply ingrained frame that sees human services in a very narrow light, as serving only "the poor" and only for a short time. The more often people hear a broader vision of human services that provides many kinds of services that impact everyone in the community across their life span, the more likely they are to remember it and even repeat it to others. You and your colleagues in other organizations are building a new frame for public understanding; it will take teamwork to get it to stick.

***Q: According to your research, most Americans define well-being solely in terms of health and financial security. Those are exactly the priorities our organization focuses on for our target population. So why shouldn't we use that to our advantage? Why is a holistic definition of well-being better?***

The answer has to do with the way people process information. Humans are "fast and frugal" thinkers. When presented with one familiar idea and one unfamiliar idea, they will latch on to the story they already know and believe and are unlikely to absorb the information that isn't readily incorporated into their existing understanding.

In this case, focusing communications on information the public already believes to be true makes it less likely that they will absorb additional ideas about the work of the human service sector. It makes it less likely that people will value work in advocacy, research, or prevention services. It leaves people with their existing *Kindness and Charity* model of human services, which limits public support for anything besides direct services. Appeals to professionalize staff or ensure they get paid a living wage will fall on deaf ears, because it will be seen as "inappropriate" for those doing charity work.

Reframing an issue is hard work. We can't afford to miss any opportunities to build a fuller understanding of the sector, and because all the contributions we make are essential, we must talk about all of them more often and more powerfully.

*Q: I notice that you don't mention using a personal story – for example, a story of someone whose life was changed because of the services they received. People love those stories.*

Personal stories focus people on the details of the protagonists' plight. And when we focus on characters, we see less of the setting. The typical type of story we consume through mass media or for entertainment makes it more difficult for the public to appreciate and support the kinds of collective or system-level solutions required to address social issues successfully.

To build the public's support for policies and programs designed to address systemic problems, communicators need to build people's ability to think in systemic terms. When advocates tell stories that focus narrowly on individuals, this opportunity is missed. And, while such stories capture attention, they do more harm than good when it comes to illuminating social issues. Tales of the triumphant individual who beat the odds feed a larger narrative that personal choice is the primary influence on outcomes. They obscure the social determinants that shape our lives.

Another kind of storytelling can be harnessed to invigorate the public's "sociological imagination." In contrast to episodic stories, thematic stories explain the nuts and bolts of social problems: what's at stake, how they work and what can be done to fix them. By telling a thematic story—widening the lens to include the contexts and environments that affect people's lives—communicators can tell a more effective narrative that highlights systems, processes, collective action, and policy solutions.