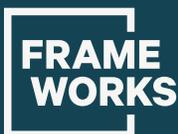


Framing Economic Wellbeing

A Communications Toolkit

MARCH 2026



A FrameWorks Institute Toolkit



Welcome to Framing Economic Wellbeing, a communications toolkit designed to support the communications goals of advocates who champion sustainable prosperity for all individuals, families, and communities.

These tools and ideas were developed for and with local advocates and experts in the greater Cincinnati region who are working to expand access to economic mobility and wellbeing. Throughout this toolkit, communicators will find strategies that can help them connect with diverse audiences, spark curiosity-driven conversations about economic wellbeing, navigate unproductive attitudes and assumptions about economic precarity, strengthen partnerships, and advance solutions that create pathways to stability and prosperity for everyone.

These practical recommendations draw from the science of framing and in-depth analysis of current challenges in outreach, education, and advocacy communications about economic wellbeing and mobility. (They are not designed for direct service efforts and may not be well suited to those types of communications.)

We invite communicators to use these strategies to guide the creation of advocacy messages in various forms and modalities, including (but not limited to) website copy, reports and fact sheets, annual appeals, conversations with community and employer partners, letters to the editor and op-eds, comments in podcast interviews, social media messaging, testimony to legislative committees or other public bodies, contributions to policy working groups, and public conversations with general audiences. Communicators using this toolkit can feel confident that the strategies and messages promoted here are grounded in research and framed to promote positive change.

When the systems that support people function well—expanding access to supportive communities, quality jobs, stable housing, opportunities to learn and grow, and accessible child care—individuals can reach their potential, families can build stability, and communities can prosper together.

Contents

Quick Start Guide to Framing Economic Wellbeing	4
Mindsets to Move to the Background	5
Mindsets to Move to the Foreground	7
Mindset Movers	8
Maintaining an Explanatory Stance	11
What Is—and Isn't—Explanation?	11
Increasing the Power of Your Explanations with Plain Language	12
Keeping Conversations on Track	14
Alternatives to Partisan Signals	17
Advocacy Storytelling Tools	18
Planning for More Effective Storytelling	21
Supporting Community-Based Storytellers	22
Advocacy Storytelling Template	24
Grab-and-Go Language	26
Mind the Gaps and Avoid the Traps: A Framing Checklist	28
About FrameWorks	31

Quick Start Guide to Framing Economic Wellbeing

Four “beats” that can shift thinking about economic wellbeing as a policy issue

To lead more productive conversations about what we can do to expand access to economic mobility and wellbeing, it's essential to establish a strong frame. To do so, keep the “beats” in this Quick Start Guide top of mind.

- 1. Lead with a vision of what's possible**, rather than an assessment of what's wrong. Build motivation for systems-level change by showing how policies and programs that expand access to economic wellbeing and mobility can contribute to regional prosperity. The principles of *Fairness Across Places*, *Shared Prosperity*, or *Interdependence* can help collectivize the issue and broaden your base of support.
- 2. Draw on plain language and familiar concepts** to illustrate the interconnectedness of wellbeing. Using plain language is especially important when talking about policies and programs that shore up wellbeing in places where it has been eroded or denied. That's because it's easy for people to reason that supporting the wellbeing of one community or group takes something away from another. To navigate false assumptions like these, provide concrete examples of how expanding access to things like stable housing, quality education and mentorship, clear career pathways, and supportive communities builds overall physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing across a region. You can use the *Building Wellbeing* metaphor to direct attention away from the assumption that outcomes are entirely due to individual choices, decisions, or effort levels and toward the role played by resource availability in the overall wellbeing (or lack thereof) of individuals and communities.
- 3. Name the structural causes of the problem**, rather than focusing on symptoms. Counter false assumptions about the causes of economic and racial inequities by giving concrete examples of how things like housing, health care, and employment policies and practices have led to concentrated poverty, racial wealth gaps, and other disparities and injustices. Invoking the *Context Matters* mindset can help with this. To reach rural audiences, offer examples of policies or practices that have affected people living in rural areas before giving examples of policies and practices that have affected racialized, minoritized, or urban groups. Connecting the past to the present in this way can activate *Fatalism*, so be sure to push back against it by cueing the *We Can Redesign This* mindset.
- 4. Highlight the different roles we can each play** in advancing large-scale solutions. Lift up policy and programmatic solutions to communicate that we, as a society, have what it takes to make sure that all communities have the resources that people need to thrive. To further inspire collective action, give examples of how the local community can and does play an active role in making this vision a reality. The *Ingenuity* principle and *Stronger Together* mindset can help with this.

Mindsets to Move to the Background

Mindsets influence how people interpret messages and stories, assign responsibility for solutions, and decide whether or not to support systemic or preventive solutions. To change the public conversation on poverty in ways that can boost support for policies and programs that expand access to economic mobility and wellbeing, avoid using images, vocabulary, and/or arguments that activate the mindsets below.

Individualism

Avoid reinforcing the false assumption that what happens to an individual in life is primarily the result of the choices they make. When it comes to issues associated with economic mobility and poverty, Individualism can also show up as:

Self-Makingness

This mindset cues up the narrow idea that success goes to those with enough drive to work hard enough to grab it.

Adequate Help

This mindset leads people to conclude that because food and shelter assistance programs exist, the government provides for basic needs. People reasoning from this mindset see no need for initiatives or policies that help people build wellbeing.

Otherism

Avoid reinforcing the false assumption some communities and cultures don't value self-improvement and hard work. When it comes to issues associated with economic mobility and poverty, *Otherism* can also show up as:

Reverse Racism Is the New Racism

This mindset cues up the false idea that our society has overcorrected on race, such that white people now face disadvantages at work and elsewhere.

Fatalism

Avoid reinforcing the false assumption that poverty is an unsolvable social problem. When it comes to issues associated with economic mobility and poverty, *Fatalism* can also show up as:

Market Naturalism

This mindset cues up the false assumption that inequality is inevitable because the jobs we have available are the jobs that the market naturally creates.

Government Ineptitude

This mindset cues up the false assumption that the government is inherently inept and, therefore, incapable of solving society's problems.

The System Is Rigged

The core assumption baked into this mindset is that there are a powerful few (e.g., corporations, coastal elites, media, politicians) who use their power to rig “the system” (i.e., the economy, health care, immigration, government) to benefit themselves at the expense of regular people.

- Note: FrameWorks research shows that advocates for progressive change should not—and usually cannot—avoid *The System Is Rigged Mindset*. Instead, they should be prepared to engage in a contest over its meaning. See [“Filling in the Blanks: Contesting What ‘the System Is Rigged’ Means”](#) for guidance.

Mindsets to Move to the Foreground

Mindsets influence how people interpret messages and stories, assign responsibility for solutions, and decide whether or not to support systemic or preventive solutions. To build public understanding of economic wellbeing and political will for policies and programs that promote it, use images, vocabulary, and/or arguments that activate the mindsets below.

- ***We Can Redesign This:*** A mindset that primes people to recognize that *our economy is, in fact, designed, not organic*. And because our economy is a designed thing, it is within our power to redesign it so that its rules and incentives promote stability and wellbeing for all. Cue this mindset to combat *Fatalism* and inspire a “can-do” attitude.
- ***Context Matters:*** A mindset that foregrounds the idea that the environments we live in, the quality and number of our relationships, and our everyday experiences can make some choices easier or more challenging to execute and can place other choices entirely out of our reach. Cue this mindset to promote systems-level thinking about disparities in economic outcomes.
- ***Stronger Together:*** A mindset that primes people to recognize the power of collective action and collective voice. Cue it when you want to talk about how inclusive participation leads to smarter and fairer policies and programs.

Mindset Movers

These tested frame elements have been shown to make a measurable, meaningful difference in how people think, feel, and act when it comes to economic issues and policies.

Building Wellbeing

A metaphor that helps the public understand how resource availability impacts the wellbeing of individuals, families, and communities. Use this metaphor to push back against *Otherism* and *Fatalism* and to help the public move beyond the limiting assumption that wellbeing consists only of financial self-sufficiency or physical health.

What it can look like:

Just as building a strong house requires certain materials, building wellbeing requires many kinds of resources: strong relationships, opportunities to learn and grow, financial stability, physical and mental health, and more. Nobody builds wellbeing alone. It takes a construction crew. And just as a house must be maintained and repaired, wellbeing needs to be shored up and restored.

A second example:

Wellbeing is a lifelong process shaped by many parts of our lives. No person or family builds wellbeing alone. Financial security, strong relationships, physical and mental health, and a sense of purpose are all essential to overall wellbeing and are deeply influenced by access to resources and opportunities as well as the care and support we receive from others.

A third example:

Across seven counties in Ohio, we provide the bricks and mortar of lasting wellbeing, from financial stability to opportunities to learn and grow to community connections. Without these materials, it becomes harder for people to weather life's storms. Our region grows stronger when we shore up the foundations of wellbeing together.

Developmental Roots

A metaphor that helps the public understand the essential role that stable, nurturing relationships play in young people's positive development. Use this metaphor to activate a shared sense of responsibility for the youth in our communities.

What it can look like:

Just as a system of roots supports and nourishes trees as they develop and grow, nurturing relationships with adults support young people's development by offering opportunities for guidance, encouragement, and learning experiences. Strong roots anchor young people in community and support their development and growth. When young people have the opportunities for learning and growth that are essential to healthy development, they can contribute their unique talents and skills to their communities and to society as a whole.

Dignity

A principle that primes a sense of shared humanity by reminding people of our inherent worth as humans. Use it to redirect conversations that use dehumanizing languages or invoke negative stereotypes or harmful narratives. Grounding conversations in dignity helps sidestep polarizing terminology while keeping the focus squarely on what matters most: ensuring every person and every community can thrive.

What it can look like:

To truly treat people with dignity, we need to value each person and their overall wellbeing. When some communities don't have access to the resources they need to build and maintain their wellbeing, we're not demonstrating respect for the people in those communities.

Explanation

A core frame element that helps people understand how and why an issue exists, not just what it looks like or who is affected. In practice, explanation makes causal mechanisms visible, showing how policies, systems, and conditions work together to produce current outcomes.

Fairness Across Places

A principle that foregrounds the idea that where we live should not determine the trajectory of our lives. Use this principle to push back against *Otherism* and to activate *Context Matters* and *Stronger Together*.

What it can look like:

One neighborhood benefits from well-funded schools, safe streets, and abundant green spaces, while another struggles with underfunded schools and food deserts. These stark disparities are not random but are the result of structural racism embedded in housing policies, resource allocation, and systemic inequities. A child's zip code—too often determined by historically discriminatory practices—should not dictate their access to opportunity or level of exposure to risk. It's time to dismantle these barriers and ensure that, regardless of where they live, all kids in our region have the resources they need to thrive.

Ingenuity

A principle that inspires engagement by reminding people that our society has solved hard problems before and can solve hard problems again. Use it to push back against *Fatalism*.

What it can look like:

By applying ingenuity, we can design programs, systems, and policies that promote economic mobility and support economic wellbeing. For example...

Interdependence

A principle that primes a sense of shared destiny by highlighting a fundamental truth: Although a region may include many jurisdictions, its overall prosperity and challenges are deeply connected. Use this principle to push back against *Otherism* and activate *Stronger Together*.

What it can look like:

Our futures are bound together, and so our region benefits when the systems and policies designed to support our wellbeing are built to serve all of us—no matter where we live or who we are.

Shared Prosperity

A principle linking the work of expanding access to economic mobility and wellbeing to the work of ensuring the region's future prosperity. Use this principle to push back against *Otherism* and activate *Stronger Together*.

What it can look like:

Our region's future prosperity depends upon ensuring that our systems and policies are designed to work for everyone, not just those who are already ahead.

Steep Climb

A metaphor that invokes the adage “life's a journey” to help the public understand the specific challenges (terrain) that opportunity youth face and communicate why we as a society have a responsibility to ensure opportunity youth are equipped with the supports they need to maintain secure footing on their journeys to adulthood. Use this metaphor to push back against *Otherism*.

What it can look like:

Every young person needs resources and supports like caring mentors, opportunities to learn and grow, and stable housing as they climb toward adulthood. Opportunity youth need these too. Although they face a steeper climb than most, their intended destination looks the same: a thriving adulthood connected to their communities.

Maintaining an Explanatory Stance

Explanation is a uniquely powerful tool for building the public’s understanding of social issues. Unfortunately, it is missing in most media and advocacy messaging.

An explanation of an issue invites people to understand how something works. It illuminates mechanisms and processes by filling in holes in understanding and connecting the dots between causes and outcomes. In so doing, well-crafted explanations spark the satisfying sense of grasping the issue at hand. Explanation helps people recognize the causes of injustice and embrace impactful approaches to solving social problems. Eyes don’t glaze over; they flash with “aha!” Well-crafted explanations invite people into the conversation and help advocates for systems-level change broaden their base of support.

Explanation is key to social change because when we show the structural or systemic roots of a problem, we give people a way to reason about policy-level solutions. If we skip the causal explanation or offer it late in a communication, people fill in the missing mechanism for themselves. Given the human tendency to attribute outcomes to the choices and characteristics of individuals, people will likely blame those experiencing a problem for their own circumstances.

To set up policy change (rather than better individual decisions) as the solution to a social problem, it is critical that we include systems-level explanations early in our communications. See [“Unleashing the Power of How: An Explanation Declaration”](#) for more guidance.

What Is—and Isn’t—Explanation?

-  An explanation differs from definition and description, though it may incorporate aspects of both.
-  A definition aims to name an issue’s distinguishing characteristics, often by asserting facts related to the issue.
-  A description seeks to represent the scope of an issue and its effects, often by using “naked numbers.”
-  An explanation of an issue illuminates processes, mechanisms, and cause/effect relationships, inviting us to understand how something works.

Example

Instead of This	Try This
Black children and youth experience disproportionately higher rates of entry into the foster care system, as well as longer wait times before achieving reunification and lower rates of permanency.	Biased policies lead to more Black families being unfairly policed by the child welfare system. For instance, some guidelines direct home visitors to check for the presence of a parent. This devalues the role grandparents play in multigenerational households.

Increasing the Power of Your Explanations with Plain Language

Plain language makes advocacy communications clearer, more inclusive, and more persuasive. This is true no matter your audience. Below are a few technical terms that can backfire, along with plain language alternatives. Consider copying this table and adding to it as you engage with people—policymakers, fellow advocates, community members—in the course of your work.

Jargon / Technical Term	Plain Language Swap
Agency	The ability to make your own choices and take action to shape your own life and the world around you
At-Risk Population	People in harm's way because of the policies and social conditions around them
Benefits	Programs that devote public resources to meeting needs like child care, housing, or nutrition
Benefits Cliff	A situation where a small increase in earnings triggers the loss of housing, food, or tuition assistance, putting a worker farther behind instead of ahead.
Best Practices	Approaches that have been proved to work
Care Coordination	Making sure services work together
Case Management	Helping someone navigate services and next steps

Eligibility Criteria	Rules for who can get support
Empowerment	Supporting people to shape their own lives
Equity-Focused	Aiming for fairness, not just sameness
Holistic Approach	Looking at a person's entire circumstances, not just one issue
Outcomes	What changes because of the support
Policy Advocacy	Speaking up to change rules or laws
Proactive Intervention	Things we can do now to avoid predictable problems later
Race Equity	Our commitment to making sure that policies, practices, and programs give people of color a full, fair, and just opportunity to thrive
Stakeholders	People or groups with an interest in the work
Sustainability	The ability of good work and positive results to keep going after a grant or improvement effort has ended
Trauma-Informed	Awareness that serious negative experiences in a person's past can affect current behavior and needs
Upstream Thinking	Solving problems at their source, not just treating the things we notice
Vulnerable Population	People in harm's way because of the policies and social conditions around them
Whole-Family Approach	An approach that considers the interrelated needs of all family members, not just single individuals
Wraparound Services	A mix of supports that create a solid foundation for health—things like healthy food, secure housing, job seekers' support, and counseling for mental health or substance use issues

Keeping Conversations on Track

If a conversation focused on economic wellbeing starts getting derailed, don't worry. You can steer it back on track. At FrameWorks, we recommend that our partners avoid myth-busting and other forms of negation because doing so tends to reinforce the undesirable message. Instead of engaging directly with negative or false messages, use this simple three-step formula to construct a well-framed response that reinforces a collective, affirmative vision.

Step 1: Analyze

Figure out what you're responding to. Pushback against efforts to promote equitable access to economic wellbeing tends to use patterned, predictable frames. The most common of these are:

- Poverty is about individual character.
- More for "them" means less for me and mine.
- Our society is equal now; discrimination is a thing of the past.
- There's nothing we can do; the poor will always be with us.

Step 2: Bridge

When someone says something that might take the conversation off course, you first need a "bridge" between what they said and what you want to say. Acknowledge the person you are engaged in conversation with, but don't restate or try to rebut the assumptions in their message. Instead, use an innocuous bridging phrase to redirect the conversation, such as:

- "What's most important to understand ..."
- "Another thing to remember is ..."
- "While ... is important, it is also important to remember ..."
- "The key here is ..."

- "And that reminds me ..."
- "That reminds me of a question I often consider ..."
- "Before we leave the subject, let me add that ..."

- "Let me put that in perspective ..."
- "Let me answer you by saying ..."
- "Let me emphasize ..."

- “Another way to look at this is ...”
- “The question you raise is really about ...”
- “It’s interesting you ask that. I believe ...”
- “It’s interesting you ask that. The way it works is ...”

Step 3: Pivot

Introduce the framing strategy that will get the conversation back on track.

When They Use the Frame ...	Respond with These Mindset Movers ...
It all comes down to individual character	<i>Building Wellbeing, Steep Climb, Fairness Across Places, explanation</i>
There isn’t enough for everyone	<i>Shared Prosperity, Interdependence, explanation</i>
Racism is over	<i>Fairness Across Places, Dignity, explanation</i>
There’s nothing we can do	<i>Ingenuity and/or Stronger Together, Shared Prosperity</i>

Here’s What It Looks Like

Scenario 1	Scenario 2	Scenario 3	Scenario 4
<p>Person 1: We need approaches that support both children and their caregivers, combining education, early childhood programs, and economic supports to break the cycle of poverty.</p>	<p>Person 1: Policies and programs that create social, economic, and civic infrastructure benefit all of us.</p>	<p>Person 1: We must dismantle policies and practices that unfairly concentrate wealth and limit access along racial lines.</p>	<p>Person 1: Economic wellbeing is about thriving, not just surviving. It’s about building lives that are stable, fulfilling, and resilient.</p>
<p>Person 2: Why should taxpayers support adults who haven’t taken responsibility for themselves?</p>	<p>Person 2: Don’t tell me how much it helps, tell me how much it costs. Something’s gotta give.</p>	<p>Person 2: Wealth differences come down to personal choices and work ethic, not race.</p>	<p>Person 2: That sounds nice, but some people are always going to struggle. That’s just reality.</p>

<p>Person 1 (thinking): That sounds like the “it all comes down to individual character” frame, so I should respond with <i>Interdependence</i> and explain how <i>Shared Prosperity</i> works.</p>	<p>Person 1 (thinking): That sounds like the “there isn’t enough for everyone” frame, so I should respond by using explanation to set a “loss frame.”*</p>	<p>Person 1 (thinking): That sounds like the “it all comes down to individual character” and “racism is over” frames, so I should respond with <i>Fairness Across Places</i>, <i>Context Matters</i>, and explanation.</p>	<p>Person 1 (thinking): That sounds like the “there’s nothing we can do frame,” so I should respond with <i>Ingenuity</i>.</p>
<p>Person 1: <i>What’s important to understand here is that no family raises children alone. Schools, employers, health care systems, and public policy all play a role.</i></p> <p>Two-generation approaches recognize that reality, strengthening families in ways that benefit schools, the workforce, and the broader community</p>	<p>Person 1: <i>Let me answer you by saying that when people face barriers to health care and housing, children miss out on quality schools, and families struggle to get by, communities become less stable and less productive.</i></p> <p>That instability costs the county in lost tax revenue, increased social services, lower workforce participation, and fewer economic opportunities for everyone. The cost of doing nothing is far higher than the cost of building strong, supportive systems.</p> <p>Ensuring that our county has policies and programs in place that build wellbeing is the responsible thing to do.</p>	<p>Person 1: <i>That reminds me of a question I often consider: Are choices really the issue when people don’t have the same access to good schools, quality child care, safe housing, reliable transportation, or fair credit?</i></p> <p>Some systems were designed in ways that disadvantage certain communities. For example, research shows that many Black neighborhoods have fewer supermarkets and more fast-food outlets and convenience stores. These patterns come from historic and current disinvestment and zoning. Redesigning unfair systems like these is the right thing to do.</p>	<p>Person 1: <i>The key here is we know what works. Communities across the country have redesigned policies around housing, wages, health care, and education, and when they do, people become more stable and better able to weather setbacks.</i></p> <p>Economic wellbeing for all is achievable when systems work for people, not the other way around.</p>

*A “loss frame” highlights how inaction can result in unnecessary costs to society.

Alternatives to Partisan Signals

Partisan signals are words, themes, and examples that are commonly associated with a particular political perspective. Highly charged or overtly partisan rhetoric can limit broad public engagement in solutions-oriented discussions about economic wellbeing. Consider copying this table and adding to it as you engage with people—policymakers, fellow advocates, community members—in the course of your work.

Instead of This	Try This
Politician, policymaker	Elected official, community leader
Policies, legislation, [issue name]	Proposals, commitments, agreements, ideas
Ohio voted yes on ...	Ohioans agreed to/committed to ...
The government	Our state/community/county/region
Speak up, let your leaders know your opinion	Join a group, get involved, say yes to ...
Structural racism	Unfair systems, patterns that affect outcomes, historic unfairness, systems that work differently for different people

Advocacy Storytelling Tools

An advocacy story is a real, personal story that shows how a policy, system, or institution has directly impacted a person's life—for better or for worse. Effective advocacy stories build public will for change, influence decision-makers, and mobilize communities toward action.

What makes an advocacy story effective? Research¹ suggests the following:

- **Relatability:** Can the audience identify with the storyteller?
- **Transportation:** Does the audience get absorbed in the story?
- **Emotionality:** Created through the use of descriptive, social language that captures the emotions felt.

We are all familiar with these three story qualities—relatability, transportation, and emotionality. They often show up in what we call “episodic” stories, that is, stories that focus on an individual's experience of a particular event or circumstance. Imagine, for example, the stories that could go with headlines like “Man loses job after factory closes” or “Family Loses Home After Unexpected Medical Emergency.” Episodic stories like those grab attention.

However, episodic stories have clear limits when it comes to policy advocacy. They can reduce support for progressive change and diminish community-based stakeholders by portraying them primarily as victims. These drawbacks stem from the way episodic stories draw focus to the private realm of emotions, motivations, and family life.

This narrow focus creates additional problems. By tightly focusing on individual experience, episodic stories can imply that the causes of—and the solutions to—complex social problems like poverty rest with the individuals affected. As a result, it can seem like society has little or no role to play in solving the problem.

The key to telling stories that are compelling and move the public to think about the broad social contexts and structural realities that influence how well we do in life is to “widen the lens.” We call stories like these “thematic” stories. Thematic stories can foster thinking about broad-scale and longer-term change. They remind us that things like access to good jobs, stable housing, reliable public transportation, health insurance, and healthy food don't just happen. These conditions are created and maintained through policies, laws, and collective decisions. Thematic stories also remind us that when we work together to support laws and policies that promote individual and collective wellbeing, we're fostering a healthier and more productive society.

Advancing thematic storytelling increases our capacity to build trust with community stakeholders. This is because, as a story form, thematic stories make it easy for community stakeholders to share their lived experience in ways that honor their agency and expertise. And when we share thematic stories, we're doing more than just amplifying voices. We're shifting power.

Use the strategies below to craft thematic stories that drive change and inspire action:

Widen the Lens

Show trends and patterns that shape the environment in which a community or group of people operates.

From “The Numbers Say This Is About Race”	To “This Is About Unjust Systems”
Fifty percent of incarcerated individuals reported having a dental problem during the time they were incarcerated.	Many incarcerated people come from communities where medical and dental care are hard to come by. Thus, unmet oral health needs are common among this population
Black adults are incarcerated in state prisons at nearly four times the rate of white adults.	Black adults face higher incarceration rates than white adults due to unfair laws, policies, and social norms. Heavier surveillance in Black neighborhoods (regardless of crime levels) and underfunded and overburdened public defender systems are just two examples of policies that reflect racial and economic discrimination—and make it worse.

Highlight Expertise and Agency

Instead of organizing a story around a downtrodden person as protagonist, make your protagonist a community-based program or an empowered individual with a sense of injustice.

From “Crisis Framing”	To “Highlighting Agency in a Crisis”
Like many older Americans, Gloria has been directly harmed by recent cuts to health and human services under the Trump administration. When federal funding for home- and community-based care programs was slashed, Gloria lost access to the in-home aide who helped her manage medications and prepare meals safely. She began skipping appointments because transportation assistance had also been reduced. These cuts—part of broader efforts to shrink Medicaid and dismantle programs under the Older Americans Act—left Gloria isolated, vulnerable, and struggling to maintain her health. The erosion of public systems meant to support aging with dignity created a cascading crisis in her daily life.	Like many older Americans, Gloria understands the consequences of disinvestment in public health systems—and in the power of speaking out. When she lost access to essential services after Trump-era cuts to Medicaid and aging programs, she didn't just suffer quietly. She connected with others facing similar barriers, shared her story with local officials, and advocated for the reinstatement of transportation support and home care funding. Gloria knows that her struggle was the result of policy decisions that put cost-cutting above care. Through her experience, she's helping others understand why reinvesting in community-based services is essential. She's become a source of insight for building a future where older people have what they need to thrive.

From “Community Foundation as Hero”	To “Community as Hero”
<p>We are a community foundation dedicated to improving the lives of people in our region. By investing in work that changes laws, policies, and practice, we are helping to make our region a more equitable place to live.</p>	<p>Community-led organizations across our region are building economic wellbeing by changing laws, policies, and practice.</p>

Point to Shared Humanity

Avoid gatekeeping language about who deserves support. Use inclusive language that emphasizes shared connection.

From “Worthiness Framing”	To “Shared Humanity Framing”
<p>Helen worked her whole life—first as a teacher, then as a caregiver for her aging parents. She paid into Social Security, volunteered in her community, and never asked for help. Now in her late 70s, Helen is facing serious health challenges. But when she tried to access in-home care, she was told the waitlist was over a year long. Despite everything she’s done—everything she’s given—she’s being denied the support she’s earned. People like Helen shouldn’t be left behind after a lifetime of contribution.</p>	<p>Helen’s story reminds us that we all deserve to age with dignity and support—no matter our job history, income, or background. Right now, in her late 70s, Helen is navigating health challenges without the supports she needs, like transportation to medical appointments. When she looked into in-home care, she learned the waitlist was over a year long.</p> <p>It doesn’t have to be this way—but for too many of our elders it is. This is because we’ve let critical programs go underfunded and neglected for years.</p> <p>Helen spent years working as a teacher and unpaid caregiver. But, aging well shouldn’t be about earning care. Aging well is about all of us enjoying a society that supports us at every stage of our lives. By listening to people like Helen, we can build systems that honor our shared humanity—and make sure no one is left to age without supports.</p>

Recommendation Recap

- Show trends and patterns that shape the environment in which a community or group of people operates.
- Carefully consider how your existing stories might reinforce unproductive assumptions and narratives.
- Look for stories that can make broad shifts to the public discourse.
- Along the way, make sure to take opportunities to bring the social setting to the foreground and highlight agency and efficacy.
- Avoid gatekeeping language about who deserves support.
- Use messengers to validate messages, challenge stereotypes, and amplify voices.

Planning for More Effective Storytelling

Developing a thoughtful plan for collecting and sharing stories helps ensure that the process is ethical and respectful, helps build trust with community partners, and results in stories that strengthen the community and advance your communications goals.

- Be intentional about stories you collect. Focus on stories that show how community action and systemic and structural change are essential to building wellbeing.
- Build a story bank. Create a central place to store stories, along with a clear system for verifying consent to share the story, updating details, and deciding how and where to share them.
- Create diverse ways to capture stories. For example: story circles, individual interviews, online forms, submitted videos.
- Share stories in multiple formats. Use social media, reports, newsletters, and speaker series to reach different audiences.
- Pair stories with complementary visuals. Use images that highlight activity, systems, and communities.

Supporting Community-Based Storytellers

There are multiple ways to amplify community voices. These strategies range from storytelling for use in public campaigns to storytelling for leadership development. In any case, it's important to avoid extractive and harmful practices that are disempowering and to interact with community members as equal stakeholders.

It's important to remember that community members may be reluctant to participate in advocacy and policy design due to negative past experiences with advocacy groups, mistrust of systems that have consistently fallen short, and/or Fatalism. Time constraints, emotional fatigue, and/or the mistaken belief that effective advocacy requires formal education can also contribute to reluctance.

The following strategies can help you center community voices in ways that build power, respect experience, and avoid exploitation:

- Ensure that everyone involved understands why effectively addressing economic disparities requires the expertise of people most affected by our economic system's shortcomings.
- Avoid using jargon like "in-reach." Instead, offer concrete examples of how "in-reach" works as a process.
- Offer storytelling training that helps community stakeholders speak with confidence and authority, and reframe difficult and/or disempowering experiences as sources of valuable knowledge.

- Provide ways for community stakeholders to contribute meaningfully to story shaping.
- Promote a culture of treating personal stories as belonging to someone who may or may not choose to share that story in any given setting.
- Treat community stakeholders as equal partners who are no more obligated to share personal information than are staff members.
- Provide numerous ways for community stakeholders to serve as equal and critical partners in the work of increasing access to economic wellbeing—other than sharing their stories.

Example Prompts

- Tell me about a time when someone told you a story that moved you to act. What made it powerful? What stuck with you?
- Describe a society that works the way you believe it should. What does it look like when it comes to economic wellbeing? What values shape your vision?
- Has your experience trying to build economic wellbeing matched that vision? If so, what helped? If not, where did things fall short?
- What specific challenges or roadblocks have you run into when trying to get the tools and resources that would help? Think about costs, access, respect, or anything else that made it harder.
- What changes would you bring to our region that would bring things more in line with your values and vision? What would make things work better—not just for you, but for others too?

Advocacy Storytelling Template

The shape of your story matters. We all know that stories should have a beginning, middle, and end. It may be less obvious that strong stories also introduce a problem and show it can be addressed or resolved. That's just one of the reasons why stories are essential advocacy tools.

Use this evidence-based template to craft stories that answer the public's big questions about social issues: WHY does this matter? HOW does this work? WHAT can we do?

1. ASPIRATION

Why does this Matter?

To establish an outcome that matters to us all tap into a collective concerns using a tested principle. (See *Mindset Movers*.)

2. EXPLANATION

What's this all about? How should this work?

To build understanding of what we need to bring about this outcome, use explanatory metaphors (See *Mindset Movers*), examples, and/or other explanatory tools to help people grasp the true causes of observed effects.

3. COMPLICATION

Why isn't this working?

To help people see what needs to change, use explanatory metaphors, (see *Mindset Movers*), examples, and/or other explanatory tools to help people grasp the true causes of observed effects.

4. IMPROVE THE SITUATION

What can we do about this?

Ward off *Fatalism* by highlighting what we can do to improve the situation.

This template can help you craft stories that boost support for policies and initiatives and/or share impact. Consider the following example that uses the principle of *Shared Prosperity* and the *Developmental Roots* metaphor to communicate impact.

Example Story

Aspiration:

When we make sure young people have opportunities to engage with peers and community, we set the conditions for shared wellbeing and community strength.

Explanation:

Adolescence is a time of discovery and opportunity, a time when our healthy development depends upon testing out new ideas, learning from new experiences, and connecting with the world outside the family. And just as plants need multiple roots to grow strong, adolescents thrive when they have stable, nurturing relationships with many adults across different settings.

Complication:

Unfortunately, in our town, young people had few opportunities to socialize outside of home and school or to build supportive relationships through activities like sports, clubs, and community programs.

Improve the Situation:

That's why we partnered with The City of [Name Redacted] to expand recreation programs for children and teens. What began as a single swimming program has grown into over 40 activities serving 200 participants, providing young people with the relationships and experiences that help them flourish.

Grab-and-Go Language

Use this section as a resource for choosing words, phrases, and ideas that tap into the public’s knowledge and helpful assumptions about why and how we as a society should work together to expand access to economic mobility and wellbeing.

Adapt the messages below to reflect your voice, or use them (or part of them) as-is. And keep in mind that reusing strategically-framed messages verbatim can increase their power. Research shows that messages gain trust through repetition.

Principles and Possibility

- “By working across differences to uphold dignity for all, we can build a region that is both prosperous and fair.”
- “Where we live should not determine the trajectory of our lives. To ensure fairness across our region, we need to work together to make sure that critical resources for building and maintaining wellbeing are available not just in a few desirable neighborhoods but in all communities, large and small, rural and urban and suburban.”
- “As a society, we have solved tough challenges before and we can do it again. There is much we can do to promote economic wellbeing in our region. And when we do so, we all will benefit.”
- “Our futures are bound together, and so our region benefits when the systems and policies designed to support our wellbeing are built to serve all of us—no matter where we live or who we are.”

Expanding Understanding of Economic Wellbeing

- “Economic wellbeing goes beyond the ability to meet basic needs and financial security. It means being able to build savings, make choices about your money, enjoy daily life, access opportunities to learn and grow, participate in community life, rely on supportive relationships, and feel secure today and prepared for the future.”

Bringing Systems and Choices into View

- “Poverty is a product of our choices as a society. Through our collective decisions, we have designed an economic system that produces poverty. By changing policies and institutions, we can redesign the system itself so that it produces better outcomes for everyone.”
- “The decisions we make as a society determine the opportunities that individuals and groups have. Creating a fairer and more prosperous region requires collaboration across sectors to remove barriers and expand access to economic wellbeing for all. The policies and programs we adopt to support this goal are long-term investments that benefit both today’s residents and future generations.”

Addressing History, Harm, and Responsibility

- “Access to good places to live influences many other outcomes for people and communities. When we see different patterns in the living conditions, home ownership rates, neighborhood resources, and other housing-related outcomes, we can trace most of these disparities to unfair policy decisions, both past and present. We must learn from the mistakes of the past and take responsibility for ensuring that critical resources for building and maintaining wellbeing are available to everyone in all of our region’s communities.”

Inspiring Community Partnership and Collective Action

- “As a society, we know that the only way to create the world we want is by coming together across our differences. When people try to keep us down or we run into challenges, we can change things by acting together. This means recognizing our different needs along with what we have in common so that we can do right by all of us and each of us.”
- “If we want more people in our region to experience economic wellbeing, we need to partner with community members as experts to create policies that harmonize in ways that drive lasting results for individuals, families, and communities.”
- “Working together, we can and should design policies and programs that create sustainable cycles of opportunity and prosperity for all.”

Mind the Gaps and Avoid the Traps: A Framing Checklist

Ask yourself the following questions to make sure a message is well-framed.

Does this message ...

Lead with a vision of what's possible?

Yes	No
This message invites people to imagine what an economy designed to promote wellbeing for all would mean for individuals, families, communities, and the region as a whole. It uses principles like <i>Shared Prosperity</i> , <i>Fairness Across Places</i> , <i>Interdependence</i> , and <i>Dignity</i> to establish a collective orientation.	This message features poverty as the predicament, rather than prosperity as the goal.

Avoid the “worthiness” trap?

Yes	No
This message highlights how systems, policies, and/or cultural norms produce economic outcomes.	This message tries to win support by using words like “hardworking” and “responsible” and/or uses other strategies to stress individual traits and behavior. In so doing, it risks reproducing the same structural logics that sustain economic injustice by drawing arbitrary lines between the “deserving” and the “undeserving.”

Name the structural causes of the problem?

Yes	No
This message highlights the structural causes of social and economic challenges, showing that poverty and prosperity are the result of policy choices rather than personal choices.	This message reinforces the idea that poverty is a personal choice by over-focusing on individual circumstances or by cataloging social problems without connecting them to their structural causes.

Provide a clear explanation?

Yes	No
This message unpacks how systems work, defines unfamiliar terms, and uses metaphors like <i>Building Wellbeing</i> , <i>Developmental Roots</i> , and <i>Steep Climb</i> to make complex issues more relatable.	This message assumes its audience understands more than they do, skipping over essential explanations. In so doing, this message invites its audience to blame “bad choices,” “lack of effort,” “bad apples,” or fate for bad economic outcomes.

Uplift systems-level solutions?

Yes	No
This message makes clear that effective systems-level solutions to poverty are both within our reach and able to generate broad social and economic benefits for society as a whole.	This message explicitly (or inadvertently) frames poverty as the result of individual choices and behaviors, suggesting that solutions depend upon personal effort rather than changes to systems or policies.

Highlight the different roles we can each play?

Yes	No
This message shows that everyone—individuals, communities, organizations, policymakers, etc.—has a role to play in reducing poverty and building economic wellbeing in our region.	This message implies that only one sector or a few individuals are responsible for addressing poverty and building economic wellbeing in our region.

Endnotes

1. Bauer, L. M., Olheiser, E. L., Altarriba, J., & Landi, N. (2009). "Word Type Effects in False Recall: Concrete, Abstract, and Emotion Word Critical Lures." *American Journal of Psychology*, 122(4), 469–481; Green, M. C. (2006). "Narratives and Cancer Communication." *Journal of Communication*, 56, S163–S183; Green, M. C., & Brock, T. C. (2000). "The Role of Transportation in the Persuasiveness of Public Narratives." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 79(5), 701–721; Murphy, S. T., Frank, L. B., Chatterjee, J. S., & Baezconde-Garbanati, L. (2013). "Narrative Versus Non-narrative: The Role of Identification, Transportation, and Emotion in Reducing Health Disparities." *Journal of Communication*, 63, 116–137; Neimand, A. (2018). "How to Tell Stories About Complex Issues." *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. doi.org/10.48558/PF06-ZH35

About FrameWorks

The FrameWorks Institute is a non-profit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organization's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis®, offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multi-disciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will, and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing, through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks®, toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

Learn more at www.frameworksinstitute.org

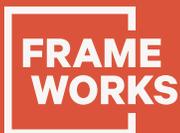
Framing Economic Wellbeing

A Communications Toolkit

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the FrameWorks Institute.

FrameWorks Institute. (2026). *Framing Economic Wellbeing: A Communications Toolkit*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

Designed by Constructive · © FrameWorks Institute 2026



UNITED WAY
Greater Cincinnati