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Creating and Using Metaphors

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Metaphors are a powerful tool to give people additional concrete cues about how to think about a particular policy or abstract issue. Our minds rely on metaphor and analogy to understand new information in light of what we already know. Metaphors may be especially useful for talking about health issues, especially those that contain complex information about causation, the mechanisms of a particular disease or condition, or complicated policy solutions, such as those found in health care reform.

Metaphors are also highly quotable for the news media. A strong metaphor is often repeated, and can rapidly spread throughout a population, helping to shape people's thinking about an issue. However, **simply creating a memorable metaphor and being quoted is not sufficient if the metaphor does not support your broader communications goals.** This is because metaphors contain entailments, or related consequences, that infect people's reasoning. Whenever possible, use metaphors that have been tested to confirm that they set up policy-oriented thinking. But when research is not available, here's how to think about wielding this important frame element.

Tips for Using Metaphors Effectively

- Use metaphors and models that connect the issue to larger systems.
- Use metaphors and models that make vivid the role of prevention and/or causality.
- Examine the relationship between your metaphor and the concepts it invokes. Do they support your communications goals?

Let's look at some metaphors that advocates for health care reform are using and see if they are working effectively.

"Part of the problem is that health care is one of the few places in our society where we haven't made the commitment to include everybody. We don't have a fire system where the fire trucks don't go to certain houses on the block."

This metaphor makes an effort to connect health care reform to the public system of fire protection and fire prevention. It's an image that is easily accessible and memorable to the reader, and highly quotable by the media. However, it may have some unintended consequences as well. The focus on putting out fires doesn't emphasize prevention, for example, which is a strong argument for health care system reform, and doesn't teach the reader about causality.

"[The health care reform bill] is little more than a fresh coat of paint on a collapsing house and a huge gift to the insurance industry...There are no limits on skyrocketing health premiums, no requirements on what will be included in the required plans."

Once again, the image of a collapsing house is vivid and memorable, but whose responsibility is it to paint a house? Is this metaphor inadvertently reminding us of individual responsibility? Moreover, it misses an opportunity to teach the reader about causation (what caused the house to collapse in the first place?) and doesn't offer a solution to the calamity.

FrameWorks research has produced a number of tested metaphors that can be used to advance health care reform. These include: the infrastructure we never built, missing pillars, and public structures. Here are three metaphors that are built off of these initial recommendations and can prove helpful to advocates as they try to engage public thinking about health care reform:

I propose we take a medical approach to the problems of the health care system: chart the obstructions, refer to the research on what approaches have been proven to work, and set out a course of action for our patient.

This metaphor of the health care system being a patient that needs help emphasizes the step-by-step nature of health care system reform, and shows causality.

"Unlike the modern networks that are essential to our economy and our quality of life – like water systems, the electric grid, and interstate highways -- with health coverage we're stuck in the 1940s. We have the equivalent of scattered wells, individual generators, and county roads but no Health Coverage Infrastructure we can rely on, no system for making sure that people have health coverage."

This metaphor links health care to other familiar public systems, and highlights successful solutions from the past that can be used to build a better health care system today.

"The findings from this report reveal that many Arizonans are being shut out of the system because we haven't built a system that reaches them. Low-income seniors, primarily immigrants and people of color, are in the poorest health because of lack of access to health care services and often face language and cultural barriers within the health system. We haven't done what we need to do to build bridges to these groups, to get them over the barriers that keep them out."

The metaphor of a bridge focuses the reader once again on structural issues, rather than the personal characteristics of underserved groups. It shows causality for the problem (lack of a connection to the system) and offers a solution.

Metaphors are a great frame element to use to shape people's thinking about social issues. It's important to remember, however, that the best metaphors will be those that get people thinking about systems reform.