



Framing Legislative Testimony

This guide models how to apply framing recommendations to legislative testimony.

These framing recommendations aim to help communicators draft legislative testimony that can achieve three goals:

1. Offer a new explanation of why positive mental health is important for society.
2. Explain the underlying problems in addressing our population's mental health needs.
3. Show how legislative actions will (or will not) address them.

This worksheet highlights three key recommendations that show how framing can help achieve these goals using values, examples, and data.

Recommendation 1: Lead with the value of *Human Potential*

Your opening statement offers an opportunity to explain why mental health matters to society. Introduce yourself and the legislation at hand with an appeal to a value—a shared and collective ideal that establishes a new frame. Values give audiences a reason to engage with an issue and direct thinking in positive directions. Opening with a value gives the audience a filter through which to interpret the rest of the testimony.

Take a look at the following opening statements, which open with the value of *Human Potential*—the idea that supporting mental health across our population will help all people achieve their full potential. Each statement shows how to integrate this value into the speech. For more information about the effect of the value of *Human Potential* on public thinking, see FrameWorks' research on [human services](#).

Good afternoon, my name is [insert name], and I am [insert title] at [insert name of organization]. Thank you for starting a conversation today about the steps *Colorado can take to achieve a better, brighter, and healthier future for all*. How can we unlock *the door to that future?* By enacting House Bill 700. This bill will support good mental health across our state. *When it takes effect, the benefits of positive mental health for all will strengthen our communities and our state.*

Good morning, my name is [insert name], and I am the [insert title] of [insert organization]. Like the song says, I believe children are our future. My organization is committed to supporting healthy children, vibrant communities, and a strong economy in Colorado. Supporting children, and supporting their families, today will bolster the future success and health of our community. If we fail to act, we will face consequences down the road. House Bill 700 is an important step toward better mental health for all, but we need to amend it to ensure it achieves its full potential to support children’s mental health and wellbeing—and moves us towards a better, brighter, and healthier future.

 **Why it works:**

The value of *Human Potential* has been shown to spark positive thinking about societal efforts to promote health and wellbeing, including mental health, across society. This value presents human services organizations, including those in the mental health sector, as forces that support health and wellbeing for individuals, families, and communities.

Recommendation 2: Use “Explanatory Chains” to Connect Causes to Solutions

Explanatory chains are a tested tool for explaining the importance of policy solutions and the problems they address. An explanatory chain is a series of statements that links a problem to its underlying causes, its consequences for society, and to systemic solutions that can address it.

Use the steps below to create an explanatory chain to use in the body of your testimony.

Start your explanatory chain by working backwards from the policy ask:

Step 1: What policy are you advocating for (or against)?

Step 2: What solutions does this policy put in place?

Step 3: What are the problems this policy addresses?

Step 4: What is the underlying cause of the problem you are trying to solve?

 **Framing Tip:**

When filling out the chart, don’t be put off by long explanations. Spell out the logic behind your argument first, and then refine and shorten it to meet space constraints.

Explanatory Chain Planning Table	
Step 1:	House Bill 700 funds innovation and demonstration grants to expand screenings for mental health disorders in pediatric, adolescent, and adult primary care.
Step 2:	Early screenings are a key component of prevention and early intervention efforts. More funding for screenings and innovations in service delivery increases the likelihood that Colorado’s children and adults can access mental health supports and treatment.
Step 3:	Without adequate access to screenings and early interventions, mental health needs often go undiagnosed or unaddressed. There is a specific lack of screenings in primary care settings. ¹
Step 4:	Our health care system separates behavioral health care from physical health care. Because behavioral health supports are not widely available in primary care contexts, patients often need referrals from their routine providers to access to mental health specialists. This extra step makes connecting with behavioral health care more difficult and less likely. Limited access to care ultimately interferes with achieving good mental health.

¹ Kessler RC, McGonagle KA, Zhao S, Nelson CB, Hughes M, Eshleman S, Wittchen H-U, Kendler KS: Lifetime and 12-month prevalence of DSM-III-R psychiatric disorders in the United States: results from the National Comorbidity Survey. Arch Gen Psychiatry (1994)

To turn your chain into a message, reverse the order of the text in the Explanatory Chain Planning Table. Here is a draft of a well-framed policy ask.

In our health care system, mental health care is siloed—or separated—from physical health care. This separation comes at a cost. When patients can’t access mental health care in the same place that they get physical health care, they have to jump through logistical hoops to get the treatment they need. For example, parents trying to access behavioral health care for children may have to get permission from their general provider or insurance company to obtain a referral to a specialist, which prolongs the time it takes to access care—and sometimes makes it impossible. Such “referral roadblocks” mean fewer families are able to access screenings or treatment, which leads to higher rates of undiagnosed mental health disorders and increased pressure on families. Funding for mental health screenings in primary care settings can reverse this trend. House Bill 700 would create new funding streams for mental health care

and authorize grants to make it easier for children to access screenings and treatment. This will serve the whole family, and solidify our state's commitment to creating a community where everyone can thrive.

 **Why it works:**

Explanatory chains connect causes to solutions. Doing so frames a lack of mental health supports as a solvable problem that can be addressed with civic action.

 **Framing Tip:**

This chain is in support of specific legislation, but the same one could be used to argue for other bills or amendments on similar subjects.

Recommendation 3: Frame Your Data

Data are an important tool to help the public understand the scale and scope of issues related to mental health and how to support it. But don't leave data to speak for itself. Follow these guidelines to make full use of its explanatory power:

1. Select relevant data. Choose data that support an understanding of the scope and scale of a problem or the efficacy of solutions.
2. Make sure your data points don't cue fatalistic thinking about mental health and mental health care (i.e., beliefs that the problem is too big and overwhelming to solve).
3. Help your audience interpret the significance of your data by putting it into perspective using analogies and comparison.
4. Use data to identify problems and to highlight the appropriate solutions. Also, consider integrating data into an explanatory chain.

Consider this before-and-after example of data.

Before:

Forty-six percent of adults need mental health services during their lifetime, studies show.

After:

House Bill 700 addresses a clear need for mental health screenings and support in our state. Forty-six percent of adults, or about 150 million people, need mental health services during their lifetime, studies show. This means that roughly the same number of people who comprise the U.S. workforce need mental health services. Expanding the availability of screenings in pediatric, adolescent, and adult primary care supports lifelong, positive mental health.

✔ **Why it works:**

Numbers and data are frame elements that impact how audiences think about an issue. Communicators can redirect thinking by using data to promote constructive thinking about problems and solutions.