

Sample Legislative Testimony: Opposing “Flat Funding” for Human Services in the County Budget

This sample testimony for a typical budget hearing makes use of several reframing strategies. Instead of relying only on Numbers to make the case – merely offering information about how flat funding will impact nonprofit organizations and their staff, or even by talking about clients who will be harmed - the piece embeds these facts within the *Constructing Well-Being Narrative*.

Testimony on the County Commission Budget Committee Hearing

Thank you Madam Chairman, and Commissioners, for the opportunity to address you today on the Commission’s budget proposal for next fiscal year. My name is [first name, last name] and I direct Human Services Inc., which provides critical services statewide through outreach, research, planning, prevention efforts, and direct services. I welcome any opportunity to discuss these matters because our work keeps us deeply mindful of our county budget’s purpose: it’s a blueprint to support the well-being of every person in this county. 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 county thrive and remain a vibrant place to live, work, and play.

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. We provide the bricks and mortar of well-being: social relationships, opportunities to maintain physical fitness, ways for young people to develop new skills and discover new interests, places for people with disabilities or mental health problems to get different kinds of support. We provide a team of specialists who know how to construct different aspects of well-being: not carpenters or electricians, but skilled craftspeople nonetheless. We maintain a staff of child development experts, social workers, career counselors, and a variety of health-oriented professionals. We work together to ensure that those we serve can do well socially, emotionally, financially, and physically.

This opening appeals to the Value *Human Potential* to set up a “common good” frame.

By using the Explanatory Metaphor *Construction*, this passage establishes human services as a public good that benefits us all, and reframes the assumption that individuals create their own well-being. The metaphor is extended throughout the testimony, adding both coherence and additional “doses” of this frame element.

As I said, our county budget is our region's shared blueprint for how we will build well-being. Right now, though, if we follow the blueprint that's been proposed, we won't end up with a strong structure. We're simply not providing the materials, or the team, to maintain it, much less handle any repairs if our community hits a patch of stormy weather and well-being begins to break down. For the fifth year in a row, the budget blueprint offers flat funding for human service organizations like ours. Let me explain what I mean by walking you through what flat funding for human services means for different members of our community at different stages of life.

Human services support children, providing the kinds of developmental opportunities that are needed to build a strong foundation for life-long well-being. Our organization conducts research on ways to improve children's health – focusing especially on effective ways of incorporating more physical activity into children's lives. This research promises to yield long term health and economic benefits, by giving us clear ways to reduce health problems related to inactivity. In another example, our efforts have helped our local school district improve attendance by drawing attention to an under-noticed but very common cause of school absences: untreated oral health problems. By making preventive oral health services available at schools, more children are getting appropriate treatment in a timely manner, and attendance has gone way up. And of course, our popular summer camps and afterschool programs for kids are well-known in the community. These various research, advocacy, and direct service efforts provide multiple benefits to our community. Yet, due to the flat funding over the past five budget cycles, we have had to cut in all of these areas. As one example, we had to cut the availability of childcare and kids' classes in the summer and in the evenings. This meant fewer opportunities for children to be exposed to things like sports or dance – and also, meant that in some cases, parents had to cut back or rearrange their work hours because no high-quality child care option was available.

Those services build the foundation of well-being in the early years of life – but well-being is a construction project that goes on our entire lives. Human services meets the needs of adults, too. A few years back, our community planning specialists worked to identify where and when shortages of affordable housing would occur, and brought this data to county officials who were making zoning decisions that might make matters worse. As a result, our county has increased its rates of home

This section begins the Life Cycle Examples, which continue through the following paragraphs. Note that the types of services for children are mixed: research, advocacy, and direct services are all mentioned.

When it comes to "able-bodied adults," this communication focuses more on planning, research, and prevention services. There is very little in this section that could call up people's concerns about dependency or worthiness.

ownership recently, which increases our tax base and adds to the stability of our community. But flat funding means we've had fewer resources with which to do this kind crucial planning. For example, we were unable to adequately staff the Mayor's listening sessions on community policing this year, though in years past we were an active and helpful partner in violence reduction efforts. Because we didn't have the staff to keep up with federal reporting requirements for a very promising national, randomized clinical trial that promised better outcomes for addiction prevention and treatment, we had to withdraw from this important research initiative. We also had to drastically scale back clinical supervision hours for our frontline therapists in our counseling offices, which jeopardizes our ability to deliver the outcomes we promised, when this commission helped us invest in evidence-based mental health treatment models three years ago.

Human services support older adults, too. Our research division is studying the factors that affect the mental health of older adults – looking into things like the healing effect that social connections can have after the loss of a life partner. Our educational efforts have helped our county to pay careful attention to the policies that can help seniors “age in place,” – stay in their homes – which in turn, reduces health care costs and increases seniors quality of life. We also provide services that are critical for shoring up the well-being of older people in difficult circumstances – for instance, bringing meals for older people who can't leave their homes. Again, we have had to cut back across these three important strands of our work: research, policy analysis, and direct services. The waiting list for Meals-On-Wheels has grown, while our ability to meet demand has shrunk. As we have reduced research staff, important questions take longer to answer and we have less ability to share what we learn with some audiences who might benefit from it. We cut one of our most popular programs – a tutoring service that paired older adults with kids who were struggling in school. This program benefited the seniors by keeping them active and engaged, benefited the kids who got one-on-one-attention, and benefited us all by creating strong relationships, healthier seniors, and smarter kids in our community. But we simply couldn't afford the staff it took to manage the schedules, train the tutors, and follow up on kids' grades to make sure it was all working well.

I've been talking about construction and maintenance as a metaphor all along, but the flat funding has had a literal effect on our buildings and infrastructure, too. We have had to delay necessary maintenance on

This example highlights a life event that could happen to anyone, while also highlighting an under-appreciated aspect of well-being – social connections.

This example highlights the role of human service professionals in coordinating and evaluating programs – expanding the view of them beyond “charity workers.”

buildings where we serve county residents, as well as put off upgrading computers and equipment necessary for our staff and our clients to do their work.

Budgets are tools for peering into the future, planning for the needs we can see ahead. A sound budget anticipates and allocates for these needs. We can see that the cost of doing business will rise in the year ahead – our agency’s routine expenses for rents, materials and supplies, and salaries all continue to increase just like the cost of living increases. In this circumstance, flat funding is the same as a service cut for the people of this county. Flat funding means disinvesting in our well-being. Over time, that weakens our community’s well-being in ways that are obvious right now – like unfilled positions and program cutbacks – but also, in ways that we might not see for years to come. When people have the support they need, they’re better able to weather life’s storms. When they haven’t had access to support, they might struggle to do so. Well-being requires steady, long-term support that keeps pace with the cost of doing business. While we at Human Services, Inc., are always willing to work with the Commission to find ways to better plan for our needs and to make responsible use of our resources, we believe – we *know* -- that continued flat funding is doing serious damage to the well-being of our county’s residents, and undermining the strong foundation we have all worked so hard to build. We ask that you revise the budget to include a cost-of-doing-business adjustment for human services across the board. That would be a better blueprint for building the kind of community we want and need.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

[Signed]

[Your Name, Organization, Mailing Address]

Rhetorical Tone
“preaches to the choir”
and alienates everyone
else. The Reasonable
Tone, and explanatory
structure, modeled
here widens the appeal
of the message beyond
those who already
agree with the point of
view being expressed.