

How to Reframe Refugee Resettlement

A strategic communications brief for the Minnesota
Department of Human Services

Developed by the FrameWorks Institute 2017

Introduction

This brief offers a set of framing recommendations for the Minnesota Department of Human Services (MNDHS) to use in developing a messaging strategy to build public understanding of and support for Minnesota's refugee resettlement efforts. These recommendations are based on a thorough analysis of MNDHS' existing communications on refugee issues. FrameWorks staff agreed that the materials are very well framed. We believe that the recommendations included in this report will strengthen the department's messaging about refugee issues and its efforts to build public support for a strong refugee resettlement system in Minnesota.

Overall, our recommendation is for communicators to harness the power of storytelling to build support for refugee issues in Minnesota. An effective social change narrative doesn't select the beginning, middle, and end on a whim, or merely for a pleasing literary effect. Rather, it fills in the chapters strategically, anticipating where and why the story will be difficult to tell. It builds on knowledge of where people get stuck when they attempt to follow experts' logic, where they are likely to dismiss or misinterpret evidence, and where they are missing key concepts that allow them to develop informed positions on the issue. By filling in these blanks consistently, systematically, and scientifically—choosing among plausible alternatives by looking to evidence about the effects of frames—and using narrative consistently to shape a variety of communications efforts, MNDHS can significantly advance public understanding of refugee issues.

This brief outlines the main framing recommendations, includes sample communications, and identifies strategies that can backfire. The accompanying toolkit models these recommendations and provides MNDHS staff with well-framed and customizable communications materials.

RECOMMENDATION #1: HARNESS THE POWER OF STORYTELLING

Use a well-framed, complete, and coherent narrative that channels public thinking.

Order matters. Reframing an issue involves telling a new story that fills in the public’s cognitive holes about the issue by answering key questions that enable people to make informed decisions about what policies to support. These questions include:

- *Why does this issue matter?*
- *How does it work?*
- *What can we do about it?*

Making sure your communications about refugee issues answer these questions will increase people’s understanding of the causes and consequences of, and solutions to, the social problems that MNDHS addresses. A strong “narrative arc” is one way to accomplish this task.

The human brain is wired to think in narrative—we use storytelling all the time to make sense of the world around us. Strategic framing harnesses this cognitive feature by organizing information about an issue into story form, which aids people’s interpretation of a message. A well-framed narrative organizes the answers to the primary questions we’ve identified above in a way that fits people’s expectations about what a good story sounds like. A typical arc for a story about social change looks like this:



Other frame elements—values, metaphors, examples, explanatory chains, numbers, and solutions—help answer the questions that, collectively, tell the story about the issue. Values, for example, work well at the beginning of a communication to explain why an issue is a matter of public concern. Explanatory chains, metaphors, and data then fill in the meat of the story. After you have established an issue’s importance, explain the mechanisms of the problem to help people engage in the systems-oriented thinking needed to address large-scale social change. When people have the information they need to understand a problem’s causes and effects, they are better able to think productively about what solutions are required and to entertain more expansive ideas about how to solve the problem.

The recommendations below offer strategies for answering these big questions effectively.

RECOMMENDATION #2: START WITH WHY IT MATTERS

Use *tested* values to establish what is at stake.

Before the public will throw its support behind a policy issue, it first needs to understand why that issue matters. By tapping into our society’s widely shared beliefs about what is positive, ideal, and desirable, appealing to a value can prime these same beliefs in people who encounter your messages. Testing which values work best to establish the importance of social issues like immigration reform or public funding for human services is an element of FrameWorks’ communications research. Across our work on issues related to community and social wellbeing, we have found that values emphasizing shared benefits and the common good are best able to boost public support for expert-recommended solutions to an issue. *Human Dignity* and *Prosperity* are two values that have been shown across issue areas to help the public think about the collective benefits of more expansive and welcoming immigration (including refugee) policies.

The good news is that MNDHS is already using these values in its communications. For example, when communicators argue that refugee resettlement is a policy priority because refugees are a part of Minnesota’s history or that refugee programs are critical for family reunification, they are drawing on people’s sense of moral obligation to members of their communities. Communicators should take time to be explicit in their communications about this shared value, as illustrated in the sample iteration below. It shows how communicators might use the values of *Human Dignity* and *Prosperity* in a media statement or another type of communication in response to a news event pertaining to refugees.

{Sample Media Statement}

[Date]—For immediate release:

[Organization Name] Statement on Proposed Refugee Ban

Minneapolis, Minn.—In response to [description of news event], [Name, title, organization] issued the following statement today:

“In the United States of America, we strive to treat all people with dignity and compassion. Refugees are in perhaps the greatest need of our support. They arrive on our shores with little more than a small bag of belongings and the hope of a new life, one in which they can participate fully and live without fear of violence or persecution. Recent executive actions don’t live up to our values and deprive our state of the prosperity that refugees bring to Minnesota. We need a refugee resettlement system that provides all people—regardless of where they were born or what social group they belong to—with the opportunity to meet their basic needs, support their families, and contribute to our communities. We need to sustain our resettlement system and make sure Minnesota continues to welcome all those who come here.”

Communicators should bear in mind the key components of the *Human Dignity* value, which are listed below with examples (in italics) of how to incorporate them.

- ➔ Reference our shared humanity and inoculate against the tendency to see refugees as others: *“We need to treat everyone with the compassion they deserve as human beings. No matter where we were born, we are all people and are all entitled to the same basic respect.”*
- ➔ Demonstrate how the state’s resettlement system honors Minnesotan values by recognizing immigrants’ humanity: *“Our resettlement efforts keep family members together and provide the assistance people need to begin new lives here.”*
- ➔ Connect a strong refugee resettlement system to our ability to fulfill our moral obligation to other human beings: *“Welcoming people to our great state and treating everyone with compassion and respect is just what Minnesotans do—and that is also a priority for our refugee resettlement system.”*

The value of *Prosperity* is also a central part of existing communications. When communicators talk about how refugees make Minnesota more economically competitive or how they contribute to stronger and more vibrant communities, they are deploying the *Prosperity* value.

To improve this value’s framing effects, we recommend that communicators always point to the collective rather than selective benefits of a strong refugee resettlement system. We

found that in some materials, communicators narrowly focus on the benefits that will accrue for refugees or refugee communities, rather than to all of Minnesota. Consider the difference between these two passages taken from existing communications materials:

Example One (collective-benefits orientation):

Refugees provide a story of resilience and hope for our community. People with refugee status have experienced extreme loss and had to start their lives and careers over again with little more than courage and determination. These same individuals are now legislators, school board members, teachers, state workers, nurses, factory workers, and business owners. Their tenacity strengthens the future of Minnesota.

Example Two (selective-benefits orientation):

The Resettlement Programs Office works with many others to support the effective resettlement of refugees in Minnesota by helping meet their basic needs so that they can live in dignity and achieve their highest potential.

Where the first example is clear that refugees contribute to the future of Minnesota, the second passage only focuses on the benefits that will accrue to refugees themselves, making it difficult for members of the public to see what is at stake for everyone. Furthermore, because the second passage only explains the benefits that accrue to refugee communities, it may inadvertently activate *Us vs. Them* thinking, a pattern of thinking that prior FrameWorks research has shown to be pervasive when ordinary Americans think about immigration and refugee issues.

Messages using the *Prosperity* value should incorporate these key components:

- Appeal to the public's sense of common goals for the state's economic future: *"One of the most basic American goals is to make sure our state is prosperous and its people are living good lives."*
- Use language that aligns the public with expert understandings of how refugees contribute to economic growth: *"Prosperity requires maximizing every individual's skills and energy to build Minnesota's economy."*
- Alert the audience immediately to the importance of an inclusive refugee system: *"To achieve this goal, we need to maintain and support the policies and programs that help people become a part of Minnesota's communities."*

Be clear in every communication that a strong refugee resettlement system benefits all of Minnesota.

How does this work?

In their existing communications, MNDHS communicators are trying to explain two distinct but interrelated processes:

1. How the US immigration system works with respect to refugee-related issues.
2. The kinds of human and social services that are (or should be) available to refugees to assist the resettlement process.

FrameWorks' prior research on public understanding of the immigration system and of human services has found that the public has a very thin understanding of how these complex systems work. These bodies of research also demonstrated that communicators can build understanding through empirically tested explanatory metaphors. Explanatory metaphors make complex or unfamiliar concepts easier to understand by comparing them to more concrete, familiar objects or processes. They use the power of analogy to enable the public to think more productively about how social policy affects issues like refugee resettlement. Below we recommend two metaphors that can help MNDHS communicators accomplish the two explanatory tasks detailed above.

RECOMMENDATION #3: EXPLAIN HOW THE SYSTEM WORKS.

Use the *Sail* metaphor to build understanding of how the refugee system works

The *Sail* metaphor helps communicators explain how the immigration system works for refugees, encourages members of the public to think more expansively about refugees' potential contributions, and channels thinking toward the ways in which more welcoming refugee policies benefit all Minnesotans. The following iteration shows how communicators might use the metaphor in the beginning of a speech, a commentary, or another communications opportunity.

{Sample Speech Statement}
Remarks for [Name]
[Name of Organization and Event]
[Date]

Throughout Minnesota’s history, refugees and other newcomers have been the wind in our state’s sails. Most refugees become citizens and make our “land of 10,000 lakes” their permanent home. They bring labor, skills, and ideas that propel our state forward.

Refugees support our business community, helping local companies meet workforce demands and building a larger consumer base. Refugees benefit our neighborhoods, bringing new economic development and cultural diversity. And refugees benefit our state, paying taxes, contributing to Social Security, and expanding Minnesota’s GDP.

Changes in federal policy would impede our state’s progress by limiting the energy that refugees bring to our state and separating parents from children. But we know that our communities and our state are stronger when refugees can contribute and when families stay together.

We need our system’s “sails” to remain unfurled and positioned to keep families intact and harness the full power that refugees bring to our state. By maintaining humane refugee policies, we will all move forward faster.

The *Sail* metaphor channels thinking away from the dominant perception that refugees are “others” who potentially pose a threat to public safety. It also avoids activating the assumption that refugees are a drain on public resources. Instead, the metaphor leads to more productive engagement with refugee issues by:

- ➔ Using the wind component of the metaphor to show the benefits of welcoming refugee policies and to avoid cuing up an *Us vs. Them* perspective.
- ➔ Describing the positioning of the sail to help people understand how policies or structural mechanisms need to match prevailing conditions in order to work as well as possible for everyone.
- ➔ Highlighting the need for an adaptable system by discussing the flexibility of the sail. This allows space for communicators to add details about the refugee resettlement process, including the vetting systems that are already in place.
- ➔ Emphasizing the idea of a common destination to focus attention on how good policies help the state achieve its goals.

RECOMMENDATION #4: INCREASE SUPPORT FOR PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

Use the *Building Wellbeing* metaphor to explain how refugee resettlement programs support wellbeing.

FrameWorks research on communicating about the work of human services organizations tested strategies for building public understanding of wellbeing. Since refugee resettlement programs deal with elements of wellbeing, we believe these research findings will be of use to those working on refugee resettlement issues.

The *Building Wellbeing* metaphor boosts public support for policies, programs, and funding related to human services. MNDHS can extend this metaphor to communicate about how human services work together to support wellbeing for refugees. The following iteration shows how communicators might use the metaphor in the beginning of a series of talking points.

{Sample Talking Points}

Human Services Talking Points [Date]

- *Just as building a strong house requires certain materials, building wellbeing requires community resources, social relationships, and opportunities to thrive.*
- *These materials are often not available to people fleeing dangerous and violent situations.*
- *Without these supports, refugees sometimes struggle to participate fully in our communities.*

The *Building Wellbeing* metaphor moves people beyond dominant perceptions that aid agencies provide (and should *only* provide) temporary supports that address basic needs, a limited understanding that obscures the purpose and results of these agencies' efforts to create a foundation for community- and population-level success. The metaphor helps people to think differently about wellbeing in three key ways by:

- Making it easier to think about how wellbeing, like a house, is constructed through the collaborative effort of many stakeholders, including experts, advocates, and community members. This helps expand the public's attribution of responsibility for solving social problems.
- Steering people away from individual-focused solutions; after all, houses don't build themselves.

- Illustrating how investing in sturdy wellbeing now enables people to weather storms that may come in the future, which demonstrates the importance of preventive or mitigating work.

RECOMMENDATION #5: COMPLETE THE STORY WITH SOLUTIONS

Use the Five “C’s” of Conclusion checklist to frame solutions.

It is important to recognize that values and explanatory metaphors are designed to prime a conversation about solutions. Communicators should view the above recommendations as a prerequisite to a conversation about which solutions fit the problem definition. By providing a goal, values help people think collectively about what they want from society. And explanatory metaphors help people evaluate whether the system is working to achieve positive outcomes. But the narrative is incomplete without the final chapter: a discussion of which solutions the people of Minnesota should support to improve the state’s refugee resettlement system.

Several of the materials we reviewed explained why refugee issues matter to Minnesota and explored many of the issues that refugees face, but they lacked any clear call to action or concrete steps that people can take to ensure a strong refugee resettlement system in Minnesota. The major exception to this was the information provided in the World Refugee Day materials, which included clear action steps for the audience. Communicators should consider including solutions in all materials where possible.

FrameWorks has developed a five-point checklist that communicators can use to “frame-check” their messages’ conclusions:

- **Concrete:** Are the solutions specific? Have you offered details about how they work?
- **Collective:** Does your ending make it clear that the problem and its solution exists at a systemic level and requires public attention and support?
- **Causal:** Are the solutions discussed linked explicitly in the message to the problems they are designed to solve? Is the chain of cause and effect clear enough for non-experts to understand?
- **Conceivable:** Are the solutions feasible? Do they encourage a sense of efficacy?
- **Credible:** Are the solutions presented in a disinterested way that steers clear of cues that might trigger partisan feelings or debate?

COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGIES TO AVOID

Some ways of framing an issue can ensnare public thinking in unproductive evaluations and judgments. Strategic Frame Analysis® identifies such communication traps, focusing on those that are habits of a field or common media practices and that, as such, can be difficult to notice and even harder to avoid. These traps are popular techniques precisely because they are eminently plausible ways of framing an issue and respond logically to challenges that communicators have observed from experience. However framing research shows that they fail to achieve their desired effect, or even turn out to do more harm than good. FrameWorks research on how the public thinks about immigration and human services suggests that communicators need to be wary of the following traps as they engage the public.

The Worthiness trap. Communicators want to convince the public that refugees are worthy and deserving recipients of public assistance. In existing communications, MNDHS establishes worthiness in two ways: by showing how refugees have better outcomes than non-immigrant groups receiving public assistance and by emphasizing refugees' legal (as opposed to illegal) status. These strategies have the potential to backfire.

First, direct comparisons with US-born groups may inadvertently activate *Zero-Sum* thinking, where supporting one community necessarily means taking supports away from others. The public tends to be less supportive of a robust system of human services when thinking in these terms. Second, even implicit differentiation of refugees from other kinds of immigrants may be counterproductive both to refugee resettlement efforts and to the larger immigration reform movement, including for experts and advocates who are working to improve conditions for those without legal status. Direct comparisons can remind people of the biases they have against this or that group, leading to *Us vs. Them* thinking that constricts their ability to reason productively about these issues. Rather than focusing on the worthiness of individual people or groups of refugees, the strategies suggested here channel attention to improving the *systems* that support refugee resettlement.

The Demographic Change trap. FrameWorks' analysis of MNDHS public engagement materials revealed that the field has a tendency to argue for reforms to the refugee system by pointing to future demographic change, particularly the "graying" of Minnesota's population. This line of argument is a trap because it is based on an impending demographic crisis. Prior FrameWorks research and other research in the social sciences shows that fear-based messages may garner short-term attention but discourage public engagement over more extended periods of time.¹ Furthermore, this line of argument may inadvertently trigger the *Us vs. Them* perspective, which will likely dampen support for

¹ See for example, Witte, K. & Allen, M. 'A meta-analysis of fear appeals: Implications for effective public health campaigns.' *Health Education & Behavior* 27, no. 5 (2000): 591-615.

refugee resettlement programs. To steer clear of this trap, use values rather than data to open the case for why refugee issues are a matter of public concern and clearly communicate the benefits of a strong refugee resettlement program for all Minnesotans.

The Myth/Fact trap. Myth/fact sheets are pervasive in communications materials across a variety of issue areas, but social science research has demonstrated repeatedly that they are counterproductive. While myth/fact sheets might seem like a good strategy for correcting misconceptions, they are likely to backfire. Due to the way people process and recall information, repeating a misconception before introducing a correction reinforces the misconception—not the correction. Studies have shown that myth/fact sheets can actually lead to a *decline* in understanding and regressions in policy support.

Consider the passage below. While the author intends to dispute the idea that Syrian refugees are not more dangerous than other refugee groups, the passage’s headline reminds people of exactly what the author does not want them to think.

Are Syrian refugees more ‘dangerous’ than other refugee groups?

No person who has a criminal history associated with groups that the US considers dangerous is afforded protection under refugee status. No category of people or ethnicity or culture is inherently bad or criminal, that is an ill-founded fear. Security is a central component of the US Refugee Admissions program and there are extensive security processes in place along with 8 federal intelligence agencies involved in the security process.

The Just the Facts trap. The use of numbers and statistics can be an effective communications strategy, but only if they are properly framed. While the meaning of a given data point or statistic may be obvious to experts and advocates, the public is likely to interpret numbers in unexpected and potentially unproductive ways—unless they are placed within a frame that aids interpretation and guides meaning-making.

The State by State Competition trap. Communicators are often tempted to raise salience of a particular issue by highlighting how poorly that issue is being addressed when compared to other states. The idea is that when people are informed of how they rank against other states, they will mobilize into action. Rather than inspire people to action, it can actually increase fatalism about the possibility of change in solutions. The thinking goes, “why do anything if we are 47 out of 50?” This trap also frames social issues as

competitive rather than cooperative endeavors and therefore can inadvertently cue *us-versus-them* thinking.

SUMMARY OF A WELL-FRAMED APPROACH

An important tenet of strategic framing is to leave nothing to chance. When communicating with non-experts about refugee-related issues, it is critical to include all of the important parts of a story to prevent your audience from filling in any gaps in understanding with their own preexisting default habits of thought.

Instead of:	Try:
Focusing on outcomes for refugees	Pointing to collective benefits and shared responsibility; appeal to <i>Human Dignity</i> and <i>Prosperity</i>
Assuming too much about non-experts' understanding of the issues	Using explanatory metaphors that fill in people's cognitive holes, step by step
Focusing on problems	Matching the scope of problems to the scale of solutions
Discussing abstract solutions	Explaining how solutions can be implemented
Listing needed changes	Telling "how it works" stories that show how supports and interventions translate to change