



Published on National Council of Nonprofits (<https://www.councilofnonprofits.org>)

Original URL: <https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/articles/frame-you-use-matters>

The Frame You Use Matters

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You're facing a deadline. It's the end-of-the-year fundraising push, and you are trying to draft the most compelling message possible. You've seen many examples of fundraising letters and videos that describe stories of an individual person's struggles that seem compelling to you, so that's the direction you are heading... But wait! Did you know that research shows that such stories may actually be *counterproductive to attracting financial support*?



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The National Human Services Assembly enlisted the help of [The Frameworks Institute](#) to investigate the best approach to telling stories that will motivate someone to support the organizations that build and maintain well-being in our communities. Typically, the stories many nonprofits use in year-end fundraising

appeals highlight individuals whose participation in the nonprofit's program helped that individual overcome some personal challenge. But the research findings show that tightly focusing the public's attention on a particular person can backfire by cuing up the "[Individualism Trap](#):" people tend to think about *an individual's* drive, willpower, and character when they learn about why a person may be experiencing difficulties – rather than seeing the broader context and conditions that contribute to well-being.

Through this individual lens, the public views human services (and the nonprofits that provide them) as all about direct, temporary interventions that address the basic needs of people in crisis, leaving out the many ways that nonprofits promote well-being throughout life. Research also found that when individual stories are used, readers tend to look narrowly at a nonprofit's efforts to help that one individual, while the benefits to society are likely to be overlooked. By reinforcing the public's incomplete perspective on what human services are, why they are necessary, and who benefits, the types of personal stories often told in fundraising appeals can actually limit the public's engagement as advocates and as donors.

The research doesn't mean that we need to excise people from our fundraising appeals.

When carefully framed using a [research-based narrative](#) and storytelling strategies, stories that include individuals can not only encourage people to donate but also mobilize them to take action to fix societal problems. In a webinar conducted earlier this year on National Human Service Assembly's behalf, [Storytelling for Social Change: A Wide Angle Lens Approach to Reframing](#) (password nhsa), Frameworks provides helpful guidance on how to include personal stories in communications. In particular, the webinar reviews the importance of a [thematic story](#), one that helps the audience see the broader trends, systems, and solutions, rather than an [episodic story](#), which focuses narrowly on an individual's actions or challenges.

In one example highlighted in the webinar, FrameWorks walks through the process of turning an episodic story about how an organization helped one person, into a thematic story about how an organization is addressing a challenge that impacts the entire community.

The Story of Randy - Original, Episodic Example

Randy's homelessness was further challenged by ongoing medical conditions which led to repeated hospitalizations. Due to his health, he struggled with organization and memory, making it difficult to tend to his needs appropriately. Once Randy had a stable place to live, he was able to leave reminders around his apartment about appointments, making trips to his mental health care providers more consistent. His new dog has helped Randy regulate his moods by providing him companionship and an outlet to remain motivated and engaged with his community.

The version of the story above focuses on the importance of stable housing to Randy's well-being. And while that story is true, it is incomplete. Important pieces of the story, like why homelessness should matter to the public, and how the organization addresses housing and homelessness, are left unexplained. You can contrast the episodic approach with FrameWorks' reframed thematic version, which charts out the process of: 1) placing Randy's story into the broader context of the what healthy, stable housing means for all of us; and 2) providing a deeper explanation of the organization's role in fostering well-being throughout the community.

The National Human Services Assembly engaged The Frameworks Institute, with funding from the Kresge and Annie E. Casey Foundations, as part of an ambitious effort to increase the public's support for human services. Thanks to FrameWorks' rigorous, evidence-based approach to communications, we can say with confidence that [we now have a way to communicate](#) about the role of human services so the public understands it better and is more willing to support policies and funding that will improve the reach and effectiveness of human services organizations. [Interested in learning more?](#)

Bridget Gavaghan, National Human Services Assembly, is the director of the National Reframing Initiative.

Resources

- [Building a new narrative on human services](#) – a communications toolkit (Frameworks)
- [Rethinking personal stories](#) (National Human Services Assembly)
- [Episodic vs. Thematic stories](#) (Frameworks)
- [Handed to them on a plate](#) (Frameworks research report)

- [Building Our Collective Well-Being with Forward Looking Public Budgets](#)
(National Human Services Assembly)
- [Podcast/video presentation](#) about the deep assumptions people use to make sense of issues about well-being (National Human Services Assembly/Frameworks)