

Storytelling Guide

National Consumer Advisory Board
National Health Care for the Homeless Council
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Purpose and Use of this Guide

The National Consumer Advisory Board (NCAB) is a committee of the National Health Care for the Homeless Council that works to engage the voice, experience, and expertise of people experiencing homelessness in governance at health centers, as well as in the broader discussions about health care quality, access and delivery systems. Through this work, NCAB members have found the power of storytelling. Storytelling helps share experiences of homelessness, and highlight the services that helped while facing homelessness and transitioning into housing. Sharing these experiences can demonstrate that homelessness can happen to anyone based on a health need, job loss, natural disaster, or domestic violence situation. In order to prevent others from falling into homelessness, there needs to be better access to comprehensive health care, affordable housing, living wage employment, and assistance programs for those struggling to meet their basic needs.

Storytelling workshops at the National Health Care for the Homeless conference helped share lessons and tips with others. Health centers then began putting together their own storytelling trainings and programs, including a successful Consumer Advocate training at Care for the Homeless, a Health Care for the Homeless (HCH) project in New York City. The NCAB Steering Committee then put together this manual to share its experiences and knowledge of storytelling for the broader health center community.

People experiencing homelessness developed this guide as a tool to be used by others experiencing homelessness. Strategies and tips are included to help construct your stories and highlight the realities of homelessness, paying attention to how your story can shine a light on the broader causes and solutions of homelessness. Learn to use your story to become a leader in the struggle to prevent and end homelessness.

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The Value of Storytelling

Every day, messages are all around about you, other people and the world in general. These messages spread through language, images, and stories. Stories help construct and communicate messages and beliefs. They convey values that can reinforce beliefs, or help see things with a new perspective. Taking the time to listen to individuals' stories helps look beyond generalizations or stereotypes and see the real person. This human understanding and connection can help challenge assumptions, create bridges with people, and build community based on shared humanity.

Storytelling is a way to use personal experiences to talk about homelessness in a broader way. When experiences are shared, it helps to put things in perspective for others. It makes it "real" in ways that data and reports cannot. People who have never experienced homelessness cannot imagine going through some of the challenges that people without homes face on a daily basis. It is important for people to understand that it can happen to anyone.

Yet storytelling is not just about expanding the perspectives of others, building empathy and understanding, or influencing people and communities. Storytelling is also transforming for the storyteller. It gives people the time and space to deconstruct their experiences to consider their cause, impact, and meaning. Storytelling gives you the power to claim your experience and decide how you want to be perceived or viewed by others.

Why Tell Your Story?

Plenty of reports on homelessness focus on statistical analysis, facts, and figures. Stories about what a day in the life of a person experiencing homelessness looks and feels like personalize the issue. Telling your story makes these experiences concrete and personal, humanizing both the Storyteller and the broader issue.

Storytelling can serve people experiencing homelessness in different ways:

- Help individuals to better understand their own experience, help them find the strength to share their voice, and gain confidence in the power of that voice.
- Be an instrument for change. Individuals can share their experiences at public meetings to help identify where more resources are needed or how things could be done differently to help people experiencing homelessness.
- Help in demonstrating how the health center and support services helped them, and how it could help others.

Connecting Your Story to the Broader Experience of Homelessness

In order to challenge stereotypes and humanize the issue of homelessness, be careful how you construct your stories. It is important to know the current narrative about homelessness: how do people perceive those experiencing homelessness? Consider how messages or images affect views about homelessness and the people experiencing it.

Often these messages focus on homelessness as an individual failing; a person who made bad choices or is down on their luck. When the problem is defined as an individual issue, you do not see the connection that this issue has to other people in the same situation or how that one experience was influenced by society and policy. If millions of people are struggling with homelessness in the United States, it has to be more than a personal problem—it is a social problem. While everyone's experience of homelessness is unique, they are linked by the social and economic issues that lead to homelessness, and you want the audience to see that larger picture. When telling personal stories, it is important to acknowledge how your experiences were influenced by policies or social realities to help the audience understand why homelessness exists and how it can end.

Homelessness is fundamentally caused by a lack of access to resources to meet basic needs, including access to affordable housing, livable wages, comprehensive health care, mental health and substance use treatment, educational opportunities, and many others. What caused you to experience homelessness? What resources would have helped prevent your experience of homelessness? Think about how these factors play into your own experience, and use your story to highlight these social causes of homelessness. Use this guide to connect your story to a call for broader access to these resources and to help prevent and end homelessness.

Aspects about Homelessness to Consider Including in Your Story

- Homelessness is not an individual failure.
- Homelessness includes a variety of experiences with underlying, broader social issues.
- Substance use disorders, mental health issues, and other health problems can cause or be worsened by homelessness. Homelessness can prevent access to the resources needed to recover from behavioral health struggles.
- Marginalized populations are particularly vulnerable to homelessness and have additional barriers while experiencing homelessness, including Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) populations, youth released from foster care, individuals released from correction centers, immigrants or refugees, and people of color.

Effective Storytelling

Effective storytelling is engaging your audience by telling your story for a specific purpose and conveying that message to your audience clearly. Your message and purpose should guide which parts of your story to tell. Then put that story together in a way that clearly demonstrates your message. Audiences will create their own meaning based on what they hear and how they interpret things. Therefore, control the message so they take away the information and perspective you want the audience to obtain or receive from your story.

Factors to Consider in Developing your Message

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- Who is my audience?**
 - What is my goal for sharing a story?**
 - What do I want the audience to feel, think, or do?**
 - What parts of my story can create that feeling and message?**
 - How does this story relate to other people's experiences? To social issues?**
 - How can this story create change? How did this story change me?**

Stories should set the stage, explain a central problem or conflict, demonstrate a journey, and then explain how the conflict was resolved. With stories, that resolution doesn't always mean that you escaped homelessness—it means being honest about how you are currently managing the problem of homelessness or what it would take in order to get you adequately housed.

Key Components of Good Stories

Evoked Emotion and Dramatic Tension

- Focus on emotions rather than data and dates.
- Include emotions to inspire and motivate the audience to action.

Draw a Picture for the Audience

- Use vivid sensory language to immerse the audience in the world you are creating.
- Demonstrate a core message through your story. Show them--don't tell them.

Be Simple and Relatable

- Don't get stuck in the weeds. Edit out the irrelevant details.
- Focus only on what they need to know so they don't get lost in dates, years, or get off topic.
- Be clear and concise.

Be Credible

- Always be truthful. People can tell if you're exaggerating or not being honest, and you will lose credibility.
- If part of your story is not credible, they may disregard the entire message.

Advice to Consider

1. **Writing your story down** can be a powerful step in telling your story, to help sort through memories, shape a clear understanding of your personal experience, and craft your message.
2. **Practice your story to get comfortable sharing with strangers.** Sharing your personal life or speaking in public can be an intimidating process. Practicing and getting used to telling your story in your own way helps to give a sense of confidence when you are nervous.
3. **Get feedback on your story from those you trust.** You may not always communicate as clearly as you think. Make sure that the message is what you intend it to be.
4. **Consider how to tell your story within different time frames** so you can use this skill in any context. An elevator speech is a quick, one-minute (or less) pitch that can be used during meetings or introductions and can help to get across your key experiences to engage people in wanting to learn more. Nevertheless, the same story with more detail can be a feature of a presentation lasting five or 10 minutes (or more).
5. **Be mindful of how you include others in your stories.** When you include others in your storytelling, you are telling a piece of their story as well. If you want to speak about events that include another person by name, talk it over with the person you want to mention and see what they are okay with and not okay with you sharing. You can always help maintain someone else's privacy by not mentioning names or identifiable information.
6. **Be careful with media.** Your story belongs to you, but once you share in public it becomes a part of the public record. Decide what you are okay with people knowing and what you want to keep private—there is no need to tell your entire story. You do not know how many people (or which people) will see that story.
7. **Talking about experiences with homelessness can be difficult.** Not everyone is comfortable talking publicly due to the stigma attached to homelessness. Stigma is a damaging and powerful force. Judgement, or fear of judgement from others, can cause you to be excluded from opportunities like housing or employment or even question your own self-worth.

Be Careful Sharing

When signing a release form for your story, carefully weigh the risks and the opportunities. Once you sign that release, you may not know where your story is shared. However, having your story shared can increase the audience that hears your message & the “reach” of your message. Discuss the expectations for how your story is shared and only share with those you trust.

8. **Destigmatize homelessness through public speaking.** Hearing about homelessness from people with direct experience is a chance for the audience to challenge stereotypes about homelessness and shed light on the reality. It is a chance for the storyteller to humanize the issues of homelessness.
9. **Empower and heal through storytelling.** Acknowledging your own experiences and speaking “truth to power” can be personally empowering, and it can yield better health outcomes. Understanding the structural causes of homelessness can help fight any personal blame or shame, and can increase a sense of dignity and worth. This can be a key step to engaging more fully in health care services and other programs needed to protect well-being and achieve greater stability.
10. **Consider your audience.** You should not make assumptions about the values and beliefs of the audience based on the communities or organizations they come from. People from all areas of life may have the experience of homelessness, or have suffered trauma. It is important to tell your story in a way that is respectful of the audience and makes them want to listen to your message.

Example of an Effective Story

The block I grew up on was filled with boarded up vacants, empty corners stores, and schoolbooks with missing and ripped up pages. I learned early that my life wasn't valued the same as other lives. These daily messages told me that I wasn't worth investing in. And for too long of my life, I believed it. The first time I felt like I was a part of a community was with a local gang. They cared about me. They made sure I had food and clothes on my back. Slowly, I began to roll with them. They were my family. I got caught up selling drugs – the only job that my community educated me to have. After spending time locked up, I was released with no money, no resources, and no referrals to get anything I needed. It would have been easy to get back into the game. It was still the job I was most qualified for, and now that I was a felon, the only one that would have me. But I wanted something different. I found some people staying at a local vacant house, and they let me stay with them. They looked out for me and told me about places in the community that would help me. I found the same love and support I had when I was with the gang – but these people wanted to help me. They helped me figure out what benefits I qualified for and how to apply for housing. I have been in my own apartment for 3 months now and I am trying to figure out how to help people like me, who have been released from prison and need help not falling back into the game.

Example of an Ineffective Story

I became homeless on March 1, 2010. I was living with my friend and her boyfriend; he was a janitor from Kentucky and grew up on a farm. When I left there, I went to the shelter on 42nd Street and stayed in a room with a woman named Karen. She was crazy. Then in July, I got some help. The first apartment I went to I didn't like. The next place was good; it was downtown and clean.

Considering Emotions during Storytelling

Different things have affected everyone's lives, and sharing with others can be a good or bad idea. Many people who have experienced homelessness have also endured trauma. The act of losing housing and an individual's experiences during homelessness can cause traumatic stress including depression, anxiety, and insecurity. When stories are shared, they can include past traumas, relationships, and emotions. The feelings that may have been experienced during those times in the past can often resurface, causing a negative trigger to emotional well-being. You can also risk triggering traumatic reactions in others.

For the storyteller, it is important to consider any potential triggers that could arise, develop your personal boundaries around what you are comfortable sharing, and develop a set of ground rules on how you share. You must consider how to balance the genuine delivery of your story and how you talk about potentially triggering topics. You should also develop a safety plan, or a process just in case you are triggered or have an emotional health need during your participation at an event. Your safety plan can include talking with a counselor or trusted friend to help you process your emotions effectively or communicating any issues or potential issues with event staff. You should also develop "safe stories," or stories that you know you are comfortable sharing. This way, if on the day of the event you are feeling overwhelmed, you can fall back on telling your safe story. If you have difficulty sharing a particular part of your story, identify if you need to continue to tell that piece of the story and, if so, think about how to change the way you talk about the experience so that you are able to feel more comfortable.

Likewise, you cannot assume that everyone in an audience of people experiencing homelessness has endured trauma, nor can you assume that business audiences do not have anyone with the experience of trauma. Every time you tell your story to an audience, tell it as if someone in the audience could be affected. Be mindful of what you are choosing to share and if you are sharing about traumatic experiences, be careful not to share too many vivid details that could be triggering to some.

Public Speaking Tips for Connecting with the Audience

- Rehearse your story ahead of time with friends, colleagues, or family.
- Build a human connection before and after the event by coming early and/or staying later.
- Look directly at audience members—do not look down at the floor or read directly from your notes.
- Speak clearly and make sure everyone can hear you. Use a tone that makes people want to listen.
- Stand up straight and use open body language.
- If you forget where you are in the presentation, pause, compose yourself, and continue.
- Be respectful of the audience members. Leave room for questions and answers.

Conclusion

Storytelling is an opportunity to use your personal experience for the greater social impact of changing how people view homelessness and people experiencing homelessness. These exchanges are chances to expand the perspectives of your audience and shed light on the social causes and solutions to homelessness. Each storytelling experience will be different depending on the audience and your goals. However, it is important to find your unique voice as an individual and as a storyteller that honors who you are, what you have to give, and what message you want to share with people. Consider what is unique about you, your experiences, and values, and how you can share them in effective ways to communicate your message clearly. Sharing your story effectively means sharing it in ways that engage the audience, are simple to understand, and make the audience want to listen to you.

Moving Forward: Creating and Using Your Story

The purpose of this guide is to provide helpful considerations on beginning to develop and sharing your story. At the end of this guide, you will find worksheets with some of the prep questions outlined thus far to get you started.

If you are looking for additional storytelling guides, here are two valuable resources:

- **Public Narrative Training:** originally adapted from the works of Marshall Ganz of Harvard University and modified by Michele Rudy. Available at: <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Public%20Narrative%20Participant%20Guide.pdf>
 - This guide provides useful guidance on how to connect your story to the story of the audience, and a specific “ask” of the audience
- **Strategic Sharing:** developed by the Federation of Families for Children’s Mental Health and the Research and Training Center for Pathways to Positive Futures. Available at: <https://www.pathwaysrtc.pdx.edu/pdf/pbStrategicSharingGuide.pdf>
 - This guide provides useful tips on deciding when to share a story and effective public speaking.

Here are ideas for how to use your story to affect change:

- Promote your story on social media.
- Attend local public events to share your story and spread awareness about homelessness.
- Join or Develop a local Speaker’s Bureau
 - The National Coalition for the Homeless developed the Speaker’s Bureau project that is led by people with the direct experience of homelessness, who arrange to speak at schools, community events, and local organizations to spread awareness of homelessness. Find out more here: <http://nationalhomeless.org/about-us/projects/faces/>

Creating your Own Story

What is the purpose of this event? Who is my audience?

What is my core message for this event?

What do I want the audience to take away from this event? How do I want them to think about the issue?

What parts of my story get to that message or perspective?

How does my story connect to someone else's experience? How does it connect to a broader context?

How can my story create change? How can it help someone see a new perspective?

How can my story help someone more deeply understand a social issue or policy?

Emotional Considerations in Sharing

In order to emotionally prepare before an event, I need to...

These triggers cause me fear, anxiety or agitation...

These are my warning signs that I am getting upset...

If I am triggered during an event, here are things that will help me feel comfortable and safe...

If I am triggered during an event, others can support me by...
