

The Value of Storytelling

Every day, messages are all around about you that are spread through language, images, and stories. Stories help communicate messages and convey values that can reinforce beliefs, or help us see things with a new perspective. Taking the time to listen to individuals' stories helps look beyond generalizations or stereotypes, challenge assumptions, create bridges with people, and build community.

Storytelling within health care for the homeless can:

- Help individuals to better understand their own experience and gain confidence in the power of their voice.
- Demonstrating how the health center and support services help people experiencing homelessness
- Educate the community on the root causes of homelessness and health care injustice

Connecting Your Story to the Broader Experience of Homelessness

Housing and health care injustice are linked by the social and economic issues, and you want the audience to see that larger picture. When telling personal stories, it is important to acknowledge how your experiences or the organization are influenced by policies or social realities to help the audience understand why homelessness and health care injustice exists and how it can end. Think about how social factors play into these experiences, and use your story to highlight social causes such as access to affordable housing, livable wages, comprehensive health care, mental health and substance use treatment, educational opportunities, and many others.

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 and health care justice. In order to challenge stereotypes and humanize the issue of homelessness and healthcare, be careful how you construct your stories so you don't inadvertently reinforce negative stereotypes or misconceptions.

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.
- Marginalized populations are particularly vulnerable to homelessness and have additional barriers while experiencing homelessness.

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. Control the message so they take away the information and perspective you want the audience to obtain or receive from your story.

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.

Factors to Consider in Developing your Message

- 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?

Key Components of Effective Stories

Stories should set the stage, explain a central problem or conflict, demonstrate a journey, and explain how the conflict was resolved. With stories, that resolution doesn't always mean a happy ending —it means being honest about how the problem is currently being managed or what it would take in order to truly resolve it.

Evoke 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.

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.