

## Strengthening Economic Supports for Families Recommended Messaging<sup>1</sup>

### Background

#### I. Dominant Frames That Present Challenges to Support for Social Policy:

There are several highly accessible and unproductive patterns of reasoning common in American culture that present challenges to framing social policy:

- America is the land of opportunity, and anyone can succeed
- Individual responsibility is the key to success
- Fairness is proportional to effort
- Government is a crutch for those who won't do for themselves

Communication efforts, then, to educate others on policies that strengthen families and communities need to both understand and address these frames. The message strategies on which the following recommendations rest are supported by research that has shown their efficacy in assailing these dominant frames and improving support for policies related to family economic security.

#### II. The Structure of an Effective Message

Successful social issue framers use a well-tested structure for communicating about their issues with the general public.

##### Step 1: Appeal to shared values<sup>1</sup>

Values are the “big ideas” in communications that help people think more productively about social issues. The values that work best to advance family economic security are those that encourage thoughts of collective benefit and avoid thoughts of individual responsibility.

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<sup>1</sup> *These are general recommendations for effective messaging. If you are a recipient of federal funds please note the lobbying restrictions that may affect how you communicate around policies:*

*Awardees may not use funds for any kind of impermissible lobbying activity designed to influence proposed or pending legislation, appropriations, regulations, administrative actions, or Executive Orders (“legislation and other orders”). These restrictions include grass roots lobbying efforts and direct lobbying. Certain activities within the normal and recognized executive-legislative relationships within the executive branch of that government are permissible. For more information, please see: <https://www.cdc.gov/grants/additionalrequirements/ar-12.html>*

These include *Opportunity*<sup>ii</sup>, *Community (Interdependence)*<sup>iii</sup>, and *Ingenuity*<sup>iv</sup>. Messages should both begin and end with an appeal to shared values.

### Step 2: Tell a causal story<sup>v</sup>

Effective policy messaging relies on *causal stories* that connect the dots from the *cause*, to its *consequences*, and to the proposed *solution(s)*. Audiences will be skeptical of how solutions can be accomplished without sufficient detail that allows them to understand how the solution fits the problem. An explanation of the specific policy or program proposal is the final link in the causal story chain.

## III. Which Values?

### A. Effective Values:

**Opportunity** - The opportunity value emphasizes that some communities face structural barriers to financial security, and that removing these barriers and opening pathways to opportunity – through policy - will have tangible economic and community benefits for us all.

**Interdependence (Community)** - The value of interdependence suggests that what affects one part of the nation/state affects us all. It suggests that we need to give greater support to programs that get people to work together to solve social and economic problems, which helps bond our communities together and deal effectively with the problems communities confront.

**Ingenuity/Innovative thinking** - The ingenuity value expresses that Americans have long relied on ingenuity to solve tough problems - that we face challenges today that demand our creative thinking, and a commitment to working together to address these challenges.

### B. Problematic Values Frames:

**Sympathy/Care for the poor** - e.g., “More cuts to safety net programs will leave our most vulnerable even more vulnerable....” Framing economic support policies in terms of compassion or care can easily trigger destructive frames about government (i.e. that government is a crutch for those who won’t do for themselves). Further, it can evoke thoughts of charity as the appropriate solution, not public policy.

**Self-sufficiency/Self-reliance frames** - e.g., “We can strengthen our economy by getting people permanently on the road to self-sufficiency.” The goal should be interdependence and well-being, not just financial independence. So, helping people contribute to society, improving overall health, etc. need to be brought into the frame. Family economic security can be the OUTCOME, but it should not be the VALUE on which the messaging rests.

**Fairness** - Any "fairness" frame has to move beyond a compassion-based fairness and show that we need to right systemic wrongs; it can't be about achieving fairness in outcomes, but fairness in opportunity.



## Six Key Strategies

1. Begin by appealing to **shared values**: Opportunity, Interdependence (Community), or Ingenuity.
2. Tell a **causal story** that connects the dots between systemic causes and their consequences, and leads to a specific policy or program solution. Steer clear of episodic stories that focus on the impacts of the problem on particular individuals or groups.
3. Do not make the mistake of talking about inequality in *outcomes* as the issue that must be addressed; it is important to **explain inequality in opportunity** as the driver of unequal outcomes. <sup>vi</sup>
4. Make it clear that the **economy is a system that can be influenced**; i.e., that humans have power to influence economic conditions. Since most people don't understand how the economy works, they default to thinking it is uncontrollable and/or cyclical. <sup>vii</sup>
5. Widen the lens on attribution of responsibility so it is not only affected groups and policymakers who can envision a role for themselves in solutions.
6. **Emphasize the societal benefits** – both practical and moral – of proposed solutions. <sup>viii</sup> This ensures that the audience's relationship to the problem is connective; it is about "us," not "them."

## Sample Message Templates

*Note:* While I have provided a sample Value in each example, you should feel free to draw from any of those identified above. Further, in each case, the causal story will need more specifics regarding the unique challenges of your state relevant to family economic security (e.g., being hard hit by the shift from manufacturing to service-sector jobs; reductions in jobs with employer sponsored benefits; lack of affordability/availability of health and child care; particulars of state TANF, EITC, minimum wage, paid leave and other policy trends, etc.).

It is suggested that the CDC “technical package,” *Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect: A Technical Package for Policy, Norm and Programmatic Activities*, be consulted for more detail on the rationale and evidence-based approaches to *Strengthen Economic Supports for Families* (see pp. 13-17).<sup>ix</sup>

### ***Policy Area: Strengthening Household Financial Security***

Example 1, EITC and SNAP: *\*Messages for these two policies can have the same values set up and close, with a slightly different causal story.*

*Value:* The future of [our state] depends on ensuring that the **pathways to opportunity are open and accessible** throughout the state. When we allow *any* community to struggle, that derails progress for all of us.

*Causal Story, EITC:* Right now, many communities face barriers to the resources that strengthen opportunity, such as good paying jobs, affordable housing and quality early care for children. When our public policy doesn't keep pace with the needs of our communities, we can perpetuate hardship instead of strengthen opportunity. The state and federal **EITC** (Earned Income Tax Credit) help low-income families increase their income while supporting work and offsetting the costs of childcare.

*Causal Story, SNAP:* Right now, many communities face barriers to the resources that strengthen opportunity, as good paying jobs have dwindled and costs of food, housing and other basics has risen. When our public policy doesn't keep pace with the needs of our communities, we can perpetuate hardship instead of strengthen opportunity. That's why facilitating to the federal nutrition assistance program, known as SNAP (or food stamps), are integral to family financial security. Providing food assistance means a family's income can be used on other basic needs, and has also been shown to decrease child and family poverty.

*Value:* Our state is only as strong as its communities. And if we want a prosperous future we must support policies that **remove barriers and open pathways** to financial security across for all families.

#### Example 2, Subsidized Child Care:

*Value:* In [our state], we have a long history of working together to solve tough problems. Recent economic trends have created some challenges that we must address if we want our families and communities to thrive.

*Causal story:* The majority of (X% of) children in our state live in households where all adults work. Nonetheless, the availability of steady jobs that pay adequate wages has dwindled, leaving many families struggling to stay in or reach the middle class. The lack of affordable child care is a particular obstacle to family financial security. Since we know that early experiences in a child's life actually shape the architecture of the developing brain, we need to ensure that all children have access to high quality early learning experiences. Subsidized child care provides (vouchers/reduced fees/cash-transfers) to income eligible families offset the cost of quality, full-time child care.

*Value:* If we expect solid outputs we have to invest in solid inputs. Ensuring all families have equal opportunity to provide for children's needs is good for working families, for children, and society as a whole.

#### ***Policy Area: Family Friendly Work Policies***

\*Colorado's [Family Friendly Workplace Toolkit](#) is full of terrific arguments for and detail on the benefits of these policies. Their overall message is also very strong, and I include it as a great way to talk about *family friendly policies as an issue*. Following this are templates for *specific* family friendly workplace policies.

#### Example 1, Family Friendly Workplaces

*Value:* We need innovative solutions to the challenges that confront today's workforce, which is a very different workforce than 40-50 years ago. Today, the majority of families have all adults working.

*Causal Story:* Both work and family suffer when we don't have enough flexibility and resources to meet our responsibilities at work and at home. Family friendly policies in the workplace can make a big difference in a parent's ability to raise their children to succeed and participate in the state's future. Family friendly workplaces also benefit employers in the form of increased productivity, improved employee retention and lower absenteeism – they also give employers a competitive advantage in recruiting and retaining skilled employees.

*Value:* If businesses want to invest in the future of our state, supporting parents with smart business policies that produce bottom-line results and help strengthen families is a great place to start.

Example 2, Living Wage / Minimum Wage Increase (\*appropriate additions for Minimum Wage Increase efforts noted in blue):

*Value:* In [our state], we have a long tradition of **working together** to solve tough problems. And if we hope to have a prosperous future, we need to apply that **innovative thinking** to current challenges in the financial wellbeing of our workforce.

*Causal story:* Right now, too many jobs don't pay enough for workers to afford basic needs. The cost of groceries, housing and other basics have gone up but wages haven't. That hurts working people *and* slows down the economy. **The minimum wage is so low that many full time workers qualify for public assistance. Taxpayers shouldn't be subsidizing low wage employers; they should pay workers enough to live on.** It's just common sense that full time jobs should pay enough for people to afford the basics. A living wage/**minimum wage** helps not just individuals and families, but also our communities and economy. When people have more money to spend it will boost Main Street, create jobs, and help our communities thrive.

*Value:* By **working together to implement common sense solutions**, we can not only ensure financial security for [our state's] families, but also create a better quality of life for all of us in [state].

Example 3, Paid Leave and Flexible Scheduling: \*Messages for these two policies can have the same values set up and close, with a slightly different causal story.<sup>x</sup>

*Value:* An economy that leaves a substantial segment of workers far behind the rest of the workforce is contrary to our belief that we are "one nation, indivisible." That's why creating an economy that works for all means supporting economy-boosting, not economy-busting jobs.

*Causal Story, Paid Leave:* When people lose paychecks in order to care for themselves or family members, it not only hurts families, it also slows down spending, and ends up affecting all of us. *Paid family medical leave and paid sick days* are designed to protect people from losing income when they are sick, or to care for a family member, or take care of a new baby, and so on. We need to look at all job standards to make sure that jobs boost rather than bust the economy.

*Causal Story, Flexible Scheduling*: Jobs that allow workers to earn more and retain employment are better for the local economy. When workers have more notice of scheduled hours, they are better able to plan for childcare and transportation needs, making getting to work and staying on the job more likely. Likewise, policies that require employers to pay for a minimum of hours when a shift is cancelled, or practices that offer workers more hours before additional part-timers are hired, are ways of ensuring that jobs compensate better.

*Value*: Having an economy that works for all means ensuring work removes instead of creates barriers to financial security.

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<sup>i</sup> Milton Rokeach, *The Nature of Human Values* (Free Press, 1973); Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, "Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment," *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000): 611–39.

<sup>ii</sup> "PEN: Progressive Economic Narrative" (US Action Education Fund, 2011) <http://www.usactioneducationfund.org/pen/the-narrative/>; "Shifting the Narrative on Poverty: Messaging Memo" (The Opportunity Agenda, September 2015), [https://opportunityagenda.org/sites/default/files/2017-03/Poverty\\_messaging\\_memo.pdf](https://opportunityagenda.org/sites/default/files/2017-03/Poverty_messaging_memo.pdf).

<sup>iii</sup> "Shifting the Narrative on Poverty: Messaging Memo"; "Vision, Values and Voice: A Social Justice Communications Toolkit" (The Opportunity Agenda, n.d.), [https://toolkit.opportunityagenda.org/documents/oa\\_toolkit.pdf](https://toolkit.opportunityagenda.org/documents/oa_toolkit.pdf); Lynn Davey, "Strategies for Framing Racial Disparities: A FrameWorks Institute Message Brief" (FrameWorks Institute, 2009), <http://frameworksinstitute.org/toolkits/race/resources/pdf/disparitiesmessagebrief.pdf>.

<sup>iv</sup> Davey, "Strategies for Framing Racial Disparities: A FrameWorks Institute Message Brief."

<sup>v</sup> Deborah Stone, "Causal Stories and the Formation of Policy Agendas," *Political Science Quarterly* 104, no. 2 (Summer 1989): 281–300.

<sup>vi</sup> Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon, 2012).

<sup>vii</sup> Meg Bostrom, "Together for Success: Communicating Low-Wage Work as Economy, Not Poverty." (Ford Foundation, Economy that Works Project, 2004).

<sup>viii</sup> "Shifting the Narrative on Poverty: Messaging Memo."

<sup>ix</sup> B.L. Fortson et al., "Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect: A Technical Package for Policy, Norm and Programmatic Activities." (Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control, 2016).

<sup>x</sup> Topos Partnership, "Government, the Economy, and We the People: Creating Public Will to Shape an Economy That Works for All" (Public Works: The Demos Center for the Public Sector, October 2009), <http://www.topospartnership.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Government-The-Economy-and-We-The-People.pdf>; Topos Partnership, "Framing Job Quality: Scheduling, Paid Leave, and More" (Topos Partnership, April 2015),



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<http://www.topospartnership.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Framing-Job-Quality-Final.pdf>.