

## Explain your numbers

- Many compelling statements use numbers to describe a problem or challenge. If you use numbers in your stories, provide an interpretation first, followed by the statistic. Do not require the reader to draw their own conclusions from the numbers.
- Numbers are most effective when compared to small, everyday experiences; this tactic is termed “Social Math.” Be sure your narrative creates an image, not a math problem.

## Photos can be the whole story: beware!

- A picture must be clear without captions.
- The wrong picture can completely undermine a carefully worded story by conjuring up misperceptions.
- Pictures of meetings are weak because there is no action. Instead, take a picture of leaders clearly in action (like putting together food boxes or giving a presentation).
- **To create your supporting visuals, set up your own dramatic pictures of the unique actions that make up your CAAs work. In your pictures, literally “frame” your subject by focusing the camera on actions that evoke the story’s theme.**

## Keep up a continuous flow of stories

Your updated messages provide the public with new images that interpret your CAA’s work. Repetition is a key element of education. Keep producing and publicizing a steady stream of similar themes and catch phrases in each unique and memorable story.

## Research Results: Language about ‘Poverty’

Words that Rarely Work	Better Words
Poor/poverty	Economically disadvantaged, economically insecure
Working poor	Low-wage workers
Low-income families or low-income population	Low-wage workers, retirees, and their families
Unemployed	“Hard-working people” or “workers trying to find jobs”
Job security	Employment security
“Food insecurity” or “energy insecurity”	Hunger, poor housing, high utility bills
Program	Initiative, strategy, plan, action plan, plan of action
High school dropouts	People without a high school or other degree
Unskilled jobs	Low-wage work
Clients	Participants (in CAA programs)

### More Resources

*NASCSP has developed a detailed **Storytelling Manual** to help the staff of CAAs and State CSBG agencies communicate through strong stories. It is available at [www.nascsp.org](http://www.nascsp.org) in the CSBG section under “Guides and Manuals.” It contains more information on, and many examples of, the essential skills and strategies described here, along with communications research sources that support this guidance.*



NASCSP

# Telling Community Action’s Stories

National Association for State Community Services Programs

[www.nascsp.org](http://www.nascsp.org)

# Five Steps to Stronger Stories

## Step 1. Choose Your Stories Well

The most effective success story includes:

- The CAA and its staff as the central characters
- Responsible leadership and leaders' strategic thinking
- Program concept that involves actions general readers will understand
- Actions that mobilize and unify a variety of resources and partners
- Delivery of high-quality, well-managed services or investments
- Positive results for individuals, families, and the community as a whole

## Step 2. Frame Your Story:

### *The Beginning Is the Most Important*

- Focus your story's beginning by defining this category and describing the challenge the CAA addressed - and why it is important to this community or the nation.
- Setting up the values and perspective that you want your audience to accept is called "framing" your story; it ensures the story is interpreted as you intend.
- State the goal of the CAA, describing it as a "social inclusion" goal, not a "problem-reduction" goal. Social inclusion means something that allows the few to join the many, such as "opening new opportunities," not something to "fight," such as "overcoming illiteracy."

## Step 3. Set Up the Specific Challenge and the CAA's Immediate Goals

- Use an active writing style to tell how the agency identified the need for action and proceeded to create change.
- Demonstrate how the staff is proactive and capable, and works as a team as well as with partners.
- Emphasize how the specific goal matches shared community values such as "a hand up, not a handout."

## Step 4. Describe How the CAA Implemented the Plan

- Showcase vision, decisions, and actions.
- Using active verbs, show exactly what the CAA did in each essential phase of the project. Did they *convene, plan, mobilize, coordinate, raise funds, persuade and/or manage*? **Explain their decisions and action steps clearly.**

## Step 5. Describe the Outcome

- End with the demonstrated successes.
- Refer back to the beginning and its values frame.

### Contributors

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## Words are Your Most Important Tools

In order for each of the five steps to succeed you must use clear and effective language that consistently conveys your intended message to a diverse audience.

### Telling personal success stories can weaken your message!

Personal stories can lead to the following:

- **Narrow focus:** Readers may feel sympathy for the person in the story but fail to make connections to the societal or community-level conditions that contributed to the person's problems.
- **Hero focus:** Readers may believe that a very successful individual is unique or is so strong that the CAA's contribution was marginal and may even conclude that the individual's success is a one-time event.
- **Negative focus:** Readers may prejudge based on negative stereotypes instinctively when presented with your chosen case.

### Use words that work for many people

- Your story must break down barriers caused by lack of a shared understanding from audiences who are unfamiliar with your CAA and program. Address them so they will receive the message you intend.
- Avoid the professional jargon of the human services field. Instead, use plain English. The words listed on the back offer alternative word choices to help gain the support of your audience.