

# Talking Human Services

*A FrameWorks MessageMemo*

**Susan Bales**, *Founder and President*

**Andrew Volmert**, *PhD, Director of Research*

**Michael Baran**, *PhD, Associate Director of Special Projects*

**Moira O'Neil**, *PhD, Director of Interpretation*

**Nat Kendall-Taylor**, *PhD, Senior Vice President*

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# I. Introduction

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This MessageMemo charts a course through the dominant patterns of reasoning employed by the public about human services, identifies the major challenges for those communicating about related topics, and recommends how communicators can redirect their messages to improve public understanding, and increase support for this field. Why is this work critical to human service providers and advocates?

The field of human services has transformed dramatically since its origins in the colonial period and in the charitable activities of religious and civic organizations. The dominant narrative about human services, however, remains stuck in a charity model. The Community Action Movement of the 1960s made gains in its work to “eliminate the causes and conditions of poverty.”<sup>1</sup> However, the movement was still trapped in the concepts and language of past antipoverty efforts and relied on the differentiation between “the deserving poor ... and the lazybones who would not work.”<sup>2</sup> Over time, this script has worked its way deep into American culture and has become the story that Americans tell themselves when thinking about when, how, and why we provide social supports to individuals. The tension in the plotline of this story revolves around assessments of the “worthiness” of the person in need of assistance, while the precipitating events and social contexts remain invisible or, at best, in the distant background. Because so much of the narrative action is focused on establishing worthiness, public support for human services is always vulnerable to attacks on the character and “deservingness” of recipients.

Human service professionals recognize that this charity-based narrative contradicts the field’s current practices and orientation. Rather than just addressing problems for people experiencing the direst of circumstances, human services provide an infrastructure of well-being that supports *all* members of society. Through advocacy and a focus on *prevention*, today’s human service professionals focus on the social determinants—such as poverty and inequality—that create the need for direct services in the first place. Human services *promote* well-being by ensuring social supports like employment, education, community participation, transportation, and access to public spaces are in place for everyone. Finally, human services provide direct supports to help people who are exposed to multiple societal stressors regain well-being and maintain an improved quality of life.<sup>3</sup> It is clear that the field needs a new narrative that adequately reflects the scope and breadth of the human services.

Recognizing the communication challenges of the human services field, the National Human Services Assembly (the Assembly) asked the FrameWorks Institute to conduct a series of studies to document the public’s existing understanding of human services and to recommend communications strategies that can be used to increase understanding and support for human services. Supported by the Kresge and Annie E. Casey Foundations, this MessageMemo summarizes that research. Starting from the premise that crafting a new narrative of human services should not rely on guesswork or gut instinct, FrameWorks draws upon theories and methods from the cognitive and social sciences to generate empirically-tested reframing strategies. The re-framed narrative that results from this research provides a shared communications platform for professionals working across the human services. This MessageMemo is accompanied by a Talking Human Services Toolkit that provides communicators more specific guidance about how to pivot

from this common story to more specific messages they adapt to advance their own priorities and fields of practice.

The research base informing this MessageMemo is as follows:

1. expert interviews were conducted in March 2013 with 12 leaders in the field of human services;
2. interviews with 20 Americans were conducted in March 2013 in 3 states to document cultural models in use on this topic;<sup>4</sup>
3. qualitative and quantitative testing of Metaphors, Values, Examples, and narrative frames designed to capture aspects of human services were conducted with 4,959 Americans across the country.

All in all, 4,979 Americans were queried as part of this research. Descriptions of this research can be found at [www.frameworksinstitute.org](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org).

The MessageMemo is organized as follows.

We first **Chart the Landscape** of public thinking by describing the dominant and chronically accessible patterns of thinking that Americans use to reason about human services and well-being more generally. We also explain the communications implications of these ways of understanding.

We then provide an outline of **Redirections**, research-based recommendations that represent promising routes for improving public understanding of human services.

We end with a cautionary tale of the **Traps in Public Thinking** that must be avoided if reframing is to succeed.

## II. Charting the Landscape: Patterns of Public Thinking

Understanding the ways that Americans think about human services requires analyzing how they think about what constitutes well-being more generally. In this section, we discuss the most prevalent “cultural models”—or deeply held cognitive shortcuts used to make sense of new information<sup>5</sup>—that ordinary Americans rely on when asked to think about *what well-being is, what threatens it, what human services are and do, and what can and should be done to improve well-being*. A detailed knowledge of these cultural models helps communicators anticipate what their messages must overcome, proactively maneuver around unproductive understandings, and intentionally activate more productive ways of thinking.

FrameWorks uses the metaphor of a “swamp” to describe the ecosystem of cultural models that people use to think about a given topic. Unproductive cultural models are like alligators in a swamp that threaten to “eat” incoming messages, changing their meaning in unproductive ways; other places harbor incipient understandings that, if cultivated, can prove beneficial to advocates’ messages. Using this metaphor, reframing becomes a navigating exercise: knowing what to avoid and what to cultivate to get your message through the swamp alive.

FrameWorks research suggests that this is what the swamp of human services looks like:



## What is well-being?

Americans fall back on the following cultural models when thinking about what constitutes well-being.

*Well-being=Financial Self-Sufficiency.* Financial self-sufficiency is at the core of how people understand well-being and defines. According to this model, individuals should be able to meet all of their financial needs through employment, without relying on family, community members, or the government; people who receive assistance have failed to demonstrate the requisite discipline, willpower, and drive necessary to become a self-made individual. Thinking with the *Financial Self-Sufficiency* model, people who receive assistance are immediately classified as failing to meet the basic requirement of what it means to be a functional person. In addition, this way of thinking makes services like job training and temporary income support easy to understand as promoting well-being, but limits people's ability to consider the importance of a wider, nonfinancial set of human services.

*Well-being=Physical Health.* People consider health as an important dimension of well-being, but their top-of-mind conception of health is largely limited to physical health. They struggle to connect well-being and mental health.

## What threatens well-being?

When reasoning about what threatens well-being, Americans fall back on a handful of explanations:

*Lack of willpower threatens well-being.* People believe that everyone has opportunities to “achieve” well-being; people who experience hardships have failed to seize those opportunities. Thinking in this way, people attribute success or failure solely to individual agency—whether they have tried or not. When people are poor it is because they have made bad choices or have “chosen to be poor.” This idea also structures how people make determinations about who “deserves” human services. People who are not perceived as exerting sufficient willpower over their behaviors or sufficient drive to overcome adversity are generally categorized as unworthy of help.

*Bad parents threaten well-being.* When explaining differences in people's well-being, people focus on how people are raised and make assessments about the quality of parenting they received. Thinking in this way, children's outcomes are understood to be shaped quite narrowly by parents and events in the home. When development is viewed in these narrow terms and not connected to wider social contexts, the actions that people are able to see as potentially effective in addressing human needs are dramatically reduced.

*Dangerous communities threaten well-being.* People generally understand communities as a site of danger that individuals need to be protected *from* rather than as a source of resources and opportunities that can support and improve outcomes. In this way, exposure to community is frequently offered as an explanation of why some people are not doing well, but community is rarely evoked in explaining positive well-being.

## What are human services and how do they work?

When first asked to define human services, people struggle to come up with a definition and draw limited associations.

*Human services are cognitive hole.* A large portion of the public is unfamiliar with the term “human services” and, when asked to define or explain the term, most people are simply stumped.

When people are pushed to fill in this cognitive hole about human services, they fall back on the following models of service provision:

*Human services are direct services.* Americans assume that human services are exclusively about the provision of direct services. They do not associate human services with the advocacy or prevention work that members of the field stress as essential parts of human service work.

*Human services are charity.* There was a common assumption that human service work is about individual acts of kindness given to poor people in times of acute crisis. However, support— particularly financial support given to people in need—is thought to have a corrupting influence on their motivation to become self-sufficient, leading to a problematic cycle of reliance. According to this logic, the more money that is given to people, the more dependent they become. Therefore, increased funding to organizations providing such services is understood to lead to more dependency, and thus ironically to exacerbate poverty. When coupled with the understanding that well-being is primarily about being self-sufficient, human services work is sometimes seen as *undermining* individual well-being.

*Human services should provide the basics, but only temporarily.* Americans share an assumption that human services should only provide for people’s basic or essential needs. Recipients who acquire “extras” are seen as “working the system,” which becomes evidence of corruption in the system as a whole. Furthermore, people reason that the longer the “basics” are provided, the more dependent a person will become. Therefore, people stress that services should only be provided on a temporary basis.

## How do we improve well-being?

People draw on the following models to think about how to improve well-being:

*Individuals are responsible for improving their well-being.* People generally assert that individuals *themselves* are responsible for providing for their *own* needs and assuring their well-being. This strong sense of individualism has the potential to work against support for human service work because it undermines any sense of collective responsibility for social problems.

*Government should but cannot work to support well-being.* People assert that in an “ideal world” the government exists “for the people” and it therefore is responsible to create, fund, and regulate organizations that address social problems. At the same time, people view human greed—both on the part of politicians and the recipients of services—as an impediment to the government’s successful provision of

human services. When they reason through understandings of government as inept and corrupt (a dominant American cultural model of government<sup>6</sup>), people become fatalistic about proposals to improve human services more generally.

*Informal networks can step in to address social problems.* Although much less dominant than the other two models, there are times when people can see other groups as being somewhat responsible for stepping in and providing support. People highlight the role of extended families, schools, churches, and to a lesser extent, nonprofits, as potential sources of informal support. This understanding has the potential to *invigorate people's sense of public responsibility for addressing social problems.* However, it is relatively weak in comparison to the public's ideas about individual responsibility. Furthermore, this understanding will need to be expanded and reframed in order to extend the sense of public responsibility beyond informal networks. First, the focus on *informal* networks does not necessarily include human services—communicators will need to frame a broader network of support. It also may reinforce unproductive thinking about governmental responsibility for the provision of human services.

In contrast to these views, human service experts and practitioners emphasize a very different set of ideas about well-being and human services summarized below.<sup>7</sup>

## The Expert Story of Human Services

### What are human services?

- Human services are support mechanisms designed to help people—many of whom are exposed to multiple societal stressors—achieve and maintain well-being and quality of life.
- Human services help people meet needs across the lifespan.
- The work of the human services sector encompasses both direct services and advocacy.

### Why are human services important?

- Human services are designed to buffer the stressors and threats to well-being that all people may face at some point.
- Human services have society-wide impacts—improving population health and the economy and preparing the nation's workforce.
- Human services help those without access to resources, because of circumstances beyond their control.

### What are the challenges that face human services?

- The field of human services is divided into silos.
- Lack of funding is the biggest problem, which is especially limiting for the field's work on prevention and advocacy.
- The field lacks innovation because of its reliance on donors and other funding organizations who are risk averse.
- The focus on direct service provisions can distract from higher-level preventive work and make the field reactive rather than proactive.

### What can be done to improve human services?

- While maintaining its provision of direct services, the sector needs to look upstream and work more effectively at addressing "root causes" of human service needs.
- Focusing on what communities need to be successful rather than myopically on specific needs or services can unite sectors.
- The field needs to be more collaborative; in service design and provision and in its communication with the public.

### III. Redirections

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Communicators must navigate the swamp and avoid those highly accessible but unproductive patterns of public understanding about human services and well-being to build a more productive public understanding of the field. People also need substantial guidance in thinking that human services work over time to build, maintain, and repair Americans' collective well-being, rather than simply targeting specific groups at specific points in time. Finally, given the map outlined above, encouraging public appreciation of the supports human service professionals need to do their job well requires significant reframing. In order to combat the accessibility of the dominant frames, communicators will need a coherent and memorable narrative that can redirect thinking.

Based on findings from our research, we offer a series of evidence-based recommendations for human service communicators. Importantly, these recommendations should not be interpreted as a grab bag of suggestions, but rather as a storyline that can be used to organize messages about human services across advocacy groups. Drawing on evidence from the cognitive and social sciences, FrameWorks defines an effective narrative for social issues as addressing the following questions:

- Why does the issue matter to society?
- How does it work?
- What impedes it?
- What promotes it?

Below we outline the contours of a reframed narrative about human services – the Building Well-being narrative. The story looks something like this:

# A Story of Well-being and Human Services

## I. What is at stake?

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### Human Potential

Lead with the *Human Potential* Value to help people recognize that *everyone* needs support and that human services benefit us *all*.

## II. What kind of support do people need?

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### Construction

Use the *Construction* Explanatory Metaphor to explain what wellbeing is and how it is shaped.

## III. What threatens wellbeing?

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### Construction

Use extensions and implications of the metaphor—like spotty construction and unpredictable weather—to explain how context affects outcomes.

## IV. How do we ensure wellbeing for all?

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### Construction

Use the *Construction* Explanatory Metaphor to help people reason about the *different ways* that human services support wellbeing.



### Life Cycle

Use *Life Cycle* examples to give people a concrete understanding the full scope of human services.

## Use the *Building Well-being* narrative to help people understand what human services are, what they do, and why they are important.

Given the challenges posed by the ways that the public reasons about human services, no single tool or strategy is capable of shifting thinking in the ways or at the depth that is necessary to reframe this issue. Giving people a strong grasp of what human services are and what they do, and helping people appreciate their fundamental importance for individual and collective well-being requires a *narrative strategy*. A new narrative is required to redirect the public toward more productive ways of thinking about human services. This narrative must replace the actors, plotlines, and solutions that we identified in the public's dominant story with powerful alternatives that better align with experts' and advocates' perspectives. In creating this narrative FrameWorks relied on three strategic frame elements: *Values*, *Explanatory Metaphors*, and *Explanatory Example*. Matching tool to task, we used these frame elements to fill in important parts of the narrative by drawing upon what each element does best.<sup>8</sup>

**Values are enduring beliefs, which orient individuals' attitudes and behavior. Effective values form the basis for social appeals that pull audiences' reactions in a desirable direction.** Within the context of the *Building Well-being* narrative, appealing to specific values can establish the collective benefit human services.

**Explanatory Metaphors are linguistic devices that lead people to think and talk about something they were not previously proficient in thinking or talking about.** By comparing an abstract idea to something concrete and familiar, metaphors make something that is hard to understand easier to understand. Good Explanatory Metaphors do not become the topic of discussion, but provide the grounds for further discussion. FrameWorks tests metaphors for both their fidelity to the expert concept and for their usability in people's attempts to communicate with each other. Within the *Building Well-being* narrative, Explanatory Metaphors were developed to ground a new understanding of human services.

**Explanatory Examples are particular cases that illustrate some facet of an issue and motivate deeper engagement.**<sup>9</sup> Within the *Building Well-being* narrative, Examples fill out the narrative skeleton with specific content that enables members of the public to better understand the scope of human services.

Below, we recommend a narrative that weaves together the Value of *Human Potential*, the *Construction* Explanatory Metaphor, and *Life Cycle* examples to show how human services work over the life course. The components of this narrative have complementary functions, each of which must be filled in order for the message to be optimally effective.

While we offer examples of the overall narrative and its components, these are meant to illustrate how the narrative can be articulated and are more fully explored in the Talking Human Services Toolkit that accompanies this MessageMemo. Because these tools are adaptable for different contexts and forums, we seek here to explain how they work so that advocates have the understanding they need to use the tools flexibly.

## **The *Building Well-being* Narrative**

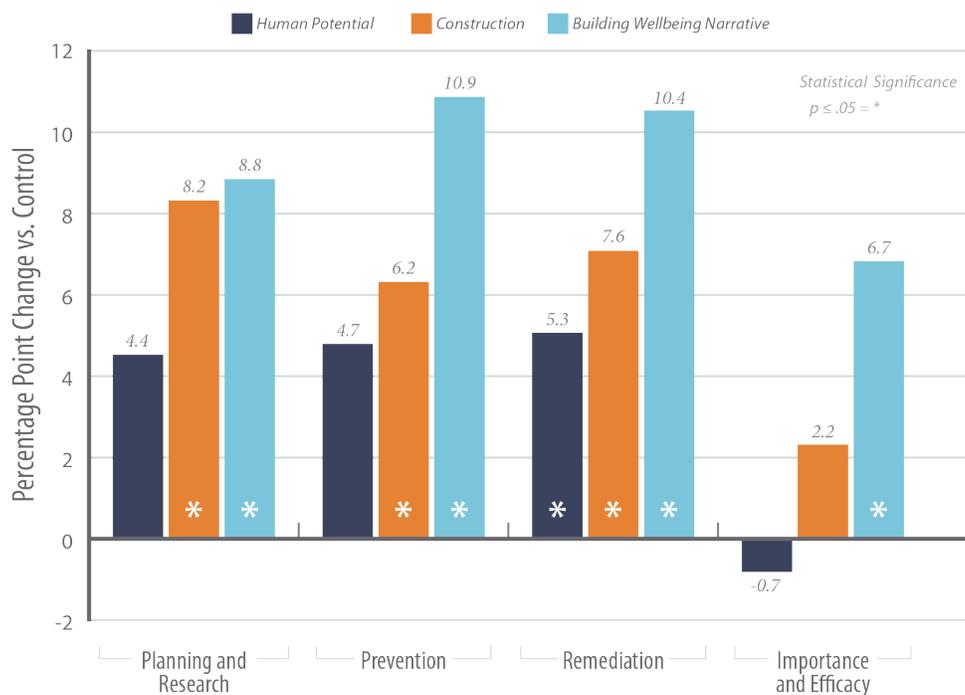
Below, we review quantitative evidence from two large-scale survey experiments that demonstrate the effectiveness of this narrative. We then explain the role of each component of the narrative, drawing on findings from qualitative and quantitative research to illustrate the ability of these tools to address particular tasks and to explain what each component contributes to the overall message.

FrameWorks conducted two large-scale survey experiments to test different tools for reframing human services. The surveys were conducted online with over 4,000 participants. Each respondent reads either a frame element—Value, Explanatory Metaphor, or Examples in isolation or in combination—or is assigned to a control group that receives no messages. Respondents are then asked to reply to a series of questions measuring their understanding of and support for the human services. While controlling for other variables, FrameWorks measures differences in responses. This process allows us to measure how exposure to different frames impacts their support and understanding of the human services. The first experiment identified a Value and Explanatory Metaphor that most effectively build public support and understanding of human services:<sup>10</sup>

- The *Human Potential* Value, or the belief that our communities are stronger when all people can realize their full potential.
- The *Construction* Explanatory Metaphor, or the idea that well-being is built through social support.

To measure how these components work together to build an effective narrative, the second experiment tested the *Human Potential* Value and *Construction* Explanatory metaphor in combination and with several types of examples of human services. This second experiment showed the power of weaving *Human Potential* and *Construction* into a narrative that includes examples of how human services support well-being throughout the life course (*Life Cycle* examples). This narrative—the *Building Well-being* narrative—is highly effective in helping people better understand and recognize the importance of human services. As Figure 1 illustrates, the full narrative has effects on people’s understanding of a wide range of human service issues. In the sections that follow, we look in-depth at each narrative component and explain why they are more effective than other tested elements.

Figure 1:  
Effects of *Building Well-being* Narrative on Understanding of and Support for Human Services



A key criterion of an effective reframe is whether it can overcome the public’s default understandings of the issue. To capture the ability of the messages to shift people away from unproductive cultural models, questions in the experiment were written in multiple-choice format. Survey respondents were given answer options that reflected unproductive default assumptions, such as that human services are provided only to people living in poverty, that they are only remedial services provided in times of crisis, or that

they increase dependency among recipients and thus ultimately undermine well-being. In addition to these options, respondents were given answer options that reflect the expert and practitioner understandings of human services. In this way, the figure above shows the ability of each message combination to overcome default understandings and channel thinking in ways that make people more receptive to ideas about human services that those in the field are seeking to communicate.

Survey results indicate that the narrative is highly effective in shifting people *away* from unproductive cultural models and in generating a broad understanding of human services' function and importance. The narrative produced increases of between 8.8 and 10.9 percentage points on the *Planning and Research*, *Prevention*, and *Remediation* scales, which measured people's understanding of the different ways that human services support well-being. Crucially, the narrative generated a 6.7 percentage-point increase on the *Importance and Efficacy* scale, which measured people's beliefs about the importance of providing a wide range of human services and about the ability of these services to create real changes in the well-being of individuals and groups. It is important to note that 6 to 10 percent differences in survey responses are big effect sizes. Despite the fact that participants were exposed to messages for a brief amount of time, those messages produce major differences in how people understand human services and their willingness to support policy change. Furthermore, all of these effects were statistically significant, meaning that the relationship is not caused by mere random chance.

To further verify the narrative's ability to shift public thinking away from unproductive cultural models, FrameWorks gathered and analyzed data from open-ended questions on the survey. These questions asked respondents to describe what human services do. Thirty-six (36) percent of respondents in the control group—who received no message—understood human services in a very narrow *remedial* way (i.e., as services needed only after people are in trouble or face a crisis or problem). By contrast, only 13 percent of respondents in the group who received the full *Building Well-being* narrative thought of human services in this remedial way. This striking 23 percentage-point difference suggests that the narrative is highly successful in inoculating against this narrow definition of human services.<sup>11</sup>

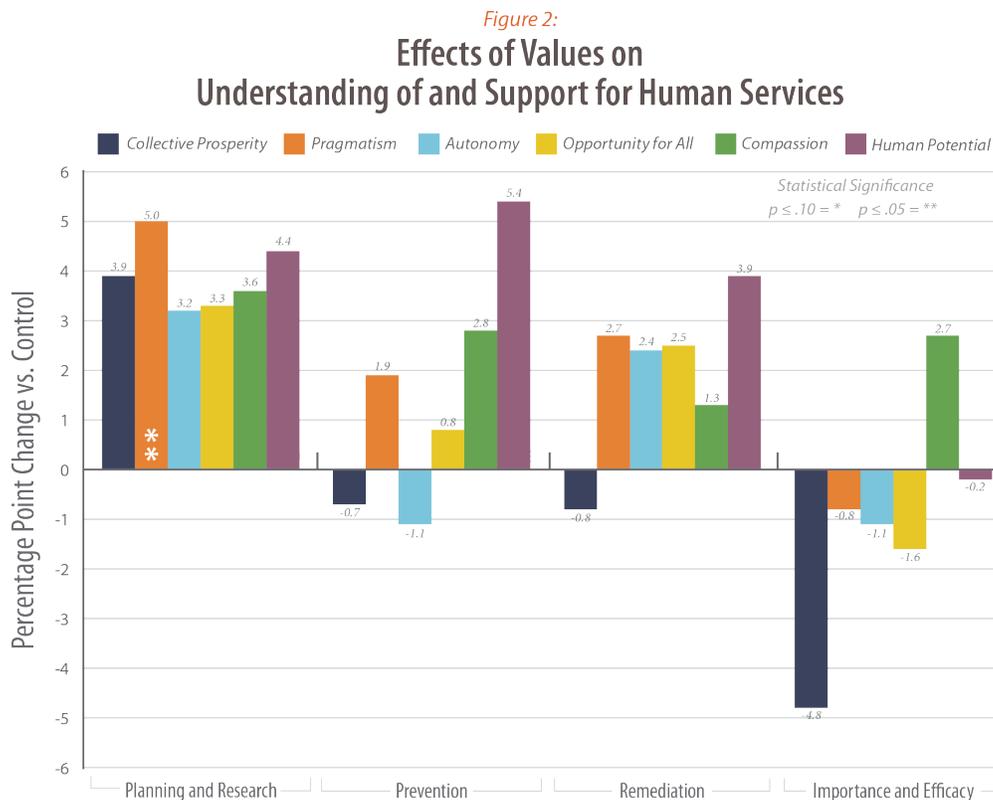
In general, these results indicate that the *Building Well-being* narrative broadens people's understanding of what human services provide and, in turn, helps people see these services as vital and necessary supports for well-being. But in order to understand why the narrative works, we must look at what each part of the narrative contributes to narrative's overall effects. Taking the story apart and looking at its components can help human service communicators ensure that they are matching each communications task to the right tool in their reframing efforts.

### **A. What is at stake? Lead with the *Human Potential* Value to help people recognize that *everyone* needs support and that human service benefit us *all*.**

The Value of *Human Potential* orients people toward the well-being of everyone in society. By opening the narrative and leading communications with the idea that all people need support to reach their potential, communicators can incite people to recognize the importance of human services for society as a whole. This is a pivotal finding from this research. Below we offer a sample iteration of the Value:

“When we support well-being, we make sure that everyone can reach their potential and fully contribute to our communities.”

To determine which Value is best able to shift how people think about human services, FrameWorks researchers tested *Human Potential* against five other Values. The Values that were included in the experiment were chosen speculatively because of their current use among human services practitioners or because of their effectiveness in other fields in which FrameWorks has conducted research.<sup>12</sup> As Figure 2 illustrates, *Human Potential* outperformed the other Values, producing an average gain of 2.7 percentage points across the four scales. Critically, *Human Potential* helped to broaden people’s understanding of the different ways that human services support well-being for everyone.<sup>13</sup>



The power of the Value of *Human Potential* is enhanced when it is embedded in the *Building-Well-being* narrative, as illustrated in Figure 1. Absent a clear understanding of what well-being is, how it works, and how human services support it, the Value’s effectiveness is limited. Especially when coupled with tools that provide a clear understanding of what well-being is, how it works, and how human services support it, *Human Potential* helps people see human service work as *vital and important* for society.<sup>14</sup>

## **B. What kind of support do people need? Use the *Construction* Explanatory Metaphor to explain what well-being is and how it is shaped.**

As discussed above, Americans begin with a constrained understanding of well-being and default to the individualistic assumption that people's well-being is exclusively the result of individual choices and drive. In order to create space for people to recognize what human services do and why they are important, it is necessary to broaden people's understanding of what well-being is and where it comes from.

The *Construction* Explanatory Metaphor is highly effective in accomplishing these tasks. The Metaphor proved effective in both quantitative and qualitative research in shifting people's understandings of human services. Qualitative research reveals that this success is rooted in the Metaphor's comparison of well-being to the physical structure of a building.

*Well-being is built. It is strengthened by materials like social relationships, community resources, and opportunities to thrive.*

The Metaphor inoculates against the narrow *Financial Self-Sufficiency* cultural model by helping people see that well-being is composed of many materials. Upon hearing the Metaphor, research participants used the comparison with building materials to suggest that well-being includes doing well socially, mentally, and spiritually—as well as financially. Participants also drew on the metaphor to reason that well-being depends on the work of others. Just as a building is constructed depends on different people with different skills working together with materials, people's well-being is not solely of their own making but depends on what others do and on the resources that are available. The *Construction* Explanatory Metaphor helps people understand how each and every person's well-being depends on context, resources and the support of others.

To make full use of the Metaphor's explanatory power, communicators should:

- ***Talk about the need for a strong foundation.*** Communicators can use this language to explain the importance of providing support early on, before there is a problem. This part of the building concept also highlights the importance of ongoing support—a foundation is just a start, and further construction and maintenance are needed to create a solid, stable structure that endures.
- ***Emphasize that the thing being constructed is well-being, not a person.*** Faults in the foundation should not be identified as faults in character or personal defects, but faults in the way well-being was constructed to support an individual.

Further guidance on when and how communicators can use the metaphor to craft specific language about their unique areas of work can be found in the Toolkit that accompanies this MessageMemo.

### **C. What threatens well-being? Use extensions and implications of the metaphor — like spotty construction and unpredictable weather — to explain how context affects outcomes.**

The *Construction* Explanatory Metaphor helps people understand how well-being depends on supportive networks and social environments. The Metaphor also gives people the ability to reason about how things outside of individual choice and drive can threaten well-being and why therefore these extra-personal factors need to be addressed.<sup>15</sup> Discussing “shaky” or “spotty construction” helps people understand how inadequate support—especially early in life—can lead to problems later on. When asked to explain what threatens well-being, research participants described how “spotty construction” destabilizes well-being, making it more susceptible to being harmed.<sup>16</sup>

In addition, language around weather and particularly “unpredictable weather” highlights how well-being can be challenged or threatened by factors beyond individual control. Research participants recognized that there are social determinants—such as an economic downturn or changes in the education system that impacts its overall quality—that are outside of an individual’s control in the same way that “bad weather” can threaten the stability and integrity of a building. Participants talked about how “storms can harm well-being,” especially in cases where well-being was not solidly constructed in the first place.

The striking thing about these findings is that these ideas were introduced by research participants themselves. In qualitative research sessions, participants were taught a basic version of the metaphor that *did not* include language about spotty construction or weather. Participants introduced these concepts on their own. Participants’ extension of the metaphor is evidence of its flexibility, strength, and ability to provide people with a new way of thinking about what well-being is, what challenges it, and what needs to be done to support it.

Below, we offer a sample of this application of the Metaphor.

*Buildings are more stable and better able to withstand bad weather when they have a strong foundation. The same can be said about well-being. People and communities thrive when they have the social relationships, resources, and opportunities that build strong well-being. But when those materials are not available and there is not a solid foundation for well-being, people and communities may have difficulty weathering life’s storms. When well-being is unstable, social stresses like graduating from school during a recession or having an aging parent who needs care can be catastrophic. While people with lots of support can weather the storm, people without enough support may struggle to do so.*

## **D. How do we ensure well-being for all? Use the *Construction* Explanatory Metaphor and *Life Cycle* examples to explain how human services support well-being.**

The narrative components discussed above help people recognize the importance of providing support for all people. These tools lay groundwork so that people can understand what human services do and why they are important. The rest of the narrative consists of two complementary tools that explain *how human services provide that support and create positive well-being*. The *Construction* Metaphor can be used to explain the different functions of human services *in general*, while *Life Cycle* examples give people a concrete understanding of how human services support well-being throughout a person's life. Our research shows that *Life Cycle* examples are powerful ways of normalizing the need for human services. By extending the *Construction* in combination with a specific set of examples, communicators can overcome the public's tendency to define human services as short-term interventions targeted to specific groups that only exist to "get people back on their feet."

### **Use the *Construction* Explanatory Metaphor to help people reason about the *different ways that human services support well-being*.**

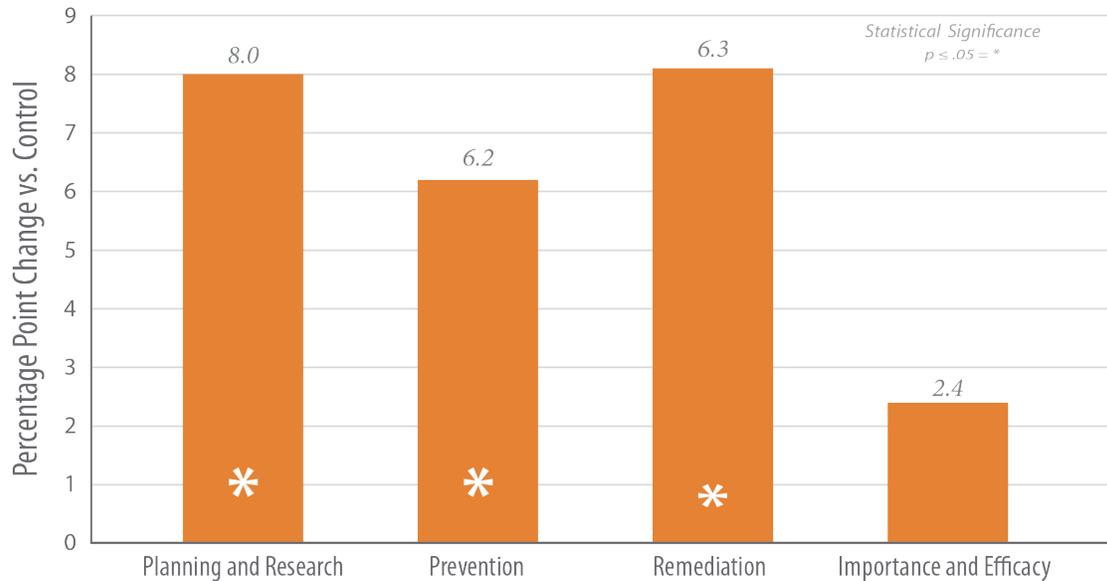
The *Construction* Metaphor is powerful in helping people better understand how to promote well-being. It also can be used to effectively explain the wide range of work that human services professionals engage in. The Metaphor can be used to explicitly describe the functions of human services:

*There are organizations in our country that are set up to help everyone build support in life. They are called "human services." Human services are set up not only to repair well-being when it starts to break down, but also to construct a strong foundation to maintain this strength over time.*

The different functions involved in the construction of a building—planning and initial construction, ongoing maintenance to ensure sturdiness, and repair in cases of damage or instability—can be used to explain the comparable functions of human services.

Quantitative research provides strong evidence that the Metaphor is effective in helping people reason about the different functions of human services. As Figure 3 shows, the *Construction* Metaphor had large, statistically significant effects on the scales measuring people's understanding of the different functions of human services.

Figure 3:  
**Effects of the *Construction Explanatory*  
 Metaphor on Understanding of and Support for Human Services**



Qualitative research confirmed the Metaphor’s capacity to improve people’s understanding of the myriad ways in which human services support well-being. Participants compared human service professionals to the specialists who plan the construction of a building. Just as constructing a house requires a team of specialists—architects, electricians, plumbers, etc.—constructing well-being requires a team of human service professionals—home care providers, social workers, youth development workers, job training specialists, early childhood teachers, etc.—to plan, build, and maintain well-being.

Despite its considerable strengths as a stand-alone tool, the Metaphor is more effective within the narrative. As Figure 1 illustrated, the Metaphor’s power is amplified across a range of outcomes when it is included within the broader *Building Well-being* narrative. Without the Value and Examples, the Metaphor’s ability to increase people’s belief in the *importance* of human services is limited.

This limitation is likely due to the strength of the assumption that human services are primarily for people living in poverty. In qualitative research, when participants started from a strong position that human services are “only for the poor,” they sometimes resisted a broader conception of human services. They assumed that this meant providing *more services only for people living in poverty*. When participants started with a broader understanding of potential recipients and beneficiaries, the Metaphor improved participants’ understanding of and boosted support for human services. This shows the importance of expanding the way that people understand *who* benefits from human services. The *Human Potential Value* begins to accomplish this communications task and the Examples discussed below complete it.

In using the Metaphor to explain how human services work, communicators should:

- ***Compare human service professionals to the specialists who plan and construct buildings.*** This analogy spotlights the expertise of people who work in human services and can help people understand how human services coordinate to construct well-being.
- ***Emphasize the importance of “planning” and “maintenance.”*** To expand understanding of human services, communicators should emphasize the initial and ongoing nature of the work that is required to support positive well-being. Focusing primarily on major repairs might undermine the Metaphor’s ability to help people normalize human services and see the ongoing way in which these services support people’s well-being in both small and large ways across the lifespan.

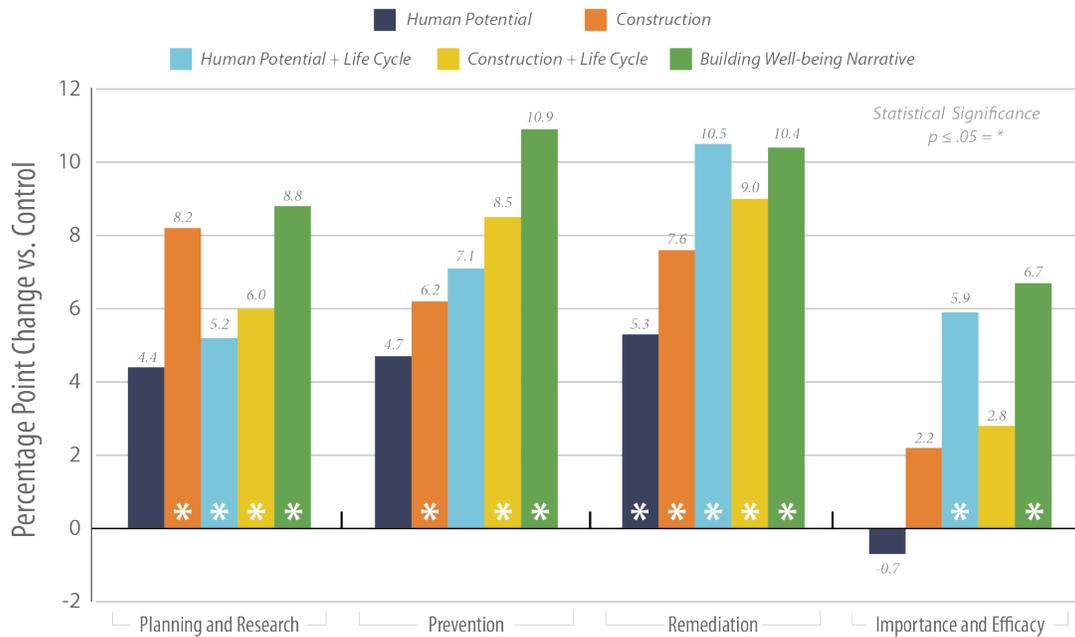
**Use *Life Cycle* examples give people a concrete understanding the full scope of human services.**

Providing examples of how human services support well-being throughout the life cycle—from early childhood to adolescence to adulthood to older age—solidifies the explanatory power of the narrative. These examples give people a concrete understanding of what human services do, how they work, and how they improve outcomes throughout the life course. Below, we offer a sample of what we mean by *Life Cycle* examples.

*Human services provide supports for well-being throughout life. In childhood, human services support people by doing things like looking at how childcare affects children later in life, pushing for high-quality education for all children, and offering programs that support adolescent development programs. In adulthood, human services support people by doing things like studying what affects people’s mental health, working to make housing safe, and providing literacy programs for adults who cannot read. Human services support older adults by doing things like exploring how social isolation affects people’s well-being, setting up tutoring or mentoring programs so older people can remain engaged in their communities, and providing meals to older people who can’t leave their homes. By supporting people throughout their lives, human services construct and maintain well-being.*

FrameWorks tested *Life Cycle* examples in both quantitative and qualitative research. Quantitative findings demonstrate the capacity of *Life Cycle* Examples to amplify the power of the other components of the narrative. As Figure 4 illustrates, adding these examples to messages generally enhanced understanding of the scope of human services. Adding the *Life Cycle* Examples to *Human Potential* increased message effectiveness by an average of 3.2 percentage points. Combining *Human Potential*, *Construction*, and *Life Cycle* examples into a narrative—the *Building Well-being* narrative—produced a highly successful message that outperformed all other messages.

Figure 4:  
Effects of Including Examples on Understanding of and Support for Human Services



Qualitative research confirmed the power of *Life Cycle* examples and clarified the specific strengths of this tool. In group discussions, *Life Cycle* examples consistently prompted talk about the importance of preventive measures. The life cycle perspective focused attention on how human services support well-being by *preventing* problems, particularly by providing support early in life, and how this prevention was key to sustained positive well-being. In addition, by helping people understand more concretely *how* human services support well-being, the examples helped people see that human services are crucial for achieving well-being. The *Life Cycle* examples underscored the idea that all people need support in different ways at different points in their lives and made it easier for people to prioritize human services.

In addition, the examples play a key role in helping people understand what the term “human services” means at a basic level. Qualitative research found that the examples anchor thinking about human services and prevent misunderstandings of the term that can short circuit uptake of the narrative. In other words, providing specific examples helps people better understand what the term “human services” means.

To maximize the power of *Life Cycle* examples, communicators should:

- **Be specific.** Given lack of understanding about the meaning of the term “human services,” communicators must offer specific, concrete examples to help people understand what the term refers to.

- ***Provide examples of planning, prevention, and remediation.*** By offering examples of the different *types* of services, communicators can reinforce how the *Construction* Metaphor expands people's conceptions of the functions of human services.
- ***Emphasize a diverse array of recipients.*** Given the default assumption that human services are *only* for people living in poverty, communicators should use examples to illustrate how we *all* rely on human services at points in our lives. Moreover, examples across the lifespan help people overcome their sense that one group is getting an advantage over another. *Broadening understanding of recipients is critical to cultivate support for human services.*

The integrated narrative outlined above is powerful in building public understanding and support for the human services. While each of the reframing tools showed some effects in overcoming problematic public understandings, it is the coherence and power of a new explanatory *story* that has the best chance of propelling public support for the wide array of human services work. On this topic, the story is everything.

## IV. Traps in Public Thinking

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Achieving fluency in this new narrative will not come easy. Old habits of storytelling die hard. New stories often seem awkward and less “resonant” with people than the old stories we know and know how to tell. To make explicit these temptations to defer to old narratives, we identify communication habits that “trap” public thinking in unproductive evaluations and judgments about human services. Traps are communication habits of a field and, as such, can be difficult to notice and hard to avoid. Traps are plausible ways of framing an issue that, upon investigation, fail to achieve the desired effect, or even turn out to do more harm than good in their effects on people’s understanding of and support for an issue. Communicators need to be aware of the following traps as they engage the public about human services.

**The *Black Box* trap.** FrameWorks research shows that people are generally unfamiliar with human services. People will default to more unproductive understandings of human services if communicators do not first define well-being and establish how human services work to improve well-being for all.

**The *Individualism* trap.** Without careful framing, people narrowly define human services as direct assistance that targets individuals in times of dire need and crisis. They tend to think about an individual’s drive, willpower, and character when they reason about why a person may be experiencing difficulties. The *Building Well-being* Narrative explains how human services are a system that supports everyone’s well-being at all stages of life and, in so doing, does not leave space for people to default to thinking about deficiencies of character or effort.

**The *Government* trap.** People believe that the government *should* be responsible for supporting well-being, but they are skeptical about how government can fulfill its responsibilities in reality. Without careful framing, people will default to a strong set of assumptions about government as inherently inefficient and corrupt. The *Building Well-being* Narrative focuses people’s attention on solutions—actionable steps that promote well-being, prevent problems from occurring in the first place, and repair systems when they are in disrepair.

**The *Basics* trap.** The public tends to limit the optimal definition of human services to basic human needs such as food and shelter. This tendency becomes more pronounced when people get stuck thinking about the “worthiness” of recipients of assistance. The *Life Cycle* example expands people’s focus to services beyond the basics that are necessary to support the individuals at all stages of life.

**The *Charity* trap.** The well-known charity story rests on the largesse of the donors and the worthiness of the recipients. It focuses on the moment of human need, not on the preventions and interventions that led to that moment. It shuts out human services’ advocacy work and research and focuses attention narrowly on the provision of direct services. While it might result in a fundraising coup, it leaves donors ignorant of the larger scope of the problem and of the necessary solutions. The *Building Well-being* Narrative, helps people think about how human services work to prevent harm and promote well-being and, in so doing, explains how human services benefit everyone.

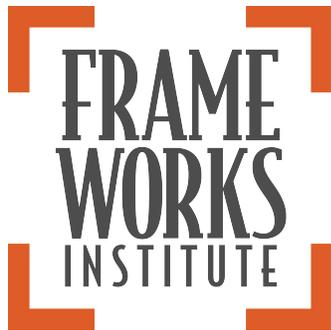
## V. Conclusion

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The reframed narrative laid out in this MessageMemo was designed to help people understand how human services support our collective well-being. This narrative draws power from an orienting Value, a Metaphor, and Examples. Each of the component parts plays an essential role in the narrative. We offer the above research-based recommendations for communicators as they use these narrative elements to meet specific communications needs and goals. This evidence-based approach to storytelling provides the rough draft of a new plot, complete with sub-chapters. This narrative structure is not meant to constrain the creativity of communicators, but rather to focus their energies on those narrative elements that hold the most promise in opening up public discourse to the power and import of human services.

## About the FrameWorks Institute

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The FrameWorks Institute is a national nonprofit think tank devoted to framing public issues to bridge the divide between public and expert understandings. Its work is based on Strategic Frame Analysis®, a multi-method, multidisciplinary approach to empirical research. FrameWorks designs, commissions, publishes, explains, and applies communications research to prepare nonprofit organizations to expand their constituency base, to build public will, and to further public understanding of specific social issues — the environment, government, race, children’s issues, and health care, among others. Its work is unique in its breadth — from qualitative, quantitative, and experimental research to applied communications toolkits, eWorkshops, advertising campaigns, FrameChecks™, and Framing Study Circles. See [www.frameworksinstitute.org](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org)

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## About the National Human Services Assembly

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The [National Human Services Assembly](#) (the Assembly) is a Washington, DC-based association comprised of over [80 of the largest national nonprofit organizations](#), including American Red Cross, Boy Scouts of America, Boys and Girls Clubs of America, Girl Scouts of the USA, Volunteers of America, and United Way Worldwide. In aggregate, members and their affiliates and local service networks collectively touch, or are touched by, nearly every household in America—as consumers, donors, or volunteers. The Assembly focuses on shaping public dialogue, improving the business practices of nonprofits, and building capacity for the human services sector. Its priority is to strengthen collaborative practice and policy that promote equality of opportunity and upward mobility for all.

The Assembly's National Reframing Initiative seeks to build public understanding of human services to encourage more vibrant civic participation and deepen support for effective programs.

This project is generously funded by The Kresge Foundation and The Annie E. Casey Foundation.

## Appendix A: Detailed Discussion of Survey Experiments

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To understand the potential of Values, Explanatory Metaphors, and examples—on their own and in narrative combination—to increase understanding of and to promote positive attitudes toward human services, FrameWorks conducted two survey experiments. In the first survey experiment, FrameWorks tested Values and Explanatory Metaphors on their own. The experiment tested six Values: *Collective Prosperity*, *Pragmatism*, *Autonomy*, *Opportunity for All*, *Compassion*, and *Human Potential*. These Values were derived from messages currently in use within the field of human services and from hypotheses stemming from FrameWorks’ descriptive research on how the public understands human services. The experiment tested three Metaphors that had proven promising in initial, exploratory qualitative research—*Construction*, *Fabric* (which compared well-being to a fabric), and *Road* (which compared well-being to a journey). Three versions of each Metaphor were tested to determine the optimal way of iterating the Metaphors.

The second survey experiment incorporated the best-performing Value (*Human Potential*) and best-performing Metaphor (*Construction*) into narrative messages, testing different versions of these narratives to determine what type of narrative is most effective. The experiment tested this Value and Metaphor in combination with each other, as well as in combination with two examples (*Life Cycle* and *Economic Stability*, an example focusing on how human services support economic well-being).

In both experiments, respondents were randomly assigned to message frames and analysis controlled for demographic variables, ensuring that observed effects were produced by the frames. After receiving one of the messages, respondents answered a series of questions designed to measure their understanding of and support for human services. Outcome measures included sets of questions designed to capture the following:

- Understanding of the planning and research functions of human services and recognition of the value of this work (referred to above as “*Planning and Research*”).
- Understanding of the preventive role of human services and recognition of the value of this work (referred to above as “*Prevention*”).
- Understanding of the role of human services in remediating harm and recognition of the value of this work (referred to above as “*Remediation*”).
- Recognition of the importance of human services and confidence in the ability of human services to support well-being (referred to above as “*Importance and Efficacy*”).

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Clark, R.F. (2000). *Maximum Feasible Success: A History of the Community Action Program*. Washington, DC: National Association of Community Action Agencies. p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Clark, R.F. (2000). *Maximum Feasible Success: A History of the Community Action Program*. Washington, DC: National Association of Community Action Agencies. p. 43.

<sup>3</sup> Baran, M., Lindland, E., Kendall-Taylor N. (2014). “*Handed to Them on a Plate*”: *Mapping the Gaps Between Expert and Public Understandings of Human Services*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

<sup>4</sup> Cultural models interviews were conducted in Missouri, Maryland, and Pennsylvania.

<sup>5</sup> Quinn, N., & Holland, D. (1987). *Culture and cognition*. In D. Holland & N. Quinn, (Eds.), *Cultural models in language and thought*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press. (pp.3-40).

<sup>6</sup> Kendall-Taylor, N. & Bales, S. (2009). *Like Mars to Venus: The Separate and Sketchy Worlds of Budgets and Taxes*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

<sup>7</sup> For more on the understandings and ideas of human service experts and practitioners see: <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/human-services1.html>

<sup>8</sup> A more detailed description of frame elements and their role in constructing narratives can be found in the FrameWorks Academy “Framing Fundamentals” module. Information about how to access can be found here: <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/frameworks-academy.html> .

<sup>9</sup> Brosius, H.B., & Bathelt, A. (1994) “The utility of exemplars in persuasive communications.” *Communication Research*. 21: 48-78. Smith, E.E. & Medin, D.L. (1999) “The Exemplar View.” In *Concepts: Core Readings*. Ed. Margolis, E. & Laurence, S. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. Zillmann, D. (1999) “Exemplification Theory: Judging the Whole by Some of Its Parts.” *Media Psychology*, 1(1): 69-94.

<sup>10</sup> A more detailed description of how FrameWorks conducts can be found in the FrameWorks Academy “Framing Fundamentals” module. Information about how to access can be found here: <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/frameworks-academy.html>

<sup>11</sup> It is important to acknowledge that the narrative did not produce statistically significant results on the *General Understanding* scale, but within the broader context of the experiment we are confident that these results are a reflection of the way these questions were written rather than a reflection of the narrative’s limitations. The questions, which attempted to capture beliefs about well-being and human services at the broadest level, were likely too vague to precisely measure understanding. Given the narrative’s clear effectiveness on the other sets of questions, this result does not place in question the finding of narrative effectiveness.

<sup>12</sup> For example, the Value of Pragmatism has proven effective in building public support for criminal justice reform and comprehensive immigration reform (see Gilliam, F.D., & Simon, A.F. (2013). *Framing and facts: Necessary synergies in communicating about public safety and criminal justice*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute. Simon, A., & Gilliam, F.D. (2013). *Don't Stay on Message: What 8,000 respondents say about using strategic framing to move the public discourse on immigration*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.)

<sup>13</sup> More detailed description of how FrameWorks determines which values to include in an experiment can be found in the FrameWorks Academy “Framing Fundamentals” module. Information about how to access can be found here: <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/frameworks-academy.html>.

<sup>14</sup> The importance of articulating the Value of *Human Potential* in collective terms is supported by qualitative research conducted on a similar value—*Interdependence*. Analysis found that the emphasis of *Interdependence* on collective well-being was vital to its ability to shift people away from unproductive individualistic thinking about human services. This lesson from our analysis of *Interdependence* informed our research and supports the collectivized iteration of *Human Potential* that we are recommending.

<sup>15</sup> For more information about how to tell broader, thematic stories about social problems, see FrameWorks *Wide Angle Lens* module: <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/workshops/wideanglelens/children/>.

<sup>16</sup> Qualitative research on the Metaphor *Prosperity Grid*, which comes from earlier FrameWorks research on disparities, similarly showed that spatial metaphors can help people understand how systems and context shape well-being. We recommend using the notion of spotty construction to explain this point given its connection to the broader *Building Well-being* Metaphor.