

Telling Your Story

A Guide for Families Who Want to Impact Policy Change

This guide will help families who have children and youth with special needs use their personal experiences to create messages for policymakers that impact changes in services and systems of support.



Identify Your Issue

What's Your Issue? Almost everyone has encountered a situation that made them say, "This is wrong. Someone has to do something! Enough is enough!" These situations are issues in disguise.

It's important to narrow your issue to something that is manageable and realistic. Remember, you can't accomplish everything. You will lose credibility fast if you approach a policymaker asking for too much or for something he/she can't do anything about. Focusing on a specific area will help you determine exactly what needs to be changed or improved.



Develop Your Story

What's Your Story? When you're pushing to change public policy, your family story is your most important tool. From an advocate's point of view, a good story:

- Introduces you and your family.
- Focuses on one thing.
- Explains your situation.
- Has enough details to make it interesting.
- Includes only information that relates to the situation or your goal.
- Reminds the policymaker that you are a constituent.
- Captures your emotion and passion for an issue.
- Asks for a specific action to correct the situation.



This guide was modified with permission from "Telling Your Story: A Parent Guide and Workbook" created by the Statewide Parent Advocacy Network (www.spanadvocacy.org). The guide was part of a "virtual train-the-trainer" hosted by the National Center for Family-Professional Partnerships (www.fv-ncfpp.org) and facilitated by Mercedes Rosa, Director of the NJ F2F at the SPAN Parent Advocacy Network and Diverse Family Leadership Coach on the NCFPP.

Think about the issue you've decided to tackle:

- What experiences made you choose this issue?
- What situations made you say "Enough"?
- What do you think should have happened but didn't?
- What do you want to happen in the future?
- What really happens?
- How it's different from what policymakers think happens?

Successful advocates have one key story that they know inside and out. It's important to narrow many personal stories to one that represents many experiences. When deciding which situation to focus on:

- **Think about emotions.** We remember stories that make us feel something—anger, joy, frustration or sadness. That's because emotion generally stays with us longer than cold facts.
- **Decide what you need a policymaker to know.** For example, if you need more support, think about how family support will help you live more productively. What difficulties and challenges do you face?



Define Your Request

What's Your Action Request? Now that you know your issue and have developed your family story, it's time to figure out exactly what you want the policymaker to do. Your request for action should describe specifically what you think should be done:

- Are you offering to help the policymaker understand firsthand how something does or doesn't work?
- Are you asking the policymaker to continue his or her work in an area important to your family?
- Are you asking the policymaker to sponsor, approve, amend or repeal a specific policy?

Your Request for Action should be:

- **Timely.** Is the legislature or other governmental body preparing to vote? If so, when is the vote scheduled to take place? Is the legislature between sessions so the policymaker may have more time to learn about your situation?
- **Realistic.** In many cases, your goal will be achieved through small, incremental steps that build momentum over time and lay the groundwork for the future. If this is the case, what do you want or need to happen now? What other changes need to occur before your future vision can be implemented?
- **Specific.** Your demand should be specific and clear. For example: I am asking you to support additional special education funding for transition services in the state budget.
- **Concise.** Boil down your request to as few words as possible. This will make it easier for you and policymakers to remember it.



Write Your Story and Request for Action

My Personal Story: Think about the following questions in light of your personal situation and the details that you want to share. Then, write your family story. You should be able to tell your story in five minutes or less.

- Describe who you are and where you are from. Include your name.
- Do you have a picture of yourself and your family that you are willing to share?
- Describe the situation that you want changed. What is happening? What is working? What needs to change?
- What could be done to improve the situation?
- What makes this situation memorable for a policymaker?

My Request for Action: Describe in 30 words or less what you would like the policymaker to do.

Next Steps

Contact your elected officials in Madison, Washington, DC, or at the local or county level and share your story and your request for action! If you want help, contact **Lynn at Family Voices at Lynn@fvofwi.org** or go to our website for more resources on telling your family story.



What Makes a Good Story?

It's the one you love to tell. Think about the stories you've told your family and friends when describing the situation you're trying to change. What examples do you use? What facts or incidents draw an emotional response from them?

Captures a central idea. Don't try to cover too many incidents in one story. Focus on one issue and use real-life details to make it come alive.

Has a main character that people want to help. The more your audience knows about you or your child as individuals, the stronger the emotional connection and the more likely you are to make your story memorable.

Presents a struggle, conflict or challenge. Conflict is a struggle between two different needs, wants or situations. Your story might illustrate a conflict between your right to equal education and the school board's refusal to pay for a specific curriculum.

Has a high point. Your story should build up to an example that makes your listener say, "That's wrong" or "That's too ridiculous to be true."

Contains vivid images. Use words to draw mental pictures that help listeners connect to your story. Don't be afraid of strong words like *cold*, *dark*, *terrified*, *cringed* or *panic*. Positive words can cause emotional reactions just as easily. Think about how you feel when you hear words like *giggle*, *beautiful*, *artistic* and *loving*.

Includes details. The more details you can provide, the better the policymaker will understand and support your position. A note of caution: Make sure the details and images you include are relevant to the story you're telling.

Addresses the five W's (and an H): who, what, when, where, why and how. Policymakers need the basic facts.

Has a beginning, middle and end. Think about an ongoing television series. You might not be a regular viewer but within a few minutes of watching, you know the characters and what's happened.

It's short and to the point. Policymakers are very busy. You need to be able to tell your story in five minutes or less so stay focused!