

National Association for State Community Services Programs

COMMUNITY SERVICES BLOCK GRANT

Telling Community Action's Story: A Guidebook

To Assist States in Completing the
FY 2009 CSBG Information System Survey

February 2009

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Introduction	3
II. How an Audience Will Receive Your Message.....	4
A. How Our Minds Process Information	4
B. Frameworks and Frames	4
C. 21st Century Frames of Reference Regarding Poverty and Anti-Poverty Programs	5
III. Using Research to Write Your Story	7
Create Your Narrative in Five Strategic Steps.....	8
IV. Individuals and Their Successes: How Do Their Stories Fit In?.....	16
A. Pitfalls of Telling Personal Stories.....	17
B. Tell a Personal Story When.....	18
C. Choosing Words that Speak to Others	20
D. Use Numbers Carefully.....	24
E. Using Statistics Means Taking Risks	25
F. A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words	25
G. Problematic Photos and Some Alternatives	27
V. Conclusion	34
Endnotes.....	35
Appendix A: More Examples of the Five Strategic Steps in Story-Writing.....	36
Appendix B: A Complete, Well-Framed, and Action-Oriented Story of a Responsive CAA.....	45

I. Introduction

Narratives or stories can bring a Community Action Agency's (CAA's) work, challenges, and successes to life. Stories are essential communication tools for helping the public, your partners, and your potential funders understand *how* a CAA works toward its many goals as well as the goals themselves. Stories evoke images and suggest your organization's style and character.

Your narratives should clarify the identity of your agency by conveying powerful examples of the way it delivers results. The readers should take away an image of competent, positive approaches to tough community and personal problems. Readers should also remember why your organization is unique and not a duplicate of other community institutions that help the poor.

One request for stories comes annually from the CSBG national reporting system managed by the National Association for State Community Services Programs (NASCS). NASCS asks all organizations in the CSBG network to send several kinds of narratives to their state CSBG office. Stories illustrating the agency's successful innovations, the agency's capacity expansion, and its mobilization of many resources and partners to solve a difficult community problem are of special interest to NASCS.

The CAA staff members who respond and create these stories are typically neither professional writers nor storytellers. Instead, they are the CAA's leaders, organizers, managers, and service providers whose skilled work produced the outcome worth highlighting. They may need to interrupt the work that they do best in order to write these accounts.

The guidelines that follow are intended to help with the challenging task of communicating a story about a unique approach to others. The guide will help you organize your stories to begin with descriptions of specific problems and their solutions and then show the steps the agency leaders and staff take to achieve the desired result.

Fortunately, recent researchⁱ about how the public understands poverty tells us a lot about how to choose topics and how to write effective narratives. NASCS, with the assistance of Economic Opportunity Studies, has distilled that research into this guide to writing a CAA narrative that will be as powerful as the real events and the concrete results.

Beginning in 2009, all agencies in the state and local network can begin applying these communication techniques.

II. How an Audience Will Receive Your Message

A. How Our Minds Process Information

Your readers are not blank slates. Social scientists say each of us is an “experienced and sophisticated veteran of perception.” This means that our experiences have shaped our perceptions of the world and we rely on our experience-based assumptions to take shortcuts in our thinking. Taking shortcuts is not the same as being closed-minded; taking shortcuts is automatic behavior that helps us cope with the large amounts of information that we must process every day. This behavior starts to develop in babyhood as soon as we begin to think, so adults are veterans at taking automatic shortcuts that speed up their thinking.ⁱⁱ

The one shortcut humans use most often is categorizing. For example, if you are walking through a park and you see someone lying on the grass, you may not be aware of the process you rapidly complete while you put that person into a category. You will process many visual cues to determine whether the person is “someone who has collapsed and needs my help” or “someone who has fallen but will be fine without my help” or “someone who is lying on the grass, enjoying the sun.” While you are not aware of the process, you will either unconsciously choose a category or else you will experience uncomfortable confusion.

A similar process occurs when someone reads your story about the work of Community Action. Within the first few sentences, the reader has put the story into a category, such as “a situation with which I can identify” or “another example of how charities give hand-outs without solving underlying problems” or “an unexpected example of a smart approach.”

B. Frameworks and Frames

Communications researchers call these mental categories frames. Think of a category as a picture frame for a concept -- a way to contain and put the contents in focus. For example, a story about a program that provides support for parents finishing their GED could be “framed” by a reader as either a) “There’s a lazy bum who fooled around, didn’t work in high school, and now gets government money to make it easier,” or b) “There’s a hard-working person who never had much luck, and is trying to turn his life around” depending on the way the narrative is framed in the writing.

Researchers also refer to people’s framework for receiving information. A person’s framework is a complex structure of personal beliefs. It influences the way the person sees any story you frame and how she tells her own story. An example of a framework would be “Every individual is on his own in this world with only God as his companion. Therefore, the good parent trains his child to go out on his own and ‘make it’ relying only on his own effort, the grace of God, and the support of his family...”ⁱⁱⁱ A contrasting framework is: “We all need to work together to be sure every American gets ahead in today’s uncertain economy.”^{iv} Most people’s frameworks have a mix of values, including contradictory positions, and are neither pure nor extreme.

It is helpful to know what kinds of categories your readers are likely to use so you can guide them to put your story into the appropriate category, that is, into the frame that *you* chose for them. Several researchers have recently probed the thoughts and attitudes that shape public opinion about poverty, economic insecurity, solutions that overcome poverty, and about the programs or organizations working on such solutions. The summary below shows how their findings can help advocates communicate the message intended.

C. 21st Century Frames of Reference Regarding Poverty and Anti-Poverty Programs

About 50% of the public identifies itself as “middle class” or “upper middle class,” and another 30 percent usually self-identifies as “working class.”^v In this century, many middle-class Americans say that they are feeling an economic “squeeze,” that their incomes and other resources are not keeping up with their rising costs. They are concerned about major economic trends such as corporations’ off-shoring jobs and vanishing job benefits. Most of these believe they personally can overcome these problems through sacrifice and continuing struggle. They do not feel they are helpless victims nor that public programs can or should help them. This is an example of a deeply-held moral belief, intersecting with economic analysis to create a framework for interpreting the world: middle-class Americans feel that they and others should struggle in unfortunate circumstances in order to deserve to prevail. However, their moral framework also makes them sympathetic to workers who are struggling but having little success at supporting their families.

In other words, while the majority believe that economic insecurity is something too many families face today and that large economic forces are making it too hard for the average person to get ahead while insecurity in employment, health care, and retirement is the rule, they are not completely convinced that government or other programs are the answer. They do respect those who struggle and sacrifice to support themselves and are sympathetic about the difficulties that struggling families face. Programs for hard-working low-wage workers have broad support. The research describes some of the following common frameworks that affect how Americans view poverty and anti-poverty initiatives:

1. Poverty and Poor People:

Since hard work and family are still the fundamental American values, Americans identify with a person whose work ethic is unquestionable, who is striving for a better life for her or his family. Our strong individualistic bias leads us to value work, perseverance, and also ingenuity. As noted, Americans admire their neighbors who *struggle* against adversity, as most believe that they themselves have struggled.^{vi}

This is a widely held framework; the people your agency serves will seem deserving to most Americans *if and only if they obviously share the values of hard work, personal responsibility, and commitment to family.*

On the other hand, poverty is perceived by many as something unfamiliar. Even some who have experienced incomes below the Federal Poverty Guideline and a lack of assets continue to reject the notion they were poor. This tendency leads the experts to advise advocates for low-income Americans to use the term economic insecurity instead of

poverty and to refer to low-wage workers instead of working poor or poor. Most people can identify with the terms that suggest insecure employment and hard work, but they find “poverty” and “poor” to be ambiguous. By using different words, you can explain low-wage workers’ and elderly retirees’ problems better and show why it is important that CAA programs redress the contradiction of not being able to support a family by working hard and long.

2. Fairness:

Americans believe in fairness, equal opportunity, and a level playing field in which the powerful play by the same rules as regular working people. CAA initiatives that police “the system” and also force major institutions to “play fair” can have a great appeal. Corporations that cheat, destroy employees’ pension plans, or put consumers at risk are unfair. Corporations that do well by making huge profits or off-shoring jobs may not be viewed so critically. CAAs that change institutions by winning new consumer protections or homeowner rights or by improving run-down schools will be taking actions and creating policies that most people value. However, limit the rhetoric about changing corporate behavior to attacks on unfair practices.

Strategies that lower recognized barriers and make opportunity more widely available will win support; strategies that appear to guarantee a prized result regardless of effort or merit rouse hostility.

Experts warn advocates for economic and social fairness to avoid using the word rights unless it refers to recognized legal rights. For example, “every child has a right to a free education” wins support. “Everyone has a right to a high-quality affordable home” will not find the same universal acceptance.

3. Opportunity:

Opportunity is a concept that is valued by most Americans. Many CAA programs and community initiatives are intended to create opportunities or remove barriers that block people’s way to economic security. Americans generally believe that if your work opens opportunity, the economy is fairer. However, they feel that a CAA program participant still has the responsibility to use that opportunity well, and they may want proof that such is the case if their tax dollars paid for the investment. Showcase opportunities the CAA has opened that improve the economy for everyone.

4. Programs and Organizations:

Americans are skeptical of “government” and “programs” *per se*. They are uncertain about what works in government and also about what their taxes are used for. Many are discouraged by experience or propaganda and believe that government can never work. At the same time, most Americans generally support the categories of government initiatives that offer opportunities for education, training, and employment; that provide some security for people in old age; or for those who are ill or disabled. Furthermore, higher education is seen as important for upward mobility and as too costly for many hardworking families.^{vii}

Telling Community Action's Story: A Guidebook

This contradictory set of feelings can be addressed positively. A story can emphasize how your active, imaginative agency used government and other resources to apply an effective local solution. If your story is convincing, it will surprise the skeptics and get more attention because of that surprise value. “How” is an important word because the frame you use must overcome doubts by focusing the audience on your organization’s “can-do” attitude. It will include one of the leadership’s decision steps and then the actions that led to the successful outcome. Be aware that you are narrating events, processes and choices that are unfamiliar to most of the public. Clarity and strong words are important in your writing.

The most effective success story for an organization, according to the research findings, is one that showcases the responsible, informed leadership and management behind a program. Responsible leaders are seen as those whose goals are building new jobs and strengthening the economy for the long term; they focus on strengthening the community as a whole.

Effective leaders have a plan with broad support, and they are competent at managing its implementation. The can-do attitude exemplified in your story suggests a worthy project, worthy leaders, and also teaches the public that effective solutions to tough problems of poverty can be implemented.

III. Using Research to Write Your Story

You can adopt a strategy to help your reader categorize each story in the way you intend. This guide helps you follow the steps to tell your CAA’s story so it will lead your readers to put it into the frame and framework which you intend them to use.

Stories that tell how CAAs succeed will all showcase some elements of the central plot: **the agency’s own formula for effectiveness in fighting poverty and improving communities.** Each will show that a Community Action Agency intervenes and succeeds using methods which, combined, make up a unique approach that is consistent with American values.

For the CSBG/IS report, the stories are to describe approaches taken by the CAAs in the following areas:

- Strategic thinking:
 - Articulating a specific goal for bringing new opportunities and more economic security and stability to the local community by:
 - Including all community sectors in decisions and plans;
 - Identifying community problems;
 - Designing appropriate effective long-term solutions that involve local partners; and
 - Using its resources (often CSBG) to plan, manage, and test a project.

Telling Community Action's Story: A Guidebook

- Mobilizing and coordinating a variety of resources and sometimes a variety of investments for people or neighborhoods. This can involve:
 - Tailoring national general programs or resources to meet local needs;
 - Overcoming bureaucracy;
 - Filling gaps in public resources and services; and
 - Exhibiting flexibility and creativity.
- Delivering high-quality services that are accessible and well-managed, including serving people whose aspirations are like most Americans' aspirations and who are willing to make sacrifices to improve their economic opportunities and their children's futures.
 - In some cases, your hardest-to-serve participants may have violated community values in the past. You will be serving ex-offenders, substance abusers, and formerly violent spouses and you must show how they will use the CAA's help to carry out their change of heart.
- Uniting the community through select projects.
- Providing positive results not only for individuals and families, but also for the community at large.
- Making a comprehensive, long-term commitment to program participants and to their neighborhoods.

Create Your Narrative in Five Strategic Steps

1. Choose stories that illustrate frames and focus on the values and goals to which your organization is committed. Be sure they reflect shared basic values the CAA promotes, such as supporting working families, bringing new services where they are lacking, changing conditions, opening new opportunities, and expanding economic security, ownership, assets, and community engagement;
2. Begin with a widely-shared framework, a broadly shared concern;
3. Continue with a description of the specific problem itself; frame it in terms of the categories people recognize and respect;
4. Lay out the well thought-out and effective solution as it was implemented by the CAA's leaders and staff; and
5. End with a description of the outcome, and if appropriate, future expectations.

This five-step strategic approach to story-telling may seem counter to many conventional communications practices. For example, most of the stories CAAs tell are focused on an individual's history. Using this five-step approach will strategically frame your story so it is more likely to connect with the audience in ways that will help them understand what America should be doing to address economic insecurity in this country.

Step 1: Choosing Your Stories

There are many purposes for CAA stories. Among them are:

- Introducing the low-income community's challenges and strengths to the general public;
- Teaching others about the face of poverty;
- Fundraising for particular purposes; and
- Reporting on programs or a group to a knowledgeable audience composed of "insiders."

This manual addresses only the stories that introduce or display the CAA to a general audience, as requested by state and national CSBG organizations **to explain the character and success of Community Action initiatives and approaches.**

As you think about what story to choose, look for options that both exemplify the best your CAA can deliver and include the elements that align with prevailing public attitudes as identified in the research. Remember that the most effective success story is one showing the **responsible leadership and planning behind a strong program.**

As you outline a story, be sure that you are giving your CAA's leadership and professionals, including your skilled hands-on staff, the starring roles. Most of the accomplishments CAAs prize can be framed to resonate with widely-held values:

- What are you most proud of as an organization?
- What success has shown your leadership's creativity or vision?
- Not only should you choose a success story that shows Community Action's unique approach, you should choose a story that shows your organization's special skills.

Bonus: Choose Contemporary "Hot" Issues Your CAA Has Successfully Addressed

When your narrative can demonstrate your CAA's response to a widely publicized contemporary problem, it communicates the fact that your leaders are relevant and ahead of the curve. Recent examples include CAAs' roles in natural disaster recovery, in helping homeowners who face foreclosure on sub-prime mortgages, and in fighting for tough regulations to govern payday lenders.

More broadly, CAAs' roles in uniting various groups in their community and in demonstrating how divisions are overcome resonate with today's public. In 2008, the concepts of unity and of change are particularly popular. Look for stories that show how the CAA changed its people or communities.

Discussing CAA success

As individuals and as members of partnerships, we have been taught since childhood that it is rude to brag and counter-productive to claim credit for a team effort. However, CAAs succeed by building teams, coalitions, and even movements. So we must find ways to talk about our efforts in these situations.

Telling Community Action's Story: A Guidebook

Your stories are needed because there are members in your community who do not know how a nonprofit organization works, how a CAA could respond to a board of low-income and other community members, how decisions get made, and what the process is like of delivering services or community investments.

Your narrative should explain the key development steps and decisions and how successful implementation occurred, including the roles others played. Your CAA can tell a powerful story from several perspectives. It could have been the leader; it might have been a key team member among many organizations and played a unique role; perhaps it just recognized and funded a brilliant initiative of another group when no other supporters stepped up. All three variations can be told so they **spotlight an aspect of good leadership** and give credit where it is due.

Are there any CAA successes that could make poor public narratives?

At certain times, ideas or issues become very divisive in American public life. In 2008, immigration policy was such an issue. When the CAA decides that a story about an initiative in such an issue area is very important to tell, the frame must be set to emphasize the legitimacy of the effort, the legitimacy of those served, and the legitimate way public resources were used. In the case of immigrants, for example, the project would be shown to help documented workers, and also it would exemplify the widely-held American values of hard work, struggle, of creating a level playing field, and of participants' efforts to respect American ways.

Step 2: The Beginning is Important: Framing Your Story

A reader will put your story into a category after reading or hearing the first few sentences. Remember that, according to researchers who have assessed Americans' thoughts and attitudes, middle-class Americans can identify best with societal problems that affect us all. Therefore, you should begin a story by identifying the broad community or social problem that is behind the subject. When you frame your story by beginning it in a way that shows the reader that the problem you solved is a broad-based problem, you open the door to showing how the solution worked out by your agency staff is a solution that benefits the reader and the entire community. Your intention is to demonstrate that a specific initiative is solving a problem that is shared by many and that can be solved by solutions like yours.

- Begin with a short description of an issue or trend that affects all Americans and many in your area. It is almost certain that at least one such issue or trend is involved in any initiative that CAAs will want to tell about. For example, when low-wage working parents have had trouble finding adequate child care, they are like most other working parents.

Telling Community Action's Story: A Guidebook

- As you describe the issue, state a social inclusion goal rather than a problem-reduction goal. Social inclusion means something positive for many to support, such as opening new opportunities, not something negative to fight, such as the illiteracy of an individual or the language limitation of an immigrant group. A social inclusion goal opens the way for readers to see how solutions benefit the community as a whole. Because your story will be about a shared problem, not the problem of a few individuals, you will help your reader avoid thinking in terms of narrow solutions.^{viii}

Several of the frames described below may fit your story. Choose one that will encourage your readers to put the story into a positive context.

- A widely shared problem such as low-wage jobs, high-cost housing, and lack of health services, including:
 - Economic circumstances (such as a factory closing) that are beyond the control of individuals and/or communities;
 - Labor conditions or job quality;
 - Retirement insecurity and lack of pensions; and
 - The high cost of housing.
- A response to problems caused by unfair acts or deceptive practices^{ix}, including:
 - Reversing neighborhood deterioration caused by disinvestment and abandonment;
 - Organizing a disaster plan or response that protects everyone;
 - Controlling predatory lending; and
 - Winning emergency consumer protection.
- Expanding community economic opportunities for all through positive development, including:
 - Increasing community stability and economic security through home or business ownership;
 - Building housing;
 - Fighting street crime; and
 - Improving public education.
- Preventing economic destabilization by helping families in emergencies to overcome adversity (caused by tragedy, illness, disability, etc.).

Look for additional ways in which you can use the research findings about predominant thoughts and attitudes as you shape a story. For example, you might be able to build your presentation on the perception that effective government initiatives offer opportunities for getting ahead for responsible people, or provide security and independence for people who are old or ill.

Examples of Story Beginnings:

(Note: The examples used in this paper are based on stories submitted in recent CSBG surveys. All stories were edited to be more extreme versions, good or bad, of the original, but all are typical of many narratives commonly provided by local agencies.)

Unframed:

Here is the start of a local story that could have been effective, but it is not strategically told:

A highlight of the past year in our community was the opening of an extended-hours day-care center, which provides a safe environment for children whose parents work nontraditional hours.

How can it be re-framed?

- A. This is a story from a single community. The reader may wonder “So who cares what happened in a small town 3,000 miles away from me?” and move on.
- B. The role that a CAA, or any local leadership, played in bringing the center to life is not identified so it may appear that it just happened easily. Add information about the leaders who dreamed it, the movers and shakers who got it established, and the skilled staff who opened it and are making it succeed.
- C. The description inadvertently suggests that children might have been in unsafe environments before the day care center opened. Don't let readers wonder, “Were their thoughtless parents locking them into a house alone and heading to their night shift?” Or “Was the problem confined to this particular ‘non-traditional’ work force?”

Re-framed:

In many families today, parents need to work full-time or longer to make ends meet. High-quality child care can be difficult to arrange, even when parents have a traditional work schedule. It is even more difficult to obtain such care for children of working parents who work night shifts and weekends. Finding competent caregivers for infants is especially challenging.

This description sets a socially inclusive frame by evoking the broad-based issue that was behind the specific problem the agency solved.

In the next paragraph, under Step #3 below, the story becomes community-specific and introduces the far-sighted, activist CAA.

Step 3: Describing the Specific Problem and Goals

Now that you have framed the problem in a general way so that the problem is recognized as one shared by many communities, employers, and workers, the story can become an action narrative. (Think of the “action” in Community Action.) Plan your narrative to include the action steps that dramatize your theme, the theme that your leadership is pro-active, imaginative, and highly capable of fighting poverty and making conditions better.

Unframed:

Call-center workers often work nights and weekends and need child care. When Responsive CAA noticed that our requests for help finding child care had tripled last fall, we also learned that many new jobs in a new call center were going unfilled but that local workers were rejecting employment offers.

How can it be re-framed?

- A. This inadvertently makes it seem like the CAA was not in touch with this big local employer and so didn't know about the problem and the needs of the prospective employees.
- B. It sounds like potential workers are waiting for a program to solve family problems, and rejecting employment opportunities.
- C. It does not identify who took the active role in solving the community problem, nor focus on the elements of common issues facing all workers.

Re-framed:

Many customer service representatives in call centers work nontraditional hours. After Modern Financial Services announced it would open a call center and create much needed jobs in the Valley, Responsive CAA foresaw that workers would quickly run into a major barrier to taking these employment opportunities: very little night or weekend child care was available.

Our Executive Director Joe Black looked into the problem, met with Modern Financial's executives, and learned that many of the relatively well-paid call center jobs had few applicants. However, RCAA staff knew many low-wage working parents who were seeking full-time jobs with benefits, but they needed safe child care.

Modern Financial's leaders agreed that the company needed local partners to help develop these essential services for its anticipated workforce, and RCAA offered to lead the initiative.

This demonstrates that the staff knows the community's working residents and their families and can help define and solve a problem, thereby opening opportunities.

This version uses strong active verbs to describe how the agency's leaders moved to solve the problem. Your story must avoid vagueness about who did what. In this problem specification, the CAA staff foresees; its leader reaches out to the private enterprise to discover common concerns and develops a shared goal that benefits the company, the workers, and the community by solving a defined problem. The style demonstrates that the staff knows the community's working residents and their families and can help define and solve a problem, thereby opening opportunities.

Step 4: Describe the CAA's Solution and How it Implemented the Solution

The successes should match the positive frames that determined your decision to choose the story. They turn the general goals from steps 1 and 3 into specific achievements.

Unframed:

Due to the work of the community coalition operated by RCAA that included all sectors and also the call center's executives, the agency applied for a grant. Financing and construction soon began on a state-of-the-art children's center to accommodate 24/7 care needs and offer enriched daytime programming. Development partners included the re-development authority, the state Housing Finance Authority, the Smith Foundation, the We Love Babies Foundation, Modern Financial Services, Family Savings and Loan Institution, and RCAA.

How can it be re-framed?

- A. This tells what happened in general, but not *how* it happened. Who undertook what actions? What roles did the active partners take? What concrete steps had to be taken to get a successful result?
- B. There are no action words, no images to clarify how such a process works. You must focus on the actions and leadership qualities of the CAA.

Re-framed:

Responsive CAA's Director Joe Black and our Development Director Mary Jones visited with every funder and every corporate employer in the county. They won commitments to work together to expand child care facilities and the local workforce of trained and licensed child care providers. RCAA's leaders organized a local Leadership Working Group to implement the Valley Children's Center project. It included local business owners, child care providers, two members of the County Council, Modern Financial leaders, and two foundation representatives. Together, they agreed to build a child-care center right in the Modern Financial Commercial Park and to design its capacity so that it could serve workers in many local enterprises.

RCAA provided the CSBG-funded community organizing staff that recruited the group and provided its administrative support. RCAA also funded the planner who coordinated the early financial planning, the design phase, and the early development stages.

Step 5: Describe the Outcome

All narratives should end with demonstrated successes, even if there are more steps or repetitions of the activities to come in the future. Sometimes numbers can be helpful, especially with respect to community and economic changes. Sometimes statistics are difficult for readers to understand and may be distorted by their personal frames. We explore this further in Section V below.

Unframed

Upon the opening of the new Valley Children's Center, 80 children at a time could be accommodated on a sliding scale fee basis. Programming managed by RCAA included educational support and activities for children, coordination with ECE resources for staff professional development, linkages to workforce development participants, and financial and physical plant management services.

Many workers who could not work full-time because of the absence of child care are now earning a living wage. Thirteen to fifteen family development clients who took positions after enrolling their children at the center are now self-sufficient. Two others are currently stable.

How can it be re-framed?

A. Avoid jargon like:

- "Programming managed" – this is confusing to a reader who understands business and household management but not program delivery.
- "Linkages" – what is actually happening here? Even CAA colleagues may not know exactly what the connections are unless they are listed.
- "Family development clients" – you don't want to interrupt the flow to define "family development" or even "self-sufficiency programs." When you use these terms your writing is directed primarily at CAA insiders.

B. Avoid lists of activities or resources packed into tight sentences. Walk your reader through the collection of simultaneous activities and achievements rather than running through steps.

Re-framed:

One year after their first meeting, the members of the Leadership Working Group joined parents and representatives of Modern Financial Services and all our County Commissioners for the ribbon-cutting ceremony that opened the beautiful new child care center. RCAA agreed with the Leadership Group's request to be responsible for managing the facility, coordinating the programs and activities that enrich children's time at the Center, and for arranging continuing professional development of the Center's staff. The Center is open for extended hours and accommodates 80 infants and children at one time. Employees of more than 30 local businesses use the center.

Fees are on a sliding scale which reflects family income levels. RCAA facilitated an agreement among nearly all local employers; signers will contribute in proportion to their lower-paid working parents' use of the center. Then, RCAA's skilled development team identified and coordinated other federal, state, and county resources that support the services. (*Continued on next page.*)

The parents who work nontraditional hours at the call center usually spend their dinner break with their children, help them with homework, and then go back to work with peace of mind.

Of the 80 families using the Center, fifteen are working parents who had formerly been participants in RCAA's workforce development program. Until they secured these positions, they had been unable to work full-time because of their need to care for young children. Now their wages and benefits have doubled their income, and thirteen already do not depend on any income support or other programs to care for their young families. The remaining two will soon complete RCAA's Adult Education curriculum and, with their GEDs in hand, also will qualify for higher pay.

The re-framed alternative is still complex, but it is more descriptive and uses simple action verbs. Further, the description of deeply engaged parents removes the opportunity to question the value of putting a child to bed in a facility.

Of course, your own success story might be less dramatic and might have more loose ends. For example, it might have been the case that too few local employers agreed to chip in, or there were cost overruns that raised fees. A good story can end with a first set of successes followed by a vision for improvement through next steps. For example:

“Now that 80 children are cared for near their parents' work place where they can share meals and activities, Phase 2 can begin. RCAA and its four business partners [insert names] plan to initiate an outreach campaign for more contributing member businesses. John Brown, our workforce development coordinator, is working on a plan with our local community college dean for continuing early childhood education for the center's staff.”

IV. Individuals and Their Successes: How Do Their Stories Fit In?

The practice in the past has been that, as you tell a story about your Community Action work, you should focus on a participant and his or her personal story of success. We have generally accepted that this “puts a face” on the problem and on the solution. Indeed, most CAAs' annual reports include a collection of portraits of their participants and staff. **The recent research reveals a big surprise**; it indicates that the conventional wisdom was wrong about the best way to help the public identify with CAAs' work in communities.

The research shows that too many readers of personal stories frame the story by assuming that personal character flaws caused the difficulties that led to the person's lack of job readiness, indebtedness, or the health problem that brought the person to a CAA. This assumption is related to the strong individualistic bias in American culture, which values the struggle to “make it on your own” and dismisses programs or government assistance as undesirable or marks of failure to “make it.”^x

This finding means that, without your frame, the person you write about may either invoke an unconscious stereotype (such as “poor = lazy”) or remind your readers of a personal experience with someone they know, such as their shiftless cousin Jane. As Dr. Donna Beegle writes, people living in economic poverty are commonly blamed for their plight, even though poverty rarely is caused by personal deficiencies.^{xi} Dr. Beegle urges us to work to **shatter myths by presenting the structural causes of poverty as part of every narrative or frame**. A story that begins with the general problem and a social inclusion goal and moves from problem to solution by using the personal story as just one example, not as the central theme, meets that test. Americans respond to organizations helping those who are sacrificing and struggling to get ahead. They admire an institution that can solve a shared societal problem. Be sure your story of an individual has those elements.

A. Pitfalls of Telling Personal Stories

Pitfall 1: Representing

When one person's story is showcased (or one family's story), the person (or family) is likely to be considered “typical” of an entire group – in your case, of your program participants. The reader is probably, and reasonably, assuming you purposely chose the person's tale to make a general point. Since this usually is truly the case, it is critical to **make your general points first**, in ways that do not involve a personal story.

For example, telling the story of someone whose struggles included overcoming a tendency to self-defeating behaviors like addiction or living in abusive situations could plant the idea that most of those your CAA serves behave in self-defeating ways. Frame the story by describing the shared threat of abuse or substance abuse and the general truth that many can overcome either, if given the proper kind of help -- the kind your programs deliver.

Pitfall 2: Disconnecting

There is a risk that the reader will not see the policy forest for the personal trees. A reader may feel sympathy for the person in the story while failing to make connections to the broad, societal or community-level conditions that contributed to the person's problems. A dramatic story increases this risk.^{xii}

Research tells us that a vivid image, such as a dramatic or emotionally evocative personal story, keeps the audience from perceiving the general problem behind the story, or the policy and program that is the general solution. The person and her or his drama dominate the memory the reader takes away. This is one explanation for the willingness of many to send unsolicited donations to people whose misfortunes are shown in the media, while the donors lack interest in solving the general problem (perhaps the too-common lack of medical insurance that put a patient in jeopardy or the light state penalty for drunken drivers that resulted in a repeat offender crippling the child). Readers may also believe that a very successful individual is unique or is so strong that the CAA's contribution was marginal, or that it would not be decisive for less extraordinary individuals.^{xiii}

Pitfall 3: Stereotypes

A story without a general framework and a clear action sequence can activate one or more negative stereotypes. For example, there is a common misperception that economically impoverished families are larger, on average, than families in the middle class. A story of a family with a large number of children, in which the parents struggled their way to self-sufficiency, could backfire by summoning forth the idea that “poor people have too many children,” thereby causing their own problems. Similarly, stories about foreign-born program participants can lead the reader to conclude that they are illegal immigrants.

Use personal stories only when a personal story helps bring to life your action narrative about the work that you do and about all the hard-working, respectable people for whom your CAA provides new opportunities.

Keep in mind that even a service that is delivered on a person-by-person basis, such as casework or family development support, can demonstrate your leadership's understanding of widely shared local needs and how to respond effectively. A good story can involve coordinating community-wide resources and partnerships with others to provide program participants with appropriate and skilled individual assistance. One person's case can be highlighted after it is clear how many have succeeded. By delivering these individually-directed strategies together, the CAA creates a community resource, too. Make the general point that your organization's program is ready to support numerous struggling community residents, including workers, retirees, and their family members.

B. Tell a Personal Story When...

- You have helped readers categorize the story accurately by introducing it strategically. Once you have framed the story with one or more society- or community-level concepts, you can turn the personal story into an example of the impact of the work described in your narrative. After providing the society- or community-level factors:
 - Describe the problem that your organization addressed;
 - Describe the solution;
 - Describe how your leaders implemented the solution and explain the results;
 - Use the personal story to illustrate the broad success; and
 - Be sure to relate the events and factors in the personal story back to the society- or community-level problems and solutions described in the beginning.
- You have selected a person (or family) who is a good representative for the majority of the participants and can easily be identified as a member of your community.

Example:

Unframed:

Jane Doe was an immigrant who moved to our community with her children. She soon found that her job as a hotel maid did not even begin to provide a living wage for the family. Jane came to Positive CAP in need of emergency rental assistance when she faced eviction. She told her case manager that she was skilled in catering and wanted to know if they could help her open a catering business. She was referred to our microenterprise program that helps entrepreneurs become small business owners.

How can it be re-framed?

- A. Be careful that you are encouraging a reader to categorize the story accurately. As it currently reads, a reader could think that Jane was not legally able to work in the U.S.
- B. Make sure your story reflects the careful thinking that went into the CAA's decision to begin a microenterprise program. Focus on the CAA: the difficulty of running a successful program of this nature and especially the selectivity involved in accepting participants into the program who have the capacity for success.

Re-framed:

America always has been a land of opportunity for anyone with a good business idea and a willingness to work hard. Start-up money for the new business can be difficult to find, however, even when the amount that is needed is small. When our Board of Directors looked at the results of the community needs assessment carried out by Venture Community Action Agency, we saw that a substantial number of low-wage workers in our community had realistic ideas for becoming entrepreneurs. All that they needed was a little support and some good management skills.

Our Economic Development Director, Joan Smith, was able to recruit several local partners:

- Four seasoned business owners provided free-of-charge Saturday seminars in steps and strategies for establishing a small business;
- Students in the College of Business at our local university, supervised by members of the faculty, fulfilled a class requirement by working one-on-one with each microenterprise participant to create a business development plan; and
- VCAA persuaded our own local bank to provide part of the funding for microenterprise loans, which VCAA then used to win matching funding from the U.S. Department of Commerce.

Our staff used CSBG funding to support its work of reviewing applications to microenterprise programs, coordinating the efforts of our partners, applying for funding, and tracking the progress of program participants. By the end of its second year of operation, the microenterprise program had helped fourteen entrepreneurs launch a new business, each of which was on solid footing financially and providing a living wage.

(Continued on next page.)

The new businesses include quite a range of services: an errand service for people who are housebound, a tailoring and alterations home-based service, a pet-sitting service, and a mobile ethnic food stand that visits several large work sites every day. These new owners provide funding for future entrepreneurs by repaying their start-up loans; this year a new group of potential entrepreneurs is being recruited by VCAA's microenterprise team.

One of the successful entrepreneurs is Jane Doe the creator of Fast Break catering, for constructions workers. Despite her many years in this country as a documented worker, her catering venture remained a dream. She catered friends' events and even weddings, using her grandmother's traditional recipes. She had earned a local reputation for her excellent cuisine.

When tourism dropped following Hurricane Katrina, Jane's hotel work hours were cut in half. She came to VCAA after exhausting her savings and falling behind on her rental payments. Once VCAA identified resources to tide her over and prevent her family from becoming homeless, our employment specialist interviewed Jane to help her find a second job. The employment specialist learned about Jane's dream for her own catering business. When Jane was introduced to the microenterprise program specialist and learned about the opportunities opening up, she devoted herself to applying to the program and then absorbing the training offered. Her income received an unexpected boost from a new set of catering customers: VCAA staff tasted her food and soon commissioned many more meals for our youth programs, our senior day care center, and our Board meetings. Within eight months of completing the course, Jane was able to quit her hotel maid job and support her family, as well as make her loan repayments.

Jane's story, as told in this way, is now an illustration of the larger program story which supports respected American traditions of entrepreneurship, supports struggling working parents, and delivers integrated services competently.

For another example of a complete, well-framed story, see [Appendix B](#).

C. Choosing Words that Speak to Others

This manual's first sections **provide strategies for parts of your narrative**. We now move to address another issue: that of the use of specific words or phrases that can help you frame your story. We all know that words matter. Some words or phrases have acquired negative associations. Other words and phrases also can communicate in a way that you do not intend to communicate.

Too many communications about the poor and about poverty itself have stereotyped both poor people and the condition of poverty as undesirable and different from most people. Your readers will apply the images and meanings they originally learned for words that carry very different images and meanings to those in the Community Action network.

Telling Community Action’s Story: A Guidebook

However you felt when you heard it, you have certainly heard Americans say proudly, “We had nothing, but we didn’t feel *poor*...”. Poor is someone *else* to most readers, regardless of the reader’s income.

Words that Work

The following words, which reflect the value frameworks described in Section II, have been found by researchers to have positive associations for a majority of Americans:

- **Opportunity** (“Opportunity” suggests opening the way to self-improvement. Fortunately, opportunity is Community Action’s middle name, as in the “Economic Opportunity Act” of 1964.)
- **Responsibility**
- **Choice**
- **Prevention**
- **Security** (But, be careful using the word “security.” Used in the wrong context, it can suggest dependency, as in a person who is asking for unfair advantages. However, “security” is more often seen as a positive word when paired with words such as “health” or “retirement.”)

Words that Mobilize

Americans are critical of businesses or governments or executives that do not do the fair thing. Effective concepts to frame your goals for changing policy or local conditions are:

- Establishing a level playing field;
- Playing fair; and
- Playing by the rules.

The next two pages compare words CAAs commonly use with alternatives that are more likely to ensure that a reader categorizes your story in the way you intend.

Telling Community Action’s Story: A Guidebook

Conventional or Specialized Words	Words that Work Better
<p>“Poor” and “poverty” – They can suggest dependency; different from “middle class” or “working class.”</p>	<p>“Economically disadvantaged” – It is long, but it includes the cause and leaves out meanings that some think reflect culture or character.</p>
<p>“Working poor” – Still “poor.” (See explanation above.)</p>	<p>“Low-wage workers” – Implies that people are working for a living, however poorly they are rewarded.</p>
<p>“Low-income families” or “low-income population” – May be misinterpreted as low-ambition. “Population” depersonalizes.</p>	<p>“Low-wage workers, retirees, and their families” – Really long, but highly recommended by experts.</p>
<p>“Unemployed” – It emphasizes the idea that someone is not working, not the cause for his or her lack of work.</p>	<p>“Hard-working people” or “workers who are trying to find jobs” – Even though cumbersome, these phrases emphasize people’s willingness to work.^{xiv}</p>
<p>“Job security” – It suggests the security only of a person’s current position. Few workers feel that they have that promise anymore; many may feel a program promising to provide it is either unrealistic or unfair.</p>	<p>“Employment security” – It suggests that a person will be securely in the workforce, employable. It is more sympathetic, since the ongoing ability to work for a living is something so many Americans worry about. Also: “health security,” “retirement security,” etc., but not “security” without a qualifier.</p>
<p>“Food insecurity” or “energy insecurity” – These are not commonly recognized concepts.</p>	<p>“Hunger,” “poor housing,” or “high utility bills” – These terms lack the subtlety that professionals recognize—in other words, the “food insecure” are not necessarily hungry every day, for example--but they are easy to grasp.</p>
<p>“Program” – It can sound cumbersome, costly, or bureaucratic. “Welfare” is a “program”; “Social Security” is not, because it is seen as simple and universal.</p>	<p>“Initiative,” “strategy,” “plan,” or better still, “action plan” or “plan of action” – Alternatively, use the name of the specific project instead of the generic “program.”</p>

Telling Community Action’s Story: A Guidebook

Conventional or Specialized Words	Words that Work Better
<p>“High school dropouts” – Dropping out means making a poor choice. Teenagers come to mind. Some readers may find dropouts to be undeserving.</p>	<p>“People without a high school or other degree” – It is neutral as to cause or motivation.</p>
<p>“Unskilled jobs” – A term that is inaccurate as well as negative; no job is truly unskilled.</p>	<p>“Low-wage work” – It evokes the economy, the wide income gap, the devaluing of work and workers, all of which are shared issues.</p>
<p>“Clients” – This service term evokes “welfare” clients and suggests dependency; it is even less appropriate for those not involved in intensive programs.</p>	<p>“Participants” – NASCSP’s word for those who participate in CSBG network programs suggests equality and active engagement. <i>(Note: This term was not included in the research, but is an established NASCSP best practice.)</i></p>
<p>“A 39-year-old female with two dependents and multiple deficits” – Any clinical language is the sort of language that may be used in a case note, but it projects a detached attitude on the part of the story-tellers. Remember that your entire story and your writing style project the voice of your CAA. This example projects the voice of the disengaged.</p>	<p>“Mary Jones, a hearing-impaired mother of two young children who suffered a back injury” – This captures it all, but from a respectful and sympathetic perspective.</p>
<p>“Moms and dads” – The casual tone annoys some readers and suggests that the “voice” of your organization is unprofessional.</p>	<p>“Parents” or “mothers and fathers” – These are roles and words that society respects.</p>
<p>“Kids” – Please see the explanation above for “Moms and dads.”</p>	<p>“Children,” or “young people,” or specific subgroups such as “preschoolers,” “school-age children,” “teens,” or “infants,” etc.</p>
<p>“TANF” or “Medicaid” – They can suggest dependency and may not accurately depict specific needs and goals.</p>	<p>“Educational support,” “medical insurance,” or “income supplement” – Benefits such as student loans or health care make it clear that these are supports for people who are striving to improve their own lives.</p>

D. Use Numbers Carefully

You should not feel that you have to include numbers in what you write. Often it is possible, and sometimes it is highly advisable, to write a strong story without including any statistics. Many effective narratives will showcase leadership, vision, decisions, and implementation strategies.

You may have a story in which statistics are helpful for describing the problem that your Community Action Agency addressed. For example: "As the river began to overflow its banks, 2,500 families had to leave their homes in two hours" is a compelling statement that includes a number. The reason it works is that it adds dimension to your problem description while not interrupting the narrative.

If it seems helpful to include statistics in a story, try to incorporate it at the end of the story.

- **It is important that a number or numbers be firmly connected to a frame.** For example: "Many working people in Terrific Valley have earnings that are too low to provide their family a secure future. Terrific CAA opens doors to better jobs for many of these workers who are willing to study in our training center's night program. The U.S. Census tells us that at least 1,920 low-wage workers live in our six communities. Last year, 119 of them got better-paying positions after completing TCAA's training and participating in our child care center program."
- However, **numbers are most effective when they are compared to small, everyday experiences and are linked to practical actions;** this is called "Social Math."^{xv}

The following are examples of "Social Math":

- Before Outback CAP created the State Dental College Rotation system, our rural counties had one dentist available for every 211 low-income children. Now, there is one dentist, or supervised dental student, for every 80 children at all times. This caseload is reasonable, and every child who needs a dental checkup can be seen within the next eight months. This means that cavities and chipped teeth can be taken care of as needed.
- The Weatherization Program in Efficient CAA used funds from several sources and in just one year saved the equivalent of the cargo of 20 full oil trucks (or: the electricity needed to light and provide power for 30 houses for an entire year...etc.). Next year we expect to do the same, which means that a year from now, the annual combined savings will equal the load of 40 oil trucks. Forty oil trucks parked end to end would stretch from the Fire Station all the way to the City Hospital.
- Our average LIHEAP benefit "buys three and a half weeks of heat", not our average LIHEAP benefit "is \$400," or even, "our average benefit buys 125 gallons of propane at current prices." The dollar amount and the number of gallons are not as clear.
- If you stacked the books that the participants in our after-school program read for fun in the past eight months, the stack would be 10 inches higher than the smokestack on City Hall.

E. Using Statistics Means Taking Risks

- **A statistic may seem to show an unimpressive outcome.** Our programs, unlike baseball, do not have statistics that are universally accepted. For instance, in a group of program participants with complex, multifaceted, long-standing challenges, your staff may know how impressive it was when 20% of the group became self-sufficient. A reader might think “*Only 20%?*” unless the statistic is embedded in an adequate context. The context might be a statement such as: “Research shows that only about 8% of learning disabled adults can complete their GED requirements. With a GED, they can secure positions that offer more than a minimum wage within a year’s time, so this accomplishment is important to their economic security. Our CAA and our partners at Morgan Institute thought we could do better. By offering...”. This indicates why the CAA success rate is astonishing and proves great competence as the CAA beat expectations by 150%.
- **Big, complicated statistics are not descriptive, they are analytic.** Large-scale problems seem overwhelming, and readers lose their connection to the narrative. Beginning a story with, “In Tornado City, the 100,000 households with incomes at or below 75% FPG have average energy burdens of 22% compared to the average family’s energy burden of 5%,” will not elicit the sympathetic concern that it should. Numbers are cold, averages are hard to imagine, and many real measures of poverty conditions seem too appalling to be real (*22% of income spent on energy? Come on!*). Consider the following, instead:

“The average family in Tornado City pays about 5% of their income for energy. Low-income households have the same energy costs, but these represent a larger percentage of the income – on the average, about 22%.”
- **Even national statistics used in your initial framing section may weaken your presentation.** “With more than 12% of Americans in poverty, it is hard to believe that 69% of all impoverished adults have jobs, and 23% have full-time jobs,” is a fine sentence. But it doesn’t have the power of a more descriptive and concrete presentation. Something like: “More than two-thirds of the Americans who live in poverty have jobs, many of which are full-time jobs. But these individuals are unable to earn sufficient wages to bring them economic security.” This will be followed by the specific points you wish to bring to the reader’s attention.

Appendix A is a collection of narratives recently submitted with the CSBG-IS which offer examples of problems and solutions in story writing.

F. A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words

Photographs that illustrate a story can be wonderful, but pictures are powerful tools to use with great caution. Even where your words have “painted the picture” you intend, you may wish to add power to the story with a strong picture.

Telling Community Action's Story: A Guidebook

In deciding whether and how to use a particular picture as an illustration, remember these findings:

- Pictures summon forth the same pre-existing perceptions or frames as do words;
- A picture is visual shorthand, replacing more words;
- A picture, like a dramatic story, will be remembered longer and more vividly than words;
- Captions are only words. Be sure your picture is clear without captions; and
- The wrong picture can completely undermine a carefully worded story.

Shape Your Photos around the Real Story

You can, literally, frame your subject by focusing the camera (or cropped picture) on the theme and actions that evoke shared values. By accident, informal shots may be everything you need, but you can plan ahead to create your “visual story” to be sure it has all the needed elements.

The approach that this handbook has been promoting is important to use with photos as well. Highlighting your CAA leaders' and professionals' vision, strategic skills, and effective implementation may be hard to convey in still pictures. Action gets frozen by the shutter. Community-building, teamwork, and mobilization involve many meetings and sometimes large group events; both are hard to photograph and even harder to make interesting. Examples in the following pages may give you ideas about how to set up effective, even dramatic, pictures of the unique process of Community Action's work.

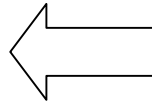
A Picture is Problematic When...

- It is not obvious what story the picture is telling. Vagueness allows the viewer to attach his/her own interpretation and frame;
- It illustrates a bias or stereotype along with your story;
- There is something in the picture that will divert attention from your story;
- It focuses on individuals, not actions or results. For example: Close-ups and head shots emphasize the personal while concealing societal or community-level factors. Such pictures are not always wrong, as you may need to show detail to make your point. But personal portraits, like personal success stories, should be used only when they help to frame your story in positive terms. Otherwise, readers may frame the photo as the portrait of The Problem, rather than a person or the person who solved the problem. Photos can sometimes dramatize how the individual has struggled and prevailed; and/or
- The role of your CAA is not obvious.

The following seven pages identify common causes and conditions of problematic photos and highlight simple changes you can make to ensure the photo enhances, rather than detracts from, an accompanying story.

G. Problematic Photos and Some Alternatives

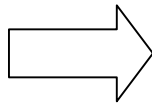
Problem: What is the Action?



Problems – Did these adults perform a useful service? Did they cut old growth trees? Are they connected to the CAA? Are they staff members? What verbs does the photo suggest? Chopping? Chatting? Admiring? Smiling?

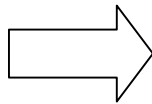
Solution: Activity demonstrating unique characteristic(s) of the CAA & its programs.

Best – Elements of this picture include: a plan and direction; a leader; diverse people who appear to be functioning as a team; and people who look energetic and ready to work.



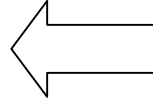
Good – Elements of this picture include: planting, growing, working, improving the community, and putting unused resources (land) to work.

Problems – Is this one family in its own back yard? Is it part of a plan led by a CAA? Props such as an agency banner or a staff leader with logo clothing would help. Also, a blueprint, as in the photo above, would indicate a plan and direction.



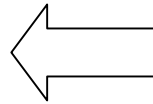
Problems: Vague program, uncertain activity, or disturbing element

Telling Community Action's Story: A Guidebook



Problems – Why are women holding babies outdoors while someone blocks the door? Is the person in the door in uniform? Is s/he a cop? What is their role here? Is that a small child holding an infant? Is that safe?

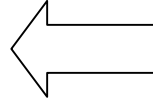
Suggestions – Could this activity be pictured so that the image accurately communicates? What if the person in the door was interacting with the mother, looking at the baby, taking instructions from the mothers, accepting bottles, etc.? Would an indoor shot be better?



Problems – Why is the agency keeping this man waiting? Why is a child alone outdoors? Is the child worried? Who is responsible for him?

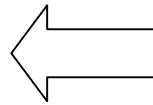
Suggestions – Could this activity be pictured so that the image accurately communicates? It could be a good image if the man were reading to the boy while they wait or if the man was filling out forms with a helpful worker while the boy played with blocks.

Telling Community Action's Story: A Guidebook



Problems – Is there a problem or barrier? Are the standing people worried? Are they blocking the wheelchair? If this photo celebrates newly accessible intersections, why is the man in the wheelchair not using them?

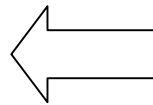
Suggestions – Could this activity be pictured so that the image accurately communicates? The photo needs one or more props. What about a ribbon cutting? Several wheelchair-bound people enjoying the new corner curb-cuts? The role of the CAA should be clarified.



Almost clear. Fuel is being delivered and it's winter. This looks like tangible essential help, action at the right time.

Problems – The connection between the CAA and the oil delivery is absent.

Solutions – A welcoming older woman on the steps of a dilapidated house would add context. Even better would be a CAA outreach worker with her or a Weatherization Assistance Program crew (with their logo visible) at work.



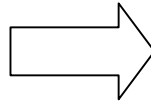
Problems – The photo slightly misses the program dynamics. It is hard to imagine a CAA program that brings together small children to watch an adult do something on a computer. Although these two children are apparently interested and well-behaved, the image does not tell a story.

Solutions – Do not include a photo only to allude to a program.

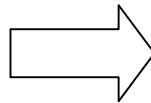
Solution: Activity depicting safe, positive, and recognizable work

Many different images could convey what your CAA initiatives do and *how*. There are different elements of the same work that can be pictured in multiple images. These photos raise few questions and show direct action. Unfortunately, not one of the photos below has a visible CAA identifier. Consider including CAA t-shirts or work-shirts in shots without a CAA banner or sign.

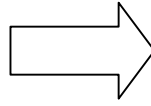
Good – Main concept: an engaged staffer or volunteer is obviously helping the smiling wheelchair-bound man.



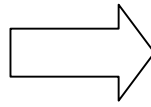
Good – Concepts: youth working, constructing, improving buildings, and contributing to the revitalization of their community. Their carpentry or painting is guided by a helpful adult woman – which breaks a stereotype.



Good – Concepts: generations working together; skilled craftsman passing on his skills; diverse group of engaged kids; volunteering; and investing in the future.



Good – Concepts: women working with helpful teachers; bettering themselves; one-on-one attention; and the photo appears to demonstrate relaxed teamwork, not irate supervisors correcting people's work.

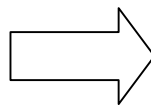


Problem – No CAA branding or logo appears. It would be best to find imagery that shows this is training, not a secretarial pool.

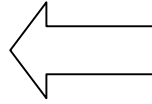
Good – Excellent use of a close-up. The older woman is likely part of a foster grandparents program and she seems fully engaged with the young boy (note the pencil in her hand). The boy appears eager, interested in his work, and able to read and write. The setting is easily identified as a classroom, which is regarded as safe.



Good – Good action shot. The subject or focus is the home improvement, not the worker. This is not a personal story or focus. The technique of blown insulation is not easy or common, so this image demonstrates CAAs' specialized skills.



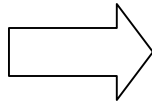
Individual Portraits: Risks and Hits



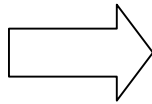
Risk – This picture does not have a theme. It doesn't immediately bring to mind what the service or success has been.

There is no context, no action, and no photo element that puts this family in the frame, "kind of people who deserve my help or my community's help to get by."

Hit – Suggests the frame, "single mother who persisted and got her degree, and her supportive mother/aunt who helped her struggle to advance." Also, suggests a successful student who used the help provided well. Character is guessed from these results and from the three generations of support shown. The results are pictured with the individual (cap and gown). CAA logo shows.

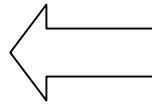


Hit – A child who has been working and developing successfully. This program moves kids ahead to success.

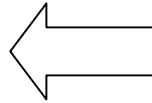


Problem of CAAs' unique mission: Investment in *long-term* development for those who sacrifice to better themselves

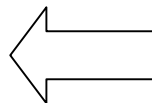
Photos of resources alone, especially emergency resources or gifts, bring the frame handout to mind. Whether or not the viewer feels positive about simple generosity, this is the way the CAA will be framed: "The place to go when one needs a handout." The images below can be interpreted as "handout" messages. For many viewers, they may raise questions about fairness and suggest that CAA participants receive "something for nothing."



Problems – Is this a CAA worker? Is she alone or is this part of a program? The agency logo is missing.



Problems – Why are adults getting this food? Are they paying? Are they in school? If this photo illustrates the graduates of a commercial food prep/food-handling program at work, it is not obvious. The symbolism, "Here, have some of the food we made for you" – evokes the concept of receiving "something for nothing."



Problems – No matter how worthy the recipient, a program may still be interpreted as a handout. Does this activity keep seniors independent? Healthy? How can we tell? Is the standing woman a CAA worker?

Solutions – Could this activity be pictured so that the image communicates? There is wide acceptance of programs helping seniors. Some indication that the meal adds to their health might be enough. How about showing seniors with forks full of salad or fresh fruit? What if nurses were sitting at their tables? What if participants were exercising?

V. Conclusion

Community Action Agencies have a unique story to tell, but it is challenging to keep the story out of commonly-held conventional frames of government programs and images of the poor. This guidebook contains strategies and tips to help CAAs write narratives for a wide variety of audiences, including the general public and their elected representatives.

NASCSP welcomes examples of good stories, before-and-after models, and other helpful instructional materials to provide to the CSBG network. Research that advocates for low-income workers, retirees, and children is very new and is still being tested by many organizations, including our own. As this research field develops, our intention is to share findings and best practices, and expand on these materials. All members of the Community Action network are encouraged to share their resources as they discover new ways to disseminate their impact stories.

Endnotes

ⁱ Materials

1. General: How our minds process information

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2. Recent research into effective communication:

Donna M. Beegle, PhD., "Overcoming the silence of generational poverty," *Talking Points* (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, October/November 2003)

http://www.nacmnet.org/PastConferences/2007Midyear/DonnaBeagle_TP0151OvercomingTheSilence.pdf

Heather Boushey et al., *Social Inclusion for the United States* (Washington, DC: Center for Economic and Policy Research & Inclusion, April, 2007) <http://www.inclusionist.org/files/socialinclusionusa.pdf>

For an Economy that Works For All Project, *For an Economy that Works For All: A Tool Kit for Advocates for Low-Wage Workers* (New Rochelle, NY: Douglas Gould & Co., 2005),

<http://www.douglasgould.com/resources/WorkingPressFEWMediaAnalysis.pdf>

Frameworks Institute, *Framing Public Issues*, (Washington, DC: Frameworks Institute, 2002),

<http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/strategicanalysis/FramingPublicIssuesfinal.pdf> This is their complete handbook for advocates. Many articles on specific communications problems that affect the public discourse on poverty can be found on this site.

Stan Greenberg et al., *The Economic Disconnect: How Both the Left and the Right Get It Wrong* (Washington, DC: Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, December, 2006), http://www.epi.org/books/talking/greenberg-lake_report.pdf

The website of the organization Inclusionist is a rich source of information about effective communication, including the most recent information available: <http://www.inclusionist.org>.

David Kusnet, Lawrence Mishel, & Ruy Teixeira, *Talking Past Each Other: What Everyday Americans Really Think (and Elites Don't Get) About the Economy* (Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute, 2006).

Frank Luntz, *Words that Work: It's Not What You Say, It's What People Hear* (New York: Hyperion, 2007).

The Tides Foundation and the SPIN Project, *Words That Work: Messaging for Economic Justice* (2005), <http://www.tides.org/fileadmin/pdfs/EconJusticeMessaging.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Deborah Tannen, ed., *Framing in Discourse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), cited in Frameworks Institute, *Ibid.*, 4.

ⁱⁱⁱ George Lakoff, *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think* (University of Chicago Press, 2002).

^{iv} David Kusnet et al., Introduction

^v *Ibid.*, 24

^{vi} *Ibid.*, 24

^{vii} *Ibid.*, 34-35

^{viii} Boushey et al., op. cit.

^{ix} Federal Trade Commission, *A Brief Overview of the Federal Trade Commission's Investigative and Law Enforcement Authority* (2008), <http://www.ftc.gov/ogc/brfovrww.shtml>

^x Kusner, op. cit.

^{xi} Beegle, op. cit., 12.

^{xii} Franklin D. Gilliam, "Vivid examples: What they mean and why you should be careful using them," Frameworks Institute e-zine 33, <http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/products/issue33framing.shtml>

^{xiii} Gilliam, op. cit.

^{xiv} Frameworks Institute, op. cit., 24.

^{xv} *Ibid.*

Appendix A: More Examples of the Five Strategic Steps in Story-Writing

Step 1: Choosing your story

Almost every CAA activity that has demonstrated its results and value can be the basis of a compelling narrative that wins the support of its readers. The reason is that the CAA mission fits into the framework of mainstream American values. However, not every program or project directly contributes to achieving the shared American goals of opening opportunity to those who are struggling, of rewarding work, of supporting strong families, and of building community. Even some activities that CAAs know do contribute to these purposes are difficult to frame so that the connection is clear and unambiguous to those unfamiliar with our work. Examples of the latter would be building organizational capacity or winning community recognition of a poverty condition.

The examples listed in the Guide Book's Five-Step Strategy suggest a few of the many kinds of activities that "connect" directly to the values of many Americans.

Below are examples of stories sometimes submitted in CSBG-IS reports that we believe are too difficult to frame so that the general public focuses on the story you hope to tell. While any veteran of Community Action can see how the narrative demonstrates strengths and could be re-framed, these are examples of stories that are not the best use of your messaging opportunities. Simply put, they require too much uninteresting explaining to be changed.

A. Management achievements

Original:

In 2007, Grassroots EOC introduced a computer network that links all our satellite offices and implemented a paperless joint application system so that clients can be entered in all our programs for which they are eligible at one initial visit. This system also prevents duplication of services. Staff skills were upgraded to utilize the new system, and our customer processing speed has been cut by 1/3. 102 clients learned about benefits they can access and improved their family resources; many would never have known about the help available to them from many sources without our system.

What's wrong with it?

This style and the results of these advances might be perfectly appropriate for a report to peers or oversight bodies, but is not framed as a story for telling the general public about your advanced management practices and improved delivery. For one thing, it assumes too much knowledge and uses many words that are managers' jargon, such as "customer processing."

A second element is more problematic. The result is apparently more people getting more government assistance. It will trigger many negative "frames," such as promoting "welfare" and spending tax dollars. You could emphasize the efficiencies in staff time saved and fraud averted, but showcasing those values might not frame your mission as you would want.

B. Investments that may seem too rich to be fair

Original:

Our partnerships with the Green Pastures Country Club and the District Attorney's office have provided troubled youth with a new outlet for their talents and new ambitions for success. Every year, six participants in our Community Corrections program are provided with free golf instruction; when they pass the initial proficiency test, GPCC rewards them with certificates for free use of the greens at slow periods and free rental clubs. The golf coaches are recruited from the local business community and backed up by the club's pro. Our staff organizes the schedule and activities for the youths and provides space on our shuttle service so they can access the GPCC. After three years, only two of the 18 recruits have left the program; of the rest, three are attending college on golf scholarships and the others have part-time jobs as caddies or less skilled staff at the GPCC.

What's wrong with it?

Who wouldn't like their kids to have free everything at the golf club; to have a shot at a scholarship in a field with less competition than, say, basketball or baseball? But who actually received these benefits? Often, teenagers who have broken "the rules," rules that your readers have set for their own children. Most of the community will not be country club members, and many in your audience probably would enjoy the access but cannot afford it. Many will see the investment as their tax dollars (Community Corrections) at work paying for luxuries, or at least opportunities, for which they themselves cannot hope.

The full story does not meet the test of playing by the rules which include discipline and sacrifice to do well in school and participate in wholesome, common experiences.

A better approach?

Perhaps a story honoring the volunteer golf mentors when you recognize them at your annual banquet could praise their contributions while remaining discreetly silent on the exact extent of the support from all sources. Another story about specific young people who change their risky ways as a result of their passion for their new sport could also work, if carefully framed. Know your audience and anticipate its reactions.

While most of our examples are extreme, rewritten versions of actual submissions, the following example represents a commonly offered story. We highlight it in this same category of story type:

Questionable investments

Original:

Each fall, our child development staff reaches out to our Christmas Partners, the local fire department, K-Mart, Piggly Wiggly, and four congregations to gather gifts for over 200 children. The entire Santa CAA staff bakes holiday goodies to prepare for the party. This year, our Board Chair took the part of Santa to give a joyous Christmas to 244 low-income children. Each received four age-appropriate gifts such as new toys and

handheld games, Christmas dresses or slacks, and art supplies. Parents received gift bags of personal-care items and children's books to read aloud.

What's wrong with it?

(First, our disclaimer: We do believe that some narratives that show how children demonstrably in great need are given care that makes them know they are included in America's big holiday are good examples of your CAA skills in mobilizing support and appropriate gifts for "your" children. Your children could be those living in your homeless shelters/transitional housing or your Head Start participants or perhaps the teen leadership group. Of course the gifts should be items that offer high quality and skill-building potential, or necessities of life (in other words, not jewelry or rap CDs). However, you should, even in those cases, consider whether the Christmas gifts story is the most important one to tell the public to illustrate your CAA's achievement.)

In this example, these are not investments connected to specific groups of families or developmental needs. There is little clear connection to your core activities and mission: investing in better futures for families that are struggling. Yet a lot of staff time and energy is tied up in this giveaway activity. This story allows readers to frame it as something for nothing or your CAA as a nice place to go for stuff.

Given the uncertainties, many readers, who themselves scrimped on Christmas, also may wonder why their child got less. They may wonder if their contribution to the toy box at their office or school was actually needed, and it may cross their minds to wonder whether their tax dollars supported your initiative.

In sum, it is hard to place the frame correctly over images of giveaways to anyone, even children, and still fit in the framework that Americans value.

C. Outcomes that are clearly what you aimed for, but are not desirable to all

Original:

Our employment specialists have observed over the years that many disabled adults who are determined to work at a chosen trade they enjoy will surpass all expectations by overcoming their handicaps through ingenuity and hard work. Our dedicated volunteer medical professionals at Mercy Hospital Center joined Devoted CAA's workforce development team to make Don's career hopes a reality at last. At the age of 24, Don could not read above the fourth grade level nor operate a vehicle because he was amblyopic ("wall-eyed"). He came to our emergency health support clinic in desperation after failing on his third attempt to qualify for the police academy. After surgery on one of his eyes by one of our volunteer ophthalmologists and a prescription of strong glasses for the other eye, Don made lightening progress in our GED course, and was placed in a 911 call center while he completed his community college degree in law enforcement. Ten years later, it is a great pleasure to see Don in his uniform mounted on his motorcycle and to know that Devoted CAA helped his dream come true.

What's wrong with it?

In addition to the problem of using individuals as examples of your participants, there is a more fundamental question. More than one reader may wonder whether your program was correct in deciding NOT to steer Don away from this career that puts him on a moving vehicle and provides him with weapons.

Bottom line in choosing a story:

Do not choose results that are not clearly within the framework of American values. There is no gain in inviting second-guessing by your reader when you will have so many successes that you could write about instead which have positive significance for all.

Step 2: Framing the story

In the following examples, a story (as submitted) is shown along with a strategically edited version. The edited version shows the application of the framing strategy of Step 2. In the edited version, the story begins with a description of a general problem and principles which frame the narrative in an inclusionary, accepted-values framework.

A. Employment initiative

Original Opening:

The first Southern CAA Job Fair was a true success; 22 employers were on hand to interview prospective employees and 10% of attendees interviewed got the jobs they interviewed for. The Chamber of Commerce partnered with the agency to fight the contradiction in our area of high unemployment – as high as 9% in many seasons - and unfilled jobs. (This was the complete narrative.)

Framed:

Areas of high unemployment are not without ANY job openings at all. In fact, slow labor markets are promising for employers who need to fill vacancies with seasoned workers. Most are willing to offer training to willing workers who are new to their industry. However, there are barriers to employers' communication with job-seekers, and there is hesitation when employers find prospects who lack a current job. A knowledgeable local institution can make a big difference in bridging that divide and can support employers in assuring that every position is appropriately filled.

(See below for Steps Three through Five of this full story framed.)

B. Emergency preparedness initiative

Original Opening:

Cliffside CAC decided to take charge of the county's disaster response plan when we realized few local organizations had any idea about how to respond and there were few community residents trained to assist until the professional responders arrive.

What's missing?

This is clear active language and demonstrates the leadership and initiative of the agency. However, it may suggest that others have failed and/or that there is something unusual about the lack of preparedness in the area.

Framed:

All levels of government have a new focus on disaster-readiness as a result of the lessons learned from the nation's experiences with Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Clearly, preparation is an essential part of any crisis response, but many responsibilities are local and challenge the limited resources, both financial and human, of rural areas. Most of these areas need a local institution that can take charge of organizing the planning and coordination that is the foundation of effective emergency response.

(See below for Steps Three through Five of this full story framed.)

C. Grandmother in crisis

Many stories submitted begin with the experience of an individual in crisis and state his or her problem; the narrative then lays out the decisions and action steps that put the participant back on a path to stability.

Original Opening:

Mary was a 62-year old single grandmother of 3 who came to us seeking help from the city rodent control department because vermin were infecting her apartment. She feared for the safety and health of the young grandchildren she was raising alone, since their mother was incarcerated.

What's missing?

As discussed with respect to individual narratives, this suggests Mary has a unique situation in her apartment. Nothing suggests that hers is a situation shared by many. Furthermore, she is the mother of a criminal, and she is now unable to keep her grandchildren safe without help from "the government." Readers may or may not perceive Mary sympathetically, but they probably will not identify with her.

Framed:

Many people who are getting by independently on very modest resources experience devastating personal tragedies that require more investment than they can afford. In such circumstances, they are threatened with the prospect of long-term hardship that affects their extended family as well. Usually, a timely infusion of resources and specialized knowledge can help stem their fall and prevent their tragedy from turning into persistent poverty and hardship; in some cases, those affected also require sustained medical or legal support.

Capital CAP staff is trained to recognize such destabilizing crises. In addition, our integrated system of family development services and investments has a variety of

resources that can be combined, as the need warrants, to set a family on the road to stability and economic security.

This story should go on to tell how the CAA identified the kinds of problems to be solved and the resources needed--the programs, case managers, legal aid referrals, trained staff paralegals to help Mary get child support, or whatever was the case. Mary, or rather, Mrs. Smith as she should be respectfully called, **can be the example at the end of the general narrative**. Remind readers that Mrs. Smith has experienced the tragedy of her daughter's fall. Show her parenting skills by suggesting the excellent care she gives her grandchildren and how they will thrive once Mrs. Smith has safe, affordable housing.

Step 3: Stating the specific problem and solution

A. Southern CAA job fair (continued from Step 2)

Original:

The first Southern CAA Job Fair was a true success; 22 employers were on hand to interview prospective employees and 10% of attendees interviewed got the jobs they interviewed for. The Chamber of Commerce partnered with the agency to fight the contradiction in our area of high unemployment – as high as 9% in many seasons - and unfilled jobs.

What's missing?

This short snappy narrative is insufficient to show the way a CAA works and how it builds the partnerships and services needed to make an impact.

Framed:

Southern Community Action's Community 2006 Economic Needs Assessment confirmed that good employment opportunities were scarce in our coal-mining region where the unemployment rate has been as high as 9% in recent years. However, our more extended employer analysis showed that the jobs that do exist are disproportionately low-wage, low-benefit positions. Jerry Sloane, the Community Services Block Grant Coordinator, asked to meet with each major employer and business organization in the county; he was initially surprised to learn that there were many vacant positions because of a lack of trained applicants.

B. Cliffside disaster preparedness (continued from Step 2)

This is the original, well-framed specific problem statement. Note how the strong images of the physical terrain and the active outreach and analysis by the agency are worked in.

Original:

Mountain County's rough mountainous terrain is traversed only by narrow winding roads that link the county's scattered communities. A major natural disaster would severely challenge the access and response capability of any emergency services, and residents could be without help for at least 72 hours. Low-income retirees and children

are the least mobile and face the greatest dangers in natural disasters.

The leaders of Cliffside CAA surveyed local governments and their partner organizations, such as Chambers of Commerce and hospitals, and realized that there was no source of emergency response training or even information, no handbooks or contact lists for civic leaders and volunteers. The Cliffside CAA leaders also learned that the lack of liability insurance prevented the local fire departments and other emergency responders from offering training to civilian volunteers.

Step 4: Actions

A. Southern CAA job fair (continued from Step 3)

Original:

None

Framed:

Together, Jerry and the business leaders designed a plan to identify potential candidates and to establish linkages to any appropriate candidates for the jobs.

The County Chamber of Commerce offered a dollar-for-dollar match for SCAA's CSBG investment in the first step: a well-organized, well-publicized, effective Job Fair. Jerry Sloane designed the event to include training and advice on job search and interviewing skills as well as resume development, offered by his skilled staff working with Human Resources experts from the participating corporations. Of course, the SCAA team provided introductions for employers and job candidates.

B. Cliffside disaster response (continued from Step 3)

This is a slightly condensed version of the excellent action narrative submitted.

Cliffside took the lead. It began to fill these gaps by reaching out to Mountain County Emergency Service Authority and offering to manage staff to organize a plan for training and for rehearsing citizen emergency responses. The organizations jointly established an advisory committee, and Cliffside CAA won grants for four AmeriCorps Vista volunteers whom it would house and supervise during their work on this project.

Cliffside then used its flexible CSBG funds to overcome the single major barrier to training responders: CSBG purchased liability insurance that covered the local government emergency responders as they trained private citizens. Cliffside's community organizers raised local private donations to purchase the training kits and other supplies for low-income trainees.

Step 5: Results

A. Cliffside disaster response (continued from Step 4)

Within three years, 360 trainers and 1,000 citizens will be sharing and rehearsing their disaster response skills and will know how to carry out the plans that will maximize county residents' safety. This means that our area now has one trained first responder for every 22 residents.

B. Using ROMA indicators

Original:

At the end of the first program year of our new transitional housing program for 20 homeless families, 12 families were stable, having achieved both food security and stable housing. Nine of the families had moved from unstable to thriving on the family security scale.

What's missing?

The goals are stated in human services jargon, and the scales measures are either unfamiliar or have multiple interpretations. The use of these numbers is also a problem because the results seem small, without a context.

Framed:

American families who become homeless following a crisis, such as the illness of a working parent, domestic violence, or protracted layoffs, often lose everything and face nine months or more in a shelter while saving for basic necessities and a security deposit. It typically takes two years and three months of full-time work and good health to return to the level of income and well-being that the family had before they became homeless. Children whose families live in transitional housing for more than a few weeks are at great risk of failing in school and of experiencing a serious illness.

The leadership of High Desert CAP's Transitional Housing Program decided to try an unconventional strategy for shortening the period that it typically takes to get families back "on their feet" economically and personally. The need for a new strategy became clear last year when 20 working families with children (an unprecedented number) became homeless in High Desert County, where rental costs are soaring as vacationers flock to our new golf courses. In fact, we set a goal of improving the economic security of the participating families above their pre-homeless situation within a year. Seventeen participants were selected for an intensive transitional initiative because they committed to undertaking a number of steps to improve their skills, from work skills to domestic management. They also committed to following a strict program of managing their resources wisely and to working full-time when offered a job and good child care.

(Add your program outline here)

Telling Community Action's Story: A Guidebook

The intensive approach was an overwhelming success. The speed at which lives were restored to stability, allowing the parents to work, meant that later health and job crises were avoided, and the setbacks on the road to economic security did not become insurmountable. The children were safely in their parents' new home within 3 weeks of entering the program and are all progressing in school.

Fifteen families' workers are employed and doing well and have surpassed their pre-crisis family income. Most of them completed the entire program in less than a year and met all their obligations. They are able to pay their rent, provide nourishing meals to their children, and maintain the budgets they set. Nine have become entirely self-supporting. Another three need only partial rent support and child-care assistance to maintain a safe and stable home for their family. The final three families will need High Desert CAP's services and also Food Stamps and TANF support until they can complete the program and pass the GED exam next summer.

Appendix B: A Complete, Well-Framed, and Action-Oriented Story of a Responsive CAA

Community Action Supports Local Employers and Their Workers

In many families today, parents need to work full-time or longer to make ends meet. High-quality child care can be difficult to arrange, even when parents have a traditional work schedule. It is even more difficult to obtain good care for children of working parents who work non-traditional hours, such as night shifts and weekends. Finding competent caregivers for infants is especially challenging.

Many customer service representatives in call centers work nontraditional hours. After Modern Financial Services announced it would open a call center and create much-needed jobs in the Valley, Responsive CAA foresaw that workers would quickly run into a major barrier to taking these employment opportunities: very little night or weekend child care was available. Our Executive Director Joe Black looked into the problem, met with Modern Financial's executives, and learned that many of the relatively well-paid call center jobs had few applicants. However, RCAA staff knew many low-wage working parents who were seeking full-time jobs with benefits, but they needed safe child care.

Modern Financial's leaders agreed that it needed local partners who could help develop these essential services for its anticipated workforce, and RCAA offered to lead the initiative. RCAA's Director and our Development Director Mary Jones visited with every funder and corporate employer in the county. They won commitments that local companies would work together to expand both community based child care facilities and the local workforce of trained and licensed child-care providers.

RCAA's leaders organized a local Leadership Working Group to implement the Valley Children's Center project: it included local business owners, child-care providers, two members of the County Council, Modern Financial, and two foundation representatives. Together they agreed to build a child-care center right in the Modern Financial Commercial Park but to design its capacity so it could serve workers in many local enterprises.

RCAA provided the CSBG-funded community organizing staff that recruited the group and provided its administrative support. RCAA also funded the planner who coordinated the early financial planning, the Center design phase, and the early development stages. One year and eight days after their first meeting, the members of the Leadership Working Group joined parents and representatives of Modern Financial Services and all our County Commissioners for the ribbon-cutting ceremony that opened the beautiful new child care center. RCAA agreed with the Leadership Group's request to be responsible for managing the facility, coordinating the programs and activities that enrich children's time at the Center, and for arranging continuing professional development of the Center's staff. The Center is open for extended hours and accommodates 80 infants and children at one time. Employees of more than 30 local businesses use the center.

Telling Community Action's Story: A Guidebook

Fees are on a sliding scale which reflects family income levels. RCAA facilitated the agreement among nearly all local employers; signers will contribute in proportion to their lower-paid working parents' use of the center. Then, RCAA's skilled development team identified and coordinated other federal, state, and county resources that support the services.

The parents who work nontraditional hours at the call center usually spend their dinner break with their children, help them with homework, and then go back to work with peace of mind. Of the 80 families using the Center, fifteen include working parents who had formerly been participants in RCAA's workforce development program. Until they secured these positions, they had been unable to work full-time because of their young children's needs. Now their wages and benefits have doubled their income, and thirteen already do not depend on any income support or other programs to care for their young families. The remaining two will soon complete RCAA's Adult Education curriculum and, with their GEDs in hand, also will qualify for higher pay.