

Ethical and effective story-telling in advocacy

This is a reference tool for considering the role that story-telling can play in your advocacy for social change. It builds on a guide included in Rachel Ball's report "[When I Tell My Story I'm in Charge": Ethical and effective storytelling in advocacy](#)'

Why should we include storytelling in our advocacy?

We don't do storytelling because we like the idea of it: we do it because it's strategic. Storytelling is part of our theory of social change. When people gain the confidence to tell their own stories it is transformative for many parts of their lives. Developing a sense of your own power is a necessary foothold of fighting injustice. Through storytelling people become leaders and fighters and they begin to learn how to wield their own power **Purvi Shah, Center for Constitutional Rights (USA)**

To maximise the power of storytelling for change, it should be incorporated into an advocacy strategy that has a clear objective, target and theory of change.

Employed strategically and ethically, storytelling can:

- Empower individuals and communities by recognising their experience, expertise and agency
- Challenge dominant narratives, cut through prejudice and build understanding
- Demonstrate the impact of a program or service on the lives of community members
- Be a foundation for bringing people together, and for motivating and organising people to create social change
- Be a powerful weapon against attempts to dehumanise groups, silence certain voices and exclude people from democratic institutions and processes

How can we strategically include storytelling in our advocacy?

'As soon as I fronted the Minister of Housing, eye to eye, where he could not lie, he could not ignore me' - **Residents Group 3081 member, West Heidelberg**

- **Stories could be included in submissions and correspondence with decision-makers:** Often this has been done in the form of de-identified written case studies. Where possible use direct quotes and audio-visual formats to maximise emotional connection and impact.
- **Consider whether someone may be prepared to tell their story at a parliamentary hearing, a meeting with a decision-maker or at a public event:** This could either be in person or by way of a recording (where appearing in person is not possible or appropriate). For public events, inviting a key decision maker or considering a compelling call to action for the audience to follow the story may be strategic.
- **Consider distributing videos of people telling their stories via social media (e.g to promote a petition, event or crowd-funding initiative):** Consider shorter video edits and your promotion strategy (e.g who is your target audience, what social media do they use, are there online influencers you can reach out to in advance who can help to reach them?).
- **Consider supporting identified community members to tell their stories through traditional and/or online media:** As with social media, a clear sense of your strategy and target audience will help to narrow down which media outlets

you might approach (e.g are you trying to influence a local government process, promote an event, challenge a mainstream media narrative?).

How do we maximise the benefits and minimise the risks of storytelling in advocacy?

- **Ensuring participation of community members** in the development of all aspects of the broader advocacy strategy, including consideration of the risks and benefits, will make storytelling more effective and empowering.
- **Consent for the use of a story should be fully informed and freely given, including in relation to how the story may be used and in what forums:**
 - For example, has consent been given only to use footage of a story at events? Are the story tellers comfortable with content being sent to a key decision maker? Does consent extend to putting the video online and promoted on social media? What about fundraising?
 - Informed consent is usually a process of communicating with a community member who has agreed to tell their story about different uses, making clear that consent can be withdrawn at any time.
 - Language barriers should be explicitly considered. Interpreters and visual examples of the way a story will be used may help.
 - Power dynamics should also be considered: Is the person in a position that will mean they would not feel able to withhold consent?
- **The process of ensuring that consent is fully informed and freely given is likely to differ depending on the context:** Gaining fully informed consent from a young participant in your program will likely require more than a community leader with advocacy experience.

What risks should we consider before embarking on a storytelling project?

Coming here and outing myself has been the end of the road for my drug and alcohol career. In the beginning when I did decide to disclose I was convinced that I was making a fully informed decision, but I guess in hindsight I wasn't

-Jane, Harm Reduction Victoria

- **Potential harm to individuals, their families and communities:** for example, affecting future employment opportunities, exposing people to danger/culturally unsafe environments or their story being taken out of context.
- **The risk that professional advocates/journalists disempower clients and communities by seeking to control the way their stories are told:** For example, introducing a person as a victim where they identify as a survivor, or selectively quoting to fit another agenda.
- **The possibility that focusing on one particular story serves to exclude other voices and perspectives:** For example stories are all about men's experiences or unintentionally reinforce cultural, gender or other stereotypes?
- **Certain professional risks and obligations (including confidentiality) that should be considered** For example, if a story is de-identified to protect privacy, could that person still be identifiable to their community or peers in a way that could be harmful?

For information, including sources and further reading: Julian Cleary, Community Mobilisation Lead at cohealth contact: julian.cleary@cohealth.org.au