



An Evaluation and Sustainability Resource Brief

Narrative and Visual Storytelling: Strategies for Conveying the Impact of Your Reentry Program

Getting the word out about your reentry program—about the people you are serving, the services you are providing, and the impact the program is having—is key to raising public awareness about your program, maintaining engagement among your program partners, and attracting funders. Communication is critical to program sustainability. Yet it can be challenging to convey a program’s results and to reach intended audiences, whether you are targeting clients, members of the community, or decision makers.

You can choose from numerous communications products, including full-length reports, one-pagers, newsletters, and blogs. Similarly, many channels are available to disseminate those products, such as email, websites, and social media platforms. The challenge lies in developing and disseminating products that will grab your audience’s attention and spur them to action. In the era of mass media, online users spend hours a day weeding through crowded email inboxes, skimming social media posts, and browsing other online content. So, to be seen, our work needs to stand out.

This brief offers strategies for breaking through information overload and effectively conveying the benefits of your reentry program to your target audiences. It emphasizes the importance of telling a compelling, consistent story through narrative accounts and visuals.

Knowing Your Audience

STRATEGY 1: Identify the specific audiences you are trying to reach.

Before mapping out a communications plan for your reentry program, consider whom you want to reach. Specifying an intended audience will help you to determine which types of communication products and dissemination channels will be most effective. If your goal is to conduct outreach with potential program participants or wider communities, flyers and posters in public spaces are a good option. By contrast, engaging with funders, policy makers, or elected officials might require a more targeted approach. Communication products that are not tailored to a specific audience can cause confusion and deter potential clients, funders, or members of the community from engaging.

For more information on communications planning, branding, and funding mapping for reentry programs, see the related three-part infographic series developed by the Evaluation and Sustainability Training and Technical Assistance (ES TTA) project:

- [How to Develop a Communications Strategy for Your Reentry Program](#)
- [How to Develop Your Reentry Program Brand](#)
- [How to Develop a Funding Strategy for Your Reentry Program](#)

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“People can’t face facts if they’re looking the wrong way. So, first, we tell them a story.”

—Andy Goodman

author of *Storytelling as a Best Practice* (7th ed., 2015) and *Why Bad Presentations Happen to Good Causes*

For more information on how to use storytelling effectively, see the archived webinar from the ES TTA team, [Storytelling for Reentry Programs: Using the Power of Story to Build Strong Support for Your Program](#).

Communicating Program Impact Through Narrative Storytelling

Storytelling is a powerful means of relaying your reentry program’s impact to the audiences you are trying to reach. Researchers from across the fields of psychology, education, and marketing have found that when information is embedded in a narrative, audiences are more willing to consider and act on the information. Stories are easier to digest, and they can make your program feel relevant to your audience (Sundin et al., 2018). Moreover, studies show that information conveyed through narrative is more memorable than are plain arguments or statements of fact (Kromka & Goodboy, 2019; Sundin et al., 2018; Woodside, 2010).

STRATEGY 2: When developing a communication strategy, think about how you might tell your program’s story.

Effective stories might answer the following questions:

- What circumstances or problems spurred the program’s development? Which actors or agencies were involved?
- What services are you offering and how are they being offered?
- What success stories have you seen? What are some examples of how program services have addressed the initial circumstances or problems for program clients?

A narrative can help frame your message—whether it is a greeting to potential clients or an entreaty to investors—in a way that appeals to your audience’s interests and concerns. For example, a personal account of the problem your program was developed to address can make a convincing case of the need for your program’s services. Stories put a face to issues like poverty, substance use, and homelessness. Moreover, they highlight the shared nature of these issues. A success story or client testimonial can vividly illustrate your program’s benefits to the larger community and to funders.

It is important to note here that stories are, by their very nature, anecdotal. Make sure that any narratives about your program are reflective of larger trends. If preliminary evaluation findings indicate that your program is not reaching its target audience or that services have not resulted in the intended outcomes, stories shared as part of a communications strategy should not suggest otherwise. Your

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goal is to bring what you are seeing on a larger scale (e.g., across program participants or relevant jurisdictions) to life, not to highlight rare instances of success that may be misleading.

Exhibit 1 offers a fictional example of the use of storytelling to convey the larger impact of a reentry program.

Exhibit 1: Sample Story

In 2018, Alex returned home from prison with little more than a bus pass and a printout with instructions for meeting with his parole officer. Lacking the money for a security deposit and without a valid ID to present to a landlord, he became homeless shortly after his release. Recognizing the high rate of homelessness among returning citizens like Alex and the barriers it creates to reentry, several local agencies banded together to develop the *Homeward Bound* program.

Homeward Bound links community members returning home from prison with housing services. With support from an on-staff case worker, Alex was able to obtain a valid license and secure an affordable apartment close to his family. Today, Alex is among the 75% of *Homeward Bound* alumni who have successfully rejoined their communities with no new arrests.

Homeward Bound is working to make sure that returning citizens have what they need to rebuild their lives.

Conveying Program Impact Through Visual Storytelling

Data and graphics can also effectively convey your program's story. A written account (as shown in Exhibit 1) is helpful, but text alone is unlikely to grab your audience's attention when they are skimming through content online.

STRATEGY 3: To demonstrate your program's impact, consider developing visual storytelling products to complement more traditional methods of communication.

Can you use images, pictures, graphs, charts, videos, and so on to convey your message? Examples include infographics, flyers, brochures, video "shorts," and multimedia posts on social media platforms and other websites.

Visual storytelling is not just eye-catching, it is also a highly effective form of communication. By one estimate, visual information is processed 60,000 times

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“Visual storytelling involves the use of graphics, images, pictures, and videos to engage with viewers in an effort to drive emotions, engage intercommunication, and motivate an audience to action.”

—Eric Goodstadt and Sacha Reeb

Manifest content marketing agency, as cited at <https://contentmarketinginstitute.com/2020/03/visual-storytelling-examples/>

faster than text (Media Education Center, n.d.). Products that employ visual storytelling exploit the ease with which our minds digest images. Rather than asking the audience to pause and decode a message embedded in a block of text, visuals announce the takeaway up front.

An infographic or social media post designed to highlight your program’s impact might feature...


- Photographs or videos of your program at work
- Quotes from clients, staff, or partners
- Graphs and charts that visualize your program’s goals or outcomes
- Links to additional information (such as a full technical report on your evaluation findings, program website or social media account, your contact information, and so on)


Exhibit 2 presents a fictional example of how visual storytelling can be used to communicate the benefits of a reentry program.

Exhibit 2:
Sample Infographic


HOMEWARD BOUND REENTRY PROGRAM

Addressing homelessness and unemployment among Denver's returning citizens

60%  of Homeward Bound clients have a **safe place to stay at release**

80%  of Homeward Bound clients are able to obtain a **valid state-issued ID**

"As a case manager at Homeward Bound, I link returning citizens with critical support services, including temporary housing and assistance with identification documents. These supports make a huge difference in the lives of our clients."

 For more information about Homeward Bound, visit our website at www.homewardbounddenver.com

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For more information on graphic design platforms and subscription options, see the fact sheet [Comparing Web-Based Design Software Programs](#).

For tips on how to develop engaging and effective visual communications products, see the related ES TTA webinar, [Using Infographics for Reentry Program Evaluation and Sustainability](#).

Several resources from the ES TTA project provide additional information about using social media platforms for your reentry program:

- Archived webinar on [Leveraging Social Media for Reentry Programs](#)
- Infographics on [How to Build an Effective Social Media Presence](#) and [Choosing a Social Media Platform: Four Popular Options](#)

Designing and Distributing Visual Storytelling Products

STRATEGY 4: Take advantage of free or low-cost design resources available online.

You do not have to be a graphic designer to develop compelling and polished products that tell your program's story. Numerous free or low-cost graphic design platforms are available online. These platforms allow users to easily design and export infographics, flyers, brochures, and multimedia social media posts, among other products. Some platform subscriptions give users access to customizable templates as well as interactive features (such as embedding videos or polls).

STRATEGY 5: Disseminate communication products through the channels that are most likely to reach your target audiences.

Circulating visual storytelling products online is a snap. These products can be shared via email, websites, or social media platforms. The advantage of these channels over more traditional modes of communication is the broad reach they can have. Infographics posted on your program's Facebook or Twitter account may be shared far beyond your immediate network. Email is a powerful and mobile-friendly way to circulate longer products like newsletters that drive your audience to your program's website or other online accounts. Some graphic design platforms like Venngage allow users to publish their designs on the platform itself and circulate using a hyperlink. If your audience is easiest to reach offline, your program can disseminate visual storytelling products in hard-copy form; flyers, brochures, and postcards can be printed out and mailed or posted in public spaces.

Conclusion: Making a Lasting Impact Using Narrative and Visual Storytelling

The strategies presented in this brief can help your reentry program raise its profile to your intended audiences. Communicating the impact of your reentry program can be a challenging endeavor, especially when your audience is wading through hundreds of digital dispatches a day. Narrative and visual storytelling are low-cost, high-impact ways of overcoming information overload and engaging with your target audiences, whether they be potential clients, policy makers, funders, or broader communities. Incorporating narrative and visual storytelling products into communications plans can help to put your program on the map and ensure that you have the resources needed to support successful reentry for years to come:

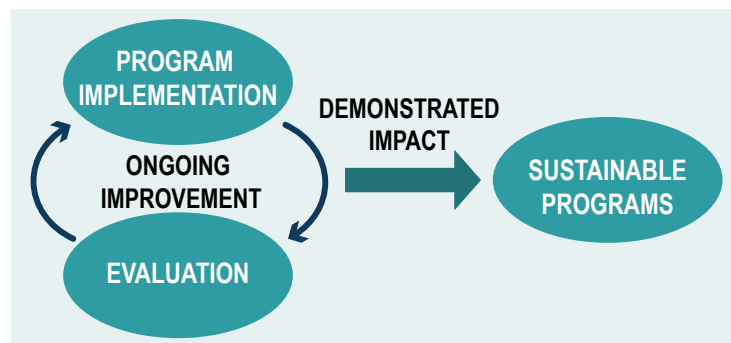
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The Evaluation and Sustainability Training and Technical Assistance Project

The Evaluation and Sustainability Training and Technical Assistance (ES TTA) Project supports Second Chance Act (SCA) grantees in conducting more rigorous evaluations that lead to data-driven program improvement and demonstrated impact and that support programs' long-term sustainability. For more information about the project, contact ESTTA@rti.org.



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