



Telling It Our Way

A Media Strategy Kit for Economic Justice Advocates

Voices for the Silenced
a project of We Interrupt This Message

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Voices for the Silenced is a project of We Interrupt This Message, a national media training and strategy center. Voices works with five New York City welfare rights organizations to amplify the voices of grassroots welfare rights activists and advocates in the media debate about welfare reform.

Voices for the Silenced Project Partners:

CAAAV, Organizing Asian Communities
Community Voices Heard
FUREE, A Project of the Fifth Avenue Committee
Make the Road By Walking
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OVERVIEW

MEDIA STRATEGY KIT FOR ECONOMIC JUSTICE ADVOCATES

“Welfare reform’s great success.” “Culture of poverty.” These and other messages in the media are in stark contrast with the reality that we as people in the welfare system, activists and others who care have come to know. What is the extent of the differences between spin and reality? And most importantly, what can we do to turn things around?

Although media is no substitute for base building and community organizing, it does play an important role in setting the public agenda, affecting public perceptions and, as a result, determining public policy. Therefore, organizations committed to addressing problems related to welfare reform cannot afford to ignore it.

This kit is designed to help those working to advance progressive welfare policies to work effectively with news media. It begins with an overview of the “framing terrain” or how we – and our opposition – are currently framing welfare issues. We offer some ideas for effective framing strategies as well as some tips on gaining access to media. The latter half of this toolkit is designed to share some tools for effective media planning and successful implementation.

UNDERSTANDING THE FRAMING TERRAIN

1

HOW WELFARE IS FRAMED

This overview of welfare coverage is based on an in-depth analysis of news coverage of welfare conducted by We Interrupt This Message for the Grass Roots Innovative Policy Program (GRIPP) and research conducted through our Voices For the Silenced project in NYC.

The GRIPP research was conducted by We Interrupt This Message in 1999 and looked at six months of national and regional welfare coverage following the comprehensive overhaul of welfare known as welfare “reform” and the pronouncements by welfare departments across the country of its success. As part of that analysis we also examined a year of coverage in four cities with innovative welfare rights organizing or advocacy: New York, San Francisco, Chicago, and Boise, Idaho. We examined messages by supporters of welfare repeal and by welfare rights and economic justice advocates to identify: which messages were most effective for both sides, models of media success, and opportunities for welfare rights groups.

In Voices (a project working to build media capacity in five welfare organizing groups in New York City) we analyzed six months of welfare coverage in *The New York Times*, *Hoy* and *El Diario - La Prensa*, to see what had changed since the GRIPP study and the implications for work around TANF reauthorization.

Again and again, welfare repeal was sold as a “success” and we never countered effectively. When repeal first hit the media, our opposition was ready with powerful stories. They echoed the same message and had a coordinated strategy. As a result, they dominated the coverage with smiling former welfare recipients thrilled with their new jobs and independence.

They gauged success by the number of people leaving the rolls. Our opponents used terms like “dependency” and “responsibility” constantly (e.g., “It’s like an onion we keep peeling off and we’ve gotten to the heart of dependency.”) There was remarkable consistency of message between welfare department heads, politicians supporting welfare repeal from both parties, and even low-level welfare department employees. Those words penetrated to the point where many reporters and even some welfare recipients use them. By echoing their message that welfare reform is “bringing people out of dependency,” our opponents portrayed welfare repeal as more successful and kinder to recipients than grants and services.

STEREOTYPES FORM THE BASIS OF COVERAGE

There are many assumptions woven through media coverage for the first six months of 2001 that repeat themselves and serve to fuel stereotypes about people receiving welfare and the “success” of welfare reform. These assumptions are stated rather than challenged and, hence, passed off as “fact.” The *Times*, like other newspapers we reviewed, appeared to mostly repeat stereotypical assumptions of the Right without any independent analysis. Some examples of these assumptions:

Good Intentions

When welfare reform was passed in 1996, policymakers and politicians purported to have the well being of America’s poor as their paramount concern in “ending welfare as we know it.” These good intentions behind welfare reform basically declared that it happened for the betterment of poor people:

- To push welfare recipients to work and get an “earned” income
- To push welfare recipients to self sufficiency
- To provide more morally sound, two-parent homes for children

While there may have been some element of genuine concern for the poor in TANF legislation, the *Times* accepts this “well intended” reform with no consideration or analysis given to the other reasons for welfare reform. In the time period we studied for 2001, not one single article explored, even in the briefest form, any of the following reasons welfare repeal:

- Larger economic interests that benefit the wealthy
- The moral agenda of the religious right
- The need to fill extremely low paying, menial jobs

It is important that the public be exposed to reasons why the harsh reform took place, especially in this crucial period leading up to the reauthorization of the legislation. Poverty levels in America have not decreased since 1996, yet the welfare rolls have. There is no exploration of how people no longer receiving welfare are currently living. Intentions are important when convincing constituencies to look favorably on legislative changes. While much of the 2001 coverage acknowledges that welfare reform is harsh, it also implies that it is for the best of the people receiving welfare.

Receiving Welfare Is a Career

The overwhelming majority of the news coverage about public assistance recipients assumed them to be lifers. There was no addressing the diverse reasons people reach out to ask for assistance, nor was there coverage of recipients who sought other paths for themselves (such as education and training) to move beyond welfare. With the weighty assumption that all people receiving welfare were raised to believe that public assistance would be their career – to support them for the rest of their lives – readers were not exposed to people who cannot, for a variety of reasons, work and support themselves. There was no coverage of those so deep in poverty that it may take generations to find self-sufficiency. Nor was there coverage of the many men, women and children who use welfare as a stepping stone – one that must not be timed out after five years, but rather be kept in place to feed and clothe them for as long as they need food and clothing.

A Culture of Receiving Handouts

The stereotype perpetuated by the welfare career assumption is that all welfare recipients are lazy and do not want to work, therefore do not deserve assistance. With the assumption that all welfare recipients would receive welfare for life given the chance, media coverage in 2001 also assumed that recipients functioned in a culture of take-take-take, while lacking the work ethic to earn their keep. This culture of receiving handouts is painted as a moral deficiency, assuming that people who receive welfare will spend their lives oscillating between dependency on the government, dependency on their parents, or dependency on charities. Once a receiver of handouts, always a receiver of handouts.

Work Is the Way Forward

When the authors of the TANF legislation attempted to end welfare, they assumed that all people who had the need for welfare could meet that need by working. The assumption that work is the way forward negates that the only work open to many poor people is menial and incredibly low paying. The things politicians and public policy analysts receive from their work – good pay, challenging and stimulating work environment, the opportunity to rise and progress, etc. – people rele-

gated to menial work will never have. Media coverage did not question this difference nor explore whether work, any work, would be stimulus for people to move off welfare. Instead, news coverage was limited to describing the programs intended to help get people into work (evaluating the success of these programs) and the services needed by people to be able to move into work (childcare, transportation, healthcare etc.).

Funny Numbers

The impression of success was also created by a series of Governor and state welfare department studies released in different states claiming welfare reform's success. The messages in each state were remarkably similar (media geeks call this "echo effect"). For example:

"Time limits have obviously had a positive influence in encouraging welfare recipients to enter the workforce and begin the road to self-sufficiency for themselves and their children."

Economic justice advocates often did not have a coherent message.

There were very few profiles of people facing severe hardship due to the policy changes. For example, in both 1996(7) and 2001 coverage of welfare, we found no profiles of people made homeless by welfare repeal policies. Early on, welfare rights advocates rarely offered messages that challenged the "individual responsibility" framework, and by 2001 there was no substantial coverage of welfare rights advocates to gauge the success of their messages. In both cases, those that did get quoted often did not do it well. As a result, even sympathetic stories did not clearly illustrate the government's responsibility in poverty. Advocates' role is to insert the question, "What was it that government did or should have done?" Every message should clearly name an institution that is accountable and offer a solution.

There were some exceptions. In Idaho, Montana and Washington, advocates were able to highlight government abuse of clients in the system by focusing on clients unnecessarily turned away from food, shelter and benefits. More on that in What's Working.

Ending Welfare = Ending Poverty?

Government solutions trump community generated solutions.

When we studied six months of 2001 *New York Times* coverage of welfare, out of 24 articles only six articles equated rising out of poverty as the measurement to gauge the success of welfare reform. If the good intentions of moving people into work are to be believed, then it must also be said that the reason for ending welfare as we know it is to end poverty in America. However, not one article examined in any depth the critical question: What does it take to truly move out of poverty?

Welfare recipients and advocates must always talk about the solutions that they know will work for their community. If communities most directly affected by poverty are not constantly talking about what works and solutions that will truly move them out of poverty, then the debate is as good as conceded to the other side.

RACIALIZING WELFARE

Race continued to be a major factor in welfare coverage but in new ways

Most mainstream welfare coverage avoided dealing with race directly. It examined racial disparities but not racial discrimination. One notable exception is a series of articles in *The New York Times* (DeParle, 1999) that looked at racial disparities among clients leaving welfare for jobs. Whites, they found, were able to leave welfare for jobs more quickly than African Americans or Latinos. This series, and the few similar articles that followed, failed to mention job discrimination or racism as a possible reason for these disparities and focused, instead, on individual factors or cultural deficiencies.

In general, few economic justice advocates mentioned discrimination. However, those that did made remarkable strides in both gaining coverage and advancing policies that helped prevent bias in social service delivery. The discrimination frame was also very powerful for groups working in immigrant communities, when they chose to use it. For the most part though, stories dealing with immigrants usually didn't look at race and they didn't make clear which immigrants were being targeted, or whether there was some racial and/or ethnic aspect to the targeting. It was up to advocates to draw those distinctions. And some did with varying degrees of success.

New stereotypes rooted in the old ones

For decades, African Americans comprised the dominant image of welfare recipients. Stereotypes ranged from the lazy, shiftless lounge-about to the shifty, ruthless welfare queen. Although welfare reform coverage has done little to erode these deeply held racial stereotypes, two new ones have surfaced. Each are still embedded in society's largely racialized view of intelligence and morality.

The first, the happy former recipient thrilled with their new job, swearing they would "never go back," helped put a comforting face to the message of welfare repeal's success. It also unearthed the most expansive portrayal of whites on welfare ever. By playing on assumptions of white competency and morality, opponents could paint a palatable picture of why welfare reform was working so well for those with "the cultural and motivational resources" to succeed. The second stereotype was applied to those who did not "succeed." A special term was drawn out of the language of criminal justice: they were "hard core" cases (versus easier to serve). These were almost always people of color – usually African American or Latino – and were often characterized as having substance abuse, mental and/or emotional problems. "Cultural" barriers were often cited. In *The New York Times* sources talked about a lack of work ethic and generations of despair.

Recent policy proposals to foist marriage education and marriage incentives on benefit recipients as a condition for benefits is another example of how the cultural frame is playing out. One example of an effective advocate counter on marriage policies:

"The mission of welfare reform should be to reduce poverty and help people achieve economic independence," said Laurie Rubiner of the National Partnership for Women & Families, "not to engage in social engineering or discrimination against families that don't meet a particular ideal."

WHAT'S WORKING

WHAT WORKS: THE SUM UP

- ◆ Document problems and move stories of institutional abuse, neglect and mismanagement
- ◆ Elevate issues of bias and discrimination
- ◆ Clear messages that make institutional responsibility clear
- ◆ Offer clear and easy-to-understand alternatives and solutions
- ◆ Play up contradictions in opponents' position
- ◆ Bring in the larger economic context
- ◆ Look for how cutbacks are affecting communities in recession

STORIES OF ABUSE

Stories that showed old people losing aid were particularly effective, regardless of race, gender or immigration status. When these stories were clear about government responsibility, they quite effectively leveraged widely held suspicion of bureaucrats to bring home a message of government neglect and mismanagement. In Washington and Oregon, groups exposed the impact of food stamp policies that automatically “de-certified” food stamp recipients so that they were forced to re-apply at regular intervals even if their status had not changed. The coalitions focused on how these government policies were causing people to go hungry unnecessarily and identified a number of affected clients and trained them to articulate what was going on in ways that demonstrated government culpability. New York City groups also did well in 2000 and 2001 in getting media coverage around issues of discrimination in welfare centers against non-English speaking recipients and the failure of the city to implement a transitional jobs bill.

CASUALTIES OF WELFARE REPEAL

For the most part, these stories appeared in local media where reporters on the local level did a much better job of covering the casualties of welfare repeal. Smart advocates worked hard to build relationships, gather their own local data, and challenge prevailing messages that welfare repeal was working. In Montana, Working for Equality and Economic Liberation (WEEL) provides one example. Advocates effectively used the media to expose contradictions in welfare policy by slamming the welfare department's use of sanctions as counter to the Department's stated goal of moving families out of economic dependence.

“If they put someone in such a dire crisis that they lose their housing... they're making it even harder for families to become self-sufficient and move out of poverty.”

—Raquel Castellanos, WEEL

EXTREME PRACTICES

Some national coverage helped us, especially stories that highlighted extreme practices by social service agencies. However, economic justice advocates' failure to speak in a coordinated voice, go on the offensive, and target and attack the institutions responsible, has meant we have not made the most of even these opportunities.

DOCUMENTING BIAS AND DISCRIMINATION

Although media would often ignore possible discrimination in their own investigations, they were willing to publish data by advocates that exposed such bias and pointed fingers. In Idaho, the Idaho Community Action Network (ICAN) uncovered evidence of discrimination against Latino clients and applicants – lack of translators; intrusive questions by eligibility and caseworkers; requirements of proof of citizenship; and added processing time. In addition to bias, ICAN found that the state's application process overall was much more involved than in most states. They leveraged organizing and media to force the state to standardize application procedures and reduce the written application form from twelve to four pages.

BARRIERS TO WORK

Campaigns on transportation equity were one of the few areas where barriers to work were explored. In California, Illinois, and Indiana local groups were able to garner mostly local press on racial equity issues in public transportation. Many of these groups conducted their own surveys, turned public hearings into media events, and highlighted disparities in public spending in ways that exposed white, suburban privilege. In stark contrast, access to quality childcare, discrimination (race or gender), access to higher education, and other barriers to work received short shrift.

EXTREME POLICIES

Although coverage of workfare was largely positive, advocates were able to attract more critical coverage by highlighting more extreme policies and, in some cases, exposing the ethical issues involved in government use of workfare labor. In New York, advocates were able to get media exposure of former Mayor Guiliani's attempt to force people with disabilities to work for benefits. In San Francisco, People Organized to Win Employment Rights' (POWER) attack on city government was effective at shifting the focus of stories away from whether or not clients should work for benefits to whether the city should benefit from exploiting workfare labor. POWER found that if the city paid workfare workers the prevailing wage for their public work, they would no longer be poor.

“[POWER staff Ilana] Berger maintains the City is not hiring workfare participants since they already provide cheap labor. The city saved about \$30 million a year using workfare labor... in city employee positions.”

FINAL THOUGHTS

Track how the diminished benefits and infrastructure is affecting communities. Are there stores closing? People evicted? Track these stories and identify good interviewees and examples to help illustrate the casualties of welfare repeal in ways that point the finger back to policy. Effective messages on our side track the real side effects of welfare repeal and tie these stories of tragedy to government neglect and abuse. They challenge the data and even develop independent data and evidence that counters opponents' claims of compassion and success. It's also important to make the links between welfare repeal and related issues of job discrimination, transportation equity and the availability of affordable, quality childcare. Our side must consistently put out our own community solutions to poverty and by doing so, we help build a broader base for a more comprehensive framework for economic justice.

Economic justice advocates need a common theme. While our opponents are able to echo and reinforce each other with themes like "getting people out of dependency," economic justice advocates haven't quite gotten ourselves coordinated. With reauthorization coming up, a coordinated strategy is critical. How do we begin? First, we back the lens up, plot some long-term goals and map the steps between "here" and "there" – toward a coordinated media strategy for victory.

TOWARD A COORDINATED MEDIA STRATEGY

A media strategy is an overall plan that takes into account how you want the terrain – discourse, power balance, etc. – to change, and the images, data or evidence, personalities, ideas, stories and values that you can leverage to make that change occur. Framing is how you pull all those variables together to cut your issue and its accompanying message. It is like a picture composed in a frame. Too often, we reduce our media strategy down to what we say into the microphone. So, we tend to focus the discussion on what words we think might work. As in: “Let’s talk about working families, yeah, that works.” This is not a strategy, this is a soundbite that works for the moment.

Let’s do what they do. That works right? No. Given this understanding, one would not, for example, talk about family values because the right is winning with this frame. You start with where you really want to go and plot the path along the way. A good media strategy strikes the balance between taking advantage of short-term opportunities and the long-term goal. It should get you where you want to go with a minimum of detours. Focus on the long term and persistence in the face of opposition are key: changing public discourse takes awhile.

WHAT ARE OUR LONG-TERM GOALS?

Public support for more progressive public policy? Acceptance of mother work as deserving wages? Universal income support? Access to education and training for all? All jobs earn a living wage? Knowing the long-term goals helps make strategy development a lot easier.

MESSAGES VERSUS SOUNDBITES

For the sake of this kit, a message is not a soundbite but an overarching theme one tries to communicate through soundbites. For example, a soundbite might be, “We don’t have to worry about the glass ceiling. By refusing us access to education, the Governor is keeping poor moms in the cellar – low wages and no future.” The message, in this case, is that the state should allow education as work credit if they want people to move from welfare to real work. The underlying values communicated are big guy versus little guy, us versus them, family, fairness, education as an important factor in success. All these link with current concerns about fairness to women in the workplace.

EFFECTIVE MESSAGES

Messages that affect you emotionally are good for our side. Focus on the institutional roots of the issue and offer concrete, understandable solutions. For example, organizers working in public housing wanted to shift public perceptions of responsibility for the condition of their housing project from the tenants to the city housing authority. Their message was that their housing authority should be held to the same standards as any other landlord in the city. The message helped reframe the debate from individual blame (bad tenants) to an institution that should be accountable to the residents. People forget that public housing has landlords who rarely act responsibly. Further, if they succumb to the traditional media approach of having a few mothers tell sad stories of life in the projects, it wouldn’t contradict their campaign to force changes at the housing authority.

IDENTIFYING META FRAMES

Of course, messages don't occur in a vacuum. They are heard, understood and interpreted within a context of meta frames – contextual frames that are rooted in the history of an issue and our beliefs about them over time. Here are some key meta frames that economic justice advocates must keep in mind.

STRUCTURAL OR SYSTEMIC UNDERSTANDING OF POVERTY

When people have a structural or systemic understanding of poverty, they will support initiatives to address poverty. Much of the drop in support for welfare benefits coincides with a drop in the belief that poverty is systemic. (Instead, people believe poverty is the result of individual failing.) It's no coincidence that welfare and other similar social programs were catalyzed by the "Great Depression." The Depression taught many the cruelties of the market and the millions with direct experience of its inadequacies knew that poverty was more than individual failing. The American memory is fading. Still, support for these programs are highest among those with a structural or systemic understanding of poverty and the economy. Support also goes up among the general population when there are certain economic "events" (i.e., awareness of inflation in the late 1970s and early '80s, local plant shutdowns, etc.) that remind people of the systemic economic problems. Now that even the government and media pundits are declaring a recession, we should drive home the importance of income support without time limits given this economic context.

DESERVEDNESS

When fears of fraud, waste, ineffectiveness, or allocating money to the "undeserving" are allayed, support increases. What the Right understands is that, on the whole, most people want to help others in need. When respondents are comfortable with the "deservedness" of the recipients, support increases dramatically. For example, efforts to "feed the hungry" are much more likely to have public support than the food stamp program. Although food stamps are an important source of food for the poor, it has been tarnished as a wasteful government program by our opposition.

OFFERING UNDERSTANDABLE SOLUTIONS

Most people have become cynical about whether there is anything much they can do. By extorting the sacred work ethic as well as national fears of "being taken advantage of" by the undeserving poor, the right has managed to effectively smear most social programs. Still, the polls (and other research) show that if you have a concrete initiative that easily understood and can be "proven" effective, people will tend to support it. Bottom line: Talking about the problem is much less important than offering understandable solutions. Or put another way, concrete action is more important than education (though both are necessary).

FOCUS ON STRUCTURAL AND INSTITUTIONAL CAUSES

Rugged Individualism and triumphant individual frames are not good for our side. It is extremely seductive, then, to figure out how to make our issues “soft and cuddly.” Throw up pictures of adorable children, hard-working moms trying to get by, etc. These just reinforce the opposition. Individualistic values (framed as individual responsibility) are strongly correlated with opposition to anti-poverty initiatives. The stronger a person holds these values, the more likely they are to oppose any public initiative to address poverty or other social issues. It doesn’t help for us to reinforce these frames with triumphant individual stories of our own. We’ve got to be consistent in our telling of the structural and institutional roots of these problems as a foundation for why we are advocating institution-based solutions.

RACIST ATTITUDES AND ANTI-POOR ATTITUDES ARE BEDFELLOWS

Avoiding the race question doesn’t help. It hurts. There is a reason why people of color are over-represented at the bottom of the income scale. If we don’t explain it, then we abdicate the explanation to the other side. And you know what they’ll infer: culture of poverty, laziness, inferiority, lack of role models, poor family structure, and so on. The Right literally uses people of color (especially African Americans and Latinos) as poverty mascots to reinforce attitudes about the poor by leveraging racist stereotypes on their behalf. We often try to counter by finding white faces to illustrate our stories. That helps a little in the short term but without a long-term strategy to bring people toward a structural understanding of race and the economy, we won’t get far.

LINK PUBLIC DISTRUST OF CORPORATIONS WITH PUBLIC POLICY

Although many people think the market is the best system we can hope for, they believe corporations have too much power. The Preamble Collaborative and others have documented deep anti-corporate sentiment. It seems to have limitations. For example, a lot of people seem to think CEO’s outrageous salaries are “earned” through their business acumen. Still, a majority of respondents indicate that corporations need more regulations and they should do more to provide good, stable jobs. This affords us some great opportunities, especially if we can link mistrust of corporations with public policy that ensures investment in people and not just companies. Given the current emphasis on economic stimulus as aid for corporations, making these links will be even more critical.

A WORD ON MEDIA WORK POST 9-11

As the nation comes to grips with these tragic events, it's understandable that a significant chunk of media resources will be devoted to these and related issues for some time. Unfortunately, little coverage has focused on the impact of these events on low-income people. Further, anti-immigrant policies, like the administrative rule-making that eliminated federal mandates for language rights for social service clients, are on the rise. Advocates should take every opportunity to help others understand the importance of economic justice and liberty for everyone living in the U.S.

Now it's your turn. You can use the following tipsheets and templates to develop your own organizational strategy.

TOOLS

TO SHAPE THE TERRAIN

2

MEDIA PLANNING

1 Define 1-3 goals for a media plan to support during the year.

- ◆ For example, a new city council ordinance, new legislation to be introduced, or a new civic accord reached with a local employer
- ◆ In general the media plan will support only one goal at a time

2 Define audiences for each goal.

- ◆ For example, city council members, state legislators, the local employer

3 Frame the debate and script messages for each goal and audience.

4 Identify news media where you will get your message out (we are assuming here you are not placing paid ads or using direct mail).

- ◆ News media
 - › news stories
 - › op-eds
 - › editorials
 - › letter to the editors
 - › public service announcements etc.

5 Prepare presentation materials/press packets for each issue/goal.

- ◆ Issue briefs
 - › Fact sheets
 - › Talking points
 - › Photos

6 Identify and create news opportunities to carry a message.

- ◆ Create the news event
 - › this can take no time if the news is entirely generated by non-media personnel
 - › up to 2 weeks for a “constructed” event
- ◆ Prepare media lists, match outlets to audience
 - › can take several days depending on state of current list
- ◆ Write press releases
 - › usually will take several days
 - › have ready a week in advance, 2 weeks if it is a study
 - › embargo and mail studies to media a week in advance of release date to give them a chance to review
- ◆ Fax/mail press releases
 - › on day before news release, this can take a whole day/evening.
- ◆ Identify and train spokespeople
 - › couple days before news release
- ◆ Prepare talking points and soundbites
- ◆ Call media, pitch stories
 - › intensive for several days, then ongoing for 2-3 weeks
- ◆ Set up interviews
 - › intensive for several days

7 Piggyback on breaking news stories.

- ◆ Write press releases
- ◆ Fax/mail press releases on the day the story breaks, or a day or two later if it's a really big story
- ◆ Call media

8 Bundle stories to move news stories with your messages into bigger papers, radio, TV.

- ◆ Fax/mail clips (at least three) from local media covering your story with your press release to larger news outlets

9 Place speakers on talk shows.

- ◆ Letter to producers
- ◆ Calls to producers

10 Identify and pitch photo opportunities.

11 Prepare Op-Ed and Letter to the Editor campaigns as opportunities present.

- ◆ Make follow up calls to make sure they were received and read
- ◆ Should be submitted immediately after a news story breaks

12 Identify and pitch feature stories to media.

13 Offer expert commentary to media.

- ◆ Prepare short presentation of your qualifications as an expert
- ◆ Write cover letter
- ◆ Print and deliver rolodex cards bearing name, phone number, areas of expertise, etc.

14 Meet with editorial boards.

- ◆ Most likely done in conjunction with other groups
- ◆ Letters and phone calls to request meeting

15 Monitor media.

- ◆ Read newspapers, watch, and listen to TV and radio news shows targeted at your audiences
- ◆ Get to know which reporters report your issue, their special interests and how well they cover it

16 Build and maintain relationships with reporters.

- ◆ Respond to requests for information and interviews
- ◆ Mail and fax information to reporters regularly

17 Maintain echo effect.

- ◆ Make sure that all efforts focused on one target are using the same message
- ◆ Whenever possible use a common message with allies

CONTROLLING THE TERMS OF DEBATE IN AN INTERVIEW

DON'T ANSWER THE QUESTION, DELIVER YOUR MESSAGE

- ◆ **Answer all questions with one of three points.** Have three soundbites covering three points (no more!) written out on paper in front of you. Alternate and repeat variations of those soundbites no matter what the question is. This takes practice! Most of the time only one sentence from an entire interview will make it into the final story. This is the only way you can make sure that the one sentence chosen is an appropriate one. In a live interview use the extra time to relate anecdotes or examples to illustrate each of the three points.
- ◆ **Know everything you will say and everything you won't say before the interview begins.**
- ◆ **Avoid saying anything that can be taken out of context.** Never say “Yes, but...” or “No, but...” For instance if someone responds to a hostile question with, “This is true but it should be seen in the light of...” the reporter can paraphrase the statement as a confirmation.
- ◆ **Practice or role-play the interview ahead of time.**
- ◆ **Defer questions you are not prepared to answer.** If you understand the question and know the “answer” but are not prepared with a good response, don't answer it. Defer it until you can think about it.

When asked a hard or offensive question by a journalist, or a question that does not relate to what you want to speak to the media about, remember you do not need to answer the question. Some suggested phrases helpful in diverting from the question asked to the answer you want to give are:

- What is really important about this issue that people need to understand is...
- The reason I am here today is...
- I think you would find it interesting to know that my community thinks...
- This issue is really about...
- We think people would be interested to know that...

QUESTIONS MOST OFTEN ASKED OF WELFARE RECIPIENTS

Practice. Remember to stay focused on the institutional issues and your three main points. Role-play with others so you can comfortably handle these often rude and insensitive questions.

Do you think it is fair for taxpayers to have to support you while you stay at home?

Why did you not finish school?

Do you think the system is too easy? Most people dropping out of school can become dependent on welfare.

Did you drop out of school because you did not have a father figure around?

How come you have time to make children, but you don't have time to get a job?

**Why do you have so many kids? Where is the father?
How many fathers are there?**

Don't you think your situation would be a little easier if you had a husband?

Tell about your personal situation of why you are receiving public assistance?

How many years have you been on welfare?

Have you ever worked in your life?

**If the system is so bad, why do you stay in it?
Why don't you go and look for work?**

When your benefits get cut off will this make you go and look for work?

If you are not working, what impedes you from working?

Why are you not working? Don't you think everyone should have to work to earn their benefits?

Shouldn't you begin to take responsibility for yourself and family at some point?

PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE ECONOMIC JUSTICE MESSAGES

GO ON THE OFFENSIVE

When we pro-actively attack, our opponents respond in a disorganized fashion, often without a great message. Messages about how these jobs not only don't pay enough to lift people out of poverty, but actually trap people into it, work well. When economic justice advocates have directly targeted an institution and held it accountable for unfair and counterproductive policies and used simple personal anecdotes to illustrate the problem the stories have been powerful. Demonstrate how city or state governments have profited off these draconian policies. For example:

“The city saved \$40 million last year using workfare labor in city employee positions. And now the city refuses to hire these same workers, denying them jobs that would help pull them out of poverty, so it can keep making money off them.”

BACK UP THE LENS TO PORTRAY ECONOMIC CONTEXT

Poverty does not just fall out of the sky. It is part and parcel of the larger economic conditions. Use state data and reports from progressive economic policy institutions that monitor joblessness, the health of local industries, and other key factors in your local economy. Help people understand that poverty is more about economic conditions than character failings. WEEL in Montana provides a great example. They link hard times in their local extracting industries (a key economic staple in Montana) to the need for better social policies.

CREATE PICTURES

Economic justice advocates win when we offer stories that counter the success stories: people sanctioned for trivial things; mothers facing rising housing and transportation costs; people forced out of educational programs that would have paid them triple what the job they were forced to take pays.

REPEAT A COMMON THEME WITH ALLIES

We know what supporters of welfare cuts are saying because they are all saying the same thing. Whether they are talking about time limits or workfare requirements they echo one main theme at a time such as “getting people out of dependency and into self-sufficiency.” In this way they have created a common theme or image for a host of welfare repeal policies. We can do this too.

BREAK DOWN THE COSTS

When we actually break down the cost of necessities like transportation, rent, food, and childcare, then compare it to what folks are getting for welfare and post-welfare jobs, it is effective. However, we rarely do this.

DRAW ATTENTION TO STUDIES THAT SHOW WHAT'S REALLY GOING ON

Studies that show what is happening to people who disappear off the rolls, how many people are losing benefits because of sanctions, and other specific outcomes of welfare repeal policies result in good coverage. We need more of them and we need more national studies.

POINT FINGERS

Hold someone accountable. Generally, messages need to be more aggressive and attacking.

TALK ABOUT THE MONEY

The numbers are on our side here and we have let them only mention the numbers that most benefit them. Break them down the way that makes your argument strongest. Never talk in terms of dollars per hour. Talk in terms of yearly salary – it makes clear how little it is. Everyone has an idea of how much it costs to survive per year, but few folks can do hourly calculations in their head.

Talk about how little the post-welfare jobs pay. Compare it to the poverty line if that helps you (it is usually ridiculously low). Mention the dollar amount of the benefits if it helps (break it down per child if that makes the number look even smaller or compare it to transportation or childcare costs). Break down a mom's budget. Link transportation and time away from kids and child care costs. In some cases "the innovative transportation solution" cost former recipients between \$3 and \$6 each way when folks were only making \$5-something per hour. So, that's roughly two pre-tax hours of their day.

SHAPE THE NUMBER DEBATE

Don't let them shape it. Polls show most people drastically overestimate the proportion of welfare in state and federal budgets. They also overestimate the amount of money recipients are paid.

TALK ABOUT BIAS AND UNFAIRNESS

Be clear but speak in terms of values.

“Our members face racism and discrimination in jobs, public transportation and the welfare department itself, which makes getting work harder. The welfare department should focus on demolishing these obstacles to jobs.”

The Idaho Community Action Network received good coverage of their report on the welfare department denying low-income children of color access to health insurance:

“We believe working families are being kept out of the system by the Department of Health and Welfare’s ill-conceived and discriminatory policies. Eligible children, particularly children of color, are being denied access to Children’s Health Insurance Program.”

Offer evidence or proof of bias and discrimination. Mention the most outrageous example of racism so that people can see for themselves that it is racist rather than having to take your word for it.

MAKE COMPARISONS THAT MAKE CLEAR POLICY PRIORITIES

“St. Luke’s Hospital made almost \$20 million in profits in 1996 but refused to fund the Primary Care Consortium to provide health care for 4,000 poor uninsured families.”

—Idaho Citizens Alliance

“The city council spent over \$30 million on tax breaks to corporations last year, yet try to deny workfare workers minimum wages.”

CHALLENGE OUR OPPONENTS’ LIES DIRECTLY

Many of our opponents’ most damaging messages are just inaccurate assertions that go unchallenged. Eventually people take them as fact. Advocates need a “no empty chair” policy that ensures that no discussion of welfare or other economic justice issues occurs without representation from progressive voices.

HOW TO PITCH STORIES TO THE PRESS

STRATEGIZE BEFOREHAND: THINK LIKE A REPORTER

Reporters and editors are interested in stories rather than issues. Think about how you can turn your issue into a story. What are some story elements: good guys and bad guys, plot, controversy, tension and resolution? How do larger social forces shape people's personal experiences? What are symbols, metaphors and/or visuals that give your story meaning and make powerful images for cameras?

FIND THE NEWS HOOK

Besides all its story elements, what makes your story newsworthy? The more elements of news worthiness the better chances it will be covered. Assess the timeliness of your story. How is it relevant today? Does it relate to other news? Recent reports on local economic downturn? Disaster rebuild?

LOOK FOR PIGGY BACKING OPPORTUNITIES

Every time there is an article on welfare policy (i.e. approaching time limits, etc.), business policy, education, childcare, or issues women face in the workplace, it is an opportunity to get your message into the news. Since what's in the news is already considered news to reporters, you can use it as a hook to push your message and the policy for which your organization is advocating or organizing.

Link welfare stories to labor, employment health and "family/women's" reporting. Pitch economic justice stories to labor, health and safety, family and business reporters and columnists as well as city hall reporters. Raising issues of employment discrimination and lack of protections in the marketplace for "recipients" may put a fresh spin on stories and get you "in" with reporters from other sections of the paper.

FRAME FOR INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

As an advocate always frame your story around institutional accountability. How are institutions exacerbating the issue? What can they do to improve conditions? Offer solutions. Concretely this means providing reporters with more than people to interview. You need information that helps expose institutional roles in the issue like data documenting bias in recipient treatment, policies that lead to plant relocations, decreases in key support services, etc. All of this information helps paint the broader economic landscape on which welfare policy unfolds.

When dealing with feature reporters, in addition to using a message about institutional accountability, encourage the reporters themselves to highlight the structural difficulties posed by institutions in raising families. Refer them to relevant documentation that illustrates these structural difficulties.

IDENTIFY REPORTERS

Pitch stories to reporters you know would cover your story and who have a track record of fair coverage. Sometimes pitching a story about lack of childcare for workfare workers to a family or “women’s issues” reporter rather than the city hall reporter can result in a better story. Refer to your press list. What do you know about each reporter? When calling outlets, ask specifically for these reporters.

LOOK FOR AUDIENCE ANGLE

Does the paper have a certain constituency to whom this issue is most relevant? Include how this story affects this constituency in your pitch.

WRITE OUT YOUR PITCH BEFOREHAND

This will help you prepare your thoughts. You should expect a pitch to last no more than 30 seconds. That’s the amount of time you have to get a reporter’s attention.

PRACTICE YOUR PITCH WITH ANOTHER PERSON

Use a friendly, positive and persuasive tone. Ask for feedback from your partner.

WHEN PITCHING: BE PATIENT AND PERSISTENT

Not every reporter will be interested in your story. Pitching to several people in a larger media outlet is quite common.

OFFER PAUSES TO ALLOW REPORTER TO RESPOND

By pausing briefly after you say your primary news hook, you get a chance to gauge reporter’s reactions. You also create a dramatic effect in delivering the news hook.

KNOW THE ISSUE

Be prepared to answer reporter’s questions and provide additional information or contacts.

BE COURTEOUS AND PROFESSIONAL

Remember you are establishing relationships with reporters. The more contact you have with them the better your chances of their covering your issues.

HOW TO WRITE A PRESS RELEASE

The press release is written like a news story. Many news outlets rely on press releases to generate articles, so the press release serves as a good opportunity to deliver media messages, information and data vital to your issue.

< LETTERHEAD >

NEWS CONTACT:

< YOUR NAME >

< DATE >

< PHONE NUMBER >

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

< Press Release **HEADLINE** >

(Provide a headline for reporters. This should contain your news hook)

< **SUBHEAD** >

(Provide a subheading. This may contain your news message or the most newsworthy or surprising finding of a study.)

First Paragraph

The first sentence is the main pitch with the news hook (i.e. why must the reporter cover it today. Example: “Today, Welfare Rights of Tennessee delivered 500 postcards to welfare department head John Smith demanding the welfare department stop discriminating. A recent survey found caseworkers gave white recipients discretionary money to cover travel costs twice as often as they did to black recipients.”) This is the most newsworthy part of the story. It says why this event is significant on that particular day.

The second sentence is secondary pitch with more information (who, what, when and where)

Quote

The last sentence should be a quote. The quote should be your organization’s basic message (or theme) tailored to this event and in snappy, soundbite form. Example: “Until the welfare department provides the same opportunities and support to people of color who receive assistance as it does to white people, time limits are a racist joke,” says Lisa Jones, director of Welfare Rights of Tennessee.

Second and Third Paragraphs Provide More Information

The second and third paragraphs repeat the pattern of the first paragraph. Offer some more news and or more details of what is newsworthy about the event. If you use a second quote it should also be consistent with your overall message.

Fourth Paragraph

Provide a short description of your organization.

###

(indicates the end of the release)

HOW TO WRITE A MEDIA ADVISORY

The Media Advisory acts as an invitation to an event. It should have basic information about the event and may be faxed to media outlets anywhere from three weeks to 24 hours before the date. Follow up with a press release and phone calls.

< LETTERHEAD >

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CONTACT:

< NAME >

< DATE >

< PHONE NUMBER >

< Media Advisory **HEADLINE** >
(catchy, short with all capital letters)

WHAT:

Two or three sentences about what is happening

WHEN:

Date and time of event

WHERE:

Address

WHO:

Names of people and/or organizations involved

WHY:

Two or three sentences that discuss why this event is significant or newsworthy

Quote:

Add a brief quote to support issue or event

###

(indicates the end of the advisory)

HOW TO WRITE AN OP-ED

Use an Op-Ed to Offer an In-Depth Perspective on Your Issue

Op-eds are longer than letters to the editor and there is more competition for space. You will want to call the paper for length requirements (usually 600-800 words).

Find a Timely Opportunity to Present Your Issue

Tie your op-ed to recent headlines, public debate, upcoming events or anniversaries.

Make an Argument

Be for or against something. Form a judgment or offer a solution. Propose action.

Give Your Piece a Tone

Op-eds can tell a story in a casual voice or debate public policy in a lively serious tone. Avoid a dry academic, analytical voice. At the same time avoid excessive rhetoric. Use reasonable language and cite sources when reporting facts not found in mainstream media.

Try to Provide a Frame for Your Piece

Describe how it relates to historical patterns or trends. Show how your issue relates to something everyone understands and feels strongly about. For instance if you are writing about racial inequity in schools, show how inequity relates to segregation, separate and unequal services, *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Civil Rights movement, etc.

Use Sound Bites

Include one or two dramatic messages that hammer home your main point. Editors look for these “soundbites” and use them as pull quotes. Such messages are more likely to have an impact on readers.

Use a Professional Title That Suggests Authority

Credentials tell the editor this voice is worth printing. If you work for an organization, get permission to sign the op-ed as a representative of that organization.

Send an Op-Ed to Only One Paper

Papers will most likely print your op-ed if they know it will not be featured elsewhere in their regional market. If you only send the op-ed to one paper, let the editor know you are offering an exclusive.

Try to Think of a Catchy Title

If you don't the paper will most likely run its own and it may not emphasize your central message.

Be Prepared to Shorten and Re-Submit

In case your op-ed does not get accepted, be prepared to shorten and re-submit your article as a letter to the editor.

WRITING LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Writing a letter to the editor offers you the chance to express your opinion and change the way a newspaper covers welfare. Letters should respond to inaccurate coverage, offer a new perspective or provide more complete information on the topic.

Make One Point

Make one point (or at most two) in your letter. State the point clearly, ideally in the first sentence. Keep your letter brief. Two short paragraphs should be long enough.

Make Your Letter Timely

Don't wait. Address a recent event, article, editorial or another letter to the editor that recently appeared in the paper you are writing to.

Be Reasonable

Refute or support specific statements, call out biases, address relevant facts that are ignored, but do not make blanket attacks on the media in general or the newspaper in particular.

Support your facts

Cite proof or include documentation of any disputed piece of information you refer to.

Check the Newspaper's Letter Specifications

Length and format requirements vary from paper to paper. Don't forget to include your name, signature, address and phone number. Check the letters page for mailing, faxing, and e-mail information.

Study the Paper

Study the letters that appear in the paper. Is a certain type of letter usually printed?

Coordinate Your Efforts with Others

If media outlets get letters from a dozen people raising the same issue, they will most likely publish one or two of them. If your letter doesn't get published, perhaps someone else's on the same topic will. However, do NOT have more than one writer using the same letter. Most papers will identify such letters as "form" letters and will not publish them.

Check to See That Your Letter is Printed

If your letter has not appeared within one to two weeks, follow up with a call to the editorial department of the newspaper. If it does, always save the printed copy!

SAMPLE LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letter to the Editor From Idaho Citizen's Network

From *The Idaho Statesman*
Wednesday February 18, 1998

No Kid Care

Did you know one out of seven children in Idaho do not have health insurance? That's 48,000 children in Idaho that have no health coverage! Did you know that Idaho has \$20 million for health care for kids? Check it out. They aren't going to advertise it, but half of those 48,000 are eligible for the program. Even if you have health insurance for your children, Medicaid might pay those high deductibles and the 20 percent the insurance won't cover. They also have \$3.28 million for outreach to help find those children who fall through the cracks. But they will probably spend that money on new computer programming if we let them. Get loud; make noise and tell everyone you know.

Terri Sterling
Nezperce

Sample letter from People Organized to Win Employment Rights

February 26, 1998
To the Editor:

Regarding Rachel Gordon's February 26 article on the Mayor's proposed changes to the City's General Assistance (GA) program, I am outraged that, once again, the media has perpetuated Willie Brown's lies about GA recipients and his plan to overhaul the GA program.

There is no such thing as a GA recipient who chooses not to work. Unless they are disabled, everyone receiving GA must work in order to receive a check. The mayor's proposal to cut GA from \$345 to \$279 a month would cut assistance to those who are working for their checks.

General assistance recipients are already in the work force – they just don't get paid for their work. 2,000 women and men work alongside City workers each day, sweeping the streets and cleaning buses for MUNI, at a fraction of the wages and without any of the benefits, protection or respect given to City workers. The only way for the City to enact an effective welfare-to-work program will be to end workfare slavery, and transform workfare slots into full-time, living wage jobs.

POWER member R.G. Goudy was quoted as saying that the new GA program "is a vicious attack on the poor." This vicious attack has been aided by the untruths and stereotypes advanced in Gordon's article.

Millie Anderson
San Francisco

GATEKEEPERS: WHO TO CALL AT A NEWS OUTLET

NEWSPAPERS

Reporters: Reporters are the best people to call at a newspaper. Newspapers assign reporters to cover certain topics on a regular basis, for example the “city hall beat.” So, welfare rights advocates might call a city hall reporter, a labor reporter or a family/women’s issues reporter depending on the story.

Editors: If a reporter is not available try calling an editor. They direct the work of reporters and sometimes assign stories. Like beat reporters, editors are assigned topics to supervise, for example, the education editor.

City Desk: If you are not sure which reporter or editor to call, try asking the newspaper’s City Desk. It is a clearinghouse for information on local stories.

Op-Ed Editor: Decides which Op-Ed submissions are run in the paper. May also choose columns offered by national columnists.

Editorial Page Editor: Oversees the whole editorial section of the paper and is responsible for the newspapers editorials and endorsements.

Calendar Editor: Many papers, especially weeklies, will run several calendar listing of events. Each calendar usually has its own editor who is the person to contact to get your event listed. It is very important to direct your call and letter to the right editor.

TELEVISION NEWS

Assignment Editors: The assignment editor is usually the first person to call at a television station. The assignment editor assigns most stories to television reporters. Assignment editors are usually most interested in stories happening today. They often arrive at the station by 7AM. The best time to call is before 9AM.

Planning Editors: Larger television stations have taken part of the workload from assignment editors and placed it with a planning editor. These editors track and gather information on stories happening in the future. So, if your story is happening tomorrow or next week, you would call the planning editor.

Reporters: Most television reporters cover the whole range of possible stories. Television reporters often work in shifts, the AM shift, the noon/evening shift, etc.

Producers: Producers assemble the news stories into a news show. For television talk shows, they also generate topics and recruit guests.

NEWS RADIO

News Directors: At radio stations, news directors often assign stories, report stories, edit stories, assemble the newscasts, and anchor the news show.

Reporters: Reporters at radio stations are usually general assignment reporters and cover the whole spectrum of stories.

Editors: Larger news stations and public stations may have news editors who assign stories to reporters and shape newscasts. These editors usually report stories as well.

Public Affairs Director: The public affairs director at radio station is often responsible for the station's contact with the community. This person is also usually in charge of running public service announcements and calendar listings and sometimes programs the station's more serious public affairs talk shows.

TALK SHOWS (RADIO AND TELEVISION)

Producers: Producers are usually the first point of contact for a talk show. They assemble the shows: identifying topics, researching the issues, recruiting the guests, and orchestrating the broadcast.

Hosts: Talk show hosts are the on-air personalities conducting the talk show. They often generate ideas for topics and guests. On smaller shows, they have a large role in producing the show as well.

WIRE SERVICES

Services such as the Associated Press have bureaus in most major cities. Each bureau has a bureau chief and a staff of general assignment reporters. Reuters focuses on business news and United Press International (UPI) focuses on stories for television and radio stations.

ORGANIZATIONAL INFORMATION

Voices For the Silenced Project Partners

CAAAY, Organizing Asian Communities
Community Voices Heard
FUREE, A Project of the Fifth Avenue Committee
Make the Road By Walking
Welfare Rights Initiative

About We Interrupt This Message

We Interrupt This Message is a non-profit communications center providing media services, training, and technical assistance to community organizations and public interest advocates. Founded on the conviction that marginalized communities should have the power to speak for themselves through the media and should be empowered to challenge the media stereotypes and distortions that misrepresent them, Interrupt defends human and civil rights by partnering with grassroots and public interest organizations to challenge racist, anti-poor, and anti-youth stereotypes promoted through the news. Interrupt's work is centered on building the capacity of advocates and activists to claim their voice in the media and change the terms of debate over the issues facing their communities.

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