



## Why Framing Matters: A Review of the Basics

**F**raming is a key element of our theory of change, and we believe it is a *critical shared strategy* for anyone interested in moving system transformation in health and human services. Over the past couple of years—drawing on the expertise of framing scientists at FrameWorks Institute and the mutual commitment of partners like the National Human Services Assembly—we have deepened our understanding of why framing matters. We are learning how to develop a new narrative that more effectively tells the core story of our business—what human services is, why we have it (what is it good for), what can impede its outcomes, and what will improve it. Through this column, and our more frequent Blog posts, we will continue to share this understanding and knowledge with you, starting in this issue with a review of the basics.

### What is Framing?

Frames are organizing principles that are social, shared, and persistent over time. We use them to provide meaningful structure to the world around us. We selectively respond to things we hear (e.g., news story, commercials, a candidate's speech) by cueing up the networks of associations we have stored to help us make meaning of our world. Information “feels” more true the second time we hear it, and more and more true each subsequent time. Our mind has a whole set of pre-existing patterns and we are constantly mapping new information in a way that appears to “fit” that existing mindset.

The science of framing helps us understand the dominant frames

What We Want to Trigger	Shared American Value	What We Don't Want to Trigger	Dominant Value
Every person has the potential to build and live a good life and everyone needs support at times in their lives to maintain well-being.	Human Potential (across the lifecycle)	I pulled myself up by my bootstraps, why can't they?	Rugged Individualism
There are common sense solutions that we know work.	Pragmatism	The problem is too big; we'll never solve it.	Fatalism
By acting early on, we can prevent problems from getting worse and costing more.	Prevention	Government services create dependency and cost taxpayers too much.	Government is Inept

Americans use to reason about issues we care about, and then identify what frame elements might allow us to shift old beliefs and provide “thinking tools”—i.e., ways people can think more productively about issues, particularly those that involve understanding systems and structures.

### What are Shared American Values?

Americans have many dominant frames when it comes to human services, poverty, government, charity—dominant frames that can overwhelm and defeat our intended messages. When we talk about our business or tell individual stories of families served through human services, we tend to reinforce these unproductive dominant frames. When we talk about human services,

we want to “land in” the shared values that may not be as dominant but are more relevant to seeing the full picture. We want to “pull” those beliefs forward, letting the others recede.

To create a well-designed frame we need to start by setting up what is at stake and why it matters. We need to help our audience see themselves in the issue by connecting them to a shared value. For example, our narrative should provide practical, common-sense solutions that draw on American pragmatism. Americans want to hear what can be done—and we are more open to understanding issues when we believe something can be done. We need to avoid the stories of urgency and “doom and gloom.” We all have a “finite pool of worry”—in other words, there is only so much we


*See Director's Memo on page 37*

can take in with life's stresses. If we constantly portray our work through the lens of a crisis, the default thinking of most Americans will be that there is nothing that can be done to fix it.

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### **What Can Reframing Do for Us?**

Framing can help us provide a wide-angle view of human services that brings policymakers together and involves everyone in shaping solutions that are focused on health and well-being for all Americans. It can help create an understanding of the ecosystem that shapes the interconnectedness of systems and services in a community and connect all of us who live there (like tracks connecting a rail system). It can help us focus on the structural and systemic causes of poor health and lack of well-being and address issues of inequity. Effective framing leads to thematic storytelling to show how “connected communities” have better outcomes and helps us ask the right questions from the start—How are our children doing in school? How connected are families to their community?

Check our Blog at [www.aphsa.org](http://www.aphsa.org) and upcoming issues of *Policy & Practice* for more tips, including how to create an effective frame. We also encourage you to check out the FrameWorks Institute website at [www.frameworksinstitute.org](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org). 

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