

Empowering People with Criminal Records to Change Policy: A Legal Advocate's Guide to Storytelling

Caitlin Brown, Communications Director, Community Legal Services
cbrown@clsphila.org, 215-981-3731

Sharon M. Dietrich, Litigation Director, Community Legal Services
sdietrich@clsphila.org, 215-981-3719

Ronald Lewis, Storyteller and Business Owner
ronaldlewis126@gmail.com



What We'll Cover:

- Why Tell Stories?
- Hear From a Storyteller's Perspective
- Do No Harm
 - Consent
 - Privacy
 - Other Pitfalls
- Choosing Your Client
- Working with the Media
- How to Tell Stories



Why Tell Stories?

Messaging, along with stories, is much more powerful and memorable than using talking points alone. Together, stories and substantive information can make powerful change.



Benefits of Storytelling:

- Illustrating an injustice with a story can help people understand the issue and inspire them to take action.
- Lawmakers and other leaders are often persuaded by stories.
- Storytelling can help clients more easily understand information.
- Storytelling empowers the storytellers by letting them share their experiences and speak their truth.
- Getting the voices of people with criminal records out there can combat stereotypes and correct the record.



A Storyteller's Contributions and Rewards



Storyteller Ronald Lewis with Philadelphia Eagle Malcolm Jenkins

First, Do No Harm: Avoiding Pitfalls

When a storyteller's private story becomes public, there can be huge downsides for them, which often cannot be undone.

A story must NEVER be made public without careful consideration of negative consequences and obtaining the storyteller's informed consent.



Obtain Consent

Informed client consent must be obtained before confidential information can be shared with anyone.

The consent form should be straightforward and understandable to the client.

One consideration is whether or not your client can truly consent to sharing their story.

You also need to ensure that your client is choosing to share their story, and not feeling coerced.



Protect the Storyteller's Privacy

When working with the media or sharing a story, you must consider the privacy of the storyteller and others.

Avoid identifying information, which can include the facts of the case, their living situation, or any identifiers that make the person unique.

For a person with a criminal record, try to ensure that their full name is not used, as that would make their criminal record accessible to the public.



Protect the Storyteller's Privacy

Often, reporters will agree to use a pseudonym or only a first name for someone who would face legal problems if identified.

Obtain an agreement like this from a reporter before providing them with the storyteller's full name and contact information.



Protect the Privacy of Others

Be careful about where the interview takes place, particularly if there are cameras or video cameras present.

Ensure that other people are not interviewed or photographed without their consent.



Protect Your Legal Work

When working with the media or sharing a story, make sure to understand the legal implications for the client.

Make sure to evaluate the whole picture for your client, and evaluating storytelling opportunities with their best interests in mind.



Protect Your Legal Work

Avoid media or storytelling when there is a confidentiality agreement on a case, or, at the very least, be sure to follow the requirements set out in the agreement.

An active case requires special consideration.

A completed case may be safer to share with the public. In any event, your ethical obligations remain.



How to Tell Stories: Present Your Story

Steps for presenting your story:

- 1) Have the client sign consent form
- 2) Develop talking points with the storyteller
- 3) Practice the interview
- 4) Find a reporter by looking to see who is reporting on similar issues
- 5) Begin e-mailing with a reporter before providing the storyteller's information
- 6) Connect storyteller and reporter
- 7) Accompany storyteller on interview



How to Tell Stories: Choose the Right Storyteller

A good choice of storyteller is one who can connect to your audience, but you should recognize that people are not perfect. You should assess the pros and cons of a storyteller carefully.

The right storyteller must be able to tell the specific story that needs to be told. The most sympathetic storyteller won't do you any good if they don't fit in with the issue at hand.



How to Tell Stories: Prepare the Storyteller

The storyteller's narrative can be better controlled if presented in a written format than if they were to go before a legislative body or speak with a reporter.

Have the written narrative reviewed by the storyteller, if possible.



How to Tell Stories: Prepare the Storyteller

Even if the storyteller is fully prepared to reveal information, there may be backlash against them in the comment sections of news media websites.

Let them know this ahead of time, and warn them about reading the comments.



How to Tell Stories: Prepare the Storyteller

Prepare the storyteller for public statements about their situation, especially if he or she is being interviewed by media.

Even if the storyteller is fully prepared, an advocate should be present to counsel and protect them during the media interview.



How to Tell Stories: Have Talking Points Ready

It's important to prepare the storyteller's talking points before an interview or another speaking opportunity.

Writing down talking points is a good way of helping the storyteller focus and ensure that an interview doesn't go off course.



How to Tell Stories: Have the Talking Points Ready

It's not just what you say, it's how you say it.

When you and the storyteller are putting together talking points, make sure to write down something quotable that can be said in the interview.

Although all of your statements should be media-ready, reporters are looking for soundbites, so you should have one written down and ready to go.



How to Tell Stories: Have the Talking Points Ready

To think about the key points you want to convey, first, think about your goals.

Are you trying to convince people that a person with a criminal record deserves a second chance? Are you trying to advance a specific policy goal?



How to Tell Stories: Have the Talking Points Ready

An effective way to develop talking points is to determine which myths and misinformation the story is trying to combat.

Is there something that reporters commonly get wrong about people with criminal records? Are there myths that are commonly perpetuated about people with criminal records?



How to Tell Stories: Connect with Press

Journalists are looking for stories that are timely and significant.

To get them to tell a story, connect the story with a bigger trend and/or current event.



How to Tell Stories: Research the Reporter

Before working with a reporter, make sure you have read up on his or her work.

Have they reported on this issue or similar issues before? Is their tone sympathetic to people with criminal records?

If the reporter hasn't written on these issues, try to find them on social media to see if you can garner a sense of what the reporter is like.



How to Tell Stories: Connect with Press

Get an “off the record” or confidentiality agreement from a journalist before sharing any information that should not be in print.



How to Tell Stories: Get the Most Out of the Story

After the story comes out, be sure to promote it far and wide.

Share it with policymakers and others who need to read it.

Ask partners to promote it and give it a “signal boost.”

Share it on your social media, in your newsletter, and on your website.



How to Tell Stories: Get the Most Out of the Story

Make sure the storyteller gets a copy of any news article or publication where their story appears.

Ask them if they had a positive experience.

Some storytellers may want the chance to tell their story again in the future, so keep in touch.



Key Takeaways

- Advocates can make powerful change by working with storytellers.
- Storytellers can benefit from sharing their stories, as good storytelling empowers the storytellers.
- Consent, privacy, and protecting legal work are especially important when telling the story of someone with a criminal record.
- Developing talking points and being strategic about the narrative is the best way to ensure success.



For more information, visit
www.clsphila.org/storytelling.

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