

## **ASAP Strategy Brief: Messaging to Policymakers & other Stakeholders on Program Alignment**

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A deep well of valuable resources exist on messaging for safety net programs, including SNAP, Medicaid and TANF, that resonate positively with the public. Among them are:

- FrameWorks Institute: Building a New Narrative on Human Services
- FrameWorks Institute Messaging Memo: Talking Human Services
- Center for Community Change: Messaging for Economic Justice
- Topos: Communicating about Poverty and Low-Wage Work
- Ascend at The Aspen Institute: Voices for Two-Generation Success, Top 10 Polling and Messaging Tips
- Center for Social Inclusion: Talking About Race: Communications Tools to Win Racially Equitable Policy Solutions
- The Opportunity Agenda: Media and Public Opinion on Poverty in America
- CBPP: Language that Works
- Lake Research Partners: Fighting Back Attacks on the Safety Net, Insight from Eight Focus Groups
- Feeding America SNAP Messaging Research

These resources are valuable to ASAP advocates as part of your strategy to build public support for improvements and defense of the programs. But a large area of ASAP work relates not to the public but rather to discussions with policymakers, which ASAP grantees understand better than anyone, is a different audience with different motivators than the public.

During the ASAP messaging TA work this spring and summer, while some portions of our messages sought to engage the public and specific partner groups, a large portion of our messaging work focused on engaging policymakers.

To create a streamlined strategy source for ASAP-related messaging, this brief summarizes key findings from the resources cited above as well as additional sources on words and phrases that work as well as those to avoid. It then goes on to address strategy for specific issue areas of interest to ASAP grantees, including messaging specific ASAP issues to policymaker targets.

### **KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM THE COLLECTIVE RESEARCH**

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**Where the voters are:**

They believe programs are needed in this economy.

They want to help children, seniors, people with disabilities, and people trying to improve their lives.

They respond well to success stories.

They do not want to cut programs.

They like programs that address basic needs.

They like programs that reward hard work.

They like when programs are described as temporary.

Moderate and conservatives do not want to make cuts to safety net programs nor do they want to see decreases in current benefit levels.

Moderate and conservatives readily believe the programs are helping people who legitimately need help.

People believe programs are frequently abused. It is difficult – perhaps even impossible – to overcome this perception. These views are deeply entrenched and there is considerable skepticism about information that points to the contrary.

On the one hand, Americans believe in individualism, personal responsibility, and a small role for government. On the other, they believe in equal opportunity, shared fate, and government responsibility (CBPP, Language that Works).

### **Openings for ASAP Messaging:**

People of both parties in all areas of the country support simplifying the application process for low-income parents so that one application can determine eligibility across multiple programs (61% support among Republicans; 77% support among Democrats; Northeast 65%; Midwest 73%; South 70%; West 68%) (Ascend at the Aspen Institute).

In an even broader sense, beyond the specific policy focus on program alignment toward the ultimate goal of alleviating poverty, public opinion is moving in our favor.

There are indications that Americans' attitudes toward poverty and poor people are moving in a favorable direction. First, the widening gap between rich and poor has seen a growing disquiet. Second, poor people are viewed more sympathetically than in the past. Third, hopeful signs suggest that Millennials (those born between 1981 and 2001) may not be saddled with the same conscious or unconscious racial biases as their parents and grandparents.

Finally, support for government safety net programs in general and for several specific anti-poverty programs is fairly strong. These trends indicate that opportunities exist for promoting a constructive public discourse about poverty, one that elevates community values over individualism. (Opportunity Agenda)

Good government, which many ASAP states are framing messaging takes advantage of the significant openings that exist to tap of shared fate/community and government responsibility.

Good government messaging allows us to also tap into key language used by conservative strategists relating to safety net programs—the need to be “good stewards”. (<http://www.heritage.org/research/commentary/2015/8/the-tangling-threads-of-americas-safety-net>).

While empathy may be moving in our favor, people still need to be reminded of the stark numbers of what the poverty level is in dollar terms (in place of saying “the poverty line”) and what a full-time minimum wage worker actually earns.

#### **WORDS AND PHRASES TO AVOID:**

**Poverty.** Talking about poverty on its own is too abstract. To be effective, we need to speak in specifics—income level, poverty level in real numbers, unable to make ends meet. (Lake)

**Income inequality.** Is also too abstract a concept. Speak in more personal language, “Too many people are struggling to make ends meet and being left behind.” (Lake)

**Strengthening and improving.** Generates a negative response from conservative voters because to them it implies putting more money into programs. (Lake)

**Starting with numbers.** Numbers only resonate if you set the stage with an emotional frame. Instead of leading with “The percentage of people in poverty rose to 13.3 percent this year from 12.2 percent last year and is the highest it has been since 2004.” Lead with “Too many people are struggling to make ends meet, even more than last year or at any time over the past decade.” (CBPP, *Language that Works*)

**Poor, working poor, low-income.** Language that focuses on what people are experiencing rather than referencing a group or category is more effective. These phrases work better: “Can’t make ends meet.” “Living on the brink” “Working to provide for their family.” (Center for Community Change).

#### **WORDS AND PHRASES THAT WORK:**

**Economic stability.** Both for the community and for individuals resonates positively with both liberals and conservatives alike.

**Emphasize interdependence.** Several of the polls found this was important for liberals, moderates and conservatives alike.

**Talk about solutions that work.** Both voters and policymakers alike like success stories. Otherwise, audiences get “disparity fatigue,” – so overwhelmed by the size of the problem that they either tune you out or resign themselves to the idea that it’s intractable (CBPP, *Language that Works*).

**Accountability and responsibility.** Moderates and conservatives like this as it relates to program participants. But voters overall want this from government as well.

**Efficiency and effectiveness.** This is what voters across the spectrum want to see from government programs.

**Name real things people want.** A secure retirement. A decent life. “People who work for a living should be able to get ahead not just get by.” (CBPP, *Language that Works*).

**Phrases that encompass these concepts:**

*We need to help make sure everyone can make ends meet. The promise of America should be for everyone – not just the wealthy few. It's not right that working people have to struggle to provide for their families, while the rich just keep getting richer. The economy is stronger when more people prosper.*

*Millions of people and families struggle to make ends meet even though they work hard. We can do more than pay lip service to our most basic ideal of economic opportunity for all. Investments in policies that help people put a roof over their heads and food on the table, that ensure all kids get a good start, that boost wages, and that create job security, put us on a path to a better America. An America that recognizes that the success of every community and every child matters for all of us.*

*We're all in this together. If this nation is to continue to be strong and prosperous, everyone needs a full shot at opportunity.*

**SNAP: Language that Works**

Beyond strategies for messaging safety net programs as a whole, quite a lot of research has been done on messaging on the SNAP program. The phrases below are ones that have been tested and shown to move support in our favor:

SNAP strengthens communities by combating hunger (80% support).

SNAP empowers and enables people to regain self-sufficiency and economic stability.

Cuts to SNAP make it harder for people to provide the food their families need to get through hard times.

Every public dollar is precious and we must work hard to ensure that the food stamps program is being used properly.

The average amount of food stamp benefits isn't enough to become dependent on, which is why the majority of food stamp recipients who can work already do so.

Food stamps just help people bridge the gap in providing the basic food and fuel they need for their families to continue working hard at turning their lives around.

### **Hunger as a Health Issue**

Some ASAP states are engaging in the framing of hunger as a health issue. The messages below are examples of the language we've used to advance this message frame:

As a state that has always prided ourselves as the national leader in health, those of us who work in prominent organizations in the health field in the state have been pleased with the administration's commitment to improving the state's integrated eligibility and enrollment system for Medicaid and the Marketplace.

Access to coverage is one critical piece of health but it only goes so far. Another critical piece is access to food. Given that, the next place for the state to shine as a leader in both health and government efficiency is to combine enrollment in health programs (Medicaid) and hunger programs (SNAP) into one streamlined process. This will make [STATE] government work smarter and better by eliminating antiquated and expensive redundancies in state administrative systems.

Currently, access to food through the SNAP program is hampered by the lack of any option to apply for SNAP at the same time as applying for health care.

Other states have modeled efficient ways to reduce hunger and improve health by connecting the Medicaid and SNAP programs in one streamlined process. The Administration should begin by allowing low-income households to file for multiple benefits through a common application portal and requiring verification of common eligibility factors only once.

As an administration committed to make things work smarter and better, prioritizing focused improvements to align our major health program [STATE MEDICAID PROGRAM] with our major hunger program (SNAP) will ensure the state is in line with other leading states who view efficient access to healthy food and elimination of excessive, expensive bureaucratic red tape as a critical piece of a modern, cost efficient health care system.

### **Good Government**

Research from Pew found people are more focused on government working for all the people than the size of government. They want government to work to the benefit of all people. (Pew)

The following is an example of good government language developed for ASAP states:

Government can't solve everything. But whether it's the school being built in our neighborhood on time and on budget or the Social Security checks our grandparents receive on time every month, when government can be relied on, it can make a big difference in people's lives.

But when government doesn't work or fails to do its job, it can cause a lot of pain. Just ask the Hobbs – a family of four with a year-old child who state workers left without Medicaid coverage for seven months because they failed to send a renewal notice or check information they already had on file.

Or the elderly man from Alamogordo with no income who had his food stamp assistance terminated last August because state workers forgot to send him a legally required notice. Only after going three weeks without food assistance, and after the man visited another state office within the Income Support Division to submit a new application for food assistance, were his benefits reinstated.

Whether it's Medicaid or Food Stamps, these stories and others point to a bigger problem at HSD of improperly denying families services, failing to notify recipients about a delay or how to solve it, and leaving seniors and poor families to resolve these issues on their own.

There are common sense steps we can take to make government work better for everyone, from the low-income families and seniors who depend on essential services like SNAP and Medicaid to the taxpayers who simply want to ensure their tax dollars are being spent effectively and for their intended purposes. These steps are...

### **Churn**

We have focused in some ASAP states on reframing “churn” to “keeping people connected to programs.” The language used in that effort is as follows:

The governor has done an excellent job of fulfilling his promise to make government work smarter and better when it comes to Medicaid and getting people enrolled.

The question we should now be asking is, “Are people able to stay in coverage once they are enrolled?”

For-profit companies pay a great deal of attention to keeping people in programs they qualify for. They do this to maximize efficiency and reduce financial waste. We should do the same.

The place to make the biggest difference is in renewals. Just like in the for-profit world, processing a new application involves more resources, including staff time, than re-determining continuing eligibility.

### **Program Integrity**

Responding to policymakers calling for efforts to ensure “program integrity” with the goal of shrinking enrollment and creating additional red tape is a challenge. ASAP will continue to explore effective ways to counter the “program integrity” frame. In the meantime, we find the strongest approach to be that which Cindy Mann used when she was in charge of Medicaid at CMS for the Obama Administration. Her response to state calls for program integrity efforts was: “We must continue to look for ways to refine and further improve our processes.” We would add, “while ensuring the program continues to address the core need of X [e.g. ensuring families have enough to eat while they work to regain financial stability].”

As mentioned previously, conservatives and moderates often hold two views at the same time: safety net programs are important to help people meet basic needs when they’ve fallen on hard times **and** safety net programs are rife with waste, fraud, and abuse. This is important to remember, because we often feel we have to go head-to-head with the waste, fraud and abuse argument when in fact we need to be disciplined in staying on offense (on the need for the programs and how to make them better) in order to maintain existing support among conservatives and moderates (in addition to liberals) who believe these programs are important.

The Center on Budget findings, combined with findings from a Pew poll conducted in November (2015)<sup>1</sup>, provides a clear strategy for responding to “program integrity” proponents. While select state leaders may want to shrink the size of government and

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.people-press.org/2015/11/23/2-general-opinions-about-the-federal-government/>

use program integrity arguments to support that goal, Pew found voters are more interested in government working for all the people than the size of government. This research and the governor's focus on making government work, provide the frame for our messaging to counter "program integrity" arguments.

In order to be credible in our message, we need to acknowledge that: 1) no one wants people in programs who do not qualify for those programs; and 2) we must make efficient use of taxpayer dollars. After acknowledging that, we then move continually back to proactive messages on better, smarter government that: 1) helps people when they have hit hard times; and 2) continually refines programs to be more efficient.

People who do not qualify for safety net programs should not receive benefits. Everyone is in agreement on that.

But government should never keep people from receiving services they need and qualify for under the law, and that's all these excessive procedures accomplish.

People need access to food, health care and temporary aid when they have lost a job and hit hard times until they can get back on their feet.

- It's extremely difficult for people to find gainful employment or an educational program or find a job training program if they haven't had a good meal for days at a time, if they don't have money for suitable clothing, and if they don't have stable housing.
- Nearly everyone knows someone—a senior citizen, someone with a disability, someone who has lost a job or had a health emergency—who has relied on Medicaid, TANF or SNAP to provide economic stability when hardship hit.
- In these economic times, it takes longer to recover economic footing, to find a job and affordable housing.

Creating more government roadblocks for people to access safety net programs through excessive bureaucratic red tape does two things: it wastes taxpayer dollars and it keeps people who need help from getting the basic help they need making it harder for them to transition to self sufficiency.

- New requirements that individuals call or mail in new paperwork inevitably results in large portions of *eligible* people losing access to safety net programs.

What we need to do is make government work more efficiently, not less.

- State leaders need to focus on preventable inefficiencies, including

reducing churn—the needless flow of people on and off programs—through no fault of their own, which wastes tens of millions of taxpayer dollars each year. If you don't have the economic ability to secure permanent housing, meaning you do not have a permanent address, how can you receive applications and renewal paperwork through the mail?

The governor and leaders from both parties have generated innovative approaches to making government work better for everyone. This includes ensuring more people have access to affordable insurance through Medicaid and ensuring all people in the state have access to the American Dream through supportive work programs. These approaches, which ensure both that Pennsylvanians who need assistance get the help they need and that taxpayer dollars are not wasted on excessive bureaucracy and duplicative efforts, are the ones the state needs to pursue.

### **Conclusion**

ASAP will continue to evaluate messaging strategies focused on policymakers. In the meantime, we are focused on fully utilizing the best messaging available on program alignment, both through our own work and through resources developed by peers in other respected state and national organizations.