

PHILANTHROPY®

WORDS That Change MINDS

FrameWorks Institute helps nonprofits rethink their messages to simplify complicated ideas, move issues through Congress, and influence public opinion.

By HEATHER JOSLYN

N AT KENDALL-TAYLOR and his team confronted a challenge: how to make the public care about drug addicts.

The CEO and his nonprofit, FrameWorks Institute, have been retained by the Alberta Family Wellness Initiative to help create messages to build support for publicly funded substance-abuse treatment.

FrameWorks, a Washington-based think tank known for its in-depth research, interviewed residents of the western Canadian province, surveyed messages about the issue already in wide circulation, and field-tested more.

About 90 percent of the drug-treatment-advocacy field's communications appealed to empathy, FrameWorks found. But the approach actually drove down public support for drug treatment.

The revelation stunned Mr. Kendall-Taylor and his FrameWorks team: Advocacy groups were pouring money into a strategy that eroded support for their cause.

But their research also pointed to solutions. Albertans responded strongly to messages that flattered their ingenuity and appealed to their sense of community. To illustrate, Mr. Kendall-Taylor swings his arm as if to say, C'mon, everybody! "We're a province of problem solvers!" he booms. "We haven't had a problem that we haven't been able to roll up our sleeves and fix. We need to do that with addiction."

FrameWorks specializes in helping nonprofits get results by rethinking their messages. Sometimes, like in Alberta, that means throwing years of past practice out the window and starting over.

Albertans, it turned out, value individualism and people taking responsibility for their own troubles. To them, compassion can sound like coddling. Charities' messages must fight their way through that filter.

4 PHRASES
FRAMEWORKS
FOUND TO
ENHANCE
ADVOCACY



BRAIN ARCHITECTURE

A term to describe how human brains develop in stages, highlighting the importance of early experiences.

HEAT-TRAPPING BLANKET

A metaphor aimed at helping listeners visualize how the buildup of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere contributes to climate change.

The Alberta Family Wellness Initiative, a project of the Palix Foundation, used FrameWorks' guidance to create tools for teachers, health-care professionals, lawyers, and judges to help people understand the science behind addiction better.

It also reached out to the public: A web series, "Life Coach," took a comic but scientific-ly accurate approach to explaining addiction. The series, shared widely on social media, follows two well-meaning but bumbling young dudes as they try to "cure" a third, a recovering addict. The videos have been more effective than "a finger-wagging PSA," says Marisa Etmanski, a director of the Alberta group.

INNOVATION

One promising sign for the Wellness Initiative's mission, says Ms. Etmanski: Alberta's human-service agency now requires any addiction-treatment nonprofit that applies for its grants to use the latest brain-development science in its practices. "This is huge for us," she says.

Currently, FrameWorks is working with the Family Wellness Initiative to convey the latest findings on brain development and children's mental health to the newest residents of the province — refugees from Syria, for instance, who may not speak English — without much text.

"Something we talk about a lot is turning science into practice," Ms. Et-

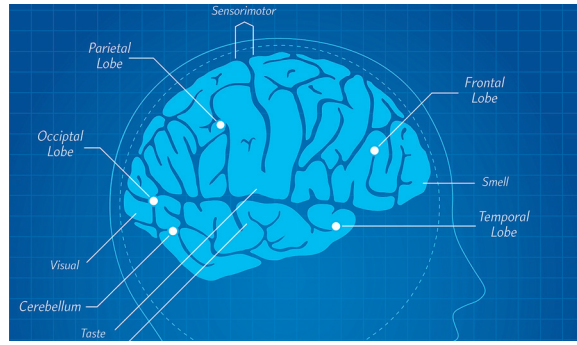
manski says. "And they've been able to help us do that by creating a language that everyone understands."

Vivid Buzzwords

You may not have heard of FrameWorks Institute, but you probably know its work and the vivid buzzwords it's created to help charities, researchers, advocates, and philanthropists translate complicated concepts to policy makers and the public:

- "Toxic stress," a phrase that conveys how trauma and instability can disrupt a child's developing brain. It's been used by the American Academy of Pediatrics and *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof.

- "Heat-trapping blanket," an easy-to-grasp visual image that helps



TOXIC STRESS

BRAIN AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL

A phrase describing the damaging impact of childhood abuse and neglect on a developing brain.

A way of describing the group of skills that allow us to plan ahead, pay attention, and regulate our emotions.

convey the science behind global warming. The Environmental Protection Agency uses the concept in its communications. (See Page 5.)

■ “Serve and return,” which describes the back-and-forth communication between a baby and its caregiver, a concept that has helped drive nonprofit efforts around the country to help low-income parents develop their children’s language skills.

Yet such buzzwords are the least of what FrameWorks does. It has helped move issues onto the agenda in state legislatures, Congress, and philanthropy circles simply by making them easier to understand. Next month it expects to release a report, sponsored by the Open Society Foundations, that aims to change the conversation about school discipline — part of a larger,

long-term project on education that’s drawn support from 10 major grant makers.

This fall, more than 25 North American colleges and universities will teach FrameWorks’ research.

Even FrameWorks’ partners say it’s hard to draw a straight line between language cooked up in the think tank’s offices and a specific law being passed or grant program being created. The game changer, they say, is the way the group’s words and concepts have seeped into the culture.

Susan Nall Bales, the institute’s founder, has worked on children’s issues since the early 1980s. Today, she says, scientists are called to testify in state legislatures about early-childhood development when budget issues that affect kids are on the line. Back in

the day, she notes, they never would have been invited.

“The entire notion that early [childhood] matters, and that it matters in certain ways, and that we can invest in those ways, is all part of a new approach that has happened because scientists talk to policy makers in a different way,” she says. “And I think that FrameWorks’ research is at the heart of that.”

Central to the FrameWorks mission is what it calls “strategic frame analysis.” Through research that draws on anthropology, neuroscience, sociolinguistics, and other disciplines, it uncovers how experts structure their messages about issues, how the news media reports them, and what cultural and other assumptions the public has that affect how those messages are

How FrameWorks Zeros In on a Message

A typical project can take up to 18 months. Here's how the communications think tank "reframes" an issue:



Researchers interview experts to learn what they want to convey to the public.



Staff members examine how the issue is portrayed in the news media and advocacy communications.



FrameWorks interviews and surveys the public, or the people the client wants to reach, often testing for people's values or assumptions that influence how they perceive the issue.



FrameWorks identifies the gaps between what experts understand about an issue and how the public perceives it and tries to bridge those gaps with new ways to describe the issue with scientific accuracy.



The new communications are tested on people randomly selected on the street to help fine-tune the final message.

- **See videos** that show how nonprofits are using FrameWorks Institute's ideas to get their messages across.

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WORK IN PROGRESS: CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF 'HUMAN SERVICES'

THE National Human Services Assembly first approached FrameWorks Institute four years ago with an almost existential problem: "People don't really understand what human services are," says Andrew Volmert, the think tank's director of research.

The assembly, with more than 80 member organizations, including the Salvation Army, the Y, and AARP, wanted to change the way people talk, and think, about the services those kinds of groups provide. The public, the group feared, generally thought of human services as something only for people in poverty or crisis, a far too narrow definition.

With the help of an initial \$158,500 grant from the Kresge Foundation, and subsequent support from both Kresge and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the assembly began working with FrameWorks on more effective language. The assembly hoped the project's results would help expand the base of support for its member groups, an urgent concern as government support declines.

FrameWorks discovered a metaphor

for human services that resonated best with its test subjects. "The basic idea is that a person's well-being is constructed, like a building," says Mr. Volmert. "And that construction requires work in the beginning, on the foundation. It requires regular maintenance. And sometimes it does require repair."

Armed with its new narrative, the assembly has spent a year making tools and sample communications available to human-service professionals online. And FrameWorks and the assembly have led workshops and training for more than 350 leaders in the field, says Lee Sherman, the assembly's new president. Earlier this summer, the group presented the new material at the National Governor's Association convention.

The feedback indicates that the new language is spreading quickly, Mr. Sherman says. The timing, he adds, couldn't be better: "Considering the current public discourse and political campaigns, it's probably important that we continue this message."

— HEATHER JOSLYN



- interpreted. The goal: crafting language that "frames" the messages in ways that are both true to the experts' findings and understandable to the public.

Too often, Mr. Kendall-Taylor says, nonprofits' messages are based on "either groupthink or 'gutthink' — a risky way to invest money in communications."

Grant-Maker Support

FrameWorks is underwritten almost entirely by large foundations, with Annie E. Casey, Ford, Kellogg, and MacArthur lending the most frequent support through most of the institute's 17-year history. For example, FrameWorks has helped for years with Casey's Kids Count project, which supplies data and communications tools to children's advocates to help them persuade policy makers to invest in kids.

"The work that we do is expensive," says Mr. Kendall-Taylor. "Anytime you do an experimental endeavor with 10,000 people, it is a big chunk of change."

Grant makers also turn to FrameWorks for help when they're taking on a new issue or looking for fresh ways to tackle a problem whose progress has stalled.

FrameWorks is helping the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation frame the immigration debate, work fueled by an \$845,000 multiyear grant begun in 2013. MacArthur also gave the think tank \$1 million in 2015 when it named it a Creative and Effective Institution for how it is "improving how we understand and talk about complex social issues."

Valerie Chang, MacArthur's managing director of programs, said the grant maker appreciates how FrameWorks shares its findings on its website and offers tutorials that can help organizations communicate more effectively about their causes.

The foundation has been involved with FrameWorks since 2004, when it helped support its work with the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, says Ms. Chang. The council sought to make research on

FROM BRAINSTORM TO THE TIP OF THE TONGUE

1999

FrameWorks Institute begins work on the Climate Message project with a diverse coalition of environmental groups, the first of several efforts to help advocates talk about climate-change science.

2001

The think tank's researchers come up with the term "**heat-trapping blanket**" to describe the impact of carbon dioxide building up in the earth's atmosphere.

2007

The New York Times uses the phrase "**heat-trapping blanket**" for the first time in conjunction with a series on climate change.

2010

The National Network for Ocean and Climate Change Interpretation is created. In the years that follow, its members help create a series of videos for use in zoos and aquariums that warn about carbon emissions and use variations of the "**blanket**" phrase.

2015

In the children's book *Nice Weather We're Having!*, a zookeeper's daughter and her classmates learn that carbon dioxide is creating "a **blanket** around the Earth."



2016

In April, Jane Goodall, the renowned conservationist, tells an audience at the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth that greenhouse gases "create a kind of **blanket** — they **trap the heat of the sun.**"



FRAMEWORKS INSTITUTE

WORDS MATTER
FrameWorks Institute — led by, from second left, Andrew Volmert, Nat Kendall-Taylor, and Julie Sweetland — is small, but it's had a big impact helping people understand nonprofits' work.

early brain development understandable to the public and boost support for early-childhood education.

FrameWorks' exploration of how audiences perceive messages makes it uniquely valuable, Ms. Chang says, especially in an era when the ways people can communicate are multiplying.

A Bunch of Ph.D.'s

Ms. Bales, a veteran issues advocate and communications strategist, created FrameWorks Institute because she felt charities lacked access to the latest tools and techniques from the cognitive sciences that would help them communicate effectively with the public and policy makers. Seed money from the William T. Grant Foundation in 1999 helped launch FrameWorks' first project, aimed at building public support for youth programs.

In 2008, it brought all of its research functions in-house, adding experts in a variety of disciplines. "We're all a bunch of Ph.D.'s here," says Andrew Volmert, FrameWorks' director of research, with almost apologetic charm. (He holds a doctorate in political science from Yale. His boss, Mr. Kendall-Taylor, a medical anthropologist, got his Ph.D. at UCLA.)

Mr. Kendall-Taylor, who took over the CEO role in April from Ms. Bales (who still chairs the board), has been at FrameWorks for nearly a decade. Before that, he helped assess and design programs for epileptic children in coastal East Africa. He learned which

families sought modern medical care and which turned to traditional healers and why they continued treatment or abandoned it.

The common thread between his work in Africa and at FrameWorks, he notes, is culture. "That's the reason we have anthropologists doing communications. That's something that's very unique about our work: It's based on the notion that people make decisions based on shared cultural values."

The goal is to shape policy by creating messages that are scientifically accurate and easy to understand.

To help uncover those values, FrameWorks researchers engage in in-depth, one-on-one conversations with 20 to 50 interview subjects for each project. The talks take place for up to three hours, largely in quiet corners of coffee shops. "The idea is to elicit from people, exhaustively, all the ways that they are able to think about an issue," Mr. Kendall-Taylor says.

The talks are both fascinating and grueling, he says. “Imagine talking to someone for three hours about child maltreatment.”

No-Spin Zone

One of FrameWorks’ longest-lasting relationships has been with the Harvard Center on the Developing Child and its partner, the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. A decade of work has generated some of FrameWorks’ most widely disseminated concepts — like “brain architecture,” to describe how early learning builds and strengthens the connections and pathways in a child’s mind, or “brain air traffic control,” for the skills that allow people to make decisions and control impulses.

“You see the language popping up in all kinds of places, people using it without knowing where it came from, which is actually great. That’s the idea,” says Al Race, deputy director and chief knowledge officer at the Harvard center.

The council’s child-development experts have sometimes balked at what they fear might dumb down their complex work to mere spin. For instance, Mr. Race says, some experts rejected FrameWorks’ phrase “toxic stress” to explain the impact of trauma on a child’s developing brain. “But when they saw how memorable it was, and that it didn’t distort the meaning of this complex science, they came around to it.”

Avoiding the ‘Perfect List Trap’

Helping human-service charities, advocates, and experts use the new “frame” for their work falls to Julie Sweetland, FrameWorks’ vice president for strategy and innovation.

“Every time I’ve had a chance to talk to nonprofit communicators about framing,” she says, “they often have an ‘I coulda had a V8’ kind of moment.”

Ms. Sweetland had a similar revelation, back before she joined FrameWorks four years ago. She had long worked in education and felt frustrated by the tired and inaccurate metaphors advocates used to talk about what happens in the classroom. “It was clear to me that talking about students as if they were plants or teachers as if they were superheroes was not particularly productive,” she says.

FrameWorks’ reports on the subject were an epiphany, says Ms. Sweetland, a sociolinguist with a Ph.D. from Stanford. “I was up till 3 in the morning, reading on my iPad. My husband said, ‘What are you *doing*?’ I said, ‘There’s this place, they test metaphors seven different ways! It’s amazing!’”

Too often, she says, nonprofit communicators fall into what she calls “perfect-list trap,” the subject of seemingly endless meetings. “You’ve got the four things that your program does, and you’ve fought over these words,” she says. “And that is a trap, because just a description of something doesn’t explain it to people.”

Instead, she says, she’d like to see nonprofits explain the problem they’re

trying to solve, step by step, and how their work fits into that chain.

Ms. Sweetland adds that philanthropists often gravitate toward communications methods “borrowed from advertising, from marketing, from social marketing” even though selling a cause is not like selling a product.

“Just kind of building brand awareness for a social issue is not the right strategy,” she says.

More in the Pipeline

The FrameWorks Institute office, sleek and modern with exposed pipes and shared workspaces, hums with activity.

Both Mr. Kendall-Taylor and Ms. Sweetland would love to work on an issue much in the news lately: inequality.

“The irony is that inequity is always the second issue we work on when we’re working on something funded by a foundation: criminal justice, immigration, housing,” says Mr. Kendall-Taylor. “But we’ve never had the chance to work on inequity as a lead issue in a project.”

As the subject of heated debate, inequity is in danger of becoming locked in an “us-versus-them kind of frame,” Ms. Sweetland suggests.

And there are plenty of other problems still on their radar as well, she says. “There’s no issue that’s getting it perfectly right.” ■

