



Making the Public Case for Transitional Jobs Programs in Minnesota

A FrameWorks Research Report

Prepared for the FrameWorks Institute

by

Susan Nall Bales

May 2005

This Memo reports on findings from the FrameWorks Institute's recent research on how Minnesotans think about transitional jobs programs, the problems they address and the constituencies they benefit. This work was conducted for Lifetrack Resources, one of the largest private nonprofit employment service providers in the state of Minnesota, and supported by a grant from the Joyce Foundation. Each year, Lifetrack Resources provides employment, early childhood, and rehabilitation therapy services, helping 15,000 people in the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area develop their strengths for independence and self sufficiency.

The overall goal of this effort is to inform public decision-making on transitional work experience programs, on the related structural deficiencies in housing, transportation and education that these programs reveal, and on the employment system that fails to accommodate the needs of this important population. Recognizing that this goal will only be attained if Lifetrack is able to articulate and engage supporters beyond those already converted to the organization's vision, this research was designed to investigate how to tell the Lifetrack story: its mission, its reason for being and the social problems it addresses, its impact and return on investment, and its importance to the broader community. Using the perspective and methods of strategic frame analysis, the FrameWorks Institute conducted qualitative research to help identify the shape and elements of a narrative that has the potential to build a bigger constituency for Lifetrack's vision, programs and policies with respect to transitional jobs. From the outset, a successful story was defined as one that could be demonstrated to engage community influentials in understanding the problems faced by Lifetrack clients and the solutions required to overcome systemic barriers to lasting employment.

Building on earlier work conducted by the FrameWorks Institute and its partners on public perceptions of poverty, race, and low-wage work¹, special attention was devoted in the research design to identifying how to tell the Lifetrack story in such a way that the narrative:

- Avoids negative associations that attach to such related issues as welfare, poverty, and immigration
- Connects to people's deeply held values, exploring the ability of such values as fairness, community responsibility and interdependence to direct people's thinking in positive directions
- Overcomes the exclusive emphasis on individual responsibility that characterizes much American thinking about marginal populations
- Makes clear and coherent the case for multiple actors, including government, employers and nonprofits
- Elevates concern for, and engagement in, prevention and systems reforms as well as remediation services

¹ For most research, see www.frameworksinstitute.org; for research on low-wage work, see www.douglasgould.com.

- Lifts the broad array of interventions, programs and policies that comprise Lifetrack's broader agenda

Following the practice of strategic frame analysis, original research was designed to pursue the following questions:

- How do Minnesotans think about transitional job programs, the populations they serve and the reasons for these services?
- Are there dominant frames that attach to transitional work and appear almost automatic in public reasoning?
- How do these dominant frames direct public choices?
- Are there habits of storytelling, in news media or advocacy, that reinforce these frames?
- How can transitional work be reframed to evoke a different way of thinking, one that illuminates a broader range of alternative policy choices?

The findings reported here result from an integrated series of research projects commissioned by the FrameWorks Institute to explore these questions, based on the perspective of strategic frame analysis. This Memo extends this research by providing another level of more speculative analysis and application to inform the work of policy advocates. Finally, this Memo makes specific recommendations for incorporating these findings into Lifetrack Resources' ongoing communications.

This Memo is not intended to take the place of the research reports which inform it; indeed, FrameWorks strongly recommends that transitional work advocates avail themselves of these reports and challenge their own creativity in applying this learning. Within each report are specific research findings and recommendations offered by the researchers. This Memo differs in that it attempts to look across the full body of research and to interpret these findings from the perspective of a communications practitioner.

FrameWorks wishes to thank Meg Bostrom of Public Knowledge and Axel Aubrun and Joseph Grady of Cultural Logic for the rich body of work that informs this Memo. While this Memo draws extensively from the work of other researchers, the following conclusions are solely those of the FrameWorks Institute.

Strategic Summary

Lifetrack leaders will have to resist the all too real temptation to interpret the FrameWorks research results as requiring nothing more than pumping additional information about Lifetrack into the public square. After all, the main problem presented here is the invisibility of Lifetrack's clientele, the problems they face, and the services provided. The logical answer might appear to be doing more of the same: turning up the volume, and worrying less about the narrative.

This research strongly suggests that such a tactic would be a mistake, for three reasons:

1. If Minnesotans are left to reason about Lifetrack populations within the dominant frame of Work, they will become more likely to assign responsibility to these workers for their own failure and to, at best, define the problem as one deserving of their charity but not their political action nor tax dollars.
2. If they do not revise their identification of the problem that needs to be solved (such as the Economy), the public will continue to mistake the clientele that needs help and to support solutions that do not necessarily benefit Lifetrack.
3. Until and unless interdependence is established, the vulnerability that many people feel about the economy and jobs will result in their competitiveness with Lifetrack's population and not a sense of mutuality.

In short, more of the same will not yield the desired outcomes. It is only by reframing the conversation to be “about” the larger benefits to society of incorporating more people as productive members of society that Lifetrack stands to gain new ground and new supporters.

Additionally, and perhaps counter-intuitively, explanations for Lifetrack's services that are rooted in the economy and its impacts on various populations do little to advance concern and support for Lifetrack's populations.

There is a strong and compelling case to be made for Lifetrack, one that overcomes the problems inherently associated with race, responsibility, work and class -- but it is not an obvious one. This MessageMemo explains why this is so, and how Lifetrack can take advantage of public thinking to build its base.

The Approach

To understand how the public reasons about transitional jobs, the FrameWorks Institute brought together a group of communications scholars and practitioners with a unique perspective on communicating social issues. That perspective – strategic frame analysis – is based on a decade of research in the social and cognitive sciences that demonstrates that people use mental shortcuts to make sense of the world. These mental shortcuts rely on “frames,” or a small set of internalized concepts and values that allow us to accord meaning to unfolding events and new information. These frames can be triggered by language choices, different messengers or images, and these communications elements, therefore, have a profound influence on decision outcomes.

Traditionally, news media is the main source of Americans' information about public affairs. The way the news is “framed” on many issues sets up habits of thought and expectation that, over time, are so powerful that they serve to configure new information to conform to this dominant frame. When community leaders, service organizations and advocacy groups communicate to their members and potential adherents, they have options to repeat or break these dominant frames of discourse. Understanding which frames serve to advance which policy options with which groups becomes central to any

movement's strategy. The literature of social movements suggests that the prudent choice of frames, and the ability to effectively contest the opposition's frames, lie at the heart of successful policy advocacy. A more extensive description of strategic frame analysis is available at www.frameworksinstitute.org.

While strategic frame analysis brings new methods to bear on social issues, this perspective only confirms something that advocates have known for years: communications is among our most powerful strategic tools. Through communications we inspire people to join our efforts, convince policymakers, foundations and other leaders to prioritize our issues, and urge the media to accord them public attention. Every choice of word, metaphor, visual, or statistic conveys meaning, affecting the way these critical audiences will think about our issues, what images will come to mind and what solutions will be judged appropriate to the problem. Communications defines the problem, sets the parameters of the debate, and determines who will be heard, and who will be marginalized. Choices in the way we frame problems associated with transitional work and the solutions that would address the root causes behind these problems must be made carefully and consistently in order to create the powerful communications necessary to ensure that the public will engage in these issues.

When communications is effective, research demonstrates that people can look beyond the dominant frame to consider different perspectives on an issue. When communications is ineffective, the dominant frame prevails. When no dominant frame is available, people tend to rely on "default" frames – less vivid and powerful frames that are, nevertheless, deemed relevant to the discussion and allow people to assign meaning to new information. Understanding this process makes it all the more important that policy experts and advocates understand the likely "default" frames that ordinary people will use in processing new information about transitional work, and that these same advocates are prepared to tell their story using frames that automatically link problems to solutions to policies.

The Research Base

To inform this Memo, the FrameWorks research team completed two related studies:

- Cognitive elicitations, consisting of recorded one-on-one interviews conducted in fall 2004 by professional linguists and anthropologists with a diverse group of twenty average citizens (including two business executives) in Minnesota recruited through a process of ethnographic networking. The goal of this research was to explore the shape of public reasoning about work, transitional jobs, and the problems Lifetrack addresses. The results are published as "Barriers to Public Engagement with Transitional Work: Visibility, Worthiness and Efficacy," Axel Aubrun, Glenn Etter and Joseph Grady/Cultural Logic for FrameWorks Institute, November 2004.
- Four focus groups in Minnesota with engaged citizens (i.e., people who say they are registered to vote, read the newspaper frequently, are involved in community

organizations, and have recently contacted a public official or spoken out on behalf of an issue). These groups took place on two successive evenings in January 2005. Two groups were conducted with urban residents of Minneapolis/St. Paul, divided by education and social class. Two additional groups were conducted with suburban residents, also segregated by education and class. The results are published as “Communities that Work: An Analysis of Qualitative Research Exploring Perceptions of Lifetrack Programs and Policies,” Meg Bostrom/Public Knowledge for FrameWorks Institute, March 2005.

It is on the basis of this body of work that FrameWorks researchers have developed the following analysis and related recommendations for improving the efficacy of communications designed to advance public engagement in transitional work and related policies. While we review key findings from the reports described above, we strongly encourage readers to review the full body of research that informs this Memo, and to refer to the FrameWorks website (www.frameworksinstitute.org) for further background on framing theory and practice.

Situation Analysis

The research for Lifetrack depicts a situation that is all too common among social issues studied by the FrameWorks Institute:

- The social problems Lifetrack addresses are little understood, and therefore the “barriers” to which Lifetrack attempts to call attention do not come easily to mind.
- The people whom Lifetrack serves are largely invisible to most Minnesotans.
- The category of “hard-to-employ” that is used to unify the diverse Lifetrack clientele is not a natural category in most people’s minds.

Given this constellation of incomprehensions, people typically resort to other more robust and available frames to direct their thinking. In the parlance of strategic frame analysis, they “default” to a familiar back up code that provides a convincing and compelling narrative to make sense of this new and unfamiliar information. That is precisely what we see in this body of research. When confronted with information about Lifetrack, its clientele and programs:

- Minnesotans resort to a highly developed and familiar story about work and workers.
- That story narrowly focuses attention on: employee and employer as the only actors in the story; a competent functional adult as the protagonist; the pathway of his career as the plot; and the bad worker as lazy or down and out, lacking “pluck or luck,” respectively, as in the Horatio Alger version of the story.

- The “moral” of this story is that work confers value on the individual and, by contrast, those who do not work are morally lax or deficient.
- The solution to the problem, as driven by this narrative, is to “fix” the individual; in this context, “transformation” is less about learning practical skills that may have been denied in the past and overcoming systemic barriers than it is about developing moral character.
- If individual workers refuse to develop the moral character necessary to triumph over adversity and circumstance, then they have exercised their “choice,” and little can be done by outsiders to change the dynamic: you can lead a horse to water but you can’t make him drink.
- Problems like depression or dyslexia are misunderstood as barriers that can be overcome through force of will, or as “excuses” for not trying harder.
- To provide additional help, in the face of such refusal, is to reward bad behavior; this does not help the individual attain morality nor is it a moral use of community funds. Tough love is a natural outcome of this pattern of thinking.

When reasoning in the Work frame, most Minnesotans have a hard time making sense of the bigger picture scenarios (the economy, the education system, the mental health system) except as a way of offering up additional individual solutions:

- The economy is perceived largely as a force of nature and individuals must find ways to ride it out.
- Job banks and other services are readily available in every community; individuals who want to work can do so by getting better information.
- To improve one’s chances in a tough economy, education is the key.

In light of these findings, the FrameWorks team identified a series of challenges that any effective new story about Lifetrack needed to address.

Reframing Challenges

Reframing refers to the process of identifying and wielding alternative frames of interpretation that, although weaker and less common to people, can nevertheless redirect their attention to different policies or actions. Essentially, reframing changes the lens through which a person can think about an issue, so that different interpretations and solutions become visible and “make sense.”

First and foremost, the FrameWorks team agreed, the reframes for Lifetrack need to shift the focus from individuals to systems. This shift must happen in two ways. The frame must be expanded to take in other actors than employer and worker if it is ever to carve out a role for multiple actors in the solution. And the attribution of responsibility must shift from individuals and groups to the broader community and society. In the following chart, Cultural Logic depicts how different stances or worldviews prime different kinds

of solutions. When Minnesotans think about Lifetrack's programs within the context of a Market Perspective, they become competitive and wonder why they are paying for other people's child care when they can't afford similar services. When Minnesotans think about Lifetrack's programs within the context of a Charity Perspective, they do not see a role for government or public programs in resolving the problems identified. It is only when considering Lifetrack's work from the perspective of the community good that Minnesotans will be able to see the benefits to all from incorporating marginalized workers into the workforce. In order to accomplish this, the reframes must shift attention from individuals to systems.

Reframing Responsibility

- Market Stance – Responsibility for **Me**
- Charity Stance – Responsibility for **Them**
- Community Stance – Responsibility for **Us**

Cultural Logic for FrameWorks

Another equally important challenge for the reframes is that they must position Lifetrack programs as values instillers, not values detractors. Getting people into the workforce should be viewed as instilling the work ethic, and a good investment in the moral health of the community.

Third, the common problems faced by Lifetrack clients – from mental health problems to illiteracy – must be understood by Minnesotans as practical obstacles that can be overcome, not as intractable social problems, moral deficiencies, or excuses. The idea of efficacy – that solutions exist and that Lifetrack has a compelling track record in realizing these solutions – needs to be advanced by the reframe.

Finally, the fact that everyone benefits when marginal populations are incorporated into the society needs to be elevated in order to establish a role for society, and to overcome the sense of vulnerability and competition that many feel in today's job market.

Effects of Speculative Reframes

In light of these findings, FrameWorks chose four speculative reframes to take into the focus group testing, which Public Knowledge developed as news articles to capture the following concepts:

- The Community Frame, in which the program and policies are described as ways to bring people who are at the margins of society into the mainstream, thereby strengthening communities' quality of life;

- The Economy Frame, in which the program and policies are described as ways to improve the state's economy;
- The Community Economy Frame, in which the program and policies are described as ways to improve communities' economies and well-being; and
- The Prevention Frame, in which the program and policies are described as preventive measures that keep manageable problems from escalating into serious crises.

These frames are essentially values primes, that is, they use the lens of a strong and familiar value to prime people to see an issue and related policies in a particular way. However, as we know from a wide array of research in the social and cognitive sciences, there are many frame cues that signal to people how to think about an issue. Those frame cues, if not controlled and integrated into a coherent story, can serve to detract people from the reframe. When fully controlled as supporting devices, consistent frame cues can make the reframe more available and attractive to people – or “good to think,” as our colleagues at Cultural Logic put it. For more explanation about elements of the frame, on which this chart is built, see the FrameWorks Toolkit on this CD-Rom or at www.frameworksinstitute.org.

In the context of framing research, we look to identify promising and compatible frame elements that can help advance the big ideas put forward by the values cues. Thus, a full description of the reframing research is captured by Public Knowledge in the following chart:

	Community Frame	Prevention Frame	Economy Frame	Community Economy Frame
Problem definition	Some are on the edges of society and need to be mainstreamed	Problems go unnoticed at early stages, missed opportunities	Employers needs skilled workers	Communities' economies are weakened when all do not contribute
Goal	Quality of Life	Opportunity for all	Fully skilled workers	Full employment
Level 1 value	Interdependence, Stability, Self-preservation	Prevention	Prosperity	Economic Interdependence
Level 2 category	Community	Society	Economy	Community/Economy
Metaphor/mechanism	Missing pillars	Transformation	Ripple effect	Fit
Messengers	Rotary, Kiwanis, mayor	Itasca Project mental health professional	Economic Devel Dept, Public Utility Exec	City planner, local businesses, business school
Lifetrack Resources organization name	Columbus United	Transformed Lives	Skill Builders	Lifetrack Resources

Additionally, the research team felt it was important to include an example of the common practice of profiling an individual who had been transformed by Lifetrack's programs. A personal interest story, based on a story from Lifetrack's own materials, was incorporated into the Prevention Frame to test the impact of this common storytelling device.

The following section offers a brief description of the focus group results in response to each of these frames. For a more detailed analysis, see "Communities that Work: An Analysis of Qualitative Research Exploring Perceptions of Lifetrack Programs and Policies," Meg Bostrom/Public Knowledge for FrameWorks Institute, March 2005.

(1) Effects of the Community Frame on Perceptions of Transitional Work

"Any time you help people help themselves and become better and become a more productive member of the community, you help the whole community."

Focus group participant, non-college-educated woman, urban group

As Public Knowledge concludes:

"When focus group participants view Lifetrack's program and policies through the lens of a strong community, they are very receptive to assisting marginal populations. In a community mindset, people see their responsibility for acting on behalf of the common good. They understand how the community as a whole benefits and are less likely to feel resentment toward, or competition with, the program beneficiaries. Without question, the Community Frame is an integral component of effective communications on this issue."

Further, this frame:

- Elevates a discussion about quality of life, which is perceived to be diminished for all when too many people in a community are marginalized
- Strongly suggests stability as the goal for community action which, in turn, is in everyone's interest
- Appears pragmatic to Minnesotans, a "no brainer," not ideological
- Translates prevention into practical problem-solving, overcoming the discussion associated with the Prevention Frame in which people focus on whether the situations experienced by individuals could have been prevented in the first place
- Achieves the goal of replacing the market stance (in which people focus on competition for scarce jobs) and the charity stance (in which people focus on helping The Other and the worthiness of that request) with a focus on benefits to an entity (community) of which all are part
- Foregrounds values of contribution, interdependence and inclusiveness or incorporation

- Works well with a civic messenger, who is further able to establish a role for government or public-private partnerships, balancing the observed tendency toward an over-emphasis on individual responsibility for work situations with shared responsibility
- May work even better when proof of efficacy and details about the program are provided

(2) *Effects of the Economy Frame on Perceptions of Transitional Work*

“It’s not just the unskilled. It’s the over-skilled that need to be retrained.”

Focus group participant, college-educated woman, urban group

When reasoning in this frame, problematically, Minnesotans *are less receptive toward assisting marginal populations in achieving job skills*. As Public Knowledge concludes, *this frame should be avoided*.

Further, this frame:

- Reminds people of what they already think about the economy and this preconception does not include the problems addressed by

transitional work (as Cultural Logic noted in explaining the invisibility of Lifetrack’s issues and constituents)

- Confuses the issue with assumptions about Minnesota’s workforce (educated, highly-skilled) which leads people to focus on creating high-quality jobs for these under-utilized workers
- Tends to default to a discussion of where the jobs went and cynicism about whether this could have been prevented, or can now be ameliorated
- Triggers a competitive mind-set in which the universal threat of economic insecurity reduces the issue to a zero-sum game
- Sets up an anti-immigrant backlash
- Makes it more likely that people will attribute responsibility to the individual or employer, not to society
- Confuses the services offered by Lifetrack with job assistance or job training programs for the middle class
- Fails to connect to the policies and programs that Lifetrack supports

(3) *Effects of the Community Economy Frame on Perceptions of Transitional Work:*

“They’re talking about the wrong end of the horse...without the jobs you can train for weeks and years and not get anywhere.”

Focus group participant, college-educated woman, urban group

Reactions to this frame depend upon the extent to which either Community or Economy have been primed before its introduction. When Economy is primed first, this frame suffers the same fate as the

Economy Frame. However, when Community is introduced first, this frame can provide valuable additional support. As Public Knowledge concludes, *this finding provides further substantiation that Community should be the primary frame for communications.* Importantly, the testing of this frame demonstrates the preliminary work that must be done to set the stage for the Community Frame, given the dominance of the economic discussion in news media and its availability in people’s thinking. Put another way, if people default to their ideas about the economy, the Community Frame will be harder to introduce and take hold.

Further, this frame:

- Establishes an important relationship between employment and community stability, which works to Lifetrack’s benefit
- Taps into a common understanding that more people participating in the economy has a ripple effect that positively benefits everyone
- Can quickly devolve into a competition between different groups for jobs
- Reinforces the idea that the kind of services needed are those of an employment agency to help match laid-off workers with existing jobs

(4) Effects of the Prevention Frame on Perceptions of Transitional Work

“On a selfish level, I pay these tax dollars. I want those potholes fixed in my freeway. It’s my tax dollars. I don’t want my tax dollars going to help an addict somewhere.”

Focus group participant, non-college-educated woman.

The concept of prevention is powerful and compelling, Public Knowledge acknowledges, but it easily conflates with individualist thinking about what specific acts could have been taken by specific people to avoid their jobless situations. As such, the power of prevention might be used as a support to the Community Frame – combined with the notion of stability and instability, for example -- but is less than successful on its own in setting up Lifetrack’s programs and policies.

Further, this frame:

- Is deadly when combined with an individual case, leading people to place responsibility for prevention on the individual in a classic blame the victim reaction
- Makes people skeptical about the ability of any program to get ahead of seemingly unpredictable twists of fate or effects of character
- Establishes information as the solution – people could prevent a situation if they had more knowledge in advance (for example, where to find job placement services)
- Tends to obscure “big picture” thinking and to focus attention on the specifics of who, what, when, where – a pattern largely associated with behavioral problem-solving

- Obscures a role for government and society

Strategic Options

Looking across the body of this research, it seems clear that Lifetrack faces a series of strategic choices in framing its issues and programs for public consideration, with consequences for constituency-building resulting from those choices.

The first decision is whether to focus attention at the individual or systems level. By accepting the first option, Lifetrack gains the ability to tell highly particular and memorable stories of transformation and efficacy. Considering this option against the backdrop of framing theory in general, and the specific framing research pursued for Lifetrack, it should be clear that this approach has some obvious limitations as well:

- It is highly inefficient, as each individual's worthiness must be established in order for the public to buy in.
- This style of narrative may already have netted the core constituency that is moved by such stories and is likely to net no new adherents.
- It easily defaults to dominant frames about individual responsibility and work.
- It is likely to set up education as the answer to the need for personal transformation.
- It does not automatically explain a role for government and, indeed, the more it approaches the traditional narrative, is more likely to establish charity as the appropriate domain for solutions.
- It is unlikely to work for all Lifetrack's target groups.
- It easily triggers powerful backlash discussions across a broad spectrum of the public, including anti-immigrant, anti-welfare and anti-government thinking.
- It doesn't serve to educate people about the overall problem of marginalization nor to make coherent the myriad groups that require inclusion.

While it may be easy to realize the inherent problems associated with individualizing transitional work, it is harder to recognize the frames that inadvertently cue this kind of reasoning. Importantly, it is not merely the individual case study that cues up individualist thinking. Focusing on work, the worker, employment, transformation, motivation, personal responsibility, information and prevention all move thinking toward these outcomes. The use of business people as messengers can trigger these associations as well, by narrowing the discussion to the core elements of the Employee and Employer scenario.

But, if systems thinking is preferable to individualist thinking, the dilemma then becomes *what system helps heighten support for transitional work programs and policies.* A logical approach would be to attach transitional work to one of the dominant systems in public discussion: the economy. This approach, however, confuses agenda-setting with framing; that is, it confuses the ability to make news with the ability to move minds. (For more on this distinction, see "Communications for Social Good," S. N. Bales and Franklin D. Gilliam, Jr. for Practice Matters: The Improving Philanthropy Project, The

Foundation Center, 2004 --

http://fdncenter.org/for_grantmakers/practice_matters_08_paper.pdf). By hitching a ride on the economy, FrameWorks research suggests, advocates do not gain ground for Lifetrack programs and policies, for reasons explained above in the section on the Economy Frame.

Again, rejecting the Economy Frame is more challenging than one might think. Given its dominance as an available frame of reference, a disorganized communication is likely to default to economic thinking. That is, when communicators don't do their job of reframing effectively, the Economic Frame is likely to fill in. Further, small frame cues – like mentioning jobs, prosperity, job loss, hard times, downsizing, etc. – will invigorate the full Economic Frame and take people down the wrong mental path.

"It's easy to say, 'go get a job.' These people are not employable. They have a past record. There are not trained. They do not speak English, which really hurts them. They don't have the skills and it's a real problem."

Focus group participant, non-college educated man, urban

Rather, *the system which needs to be explained as the context for Lifetrack programs and policies is Community*. In this frame, Lifetrack must describe work as making a contribution, and turning marginalized populations into productive members of society, which in turn improves the quality of life for everyone. Work becomes a form of participation, a civic act, that should be available to everyone. Strength comes from unity in the shared values-conferring act of work. When framed in this way, the distinctions between the categories of people that Lifetrack addresses become less important than the idea that everyone benefits if more people are included.

We find little room to improve on the recommendations made by Public Knowledge:

- Talk about enhancing the quality of life in communities.
- Quality of life for all is improved by mainstreaming people who are on the margins of society, for whatever reason.
- The values of interdependence and community stability are inferred.
- A mechanism to describe the consequences when some people fall out of the community or when everyone contributes to the community helps people understand interdependence (missing pillars, ripple effect, and fit were borrowed for this research from other FrameWorks projects for which they had been developed).
- Including civic organizations as messengers allows people to see that this is not a government welfare program.
- The economic consequences to the community can be a supporting point for the Community Frame, but it cannot be the leading point, or it will shift the emphasis toward an Economy Frame.
- The preventive aspects of the program and policies can also be a supporting point for the Community Frame, but prevention should not focus on individual situations.

Talking Lifetrack in the Context of Community

In FrameWorks' experience, the Community Frame is often a difficult one for advocates to get their heads around. This is ironic, given the frequency with which FrameWorks finds it to be a useful tool for advancing interdependent thinking on a whole host of social issues. Moreover, this skepticism about or disdain for the value of Community is puzzling, given its prominence in the scholarly literature of social movements and political communications. Political economist Robert Reich includes it in his list of the "four essential American stories" that Americans tell themselves and all political communications must address: "This is the story of neighbors and friends who roll up their sleeves and pitch in for the common good," he writes in *The New Republic* (March 17, 2005). It is the story, Reich says, that FDR "told a nation whose citizens clearly understood they were in it together." Updated for today, it is this frame that explains why providing education and health care to everyone benefits everyone: "If we join together in a Benevolent Community to provide them to every American citizen, all of us stand to gain," Reich asserts. "The rising tide of productivity and wealth will lift the nation as a whole." Here we see a condensed version of the Community Economy Frame, using economic prosperity as a support for Community. In several books that explore this frame, Reich argues that it is precisely because advocates have allowed the Community Frame to atrophy that it has become hard to think and hard to wield – to the great detriment of social services and other vital areas. FrameWorks research suggests that, far from being atrophied in the public mind, Community remains a robust and available frame that can be shown to lift collective responsibility on a host of issues.

Similarly, in a recent article in *Onward Oregon*, Frances Moore Lappe argues that those who advocate for progressive social policies must "show that the more engaged and just a community, the stronger and safer we all are." She writes:

"A 'strong communities' frame might require progressives to stop, for example, talking about the 'environment,' which non-progressives can hear as a 'soft' distraction in war time, and frame ecological challenges as threats 'to safe air and water and food.' We might stop talking about poverty, and alleviating it, which evokes images of do-gooders, and talk about 'fair-chance communities.' Stop talking about reforming criminal justice and talk about results-oriented crime prevention....Let's choose frames that capture what most people intuit: We all share one small – shrinking – planet, and our real hope therefore lies in creating strong communities."

The Benevolent Community, as Reich notes, has too often resulted in a resistance to government in favor of private charity. This is the result when the Community Frame is imbued with charity cues. Lappe's Community Frame is more pragmatic. The recommendation from the FrameWorks research for Lifetrack is toward a Community Frame that puts its emphasis on practical problem-solving. When the Community Frame is combined with a clear definition of the program and its results, the public is strongly

supportive – and, even more important, learns and retains useful information about the issues and the solutions. At the end of the focus groups, people were able to use the Community Frame to explain Lifetrack’s benefits.

Reframing Recommendations

A more extensive set of framing applications is provided to Lifetrack with this MessageMemo. We provide below the core reframing recommendations that emerge from this body of work.

- *Do not begin the communication with profiles of workers, or by narrowly defining the problem as being “about work.”* This will only serve to trip the highly available Work and Workers Frame which, at best, obscures Lifetrack clientele and programs and, at worst, finds them unworthy. Relatedly, don’t (inadvertently) attempt to prove worthiness or appeal to people’s charitable impulses. Both will torpedo the communication.
- *Do prime the discussion as early as possible with the Community Frame, establishing the benefits to all from incorporating marginalized groups as productive members of society.*
- *Reinforce that frame with a mechanism or metaphor that helps people see how everyone benefits when everyone is included.* People need to understand how something works, and the ideas of stability and fit are important foundations for further thinking.
- *Tell stories of efficacy* – but do not tell personal transformation stories. Rather, tell stories of communities and neighborhoods that have been stabilized through programs like these.
- *Try to get multiple actors into the frame,* and avoid tightly framed communications that reinforce personal responsibility or even employer responsibility. Use civic leaders to talk to the benefits that accrue from shared responsibility: public-private partnerships which engage everyone.
- *Use visuals that broaden the perspective* beyond the individual served – show workers in the context of community: library assistants helping elders, medical assistants helping people get treatment, etc. Show people in their communities, participating as regular folks: buying groceries, going to places of worship, fixing up their houses, etc.
- *Champion programs that work,* and describe how these programs actually work and how they result in stronger and more stable communities
- *Avoid reinforcing the cognitive mistakes that people make,* by examining your communication to make sure it does not portray the worker as willful, nor the economy as a force of nature.

Old Story vs. New Story

In considering the implications of the suggested reframe, Lifetrack may want to examine the storytelling practices of collegial organizations which touch on many of the same

issues and populations, asking how their stories could be improved to tell the new story put forward by FrameWorks. Importantly, the FrameWorks research can now be used to help determine which stories Lifetrack wants to emulate and which to reject. That decision should no longer be guess-work or a matter of opinion, but rather driven by a new set of research-based criteria.

As an example, we reviewed the website of Goodwill Industries and selected a handful of stories about work, workers and job programs. Among the stories told were the following:

1. “Outsourcing = Jobs for Omaha Goodwill”
 “Mention the word ‘outsourcing’ and people think of domestic jobs heading to foreign shores. For Goodwill Industries, however, outsourcing means providing affordable, quality labor for American companies while providing good jobs for Americans who want to work.” The article goes on to describe how a banking company turned to Goodwill to find and train workers.

Evaluation: This Economy Frame story reminds people of the tremendous changes in the economy that threaten good jobs. It sets up competitive thinking, and is likely to pit group against group. It is unlikely to make people sympathetic to these workers, especially those feeling financially vulnerable.

2. “Homeless Program Helps Georgia Woman Beat the Odds”
 “The obstacles to a stable life and a sense of well-being were numerous and debilitating for Pensola Parsons. She was an ex-offender with a poor work history. She battled bulimia and 20 years of alcohol abuse. She was homeless, jobless, estranged from her family, and her daughter had been removed from her custody.” The article tells the personal transformation story of Parsons as a result of her participation in an 11 month program. “The ripple effects from her employment are far reaching. Parsons no longer needs public housing and government subsidies. She’s regained custody of her daughter. She’s been clean and sober for three years. More importantly, she exhibits the self-esteem that will help her retain the job. ‘I have my own place and I own my own car,’ she says.

Evaluation: This Personal Transformation Story could have been greatly improved if it had started with the solutions and the impacts on the community, then explained the program that Pensola participated in. As currently written, the problems appear overwhelming and all the attention is directed to the mistakes the individual made and their responsibility for them.

3. “Work Opportunities ‘Pick Up’ for Persons with Disabilities”
 “Motor Messenger Services is a same-day pick-up and delivery service operating in and around New York City. MMS uses cargo vans to transport packages – interoffice letters, student records, computer printouts, public assistance checks and food stamps, biological specimens, blood chemicals, X-rays and even a local newspaper – from one office to another. Since neither the US Postal Service nor

large commercial shipping services (FedEx, UPS) offer this same day solution, companies and government agencies alike find that contracts with MMS are invaluable in managing their ongoing delivery needs. What makes MMS even more unique is the employment opportunity it affords people with disabilities. Each MMS vehicle has a crew consisting of a driver and a helper. All messenger helpers have a disability.”

Evaluation: This story uses an Ingenuity Frame to engage people in seeing the value of new solutions to existing problems – solutions that just happen to incorporate marginal workers. This story is likely to be highly effective because it combines practical problem-solving with the novelty of a new successful business that is doing well by doing good. At the same time, it must work hard to avoid defaulting to charity. It can do that by emphasizing the advantage the company had in assembling a unique workforce, and how the community has benefited as well.

4. “Tough, Supportive Environment Changes Attitudes for the...
“Intensive, confrontational, emotional – not words that one would use to describe a typical career services program. Yet, Seattle Goodwill’s STRIVE program is anything but typical...The premise of STRIVE (an acronym for Support and Training Result in Valuable Employees), is that job candidates sometimes need more than just technical skills to compete in today’s job market...it teaches job eagerness to learn new skills, and a commitment to long-term employment.”

Evaluation: Falls into the trap of framing the problem within the Work and Worker Frame. The problem is inside these defective workers, who need motivation training and tough love to overcome their bad work habits. There’s a strong possibility that people would view this program as coddling, and be resistant to tax dollars funding it.

Conclusion

Rarely in our memory have recommendations been so clear emanating from the qualitative phase of research. While Lifetrack faces a challenge in incorporating these findings into its ongoing communications planning, we feel strongly that these changes can yield long-term benefits for the organization. By moving from a Work and Worker Frame to a systems frame, and by getting that systems frame right, Lifetrack can forcefully position itself as a vital community service from which everyone benefits.

About FrameWorks Institute: The FrameWorks Institute is an independent nonprofit organization founded in 1999 to advance science-based communications research and practice. The Institute conducts original, multi-method research to identify the communications strategies that will advance public understanding of social problems and improve public support for remedial policies. The Institute’s work also includes teaching the nonprofit sector how to apply these science-based communications strategies in their

work for social change. The Institute publishes its research and recommendations, as well as toolkits and other products for the nonprofit sector at www.frameworksinstitute.org.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of FrameWorks Institute.

Please follow standard APA rules for citation, with FrameWorks Institute as publisher. Bales, Susan Nall (2005). *Making the Public Case for Transitional Jobs Programs in Minnesota*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.