Changing the Public Conversation on Family Health, Stability, and Permanency

A Framing Guide for Leaders and Advocates in Child Welfare

FRAME WORKS

Lutheran Services in America

Preface by Alesia Frerichs

Dear Colleagues,

Founded in 2016, Lutheran Services in America (LSA)'s Results Innovation Lab has partnered with more than 50 organizations across 30 states to improve equitable outcomes for children, youth, and families, with a particular focus on strengthening families, preventing child welfare involvement and ensuring that all children and youth have a "safe, stable and permanent family home." In 2023, the Lab reached 15,788 children and families in the United States, for a total of approximately 50,000 impacted since the Lab's inception.

The journey of the Lab has been rich, but we are just getting started. In that spirit, LSA commissioned the esteemed Frameworks Institute to engage our community in a generative discussion about how we can reach new heights and serve more children, youth, and families. Their insights are the foundation for this new framing guide, which is meant to help us all:

- Mobilize a broader set of allies and partners
- Build a stronger case for support
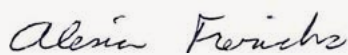- Advance supportive public policy

Our shared values and experiences call us to center the inherent worth and dignity of all people, to focus on the whole family and to recognize and address prejudice, injustice and inequities when and where we see them. I am deeply excited that we now have this new guide to bring even greater focus to our shared work and drive outreach and results for more children, youth, and families.

A few ways you may choose to use the guide (and accompanying training video):

1. **Convene a small group within your organization to discuss the guide's 4 framing recommendations.** Ask yourselves: "Which of these recommendations are we already implementing? Which are new to us? Are there any specific audiences we want to engage more effectively, and how might these recommendations support that outreach?"

2. **Pilot a framing recommendation.** Try incorporating 1 of the 4 framing recommendations from the guide into a current or new initiative and evaluate the outcomes. Ask yourselves: "What changes or effects did we observe after applying this framing approach? How does this compare to the results we've seen from previous framing or communication methods?"

3. **Integrate framing into strategic planning.** Review your team or organization's strategic plan to see if there are framing recommendations in the guide that align with your long-term goals. Ask yourselves: "How can we integrate these framing recommendations into our long-term plans to mobilize partners, build support, and change public policy?"

It's an honor to be in this work with you!

With gratitude,

Alesia Frerichs

Alesia Frerichs | President and CEO | Lutheran Services in America
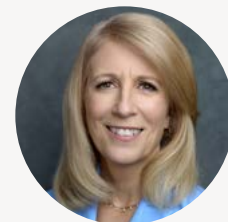
Introduction

The following framing guide was developed in partnership with Lutheran Services in America (LSA), in support of the mission of LSA's Results Innovation Lab to ensure that all children in the United States grow up in safe, stable, and permanent family homes.

The Results Innovation Lab recognizes the key role that providers play in transforming policy and practice in the child welfare system. The Lab engages leaders from the LSA network in active learning collaboratives together with partners from academia, philanthropy, and other sectors to work toward transformative change. Since its inception, the scope of the work in the Results Innovation Lab has reached more than 50,000 children and families.

The framing recommendations provided below build on the Lab's remarkable programmatic and policy accomplishments to date and offer guidance on how to further align and amplify the voices of its many powerful advocates in the work ahead. Specifically, this guide outlines a set of empirically tested tools that members of the Lab, LSA staff, partners, and other communicators can use to accomplish the following goals:

- **Build public understanding** about the structural causes of social problems like child poverty, hunger, and family separation
- **Shift public attitudes** away from harmful associations and racialized stereotypes toward a sense of interdependence and shared responsibility
- **Galvanize broad public support** for the collective actions and policies needed to address social challenges together.

All of the framing tools were developed through rigorous research methods, both qualitative and quantitative, drawn from a range of disciplines across the social sciences. Strategic Frame Analysis™ was used to first identify the *cultural mindsets*—the deeply held and widely shared implicit assumptions—at play, and then to design and test *frames*—alternative ways of presenting key information—that communicators can use to strategically navigate that complex cultural terrain.

Unlike talking points or ready-made messages, which are designed to be adopted verbatim, framing recommendations, like the ones presented here, offer communicators plenty of room for flexibility and creativity within a general set of parameters and guidelines. They can be adapted for use by different messengers and for various audiences across a wide range of formats and channels.

The power of a shared framing strategy is in the persistent and coordinated efforts of many social change advocates working together over time to uproot harmful cultural assumptions and associations and to help more productive, forward-thinking ideas and decisions take hold.

Framing Recommendations

Recommendation #1: Lead with a vision of what's possible, rather than an assessment of what's wrong.

As social change advocates, we spend a lot of time thinking about what needs to change and why. But emphasizing the size and urgency of problems doesn't inspire engagement or motivate action. In fact, it has the opposite effect. To more effectively galvanize public interest and concern, begin your communications with a clear vision for the future—one that we can all aspire to and work together toward.

Here are some examples of how this could look in practice:

Instead of this	Try this
Let's eliminate poverty	Let's promote prosperity
Our top priority is to reduce homelessness	Our top priority is to ensure safe, quality housing for everyone
We need to address child hunger and food insecurity	We need affordable grocery stores in every neighborhood
The goal is to reduce burnout and rates of turnover among caseworkers in foster care programs	The goal is to secure good wages, training, and caseload limits for caseworkers in foster care programs

LSA MEMBER IN THE SPOTLIGHT

The inspiring vision of Pennsylvania-based Gemma Services is to create "A world where every person knows they matter." Each year, Gemma provides individualized support through exemplary education, mental health services in residential and community settings, foster family care, adoption and permanency services, and prevention programs for thousands of individuals.
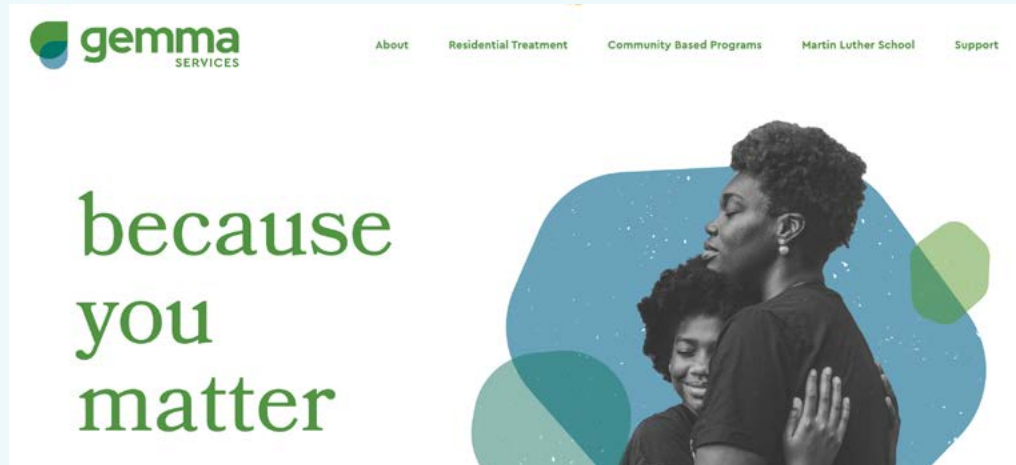

Image courtesy of Gemma Services.

Here's a related framing tool: Appeal to the value of *Fairness*, which resonates broadly across our culture and taps into a shared desire for change.

Values are effective frame elements because they open up space for thinking about how we, as a society, can better live up to our ideals. Invoking the value of *Fairness* invites audiences with a wide range of perspectives and backgrounds to join the conversation. It also signals that the particular topic at hand is important and worth caring about, because it's closely linked to a principle that we all care deeply about already.

Here's an example of how the *Fairness* value looks in practice:

Before	After
Racism is a problem throughout the child welfare system. Harmful policies have led to the disproportionately high involvement of Black and brown families, who experience more separations and fewer reunifications.	To ensure a fair and just child welfare system, we must deliver the same quality of care to all families. We can start by eliminating biased policies that unfairly discriminate against Black and brown communities.

Recommendation #2: Name the structural causes of the problem, rather than focusing on symptoms.

Social issues such as hunger, poverty, and homelessness are extremely complex in nature, and their causes are often misunderstood. Individualistic mindsets and other default patterns in public thinking frequently lead people to assume that families most directly impacted by these issues are themselves to blame. Meanwhile, structural causes—like stagnant wages, inadequate health care, and a lack of available housing—remain largely off the public radar. As communicators, we can build public understanding about the policy choices that have shaped our current social systems, which will not only point us to appropriate preventive measures and structural remedies but also reduce victim blaming.

Here's an example of how it might look in practice:

Before	After
African American children and youth experience disproportionately higher rates of entry into the foster care system, as well as longer wait times before achieving reunification and lower rates of permanency.	Biased policies—for example, those that dismiss the value of multigenerational households—lead to disproportionately higher numbers of African American children and youth in the foster care system.

When communicating about problems and challenges, it's helpful to foreground who or what is responsible instead of who or what is affected.

LSA MEMBER IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Lutheran Family Services of Nebraska recently expanded their service portfolio to include a Fatherhood Initiative aimed at addressing structural barriers to fatherhood. These barriers include low-paying jobs, lack of healthcare options, limited access to public benefits, and a shortage of education programs that teach parenting skills. By tackling these systemic issues, the initiative seeks to create a supportive environment for fathers. The mission of the Fatherhood Initiative is to "guide fathers as they work to re-engage with their children and families." Since its inception, the voluntary program has grown steadily and now reaches 2,400 fathers.
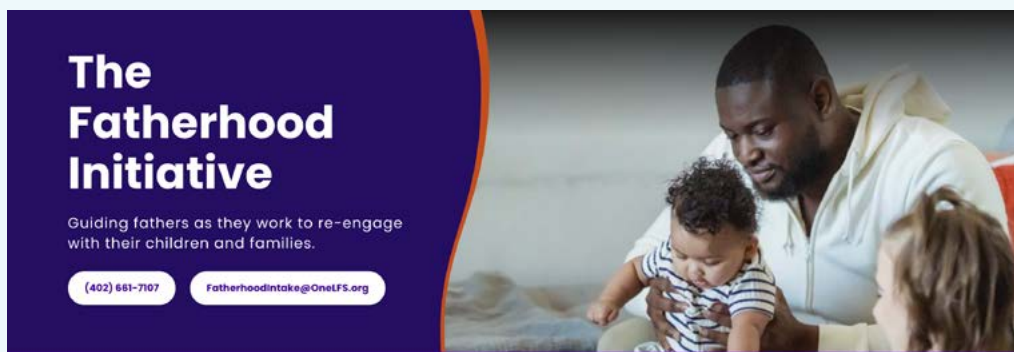

Image courtesy of Lutheran Family Services of Nebraska.

Here's a related framing tool: Use the *Overloaded* metaphor to bring social determinants into view, rather than pointing to "neglect" as a primary cause of family separation.

Many experts understand neglect as a technical term with a legal designation—one that is distinct from abuse and typically associated with oppressive social conditions. The general public, however, tends to view neglect simply as a form of "bad parenting." For this reason, pointing to neglect as a primary cause of family separation is likely to invite scrutiny and even blame on the behaviors of individual parents and caregivers. A better tactic involves using the metaphor of an overloaded truck to highlight the structural factors that increase risk of involvement in the child welfare system.

Here's the idea behind this metaphor:

> *Just like a truck can sputter or break down if it is overloaded with cargo weight, families' capacity to provide the best care for their children can be significantly reduced by financial, health-related, and other sources of stress.*

And here's an example of how it might look in practice…

(Highlighted words and phrases pull out different features of the metaphor.)

Before	After
A majority of children who end up in foster care are removed from their homes due to neglect, not abuse. Neglect is often a symptom of underlying socioeconomic challenges, such as poverty, lack of community resources, and lack of parenting skills, or an underlying mental health or substance abuse disorder.	A majority of child removals are linked to the burdens that weigh on families. Increased housing, food, and health care costs have taken a heavy toll in recent months. These conditions load caregivers down with massive responsibilities and compromise parents' capacity for attentive caregiving.

Make the most of the *Overloaded* metaphor by being as specific as possible about what weighs caregivers down *and* what can be done to lighten their loads.

Recommendation #3: Draw on plain language and familiar concepts to illustrate the interconnectedness of wellbeing.

Experts are clear that child health, family health, and community health are all intimately related. Multiple technical terms and shorthand phrases have been developed for talking about these intricately complex relationships in concise ways. While jargon may streamline communications, particularly among people who share similar interpretations already, it quickly breaks down with broader public audiences who don't have the same familiarity. Simple descriptions and clear explanations are much more effective tools for bridging understanding. The use of plain language is especially important when talking about policies and programs that strengthen wellbeing, which the public tends to view through the lens of competition rather than interconnection.

Here are some examples of how this could look in practice:

Instead of this	Try this
"Whole-family approach"	An approach that considers the interrelated needs of all family members, not just isolated individuals
"Wraparound services"	A range of essential services that together create a solid foundation for health—things like food and housing assistance, substance abuse counseling, and job seekers' support
"Proactive interventions"	Actions we can take to avoid problems down the road by strengthening community ties and improving public infrastructure now
"Resilience"	An ecosystem of healthy relationships and available resources that can buffer the effects of adversity and provide stability through hard times
"Race equity"	Our commitment to eliminating racial disparities wherever they exist by remaking the institutional policies that produce them

LSA MEMBER IN THE SPOTLIGHT

The mission of the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) is to facilitate access to "culturally responsive, trauma-informed, and strengths-based services" for refugees, unaccompanied children, and other people. Here's what that means in plain terms for Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota, an LSA member who receives resettlement funding and supports over 1,500 New Americans each year: "We help new arrivals secure housing, enroll in classes, find employment and connect with the support they need to gain self-sufficiency."

Image courtesy of Lutheran Social Service of Minnesota.

Here's a related framing tool: Use the *Roots* metaphor to explain that healthy relationships are nurtured by supportive environments.

In addition to communicating about the importance of healthy relationships to a vibrant and prosperous society, we often want to convey the reverse as well: societal factors play a critical role in the cultivation and maintenance of healthy relationships. The power of metaphor can help relay this fact. Specifically, the *Roots* metaphor can facilitate productive thinking about the social and environmental conditions that enrich and sustain (rather than weaken or strain) healthy relationships.

Here's the idea behind the metaphor:

> *Just like roots are fundamental to plants' healthy growth, family relationships provide critical connections that support children's healthy development and stability. We can help cultivate children's wellbeing by tending to their root system and nourishing whole families.*

And here's an example of how it might look in practice:

(Highlighted words and phrases pull out different features of the metaphor.)

Before	After
We are committed to ensuring that children will no longer be harmed by the system that was set up to protect them, and that families will no longer be destroyed by the institutions that claim to rehabilitate them.	We are committed to creating a system that nurtures children's healthy development and growth by cultivating and strengthening critical bonds between family members, not severing them.

Using the *Roots* metaphor and associated language helps build public understanding about how healthy social and physical environments support strong, stable relationships, which provide the grounding and nourishment children need to thrive.

Recommendation #4: Highlight the different roles we can each play in advancing large-scale solutions.

Once people understand the structural causes of a social problem as well as its far-reaching implications, they may wonder, "What can I do about it myself?" This is often a well-intentioned question, but it unhelpfully focuses attention at the individual level, pushing needed systemic solutions out of view. We can expand our collective imagination about the possibilities for social change by offering concrete examples of needed policies and other community-level actions, and then naming some different ways that various community members can contribute to them.

Here's a concrete example of how this looks in practice:

LSA MEMBER IN THE SPOTLIGHT

We all know that positive mental health for children and families is key to a stable and vibrant community. In Wisconsin, a coordinated group of community members led by Lutheran Social Services of Wisconsin and Upper Michigan is improving children's mental health across the state. Through a School Centered Mental Health (SCMH) initiative, they're bringing together therapists who can help children process life events and heal from trauma, family coaches who can brainstorm innovative solutions for busy households juggling multiple responsibilities, nurses and other health professionals who appreciate that physical and mental health go hand in hand, and teachers who can provide referrals and connect their students to available resources. The SCMH model is quickly gaining momentum because there's a role for everyone to play—from parents who have experience navigating our social systems and can identify needed improvements to neighborhood residents and local leaders calling for critical policy changes, like expanded Medicaid coverage of these essential programs and services. The SCMH initiative in Wisconsin is proving that we can boost mental health for all our children and create stronger communities for everyone by rallying together around this goal.

Please visit LSA's website to read a full Caring Communities Case Study on this initiative.

Image courtesy of Lutheran Social Services of Wisconsin and Upper Michigan.

Help people see themselves as contributors, collaborators, and members of a wider community—in other words, as civic participants rather than lone actors.

Here's a related framing tip: Feature lived expertise as an essential guide for effective decision-making and public policies.

The sharing of personal stories is sometimes encouraged as a way to reach audiences on an emotional level, or to invoke a sense of urgency—but this tactic routinely backfires. More often than not it actually increases stigma, reinforces harmful assumptions, and perpetuates blame. But lifting up deep insights and valuable expertise gained through direct experience as a way to inform policymaking and improve social systems has a tremendously positive effect.

Linking firsthand perspectives to concrete systemic solutions inspires broad public action while countering toxic stereotypes and weakening harmful negative associations. This

principle is reflected in a question that St. John's United in Montana routinely asks of itself: "Have we consulted those directly affected to understand their needs?" Just as lived expertise should guide and inform our collective decision-making, it should be explicitly named and celebrated in our communications, too.

Here's an example of how this might look in practice:

Before	After
Like many other families, Michelle and Khalid Jones are survivors of the criminal legal system. They have experienced firsthand the harmful effects of incarceration and family separation on children's development, adult relationships, and community stability. The trauma they suffered could have been alleviated by earlier access to behavioral health services for Michelle, who is recovering from drug and alcohol addiction, or a job training program for Khalid, who is taking steps now to rejoin the workforce. More preventive measures like these are needed alongside criminal legal system reforms.	Like other families separated by incarceration, Michelle and Khalid Jones have an intimate understanding of its harmful effects on children's development, adult relationships, and community stability. They also know firsthand that preventive measures—such as behavioral health services, which Michelle has accessed on her path to sobriety, and job training programs, like the one Khalid recently enrolled in—reduce trauma and improve outcomes. As we reform our criminal legal system, their insights gained through direct experience and lived expertise must guide the way.

As in the example above, featuring lived expertise involves portraying directly affected individuals and groups as knowledgeable and capable drivers of needed social action. This is vastly different from portraying them as lone heroes who lifted themselves up after being knocked down, or as recipients of social support in need of being "helped" or "served."

LSA IN THE SPOTLIGHT

LSA's Lived Voices Fellowship supports and elevates the experiences, perspectives, and community initiatives of nonprofit leaders with lived experience on issues as diverse as food security, housing, refugee support, and child and family well-being. Watch this brief video to learn how LSA's Fellowship is using healing, village building, and grassroots skill development to engage and empower lived expertise for systems change.
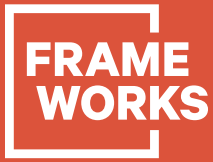

Image courtesy of LSA.

Conclusion

Taken together, the framing recommendations provided above can help Results Innovation Lab members, LSA staff, partners, and other communicators productively shift the public narrative on children and families. By adopting a shared framing strategy—and adapting it as needed for various audiences, regions, contexts, and topics at hand—we can amplify one another's voices and elevate calls for change. Together we can weaken harmful assumptions and negative stereotypes that lead to misplaced blame for social problems, and we can cultivate a greater sense of hope and collective responsibility among all members of society.

With a new narrative comes the potential for new thinking, more effective community-level decision-making, better public policies, and most of all, tangible improvements in people's lives. The core commitment of the Results Innovation Lab is to work alongside service providers to "activate local community stakeholders toward achieving systemic changes that will lead to more positive and equitable outcomes in the lives of all children and families in the United States." This Framing Guide, produced through close partnership between Lutheran Services in America and the FrameWorks Institute, was created in direct service to that commitment and in support of LSA's broader social change mission.

Endnotes

1. Frameworks Institute. (2024). *Connections and Communities: Reframing How We Talk About Opportunity Youth*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute. https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/resources/connections-and-communities-reframing-how-we-talk-about-opportunity-youth/

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3. Hendricks, R., L'Hôte, E., Volmert, A., & O'Neil, M. (2018). *Reframing Hunger in America: A FrameWorks Message Brief*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute. https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/resources/reframing-hunger-in-america/

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