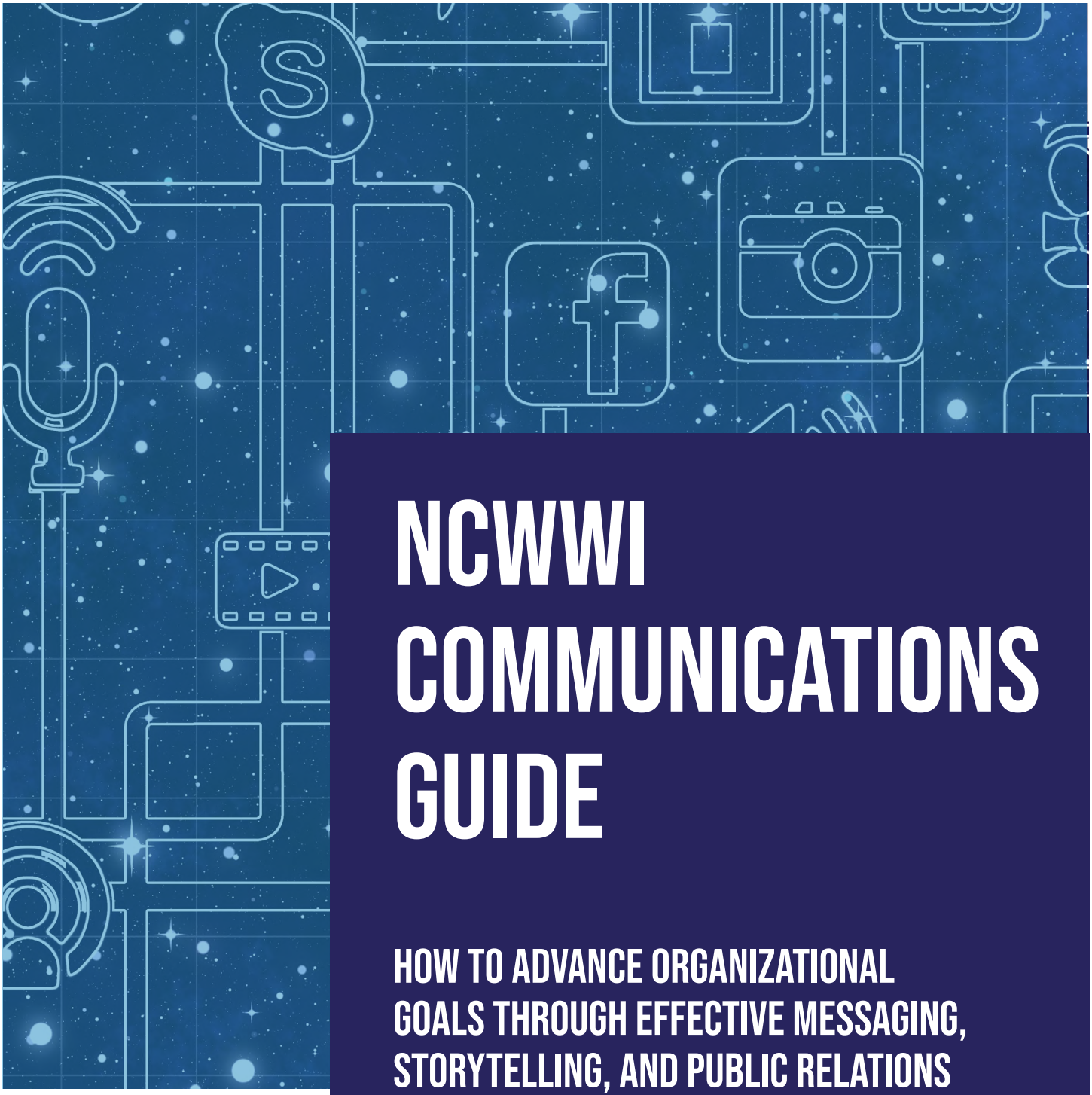

NCWWI COMMUNICATIONS GUIDE

HOW TO ADVANCE ORGANIZATIONAL GOALS THROUGH EFFECTIVE MESSAGING, STORYTELLING, AND PUBLIC RELATIONS

National Child Welfare Workforce Institute

LEARNING, LEADING, CHANGING

OVERVIEW

The NCWWI Communications Guide (the Guide) helps child welfare programs' initiate or improve their existing communications strategies to build public support, strengthen the workforce, improve partnerships, increase community collaboration, and enhance perceptions. Communication strategies support sustainable systemic change in service of equitable and just outcomes for children, youth, and families.

The Guide illustrates:

- Positive impacts of communication and public relations efforts for child welfare programs.
- Examples of how to shift the narrative about child welfare programs.
- Strategies to develop messaging that will resonate with audiences.
- Suggested channels and products to get the word out.

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THE IMPACTS OF IMPROVED COMMUNICATION

Child welfare professionals support families experiencing violence, racism, mental health challenges, trauma, substance use, homelessness, and poverty. The work is far from glamorous. The hours are long, the pay is low, and it comes with safety risks, heaps of paperwork, traumatized children and parents, and public scrutiny. But despite pressures and challenges most people would find utterly overwhelming, child welfare workers find engaging families and children deeply meaningful. For many, it is a calling.

Child welfare work is important, but chances are it is only visible to members of your community when tragedy occurs. That's a problem. A better understanding of child welfare among the general public and community organizations can:

BUILD SUPPORT | Everyone who understands what you do is a potential advocate. Through effective communication, more people will see that child welfare professionals are:

- Tackling new challenges daily to prevent child abuse and strengthen families.
- Providing critical care during a family crisis, often at a moment's notice.
- Partnering to provide preventive services to the most vulnerable families in the community.
- Key partners with community groups, government agencies, universities, and others working to combat racism and improve programs, practices, and educational preparation of the workforce.

This NCWWI infographic describes the important role child welfare workers play in their communities and what individuals can do to support families in their community.

STRENGTHEN THE WORKFORCE | Child welfare work has a higher turnover rate than other service professions. While that is partly due to the sheer difficulty of the work, **research shows** public perception does influence a worker's job satisfaction (National Child Welfare Workforce Institute [NCWWI], 2019). Telling stories that show the impact and incredible importance of child welfare professionals in their community can help the public understand the daily challenges and complicated decision-making involved in the work. These efforts help your workers feel valued and build mutual and reciprocal respect between staff and the community. Reframing the public's understanding of child welfare work will support your workforce development efforts as **decreasing turnover saves time and money, improves morale among retained employees, and leads to better outcomes for children and families** (NCWWI, n.d.a).

IMPROVE PARTNERSHIPS | The complex community issues addressed by child welfare programs cannot be solved in isolation. It requires concerted, collective efforts among all stakeholders to build systems of family support and community-based child protection. Stakeholders can include the judicial system, university partners, resource parents (e.g., kinship, foster, or adoptive parents), former child welfare-involved families and youth, non-profits, health care, education, housing, childcare, and others. Communication is just one element that will contribute to success. To learn more about how to build better partnerships in your community, view our 12-minute free online course, **Partnership for Sustainable Change.**

INCREASE COMMUNITY COLLABORATION | Speaking at community events (parent-teacher association meetings, advocacy groups, state and local councils, legislatures, boards of education, etc.) allows audiences to get to know people in the agency, interact, and ask questions. These are opportunities to educate the community on issues surrounding child welfare involvement, and encourage collaboration with child welfare programs to improve outcomes for children, youth, and families in their community. Increased community collaboration is especially important for communities of color and tribal communities, who experience child welfare interventions disproportionately. To learn more, visit **Child Welfare Information Gateway's resource page** on this topic.

CHANGE PERCEPTIONS | Sharing the inspiring stories of real people – real caseworkers and the families they serve – can change perceptions, help reduce stigma, and grow your program's connection to your community. Research by Dr. Paul Zak found storytelling leads to a surge of oxytocin in listeners' brains, which is the neurochemical responsible for empathy (Monarth, 2014).

> When a person tells a story and shares their experience face to face with someone, the listener can "see" the person's experience. And when a listener can "see," there is then a greater likelihood that they can relate emotionally to what the person is talking about. This is empathy in action, and it is a crucial step in perceiving the impact of regulations, policies, and laws on the lives of people."
>
> (WARREN & LUZ CORDEL, 2018)

CHANGING THE NARRATIVE FOR CHILD WELFARE WORKERS

Your strategy should focus on communicating the larger narrative (or commonly held ideas) around the work of child welfare. Understanding that narrative, and how your voice can influence it, creates successful messaging. Narratives are commonly held ideas about people and society, which result from the language, stories, and messages we hear every day from many different sources. We use narratives to make sense of the world: we rely on them as a means of ordering, simplifying, and attributing meaning to the information we receive and the events we experience. Narratives are powerful because they have the potential to influence the beliefs and behaviors of individuals and shape institutional practices (ORS Impact, 2019).

Unfortunately, the existing narrative around child welfare workers doesn't reflect the reality of the work. Typically, the workforce is only in the headlines following tragedy (Briar-Lawson et al., 2011). In reality, child welfare workers support families and make positive impacts in their communities every day. That work doesn't make headlines as easily. Through storytelling and other communications, we can shift the predominant narrative to build a groundswell of support for the work of the child welfare community.

In thinking about changing the narrative for child welfare (The Narrative Initiative, 2019):

1. Internally, articulate both the new narrative and the existing, dominant one.
2. Share the new narrative in many places (website, social media, posted at offices), in many ways (poster, infographic, video, 1-pager, etc.), to many audiences. Be sure to track your efforts.
3. Assess whether the new narrative has been put into practice and widely adopted. Keep doing what is working, adjust the strategy to improve practice, and keep going until the new narrative becomes the dominant narrative.

> Data can persuade people, but it doesn't inspire them to act; to do that, you need to wrap your vision in a story that fires the imagination and stirs the soul."
>
> (MONARTH & KASE, 2007)

SAMPLE STORY IDEAS TO HELP SHIFT THE NARRATIVE

SUCCESS STORIES | Success stories share specific cases that have positive outcomes for children and families. These stories may have extraordinary or unusual circumstances, but overwhelmingly highlight the incredible impact that a child welfare worker can have on families in the community. These can be families or individuals currently receiving assistance or who have received assistance in the past.

Examples:

- **Intensive Coaching, Group Therapy Helped California Foster Youth at Risk for Homelessness, Chapin Hall Study Shows**
- **Kansas Foster Care Agency Trains Social Workers To Be 'Personal 911 System' For Kids**
- **Graduation Rates Soar for Youth in Georgia Foster Care**

INNOVATION IN ACTION | Has your agency implemented innovative new ideas that go above and beyond what the average person normally thinks child welfare workers do? Have these ideas fundamentally changed how you're able to serve children and families in your community, for the better? Share them! Showing ways that you innovate and sharing positive results creates impactful stories that build greater awareness and understanding of what you do.

Examples:

- **Social workers, child-welfare services fight for child safety and family support during COVID-19**
- **New Mexico and neighboring tribes launch Binti Software to Modernize Child Welfare Services**
- **New lab trains welfare workers who probe child abuse claims**

POLICY IMPACT | Has there been a recent change in local, state, or federal policy that has affected your cases in a positive or negative way? Leaders need to know the implications of their decisions, and as the true experts in the field, only you can share how new regulations may or may not be working.

Example:

- **Want to stop the turnover among child welfare workers? The Pa. House can pass this important bill**

MESSAGING

WE ARE CHILD WELFARE CAMPAIGN

To support your efforts, NCWWI and the Children's Bureau are running the "We Are Child Welfare" campaign. This campaign is an opportunity to begin a conversation about how we must all work together to improve outcomes for children, youth, and families. It is also an opportunity to explain the broad scope of work that child welfare workers perform to support families. On the website, **NCWWI.org/WeAreChildWelfare**, you will find sample messaging and graphics. We recommend customizing these messages and encouraging others (e.g. mandatory reporters, schools, doctors, hospitals, churches, community partners) to post some of these materials.

CRAFTING THE MESSAGE

Investing time to craft messages specific to your agency's program will pay off when staff can quickly and consistently demonstrate your child welfare program's values and mission to any audience. These messages serve as a guide when preparing a response to reporters, updating presentations, developing fact sheets for partner organizations or elected officials, and even in individual visits with children and families.

Ideally, your key messages should be a set of simple statements that include the following:

- Simply stated, conversational explanations of what you do.
- Data on the number of families and children you serve and where.
- Quotes from families or stakeholders that demonstrate impact.
- Your program's vision and goals for the future.
- Information on key partnerships and programs that help achieve your goals.

The following are insights on how to develop meaningful messages (Welcoming America, n.d.):

PERCEPTION OUTWEIGHS REALITY

A person's opinion isn't based on reality—it's based on their perception of reality. Listen to and accept your audiences' perceived reality, then craft your messages to resonate with it, and use these new messages to reshape perception.

EMOTION OUTWEIGHS LOGIC

Logic supports our emotions and is used to justify our decisions, but research indicates we usually apply logic only after we've made our emotional decisions. Logic plays a part in decision-making, but emotion is always the main ingredient. Emotions inspire people to get passionate about your cause. Appeal to your audience's emotions first and you'll win them over.

BREVITY OUTWEIGHS PRECISION

You don't need to accurately describe every issue or idea in your messaging. And in a world where we've grown increasingly accustomed to sound bites and 280-character tweets, you won't have enough attention time to do so. Use the few moments of attention people give you to convey what is essential about the work you're doing.

VALUE OUTWEIGHS FEATURES

Above everything else, child welfare work is founded on values. Don't talk up programs and services that may not matter to your entire audience; talk about the core values that animate your work - values that your audiences share.

VIBRANT LANGUAGE OUTWEIGHS JARGON

Whenever possible, use clear and concise (and emotional!) language to make sure your audience can understand and connect with your message.

ACTION OUTWEIGHS MAGIC WORDS

Smart messaging expresses action; messaging isn't magic, and it can't take the place of good practices or programs. Good messaging can't undo or reverse bad deeds. People can tell if your actions don't line up with your words.

YOUR AUDIENCE OUTWEIGHS YOU

Chances are, you (and your staff) are not the audience you need to influence. You and your closest stakeholders are immersed in the work and already bought in. Your messaging is crafted to help you reach people who are not yet engaged. It needs to resonate with their perspective and answer for them, "So what?"

Another important way to gain insight into the messages you're developing it to involve stakeholders so that different perspectives can hone the message to perfection. This also gives you an opportunity to find and gain champions — like a front-line worker, mandatory reporter, judge, and/or attorney — that are on the same page and will carry your message forward.

WHERE TO BEGIN

When drafting your messaging, start simple: Identify three messages that you want to make sure any audience remembers. Those messages support your Single Overriding Communications Objective or SOCO.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (n.d.) describes SOCO in the following way:

We've all experienced the speaker who presents way too much information in a condensed amount of time - most of it over our heads. Or we've seen a TV talk show guest who has two minutes to get a point across, but loses the opportunity because the interviewer led them away from the core message.

An audience retains one to two key messages from a speech or presentation. So, you must maximize the time you have with your audiences. To use your time efficiently and ensure that your audience understands and will remember your key points, develop a SOCO - single overriding communications objective - for your presentation.

YOUR SOCO:

- Will help you organize your thoughts. After that, if necessary, you can develop a more focused set of messages that tie your SOCO to an individual speech or presentation.
- Is the reason you do a presentation or interview. If you stay true to your SOCO, there will be no doubt in the audience's mind about what you stand for, how you want them to think, and what you want them to do.
- Can help you apply the "KISS" principle - Keep It Short and Simple. Only a small percentage of what is heard is retained. Make sure what you say is brief and to the point.

Example:

Child welfare workers are part of the fabric of their communities, connecting families to services that keep them safe, stable, and healthy. They are a concrete support in trying times and constantly innovate to meet the unique needs of every family and child they serve.

BEYOND THE SOCO: COMMON MESSAGE THEMES IN CHILD WELFARE

After establishing a SOCO, consider additional messaging that addresses key points for specific audiences, answers the questions you get most often about your work, or could help dispel false narratives about child welfare. The following themes can serve as a starting point for your messaging. Feel free to customize as necessary to meet your needs and match your realities.

What do child welfare workers do? Child welfare workers connect, support, and lead.

Child welfare workers are a critical connection to services and supports that keep families safe, stable, and healthy. Child welfare workers help families resolve conflict and intervene in cases of potential abuse or neglect, providing concrete supports in difficult times. They are building coalitions of community partners with the goal of meeting the unique needs of the families they serve.

Child welfare workers are there in times of crisis.

Similar to emergency responders, child welfare workers are called to duty at all hours. They are trained to support families through the most difficult circumstances, and they continue to do this hard work because they want to ensure the safety of children and families in their community.

Supporting the child welfare workforce is critical to decreasing turnover.

Child welfare workers support families through the most difficult situations, and research shows child welfare workers experience burnout at a higher rate than other helping professions. Our program is working to change that by building a more supportive organizational climate. That work includes setting caseload limits and reducing paperwork, establishing self-care plans for all staff, and using a trauma-informed lens to better support individuals who are providing critical support to families in our community. Workers who perceive themselves as being effective are also more likely to remain on the job.

Supporting child welfare workers means more positive outcomes for families.

Child welfare work has a higher turnover rate than other service professions. While that is partly due to the sheer difficulty of the work, research shows public perception does influence a worker's job satisfaction. Reducing turnover increases the chances of stability for families and permanency for children, improves the timeliness of investigations, ensures greater contact between children in care and their families, and supports effective service delivery since workers develop greater knowledge and skills over time. These improved outcomes underscore the importance of the need for greater support and understanding from our peers and the public.

PREPARING MESSAGES TO ANSWER TOUGH QUESTIONS

It is also important to develop statements on challenging topics. Having statements already approved by organizational leadership means you can adapt quickly in any communications scenario.

RACIAL EQUITY | Social justice is at the core of social work, but families and children of color involved in today's child welfare system experience worse outcomes as compared to white families. This is also true for indigenous families and their children. We and our colleagues are dedicated to eliminating disparities. We are taking a hard look at the data and our policies, programs and practices to identify actions that will improve outcomes. We are strengthening relationships with our community partners to reach our shared goal of racial equity, meaning racial identity no longer predicts how someone will fare in the child welfare system and beyond.

PANDEMIC RESPONSE | The health and safety of children and families in our community is always our number one priority. Child welfare workers are nimble, adapting quickly in any scenario to connect families with the services they need. The same is true during the COVID-19 outbreak. Along with following all government health guidelines, child welfare workers are using technology to come up with unique ways to keep children engaged with their loved ones during this time of social distancing.

CHILD FATALITY OR CRITICAL INCIDENT | The health and safety of children and families in our community is our top priority. We are heartbroken and our thoughts are with the child's loved ones. Our program will be working closely with all agencies and officials throughout their investigations. Following any situation in which a child experiences harm, we conduct a full internal and external review examining practice, supervision, communication, and compliance with all laws and protocols. Our program is committed to serving all vulnerable children and families in our community and continually working with our partners and advocates across the region to improve outcomes for all.

WHEN TO USE THESE MESSAGES

The short answer? Always. Establishing messaging creates consistency through all communications that will build a clear, well-defined reputation in your community. Consider keeping your core messaging in an easily accessible document and review it prior to:

- Introductory meetings with anyone unfamiliar with child welfare or your program.
- Public presentations.
- Media outreach in any form, including interviews, written statements, or news releases.
- Digital communications such as social media, websites, etc.
- Meetings with university partners

CUSTOMIZING MESSAGES TO THE AUDIENCE

Be sure to consider your audiences carefully and tailor your messages to fit. Effective communication builds on meeting your audience where they are and relating the information to their needs and goals. It may be helpful to revisit your messaging document to map out which pieces of the messaging may resonate most with each group and to ensure the messaging addresses any common questions or misconceptions.

If you're thinking 'my audience is the general public,' think again – specificity matters in communicating successfully.

Priority audiences are those directly affected by a policy/initiative, or have a stake in or can influence the outcome (e.g. legislators, community partners, university partners, those involved with the child welfare system).

To identify your priority audiences, ask these questions:

- What is the desired outcome and who is most likely to take the desired action?
- Who do we need as allies to help achieve our goals?
- Who do we interact with most frequently?
- What other groups would benefit from our work?
- What keeps organizations or individuals from working with us?

To truly customize your messages, child welfare programs must connect with their communities to show that your child welfare program is part of it. Listen to various audiences (community members, stakeholders, program participants, etc.) to better understand their concerns, needs and priorities. Check out our 4-minute microlearning, **Open to All Voices,** which reviews the competencies necessary for working effectively with stakeholders.

GETTING YOUR MESSAGE OUT

THE RIGHT CHANNELS

It's not just what you say and how you say it – where you say it matters, too. Once you've polished your message, have a good grasp on your priority audiences, and have ideas for stories and content, the next step is to find the right channel to share your message with the world. Stay focused on your intended audience: Where do they receive information, what do they read, what meetings and events do they attend. The answers to these questions are all potential communication channels for reaching them. Below are the channels we consider key to the child welfare field.

SOCIAL MEDIA | Social media offers a powerful tool to increase awareness, spur engagement, and build peer-to-peer influence by developing your program as a thought leader. To be successful on a platform (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram), it's not enough to publish an occasional post with a beautiful graphic or poignant copy and stop there. An account with outdated content or one that shows unanswered questions from followers can harm your program's reputation. It's better to start small – perhaps just with one channel – and devote your energy only to platforms that you can realistically maintain on an ongoing basis. In the additional resources section, you'll find a tip sheet on how to effectively utilize social media.

WEBSITES | An effective website is the most important aspect of your overall digital presence. Your website must tell your audience who you are and how you support the community. Your audience needs to find information easily on the website, for example: Can someone quickly find out how to

report child abuse? How to support families in their community? Who to call if interested in writing a media story? In the additional resources section, you'll find a tip sheet on effective websites.

MEDIA | Media organizations all need one thing: good stories. The components that make a good media story are the same things that make up any good story – a narrative with a beginning, middle, and end that deliver a clear message.

And with a little work, you can give them one that can dramatically raise your profile, help people understand what you do, and demonstrate your leadership.

Beyond the narrative, news organizations will also look for timeliness, relevance, proximity, oddity/novelty, prominence, and/or conflict. For instance, a child welfare worker paying visits to children from her car while dressed in costume during the COVID-19 pandemic becomes a news story, because it is timely and relevant (connects to current events). To learn more, view the additional resources on media.

THE RIGHT PRODUCTS

To distribute the message widely, create products that support your message, are tailored to your intended audience, and formatted to the right channel. Use the factors above and the product strengths below, to determine the ideal product.

Product	Description	Strengths
Infographic	• Conveys content at a glance through use of graphics, illustrations, data visualization, and/or hierarchy of information • Variety of formats: mixed charts, informational/list, timeline, how-to, process (most popular), comparison, location, photographic, hierarchical, single chart, Venn diagrams, data visualization **Tip:** Start with a good "why"' question	• Audience can quickly process information and implications
Graphic	• Conveys content at a glance **Tip:** To make affordable, professional images, use free programs like Canva.com	• Conveys content visually • Great for social media posts and websites
1-Pager/Fact Sheet	• Concise overview of topic, program, and/or data/facts **Tip:** Choose when need to use more text than is appropriate for an infographic	• Conveys complicated content using plain language so audience can quickly process information and implications
Video	• For maximum digestibility, we recommend <10 minutes • Variety of uses: announcements, interview/Q&A, how-to/process, live streaming, user-generated content, training, sharing successes / lessons learned **Tip:** To make affordable videos use photos, captions, graphics, audio, and music instead of live footage which is more costly	• Relatable • Discussion-generating • Viewable on all devices (e.g., mobile, desktop) • Great way to tell stories of transformation

MEASUREMENT

ARE WE HAVING AN IMPACT?

Ultimately, public relations and communication efforts come down to results. Is our work helping us meet our goals? Are we reaching the intended audience? Does the public perceive the child welfare program the way we want them to? Possible outcomes that could indicate changes include:

- Increased visibility and/or recognition across different forms of media
- Messengers have increasing visibility and authority
- Issue increasingly framed in desired ways across different forms of media
- Changes in people's attitudes or beliefs
- Changes in policies and/or systems
- Increase in volunteers
- Increase in donations

To know for sure, you'll need to develop a plan to track your communications efforts and determine their effectiveness. For assistance in developing an evaluation plan, we recommend reviewing **"Are We There Yet"** A Communications Evaluation Guide. Another resource for evaluation, could be your university partners. Finally, be sure to re-engage your internal and external stakeholders to learn if what you are doing is resonating, and to share the success of the messages that they helped develop.

A FINAL WORD

We hope this guide has helped you to think about your role in changing the narrative about child welfare and will help you to share information about child welfare with your community. It will take all of us around the country to fully engage diverse voices to build public support, strengthen the workforce, improve partnerships, increase community collaboration, and improve perceptions of child welfare. Thank you for joining with us in these efforts to achieve sustainable systemic change in service of equitable and just outcomes for children, youth, and families. We encourage you to view the additional resources provided below and to visit our website, **NCWWI.org,** for additional workforce development tools and products.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

NCWWI.org/files/SocialMediaTips.pdf

NCWWI.org/files/VideoTips.pdf

NCWWI.org/files/WebsiteTips.pdf

NCWWI.org/files/MediaTips.pdf

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This publication represents a collaborative effort with meaningful contributions by C+C Communications, Michelle Clinch, Sharon Kollar, and Sarah Roman. Thoughtful feedback by NCWWI staff, NCWWI Advisory Board members, and the Children's Bureau ensured this product met the needs of the field. Funded through the Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau, Grant # HHS-2018-ACF- ACYF-CT-1350. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the funder, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the US Department of Health and Human Services. Special thanks to Rebecca Huffman, Children's Bureau Project Officer, and Robert Lindecamp, Child Welfare Program Specialist (CB/ICF), for their support.