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Personal Narratives as Advocacy Tools

This document details how personal narratives can reinforce research and data when advocating for policy changes. The Environmental Health Project (EHP) has created a comprehensive plan intended for community leaders to share with their local residents. This plan details the process of collecting personal narratives and presenting them to the public, as well as to policymakers, to effect positive change. By incorporating personal narratives into their advocacy campaigns, communities can expect to strengthen their campaigns and expand awareness of their cause. For questions about this document, please contact EHP.

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INTRODUCTION

What are Personal Narratives

Personal narratives are stories that depict first-hand experiences. In the context of advocacy campaigns, a personal narrative may be a story from a local resident who has experienced negative health impacts from a nearby shale gas facility. While “narrative” typically refers to a written story, personal narratives can be presented in a variety of forms including letters, photo essays, videos, and more.

How to Use Narratives Effectively

Personal narratives balance data-driven advocacy campaigns with emotional appeals. Datum tells policymakers, “this is happening.” A personal narrative tells policymakers, “this is happening to me.” Additionally, by personalizing collected data, communities can provoke emotional responses from the public, thereby garnering more public support and amplifying their collected voice. With a strong public support base, communities can more effectively persuade policymakers.

Effective narratives are personal, descriptive, and honest. These factors are crucial in creating strong advocacy campaigns. Narratives and data should be used to complement one another. While data provides at-a-glance facts and numbers, narratives provide detailed examples of what that data looks like within local communities.

Cindy Valent and Janice Blanock are two individuals whose [personal narratives](#) were used as tools for advocacy. Valent and Blanock went to Harrisburg equipped with the personal stories of their sons’ deaths from Ewing sarcoma and convinced Governor Tom Wolf to fund a cancer study in Pennsylvania.

COLLECTING NARRATIVES

Finding and Interviewing Sources

The best sources of personal narratives within advocacy campaigns are those who have personally and directly experienced concerning events.

When searching for sources, community leaders may find that many of their local residents are concerned about publicly sharing their stories, particularly if those stories are likely to be shared on social media or public websites. The use of pseudonyms should be considered in order to collect more stories and to protect the identities of those willing to share them.

To gauge residents’ interests in sharing their stories, EHP has created a Personal Narrative Interest Survey (attached). This survey should be distributed in paper or electronic form by community leaders to local residents.

Personal Narrative Interest Survey

Shale gas activity may be negatively impacting the health of [Community Name] residents.

Shale gas activity has been linked to a variety of health problems, including nausea, headaches, migraines, nosebleeds, asthma, COPD, lung cancer, cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure, stroke, birth defects, psychological distress, and more.

In partnership with the Environmental Health Project (EHP), a nonprofit organization dedicated to defending public health in the face of oil and gas development, [Community Name] has installed air quality monitors in our local community. EHP regularly analyzes data collected by these monitors and presents their findings to our community leaders.

To learn more about EHP and its air monitoring program, please visit their [website](http://environmentalhealthproject.org) (environmentalhealthproject.org) or contact them at info@environmentalhealthproject.org or (724) 260-5504.

For those of you who have experienced negative health impacts that may be associated with nearby shale gas facilities, we encourage you to share your story. By combining local residents' stories with the data collected by EHP, we can more effectively persuade local policymakers to protect the health of [Community Name] residents.

If you are interested in sharing your experience, please complete the survey included on the back side of this page. Surveys can be returned to:

[Drop-off Location Name]
[Drop-off Street Address]
[City, State, Zip Code]

or

[Community Leader Name]
[Mailing Street Address]
[City, State, Zip Code]

or

[Email Address]

Thank you for your support of our local community.

Personal Narrative Interest Survey

First and Last Name:

Email address:

Phone number:

Please provide a brief description of your experience:

Would you prefer to share your experience under your own name, or under a pseudonym (fictitious name)?

- I would like to use my own name.
- I would prefer to use a pseudonym.

Are you willing to also share your experience with EHP?

- Yes
- No

How do you prefer to be contacted?

- Email
- Phone

***Please return this survey to one of the addresses listed on the reverse side.
For questions, please contact [Community Leader Name] at [Contact Info].***

Interviewing Sources

Once a Personal Narrative Interest Survey is returned, a community leader should first determine whether or not the interested resident is willing to share their experience with EHP. If not, the community leader should contact the interested resident directly to schedule an interview, which the community leader will host. Interviews should ideally be conducted in person, virtually, or by phone.

If the interested resident is willing to share their experience with EHP, EHP's Digital Marketing Coordinator should be contacted directly by the community leader. The Digital Marketing Coordinator will then work with the community leader and interested resident to schedule and host an interview, as well as assist in completing the personal narrative.

Interview Tips

While hosting an interview requires thoughtful planning, it is important to consider an interview as a fluent conversation, rather than a Q&A session. Below are a few additional tips to keep in mind when preparing for and hosting your interviews.

- Do some research

As a community leader, it's likely that you already have a good grasp on local events, but you may not be familiar with your interviewee. Learn what you can about them through simple internet searches and use their Personal Narrative Interest Survey to get a better idea of where they live in your community and what shale gas facilities or environmental factors may be most impacting them.

- Share foundational questions prior to the interview

Use the information provided by your interested resident on their Personal Narrative Interest Survey to develop foundational questions for your interview. When communicating with the interested resident to schedule your interview, feel free to share these questions with them. This allows your resident time to consider their answers and the direction or themes of the interview beforehand, which will likely lead to more thoughtful responses during the interview.

- Remind your interviewee of the purposes of their narrative

When scheduling your interview, as well as at the beginning of your interview, remind your resident that their story will help your community better defend itself from the health impacts of shale gas activity. Reminding your interviewee of this will help provoke useful quotes and focused details to coordinate with your advocacy campaign.

- Be patient and express gratitude

Remaining patient in an interview — allowing for longer pauses — offers an opportunity to your interviewee to further elaborate upon areas of their story. Additionally, be sure to express your gratitude to your resident for sharing their story at every step of the process, including the scheduling of the interview, the interview itself, and any follow-up communication. Their story will ultimately help to shape your advocacy campaign.

Suggested Interview Questions and Phrases

- How have you been impacted by...
- Tell me more about...
- What concerns do you have about our community?
- What changes would you like to see?
- How would those changes positively impact you or your family?
- Why do you want to share your story?
- What message do you have for others experiencing something similar?
- What messages do you have for the policymakers who can change your situation?

Photo and Video Narrative Tips

Photos and videos are extremely effective in sharing personal experiences, particularly when shared on digital platforms like websites or social media. If a resident prefers to share their experience through visuals, an interview will still be necessary to provide context surrounding those images. Additional tips to keep in mind include:

- Collecting both landscape (horizontal) and portrait (vertical) images and videos for use across different channels
- Asking for contrasting visuals your resident may have, such as “before” photos or videos
- Collecting images that coordinate with every highlighted moment in your resident’s narrative
- Complementing your resident’s images with coordinating historical images, infographics, and more that are available online or elsewhere (though be sure to have appropriate permissions in sharing these)

- Combining images of people and places or things, rather than just the latter, as images with people tend to provoke stronger emotional responses

Media Release Form

When collecting a personal narrative, interviewees must complete a media release form. This allows specified groups to share the narrative publicly, including on social media. Interviewees may select whether or not they are willing to also share their content with EHP. Copies of media release forms for interviewees who have selected to share their stories with EHP should be sent to:

Environmental Health Project
4165 Blair Street
Pittsburgh, PA 15207

or emailed to:

info@environmentalhealthproject.org

Media Release Form

I, _____, hereby grant and authorize

- [Your Group Name]
- Environmental Health Project (EHP)

the right to take and/or use photos, audio recordings, and videos of me and/or my property, and quotes from me and/or my family for use in printed and electronic materials. These photos, audio recordings, videos, and quotes will be referred to as Media below.

This agreement grants the group(s) selected above the right to edit, alter, copy, exhibit, publish, distribute, and make use of any and all of these Media to be used in and/or for any lawful purpose.

This authorization extends to all languages, media, formats, and markets now known or later discovered.

This authorization shall continue indefinitely, unless I otherwise revoke this authorization in writing. I waive the rights to inspect or approve any finished product in which these Media appear.

I understand that I will not be financially compensated for the use of these Media in any way. I waive any right to royalties or other compensation arising or related to the use of the aforementioned Media.

I understand and agree that these Media shall become the property of the selected groups above and will not be returned.

I hereby hold harmless and release the group(s) above from all liability, petitions, and causes of action which I, my heirs, representatives, executors, administrators, or any other persons may make while acting on my behalf or on behalf of my estate.

Printed Name:

Signature:

Date:

SHARING NARRATIVES

Modes of Publication

To support your advocacy campaigns, consider sharing your residents' personal narratives to your website and blog, social media accounts, e-newsletters, and in public meetings or hearings. Additionally, narratives can be condensed and formatted to be submitted as Letters to the Editor (LTE) in local news publications.

By sharing their stories publicly, the families who were featured in Eliza Griswold's Pulitzer Prize winning [Amity and Prosperity](#) successfully persuaded Pennsylvania Attorney General Josh Shapiro to convene a grand jury to investigate the shale gas industry.

Your website, blog, and newsletters should highlight your residents' narratives and also offer directions for other individuals to share their experiences. Consider pulling especially impactful quotes or phrases from your interviews, or using the best of your visuals, to garner more interest.

To reach a wider audience on social media, be sure to publicize your accounts. Content shared to private accounts is inaccessible to those who do not follow your accounts. Consider creating a hashtag to share all of the content and information directly related to your advocacy

campaign — such as Environmental Health News did with their report, “Fractured: The Body Burden of Living Near Fracking” with #FracturedUSA — so that interested individuals can more easily find related content. Additionally, engage with and tag related groups or organizations, who can share your content and immediately expand your audience.