

# Building Narrative Power for Health: Strategies and Tools for This Moment

March 26, 2025



PHI CENTER FOR  
HEALTH  
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& IMPACT



**Audio**



**Questions**



**Live Captions**



# Carmen Rita Nevarez, MD, MPH



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& IMPACT



Sr. Vice President Emeritus, External Relations and  
Preventive Medicine, Public Health Institute (PHI)

Senior Advisor, PHI Center for Health Leadership & Impact

Founder, Dialogue4Health

## RELEVANT EXPERIENCE

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Former HHS Agency Director & Health Officer, City of Berkeley

Former Medical Director, La Clínica de la Raza

Past President, American Public Health Association

Board Member, Latino Coalition for a Healthy California



ABOUT CHLI

# We are a public health “do tank.”

Learn more about our work and impact at [healthleadership.org](https://healthleadership.org)



**Cultivating leadership**



**Catalyzing learning networks**



**Strengthening cross-sector partnerships**



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**HEALTH  
LEADERSHIP  
& IMPACT**





**We work with individuals, teams, and organizations across sectors to build healthy communities, including:**

- Health departments
- Government agencies
- Education/academia
- Non-profit organizations
- Health care system
- Community-based organizations

# Learning Objectives

- Identify key components of an effective message strategy that motivates action and emphasizes values
- Describe public health in clear, accessible language
- Explore how to conduct a power analysis to uncover unequal power relationships and identify effective pathways toward building narrative power
- Explain why an overall strategy is the foundation for all communication planning

# Poll Question #1

In which region of the country do you work?

- A. Midwest
- B. West Coast
- C. Northeast
- D. South
- E. Other

## Poll Question #2

In which sector do you primarily work?

- A. Public / Government
- B. Non-Governmental Organization / Non-Profit
- C. Private
- D. Other

## Poll Question #3

What population(s) do you serve in your community? Select all that apply.

- A. Urban
- B. Suburban
- C. Small Town
- D. Rural
- E. Countrywide (includes a combination of the above)
- F. Statewide (includes a combination of the above)
- G. Other

# Katherine Schaff, DrPH, MPH

Racial and Health Equity Strategy Team Director  
Berkeley Media Studies Group

## BACKGROUND

- 11 years at Alameda County Public Health Department
- Supported local health departments at NACCHO in Washington D.C.
- DrPH and MPH from the University of California, Berkeley





# Building narrative power for health: Strategies and tools for this moment

Dialogue4Health

Katherine Schaff, DrPH, MPH

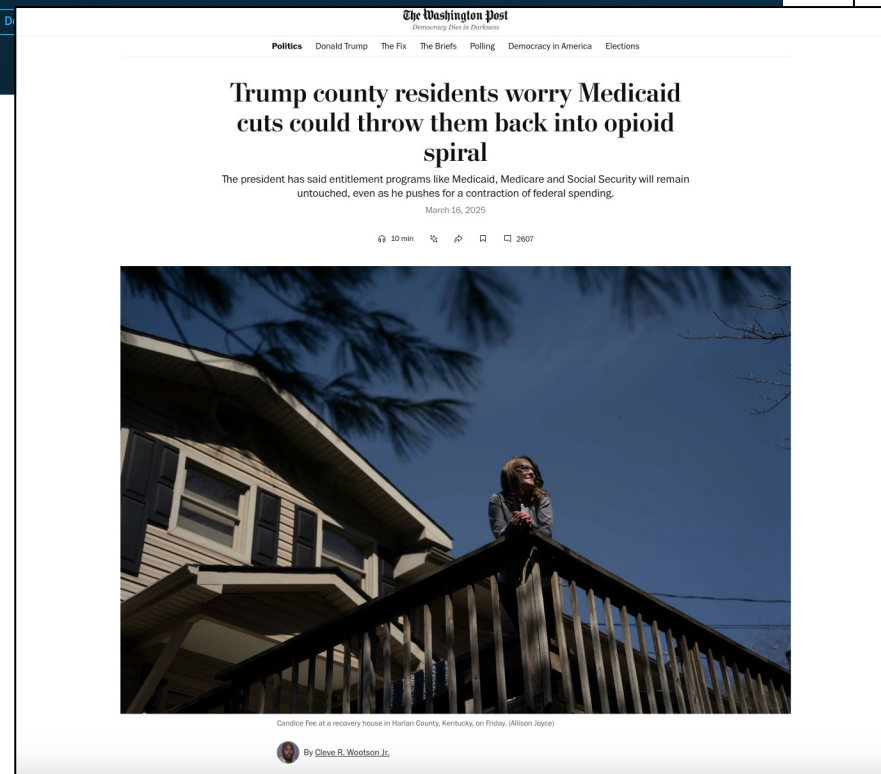
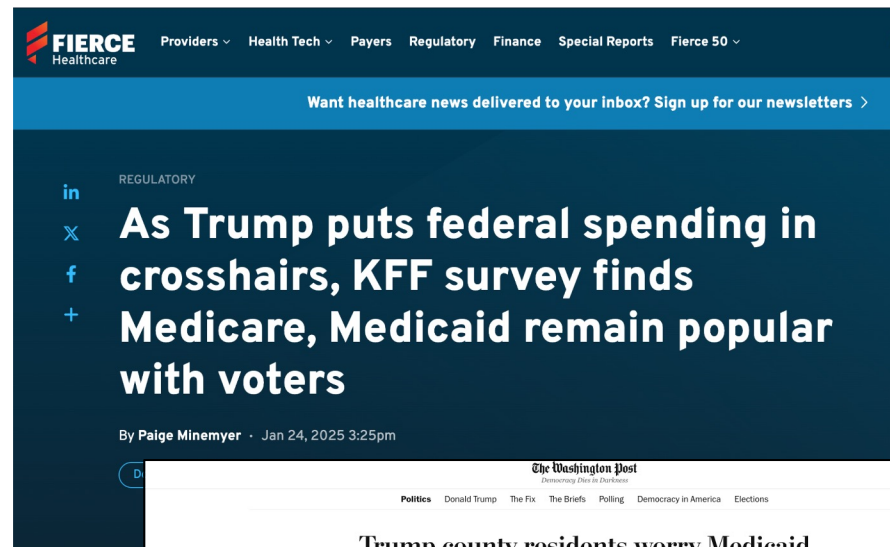




# What we know

# Medicaid is overwhelming popular

About 80% of people in the United States view Medicaid favorably and have viewed Medicaid more favorably than negatively since the late 1990s.







## People want to reduce social division

79% of people would be willing to play a part in reducing social division in the U.S. if given the opportunity.

# People support diversity, equity, & inclusion



- A study in *Scientific Reports* showed that 82% of respondents supported 15 pro-diversity statements
- Only 55% believed others in the U.S. held pro-diversity views, a 27% gap between expectation & reality

<https://www.inc.com/jessica-stillman/you-are-probably-wildly-underestimating-how-many-americans-support-dei-new-study-shows/91157848>



# The spiral of silence

- Silence spirals into more silence: people are reluctant to voice an opinion if they think they are the only ones who have it.
- When people speak up, others realize they are not alone and are more willing to speak up.
- We break the spiral when public health & community voices are louder and more visible.







**How do we make our voices heard?  
What do we say?**



# What we know

1. **Make the landscape visible**
2. Lead with values
3. Say what you want people to do
4. Describe public health in concrete, jargon-free language that focuses on community members



# Default frame

## portrait *(episodic)*



Stories tell us a lot about the individual or incident and not much else.

## landscape *(thematic)*

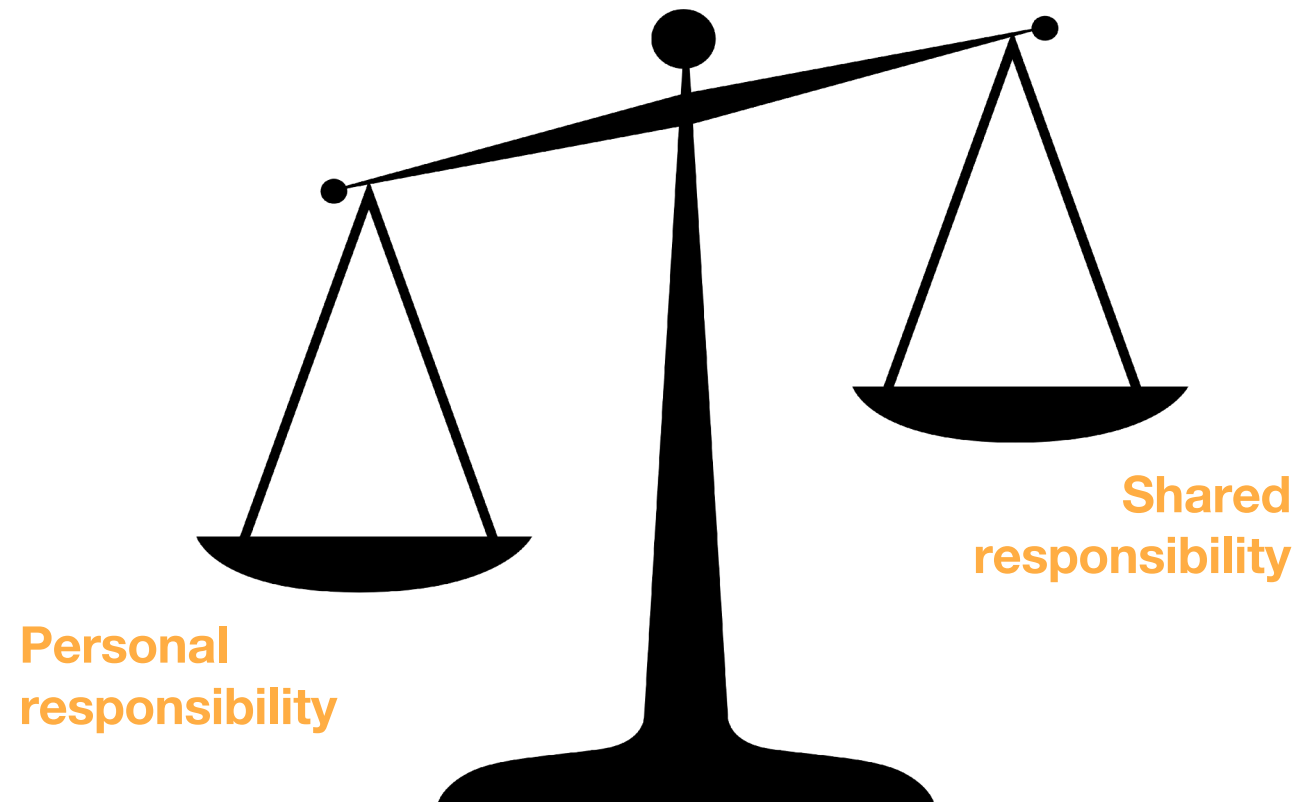


Stories show more of the systems and structures around the person, or connect incidents to trends and themes.

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*Image from Natalie Nourigat, commissioned by Upstream Public Health, used with permission*

# news frames



# key terms

## **portrait** *(episodic)*

Personal responsibility ⇒

You're on your own ⇒

Duty to family ⇒

**Market justice** ⇒

## **landscape** *(thematic)*

Shared responsibility

We're in this together

Duty to the collective good

**Social justice**

# making the landscape visible

## What is the context that surrounds the portrait?

- Bring **history** forward
- Use a **few facts/data** points
- Describe a **systemic solution** that will help more than one person
- Name **social factors** or **root causes** that affect this health issue
- Support **authentic voices** in connecting their portrait story to the landscape
- Use **compelling visuals** that include the landscape
- Use **values** in your stories

A close-up, low-angle shot of a silver microphone on a desk, with a pen visible in the background. The image is in a dark, blue-tinted style.

# What we know

1. Make the landscape visible
2. **Lead with values**
3. Say what you want people to do
4. Describe public health in concrete, jargon-free language that focuses on community members



# Lead with values

community

liberty

unity

interconnection

Can-do spirit

fairness

democracy

family

# Lakoff's levels

## Level 3:

Details of the policy  
or approach

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## Level 2:

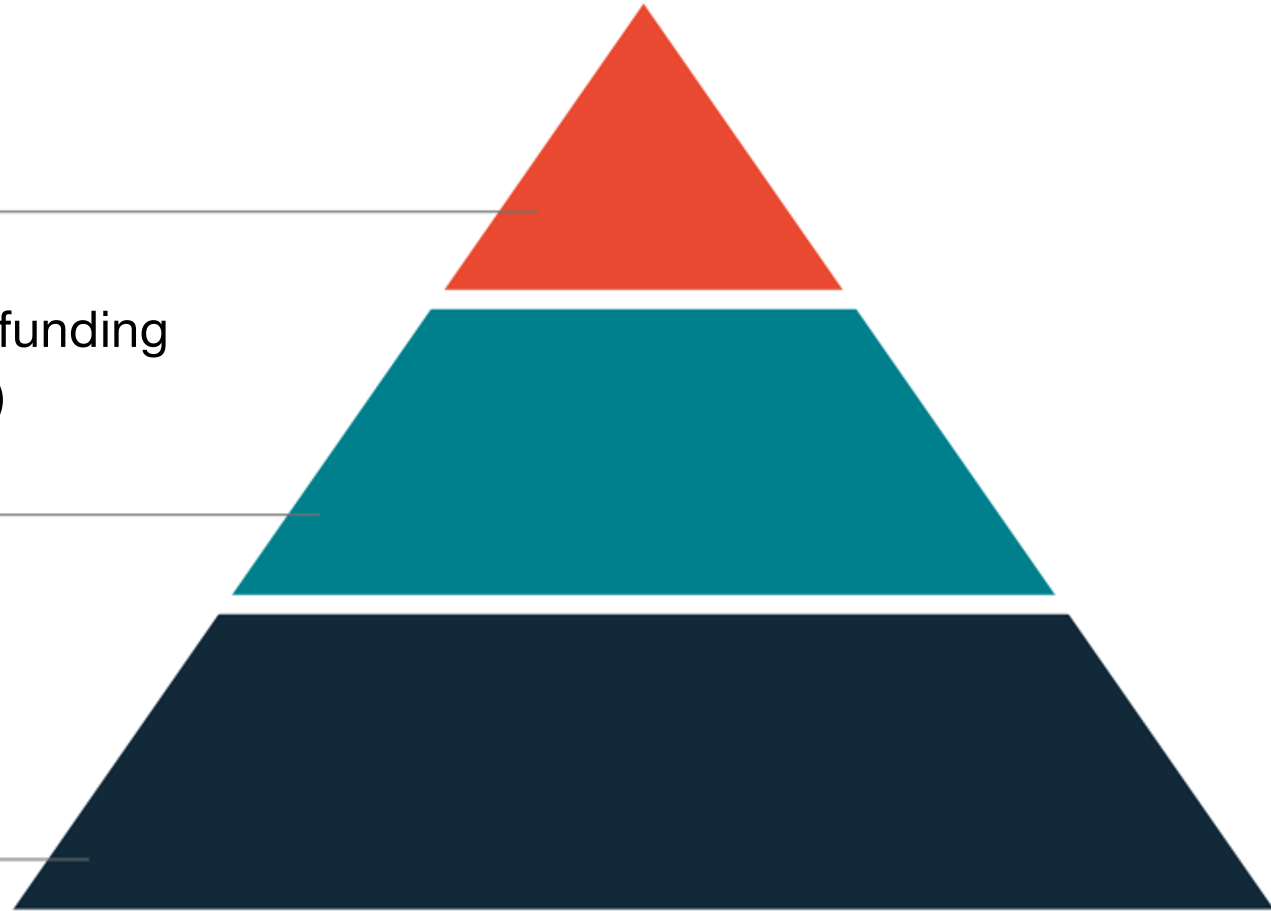
Topic areas (immigration, funding  
cuts, climate change, etc.)

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## Level 1:

Foundational value, like  
justice, unity or  
interconnectedness

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# An Analysis of Health Equity in the San Joaquin Valley Region

A Report from the San Joaquin Valley Public Health Consortium

February, 2022



## Lead with values

“The diversity, commitment, ingenuity, and resiliency of the region’s people have carried them through decades of hardship and adversity and make the Valley a unique and valuable place to live for many.”

A close-up, low-angle shot of a silver microphone on a stand, with a pen resting on a surface in the foreground. The image is dimly lit, with a blueish tint.

# What we know

1. Make the landscape visible
2. Lead with values
3. **Say what you want people to do**
4. Describe public health in concrete, jargon-free language that focuses on community members

# What do you want people to do?

## Immigration example

Possible target audience	Possible solution/action
Residents who need food but may be afraid	Continue to use WIC
Board of Supervisors	Make our county a sanctuary county
State legislators	Enact protections for immigrants accessing healthcare

A close-up, low-angle shot of a silver microphone with a black grille, resting on a stack of papers. The lighting is soft, creating a professional and focused atmosphere.

# What we know

1. Make the landscape visible
2. Lead with values
3. Say what you want people to do
4. **Describe public health in concrete, jargon-free language that focuses on community members**

# Speak plainly

Avoid jargon,  
acronyms, or insider  
language



# Framing report

## Championing public health amid legal and legislative threats

*Framing and language recommendations*

- Frame public health as indispensable
- Lead with strengths and achievements
- Portray public health as competent, confident, and active
- Use plain but descriptive language
- Describe how executive orders block public health



<https://www.bmsg.org/resources/publications/championing-public-health-amid-legal-and-legislative-threats-framing-and-language-recommendations/>





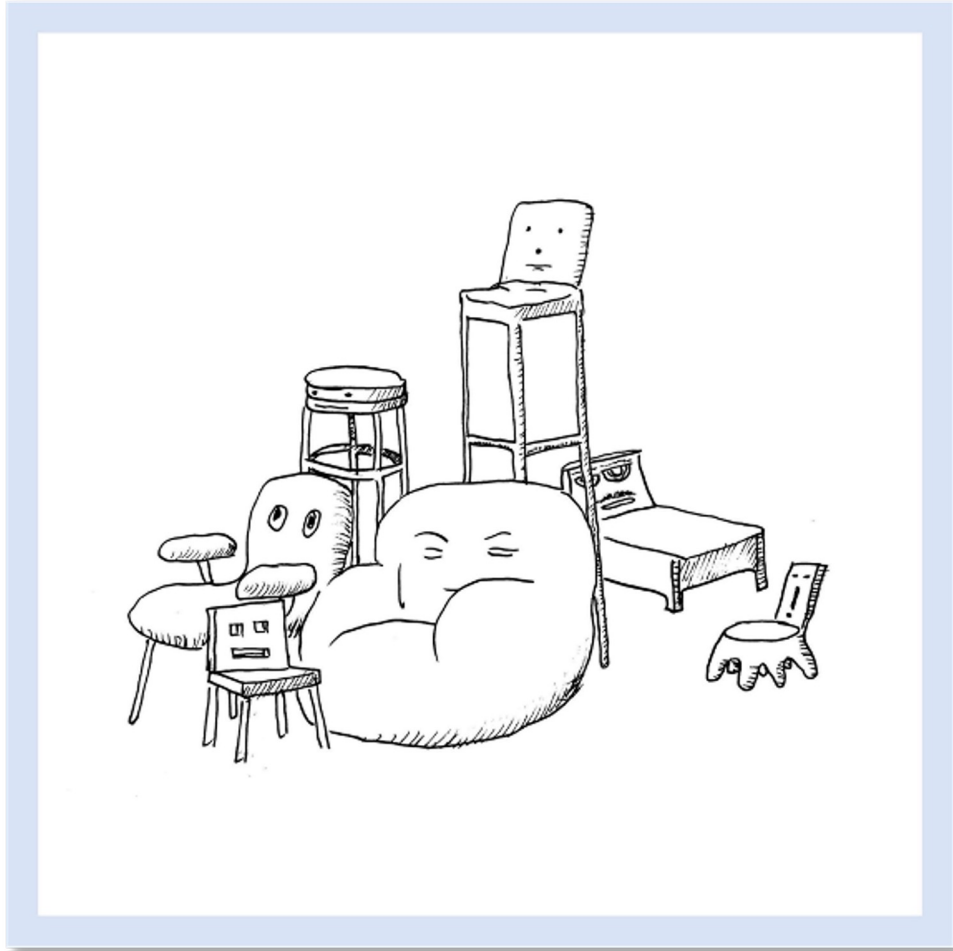
## **Before**

*Early in the pandemic, our public health workforce took quick, decisive action to protect our essential healthcare workers, who in turn protect all of us, by triaging masks to our hospitals. They also worked night and day to analyze the situation and make decisions based on new data and new supply chain developments, such as more cloth masks being available.*

## **After**

*Early in the pandemic, our public health workforce **jumped in** right away to **protect** our essential healthcare workers—who protect all of us—by **acquiring** desperately needed medical masks to hospitals. They **persisted** on the trail of the virus 24/7, **strengthening** guidelines to **urge** mask use for everyone **as soon as** enhanced data on transmission and supplies were released.*





**Show not tell**



# for example

Instead of saying: *health equity*

## **try saying:**

*“Our county’s vision is a healthy, safe, and vibrant community, yet some residents face barriers to this.”*

## **Or better yet, say:**

*“Our county’s vision is a healthy, safe, and vibrant community. This means that people have access to good jobs with dignity, quality schools and housing, reliable ways to get from place to place, and clear air to breathe”*

**How do we determine what  
values and solutions to use?**

A blurred background image showing a group of people, likely in a classroom or meeting, with several hands raised in the air, suggesting an interactive session or a Q&A period.

# Questions?



**How do we determine what  
values and solutions to use?**

# Message is never first





A diverse group of people, including men, women, and children, are gathered for a protest in front of a building with large windows. Many are holding white signs with red and black text that reads "Berkeley vs. Big Soda" and "Protect Our Children". Some individuals are wearing black t-shirts with the same text. One man in the back right has his arm raised in a fist. The overall atmosphere is one of active participation and advocacy.

# Message is never first

## Before you know what you want to SAY...





# Message is never first

Before you know what you want to **SAY...**

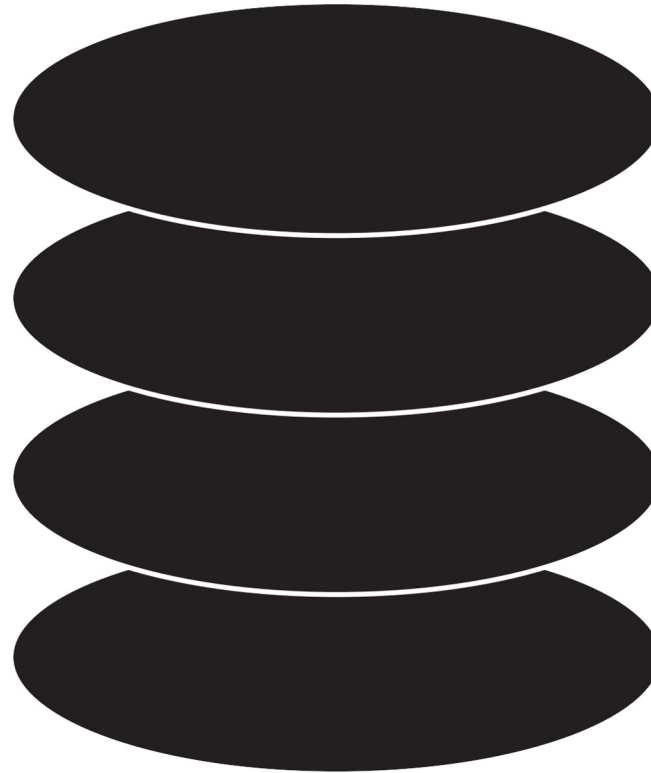
**...you have to know what you want to DO.**

A close-up, low-angle shot of a silver microphone on a stand, with a pen resting on a desk in the foreground. The image is in a cool, blue-toned color palette.

# What we know

1. Make the landscape visible
2. Lead with values
3. Say what you want people to do
4. Describe public health in concrete, jargon-free language that focuses on community members
5. **Determine your overall strategy and use it to guide all communications**

# layers of strategy



Overall strategy

Media strategy

Message strategy

Access strategy

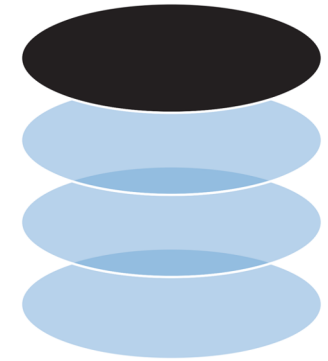
**You can't have a media or message strategy without an overall strategy.**

**layers  
of  
strategy**



# Overall strategy

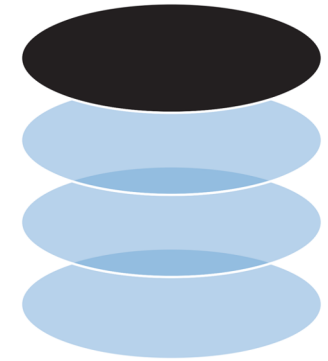
- ➔ Define the **problem** you want to address
- ➔ Clarify the **solution** for which you'll advocate
- ➔ Identify the **target** with the power to make the change
- ➔ Enlist the **allies** who can help make your case
- ➔ Identify what **actions** you'll take to influence the target





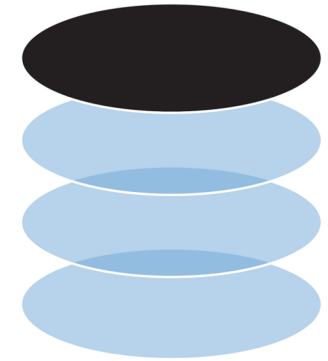
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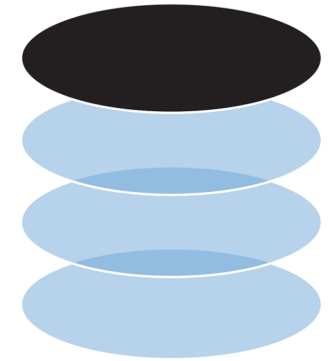
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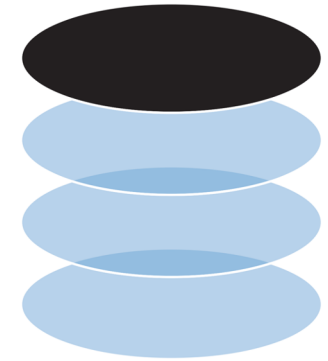
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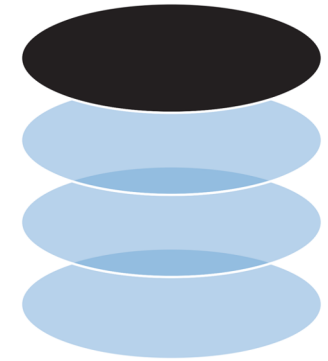
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# Overall strategy

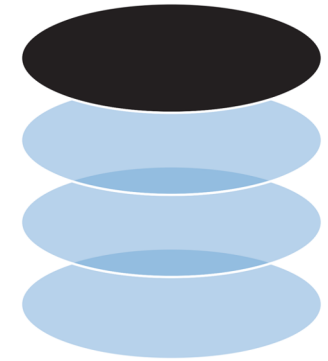
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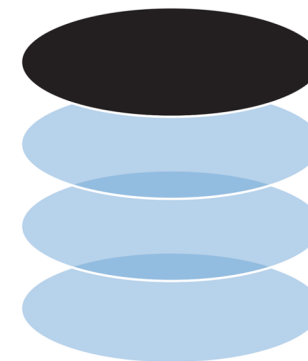
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## Overall strategy example

- ➔ **Problem:** Evictions during early months of COVID-19 pandemic
- ➔ **Solution:** Pass an equity-focused county eviction protection package to keep people housed
- ➔ **Target:** County Board of Supervisors
- ➔ **Allies:** Local grassroots groups (legal, faith, housing, immigrant rights), public health organizations, etc.
- ➔ **Actions:** petitions, public comment, op-ed, social media, etc.



*Based on work by the Vallejo Housing Justice Coalition and other community organizers in Solano County*

Solution we are seeking

Our issue/problem

Opposing solution

Decision making  
power or  
influence

Active participant in  
decision-making

Power to have  
influence over  
decision-making

Taken into  
account

Can get attention

Not on radar

Most support,  
most power

Least support,  
most power

Most support,  
least power

Least support,  
least power

Die Hard

Active Support

Inclined Towards

Neutral

Inclined Towards

Active Support

Die Hard

Adapted from  
SCOPE LA



Solution: Pass an  
eviction  
moratorium in  
2020

Problem  
Solano County residents are being evicted during the pandemic

Opposition:  
Prevent  
moratorium from  
passing

10. Decision  
making power or  
influence

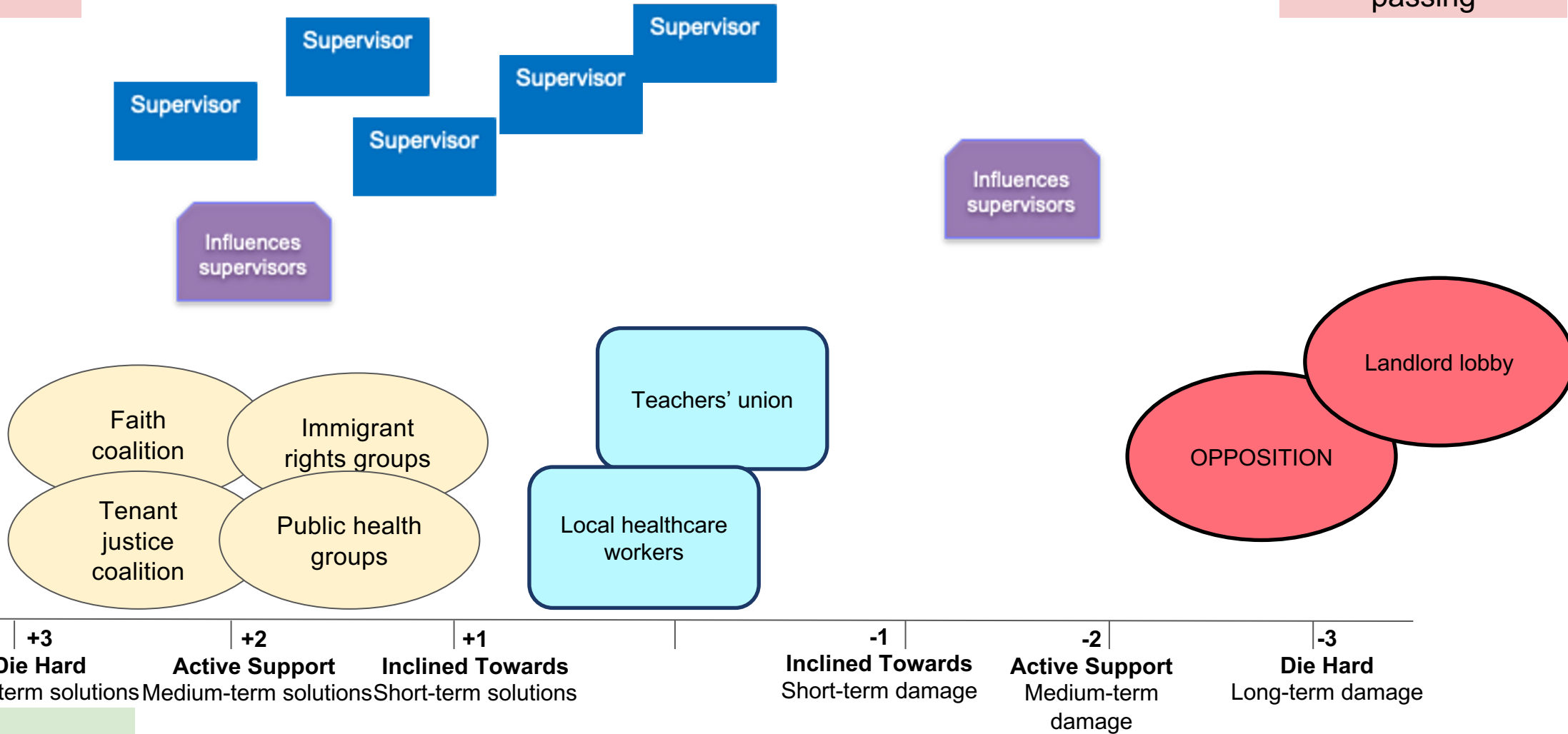
8. Active  
participant in  
decision-making

6. Power to have  
influence over  
decision-making

4. Taken into  
account

3. Can get  
attention

2. Not on radar



3. Key policy battles  
5.12.20 Budget committee vote  
5.31.20 Full board vote

Adapted from  
SCOPE LA

m  
b s g

Health-supporting policy

Our problem

Opposition to health-supporting policy

10. Decision making power or influence

8. Active participant in decision-making

6. Power to have influence over decision-making

4. Taken into account

3. Can get attention

2. Not on radar

Decision makers

Decision makers

Decision makers

Decision makers

Influences decision maker

Influences decision maker

Decision makers

Influences decision maker

ALLIES

ALLIES

ALLIES

UNORGANIZED ALLIES/ OPPOSITION

UNORGANIZED ALLIES/ OPPOSITION

UNORGANIZED ALLIES/ OPPOSITION

OPPOSED TO POLICY

OPPOSED TO POLICY

+3

+2

+1

-1

-2

-3

Die Hard

Active Support

Inclined Towards

Inclined Towards

Active Support

Die Hard

Long-term solutions

Medium-term solutions

Short-term solutions

Short-term damage

Medium-term damage

Long-term damage

Key policy battles

Adapted from  
SCOPE LA

m  
b s g



# layers of strategy



# Message development

## *Components of a message*

### **Problem**

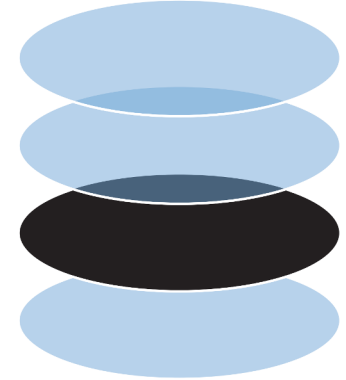
→ What's wrong?

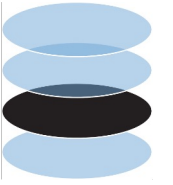
### **Values**

→ Why does it matter?

### **Solution**

→ Who should do what,  
by when?





# Message development

## *Health care for immigrants example*

Despite our unique walks of life, the string that holds us together is the ability to care and love. There are hundreds of undocumented parents entering hospitals with their chronically ill children dealing with the stress of paying for debt. This stops families from pursuing holistic and quality care as giant medical bills begin to build. Our proposal to fund the medical bills of undocumented families will guarantee healthier communities and generations. It takes one heart at a time to join the cause and completely transform the lives of our children!

Solution

Values

Problem



# Message development

## *Paid sick leave example*

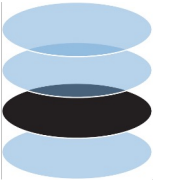
Workplace benefits, such as paid sick leave, should be equitable, restorative and focused on uplifting health. No one should have to choose between a paycheck and staying home sick or caring for a loved one. **And yet, companies like Walmart do not offer paid sick leave to the essential workers at the forefront of the pandemic.** **This is why we are asking Walmart to institute a paid sick leave policy for all its employees.**

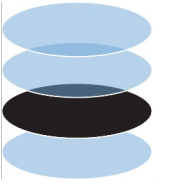
-Human Impact Partners

Values

Problem

Solution





# Message development

## *Eviction moratorium example*

“Preventing evictions and keeping people in their homes is fundamental to our health and our well-being. And housing instability is deeply inequitable by race, class, immigration status, and gender. I think if we’re serious about people’s health, and then if we’re serious about health equity, we’ve really got to take a very square and sharp focus on preventing evictions.”

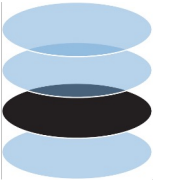
- Will Dominie, former policy manager of housing and equitable development at the Bay Area Regional Health Inequities Initiative

Solution

Values

Problem





# Message development

## *COVID vaccine example*

#NativeYouth are doing their part in protecting our most vulnerable - our elders - from getting COVID-19. As Desirae Barragan (Gabrieleño Band of Mission Indians - Kizh Nation) shared during a recent panel on COVID, "Our youth can do their part to protect elders by taking safety measures and getting vaccinated. It's important for us to protect their elders, because we are their lineage, they are the reason why we're here today." With COVID-19 cases rising in some communities, as well as the recent surge of the delta variant, it's critical that we continue to wear our masks, wash our hands, and stay 6 feet apart.

Solution

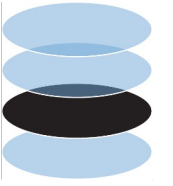
Values

Problem



# Message development

## *Reparations and resources*



When Hazim Hardeman, a 2019 Rhodes scholar, was asked about his journey from **public housing** in North Philadelphia, **where many of his friends were shot or stabbed to death**, he spoke a truth that we all need to hear: “Don’t be happy for me that I overcame these **barriers**. **Be mad as hell that they exist in the first place.**”

Surviving life’s hardest blows should not be celebrated — or expected. **Recovery and reconciliation require reparations and resources.** To expect resilience without **justice** is simply to indifferently accept the status quo.

**Solution**

Values

**Problem**

## summary

1. Make the landscape visible
2. Lead with values
3. Say what you want people to do
4. Describe public health in concrete, jargon-free language that focuses on community members
5. Determine your overall strategy and use it to guide all communications

# thank you

## stay connected!



Katherine Schaff, DrPH  
schaff@bmsg.org

Diana Guardado  
guardado@bmsg.org



Website: [bmsg.org](http://bmsg.org)



LinkedIn: Berkeley Media Studies Group



Facebook: Berkeley Media Studies Group



# Q&A and Discussion



# Thank You

- Please take a few minutes to complete the short evaluation form shared in the chat.
- Contact [info@healthleadership.org](mailto:info@healthleadership.org) with any additional questions or follow-ups!