

# Impact Storytelling

## Crafting Impact Stories That Inspire and Transform Communities



Mathematica and Health+ Studio developed this storytelling toolkit to support multisector community coalitions and partnerships in the [Getting Further Faster](#) Community of Practice (GFF CoP). These coalitions are working to address social determinants of health (SDOH) to advance health equity and prevent chronic disease.

The GFF CoP is a partnership between the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (NCCDPHP), National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO), and Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO). It builds on lessons learned from participating coalitions in the [SDOH-GFF Initiative](#), which focuses on five domains linked to chronic diseases: built environment, community–clinical linkages, food and nutrition security, social connectedness, and tobacco-free policies. To promote collaboration and share lessons learned, NACCHO and ASTHO made this guide available to any coalition or partnership seeking to transform its community by addressing SDOH.

This toolkit is a starting point for developing your coalition’s, partnership’s, or organization’s plans for impact storytelling. It walks through four steps to building your story and includes examples drawn from coalitions that have taken part in the SDOH-GFF Initiative. We encourage you to discuss the questions in this guide in collaboration with your partners to create a collective story of your coalition’s, partnership’s, or organization’s impact. This toolkit includes a response log, beginning on page nine, to help collect your coalition’s responses to the questions posed throughout the guide.



## Why Is Storytelling for Impact Important?

Sharing the impact of your coalition's efforts can be a powerful way to sustain the impact and further scale your efforts. Stories that clearly highlight what your work has achieved can inspire and motivate staff and coalition members to remain committed. They also show the broader community—including community members such as key decision makers, potential partners, funders, and advocates—that wider change is possible. Effective communications materials that paint a compelling, full, and human-centered picture of your impact not only build credibility and support across audiences but can also attract and sustain new funding.

The prompts in this toolkit will help your coalition think through how to address common barriers to sharing impact, such as the following:

- We aren't sure how to measure our coalition's impact or how to translate that data into a compelling story
- We aren't sure sharing our impact will achieve what we want
- We worry that what we consider impact won't be compelling to our current audience(s), and aren't sure if we are reaching audience(s) who will care
- We don't have dedicated communications staff or staff with communications expertise
- Our communications resources are dedicated to other priorities
- Storytelling is not an organizational priority
- We don't have the capacity or funding for storytelling
- We don't have a process for collecting stories
- Our work involves many partners, and it's hard to build a collective story

## How Do We Build Stories for Impact?

The four steps shown in Figure 1, and discussed in this section, will guide you through creating effective messages to engage audiences. You can use the questions in this toolkit to engage staff, volunteers, coalition members, and partners to collaboratively construct a shared understanding of key values, goals, and priorities toward which you are all working.

This shared understanding will help you identify compelling stories, including lived experiences and data to illustrate qualitative and quantitative dimensions of impact. These components will help you build a larger narrative of the collective impact you have achieved so far and the future impact you hope to achieve together.

**Figure 1.** Four elements of an impact story



## Step 1. “Why”: Vision and Purpose

The audience needs to know what drives the work of your coalition. Start by identifying and defining your current work, purpose, and goals.

**In your own words, describe who you are, the work you are doing to address SDOH, and for whom.**

- Examples:
  - **Who are you?** We are a cross-sector collaboration that addresses various social needs among families with young children.
  - **What work you are doing?** We promote education, community engagement, safety, employment, and health through innovative programs and advocating for policy change.
  - **For whom?** We focus on helping children ages 0 to 6 and their families thrive.

**Your “why”—what is your organization’s mission and vision for what you want to achieve?**

- **Mission example:** Our mission is to reduce health, racial, and economic inequities by (1) providing access to a coordinated system of health care and community resources that address social needs, and (2) building community capacity through partnerships that elevate community assets and wisdom.
- **Vision example:** We envision a thriving, safe, healthy, and inclusive community built on love that enables all residents to benefit from services that prevent chronic diseases.

**What key priorities and milestones are you working toward?**

- **Example 1:** We seek to increase our coalition’s name recognition among hospital systems and health care providers to strengthen the network through which we reach children and families.
- **Example 2:** We are building awareness about the role of community health workers (CHWs) in the community clinic.

**What impact do you hope this collective story will have?**

- **Example 1:** We want to uplift the work we are doing and highlight our progress toward building partnerships to generate community and institutional support for our organization, such as by increasing volunteers and funding.
- **Example 2:** We want to showcase our work to the city council, government entities, and partners in our coalition to strengthen our network, foster connections with potential collaborators, and ultimately expand our reach to underserved populations.

## Step 2. “What”: Key Messaging and Metrics

### Definition

A **key message** acts as the cornerstone for all the actions and communication goals of your coalition. It anchors and defines what your coalition does and what it aims to convey.

Identify strategic messages you can convey about the impact of your coalition’s work. You might find opportunities to build on your existing messages. Frame your story with context and support it with evidence to make it more compelling.



Identifying and understanding intended audience(s) informs your key messages. Consider who you are talking to and what matters to them, so that you tell the story in a way that will resonate with them.

When you know who your audience is, what they want and need in the world, and how and where to reach them, you can move the most people the most efficiently to take the most meaningful action. For ideas on understanding your audience, check out this GFF resource: [Identifying & Understanding Your Target Audience: A Guide to Conducting Audience Research.](#)

**What would you like others to know about the impact of your work (what you have achieved so far and what you still hope to achieve)? Why does it matter? What do you want to highlight in your communications materials to inspire, excite, inform, or spark action?**

- **Example:** We want the community to recognize the value of CHWs. We will explain how our CHW program helps people who might not seek out and use needed health and social services connect with appropriate providers, what CHWs do, how they interact with patients, and how patients can participate in the program.

**If you had to summarize the impact and highlights of your work in a single statement, what key messages would you include?**

- **Example 1:** Our partnership drafted a bill to the city council that would require bicycle lanes on all major roads in our community because active living promotes good health.
- **Example 2:** Food is a way the community can connect across generations, race, gender, and demographics. Building the local food system advances racial equity and promotes access to nutritious foods for all.



### Tip

Start with what feels most important before layering in your support points. For more ideas, check out the [GFF Messaging Matrix](#).

**Frame numbers with narrative.** When using data to support the story of your impact, frame your facts in a way that connects the dots from a data point to its context. Rather than just listing statistics to illustrate a change, provide a sense of the initial problem and landscape to create a bigger contrast when showing the solution and its results.<sup>1</sup> Figure 2 shows an example of how nesting numbers in narrative tells a more impactful story.

**Figure 2.** Nesting numbers in a narrative tells a more impactful story

Our program provided 375,000 rides last year to low-income residents across 12 rural counties, compared to 9 counties the previous year.

 **Facts**

Our program serves low-income residents in rural communities who must travel great distances in order to access help and resources and who don't have access to reliable transportation. By expanding to add 3 new counties last year, we provided 375,000 rides across 12 different counties, enabling rural residents to get to work, attend medical appointments, purchase groceries, and care for loved ones.

 **Narrative**

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Sweetland, J. "Telling Impact Stories—with Impact." Presented at a FrameWorks Institute workshop, July 15, 2021. <https://virtualcommunities.naccho.org/viewdocument/telling-impact-stories-materials-f-1?CommunityKey=be479ee0-a1d5-4d64-9f5e-01899cdc7873&tab=librarydocuments>.

**What key data points and data sources can you draw on to further illustrate the important impact of your work and mission and to support your communications goals?**

- **Example:** A 2019 SDOH screening revealed that 79 percent of community members experienced food insecurity. Our coalition is serving about 300 families a week. The demand for our services tripled during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Follow-up questions: Are there additional data you can gather to support your messaging? How can you capture the data?**

- **Example:** We can ask our clients how our services have helped them and periodically use a questionnaire to determine how many days per month they worry about feeding their families.

**Step 3. “Who”: Identify Your Messengers**

Identify the people in your coalition or the wider community who contribute to, or experience, the impact of your work. These are the “messengers” who can amplify your communications by sharing the story of their roles in this work and how they directly shape the impact you are achieving together. Community members with lived experience of the problems you are addressing can share the effect your work has had on their lives, which builds trust and credibility within your messaging.

**Whose lived experience can you uplift and center in your communications and messaging?**

- **Example:** To share the impact of the program to develop the local food system, the story will feature the head registered dietitian who runs the program, farmers who provide the food, CHWs who refer clients, and families and community members who are the consumers.

 **Tip**

Make sure you engage with the person telling their story in a way that honors and respects that person’s perspective, experiences, and background. For more ideas, check out [these ethical storytelling principles from Voice of Witness](#).



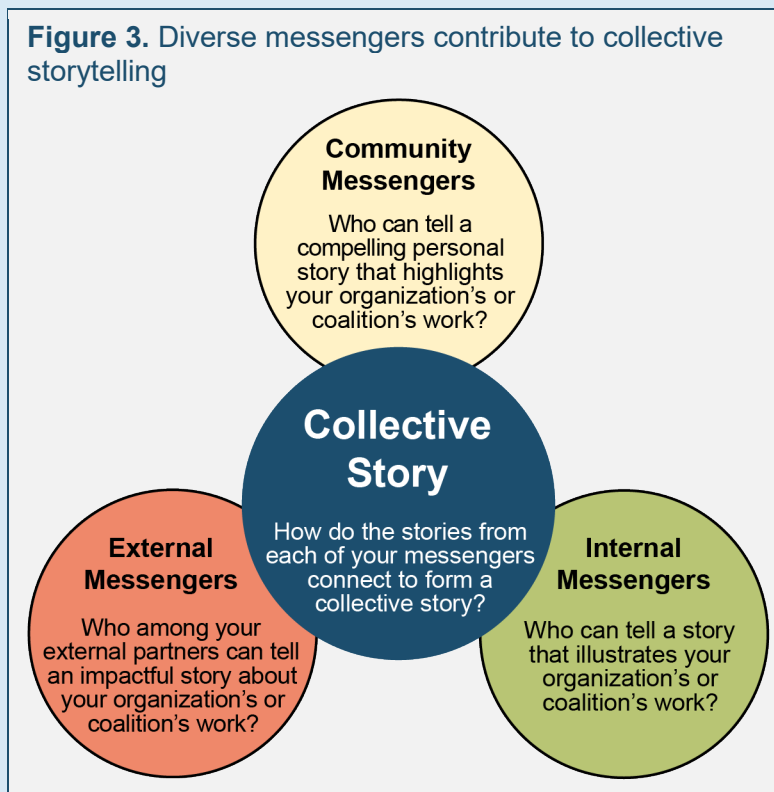
 **Tip**

**Develop inclusive story arcs** that focus on collective action, trial and error, and collaboration to achieve positive outcomes, and invite your audience to join you on this narrative journey. These types of stories reinforce the idea that it takes partnership and coalition building to address complex and multisector issues and to advance far-reaching solutions. Offer listeners a way in, where there is room for them to participate.



**Collective storytelling.** Collective storytelling is a collaborative process. It involves weaving the contributions and perspectives of a group of people, organizations, or coalitions into a shared narrative that reflects many viewpoints and experiences, rather than those of a single author. Featuring diverse perspectives in your messaging paints a broader picture for your audience by building on shared connections and themes. One way to think of collective storytelling is to think of your protagonist as a choir rather than a soloist. One person can only achieve so much, but together, a chorus of people and voices can raise awareness and amplify issues (and solutions) on a larger, more impactful scale.

Various types of messengers can contribute to your story, including internal staff, external partners, and community members. When crafting your collective story, think about the people with whom your organization or coalition interacts. Which individuals can provide meaningful and compelling stories that highlight the impact of your work from different perspectives and viewpoints? Figure 3 outlines the different types of messengers that can contribute to your collective storytelling.



Make sure the messengers and stories you are featuring reflect a variety of perspectives. Here are some examples:

- Examples of community messengers: people who can speak to the direct impact of SDOH on their lives and on their communities, and who can describe the positive changes that your coalition has produced
- Examples of internal messengers: program managers who are carrying out your coalition's strategy, researchers who can describe the underlying SDOH your program is addressing, communications leads who understand the types of stories that will resonate with your desired audience, CHWs who can show how your coalition's strategy addresses the SDOH that affect community members
- Examples of external messengers: health departments, hospitals, or city council members who can speak on a systemic level about the impact of the SDOH your coalition is working to address

An [example from Real Foods Collective](#) (formerly known as Proviso Partners for Health) shows the collective power of several story perspectives working in harmony to paint a larger picture of impact. This example demonstrates that you might not have to go far to identify multiple viewpoints and compelling narratives to represent the impact of your work. Real Foods Collective engages staff members to discuss the importance of its work in the context of the overall mission, in addition to highlighting the personal narratives that emerge from their experiences.

#### Step 4. “How”: Share Your Story and Sustain Your Efforts

Identify opportunities and appropriate venues to share your impact stories with partners and the wider community. To sustain your efforts, plan to continue building on these stories as an ongoing practice and find creative ways to work within your organization’s capacity. For example, if you have a limited budget for video production, consider other formats to share your impact, such as through photographs, text, or social media posts.

##### **How do you plan to tell your story? In other words, what is your story format? What types of communications materials can you create from the stories you gathered?**

- **Examples:** video for your website, audio messages to air on local radio, images for program materials, text for an email blast to potential partners, or an infographic for policymakers and community members



If you are telling your story through live interview formats, such as audio or video, make sure to develop tailored questions for each person you interview. Each interview should address one or more of the key messages you identified while building your impact story.

#### **Share your story and monitor whether it is reaching your intended audience**

Consider if there are other ways to repurpose the content you have created. For example, perhaps you can feature the same infographic in your annual impact report or donor campaign materials. Demonstrating audience engagement can also help your coalition determine the impact of your communications efforts and decide whether and how to change the stories you tell in the future.

##### **How will you share your story with a wider audience?**

- **Examples:** You can promote your stories in reports, newsletters, email blasts, social media, and meetings.

##### **How will you be able to tell whether your audience engages with the story?**

- **Examples:** You can track the number of web views your message receives, collect survey responses, tabulate donations, or monitor an action you ask your audience to take.

#### **Looking ahead**

Impact storytelling is an ongoing engagement process that takes time, resources, and internal support to continually build on the communications efforts of your coalition. For more ideas, check out the “Building a culture of storytelling” box and resource on the next page.

##### **How will you sustain your storytelling practices in your coalition?**

## Building a culture of storytelling<sup>2</sup>

- **Build internal support for investing in storytelling:** Encourage enthusiasm and support for storytelling across your organization by showcasing the tangible values and outcomes of sharing your stories, along with how they helped achieve qualitative or quantitative goals.
- **Embed storytelling into your organization's procedures and processes:** Identify opportunities to collect and reshare stories. For example:
  - Conduct intake and exit surveys with program participants about their experiences.
  - Collect stories, interviews, and survey feedback in a living story library that you can use in ongoing communications with supporters and donors.
  - Keep an ongoing "impact deck" presentation that you can continue to add to and draw from.
  - Tell the same story in different ways, such as through website pages, blog posts, and narratives in an annual report.
- **Cultivate a storytelling mindset:** Create space in your program meetings to talk about the impact stories emerging from the work. Hold ongoing team conversations to reflect on what's working, what's not working, and opportunities for growth.
- **Continually strengthen internal storytelling capacity:** Invest in internal staff by offering training and professional development opportunities that support impact story building. Hire staff with storytelling skills to further support your communications and story development.

---

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Dixon, J. "Stories Worth Telling: A Guide to Strategic and Sustainable Nonprofit Storytelling." Georgetown University School of Continuing Studies and the Meyer Foundation, 2016. <https://csic.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/stories-worth-telling.pdf>.



# Impact Storytelling: Response Log to Tell Your Coalition's Story

Please use the following boxes to record your coalition's answers to the questions posed in the four steps of this toolkit.

## Step 1. "Why": Vision and Purpose

**In your own words, describe who you are, the work you are doing to address SDOH, and for whom.**

**What is your organization's mission and vision for what you want to achieve?**

**What key priorities and milestones are you working toward?**

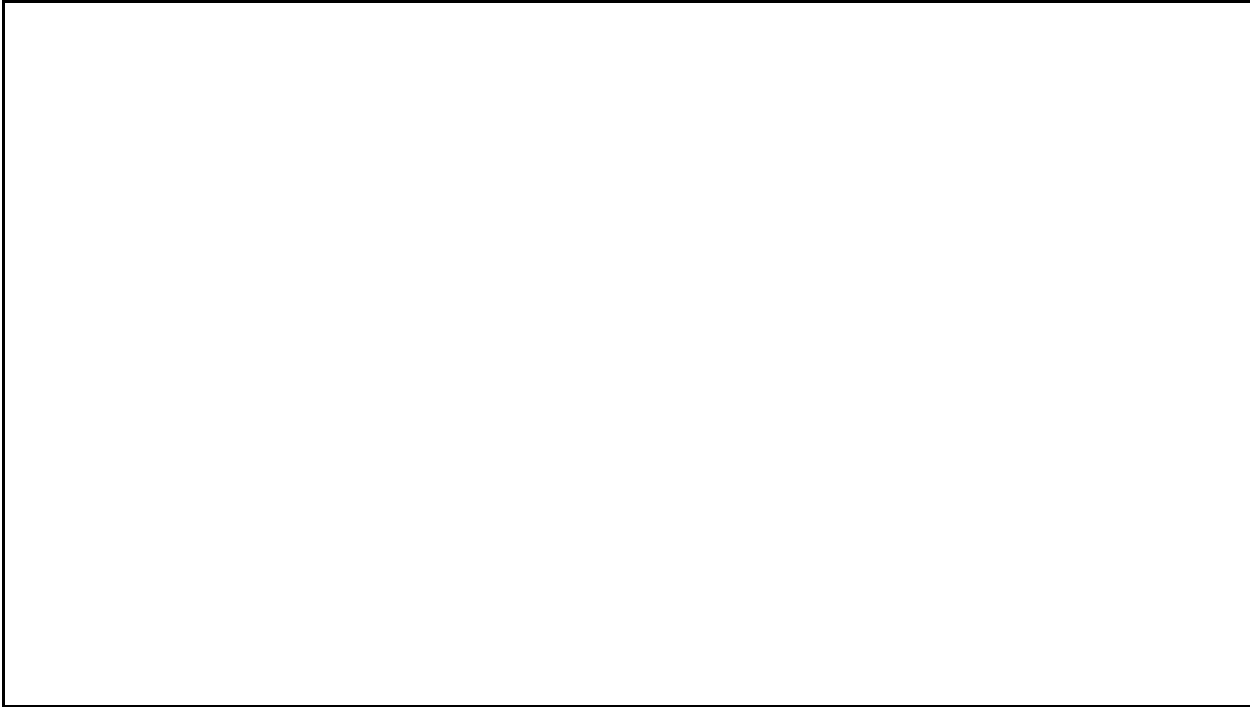
**What impact do you hope this collective story will have?**

Step 2. "What": Key Messaging and Metrics

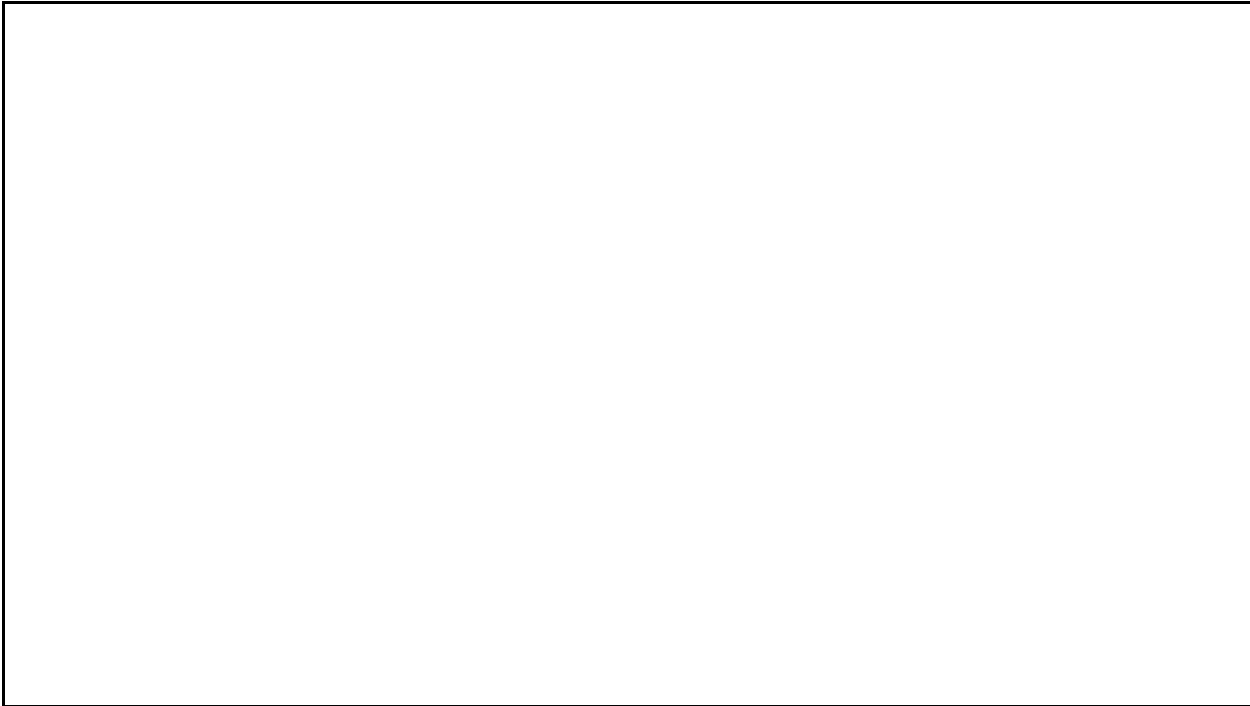
What would you like others to know about the impact of your work (what you have achieved so far and what you still hope to achieve)? Why does it matter? What do you want to highlight in your communications materials to inspire, excite, inform, or spark action?

If you had to summarize the impact and highlights of your work in a single statement, what key messages would you include?

**What key data points and data sources can you draw on to further illustrate the important impact of your work and mission and to support your communications goals?**



**Follow-up questions: Are there additional data you can gather to support your messaging? How can you capture the data?**



### Step 3. "Who": Identify Your Messengers

**Whose lived experience can you uplift and center in your communications and messaging?**

<p><b>Considerations when selecting messengers:</b></p> <p>Why are you choosing to feature these stories?</p> <p>What connections and themes do these stories have in common?</p>		
<i>Community messengers</i>	<i>Internal messengers</i>	<i>External messengers</i>
<p><b>How do their stories connect to form a collective story?</b></p>		

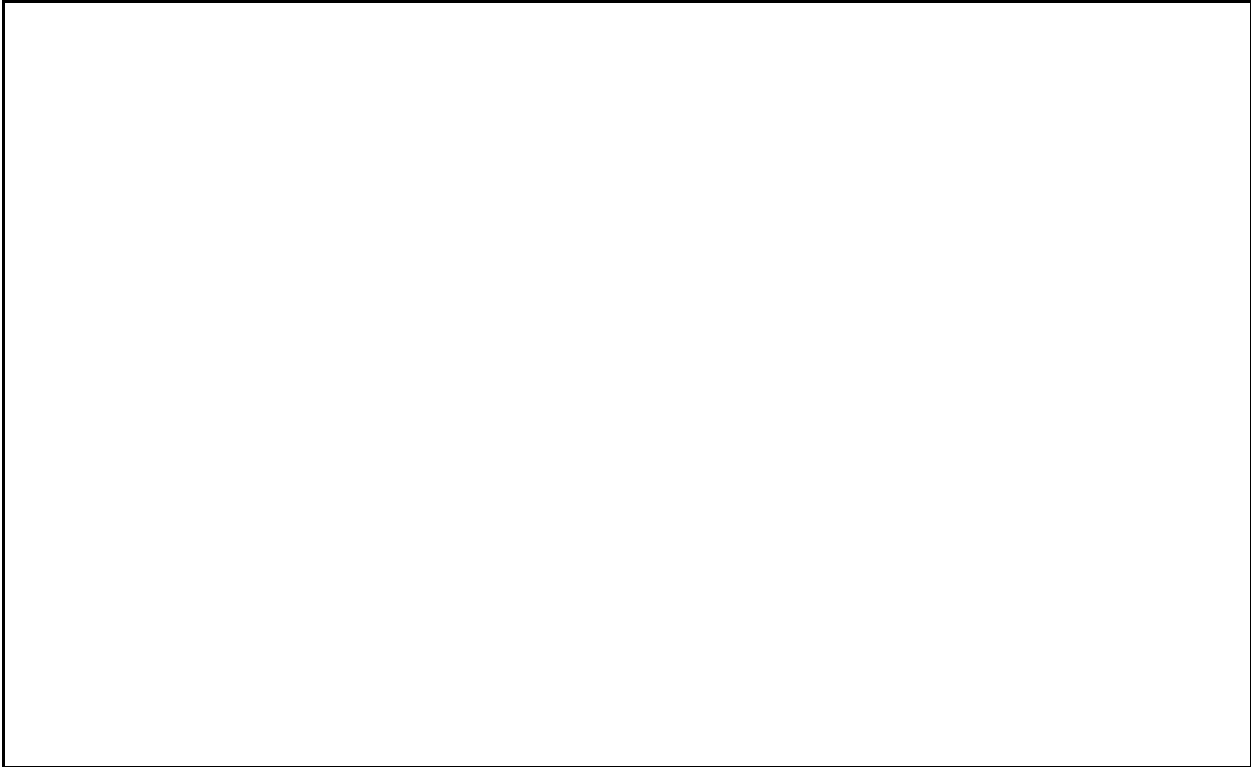


Step 4. "How": Share Your Story and Sustain Your Efforts

How do you plan to tell your story? In other words, what is your story format?

How will you share your story with a wider audience?

**How will you be able to tell whether your audience engages with the story?**



**How will you sustain your storytelling practices in your coalition?**

