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STATES LEADING THE WAY

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The Narrative Communications Project: Takeaway Findings on a Message-Framing Approach

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Executive Summary

In 2004, staff from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation—recognizing both opportunities for, and risks to, children's health insurance coverage in states—began developing a grant program with a strategic communications firm, Spitfire Strategies. Using input from a number of nationally recognized experts to inform the effort, the program was designed to help state-based advocates promote children's health insurance coverage and coverage expansion more effectively and build the consensus needed to accelerate progress on children's health insurance coverage. This collaboration resulted in the Narrative Communications (Narrative) Project, a communications capacity-building grant project sponsored by the Packard Foundation and implemented in partnership with Spitfire. Implemented across an initial 11 states in 2006, the Narrative Project combined modest grant support to state-based advocates with intensive, targeted technical assistance to grantees on effective communications and messaging.

To document key lessons from the Narrative Project and whether/how the grant program may have affected the work of the state-based advocates, researchers from Mathematica and the Urban Institute conducted semistructured interviewers with staff from 15 of the 16 Narrative grantee projects. Findings from the study offer substantial evidence that it achieved these aims by strengthening grantees' capacity for, and effectiveness at, advocating for children's coverage. All 15 Narrative grantees interviewed reported that they achieved the broad aims of the Narrative, and 73 percent cited specific policy wins as evidence. These wins included helping to stymie efforts to cut children's coverage in their state and to promote successful expansions in coverage. Eight of the 15 grantees also reported that the Narrative had helped them shift the media and public discourse on children's coverage in their state to a more positive framing of the issue, enabling them to talk about how coverage programs were working, rather than where they were weak. Two-thirds of respondents believed that their organizations have been able to sustain at least some of the communications capacities built through the project, continuing the growth in advocacy capacity on children's issues that it had begun.

The economy is still in recovery, and the implementation of the Affordable Care Act is imminent. Therefore, many continue to believe that effective state-based advocacy is vital to ensuring that all children and adults have access to quality health care coverage (Grantmakers in Health 2010; Community Catalyst 2012; Strong et al. 2011). Findings from this study of the Narrative show the importance of strategic investments in making such advocacy possible, as well as lessons for advocates and funders in the value of message framing and an advocacy strategy rooted in a positive, "glass-half-full" approach.

Foreword: The Historical Context that Gave Rise to the Narrative

In the years following the enactment of the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) in 1997, the percentage of U.S. children without health insurance has declined by almost half, from 13.9 percent in 1997 to a historic low of 7.3 percent in 2011. For children in low-income families the decline was even more dramatic, from 22.6 percent in 1997 to 9.6 percent in 2011. These decreases are due in part to the implementation and growth of CHIP (the 2009 law reauthorizing the program dropped the "S"), to more children gaining insurance coverage through Medicaid, and to a robust effort to enroll eligible children in both programs.

Many observers attribute the growth in Medicaid to the excitement and innovation fostered by CHIP—leading to the modernization of Medicaid and a rebranding of it as more of a children's health insurance program than a so-called welfare program in many states. But the road to historically low rates of uninsured children was not always smooth and the work on expanding children's coverage and access to care encountered significant bumps along the way. The Narrative Communications (Narrative) Project was developed in response to some of those bumps. The findings in this brief and the resumption of the decline in the number of uninsured children after the Narrative Project was implemented suggest that there are important lessons to be learned from that work.

States moved quickly to implement CHIP in the late 1990's, and the number of uninsured children declined by a third by 2002. But within six years, problems with the program began to emerge. These problems were exacerbated by a recession that increased the number of Medicaid- and CHIP-eligible children while reducing government revenues. By November 2003, six states had stopped enrolling eligible children in their CHIP programs in response to budget pressures, leaving tens of thousands of eligible children without coverage. Additionally, problems in the federal funding formula for SCHIP led to misallocations of federal money among the states, threatening the adequacy of federal subsidies to some states from one year to the next and putting the long-run stability of the program at risk. Growing costs in a constrained fiscal environment and antigovernment rhetoric that painted government programs including Medicaid as broken, wasteful, and subject to fraud and abuse led to escalating attacks on that program. Anti-Medicaid sentiment reached a crescendo in July 2005, when the Bush administration named a commission to find ways to rein in the rapid growth of Medicaid. Experts anticipated that the commission's report, due in December 2006, would recommend sweeping changes to Medicaid, including reductions in eligibility and benefits.

The very negative environment around Medicaid and CHIP threatened to derail efforts to see that all children had access to insurance coverage appropriate to their needs—the focus of the Packard Foundation's work on children's health at the time. Clearly, shifting the tide would require a new approach, but repeated discussions with traditional allies did not yield promising fresh ideas.

At about that time, purely by happenstance, I made the acquaintance of Kristen Grimm of Spitfire Strategies. Spitfire's specialty was strengthening the communications capacity of nonprofit organizations and foundations, but Spitfire had not

(*continued*)

then been a part of our work on children's coverage. A series of discussions and consultations involving Spitfire, Foundation staff, and key grantees led to the concept of the Narrative Communications Project. The Narrative moved the work on children's coverage to the offensive by reframing public children's coverage programs as bipartisan success stories and workable cost-effective ways to cover children. This was a shift from messaging that focused more on the shortcomings of the programs, leaving them vulnerable to efforts to slash programs that did not appear to work. The Narrative Project engaged the Foundation's major national health insurance policy grantees in developing a message set that was truthful, credible, positive, proactive, and structured along a narrative arc that provided specific messages to navigate the different policy environments in various states. The narrative arc was designed to move the public discussion about children's coverage forward from one stage to the next, facilitating real progress on the issue. A Packard Foundation grant to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP) provided funding for a pilot program of regranting to select state groups to support their implementation of the Narrative messaging strategy. State groups were chosen to participate in the pilot via a request for proposals. Participants in the Narrative pilot project were chosen from states with diverse policy environments to test the idea that the Narrative messages could be used to advance the children's coverage agenda in different environments. Because the CBPP grant budget was not large enough to fund all the promising proposals, First Focus joined the effort and provided grant funds for two additional state groups.

The Narrative was launched in mid-2006. Early adoption of Narrative messages by key policymakers and others—especially in target states—showed the project was gaining traction. Some states also experienced improvements in policies and procedures related to children's coverage; these positive effects were observed in states with different policy environments. In 2007, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation used proactive, positive messages in its Cover the Uninsured Week campaign. Unlike previous campaigns that prominently featured the problems of the uninsured, the 2007 campaign focused on the successes of the CHIP program and the need to finish the job of covering kids. Consistent messaging about the benefits of CHIP from a variety of sources helped support efforts to insure all children. CHIP reauthorization legislation was twice passed by Congress with strong bipartisan and public support and twice vetoed by President George W. Bush, but the program was extended through a number of short-term measures until it was finally reauthorized in 2009.

Following an increase in the Foundation's grant budget for work on children's coverage in 2007, the elements of the Narrative were incorporated into the new, more generously supported Insuring America's Children grantmaking strategy, while the Narrative was continued as an effort solely to boost communications capacity and execution within the format developed for the pilot project. In 2011, the Narrative was fully merged into the Insuring America's Children strategy. This brief only covers the experiences of grantees when they were part of the Narrative.

Gene Lewit

Background on the Narrative Project

For nearly five decades, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation has invested in programs that support families and communities. In the past decade, Packard (and other foundations) began to recognize the value of implementing comprehensive communications initiatives to promote and advance their mission and impact, as well as to extend their grant-making impact (Breindel 2008). In 2004, the Foundation hired Spitfire Strategies, a strategic communications firm, to develop a messaging strategy that could support state advocates trying to prevent cuts and/or encourage coverage expansions in state Medicaid and CHIP programs. After conducting polling and other market research, Spitfire staff concluded that the states were so diverse in coverage policies for children and attitudes about coverage that a single message would not be likely to resonate with policymakers nationwide. Spitfire realized that, for this project to work, it needed to have several messages (later combined with strategies for using those messages into "chapters") that follow a narrative arc, so that advocates could use the message appropriate to their state's landscape (Lewit 2011).

All the messages had the same goal—promoting children's coverage from a positive perspective—but permitted grantees to begin in different places to try to arrive at the goal. For example, a state with limited coverage policies might start at the first chapter, but a state with near-universal coverage for children might start at the fifth chapter. The program was designed to help advocates (with technical assistance from Spitfire staff) identify the chapter in which they should begin, then help them move through the chapters as they developed communications capacities, heard their policymakers using their messages ("message echo"), and began to achieve policy "wins" aligned with their goals.[1] This approach offered a coordinated way for grantees to move various target audiences along a storyline that advanced the conversation on coverage, asserting the fundamental importance of covering children and culminating with a discussion about achieving the goal of covering all kids. Grantees also engaged in peer-to-peer learning and sharing ideas and best practices. Another key aspect of the technical assistance was teaching the advocates to positively reframe the discussion on coverage and to "play offense" in their communications. This meant training the grantees to consistently use the messages (sometimes called "message discipline") and break the habit of reverting to more reactive, defensive responses to others' messages.

Before issuing the request for proposals, Spitfire spent a year developing the messages for each chapter of the Narrative, the concepts on which technical assistance would be provided, and how the technical assistance would be provided. Working with the Foundation and engaging seasoned state advocates and policy experts on children's coverage for input, a request for proposals and criteria for selecting states for the project was developed.[2] The request was open to advocates in all states; 32 groups applied to participate in the first round. The first grants, given to 11 grantees, were awarded in late 2006. The project (always envisioned by Packard as a multiyear endeavor) ran for four years, through 2010. In total, 16 state advocacy groups participated in the project for one to three years; Packard sponsored 14 of them (Table 1). (First Focus, a bipartisan advocacy organization, sponsored two of the Narrative grantees; of those two, one was interviewed for this study, but the other was unavailable for an interview.) Grantees received technical assistance and grant money to build communications capacities and integrate the messages into their work. As Table 1 shows, most of these grantees went on to participate in the Foundation's Finish Line Project, which gave grantees additional advocacy support and expertise to strengthen coverage

expansion efforts. Finish Line grants were awarded to organizations in states where the Foundation thought there was a strong chance of making major progress in children's coverage expansion and, in many of them, of "crossing the finish line" to covering all kids.

Grantee organizations in the Narrative Project agreed to partake in ongoing technical assistance trainings, participate in monthly status calls to report progress, and apply the Narrative message set. Technical assistance focused on six areas: (1) message framing and the messages themselves, (2) practical examples of how to apply the messages to the work, (3) one-on-one coaching, (4) group conference calls and meetings, (5) an online materials library, and (6) peer-to-peer learning (because sharing best practices was viewed as critical for grantees to make progress). Table 2 summarizes the key messages in each Narrative chapter; each message espouses a positive perspective, focusing on health, cost-effectiveness, and benefits, rather than language that painted a coverage crisis (such as, "If we don't fix CHIP, millions of kids will be uninsured").

Table 1. Narrative Communications Grantees

State	Grantee Organization	Years as a Narrative Communications Grantee	Finish Line Grantee?
Arizona	Children's Action Alliance	2	No
Arkansas	Arkansas Advocates for Children & Families	1	Yes
Colorado	Colorado Children's Campaign	1	Yes
Georgia	Voices for Georgia's Children	1	No
Illinois	Sargent Shriver Center	2	No
Iowa	Child and Family Policy Center	1	Yes
Kansas	Kansas Action Alliance	3	Yes
New Jersey*	Advocates for Children of New Jersey	3	No
North Carolina*	Action for Children North Carolina	–*	No
Ohio	Voices for Ohio's Children	1	Yes
Oregon	Children First for Oregon	3	Yes
Rhode Island	Rhode Island Kids Count	1	Yes
Texas	Children's Defense Fund of Texas (Texas Collaborative)	1	Yes
Utah	Utah Children	2	Yes
Washington	Children's Alliance	1	Yes
Wisconsin	Wisconsin Council on Children and Families	3	Yes

*New Jersey and North Carolina participated in the Narrative Project but were sponsored by First Focus, not Packard. The New Jersey grantee participated in an interview for this retrospective study, but the North Carolina grantee declined to participate. We do not know how long it participated in the Narrative Project.

Table 2. Narrative Project Messages

Chapter	Primary Message	Supporting Messages
0	"If other states can do it, we can do it."	Nationwide and in states like [STATE1 AND STATE2], children's coverage is extremely cost-effective. We can also deliver quality, affordable health coverage to [STATE] children at a cost lower than private insurance.
1	"CHIP and Medicaid are effective and cost-effective."	If you want to provide cost-effective health care, look to the programs that are doing the best job for children: Medicaid and CHIP.
2	"A problem we can and should solve."	Unlike many health problems facing children, the one that keeps at least 8 million children from seeing a doctor because they don't have insurance is one we can solve. Health coverage—which helps kids get the preventive care they need to stay healthy and lets them see the doctor when they get sick—is one of the best ways to keep childhood illnesses from becoming lifelong health problems.
3	"A [STATE] success story."	Medicaid and CHIP have proven successful at covering uninsured children in [STATE]. Existing programs with proven track records allow us to cover many uninsured children today. Let's do the right thing and finish the job by helping kids get the health care they need.
4	"Health care helps families grow and thrive."	When kids are healthy, they can grow and learn, and parents can spend their days at work instead of at the emergency room. Every child should be able to count on good health care.
5	"We can reach the finish line."	The finish line is in reach, and it's time to get all of [STATE]'s uninsured kids into coverage programs that have been proven to work.
6	"Leadership in covering all kids."	More and more states are moving toward covering all children, and [STATE] is leading the way. When all kids have health coverage, we all win. Our kids will be healthier, our families will be stronger, and our health dollars will be better spent. Now is the time to provide all children in America with the health care coverage they need.
7	"If they can implement it, we can implement it."	When it comes to meeting the needs of uninsured kids, states like [STATE1 AND STATE2] have shown that success is measured not in laws passed, but in uninsured children covered. Now that [STATE] leaders have committed to covering children, we can—and must—make sure our state's kids, families, and taxpayers enjoy the same benefits other states have won by successfully covering kids.

Lessons Learned from the Narrative Project

To document key lessons from the Narrative Project and whether/how the grant program may have affected the work of the state-based advocates, researchers from Mathematica and the Urban Institute conducted semistructured interviews with staff from 15 of the 16 Narrative grantee projects. These interviews followed a protocol developed jointly by both firms and are described at the end of this brief. Researchers also interviewed three key staff/former staff from Spitfire who worked on the project; reviewed grantee reports; reviewed materials Spitfire submitted to the Packard Foundation summarizing grantee activities; and participated in an online tutorial offered by Spitfire staff to review the grantee online materials library. What follows are the key themes that emerged from these interviews (summarized in Table 3).

Table 3. Lessons from the Narrative Project

Lesson	By the Numbers	In Grantees' Own Words
Most grantees believed the Narrative Project directly contributed to policy wins in their state.	All 15 grantees reported tangible accomplishments during the Narrative grant period, including 11 reporting policy wins.	"The cool thing about the Narrative process is that it's also about focus on what your objectives are. Our policy wins… have been because we have this initial ability to place some real attention on how we frame the message."
	12 of 15 grantees shared what they learned from the project with their local partners, further multiplying the effect of Packard's investment.	"We just brought these materials to the table, and our partners all readily understood it was a good idea. Everyone is starved for messaging training."
The Narrative's focus on positive messaging and message discipline resonated with the public and policymakers.	12 of 15 grantees heard message echo either in the media or by policymakers.	"…The Narrative grant made an enormous difference in ability to pre-determine messages to convey and not just be reactive."
	5 of 15 grantees adapted the Narrative arc for use on other issue areas.	"The goal of the project wasn't to change the communications culture, but that's how we utilized it."
Grantees found the technical assistance on message framing and the messages themselves most critical to their advocacy work.	14 of 15 grantees interviewed reported that learning to re-frame messages and the messages themselves were very important to their advocacy work.	"This was the core of the whole thing, to think strategically about what you are trying to achieve. More often than not, before the Narrative project…we did a lot of messaging without thinking through what we are trying to achieve. We just tried to seize an opportunity to draw attention to an issue. Being schooled in this exercise [of using a messaging framework] to think through what you are trying to achieve and how you will achieve that is useful. Are you really reinforcing the idea that the kinds of solutions you have in mind could be effective, or are you creating the impression nothing is working and it's hopeless?"
	11 of 15 said one-on-one coaching and practical examples were very important to their advocacy work.	"One-on-one coaching was very important to contextualize things. There is always stuff on the ground you don't anticipate in a group setting. Your own situation is unique. When you try to apply concepts you're just learning, it is just a good solid adult learning technique, it puts the things in the context of reality." "Not every state or situation is the same. People learn by examples. The examples helped us see the utility of the template messages."
The modest funding included as part of the Narrative Project increased the effectiveness of its core messaging and communications support.	7 of 15 grantees interviewed reported that marrying technical assistance with direct funding improved their ability to put what was learned to use.	"A lot of times, technical assistance doesn't come with money, so we were able to have accountability that we don't always have. We weren't just given the gift; we were accountable for using the gift."
The Narrative Project's emphasis on skills development helped expand grantees' communications capacities, prolonging its value beyond the grant period.	10 of 15 grantees interviewed have sustained the skills and strategies the Narrative taught.	"It imparted skills we didn't have before that stayed with us. We're much more conscious of messaging and communication techniques. We're much more conscious of what it is and the role it plays."
Funding for multiple years helped institutionalize the communication skills and capacities the Narrative had fostered.	12 of 15 grantees that received multiyear funding said the longevity helped them institutionalize and sustain what they learned through the Narrative Project.	"The Narrative was so much better because it ran for four years. That has meant that the approach has been institutionalized in a way you can't do in one year."

Source: Mathematica and Urban Institute interviews with Narrative grantees, Summer 2011.

Most grantees believed the Narrative Project directly contributed to policy wins in their state.

All 15 grantees reported tangible accomplishments during the Narrative grant. Eleven cited specific policy wins that they attributed, at least in part (sometimes in large part) to their participation in the project. Some of these wins were significant, such as expansion of coverage to all children (including undocumented immigrants) in one state; implementation of administrative simplifications (such as passive renewal) in one state; expansion to lawfully residing immigrants in one state; and expansion to children in families with incomes up to 300 percent of the federal poverty level in two states. Two grantees said that Narrative messages helped them prevent cuts to previous coverage gains.

Most grantees noted that policy wins cannot be attributed entirely to the communications work done under the Narrative Project. Some, however, said they were: "The expansion that we have got on paper in 2009 was attributable to this work and the red tape bill that we passed this past session. The Narrative process got us to those wins. It helped us focus. Both of those wins, and then even implementation [of it], has been because we have this initial ability to place some real attention on how we frame the message." Others noted that the Narrative played a contributory role, but that the policy wins were also due to having time to work on the issues, developing stronger relationships with state officials, or to laying the groundwork before the Narrative Project began, among other reasons.

All the grantees (even those that did not achieve any policy wins) reported tangible accomplishments from their participation. One grantee said the project increased the organization's public visibility through the Narrative messages, which eased fund-raising efforts; another said it positioned them as the "go to" organization in the state for media outlets; and still another said it positioned them as the leading advocate to advance federal health reform. Two grantees reported another type of spillover benefit from participating: using Narrative messages helped them attract new advocacy partners. Finally, 12 of the grantees (80 percent of those interviewed) shared what they learned from the project with their local partners, further multiplying the effect of Packard's investment. One grantee reported, "We just brought these materials to the table, and our partners all readily understood it was a good idea. Everyone is starved for messaging training."

The Narrative's focus on positive messaging and message discipline resonated with the public and policymakers.

Message framing has been documented in the literature as a method that can motivate behavioral change; however, the research is inconclusive as to whether positive or negative message framing is more influential in persuasion to a particular point of view (Entman 1993; Rothman et al. 1993; Rothman and Salovey 1997). Many of the common messages on coverage at this time were framed negatively—for example, the "problem" of the uninsured, the negative health consequences of being uninsured, and the growing taxpayer-funded cost of the uninsured. A key goal of the technical assistance in the Narrative Project was to teach the grantees how to positively frame their messages, and then for grantees to be proactive about consistently using that positive messaging frame—even when addressing negatively framed messages postured by others in the state. This proactive strategy, moving grantees out of the defensive mode, was viewed as critical to the success of the project.

Reframing messages was challenging for grantees for three main reasons. First, they were accustomed to responding to negatively framed messages in the same (negatively framed) language. As one grantee put it, "Sometimes it was difficult not to respond directly to the opposition, especially when there were a lot of myths going around about health care reform, so that's something we and other advocates struggled with, because we wanted to just dispel those myths, and we had to go a little bit on a leap of faith on our TA consultants and trust that they did not think it was good to directly respond to them. So that was difficult, and for me it was uncomfortable—it still is when there is so much misinformation, but we kind of decided to have faith in the technical assistance." Another said, "[Before the Narrative], we would do what I think a lot of advocacy groups did for a long time, which is just to draw as much attention as possible to bad news on trends for kids, and focus on the negatives. One of the biggest lessons from this project is that isn't a very good strategy when your goal is to convince people that government programs can and are making a difference. It's much more effective to focus on leadership and progress we've made and how to build on that to get the rest of the job done." A second, related challenge was their habit of being reactive to other messages in the media. As part of the message-framing training, the Narrative Project taught grantees to be proactive about messaging. As one grantee noted, "We did a lot of media work before the grant, and would really take an as-needed approach to develop messages and family story-gathering.…The Narrative grant made an enormous difference in ability to pre-determine messages to convey and not just be reactive." Another added, "One of the things that was nice about Narrative was it was trying to seize the agenda." Third, as discussed further below, they had little prior communications training, which posed a challenge for some participants in learning the reframing model.

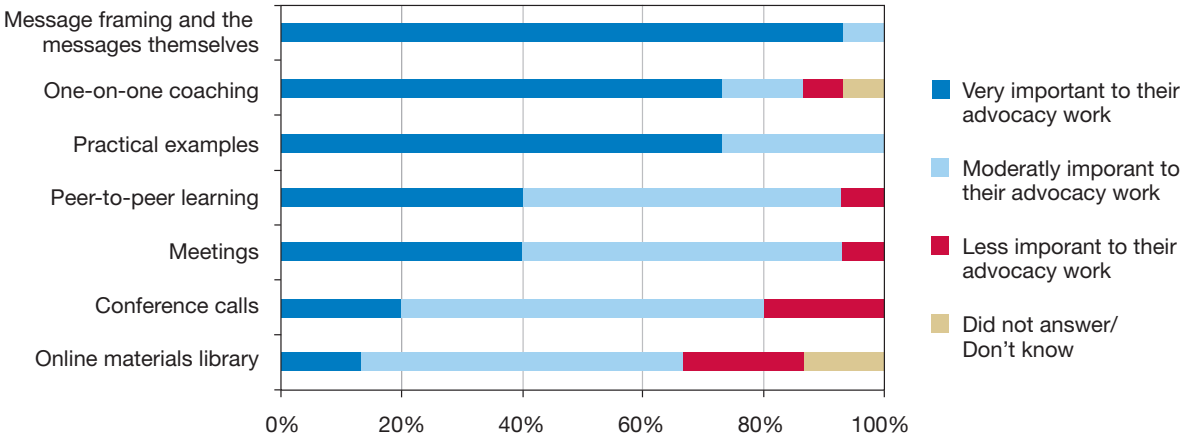
Most grantees (12 of the 15 interviewed) reported that they heard "message echo" in their policy community, meaning policymakers adopted grantees' messages and language when speaking about coverage issues. "Our Senate President invited us to be at a press conference where she was sponsoring the Cover All Kids bill. Her speech had so much language from the Narrative incorporated into her own speech." Some grantees attributed this adoption, in part, to the fact that the messages had a positive frame, although one grantee said that it also was likely due, at least in part, "because we had policymakers inclined toward the success frame."

Finally, during the interviews, five grantees mentioned that they found the Narrative message approach so powerful that they have expanded the use of the messaging strategies and the positive framing to other issues, such as child welfare and juvenile justice. One grantee said, "The Narrative project will last a lifetime here. We've taken the model across all of our other issue areas. Initially, we did not expect this, but there has been utility across other issue areas." Another added, "The goal of the project wasn't to change the communications culture, but that's how we utilized it." Finally, one grantee reported that this positive messaging strategy "was now integrated into everything we did." At the same time, some grantees believed the messages themselves were difficult to adapt for other issues (although message adaption was not a specific project intent). For example, one grantee found the messages too "kid-specific" to use for other purposes (such as supporting adult coverage under reform) or too challenging to use in a fast-paced environment (such as when health reform was being debated, where the grantee felt the messages needed constant tweaking).

Grantees found the technical assistance on message framing and the messages themselves most critical to their advocacy work.

When asked to rank each of the types of technical assistance provided in the project, most grantees indicated that learning about message framing and the messages themselves were very important to their advocacy work (Figure 1). Knowing that the messages were researched and vetted by others made grantees more confident in using them: "It's always helpful to know what the best messages are. We are working so quickly, we just try to come up with something. Having someone think through each and every word is helpful."

Figure 1. Grantee Ranking of the Importance to Their Advocacy Work of Various Narrative Technical Assistance Strategies



Source: Mathematica and Urban Institute interviews with Narrative grantees, Summer 2011.

Technical assistance and individualized coaching from Spitfire helped the grantees tailor those messages to meet the environmental or cultural challenges unique to each state. Many grantees valued this recognition and state-specific support. As one grantee said, "We had been a part of a number of different projects where the technical assistance we got was two meetings per year where everyone comes together and you listen to lectures/presentations….The coaching part of Narrative was exceptional because it gave us the opportunity to talk about, on a real-time basis, what was specifically going on in [our state]. It was more one-on-one, more interactive." Another said, "Spitfire went the extra mile, the messages were very tailored."

Grantees gave positive feedback on most aspects of the technical assistance and gave very high marks to the technical assistance providers; grantees were less likely to report the online materials library as very important to their work. Although some grantees mentioned the benefit of having an online database of resources, five grantees reported it was less important to their work, or they did not know. Grantees that thought this was less important reported that they rarely went to the online library because they received the same information from Spitfire and through email. One grantee also mentioned technical issues with the site and passwords.

The modest funding included as part of the Narrative Project increased the effectiveness of its core messaging and communications support.

Receiving financial assistance made grantees accountable for using what they were learning; many agreed the funding was critical to implementing the strategies and using the Narrative tools, even though the grants were not large (typically $50,000 or less annually). As one grantee expressed, "It's important for a funder to recognize that technical assistance will go farther if you also pay the grantees to change the way they talk. A huge chunk of success is that the Foundation made grants to do nothing more than to change the way they talk about the work they do. Other funders don't acknowledge this, that it takes time and money to change this." Another said, "A lot of times, technical assistance doesn't come with money, so we were able to have accountability that we don't always have. We weren't just given the gift; we were accountable for using the gift."

The Narrative Project's emphasis on skills development helped expand grantees' communications capacities, prolonging its value beyond the grant period.

Most grantees had little or no previous formal communications training: the key staff on this project were the advocates, typically executive directors and senior staff trained as attorneys and policy analysts. Moreover, just 5 of the 15 grantees interviewed had a dedicated "communications person" on staff. Some participants noted an "a-ha" moment when they learned that communications skills were just as important to securing a policy win as understanding the policy issues. One noted learning that, "Communications is everyone's responsibility. Regardless of whether your title is a policy, advocacy, communications person or executive director, everyone has to embrace this." Another added, "We learned communications strategy and advocacy strategy have to be linked."

Of the 15 grantees, 10 (67 percent) said that they had sustained the communications skills and strategies learned during the project. Of the other five grantees, two (both of which were dropped from the project) reported they did not sustain skills learned in the Narrative Project; one said it did not know if skills had been sustained; and two did not answer the question. When explaining why they had been able to sustain skills learned through the Narrative Project, one grantee said, "It imparted skills we didn't have before that stayed with us. We're much more conscious of messaging and communication techniques. We're much more conscious of what it is and the role it plays. Now it is part of our advocacy planning. There are plenty of ways we could be better at it, we would love more staff, but we do have more staff capacity among existing staff because they have had this experience and learned these techniques." Another reported, "Once you enhance communication skills, it's an ongoing asset. You don't go back, you always build on what you learn. We are still using what we learned."

Sustaining skills was not automatic; post-project challenges included finding funding to sustain the staff trained in the Narrative project. For example, one grantee said, "It takes ongoing support to be able to maintain a dedicated staff member to this topic; we've been patching together other funding, but it isn't easy. We really need the funding because it's linked to who you can get and retain and understand that complex issue, who can make relationships with policymakers and the community." Two grantees said that their ability to sustain these skills may be due in part to their participation as Finish Line grantees (a follow-on project the Packard Foundation sponsored). One noted, "I don't know if I can answer fairly; as we are a Finish Line grantee, we still get one-on-one coaching."

Funding for multiple years helped institutionalize the communication skills and capacities the Narrative had fostered.

Although the Narrative was designed as a multiyear project, renewal was not automatic; grantees had to re-apply each year. Three grantees received one- or two-year grants and were not selected to continue participation in the Narrative or Packard's follow-up project (the Finish Line Project). The Foundation reviewed grantees annually; it did not renew grantees that were underperforming or where the window of opportunity for state policy change appeared to have closed (typically because of a change in state leadership).

Grantees that received multiyear funding said the longevity helped them institutionalize and sustain what they learned through the Narrative Project: "The Narrative was so much better because it ran for four years. That has meant that the approach has been institutionalized in a way you can't do in one year." Another added, "The Foundation saw the value of the long-term risk." In contrast, one of the de-funded grantees said it was unable to continue making progress after its one-year grant ended, because it had not learned enough about how to execute the messages to achieve policy gains.

Final Reflections

The Packard Foundation invested in a communications capacity-building project with the hope that its investment would translate into tangible policy advances. Most of the participating grantees agreed that this occurred: 11 grantees (73 percent) cited specific policy wins that they attributed to their work on the Narrative project, while 8 (53 percent) said that their work on the Narrative helped to positively reframe the discussion of children's coverage in their state. (Table 4 summarizes policy achievements during and after the Narrative; while not all are attributed to the Narrative, the table is intended to summarize policy movement in the Narrative states in this period.) Ten grantees (67 percent) also report they have been able to sustain at least some of the communications capacities built through the project.

Grantees identified several structural elements that made this project different from other technical assistance and grant programs they had previously participated in. The first was the combination of technical assistance with grant funds. Although the grants were moderate, direct financial assistance improved grantees' adoption of the technical assistance pieces. Second, the length of the support allowed grantees to institutionalize core communications skills and capacities, which grantees believe has been a critical factor in their initial and continued advocacy successes. The Foundation was also willing to, and did, shorten the term for low-performing grantees, and some of the de-funded grantees agreed that they had not learned enough in a single year to sustain communications capacities from the project. Finally, the focus on capacity building, rather than just giving the grantees messages to use, expanded grantees' skill sets and helped prolong the impact of the Foundation's funding. Although sustaining skills was not automatic—it required continued effort, including finding funding to support trained staff—two-thirds of grantees reported they had sustained skills and strategies, thus amplifying the impact of the initial grant funds.

Table 4. Major Policy and Other Achievements During and After the Narrative Grant, by State

State	Policy and Other Achievements Reported During Narrative	Policy and Other Achievements Reported in Years After Narrative
Arizona	Delayed cuts to Arizona's KidCare program	
Arkansas*	Began the conversation to expand eligibility	Expanded eligibility for children from 200 to 250 percent of FPL
Colorado*	Delayed cuts to children's coverage programs Establishing a relationship with the Lt. Governor	Passed legislation to increase access to children's medical homes
Georgia	Prevented eligibility cuts for children	
Illinois	Prevented eligibility cuts for children	
Iowa*	Implemented 12 month continuous eligibility	Expanded eligibility in CHIP for children from 200 to 300 percent of FPL Expanded CHIP to lawfully residing immigrant children Provisions for • presumptive eligibility • simplified income verification • paperless renewals • individual coverage mandate • CHIP dental-only option for children with private medical coverage
Kansas*	Expanded eligibility in CHIP from 200 to 250 percent of FPL	
New Jersey	Expanded family coverage from 133 to 200 percent of FPL	
Ohio*	Tripled funding support for child health advocacy	
Oregon*	Created Oregon Healthy Kids in 2009 • expanded eligibility for children to 300 percent of federal poverty level • 12-month continuous eligibility for Medicaid children under age 19 • eliminated the asset test for CHIP • simplified the application and renewal process • provided funding to cover more adults	
Rhode Island*	Maintained eligibility Developed a relationship with the Senate Majority Leader to begin discussions on expanding eligibility and developing a buy-in option	
Texas*	Implemented 12 month continuous coverage for children in families at or below 185 percent of FPL Implemented 6 months of continuous coverage for families between 186 and 200 percent of FPL Increased asset limits in Medicaid and CHIP	
Utah*	Passed legislation that removes the enrollment cap on CHIP	
Washington*	Began work on eligibility expansion for children	Expanded eligibility for children in CHIP 250 to 300 percent of FPL
Wisconsin*	Implemented BadgerCare Plus, resulting in: • Increased eligibility in CHIP from 250 to 300 percent of FPL • Expanded presumptive eligibility rules • Extended 12-months continuous eligibility to infants eligible for Medicaid born to non-citizen women	

Source: Mathematica and Urban Institute interviews with Narrative grantees, Summer 2011, State Narrative Reports, CHIP State Plan Fact Sheets, and CHIP Annual Report Template System (CARTS) Reports.
Notes: *State grantee continued to receive funding as a Finish Line grantee. FPL= Federal Poverty Level.

There was broad consensus among grantees that the technical assistance was of very high quality—so much so, that two of the dropped grantees found funds to hire back the same technical assistance providers. Grantees elaborated on this by describing communications lessons they learned from the project. Most grantees reported learning the prominent role communications strategies play in policy wins. Before the Narrative Project, most grantees did not link policy wins with communications strategies; most of the advocates had no prior formal communications training, and only a third had a dedicated communications staff person at their organization. The project also helped grantees identify the importance of positive message framing in achieving policy wins, both in moving the discussion away from the "welfare/tax-eating" frame to the "investment/smart strategy" frame, and in establishing recognition that the advocates could frame the discussion, rather than reacting to others' framing of it. Finally, it helped validate the need for communications training among all advocacy organization staff, not just to embed that skill in one communications specialist. Especially as funders and advocates prepare for coverage expansion as part of health reform implementation, these lessons are relevant, as polls have indicated both misinformation and lack of education about what the Affordable Care Act means for individuals and families (Kaiser Family Foundation 2012; Factcheck.org 2012).

Data and Methods

Data for this brief were obtained through interviews with key staff from 15 of the 16 Narrative grantees in summer 2011. To conduct these interviews, staff from Mathematica and the Urban Institute used a semistructured interview guide that focused on six areas: (1) the progress made on advancing children's coverage during the Narrative Project, (2) specific accomplishments resulting from participation in the Narrative Project, (3) whether and how the Narrative work benefited the advocates' children's coverage advocacy agenda, (4) if there were additional benefits from participating in the Narrative Project, (5) strengths and weaknesses (if any) of the Narrative approach, and (6) what lessons were learned from participating in the project. In addition, researchers interviewed three key staff/former staff from Spitfire who worked on the project; reviewed grantee reports; reviewed materials submitted by Spitfire to the Packard Foundation summarizing grantee activities; and participated in an online tutorial offered by Spitfire staff to review the grantee online materials library. Summary notes from all of these activities were analyzed to identify common themes.

This study has limitations. First, although most grantees believe the project directly aided their policy success, we cannot disentangle the effects of the different types of technical assistance provided on policy change. Spitfire did a media clippings analysis as part of its work for the Narrative Project, so we know that message echo and policy change occurred, but we do not know which aspects of the project were the most essential in helping grantees achieve policy goals, or if it was the confluence of all the project features. A further limitation is possible recall bias. Because grantees were several years out of the Narrative Project by the time of this study, they may have forgotten or confused the timing of certain events or activities. In addition, a majority of the respondents received subsequent Packard funding through the Finish Line project that likewise combined direct funding with technical assistance, again leading to possible confusion in describing their experiences with the Narrative. Finally, while grantees were assured that they would not be identified by name and most shared various criticisms of the Narrative when prompted, some may have been reluctant to criticize the project too strongly given their dependence on grant support, raising the possibility of some censoring of information.

Without the willing participation of the grantees and Spitfire staff in our interviews, we could not have completed this brief. We sincerely thank the grantees and Spitfire staff for their time, thought, and candor in providing this information and making this brief possible. We also thank Ian Hill and Fiona Adams of the Urban Institute, who conducted 5 grantee interviews, for their contributions, as well as Gene Lewit, Liane Wong, and Minna Jung of The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, Kristen Grimm of Spitfire Strategies, Bruce Lesley and Ed Walz of First Focus, Amy Rosenthal of Community Catalyst, and Colleen Chapman, an independent consultant, for their careful review and input on a prior version of this memo.

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Endnotes

[1] The Packard Foundation does not support any legislative activities, and grantees did not conduct any legislative activities with their Narrative funding.

[2] Throughout the Narrative's development and implementation, staff from Spitfire and the Packard Foundation worked closely with national thought leaders on children's health coverage to solicit their opinions and advice on the approach, as well as encourage their participation in the project. These groups included The Center on Budget & Policy Priorities, Families USA, First Focus, Georgetown University Institute for Health Care Research and Policy, The National Immigration Law Center, the National Academy for State Health Policy, and Voices for America's Children. Other groups that consulted on various aspects of the project included the Southern Institute and Lake Research Partners.

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