

# Telling Personal Stories

A key component of any advocacy strategy is finding personal stories that demonstrate the importance of the change you seek. Personal stories:

- lend credibility to a problem or solution
- put a human face on a problem or solution
- help others identify with a problem or solution
- engage a reader's heart, stir compassion
- move people to action to solve the problem or contribute to a solution

In adoption assistance advocacy, the stories should demonstrate how the monthly benefit or medical insurance made a difference to the child or youth. For example, if the family couldn't have adopted without adoption assistance, the story might explore how adoption has changed the youth's behaviors and is leading toward a brighter future. Or, the story might discuss how the family used the adoption assistance to help the child function better in school, at home, or in the community. Be careful not to focus on the money itself or to talk about things that might be considered luxuries.

Below we describe how to gather personal stories that can help make the strongest advocacy points. Although this is written primarily to help you gather and write others' stories, you can also use it guide you to write up your own story.

Before you start interviewing people or gathering personal stories to help you with your advocacy efforts, you should be able to answer these questions and explain your mission to prospective speakers:

- What is your specific goal? What do you hope to accomplish by delivering your message?
- What type of story will best illustrate the importance of your goal?
- Who are the best people to tell their personal stories?

## Gathering Information

While you are conducting the interview:

- Build trust—explain your goals; find common ground; reassure the person that they will have the opportunity review the story before you do anything with it
- Ask permission to record the interview, but also take notes
- Listen and allow speakers to talk; ask questions but give plenty of time for the person to answer before moving on to the next question
- Plan questions in advance, but be prepared to think of new ones as the story unfolds
- Don't push if a person hesitates to reveal a part of the story or becomes emotional; take the time to build the relationship and you may learn more later
- Do follow-up interviews after you have written up a draft to get more information or answer questions

- Explain to the person what you know you don't want them to publicly share and why. Sometimes there are parts of a person's story that are too personal or too complicated; you want to both protect the parent or youth and keep your audience focused on your prime advocacy message.

### **Writing the Story**

- Discuss with individual how you will need to shape her story to fit your advocacy goals
- Keep the story as brief as possible, definitely under one page
- Quote the person as much as possible; if necessary go back and ask very specific questions that can elicit a quote that is true and powerful
- Include details that will help the audience form pictures in their minds
- Have team members review and edit the story to ensure that it achieves your goals

### **Be Cautious and Respectful**

- Never use a story or parts of a story without permission
- Only tell the parts of the story that you need the reader to know; be very protective of the individual and don't share anything they might later regret (even if they are willing to share it now)
- Never change a person's story; if the story doesn't fit then seek another one