

Framing Messages to Support Low-Income Families

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OVERVIEW

Public Sector Consultants reviewed the reports and summaries of several organizations with regard to public opinion on welfare reform and reauthorization. The organizations were Squier, Knapp, and Dunn and Lake, Snell, Perry, and Associates (conducting research on behalf of the Benton Foundation); the Communications Consortium Media Center; Demos; the Oregon Center for Public Policy; Golin/Harris; Hart and Associates; and Bonney and Company (on behalf of W.K. Kellogg Foundation).

What follows is a brief summary of the findings of these organizations concerning messaging on two issues: welfare and health care. The three attached matrices provide an overview of the findings.

WELFARE REFORM AND REAUTHORIZATION

Many of the messages that “work” revolve around promoting work opportunity for recipients who work hard but are simply down on their luck. Messages that do not “work” evoke images of long-term, cyclical dependency. As a number of the reports note, the negative stereotype of the “welfare queen” and all the racial baggage that accompanies it is still a part of the American psyche and any message about welfare reform and poverty must avoid it.

MESSAGES RESONATING WITH THE PUBLIC

Self-sufficiency and the ladder of opportunity

If there is one thread tying the messages together, it is self-sufficiency. The public views programs that promote self-sufficiency and independence positively and any program that is seen as fostering dependence, or giving low-income families “something for nothing” is viewed very negatively. In this vein, messages promoting images of low-income families as actively engaged in work but still in need of support to become fully self-sufficient evoke more sympathetic responses. The key here is that the family is portrayed as an active participant, rather than a passive recipient of government support. This is where the “ladder of opportunity” and “tools to achieve independence” most resonate.

Work as a core value

Americans value work and see it as a fundamental building block of our culture. One of the reasons why “welfare” has such negative connotations is that it evokes images of people “living on the dole” rather than working for what they have. Therefore, messages about welfare reform or reauthorization must emphasize that TANF and other programs exist to move people from welfare to work, enable work, and reduce barriers to individuals finding work.

In this vein, the public supports specific programs aimed at just this—particularly education and training, childcare, and health care coverage for workers whose jobs do not provide coverage. There is a strong sense that low-income families should not be penalized by being forced into low paying jobs without provision for other necessities that enable opportunity and self sufficiency. As evidence of this, the public also believes that we need to “make work pay” and favors increasing the minimum wage.

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Flexibility for families and states

The public is unwilling to extend the time limits on benefits across the board, but instead prefers greater flexibility for states to extend benefits and programs as needed. For example, there is recognition that low-income families who have recently been moved off the welfare rolls are most vulnerable to economic downturns; the public favors extended training or education for those families until the economy improves and job opportunities become available.

MESSAGES THAT DO NOT RESONATE WITH THE PUBLIC

Most of the research that we reviewed focused on the message points that resonate with the public. Messages that should be avoided are essentially those that are contrary to the ones discussed above. These phrases evoke images of the pre-1996 system. For the public, anything that harkens back to those days is viewed negatively. Instead, the focus of any messaging strategy must be on the future, emphasizing that welfare reform has been a success, but that it can be improved. According to the research, phrases to avoid are:

- Welfare
- Welfare recipient
- Extending the time limit *or* extending benefits
- Relaxing work requirements
- Cash assistance
- Dependent
- Long-term
- Mandates
- System
- Poverty reduction
- Work supports
- Safety net

HEALTH CARE AS A MESSAGE

Just three of the summaries dealt with health care coverage.

The Demos study found great concern among the public about the lack of universal health care. Sixty-six percent believed that the government should provide insurance to those not already covered, although they do not favor a single national health plan. The public supports a variety of policy options for expanding coverage: requiring businesses to offer private insurance to employees, financial supports to help the uninsured purchase coverage, and expanding neighborhood health clinics. Furthermore, 84 percent of the public favors expanding health programs for low-income people such as Medicaid and CHIP. These findings are supported by the Bonney and Company poll as well.

Other research finds support for the expansion of health care coverage to low-income people and families. However, as with other programs like education, training, and childcare, this support is predicated on the assumption that these individuals and families meet expectations about work and productivity—in essence, that they are earning what they receive.

MESSAGE OUTLIERS

Within the research, there are some themes that while important in one or two of the reports, were not a significant message point throughout. These outliers are summarized in the last attachment to this document.

Attachment 1: Messages that Resonate with the Public

	Benton Foundation (Squier, Knapp, and Dunn)	Benton Foundation (Lake, Snell, Perry, and Associates)	Demos (New Opportunities?)	Communications Consortium Media Center	Oregon Center for Public Policy (Oregon)	Golin/Harris (Children's programs in Maryland, Ohio, Kentucky)	Bonney & Company (WKKF)	Hart and Associates
Temporary assistance to needy families	X							
Self-sufficiency or independence	X	X	X	X				X
Ladder of opportunity; training and support that help people move to work	X	X			X		X	X
Support working families; enabling work	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Valuing work; work as a core value	X	X	X	X			X	X
Flexibility for families and states	X	X		X	X		X	X
Tools to achieve independence	X							X
Accountability for states and policies	X					X		X
Future	X							X
Reform	X							X
Support	X							
Welfare to work	X			X				X
Reduce barriers to finding work	X	X					X	
Long-term solutions		X				X		
Making work pay; cost of living			X					
Health coverage as a support			X			X	X	

Attachment 2: Messages that Do Not Resonate with the Public

	Benton Foundation (Squier, Knapp, and Dunn)	Benton Foundation (Lake, Snell, Perry, and Associates)	Demos (New Opportunities?)	Communications Consortium Media Center	Oregon Center for Public Policy (Oregon)	Golin/Harris (Maryland, Ohio, Kentucky)	Bonney & Company (WKKF)	Hart and Associates
Welfare	X							
Welfare recipient	X							
Extending the time limit	X	X						
Relaxing work requirements	X							
Extending benefits	X							
Cash assistance	X		X					
Dependent	X							
Long-term	X							
Mandates	X							
System	X							
Poverty reduction	X							X
Work supports	X							X
Safety net	X							

Attachment 3: Message Outliers

	Benton Foundation (Squier, Knapp, and Dunn)	Benton Foundation (Lake, Snell, Perry, and Associates)	Demos (New Opportunities?)	Communications Consortium Media Center	Oregon Center for Public Policy (Oregon)	Golin/Harris (Maryland, Ohio, Kentucky)	Bonney & Company (WKKF)	Hart and Associates
Mention specific programs		+				+		
Promote marriage		-			-			-
Racial disparities		-						
Children's programs are an investment in the future						+		
Public benefits for recent legal immigrants					+		+	
Reform of "marriage penalties" in the system								+

Note: (+) means that the message is perceived positively; (-) means that the message is perceived negatively.