



HOLLYWOOD HOMELESS YOUTH PARTNERSHIP

Issue Brief

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Navigating the Ethical Maze: Storytelling for Organizations Working With Vulnerable Populations

INTRODUCTION

There have never been more compelling reasons for organizations to tell the stories of youth experiencing homelessness. As the numbers of youth living on the streets and in places not meant for human habitation grows, communities, policy makers, and elected officials are elevating this issue in ways we have never seen before. As a result, agencies are inundated with requests for stories from the media, their donors, advocacy groups, and from their own development departments.

No one disputes the value of storytelling and many agencies use stories very effectively on their web sites, in e-blasts, and in fundraising appeals. However the complex ethical implications of telling youth stories deserve our attention.

The goals of this issue brief are:

- To make a compelling case for the power of story to help organizations move their missions forward;



- Explore key ethical considerations of storytelling in agencies working with vulnerable populations of young people;
- Offer ideas, tools, and practices to help staff navigate the ethical dilemmas to balance the needs of the young people with organizational goals and priorities.

This Issue Brief, Ethical Storytelling, is part of a series of issue and policy briefs developed by the Hollywood Homeless Youth Partnership (HHYP) to advance policy and best practices focused on youth experiencing homelessness. The Hollywood Homeless Youth Partnership is a strategic alliance of agencies serving youth experiencing homelessness in the Hollywood area of Los Angeles. This brief emerges from a collaborative project with Michael Kass, Founder of The Center for Story and Spirit, and was developed with input from development and program staff at HHYP agencies, and young people with lived experience of homelessness. We thank all of them for their bravery in sharing their real stories to inform this brief. This brief is made possible through the generous support of the following foundations, the Vladimir and Araxia Buckhantz Family Foundation, the Dwight Stuart Youth Fund, and the Carl and Roberta Deutsch Foundation.

WHY TELL STORIES

We use the word 'story' all the time, but rarely reflect upon what story actually is and the role it plays in community building and organizational growth.

At its foundation, story is the basic building block of our organizations. It contains the DNA of our organization's identity, values, and shared purpose. Whatever organization you are involved in, there's a core mythology — a story — at the center of it.

Organizations, particularly cause-based organizations, must tell a powerful story that not only connects the dots for its audiences, but also inspires them to volunteer, contribute, and engage. But sharing a truly authentic story isn't about following a set of steps; it's about digging deep into the elemental humanity that lives at the core of a narrative, surfacing it, and sharing it with your audience and community. This type of storytelling requires a degree of vulnerability on the part of the storyteller, whether it's an individual or an organization, which may be uncomfortable or even frightening.

Thanks to the internet and pervasive media, we have never been more saturated in story. As a result, we have become exceptionally discerning consumers of narrative, even at an unconscious level. Only stories that resonate at a deeply human, universal level—in other words, authentic ones that go beyond a recounting of 'things that happened' to explore the who and the why behind the events—will distinguish themselves over the 'noise.'



ETHICAL CONCERNS RAISED BY STORYTELLING IN ORGANIZATIONS WORKING WITH YOUTH EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS: THE IMPACT ON YOUNG PEOPLE

As powerful as stories are, collecting and sharing them within the context of work with vulnerable populations presents a minefield of ethical dilemmas. The very act of sharing their stories may impact young people experiencing homelessness in such a way as to raise ethical concerns. Specific impacts that Hollywood Homeless Youth Partnership (HHYP) agencies and young people have observed include:

- **Re-traumatization:** When we tell stories, our brains sometimes cannot distinguish between a re-imagined event and an event occurring in real time. In other words, when we tell a powerful story about the past, the emotions and sensations associated with that event may reassert themselves. In the case of stories about trauma, this can lead to a re-traumatization that can potentially derail a therapeutic process.

We worked with a young man who had a compelling life story. He had graduated from our program and was now living independently in the community so we invited him to speak at a small fundraiser with important donors. We had several conversations with him to help him prepare and to reinforce that he had total control over what he wanted to share. When he got to the microphone to speak, he totally broke down. We thought that this event would be a real ego-booster for this young man. Instead, he ended up feeling embarrassed and ashamed.



- **Expectation of Reciprocity or Special Treatment:**

Although it is never promised and may even be explicitly denied, some young people may assume that they earn 'special status' or privileges in exchange for sharing their story with or on behalf of the organization. This can create a clash of expectations and lead to feelings of disappointment, anger, or even betrayal on the part of the young person and, more importantly, interfere with their willingness or ability to continue to engage in important services.

- **Implicit Pressure:** With so much emphasis placed on the value and power of story, young people have reported feeling implicit pressure to share their stories to help the organization raise funds or advocate more powerfully in the community. While this may be purely unintentional on the part of the organization, it nevertheless compromises and even sabotages the service and clinical relationship between agency and young person.

We thought that we were avoiding lots of the common pitfalls by asking a current staff member (who was a former consumer) to be the speaker at our event. It wasn't until after the event that we found out that he really didn't want to be highlighted in that way but he hadn't felt comfortable telling us, even though we asked him over and over again.

- **Fear of reality not matching the narrative:** Young people that have been elevated as "success stories" may be reluctant to disclose if they relapse, lose a job, or return to homelessness. They may decide to avoid services and not get the help they need instead of disappointing their providers.
- **Lack of Control Over Their Story:** Young people may feel that they no longer have control over their narrative once it has been shared, documented, and distributed. This may lead to the storyteller feeling 'trapped' or tied to a narrative that no longer reflects their reality.

We had a young person that was doing so well in our program – she was enrolled in school, working a part time job, and taking care of all the things that she needed to do. When we were looking for a patient story to highlight in our e-newsletter, everyone thought of her and the story looked beautiful and got a lot of positive responses. We were so surprised when she totally dropped out of services after the story went out to print. We always wondered if she felt that she had to live up to this "success story" and that we wouldn't like her anymore if she had struggles.



As if the ethics of storytelling weren't complicated enough, specific media present additional challenges:

- **In-Person Storytelling:** Having a young person who currently engages with or formerly engaged with your services share their story at a live event such as a fundraiser or other gather can be incredibly powerful. It can also trigger a sense of 'culture shock' as the storyteller finds themselves sharing personal information in an unfamiliar environment and may provoke unanticipated reactions or questions from the audience that are harmful to the storyteller. Without adequate support, the storyteller may also feel 'post-performance' let down or retraumatization.
- **Storytelling in Video:** Sharing stories in video, particularly when the video is posted online, comes with added challenges. Once online, the video may be accessible via Google or other search engines far into the future. That presents a risk to a young person who moves forward in their lives, but may remain tied to an old story that no longer reflects their reality.

- **Social Media Storytelling:** When an agency or a young person shares a story, or part of a story, via social media, that material may be visible to communities far outside the young person's or organization's immediate community. In addition, all posts on social media in most cases become the property of the social media platforms the moment they go live.
- **Third Party Media (e.g. blogs, periodicals, etc.):** Third parties sometimes approach young people to solicit their stories. If the young person signs a release, their stories, once shared, become the intellectual property of the third party to be re-shared, edited, or otherwise altered at will. This can be traumatic for a young person who enters into the relationship without full knowledge of the implications of signing the release.

We had spent a lot of time vetting the journalist and preparing the young person before the interview. However, when the story came out, we were all horrified about how her story was portrayed. I would definitely do it differently next time.

THE KEY QUESTIONS RAISED BY THESE CONCERNS ARE:

- How can organizations protect the wellbeing of young people during the collection, sharing, and distribution of stories?
- How can organizations effectively communicate that sharing their stories does not imply that youth will receive special consideration or privileges?
- How can organizations ensure that young people do not feel pressured to share their stories?
- What structures can organizations put into place that ensure that young people feel empowered to own their stories even after they have been shared and distributed?



ADDRESSING THE CONCERNS: TIPS TO HELP COLLECT AND CRAFT STORIES ETHICALLY

When working with story, you are responsible for creating a safe and responsible container for the storyteller.

Asking someone, whether it is a young person or a Board Member, to share their story is about more than simply asking for a recitation of events. It is asking someone to contribute part of who they are to support your organization's mission. This undertaking requires trust and vulnerability on both sides. The tips below will support the process:

1. **Deep consent.** Ensure that you have offered and received consent that goes beyond HIPAA compliance to ensure that the storyteller understands their rights and the potential impact of sharing their story. Particularly when working with vulnerable young people, merely getting signed consent is not enough to safeguard against ethical complications. Deeper consent implies that the storyteller understands:
 - Exactly how their story will be used, both in terms of purpose and method of distribution;
 - That they feel empowered to remove themselves from the process at any time;
 - That they are under no obligation to tell their story as a condition of receiving services at your organizations;
 - That they will not receive any preferential treatment or status as a result of sharing their story;

- That they have the right to ask the organization to remove the story from any online, print, or other media at any time without any fear of reprisal or negative consequences.
- If there is an expiration date on the term of their consent. While some organizations may prefer to ask for consent 'in perpetuity,' others may wish to put a time limit on the consent to ensure that the story remains relevant to both organization and storyteller.

If at any point, the staff member responsible for having the conversation around consent feels that the young person does not comprehend the conditions of consent, they should use their best judgement as to whether it is ethical to continue with the storytelling session.

2. Create a safe container for the storyteller. The impact of sharing a story does not end with a storytelling performance, videotaping, or interview. Offer the storyteller a space to process their experience and receive support around any emotions that may arise during the storytelling process.

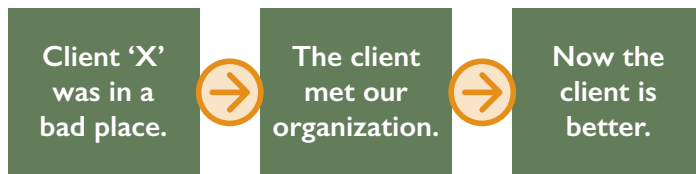
3. Offer training on ethical concerns around storytelling. Because media and social media are pervasive in the lives of young people, volunteers, and staff, making training on ethics, empowerment, and long-term implications of storytelling across media can help raise awareness around ethical concerns. In addition, by making ethical storytelling training widely available, organizations can help dispel the misconception that those who share their stories will receive special treatment.

Elements of this training could include the implication of sharing stories over various media, ensuring that storytellers feel empowered to advocate for themselves when negotiating with organizations or media, and helping storytellers understand the distinction between 'authentic storyteller' and 'oversharing.'

4. Designate and train specific staff in the ethical collection of stories. By having a trained staff member present at all storytelling or story collection sessions, organizations can help ensure a uniformity of approach and awareness to safeguard the wellbeing of the storytellers.

ETHICAL CONCERNS RAISED BY STORYTELLING IN ORGANIZATIONS WORKING WITH YOUTH EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS: THE STORIES THEMSELVES

All too often, organizational stories fall prey to time and space constraints that strip the stories of humanity, complexity, and nuance. The standard story of this type follows the outline below:



This type of story may have the short term benefit of helping the organization raise funds or meet a Board of Directors' request for something to tug at the heart strings, but may have longer term negative effects on youth, audience, and the wider community.

- **Impact on the Storyteller:** When young people see their stories sensationalized or edited to emphasize the most dramatic or challenging parts of their lives, it can feel exploitative. By the same token, when the solutions or 'journey towards success' are portrayed as relatively simple, easy, or linear, it betrays the complexity of moving towards greater stability. Seeing these stories of 'easy victory' lifted up may make young people engaged in the day to day struggle to move their lives forward feel inadequate and defeated. These feelings could lead them to disengage from services or move towards greater instability.



- **Impact on the Audience:** The ethical dilemma posed by over-simplified storytelling affects contributors and other stakeholders by creating unrealistic expectations for what 'success' looks like for an organization's work. For example, if an organization tells stories in which success is portrayed as a young person attaining stable housing, getting a job, and getting off of drugs, then its audience of contributors, Board members, and community members will reasonably expect everyone with whom the organization works to achieve this level of 'success.'

With this inflated image of success as a foundation, other, more incremental changes may be seen as 'failure.' This serves neither the organization nor those with whom it works.

- **Impact on the Larger Community:** Once a story is distributed into the world via email, video, or even direct mail, it exists in the public domain. Media in the form of newspapers, other websites, blogs, and others may pick the story up and further simplify or sensationalize it to further their own agenda. This is often perfectly legal, but raises significant ethical concerns.

THE KEY QUESTIONS RAISED BY THESE CONCERNS ARE:

- How can organizations responsibly tell stories that preserve the humanity, complexity, and depth of their work as well as the lives of the people with whom they work?
- How can stories told by organizations both meet the strategic mission and fundraising goals of the organization and foster realistic expectations for what 'success' looks like?
- How can organizations support telling stories that lift up, dignify, and affirm the experience of the people they work with while still meeting their development and communications goals?



TIPS TO HELP BUILD ETHICAL STORIES

1. **Look Beyond the Obvious Story:** The 'case/example' model of organizational storytelling is not only potentially unethical in its oversimplification of complex dynamics, it is also increasingly ineffective in making an impact on audiences. What other, more nuanced stories can you tell that encapsulate your organization's work? What small moments encapsulate the depth of your organization's work?
2. **Expand Beyond Stories of Those Who Engage with Your Services Directly:** In concert with looking beyond the obvious story, recognize that you have access to a treasure trove of stories that may be equally impactful. Volunteers, contributors, staff, Board Members, and others all have a unique perspective and experience that connect powerfully with a wide range of audiences.
3. **Emphasize Growth Over Hardship:** Ask the storyteller what part of the story they are most eager to share and make that the centerpiece of the story. Conventional storytelling 'wisdom' says to emphasize pain and hardship in order to provoke a sense of sympathy, or even horror, in the audience. While this may be effective, it is ultimately exhausting and potentially unethical. Stories of hope, growth, and progress connect with equal power and serve to uplift both storyteller and audience.
4. **Know Your Audience:** Many oversimplified stories emerge as a result of making assumptions about what your audience expects or knows about your work. Instead of meeting your audience's expectations of a 'success' story, take the opportunity to challenge their assumption with a more nuanced, human picture of what progress, growth, and success look like for your work.

5. Build Awareness around a ‘Double Bottom Line’

for Your Stories: Everyone involved in the storytelling process, including young people, staff, and other, should be aware that stories should both connect with the community to move the organization’s work forward and honor, uplift, and empower the youth. When in doubt, the needs of the youth come first!

6. Create guiding documents for your agency:

Organizations may want to develop tools that promote the principles of ethical storytelling. Examples include: A storyteller Bill of Rights; a written code of ethics or value statement to guide storytelling across different media and departments; a checklist for staff, volunteers, and Board of Directors that codifies awareness around ethical issues.



CONCLUSION

The art and science of storytelling for organizations working with vulnerable populations raises complex ethical concerns. These are compounded when the storytellers are young people, many of whom may be working through deep trauma and other challenges. While it is not possible to completely eliminate the ethical dilemmas, raising awareness, providing training, and engaging in an ongoing process of evaluation, growth, and conversation can help navigate them such that the organization achieves its communications goals while preserving the dignity, power, and wellbeing of everyone involved in the storytelling process.



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