

Leaders in *D*isability Policy

The Power of Personal Stories

“Participation in the policy change process is your opportunity to make a difference”

~ Bobby Silverstein

There is intense competition for the attention of elected officials and their staff, there are many strategies employed to get their attention. One of the most effective strategies is the use of ***personal stories linked to a clearly defined policy objective***. The purpose of telling a personal story is to get the listener engaged and willing to fight for or accept the necessary change.¹

The policy objective is typically a policy or regulation that you wish to change, update or abolish; or it might be a bill that you want passed or defeated. Writing your personal story is central to the process of making your case for change. When you've written your story, you'll use it over and over again - in letters and calls to policymakers; in newspaper articles or letters to the editor; when meeting with lawmakers; or, when gathering supporters.²

An Effective Personal Story:

- Is about something that is very important to you.
- Is short and to the point. If it is written, it should be no longer than a page. If you are speaking, try to keep your story within 3-5 minutes.
- Focuses on one main point or specific request.
- Is very specific about who the policy objective affects – and how.
- Is written using language that the policymaker understands; and if possible, targets one of the policymakers' identified policy goals or positions.
- Uses emotions and creates an image of what is happening so that the listener connects to the issue. Personality, emotion, and creativity attract attention and make your letter, story, or testimony stand out. Bring your family member with you to testify or include a picture; use creative techniques; and, demonstrate depth of feeling – but not unproductive emotions such as rage or accusation.

¹ Bob's Guide: A Congressional Insider's View on How To Become Effective Disability Policy Change Agents (2002)

² Partners in Policymaking Online Course *Making Your Case*
http://www.partnersinpolicymaking.com/makingyourcase/ready_sb.html

- Presents a struggle, conflict or challenge – and asks for the listeners help in solving that challenge.
- Has a "Tipping Point." Your story should be detailed and designed to build up to an example that makes your listener say, "that's unfair," "that cannot be happening in my district," or "that has to be changed."
- Specifically states what you want, how the person can help or what you are asking them to do.

There are four parts to an effective personal story:

1. The Constituent

- Who you are –Who this policy affects. (Establish a snapshot in their mind of you and your family).
- Where you live – make it personal: *"I live in Towson and my kids go to Stoneleigh Elementary School."*
- Why this issue is important to you or who in your family it affects – *"I have three children; my youngest Larry our adoptive son is in the 3rd grade and has ADHD, Post-traumatic stress disorder, and behavioral issues."*

2. The Ask -

- What is it you want you want the policymaker to do.
Be Very Specific *"I need you to vote yes on House Bill H567," "We need \$50,000 dollars added to the Staff Development budget line item." "Defeat Senate Bill S345."*

3. The Reason

- What does life look like with or without this policy? Use vivid words and be as descriptive as possible. *"Sally must travel over two hours to and from school in a special bus - that's a challenge for any young child, but it is simply overwhelming for a child with special needs. Last week she had a major seizure on the bus. It took so long to get Sally to the hospital she nearly died."*
- What could life be or what does it look like if the person does what you ask. *"If Sally attended our neighborhood school with appropriate supports, her bus ride would be shortened to 10 minutes. The hospital, familiar doctors, and many members her family would be just minutes away."*

4. The Leave

- Remind them of "the ask" again - *"I need you to vote yes on House Bill H567."*
- Tell them how to contact you if they wish to discuss or need more information.
- Give them a way to find out more information on the subject – references, links, or fact sheets.