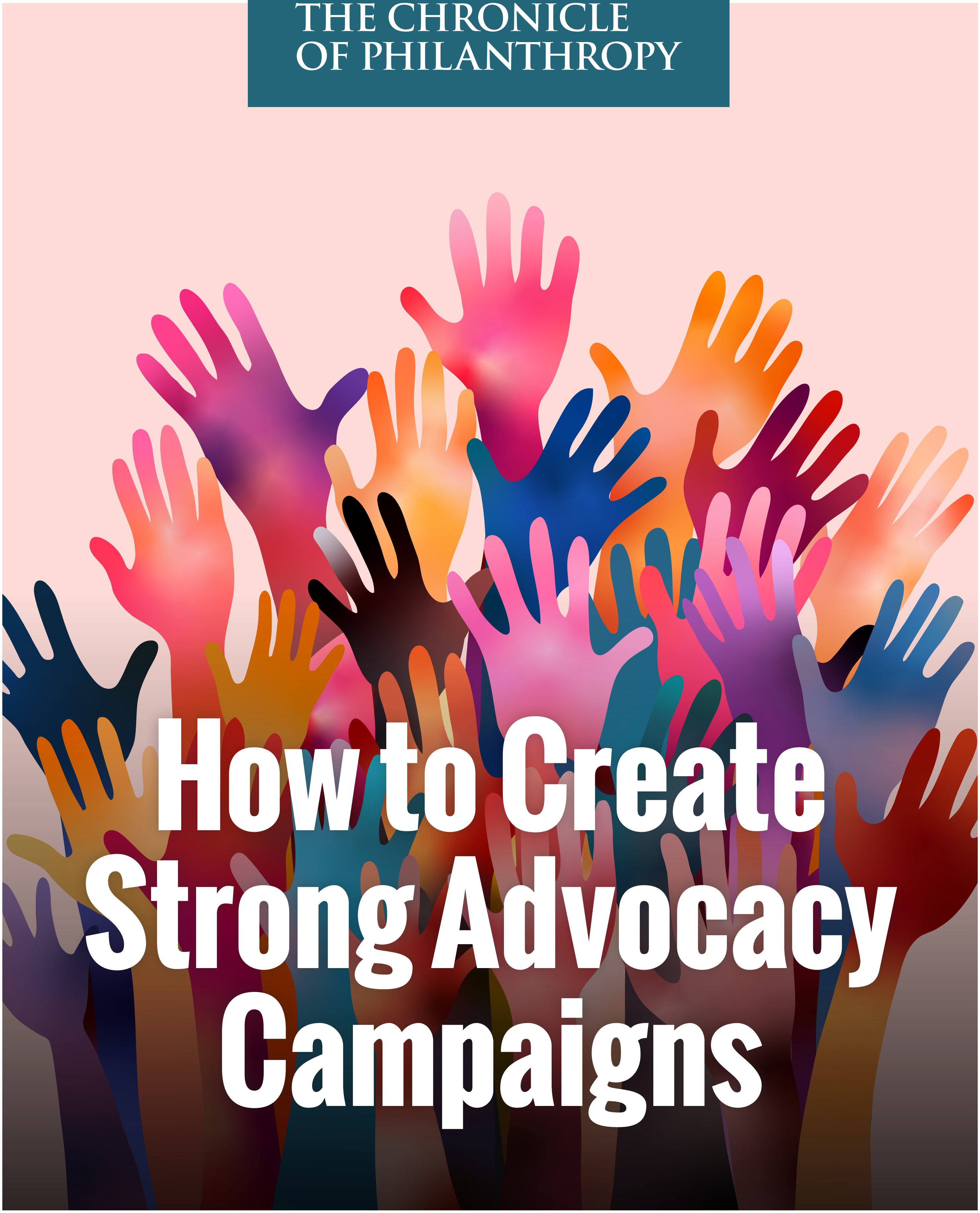
THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY



How to Create Strong Advocacy Campaigns

WITH SUPPORT FROM | everyaction

everyaction

Testing for digital engagement

5 Data-driven ways to boost nonprofit digital advocacy programs

Email raises millions of dollars for nonprofits every year, and organizations on the EveryAction platform took over 34 million advocacy actions in 2022—many of which were across digital channels. Digital advocacy can help organizations enlist and retain advocates across geography, time zones, ability, and so much more.

Improving your digital advocacy program requires testing your engagement rates and optimizing your practices based on your findings. It will allow you to understand trends—because what gets measured gets moved. But how do you do that testing? In this guide we'll walk you through five important digital engagement opportunities at techniques to optimize across channels.

LEARN NOW

THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY.

How to Create Strong Advocacy Campaigns

Pitching your cause to policy makers can be tricky, especially if your nonprofit is new to advocacy and doesn't yet have relationships with elected officials. Luckily, there are simple ways to prepare for this work, build a strong case for your mission, and forge ties with legislators that are mutually beneficial.

Don't wait to get started, says Christopher Kush, CEO of Soapbox Consulting, which helps charities develop advocacy strategies. If your nonprofit does not meet with lawmakers, other voices will prevail. In other words, "If you're not at the table, you're on the menu," he says.

This collection offers smart advice and ideas to help you start or boost your advocacy efforts. For example, enlist the help of board members — and set them up to succeed. Research shows that few trustees engage in basic advocacy, and that's a missed opportunity.

"To me board members are really the secret sauce that make things happen," says Tim Delaney, president of the National Council of Nonprofits. "They have the added juice that paid [nonprofit] staffers don't, not because they're slick, but because they care, they're influential, and they're constituents."

One way to guide trustees in this work: Help them consider how they could leverage their networks by asking them about their business connections, other charities they work with, and political campaigns they have supported. Then, talk about potential actions they could take.

Read on for more guidance from experts including ways to approach and get to know your lawmakers and how to talk about problems facing kids in ways that inspire officials to act.

Cover photo by iStock

Please note: Sources are identified by their titles at the time of initial publication.

Coaching Board Members for Advocacy Pays Big Dividends

By MARIA DI MENTO

A recent study showed that only one-third of nonprofit board members engage in basic advocacy: working with the charity's leaders to educate policy makers about the organization's mission and services.

That's a big problem, experts say. Board members often have connections that make them more likely to come into contact with elected officials at social or other events, as well as the kind of community clout that makes lawmakers more likely to listen to them.

"To me board members are really the secret sauce that make things happen," says Tim Delaney, president of the National Council of Nonprofits. "They have the added juice that paid [nonprofit] staffers don't, not because they're slick, but because they care, they're influential, and they're constituents."

Some trustees may be reluctant to pitch their organization's work to lawmakers because they believe nonprofit boards are not allowed to advocate. That isn't true, says Anne Wallestad, chief executive of BoardSource, an organization that seeks to improve nonprofit governance.

One way to bust that myth is to help your trustees understand the distinctions between lobbying and advocacy, says Delaney. Another is to give nonprofits the tools to know what their trustees can and cannot do.

Charities should create formal policies on advocacy to "clearly define the levels of engagement that are appropriate and what are not," says Wallestad.

There are a number of free resources to help board members and nonprofit executives understand advocacy, including one recently launched by BoardSource called Stand for Your Mission, which provides tools and guidelines to help charities make the pro-advocacy case to board members.

"Sometimes organizations and trustees fall victim to waiting until they feel 100 percent comfortable to dip a toe in advocacy," Wallestad says. "But there's no time like the present to make sure lawmakers understand the work your organization does."

PREPPING FOR SUCCESS

Trustee-led advocacy "should be expected because everything today is so interconnected," says Margaret Ferguson, a board member at the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore since 1999. "If your institution is going to be strong and grow, it's going to need broad connections in the community."

Of course, you can't just tell trustees that advocacy is legal, hand them copies of your policy, and expect them to be engaged and effective advocates. Nonprofit leaders need to set their trustees up for success.

A good way to start is to make sure board members understand which public-policy decisions might help or hinder the organization's work.

Wallestad says it is also important to educate trustees about any public agencies the nonprofit has partnered with and how much government support the charity has received or gets now.

"Trustees should also know where the organization is stuck or being held back and where it could take a leap forward through advocacy efforts," she says.

Just as you don't approach a wealthy donor by cold-calling them and expect a big donation, advocacy involves a long period of contact and cultivation.

BUILDING CONNECTIONS

Next, Ferguson says, nonprofit leaders should help board members think about how to leverage their networks by asking them questions about:

- their business connections and relationships.
- their involvement in community groups.
- other charities they work with.
- events they attend where they might run across a lawmaker.
- political campaigns have they contributed to.

Then, have a conversation with trustees about what actions to take. These can be as simple and natural as remembering to talk about their involvement with the charity when they run into a lawmaker at an event, Wallestad says.

"That's a time when, if the opportunity arises in a conversation, they can articulate to the person in an informal way the organization's mission," she says. For just such occasions, she adds, trustees should have at the ready a short, compelling statement about why they care about the nonprofit's mission and why they got involved. They need not be experts on the organization's issues of focus, but they should be well informed about its work and overall priorities.

"Remind them they're there to open the door to a relationship with the lawmaker," Wallestad says. And if the trustee lives in that legislator's district, she adds, it's important to make sure the lawmaker knows he or she is talking to a constituent.

STAYING THE COURSE

Making your nonprofit's case to lawmakers bears similarities to fundraising, Ferguson says. Just as "you don't approach a wealthy donor by cold-calling them and expect a big donation," advocacy involves "a long period of contact and cultivation."

She and Wallestad recommend coaching board members not just on opening a conduit to public officials but on how to elevate advocacy conversations the next time their paths cross:

- If the public official has been a supporter of the charity in the past, be sure to thank them.
- Don't lecture lawmakers about the mission, just tell them the charity's work.
- Invite the lawmaker to one of your charity's upcoming events, or schedule a visit where he or she can learn more about your group's programs or the concerns of those it serves.
- Find areas that are relevant to the official's interests and build on those.
- Read lawmakers' campaign literature to learn what issues they care about. Are they worried about jobs? Do they promote science, technology, engineering, and math education? If your organization has programs that address a favorite area, point that out.
- If lawmakers agree to attend an event, try to get them involved in a way that will make them feel good about participating.
- Use the visit to have a deeper conversation about what the organization has accomplished for those it serves.

MELANIE STETSON FREEMAN/THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR/GETTY IMAGES

11 Ways for Nonprofits to Build Ties With Lawmakers

By EDEN STIFFMAN

The beginning of a new Congress is a great opportunity for charities to get in on the ground floor and advocate for their causes.

Whether your organization seeks to protect something it cares about, bring about changes, or beef up legislation, nonprofits must build relationships with elected officials that are mutually beneficial.

"We know that it's not business as usual in Washington, D.C., this year," says Christopher Kush, author of *The One-Hour Activist* and CEO of Soapbox Consulting, which helps charities develop advocacy strategies. "To really be stewards of the issues we represent, we have to be sure we are actively working on protecting them and supporting them."

If your organization does not meet with policy makers, another organization will, says Kush. And as the saying goes, "If you're not at the table, you're on the menu."

The *Chronicle* asked Kush and other experts for their advice on how charities should build relationships with legislators.

Get to know your lawmakers.

If you don't already have strong relationships with federal, state, or local officials, begin a dialogue with them now.

"Just like you want to build relationships with your funders and grant makers," you

Charities should be proactive, laying the groundwork and building ties when they don't have a specific need and are not in an emergency situation.

need to get to know your lawmakers, says Laurel O'Sullivan, founder of the Advocacy Collaborative, which provides training to nonprofits.

Charities should be proactive, laying the groundwork and building ties when they don't have a specific need and are not in an emergency situation, she says. Make sure they know what you do, who your constituency is, and what your clients need.

Show them what you have to offer.

Nonprofits are often subject-matter experts, and they should use that to their advantage, says O'Sullivan. They have access to information that lawmakers want on people in their district, they have on-the-ground examples of whether policies are working, and they have stories to share about how they've helped their clients — or not — due to existing policies or resources.

"Elected officials crave information about their districts," says Kush. They want to know about the programs people use and need. "Talk about the 100 people you serve at home rather than trying to quote statistics from all over the world."

Rely on stories.

As director of government affairs for the National Fragile X Foundation, Jeffrey Cohen asks volunteer advocates to educate their members of Congress about the genetic disorder.

"In early years, we spent a lot of time trying to make our advocates into policy wonks," he says, but it got too technical. Trying to turn parents into policy experts was difficult at best. Today the group has swung in the opposite direction, asking advocates to show lawmakers photos of their children and share examples of how programs have helped them.

Do your homework.

"One of the first things advocates need to do is understand where decisions are made and the process by which decisions are made," says Roxana Tynan, executive director at the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy.

Figure out who can help you navigate whatever level of government you're focused on, says Tynan, whose organization works with officials at the city, county, and state levels.

To be a strategic advocate, you need to understand all the points at which legislation will go through a vote so you can talk to lawmakers ahead of time and turn people out for hearings in support of, or in opposition to, an issue.

The alliance puts together a "power analysis" before meeting with decision makers. This involves finding out everything they can about the lawmaker and what's important to that person before meeting in person. This can help you make connections between your cause and the decision maker, she says.

Time your meeting well.

Pay attention to federal, state, and local funding cycles when lawmakers decide the level of support they're going to give to different issues.

If you visit Washington when lawmakers are not debating the budget, you often have greater access to members of Congress and can get longer, more relaxed meetings, says Kush. Of the meetings he helped clients schedule in the last session of Congress, more took place outside the budget and appropriations cycle than in it.

Whereas annual lobbying days can be effective at showing strength in numbers, the work should be a year-round endeavor.

Set up meetings when lawmakers are in their home district, suggests O'Sullivan. During a legislative recess, they want to connect with their constituents. Sending advocates to the district office can be a great way to build deeper relationships, she says. The district staff members are the ones who have their ear to the ground and are frequently looking for resources they can share with constituents.

Consider inviting an elected official to an event where they can see your organization in action, helping the voters see what the elected official cares about.

Find the right people to attend — and assign roles.

The smaller the charity, the more senior the staff person should be who attends the meeting, says Kush. If your organization is tiny, send the executive director. Once a relationship is established, bring in board members and people you serve.

Tynan always recommends bringing people directly affected by the issue your organization is discussing.

Before going into a meeting, be clear about who will say what. Prepare for around 15 minutes and remind people to be brief. For those who are new to this work, sit down and rehearse, she says. “Get folks really comfortable telling their personal story.”

If you’re inviting a lawmaker to an event, have somebody assigned as a chaperone, O’Sullivan says. Be sure the chaperone will be ready to greet the lawmaker when he or she arrives and make introductions.

Don’t forget to make a request, whatever it may be.

Even after an introductory meeting, conclude by asking for assistance. For example, elected officials can help make introductions and guide your organization to resources like information about state and federal grants.

Kush suggests what he calls the “hook, line, and sinker” approach. Introduce yourself, share one statistic or story, and then make a request.

Keep your list of requests to three or fewer. “You will want to go back to talk about other things in the future,” he says. “They can’t help you if you ask for too much.”

Educating is not lobbying.

While public charities are allowed to lobby, they do face some limits. And for that reason, charities often worry that they’ll cross a legal boundary.

However, educating and talking about important issues with elected officials is “absolutely allowed,” O’Sullivan says. “It’s perfectly legal, and it’s imperative now more than ever.”

However, it may be considered lobbying if you ask a lawmaker to take a position on a piece of legislation.

Hire a lobbyist if…

“Most nonprofit advocates are the best lobbyists for their organizations,” O’Sullivan says. “They have a lot more expertise than a hired gun.”

However, if your organization has the resources to hire someone, it might make sense in some circumstances — for example, if legislation is being considered that will drastically affect your constituents and you don’t have the bandwidth to be on Capitol Hill, in the state capital, or in city hall as frequently as you should.

Recognition matters.

Just as you thank your donors for their support, it’s important to recognize a lawmaker who votes in your favor or is supportive otherwise, says O’Sullivan. If they’ve done anything to be helpful to you and your staff, give them some public credit for that, she says. That could be in the form of a news release or otherwise.

Kush recommends waiting a week to follow up after a meeting — but be sure not to forget. “This is the way the office knows that you really do care about what you were talking about,” he says. “It’s just critical to having the office do something after you’re gone.”

This work never ends.

Issues need advocates forever; thinking that you’ll have one meeting to win over lawmakers is unrealistic, Kush says. Make time to regularly update them on what you’re doing.

“We need to create time in our work plans to let our elected officials know what we’re up to,” says Kush. “It’s never over.”

iStock

To Achieve Lasting Policy Change for Kids, Advocates Need to Choose Their Words Carefully

By NAT KENDALL-TAYLOR and DAVID ALEXANDER

Kids right now are making more than the usual amount of noise. In Congress and state houses, they're at the center of public-policy debates on issues such as the child tax credit, Covid-19 vaccines and mask mandates, and the long-term effects of climate change.

For the first time in many years, advocates have a real chance to get something done for children. To take advantage of this opportunity, nonprofits and foundations need to reconsider how they talk about the problems facing kids. They need to recognize that the words they use have the power to shift how legislators, governments, and the public as a whole think about children and what they need.

Rather than using language that emphasizes the suffering of oppressed groups, focus on the policies and social structures that cause harm — and what decision makers need to do to fix them.

While many nonprofit organizations are remarkably effective at showing concern for America's kids, they rarely frame problems affecting them in ways that encourage public action and solutions. A new report released by the organizations we lead — FrameWorks and Leading for Kids — makes this abundantly clear. The report, *How are Advocates Talking About Children's Issues?*, sampled communications materials from 25 organizations that advocate for policies and programs to help children. We found that much of the messaging focuses on fear and crisis, not efficacy or solutions.

Most nonprofits, as well as the media outlets that cover their work, use terms like "vulnerable" or "at risk" to describe the primarily low-income children of color they serve. This is understandable given the significant challenges facing children historically harmed by societal and cultural institutions. But our research shows such language often backfires. The idea of "vulnerability" puts the focus on deficits and sets up a fatalistic perspective. Even if no ill intent exists, such language can be demeaning and paternalistic and can perpetuate racist stereotypes.

VAGUE AND UNINSPIRING LANGUAGE

Instead, rather than using language that emphasizes the suffering of oppressed groups, the focus should be on the policies and social structures that cause harm — and what decision makers need to do to fix them. Those discussions should offer clear and concise solutions. Unfortunately, our research found that messages about solutions are themselves often nonspecific and fail to inspire action.

Part of the problem is an overuse of the amorphous term "child well-being" in nonprofit narratives. While "well-being" is a strong, positive word and a rich concept, without clarification it is merely shorthand for a broad set of outcomes and fails to convey the types of solutions that will make a difference. Left in the dark, many people, including policy makers, default to their own interpretation. For instance, we found that people often think about children's issues solely in terms of child care and education. This narrow focus leaves out many solutions that advocates know would benefit kids.

A better approach is to specifically show what well-being looks like for children and what is necessary to achieve it. An explanation of the child tax credit, for instance, could include a discussion about how the credit helps parents pay the rent, buy healthy food, and provide their children with opportunities, such as camp or music lessons, all of which are essential to a child's well-being.

When discussing children's issues, it's important to translate collective concern for kids into a collective sense of responsibility

— and action. That requires demonstrating that these aren't just problems experienced by some kids but are part of a larger systemwide set of issues that demand a societal response.

The Black Lives Matter movement, for example, showed that racism isn't just perpetrated by a few bad cops or some guys waving Confederate flags. It's deeply embedded in societal systems that, over centuries, favored white people over Black people — from slavery to Jim Crow to housing and employment discrimination to today's harmful policing practices. Addressing racism requires dismantling these larger systems, not just taking one-off actions.

SHOW THE IMPACT OF RACISM

Similarly, when addressing problems affecting children, nonprofits need to clearly explain why creating a new child-care center or education program isn't nearly enough. Frequently that involves discussions about how racial inequities that permeate institutions and societal systems have hurt children and their families.

Nearly 40 percent of the communications materials we analyzed mentioned issues involving race, using terms such as "racial equity," "diversity equity, and inclusion," and "systemic racism." While such terms are commonplace in the nonprofit world, we found that most people, both white and Black, either don't understand what they mean or have a different view of their meaning than advocates. Our focus groups, for example, revealed that many people think of equity as a financial term, associating it with home or business equity.

Such terminology needs to be explained in relatable ways that invite more people into the conversation rather than putting up barriers to involvement. One way to do that is by using examples to show what these concepts look like in real life. Again, in the context of the child tax credit, explaining the rationale behind the policy could begin with a discussion of how unequal employment opportunities in this country have created large wealth disparities between both races and immigrant populations. That would lead to the proposed solution: how a tax credit to boost incomes would help alleviate the effects of such systemic inequity and help all children and their families.

A similar approach should be taken when data is used to illustrate challenges confronting children. Too often we found that data presented in reports and other materials about racial disparities were expected to speak for themselves, with little or no explanation provided for why those disparities existed. Here's an example of a typical sentence from materials we examined: "In 2018, Black children represented 14 percent of the total child population but 23 percent of all kids in foster care." Without explaining the causes of such disparities, people fill in their own explanations, frequently relying on racist assumptions about people of color.

For example, people might explain differences in income or wealth by suggesting that work or education isn't valued in "some communities" and that this explains why "those" (Black and brown) families are less successful. In other words, when context isn't provided, data are often interpreted in ways that reinforce the assumptions about race that communicators are trying to dispel.

Most Americans, including most policy makers, want to solve the problems facing our kids today. To take full advantage of the increased focus on children's issues, advocates and foundations need to choose their words carefully. That includes recognizing that few people outside their bubbles understand how public policy relates to children. Rather than reflexively using language that doesn't mean much to most people — or may even alienate them — advocates need to create narratives that pull people in and compel them to fight for the changes we know kids need.

everyaction

Purpose-built CRM for nonprofits with cause

Organize and mobilize supporters both online and offline, fundraise for your cause, and run marketing and communications in one unified CRM.

Built by nonprofit fundraisers based on the solutions they wished they had, EveryAction is designed to help you increase your impact without increasing your workload.

SEE IT IN ACTION

THE CHRONICLE
OF PHILANTHROPY®

1255 23rd Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20037

(202) 466-1000 | Philanthropy.com