

Supporting Those Directly Impacted When Sharing Their Stories

People with lived experience of civil legal problems are among the most powerful voices in this work. This resource offers guidance on how to engage them ethically and effectively.

Start with dignity and choice

- ▶ People with lived experience should have full agency over how, when, and whether their story is shared.
- ▶ Always get informed consent and make sure they understand how their story will be used and shared. Utilize plain language for informed consent to ensure understanding. At any point people have the choice to change their mind and withdraw consent, even when permission was previously given.
- ▶ Let them set limits and respect their boundaries without requiring explanation. They may want to share some parts of their story but not all of it, or they may not want to be identified. Make sure to discuss these options and their comfort level with the information they want to share in advance.
- ▶ Make participation optional at every stage of the process.

Prepare them thoroughly

- ▶ Explain the full context, including who will be in the room, what the goal is, and how the story will be used and shared. Make sure to provide clear information for each situation, whether it involves simple one-to-one retelling of their story in individual conversations, audio or video recordings, live interviews, or some combination.
- ▶ Share talking points and likely questions in advance. Never put someone in front of an audience without preparation.
- ▶ Practice together. A prep conversation helps people feel confident and in control of their own narrative. This practice will lead to a more comfortable experience and yield a better outcome.

Support before, during, and after

- ▶ Assign a person to support them throughout the process so they always have a point of contact.
- ▶ Sharing a difficult experience publicly can be emotionally demanding. Check in with them after the interview.
- ▶ Interview participants sometimes do not have an overwhelming or emotionally demanding reaction and that is a normal response as well.
- ▶ Be transparent about outcomes. Let them know how their participation was used and what it helped achieve.

Compensate and credit fairly

- ▶ Their expertise has value so compensate people for their time.
- ▶ Ask how they want to be identified (e.g. full name, first name only, or anonymous).
- ▶ Never use a person's story to raise funds without their explicit permission.

Frame people as problem solvers, not victims

Lead with agency, not suffering.

DO

- ✓ Center what they did, tried to do, or could do with proper support.
- ✓ Use their own words when possible. Authentic language is more compelling than polished messaging.
- ✓ Name the system failure, not the personal failure. The problem is a gap in access, not in the person.

DON'T

- x Lead with suffering or helplessness.
- x Define people by their legal problem (e.g. "the evicted," "the unrepresented").
- x Imply they couldn't help themselves. Show what is possible with the right help or improvements.

Pair story with solution

- ▶ Identify what changed when help was available.
- ▶ Identify what's possible with the right investment or policy change.
- ▶ Include a specific ask your audience can act on, like supporting a bill, signing a petition, or participating in an event.