

# WHEN AGENCY CLIENTS SHARE THEIR STORIES –

## TIPS FOR ETHICS AND SAFETY

- **EMPOWERMENT:** Having clients share their stories can be a great way for staff to support them in understanding their experiences and building a positive sense of identity and accomplishment. Always give credit to the individual first, and the organization(s) involved second.
- **INVITING PEOPLE TO SHARE STORIES:** Often, staff will approach specific individuals who they believe are ready to tell their story. Be aware that sometimes clients will say yes out of gratitude to the organization or discomfort with setting boundaries, even when it's not in their best interests. It's important to emphasize and model that it's okay for them to say no and that there won't be any consequences, and sometimes this becomes a very valuable growth opportunity for someone who hasn't been able to say no in the past.

Another way to gather stories is to put out a general invitation to a broader group – this allows people to passively ignore the opportunity if they aren't interested, or if the timing is bad for them.

Regardless of how people are asked to participate, it is very important that they understand why they are being asked, and how their story will be used.

- **IDENTIFYING DETAILS:** Ask participants to consider carefully what they are comfortable sharing publicly (real name, first name only, photo, etc.). It's a good opportunity to think about privacy and long term implications (job searches etc.).
- **SELF-DETERMINATION:** Storytelling participants should be involved in the process as much as possible. This allows them to have input into the most comfortable way to tell their story (writing it out, being interviewed etc.). It's an opportunity to support self-determination – making choices and expressing what's best for them.

Let them know you will loop back around to them (sometimes through their support person in the agency) about any public use of the material, so they get to have input into the editing, and know when and where it will be shared. This puts the control in their hands as long as they express what is/isn't acceptable to them, and ensuring the integrity of the content and context is maintained during editing (so the produced story is one that reflects their experience and identity, and feels good for them to have shared). It also ensures that they (and their families) aren't surprised when people start seeing their story somewhere.

- **WITHDRAWING CONSENT:** Participants must be allowed to change their minds and withdraw at any time, for any reason. The one caveat on this is that, once something has been shared publicly (such as in a newspaper or on the internet) you don't have total control to make it disappear from the public realm. If they are comfortable with sharing in one realm but not another (yes to grant applications, no to Facebook, for example) note this

and be aware that you can't control where online stories get copied (i.e. from website to social media).

- **CONSIDERING OTHERS:** Another privacy consideration is how others may be affected by the sharing of the story - is it also their family's story? Are teachers or other support people mentioned? How might young children be affected later on? Will anyone be upset or harmed if the story is shared?

Clients should be asked to consider these things and decide who to inform, and how they want to frame their story to avoid harm to others. Even if parents consent, kids who are involved should also be informed of the project and asked whether they consent as well.

- **PAST TRAUMA:** When someone shares their story, it can bring up past trauma or triggers. For some people, the choice of who conducts an interview, how long it lasts, where/when it takes place, etc. is very important to creating a sensitive and supportive experience.

Checking in periodically during an interview/process to make sure they are still okay to continue is a good idea, and breaks can be helpful. If the person chooses to write out their story, they may also need support. It is also important that they have a supportive, safe person available in the days and weeks after sharing their story, and this person can also remind them that they get to be involved in editing and have the right to withdraw at any time.

- **CULTURE:** In Western society, we are used to a very individual approach to making decisions. In some cultures, a collective decision making process is the norm, and it may not be appropriate to ask only one family or community member for permission. Also, there are many aspects of culture that are not appropriate to photograph or film.
- **SOCIAL ISSUES:** Telling a story is an opportunity to frame personal experiences in connection with larger issues in community and society (poverty, disability rights, mental health etc.). As much as possible, avoid telling the story only in terms of personal challenges. Use the opportunity to engage people in improving the bigger picture.

In general, marketing should be reflective of the diversity of community, and sensitive to oppressions and power imbalances. It's a good idea to have multiple people screen marketing materials to ensure that this is the case.

- **MEDIA PARTNERS:** If media partners are involved in producing stories, use the opportunity to brief them on these guidelines as needed, and have a support person available for any clients involved.