



Media Outreach Guide for Rural Child Welfare Agencies

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On the face of it the effectiveness of rural child welfare social workers and the media do not appear to be related, but they are. Indeed, any agency’s ability to ensure the safety and well-being of children is significantly influenced by the way that agency is perceived by families and the general public. And the media is a very powerful player when it comes to educating citizens and shaping public opinion.

That’s why the Jordan Institute for Families—the research, training and technical assistance arm of the School of Social Work at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill—has developed this guide. As part of our Rural Success Project, a federally-funded effort to enhance child welfare social work in rural areas, we wanted to create a resource that would help directors, administrators, and supervisors from rural child welfare agencies assess and expand their ability to communicate with community stakeholders using the media.

To make this guide as useful and “real world” as possible, we interviewed many current and former DSS directors. What we found was a changing paradigm when it comes to DSS public relations efforts—namely, a trend toward a more proactive, open, strengths-based approach to communications. As the professionals we spoke with have demonstrated, all it takes is the vision to see how such a strategy can serve your agency, your clients, and the community as a whole, and the courage to take those first steps. We hope this guide will make your journey easier.

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Crafting a Proactive Communications Strategy

Some years back, there was a workshop for social service agencies in North Carolina on media relations where the speaker emphasized the importance of honesty as a cornerstone in any communications strategy. One of the attendees at that workshop was the director of a rural child welfare agency who found himself facing a public relations nightmare just a few months later. This experience shaped that director's communications philosophy and practice for the next 20 years.

A DSS employee had been sexual with a 15-year-old client. Word was about to get out in the community. The director, remembering what he had heard about honesty at the workshop, immediately contacted the local newspaper and television station to tell them what had happened. The social worker would be fired immediately, the director said, and he asked the editor and news director to remember that there were many good people working at the agency.

The media reported the story fairly and didn't blow the incident out of proportion, keeping the seriousness of the event in perspective without trashing the agency. The newspaper even ran an editorial praising the director for being forthright and not skirting the incident. Twenty-four years later, the newspaper ran another editorial when the director left the agency, acknowledging a "bureaucrat who told the truth" and never lied.

Of course, DSS directors are not in the business of misleading the media or anyone else. Yet historically, when it comes to sharing information about the work they do, many child welfare agencies have chosen a passive style of communication.

That strategy hasn't been particularly effective. Think of the last media coverage about your agency. What precipitated the story? What was the slant? Oftentimes the media focuses on negative statistics, a child fatality, or a budget battle with local officials. The perception usually created of the DSS agency is that it is defensive, secretive, inept, uncaring, or out of touch.

There is another way.

Agency directors, administrators, and supervisors are learning that the media are not the enemy. Rather, the media play an important role in educating the public about what is happening. They truly care about the community. They may not always get it right, but they are hungry for information that will inform their readers and viewers. And child welfare agencies can play an essential role in shaping the coverage and public perception that is created.

One phenomenon that directors and editors alike acknowledge is that good news related to DSS rarely originates on its own; often the agency must initiate the coverage.

"I've learned that I have to make the news, I have to frame the picture, I have to shape the story," says Colleen Turner, DSS Director in Gates County, North Carolina. "Otherwise, the only information that would get out about DSS would be the negative stuff."

Don't wait for a crisis to initiate a story. If the only time you communicate with the media is when there is a crisis, you will be seen as a crisis agency. As one DSS director said,

if you create a positive image during 364 days of the year you will be in a much better position on the 365th day when a crisis does occur. The day a crisis hits—when nerves are frayed and deadlines are looming—isn't the best time to start building a relationship with the media.

Trust, credibility, mutual respect, and initiative are essential when it comes to building a working relationship with the media. These qualities must be developed over time. Acknowledge the media's legitimate and important role in the community. Chances are they will respond in kind.

Public Awareness Strategies

- Don't wait for a crisis to happen – communicate proactively.
- Form a communications committee that meets regularly.
- Develop ongoing, working relationships with editors and reporters.
- Regularly issue press releases to help initiate and shape local coverage.
- Write a weekly or monthly column for the newspaper.
- Create a speakers bureau and give talks to community groups.
- Ask a local radio station about public service announcements to highlight your services and new initiatives.
- Consider developing a public awareness campaign with a positive theme.
- Have a booth at events such as county fairs and health fairs.

What Media Representatives and DSS Directors Say

The following excerpts, taken from interviews conducted by the Rural Success Project, reflect the experiences, concerns, and advice of editors, reporters, and rural child welfare agency directors.

The Media: Newspaper Editors and Reporters

“I don’t think I’ve ever gotten a press release [from our local DSS agency]. They are good about responding to questions but don’t initiate stories that might help the community.”

“We’re looking for stories that contain news and information which can help our readers. If we’ve informed people to help them relieve the stress of a crisis, then I feel like I’ve done my job. That is my mission—to help people.”

“An overall discussion of the ground rules would be very helpful—especially when the relationship is just beginning or changing with a new reporter or director. Both sides are a little more cooperative when there is not a grenade already sitting on the table.”

“The director at the DSS here is informative and cooperative if I take the first step. If I don’t approach the agency, I don’t get the information. It would be great if there was someone who would keep in close contact with me to keep me informed.”

“If you want a good news story covered, you’re going to have to think of a bad news angle. When writing a press release, talk about the problem and how the agency is dealing with that problem.”

Rural Child Welfare Agency Directors

“I’ve learned that I have to make the news, I have to frame the picture, I have to shape the story. Otherwise, the only information that would get out about DSS would be the ugly stuff.”

“You have to build a relationship with the media when there is not a crisis. Then when something does happen—and it will happen—you have a better chance of getting your side of the story out.”

“If the only time you communicate with the media is when there is a crisis, you will be seen as a crisis agency. There’s an old saying – if you don’t create your image, one will be created for you.”

A Self-Assessment for Rural Child Welfare Agencies

If you want to make your communications more positive and proactive, begin by assessing your agency's current relationship to the media and its readiness to implement a communications strategy. This is also a good time to consider what ideas and approaches best fit your own philosophy and style when it comes to relating to the media and other community stakeholders. Here are a few questions to get the ball rolling:

- What do you believe is the dominant perception of your agency in your community?
- How has that perception been created and shaped in the past?
- What is the last story you remember being printed about your agency in the local newspaper? How did the article portray your agency?
- Who is designated within your agency to talk with the media or make presentations to community groups?
- When is the last time your agency produced a press release?
- How many names of reporters or editors are on your rolodex or PDA?
- Where do people in your community tend to gather to discuss important issues? When is the last time you or someone from your agency spoke at one of those venues?
- Are you more comfortable communicating through speaking or writing?
- What community trend or issue is having the greatest impact on your agency? How is your agency helping to address these problems?
- What is the untold story of your agency that is waiting to be told?

Designing a Communication Strategy

To be effective, a communications strategy must be a good fit for you and your agency. You are the expert at what works—or has a good chance of working if you try it—in your community.

Having a good relationship with the media is the biggest key to your strategy. If one of your local reporters or editors was in your office right now, what would you want to talk about? Maybe it's a past article that didn't tell enough of the story from your perspective or cast your agency in a less-than-flattering light. Or maybe you would want to discuss some ground rules on how best you can respect and assist one another in your respective roles, or stories you'd like to see covered in the future.

Such relationships will never be “all sweetness and light,” as one former DSS director says, but the level of trust and mutual respect you have with one another sets the tone for how responsive the media will be to your concerns and ideas. That trust and respect doesn't just happen on its own—make room in your schedule to meet with newspaper editors and reporters and start building a rapport with them.

Think about what the most pressing or urgent issue is that you face as an agency, and what the community needs to know in order for there to be real movement and change toward more positive outcome. Then discuss with your partner agencies in the community the possibility of an educational campaign—perhaps featuring a new initiative as the centerpiece—that would provide vital information and resources for those who want to change the direction of their lives.

In North Carolina, Catawba County hosts an Affordable Housing Summit and a Hidden Faces of Poverty Tour so that community leaders can see firsthand the critical needs in the community. Caldwell County has developed an outreach campaign to publicize the Safe Surrender Law to prevent infant homicides.

Many North Carolina counties have initiated their own public awareness campaigns on foster care and adoption—including community rallies and events at local malls, colleges, and churches—that have resulted in substantial media coverage. They utilized the media through radio and TV public service announcements and spread the word through church bulletin inserts, posters, and brochures.

The statistics generated by the NC Division of Social Services for your county on the number of children in your custody, substantiated cases of child abuse, Work First, etc. are opportunities to shape stories on the trends in your community and provide explanations for why the numbers are where they are. Any new state, regional, or national report that speaks to trends or research related to child and family welfare is another opportunity for a local angle to the story.

Your county's implementation of North Carolina's Multiple Response System (MRS) is an excellent opportunity for media coverage of how your agency is changing the way it does business—moving away from a more punitive approach to one that is more family-centered

and strengths-based. Child welfare agencies have long been stereotyped as “baby snatchers” who don’t really care about the genuine welfare of families. Emphasizing the changes inherent in the MRS approach is a way to shift this perception.

Consider your own communication strengths. If you are a good writer, a regular column for the newspaper is a very effective way to educate your community about current issues, policies, trends, and resources. If verbal communication is more your style, give talks and create dialogue at local community meetings and civic groups—or ask a radio about the possibility of an interview and call-in format. The important thing is to keep the lines of communication open with your community’s stakeholders, and that includes the media and the general public.

You may want to form a communications committee or working group within your agency to meet regularly—even if it’s monthly—so that the conversation of what the story is and how to shape it can continue and evolve. Make sure a cross-section of agency departments and programs are represented so you know you’re getting the full picture of what’s happening.

Remember the old “what’s wrong with this picture?” illustration and exercise from *Highlights* magazine for kids? That is the orientation and approach we see in much of our media and culture today—what’s going wrong, not what’s going right. Of course, you don’t want to gloss over the painful and disturbing realities and trends that exist in your community. How your agency is responding, however, is an essential part of “what’s right with this picture.” That is where the primary focus should be.

The key to any communications strategy is that it be proactive, strengths-based, and honest. Make the media—and any other stakeholder, for that matter—a partner, not the enemy. Invite dialogue and accountability, don’t shy away from it. Illuminate with your communication the path toward a healthier community, remembering that each conversation and interaction with an individual or group outside your agency is a step in that direction.

Supervisors' Relationships with the Public and the Media

The following is adapted from Marsha Salus' Supervising Child Protective Services Caseworkers (2004), part of the Child Abuse and Neglect User Manual Series by the Office on Child Abuse and Neglect, within the Children's Bureau of the Administration for Children and Families.

Be sure to check with your agency's administration to confirm that supervisors are encouraged or allowed to talk to the media.

Developing good relationships between the agency, the public, and the media is a key element of an effective child welfare unit. While the major responsibility for this rests with the agency's administration, it also may be part of the responsibility of supervisors to inform the public and the media about the complex issues of child abuse and neglect. Educating the public and the media can increase support for needed services to abused and neglected children and their families. CPS agencies have a responsibility to inform the public about the causes of child maltreatment, what constitutes a reportable incident, and how the agency is organized to serve children and families.

One of the most fundamental reasons that agencies do not speak with the media about specific child abuse incidents is confidentiality concerns. One recommendation for dealing with this issue is to avoid the specifics of the case and to speak in general terms about the agency's response in a given scenario. Other tips include:

- Know how reporters work. Ask them to understand issues from a CPS perspective and take time to understand the demands and concerns of a reporter.
- Because reporters work on strict deadlines, return calls promptly and meet deadlines in advance of the final hour.
- Speak plainly without professional jargon. Give the basics in plain language. Ask if they understand what has been stated. Allow and expect questions.
- Do not push or suggest a particular story; instead, provide information. The press is suspicious of stories it does not find itself. Be available as a resource and a contact.
- Shape the information as a news story. The press is not intended to function as a public relations vehicle, but can serve as such if a story is presented holistically and truthfully.
- Always tell the truth to a reporter.
- When unable to comment on a story, provide a short explanation. For example, suggest that it may be possible to comment once the investigation has been completed.
- Ask the reporter questions. This is an opportunity to clarify some of the broader contextual issues and may provide insight into how the information will be framed.
- Ask for corrections immediately. The best chance of getting a correction is to be timely and succinct in working with the proper authority or the editor.

Concerning Confidentiality

Journalists like to personalize their stories with the real life cases of people who illustrate and embody the issues they cover, and there is nothing more powerful than hearing the story of someone who has come “through the system” to overcome great odds and challenges in their life. Hearing such stories motivates and inspires others to see their own lives differently, and they show that social work can make a difference for people.

The NC Department of Health and Human Services makes just this point in its *DSS Public Relations Toolkit* (available at www.dhhs.state.nc.us/dss/county/pr.htm), which encourages county departments of social services to “keep track of their champions”:

When someone you helped off welfare, an adoptive family, a foster parent, a child support client, or a foster child who’s grown to adulthood sings your praises, their words ring true. Your clients’ stories carry the most weight of all. If they’re happy with your agency, ask them if they would be willing to talk to a reporter at some point about their experiences. Then keep their name and telephone number on file, and you’ll have it handy the next time there’s a reporter call or you do a press release on that topic.

However, DSS directors and others must keep in mind the state law that mandates confidentiality when it comes to disclosing the identity of past and current DSS clients. The North Carolina law—GS 108A-80—states in part:

It shall be unlawful for any person to obtain, disclose or use, or to authorize, permit, or acquiesce in the use of any list of names or other information concerning persons applying for or receiving public assistance or social services that may be directly or indirectly derived from the records, files, or county departments of social services or acquired in the course of performing official duties except for the purposes directly connected with the administration of the programs of public assistance and social services in accordance with federal law, rules, and regulations, and the rules of the Social Services Commission or the Department.

It is possible for agencies to honor the spirit of this law and still draw on “success stories” of former clients when working with the media on developing stories, or as part of educational campaigns on issues of particular importance to the community. If such former clients are willing, their stories can be told without revealing their identity through the use of names or photographs.

It’s important to keep in mind, however, the “everyone knows everyone else’s business” reality of rural communities. Be sure to exclude any details that could inadvertently reveal someone’s identity; err on the side of caution.

One county in North Carolina produced a video on their agency’s implementation the new Multiple Response System and featured a former client who was successfully rebuilding

her life. The former client, who signed a waiver regarding the disclosure of her identity, saw her participation in the video and the telling of her story as empowering and an important message to other parents currently facing challenges in their lives. An agency administrator from that county pointed out that it is important to really know a former client and see concrete evidence of significant growth before embarking upon such a project.

Even so, there are legal and ethical concerns that need to be examined before utilizing former clients as part of your communications strategy. Agencies must continually recognize the power differential that exists between agency representatives and former clients. The safety and well-being of current and former clients must always be paramount.

Many counties have conducted educational campaigns to promote foster care and adoption in their communities. These campaigns usually feature the faces and stories of children in foster care, foster parents, and adoptive parents. Because these campaigns are in the best interest of the children, they are seen as an important exception to the confidentiality rule (NC GS 108A-80).

Examples of Successful Media Coverage

Following are some examples of departments of social services using media attention to communicate important messages to their stakeholders and the public at large.

“Child Abuse Cases Rise 14% in County” <<http://www.ruralsuccess.org/Person.pdf>>

by Phylliss Boatwright, Courier-Times (Roxboro, NC), appeared 2/12/05

Even the release of negative statistics represents an opportunity for child welfare agencies to educate the public. In this article, Person County Department of Social Services Director Beverly Warren uses this occasion to clearly express her agency’s ownership of community outcomes, while at the same time she discusses the complicated story behind the numbers. Her candor allows the agency’s commitment to families and children to shine through.

“Latest Approach in Fighting Child Abuse Is Working” <<http://www.ruralsuccess.org/Catawba.pdf>>

by Alison Morris, Charlotte Observer, appeared 2/06/05

Agencies can use positive statistics to alert the public to their successes and to direct attention to important changes. In this article, Catawba County Department of Social Services uses a decrease in the number of substantiated reports of child maltreatment to tell the public about the agency’s new, family-friendly approaches under the Multiple Response System (MRS).

“Work First Program Shows Success” <<http://www.ruralsuccess.org/Watauga.pdf>>

by Scott Nicholson, Watauga Democrat, appeared 5/16/05

This article about Work First, North Carolina’s TANF program, captures an agency’s desire to help people become self-sufficient and expresses its willingness to be held accountable for the results it achieves. It also educates the public about a valuable service the agency provides to the community.

For other examples of media coverage of child welfare issues (pro and con) visit the National Child Welfare Resource Center for Organizational Improvement’s Child Abuse & Neglect News Archive at <<http://muskie.usm.maine.edu/helpkids/canarchive.htm>>.

Resources for Further Learning

Annotated

NC Department of Health and Human Services. (2003, Nov.). *DSS public relations toolkit*. Raleigh, NC: Author. <<http://www.dhhs.state.nc.us/dss/county/pr.htm>>

This 33-page guide is a good resource for developing a communications strategy. It includes a calendar listing suggested public relations activities for each month, tips for being interviewed by the media and communicating in a crisis, and a sample press release. Strategic ideas are offered as well, such as utilizing special projects and events and becoming a champion for certain causes in your community to boost agency morale and create a positive public perception. Follow the link above; click on “Public Relations Tool Kit” once you’re there. For more information, contact Lois Nilsen in the Office of Public Affairs (919/733-9190; lois.nilsen@ncmail.net).

Advertising Council. (2004). *Turning point: Engaging the public on behalf of children*. Washington, DC: Author. <http://www.adcouncil.org/research/commitment_children>

This report presents compelling findings from a 2004 public-opinion study conducted by the Advertising Council as part of its commitment to children. In addition to specific research findings, this report offers communication strategies that can effectively motivate the public to act on behalf of children. These strategies are the result of 30+ interviews with leading experts in marketing, advertising, communications, and community outreach, survey responses to individual concepts for communication, and lessons from the Ad Council's 8 years of Commitment to Children campaigns.

National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information. (2000, August). *Child abuse and neglect prevention: Getting your message out through the media*.

Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
<<http://www.ruralsuccess.org/getmsgout.pdf>>

Carefully considering your answers to the questions on this short self-assessment will help you build a strategy for working with media professionals to get your message out to the people you want to reach.

Children Now. (2001). *The local television media's picture of children*. Oakland, CA: Author. <<http://www.childrennow.org/>>

As a primary source of public affairs information for most Americans, the news media have the capability not only to set the public agenda, but also to prime people to think about certain issues in certain ways. This report underscores the need for greater breadth and balance in the news media's coverage of children and child-related issues in order to provide a better and more realistic understanding of issues affecting them. Broader and improved coverage could help educate policymakers, community members, and the public to make sound and informed decisions for the well-being of children.

Casey Journalism Center on Children and Families <<http://www.casey.umd.edu/>>

This is an excellent source of information both for child welfare agencies and the journalists who cover them. Contains useful statistics, contact information for experts in the field, and examples of news coverage of a variety of issues, including grandparents raising grandchildren, youth aging out of foster care, and adoption outcomes.

Goddard, C. & Saunders, B. J. (2001). *Child abuse and the media*.

Melbourne, Vic: National Child Protection Clearinghouse, Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2001, 23p. (Child abuse prevention issue no.14, Winter 2001).

<<http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/issues/issues14.pdf>>

This paper examines the role of the media in relation to child abuse and child protection in Australia and argues that the media have been essential to the task of placing the problem of child abuse in the minds of the public and on the political agenda. While acknowledging that the media's portrayal of child abuse and child protection can have negative consequences for children and their families, it is argued that media coverage is vital if public concern for children is to remain on the political agenda, and if child protection services are to remain accountable.

International Federation of Journalists. (1998, May). *Children's rights and media:*

***Guidelines and principles for reporting on issues involving children*. Brussels, Belgium: Author. <<http://www.ifj.org/>>**

These guidelines were adopted by journalists' organizations from 70 countries at the world's first international consultative conference on journalism and child rights held in Recife, Brazil, on May 2, 1998. This site also offers a list of recommended websites having to do with child rights and the media.

Other

Fisher, D. (1992). Child abuse and the media: Twelve tips for dealing with the press. *APSAC Advisor*, 5(1), 5–6.

Jones, C. (1991). Your reflexes, conventional wisdom, and good legal advice can't be trusted when you play the media game. In M. Sprague & R. M. Horowitz, (Eds.), *Liability in child welfare and protection work: Risk management strategies* (pp. 13–120). Washington, DC: American Bar Association.

Longino, M. (1990). *Crisis communications for CASAGAL programs: How to manage your media crisis – and not let it manage you*. Seattle, WA: National Court Appointed Special Advocate Association.

Salus, M. K. (2004). *Supervising child protective services caseworkers*. Washington, DC: Office on Child Abuse and Neglect, Children's Bureau of the Administration for Children and Families, Administration for Children and Families.
<<http://nccanch.acf.hhs.gov/pubs/usermanuals/supercps>>

An Advocate's Guide to the Media

Children's Defense Fund, 25 E Street, NW, Washington, DC 20001. (202) 628-8787.
\$4.95

How to Tell Your Story: Media Resource Guide

Foundation for American Communications, 3800 Barham Blvd., Suite 409, Los Angeles, CA 90068. (213) 851-7372.

\$10.00

Media Advocacy and Public Health: Power for Prevention

Wallack, L., Dorfman, L., Jernigan, D., Themba, M. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1993.

Media How-To Notebook

Media Alliance, 814 Mission Street, Suite 205, San Francisco, CA 94123. (415) 546-6334.

\$9.00

Strategic Communications for Nonprofits

Benton Foundation, 1634 I Street, NW, 12th Floor, Washington, DC 20006. (202) 638-5770.

\$50.00 for series of 9 publications



About the Rural Success Project

The Rural Success Project seeks to identify and share the strategies rural communities are using to protect children and help families succeed. Funded at the federal level by the U.S. Children's Bureau (grant US ACYF 2003C.2), this project is a partnership between the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Social Work and 14 North Carolina counties and the Eastern Band of the Cherokee. To learn more visit our website (www.ruralsuccess.org) or contact us at:

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