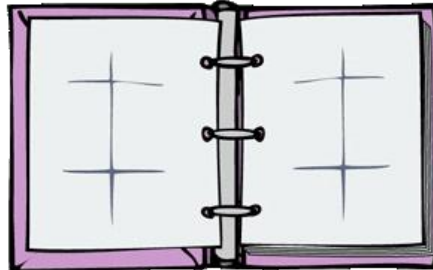


# TELLING YOUR STORY: A PARENT GUIDE & WORKBOOK





## What's Your Issue?

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Almost everyone has encountered a situation that made them say, *"This is wrong. Someone has to do something!"*

These situations are **issues** in disguise.

It's important to narrow your issue to something that is manageable and realistic. Remember, you can't accomplish everything. You will lose credibility *fast* if you approach a policymaker asking for everything from A to Z. Focusing on a specific area will help you determine exactly what needs to be changed or improved. Is your issue about DYFS? Child behavioral health? Prevention?



## What's Your Story?

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When you're pushing to change public policy, your personal story is your most important tool. From an advocate's point of view, a good story:

- Introduces you and your family.
- Focuses on one thing.
- Explains your situation.
- Has enough details to make it interesting.
- Includes only information that relates to the situation or your goal.
- Reminds the policymaker that you are a constituent.
- Captures your emotion and passion for an issue.
- Asks for a specific action to correct the situation.

Personal stories bring issues to life and make them real to policymakers. [Vicki Beatty](#), a mother from Richmond, Virginia, told dozens of policymakers how the city discriminated against her son by not making all schools in the city wheelchair accessible. She eventually organized other parents to bring a successful lawsuit against the city for failing to meet ADA requirements.

Which of the following statements grabs your attention more?

- **Option 1:** My son needs more special education services *OR*
- **Option 2:** My creative, inquisitive son Mickey has autism. He's a math whiz but he can't explore ways to use this talent after he graduates because his school won't provide opportunities for him to learn about jobs and careers that need people with great math skills.

You probably thought that the second version was much more interesting. And, it is. Why? ***Because it's more personal.*** You know the boy's name and you know that he is creative and smart. You also know that the system isn't helping him to prepare for the future. You'll find success is in the details!



## Choosing a Specific Situation



### Quick Tip

**Don't think you have to ask for a new law. It's often easier and faster to convince a policymaker to improve an existing law.**

Think about the issue you've decided to tackle. What experiences made you choose this issue?

- What situations made you say "Enough!"?
- What do you think should have happened but didn't? What do you want to happen in the future?
- What really happens? How is it different from what policymakers think happens?
- What makes you say, "That doesn't sound right or legal?"

Successful advocates have one key story that they know inside and out. It's important to narrow many personal stories to one that represents many experiences. When deciding which situation to focus on:

- **Think about emotions.** We remember stories that make us feel something - anger, joy, frustration, or sadness. That's because emotion generally stays with us longer than cold facts.
- **Decide what you need a policymaker to know.** For example, if you need more support, think about how family support will help you live more productively. What difficulties and challenges do you face?

Use this worksheet to help you organize your thoughts and information that supports your case for change.



# What's Your Action Request?

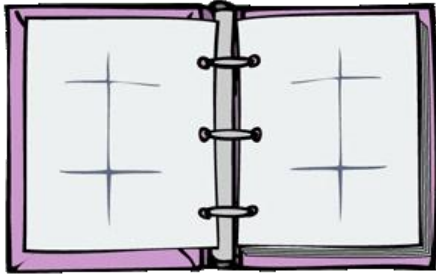
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Now that you know your issue and have developed your personal story, it's time to figure out exactly what you want the policymaker to do. Your request for action should describe specifically what you think should be done:

- Are you offering to help the policymaker understand firsthand how something does or doesn't work?
- Are you asking the policymaker to continue his or her work in an area important to your family?
- Are you asking the policymaker to sponsor, approve, amend or repeal a specific bill?

Your **Request for Action** should be:

- **Timely.** Is the legislature preparing to vote? If so, when is the vote scheduled to take place? Is the legislature between sessions so the policymaker may have more time to learn about your situation?
- **Realistic.** In many cases, your goal will be achieved through small, incremental steps that build momentum over time and lay the groundwork for the future. If this is the case, what do you want or need to happen now? What other changes need to occur before your future vision can be implemented?
- **Specific.** Your demand should be specific and clear. For example: I am asking you to support additional special education funding for transition services in this year's Education Bill.
- **Concise.** Boil down your request to as few words as possible. This will make it easier for you - and policymakers - to remember it. For example, "Parents must be given family time/visitation with their child who is in DYFS custody in a comfortable, family friendly location."



# What Makes a Good Story?

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Here are some tips for creating a good story. A good story:

1. **Is the one you love to tell.** Think about the stories you've told your family and friends when describing the situation you're trying to change. What examples do you use? What facts or incidents draw an emotional response from them?
2. **Captures a central idea.** Don't try to cover too many incidents in one story. Focus on one issue and use real-life details to make it come alive.
3. **Has a main character that people want to help.** The more your audience knows about you or your child as individuals, the stronger the emotional connection and the more likely you are to make your story memorable.
4. **Presents a struggle, conflict or challenge.** Conflict is a struggle between two different needs, wants or situations. Your story might illustrate a conflict between your right to equal education and the school board's refusal to pay for a specific curriculum
5. **Has a high point.** Your story should build up to an example that makes your listener say, "that's wrong" or "that's too ridiculous to be true." For example, you might assume that parents would be notified automatically if their child is abused by a teacher at school. In New Jersey, however, that's not the case. A group of college students was stirred to action when they learned about a kindergartner with special needs who had been abused by his classroom teacher for a year but his parents were not notified until almost two years later. Hard to believe? Yes. True? Unfortunately, yes.
6. **Contains vivid images.** Use words to draw mental pictures that help listeners connect to your story. Don't be afraid of strong words like "cold," "dark," "hates," "terrified," "cringed" and "panics." Positive words can cause emotional reactions just as easily. Think about how you feel when you hear the words "giggle," "sunny," "beautiful," "artistic," and "loving."
7. **Includes details.** The more details you can provide, the better the policymaker will understand and support your position. A note of caution: Make sure the details and images you include are relevant to the story you're telling.
8. **Addresses the five Ws and an H...who, what, when, where, why and how.** Policymakers need the basic facts.
9. **Has a beginning, middle and an end.** Think about an ongoing television series. You might not be a regular viewer but within a few minutes of watching, you know the characters and what's happened.
10. **Make it short and to the point.** Policymakers are very busy. You need to be able to tell your story in five minutes or less so stay focused!

# Assignment: Write Your Story and Request for Action

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It's time to organize and write your story. Don't worry about sentence structure and spelling. You'll have the opportunity to refine your story later.

1. Go to the **Building Your Case Worksheet**. Use it to record your answers.
2. Type or write in a brief description of the situation you have chosen into **Section 2: My Personal Story**.
3. Type or write your answers to the following questions.
  - o Describe who you are and where you're from.
  - o Do you have a picture of you and your family that you are willing to share?
  - o Describe the situation that you've chosen. What is working? What is not working?
  - o What could be done to improve your situation?
4. Write your story. If it's easier, list key points in the order you want to make them.
5. Tell your story to someone else. Try to keep it under 5 minutes.
6. Type or write your specific request for action into **Section 3: My Request for Action** in your document.
7. Consider these questions, then evaluate and revise your request if needed:
  - o Is your request clear? Easy to understand?
  - o Will the person receiving your request know exactly what he or she is being asked to do next?
  - o Is there a deadline?
8. Resave the document in the "Making Your Case" file folder on your desktop.

## SECTION 1: My Issue

1. **Briefly describe the situation that made you decide to take action. Explain what made you say, "Something has to be done."**

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**2. Was the situation related to:**

<b>CYSHCN</b>	<b>CHILD BEHAVIORAL HEALTH</b>
Access to early & continuous screening?	Lack of mental health services?
Access to a medical home?	Suspension of your child from school?
Access to community-based services?	Involvement in juvenile justice
Access to adequate healthcare financing	Delay in accessing services?
Access to effective transition services?	Problems with mobile response?
Meaningful family engagement?	Problems with insurance coverage?
Waiting lists?	Insufficient family support?
Other?	Other:
<b>EDUCATION</b>	<b>OTHER ISSUES</b>
How you are treated by the teacher(s)?	Community Inclusion?
How you are treated by the IEP team?	Transportation?
Access to the regular curriculum?	Adult services?
Access to sufficient related services?	Access to waiver programs?
Suspension of your child from school?	Language access?
Other?	Other?

**3. Remember, you should focus on changing only one issue at a time. Look at the issues you marked. Which issue is most important to you?**

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**SECTION 2: My Personal Story**

Think about the following questions in light of your personal situation and the details that you want to share. Then, write your personal story. Remember, you will use this story when you're talking to people in person, as well as in e-mails, letters, etc. You should be able to tell your story in 5 minutes or less.

1. Describe who you are and where you are from. Include your name. If you're advocating on behalf another person, include his or her name as well.
2. Do you have a picture of yourself and your family that you are willing to share?
3. Describe the situation that you want changed. What is happening? What is working? What needs to change?
4. What could be done to improve the situation?
5. What makes this situation memorable for a policymaker?

**I have chosen to describe this situation in my story:**

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**My story:**

**SECTION 3: My Request for Action**

**Describe in 30 words or less what you would like the policymaker to do:**

*I am asking you to enforce your own policy that requires that I have effective case management/care coordination services.*

*I am asking you to establish a Statewide Family Council to get direct input from parents about what is happening within this system from a parent perspective.*

**My request:**

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**Tell Your Story**



Here's a quick outline that can help you tell your story in a clear and concise way. When you tell your story, speak (or write) from your heart!

1. **Introduce your story**

(2-3 sentences). Set the stage for your story by providing:

- Your full name (even if you've been introduced)
- City or town of residence; and
- Name and ages of the people in your story

Then state your main message. This tells them why you are about to tell them this story!

2. **Tell your story**—CHALLENGE, ACTION, RESULT (4-8 sentences)

- Explain the **CHALLENGE** that you face
- Explain the **ACTION** that would help you address that challenge
- Tell what kind of **RESULT** could be achieved due to the action

3. **Wrap it up!** (3-5 sentences)

- Tell how your result would benefit other families, the community, and the state.
- State your main message again.
- Tell them what you want them to do about it.
- Say thank you!