

FINDING COMMON GROUND

HELPING FAMILIES SHAPE NEWS COVERAGE, SAFELY



***COMMUNICATIONS WORKING GROUP
COMMUNITY EDUCATION WORKING GROUP***

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WELCOME

Reporters are always looking for “real people” whose experiences can bring an abstract issue to life. And news coverage can generate much-needed public and policymaker attention for issues that matter to nonprofits and the families they serve.

Organizations that work with families are in a great place to facilitate news interviews with family and community spokespersons. But nonprofits are often reluctant because they do not have confidence that journalists will approach the interview in a way that protects the interests of the families they serve.

That’s why we wrote this guide. With a little planning, nonprofits can – and do – effectively negotiate with responsible journalists to facilitate interviews on terms that protect the people at the heart of their work. We’ve done it, and you can do it too.

We worked together on this guide, as a service to partners who want to help the families they serve raise their voices and shape the public conversation about issues that matter. We hope you find it helpful.

GETTING STARTED

Before we share ideas for negotiating interview terms, a little background might be helpful.

REPORTER AND SPOKESPERSON ROLES

At their best, a reporter and a spokesperson are collaborators in a joint effort to tell a story that informs and engages the broader community, while protecting the interests of community members. And the roles of reporters and spokespersons overlap considerably.

Reporter	Spokesperson
Be accurate	Be accurate
Simplify complex issues	Simplify complex issues
Provide information that’s timely and relevant	Provide information the community can use
Make the work fit into a busy day	Make it easy to use their quote or information
Tell a good story	Tell a good story, for us
Convey controversy, evenhandedly	Convey a point of view, dominantly

While the reporter’s interests and the spokesperson’s interests diverge a bit, there is a lot of common ground between them. While it is important to understand the differences, the overlapping roles provide the foundation for an agreement on interview terms that is productive for both the journalist and the spokesperson.

FOCUS ON RESPONSIBLE JOURNALISTS

Responsible journalists have a lot on the line when negotiating the terms of an interview. Failing to abide by a deal could compromise their credibility with other sources and, in some cases, lead to disciplinary action by the news outlet that employs them.

But those constraints apply only to responsible journalists. It's generally best to ignore inquiry from an outlet that has a track record of sensationalist, biased, or partisan coverage. Deals cut with such outlets are much more likely to be broken.

If you don't know an outlet or a reporter, spend a few minutes reviewing their recent articles – especially those concerning the issues you work on. You'll be able to tell pretty quickly whether they approach their work with an even hand.

UNDERSTAND THE STORY THEY WANT TO TELL AND HOW A FAMILY SPOKESPERSON FITS IN

Before you can negotiate meaningfully with a reporter, it's important to understand how they are approaching the story as they report it. While responsible journalists will follow the facts, the facts don't always agree or align, and a journalist's decisions about which facts to prioritize are critically important.

Reporters will often open with a very high-level overview, like *I'm working on a story about the new health care enrollment data, and I'm hoping you can help me connect with someone who's been affected.*

That article could be about the data itself, or about the policy choices that led to changes in enrollment, or how getting or losing health care shapes the lives of people in the community, or about other things entirely. Learning more can help you decide if your organization can help the reporter, or even if you want to try.

A few simple things you can ask a reporter to learn more about the story they have in mind are:

1. *Can you tell me more about the focus of the story?* This question helps you understand what the story is "about," so you can decide if your organization wants to be part of telling that story.
2. *Can you tell me who else you're talking with?* This can give you a sense of the other perspectives the reporter has an interest in. If they're only talking with politicians and agency officials, for example, you know it's mostly about policy, and a family spokesperson may be intended to humanize what will otherwise be a fairly wonky article.
3. *What are you looking for in a family spokesperson, and how would a family spokesperson contribute to the story?* This can help you get a clearer picture of the attributes the reporter considers important. If, for example, the story is about workplace safety, they may want a person working in a specific industry. Or if it's a back-to-school story, they may need a parent. The answer can also help you understand whether the reporter sees the family spokesperson as central to the story – the person through whose eyes we see the issue – or as playing a supporting role in a story that centers a health care provider, policymaker, or other perspective.

4. *When do you need to complete the interview, in order to make your deadline?* Reporters should volunteer this information upfront, but if they don't, asking can help you decide if you can line up a family spokesperson on the available timeline, even if you want to.

MAKING THE CHOICE

Once you know a little more about the story the reporter wants to tell, you can decide whether you can help, and whether you want to. Some questions to consider at this stage include:

Given the outlet, the reporter, and their vision for the story, do we want to be part of telling this story at all?

Would getting involved give us an opportunity to shape the reporting in a way that benefits our organization or the people we serve?

Is a family or community spokesperson best to meet the reporter's needs and our communication goals, or is an advocate or service provider perspective better?

NEGOTIATING TERMS FOR THE INTERVIEW

If you decide to work with the reporter, the next set of questions revolve around the terms that would make you and your family spokesperson feel comfortable and confident doing the interview.

Importantly, there is no universal "right" answer to these questions. Rather, it's about considering the safeguards that are important to your organization in its relationship with families in general, and the ones that make a specific person feel safe and confident doing the interview.

Like any professional, reporters are used to doing their work a specific way. The outlet may also have policies that limit the reporter's flexibility.

Negotiating terms other than those a journalist is accustomed to may make your spokesperson less attractive as a news source. And negotiating terms beyond the constraints imposed by the reporter's employer might make it impossible for the reporter to quote your spokesperson.

But that's OK, because in many cases, journalists are happy to accommodate reasonable requests if doing so gives them access to a source who can contribute meaningfully to the story they aim to tell, and who might otherwise be unwilling to participate in an interview. And because not getting covered is better than getting coverage for the issue in a way that compromises the trust a family has placed in your organization.

IDENTITY AND PRIVACY

News articles generally identify spokespersons by name. For example, consider this quote from [a Vox article](#) about housing for migrants in New York City:

"What the mayor said is conceptually ridiculous and unfair. [Migrants] decision to come to America was fueled by a level of bravery that we in the US cannot even understand," said Christine Quinn, president and CEO of

Win, a provider of shelter for homeless families in New York City that has housed hundreds of migrant families.

But news outlets routinely shield spokespersons who could be at risk if their identities were published. Consider this example from [a Slate article](#) on unemployment insurance:

Rosa (who asked that we not use her real name) is from Sinaloa, Mexico. She has no visa nor work authorization.

“Rosa” contributes four quotes to the final article, shaping the story significantly, without revealing her real name.

You can negotiate the specific words that will be used to:

- Identify the family or community spokesperson
- Describe the person’s immigration status – this is especially helpful if “people-first” language is important to you or your organization
- Describe the person’s occupation, family, place of residence, and other personal circumstances

For a spokesperson named George Washington from Groveton, Virginia, for example, you might consider a wide range of options like:

- George W.
- George, a Groveton man who immigrated from the United Kingdom
- G.W., a man who is undocumented and lives in Groveton
- George W., an Army veteran with a “green card”, who lives in Groveton with his spouse Martha, a U.S. citizen
- Alex (who asked that we not use his real name), who lives in Groveton with his wife and two children

For audio or video broadcast or recording, you can also negotiate how a person’s identity is conveyed in other media. Examples include:

- Changing the pitch of a spokesperson’s voice
- [Silhouetting the person](#) on video
- [Employing a drawing](#) to represent the person
- [Blurring](#) the person’s face

LOCATION AND TIMING

Reporters typically have to interview people with very different lived experience than their own. As a result, they will generally try to accommodate sources’ reasonable scheduling needs, as long as they can still hit their own deadline. You can negotiate the specific date and time of an interview or set broader parameters to help the reporter find a workable time, such as:

- Weekends
- Early mornings
- Between 3 and 7pm on Wednesdays and Thursdays

You can also negotiate the duration of an interview. Very few take longer than 30 minutes, and most are over in 15 minutes. But if you have an interested family spokesperson who can only commit five minutes, you can negotiate those terms, especially if you can be flexible on the date and time.

MEDIUM AND RECORDING

Reporters do most interviews by phone or (increasingly, since COVID-19) video calls. And, as digital recording has gotten easier, cheaper, and more portable, they tend to record audio (and sometimes video) to minimize the need for manual notetaking. But you can negotiate other terms, including but not limited to:

- Audio recording only
- Audio and video recording for notes purposes, but only a still image of the person on screen / in print when the story runs
- Audio and video recording for notes purposes, but quotes appear as text only or read by the reporter when the story runs
- Written notes only

It's important to note here that constraints concerning audio and video recording and presentation may be more difficult for radio and television (and their more contemporary podcast or vlog counterparts) journalists to agree to. That's reasonable, given that audio and video information is intrinsic to those news media. But, as noted above, there is no harm in asking if such accommodations are important to your organization or the family spokesperson. And the worst that can happen is that the journalist decides not to pursue an interview you'd be reluctant to agree to anyway.

LANGUAGE ACCESS AND ACCURACY

Journalists who cover immigrant families generally understand that language access is essential for a productive interview. If your spokesperson needs or prefers to conduct an interview in a language other than English, you can negotiate a range of issues, like:

- Ensuring that a well-prepared interpreter participates in the interview, at the news organization's expense – for example, your organization might ask to vet, train, or select the interpreter
- Having a member of your organization's team interpret
- Reviewing quotes for language accuracy

ORGANIZATION ROLE

Protecting the interests of the families your organization works with is a key priority, before, during, and after the interview. Before the interview, talk with the family to describe what will happen and perhaps role play an interview. Explore what they might need in terms of interpretation or other accommodations. We encourage you to negotiate having a representative of your organization in the (actual or virtual) room during the interview.

For many organizations, securing media attention for the organization and the issues it works on are also important. A responsible reporter cannot guarantee that your organization will be quoted or cited in the final article – to a large degree, those are decisions made by the reporter’s editor. But you can reasonably suggest alternatives, such as:

- An interview with an organizational spokesperson
- Reviewing your organization’s background materials on the issue
- Considering interviews with nonprofit allies, policymakers, or service providers who can offer a valuable perspective on the issue
- Considering a future article on a related issue or another issue affecting the families you serve

Though newsrooms are always changing these days, many reporters still work “beats” – they are assigned to cover issues like health, geographic areas like a county, systems like schools or sports, economic markets like real estate, or other focus areas. If you suggest a future story that falls outside the beat of the reporter you’re talking with, the reporter should offer to share the idea with a colleague who covers that beat. If they don’t, you should ask.

INTERVIEW PROCESS

You can also negotiate the process by which the reporter will conduct the interview. Some of the process elements you can reasonably explore include:

- How the reporter will deliver the initial round of questions – conversationally in real time, or in advance by email
- How to handle follow-up questions – in real time or after the conversation by email
- While you cannot negotiate when the story will run – the reporter can’t control that – you can ask the reporter to let you know when it’s coming
- And you can ask the reporter to share a link when it’s live

Note that, again, there are no standard “right” answers to these and other process questions. For example, having the questions by email in advance of the conversation may help for a person nervous about talking with a journalist, or for someone who’s difficult to schedule. But it can lead to a lot of email back-and-forth, and it may not work for broadcast journalists who need audio or video for the final story. Consider what’s best for the family spokesperson and your organization, and try to negotiate a process that works.

A DEAL’S A DEAL, IN WRITING

Once you’re comfortable with the terms you’ve negotiated, consider summarizing those terms in writing.

It doesn’t – in fact it shouldn’t – have to be long or complicated like a legal contract. Just a bulleted list of the key points you’ve negotiated will help to make sure you and the reporter are both on the same page and avoid confusion or disappointment later. To make it easy, add a question at the end like “Does that sound right to you?” so the reporter can reply with a quick “Sounds good” if they have the same understanding of the terms for the interview.

BEYOND NEGOTIATION - SPOKESPERSON PREPARATION

We understand that spokesperson preparation is also a barrier that often makes organizations reluctant to offer family spokespersons. Media interview training can close that gap, and there are many media training resources available to nonprofits. If spokesperson training is holding you back, contact one of us and we can help you find a good training resource. There are also some basic questions you can answer for a family spokesperson preparing for their first interview, like:

Question

Will appearing in a news article affect my immigration status or future immigration applications? Will there be retaliation?

What will the reporter ask me about?

What should I do if I don't understand the question?

What should I do if I don't know the answer?

If I stumble on a response, can I redo it?

What should I do if the reporter asks me to guess or make a prediction?

What should I do if the reporter says something I know is incorrect?

What if the reporter asks my opinion?

What do I do if I need help?

Answer

We can negotiate with the reporter to ensure your safety. For example, we can negotiate how identifiable you are.

Our agreement with the reporter is that the interview will focus on your family's experiences. If the reporter asks you about something else, it's OK to say you don't know anything about that. If the reporter presses, we'll jump in.

It's great to ask for clarification. Much better than guessing!

Just say so. We can work with the reporter to get an answer after your interview.

Absolutely! Just tell the reporter you'd like to try your response again.

It's safest to stick to the facts. We can help by asking the reporter if there's another way to get the information they need. For example, instead of asking *What would losing health insurance mean for your family?*, the reporter could ask *What has having health insurance meant for your family?*

It's important to the reporter to get the story right. Please jump in and correct any factual errors.

If you feel comfortable sharing it, please do.

Just ask me to step in and respond to the question.

THANK YOU

Thank you for your interest in this important opportunity to help immigrant families shape news coverage. We were excited to share some lessons we've learned – sometimes the hard way – over years of working with journalists. We also approach this guide with the humility that comes with knowing that we are all learning.

This brief is a joint product of PIF's Communication Working Group and Community Education Working Group, led by Ed Walz and Alicia Wilson on the PIF team, respectively. While a range of working group members contributed to its development, we offer special thanks to:

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We invite your questions about the ideas we've shared. We also invite you to share the ideas you've picked up along your journey. Please tell us what you think, as well as what you know. And please use the ideas we've shared to support the families you serve in raising their voices.