



*"There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you."*

- Maya Angelou

## **Best Practices for Collecting Client Stories**

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*Originally titled "SNAP Client Stories Best Practices," this whitepaper has been edited and reposted with permission from Feeding America.*

Client stories are an effective way to put a face on hunger and underscore the importance of the emergency food network. Having a story or two on hand can help you quickly respond when:

- A reporter calls and you need a client story to use in response to media inquiries.
- An anecdote is needed to share in a meeting with an elected official.
- An elected official wishes to elevate the need for food assistance in a speech with a constituent story.
- You are looking for a client to take with you to meet with a legislator.

Building a database of client stories and always being on the lookout for client stories prevents the situation of needing to find a story on a tight deadline, such as for the media or meeting. It also provides the opportunity to be proactive and look for ways to put a face on hunger, such as through an online blog series.

A great client story will make the connection between the reality on the ground in your community and the choices before Congress. Stories should demonstrate the need for food assistance; the effective role that your organization plays in your community. Below are some tips for how to collect compelling client stories.

### **Client Privacy and Disclosure Statement**

Let the client know exactly how the information collected will be used. Confirm whether the client agrees to use his or her real name or if it should be kept confidential. While you should never pressure a client into sharing a story if they are uncomfortable doing so, you can help reassure a client that their privacy will be protected and explain the power of their voice in impacting policy decisions. The client must be willing to sign a consent form before their story can be shared. See the example disclosure statement at end of document and/or follow your food bank's disclosure policy.

### **Details, Details, Details**

While we recognize the importance of protecting client privacy, the strongest stories should still include details that make the story come to life and demonstrate concrete examples of why programs work. For example, don't just say that your feeding program helped a family afford the utility bill, explain that the family had to choose between paying the electric bill and buying groceries when they faced an unexpected car repair.

## Starting the Conversation

The questions below can help you get started. The person sharing their story does not have to answer all questions.

- Tell me about yourself and your household. Who lives with you (spouse, children, grandchildren)? What is the employment status of household members? What are their ages? How is their health? Are they veterans or in the military?
- Is this the first time you've needed food assistance? What events happened in your life that led you to seek food assistance? What alternative sources of help did you seek first before coming to [*x pantry, meal program, etc.*]?
- What would happen to you and your family this program was not here to help? Where would they go for assistance (church, family, friend), and would that assistance be available?
- How has this food program helped you / your family? Does it mean you are able to pay other bills? How is the Quality/nutrition/variety of food you eat? Impact on health?

Also, don't forget to ask for basic biographical details, such as name, gender, age and city.

## Basic Do's and Don'ts

- **Be respectful.** People who share their personal experiences are giving you their time and trusting you to share their story in a dignified manner
- **Protect privacy.** Do not provide clients' names or other identifying details without their permission
- **Be specific.** Ask clients to avoid speaking in generalities and provide specific examples of the impact of the program.
- **Keep it tight.** A story should be long enough to provide personalizing detail, but short enough that it can be retold in a few paragraphs. You may collect far more details from a client interview than you eventually use in their "final" story.
- **Use discretion when necessary.** If a client story mentions a business or brand, consider replacing the name with a descriptor, especially if you think the story reflects poorly on the business. For example, a client lost his job at *the hardware store*, not *Lowe's*, or a client used SNAP to purchase *tomato soup*, not *Campbell's*.

## Avoid Reinforcing Common Myths and Stereotypes

It is important to be aware of common misperceptions about nutrition programs and clients and take care to present a client experience that breaks down negative stereotypes. By dispelling common misperceptions, we can eliminate excuses for not supporting our programs. Choose stories that do not reaffirm common program stereotypes and misperceptions, for example, *a single mom has too many kids* or *SNAP benefits are used to buy junk food*. Instead, stories should:

- Emphasize the improved nutritional quality that your meal program affords.
- Demonstrate the diversity of households struggling against hunger, including two-parent households or seniors taking care of grandchildren.
- Point to a specific cause that led a family to need food assistance, whether related to employment, wages, health, divorce, or other factors.

- Emphasize client demographics that are sympathetic, including children, seniors, those who are working, veterans, and military families.

### **Demonstrate that Clients are Playing by the Rules**

Stories should educate the audience about the many factors that can lead to food insecurity. Invite clients who can speak about how they recently lost a job, had their hours cut back at work, experienced a family or medical emergency, or faced unexpected issues with housing or transportation.

Choose stories that emphasize that clients are playing by the rules but are still struggling, whether because they lack adequate employment or the household faced uncontrollable factors that caused need.

### **Sample Photo Release Form**

Feel free to use this photo release form as a template for your organization.

#### **SAMPLE PHOTO RELEASE FORM**

I consent to the photographing of my person and property and the use of my photograph, name, likeness, voice, and words ("Photographs") and grant to the Feeding America (formerly America's Second Harvest) national office and member food banks and anyone authorized by them (collectively, "Feeding America and its agents") permission to use, reproduce, display, broadcast, alter, modify, and/or copyright and renew all Photographs or likeness, taken by Feeding America or provided to Feeding America, for any purpose, including, but not limited to, use in advertising, promotional, public relations, educational and fundraising materials, all media, including, without limitation, in broadcast, cable, electronic and print media ("Feeding America Materials"), without limitations or compensation (such use being defined herein as the "Use"). I agree that the Photographs, images and likeness become the property of Feeding America and may not be returned. I understand that Feeding America shall own all rights and I waive any right to inspect or approve of my images use in Feeding America Materials. I understand that I will not have any rights of ownership. I understand that my photograph and likeness will not necessarily be used by virtue of this agreement.

I declare that: (1) I am of legal age and I have every right to contract in my own name, or my parent or legal guardian has signed below; (2) I have every right to grant Feeding America the use of my Photograph or likeness without violating other commitments; and (3) the appropriate releases and/or authorizations have been obtained from any and every person shown in any Photographs I provided to Feeding America.

I hereby agree to hold Feeding America and its agents harmless from any past, present and future claims, actions, demands, liability, rights, damages or losses ("Claims"), that I, my beneficiaries, administrators, executors or assigns had, have now or may have in the future in connection with the Photographs or likeness and/or the Use, including without limitation, any actions for trademark or copyright infringement, violations of rights of publicity or privacy, or for blurring, distortion, alteration, optical illusion, or any use of the Photographs. I agree to hold Feeding

America and its agents harmless from any Claim by any third party arising out of any inaccuracy or breach of any representations and warranties herein.

I understand and agree: (1) that this Release is binding and (2) this Release constitutes an agreement between myself and Feeding America and no waiver, modification or addition to this Release shall be valid unless in writing and signed by the parties.

I have read this Release or have had it read to me. I understand its contents and sign it voluntarily and of my own free will.

**ACCEPTED AND AGREED TO:**

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Print Full Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_

**If participant is under 18 years of age, participant's parent or legal guardian must sign:**

I declare that I am the parent or legal guardian of the minor and that I am able to contract in my own name. I agree to grant Feeding America permission to use this participant's Photograph and likeness for promotional purposes described above. By signing below and initialing each page of the Release, I acknowledge that I have read the release or have had it read to me and that I understand the contents and sign it voluntarily and of my own free will. I HEREBY CONSENT TO THE USE OF THE PHOTOGRAPHS ON PARTICIPANT'S BEHALF AND AGREE TO THE PROVISIONS OF THIS RELEASE.

Print Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone No. \_\_\_\_\_

Relationship to Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Dated: \_\_\_\_\_

Legal Guardian name (please print): \_\_\_\_\_

Legal Guardian Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Feeding America Representative (please print): \_\_\_\_\_

Feeding America Representative Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

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