



FRI Frontline Resource
Institute

Frontline Momentum

Communicating Your Narrative

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A LETTER FROM FRI'S ACTING DIRECTOR

Communicating information about environmental and climate-related issues is critical to effect meaningful, lasting change. For frontline organizations, effective communication is paramount in advocacy and mobilization efforts. The messages you convey and how you convey them will vary widely depending on your audience. Often this means communicating at multiple levels, from your local community all the way up to the federal government.

One group that does an incredible job with communication is [WE ACT for Environmental Justice](#). What makes their communication efforts so powerful is that they have mastered the ability to communicate at the federal level, at the state legislative level, and directly with the community. They are good at what they do because they understand how to differentiate and leverage these three domains of communication. By being good listeners and understanding what is happening on the ground locally, they are able to translate that to state or federal policy. Likewise, they can take what they see playing out at the state and federal level and translate that to community action.

Yet communicating across multiple levels remains an ongoing challenge for many frontline organizations. Many people are unaware of the number of threats that frontline communities face, and that these threats are not just environmental but also stem from historical inequities that have compounded over time. As a frontline organization, it's difficult to synthesize and communicate these threats in a way that can be readily understood by someone who doesn't share the same lived experiences. This is why learning the art of effective communication is so important – it's not just about communicating what is seen or heard but also getting people to understand what community members are feeling. Storytelling can be a powerful communication tool for frontline communities to advance their advocacy and mobilization efforts.

At FRI, we are working on several initiatives to support community-based organizations in building greater sovereignty around their community's narrative and deploying that sovereignty into advocacy. First and most immediate is a communications guide that we have posted on our Resources webpage. This simple, straightforward guide was developed in partnership with a community-based organization based on their needs and it covers a variety of ways – print and digital – to communicate with constituents.

Throughout 2025, FRI will offer a series of trainings to support community-based organizations in telling their stories. And in fall 2024, FRI will launch our "How'd They Do That?" series that will provide free, expert-led training on how to leverage your community's story to advocate for change in a variety of arenas. Be sure to keep an eye out for more information on these trainings and additional communications-related resources in the coming months.

Margot Brown
Dr. Margot Brown

In This Issue

Page 2

Grantee Spotlight:
Toxic Prisons
Campaign of the
Human Rights
Coalition

Page 4

Three Rules of Thumb
for Communicating
within the Environmental
and Climate Justice
Space

Page 6

From Informative to
Engaging: A Few
Principles for Using
Visuals to Elevate your
Organization's Message



This month's grantee spotlight features an interview with B.P. Lyles, one of the lead organizers for the [Toxic Prisons Campaign](#) of the Human Rights Coalition. Founded in 2019, the Toxic Prisons Campaign is a program of the Human Rights Coalition, a nonprofit organization of current and formerly incarcerated people, their families, and supporters.



Members of the **Toxic Prisons Campaign** at an event. Photo courtesy of B.P. Lyles.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE TOXIC PRISONS CAMPAIGN?

The Toxic Prisons Campaign is essentially the environmental justice arm of the Human Rights Coalition. The program was started in direct response to the environmental injustices occurring at SCI (state correctional institution) Fayette. The prison was constructed on 50 million tons of coal ash waste and is situated near three coal slurry ponds. Since it opened in 2003, residents of SCI Fayette have experienced many negative health impacts and illnesses. Our initial goal for the Toxic Prisons Campaign was to raise awareness of the toxic environment at SCI Fayette and advocate for the prison's closure. We have since broadened our scope beyond SCI Fayette to address a wide range of environmental hazards found in prisons across Pennsylvania and advocate for the people who are exposed to those conditions.

WHAT IS YOUR MOTIVATION TO CONTRIBUTE TO THIS WORK?

My motivation for this work is deeply personal. For me, it's incredibly important to help people to recognize that men and women who are incarcerated are just that: men and women, full-fledged citizens of the United States who are full of dignity and worth; possess gifts, talents, skills, and dreams; and can be great contributors to society. Returning citizens deserve as much forgiveness and grace as you want for yourself. Every human being has room and capacity for growth, change, and development. No one has to stay stuck within the traumas of the past. Those coming from incarceration, regardless of the reason, should be supported in their opportunity to be released and live fully without having to endure a life sentence of rejection, ostracization, and marginalization.

It's also important to educate people on the toxicities and environmental injustices found in prisons. Polluted water and air, mold and mildew, corroded pipes, lead paint, toxic dust, pest and rodent infestations – all these things are happening inside prisons and people are getting sick. More often than not, people who are incarcerated will not go to the infirmary because they are told what they are feeling is unimportant or doesn't exist. As a result, they don't receive proper medical treatment until they are in such a severe, advanced state that they need to go to the hospital. People are losing their lives and dealing with chronic diseases that could have been prevented if properly addressed early on. Subjecting people to toxic environments that make them sick is no way to treat American citizens.

WHAT ARE SOME SUCCESSES THAT YOU ARE PARTICULARLY PROUD OF?

One recent success we are proud of is our documentary, “I Can’t Breathe: The Toxic Prison Campaign’s Fight for Environmental Justice.” We produced the film in 2023 in part with grant funding from FRI. There are two parts to the film’s storyline. One part looks at environmental injustices in prisons and the means by which we can help get justice for those impacted. The second part looks at what can be done to support people coming home from prison, including getting them involved in renewable energy-related careers that will enable them to provide for themselves and their families. We have already screened the documentary in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh and are now pursuing other screening venues, including colleges and universities. Our goal is to eventually post the film online.

SHARE SOME OF THE LESSONS YOU’VE LEARNED IN YOUR ORGANIZATIONAL JOURNEY.

Being selfless is crucial. This work takes a lot of energy and effort and it requires people who have passion, energy, and concern for others. However, we need to recognize that burnout is real. Most of the people who engage in this work are volunteers. They have jobs, families, friends, and hobbies. It’s important to encourage people to take breaks to decompress and do other things they enjoy so that they can re-engage and commit to the process for the long haul.

Another important lesson is that financing these types of missions can be very difficult. We have found success in connecting with other community organizations and like-minded partners to find out where they receive grants, even applying for grants together when possible depending on capacity and the grant’s relevance to our mission. We are also constantly looking for

grant-making organizations that are supportive of our mission, no matter the size of the grant. Due to the nature of the grant process, this can be time consuming work and it requires a good deal of focus and attention. Yet because the work is so important to us, the time and energy are well worth it and the impact is generational.

WHAT ARE SOME PROJECTS OR INITIATIVES THAT THE TOXIC PRISONS CAMPAIGN IS ASPIRING TO ENGAGE IN OVER THE NEXT FIVE YEARS?

One thing we want to do is develop an environmental justice curriculum for people who are incarcerated to train them on what environmental justice is; explore the intersections of environmental injustice, incarceration, renewable energy, and restorative justice; and talk about how to move into this new green environment. Through these trainings, we want to establish direct connections with people at various SCIs, who we will call point persons, and grow these relationships and our networks across the state so that we can become a resource center for people who are incarcerated and the people on the outside who love and care about them.

We are also seeking to build our capacity as a program, including hiring more staff, so we can deepen our involvement in environmental justice. Two areas of particular interest include reducing the number of prisons in toxic environments and helping people who are returning home to secure employment in green careers.



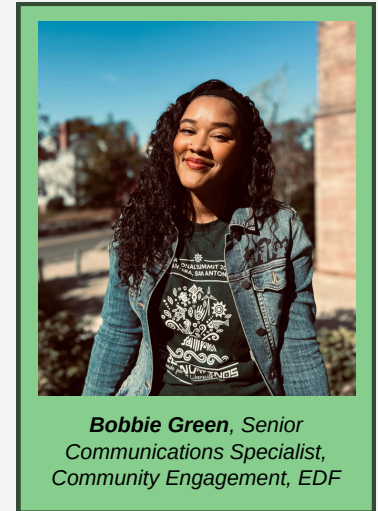
LEARN MORE AND CONNECT!

To learn more about the Toxic Prisons Campaign, the Human Rights Coalition, and their work, [click here](#).

THREE RULES OF THUMB FOR COMMUNICATING WITHIN THE ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE JUSTICE SPACE

Based on an interview with Bobbie Green, Senior Communications Specialist, Community Engagement, EDF

Community-based organizations (CBOs) know communication is key for raising awareness and securing wins on issues that matter to them. Employing effective communication is especially important in the environmental and climate justice space, where CBOs often need to engage with a wide variety of audiences. While no two CBO communication strategies will look alike, most successful strategies share common elements. Here are three rules of thumb to keep in mind when crafting and implementing your CBO's communication strategy.



ENGAGE YOUR COMMUNITY

Community members have a wealth of generational knowledge and experiences that CBOs can tap to inform communications. The best way to learn from community members is to get out and engage with them. Depending on your community, this engagement can take many forms—town halls, round tables, community sessions—but a particularly effective and simple strategy involves hitting the pavement and knocking on doors. This is a fantastic way to open lines of communication with people who might not be familiar with your organization or the issues you are trying to address. It's an opportunity to ask community members what they are concerned about, what is going on in their area, and how it's impacting them. It's also an opportunity for your CBO to share information on issues of concern, and what your organization is proposing to address those issues, provide support, and obtain buy-in before moving forward.

INCLUDE DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES

It's crucial to ensure your communications include a diversity of perspectives. Individuals from diverse backgrounds and with varied lived experiences bring unique viewpoints and potential solutions. Incorporating their experiences and stories into your CBO's communications—through blogs, podcasts, social media posts, and videos—can amplify awareness and add a personal element to environmental or climate-related issues. By actively seeking diverse perspectives, collaborating with individuals from various backgrounds, fostering open communication, embracing creativity, and continuously assessing and enhancing your approach, you can create more meaningful, authentic, and inclusive campaigns that resonate with a broader audience. You may even consider partnering with influencers or content creators from diverse communities to add to your campaigns. Building relationships with thought leaders who share your CBO's interests and engaging with them through social media or at events can also enhance your efforts.

One organization that does a tremendous job documenting community perspectives is [Counterstream Media](#). Counterstream Media collects videos and produces podcasts, feature articles and campaigns that are dedicated to highlighting environmental justice stories. The organization uses a non-traditional approach to storytelling that focuses on race, culture, and politics, topics that some would deem controversial. They empower audiences to listen first to calls for action from directly impacted communities and then consider community-driven solutions. Connect with them [here](#) to gain additional insight into their creative, powerful work.

CONSIDER YOUR AUDIENCE

How you communicate environmental and climate-related topics to your audience is just as important as the methods you use. For a general audience, consider their needs and what they might want to know. Use clear, everyday language and concrete terms, avoiding jargon unless you are certain your audience will understand it. If complex words or concepts are necessary, provide examples to clarify. A helpful guideline is to ask yourself: How would I explain this concept to an older family member or a younger sibling? If it doesn't make sense to them, think about how you can simplify your explanation to enhance understanding.

If you are addressing local government officials and policymakers, be succinct and straightforward. Avoid jargon and speak plainly, presenting your cause as a non-partisan issue grounded in scientific fact and in the public's best interest. Anecdotes, stories, and examples are powerful tools for appealing to these audiences, highlighting the importance of diverse community perspectives.

Sometimes, your audience will include naysayers and those initially opposed to your cause. Instead

of avoiding these conversations, adopt a nimble mindset and tailor your messaging to meet people where they are. Focus on the human-interest aspect and who is being impacted. For instance, skyrocketing summer temperatures that lead to increased public safety and health issues resonates with many people. Paint a picture that helps people connect the dots and see the interconnectedness of these issues. Once people understand the link between the cause and its impacts, they are often more willing to engage and discuss solutions, allowing you to build your network of community advocates and supporters.

CONCLUSION

The field of communication is constantly evolving, and it can be daunting for many CBOs to stay up to speed on the latest and greatest trends. But if you stay true to the basics and follow the rules of thumb discussed here, you are well on your way to setting up your CBO for success.



CONNECT AND LEARN MORE

To connect with with Bobbie, [click here!](#)

To connect with Counterstream Media, visit their website [here](#), and check out [The Margin](#), an independent project at Counterstream that centers the stories of those on the frontlines of environmental and climate justice.



DIG DEEPER

To learn more about communicating your message and building a communications plan, check out the [Communication Plan for Community Resilience](#) in our resource hub. The plan was adapted from a similar plan created for the Brookwood Subdivision in Jackson, Mississippi by a team of Columbia University Climate School students, in partnership with the [Community and College Partners Program](#).

FROM INFORMATIVE TO ENGAGING: A FEW PRINCIPLES FOR USING VISUALS TO ELEVATE YOUR ORGANIZATION’S MESSAGE

Rachel Marston, Frontline Resource Institute/Environmental Defense Fund



Rachel Marston, Research Project Manager, FRI/EDF

Communicating your organization’s identity, values, and goals can be a challenge, especially in a world defined by information overload. Environmental and climate justice work is complex and nuanced, making it critical to supplement written information with targeted, clear visuals.

The good news is you don’t have to be a trained artist or graphic designer to be a good visual communicator. From drawing a map to give directions, to creating posters to carry at a protest, we often use visual aids in our everyday lives. Here are some tips for integrating visuals to ensure the clarity, effectiveness, and impact of your organization’s message.

CHOOSE A RELEVANT COMMUNICATION MEDIUM

Before diving into graphic design and visual creation, it’s important to determine how you will communicate your information. The communication medium of your choosing—for example, flyers, yard signs, social media posts, or digital reports—depends not only on your communication campaign’s goals and purpose, but also on your audience or community’s context and preferences. For example, if you are looking to mobilize community members to attend a protest, but many of them don’t have social media accounts, you may opt for tangible materials like flyers or yard signs. Alternatively, if your audience is active on social media, online infographics could be an effective medium.

For a more detailed look at different communication mediums, their uses, and how to decide between them, see the [Communication Plan for Building Community Resilience](#), also highlighted on page 5.

THE BASIC PRINCIPLES OF DESIGN

The fundamentals of visual communication lie in the principles of design. Think of these as building blocks for a clear, concise, and aesthetically pleasing visual. A quick Google search will unearth lists of anywhere from seven to 17 key principles of design. The following four principles are some of the most important.



Image elements are made cohesive through shape/color.

PRINCIPLE 1: UNITY

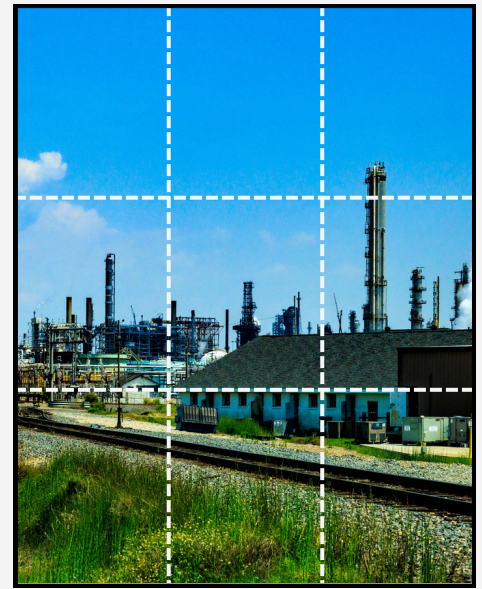
The goal for graphic designers is to achieve a unified piece. This means your final design looks cohesive, includes sufficient visual variety and interest, and conveys your message in a targeted way. Think of this as the principle that governs all principles; you can use every other principle on this list as a tool to achieve overall unity.

PRINCIPLE 2: COMPOSITION AND BALANCE

When using visuals with written communications, it's critical to ensure that visuals and text support each other to tell a story.

[The rule of thirds](#) can be a helpful tip for determining appropriate balance between text, images, and open space and achieving unity. Simply put, this is a composition technique that leverages the natural behavior of the human eye to arrange information in an easily digestible way.

To use this tool, apply a three-by-three grid over your design; the intersections where horizontal and vertical lines meet are natural landing spots for the human eye, making them ideal places to situate critical information, images, and messaging. By helping designers identify the most ideal locations for design elements, the rule of thirds also supports achieving [balance](#), the overall distribution of design elements on the page. Each piece of content in a design has a visual "weight" based on the amount of attention it draws from the viewer. For example, a large, dark image will take up more "weight" on the page than a smaller, lightly colored shape. Using the rule of thirds to achieve an evenly weighted layout – whether symmetrical or asymmetrical – can help viewers digest information in an aesthetically pleasing way.



The Rule of Thirds in action. The focal point—the building—is located at a point of intersection.



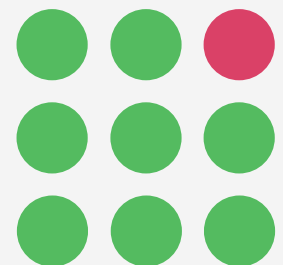
The color wheel shows how different colors interact.

PRINCIPLE 3: COLOR

[Color theory](#), the study of which colors harmonize well together and why, is critical in design. The use of color also [affects the way people respond](#) to your imagery, so it's important to understand the ways in which color can be used to influence viewers' engagement with different media. Creating an engaging color palette can be challenging – online tools like [Colors](#) can simplify the process.

PRINCIPLE 4: EMPHASIS

Designs should always have at least one focal point, even in longer-form media like reports and guides. These are often the most important pieces in a design and draw the most attention from the viewer. A focal point can be anything – an image, a piece of text, a graph, or a call to action. When determining your focal point(s), ask yourself: "what is the most important piece of information I want to convey?" Use color, size proportion, the rule of thirds, and repeated elements to direct readers to the core of your message.



Here, color contrast creates emphasis.

UPHOLDING EQUITY IN DESIGN

When creating designs and other visual supplements, it's important to center accessibility and equity. Consider using [colorblind-friendly color palettes](#) and [accessible fonts](#). Similarly, think critically about the ways your designs and communications could be interpreted. Many cultures and communities have different norms and standards for organizing and interpreting information. Just as storytelling

practices vary on local, regional, national, and global scales, so too should design principles. For example, [colors, symbols, and icons can have different meanings in different cultural contexts](#). The real “golden rule” of design is to tailor your communication methods to your audience and community in a way that resonates.

COMMUNICATIONS TOOLS FOR DIGITAL MEDIA

There is a world of graphic design tools on the market that can help your organization distribute information and announcements digitally. Here are two of the top, vetted competitors with discounts available for eligible nonprofit organizations. If your organization is ineligible, note that both offer free versions that can be great to get you started.

Canva

CANVA

Canva is a user-friendly tool for graphic design novices. The tool comes with excellent templates to help users create their designs and team collaboration within the tool is easy. Canva Pro is free for nonprofit organizations in multiple countries. See [here](#) for more information on eligibility.



ADOBE


Adobe’s creativity and design programs (Illustrator, InDesign, and Adobe Express) are great for those who would like to level up their design skills and have more functions and control in the design process. Adobe provides discounts for eligible nonprofits. See [here](#) for more information on eligibility.

CONCLUSION

Though it can seem intimidating to get started, graphic design and visual communication can push a well-written report from informative to engaging and help convey complex information in seconds. Choosing the right medium, integrating design principles, and using the right communication tools can help make this process more comfortable, efficient, and impactful. The power of visual communication lies in its ability to move and motivate; by harnessing the power of emotion, you can mobilize your audience and spark meaningful action in your community.

Rachel Marston is the Research Project Manager for the Frontline Resource Institute at EDF, where she seeks to bridge the gap between research and practice. With backgrounds in qualitative research and studio art and a talent for communicating complex findings visually, Rachel integrates her expertise in visual art to drive meaningful change.

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