

# WNC Civic Hub Meeting Summary - January 29, 2026

## Purpose (Shared Why)

Bring Community Action organizations and partners together to explore:

- How poverty is currently understood in Western North Carolina
- How harmful narratives persist
- How we can collaboratively tell more accurate, dignified stories that reflect lived realities and strengthen communities
- How we can make the public safety net cool again

## Core Insights & Shared Beliefs

- Narratives shape outcomes.
- People care when issues affect them personally. If someone hasn't experienced poverty - they are more likely to see the conditions as laziness or personal failure.
- Poverty is often framed as individual failure, when it is more accurately a community condition shaped by systems.
- Many people want to help—but don't know how. We should provide clear opportunities.
- Measuring outcomes matters: If we can't define impact, we can't sustain work.
- Frontline staff and lived experience are critical storytellers.
- Empathy grows through specific, human stories, not abstract statistics.
- Community action agencies do powerful work to change lives and we don't tell the stories enough.
- There are "frequent fliers" who abuse the system, but who are a tiny fraction of the whole
- Look at booklet for story types, common barriers in WNC

*"Small stories are a reflection of big things - like problems with culture, policies or systems. Little sparks that light dark corners. Small stories can lead to big solutions when shared." - Angie*

## Dominant Narratives to Challenge

- "People in poverty aren't working hard enough."
- "They'll just have another baby to get more benefits."
- "If they wanted help, they'd accept it."
- "That's a city problem, not a rural one."

## **Reframe toward:**

- Poverty affects workforce stability, healthcare access, education, housing, tourism, and long-term regional sustainability.

## **Key Themes**

### **1. Shared Language & Narrative Alignment**

- Need for common framing across agencies
- Start with existing media portrayals in WNC
- Focus on dignity, systems, and outcomes—not a “rescue others” mindset
- Common ground - we all want the same things for our families
- Adverse Childhood Experiences angle

### **2. Audience Awareness**

- Rural vs. urban realities differ significantly
- Political polarization creates two media ecosystems
- Generational and cultural differences shape receptiveness

*“Just because something is common sense to one person doesn’t mean it is to another.”*

*- Lacy*

### **3. Trust, Trauma & Consent**

- Many clients have lived through deep trauma and shame
- Storytelling must be:
  - Consent-based
  - Trauma-informed
  - Protective of both clients and agencies
  - Clear photo/story consent practices are essential, especially for new staff

### **4. Seeking Stability as a Unifying Frame**

- Housing, food, healthcare, and job insecurity affect everyone
- When framed this way, communities are more receptive

## **Tensions & Constraints (Named Honestly)**

- Limited communications capacity at many agencies
- Differences in preferred communication styles and political realities
- Federal restrictions on “promotion” vs. public outreach or client recruitment
- Fear of funders' backlash or misinterpretation
- Burnout and empathy fatigue
- Some communities actively resist these stories being told (shame, fear, biases, pride)
- Determining the recipients of our messages

*“Congressionally, we (in community action) have a history of working on both sides of the aisle. Always. And we haven’t done the kinds of (aggressive) things we know other program lobbyists have done. Often we did it with stories.” - Vicki*

## **What’s Working (Examples)**

- Human-centered narratives (e.g., Tropical Storm Fred story)
- Inviting skeptical or “proud” community members in, rather than confronting
- Framing stories around transition and progress, not dependency
- See the booklet from meeting for more

*“There aren’t always traditions of empathy in western North Carolina ... a lot of people, generationally, have had it rough, and they persevered. That’s kind of a part of the legacy of the area. And finding empathy for people who are struggling is not always easy for them.” - Bill*

## **Decisions & Direction**

- Collectively develop stories
- Prioritize audiences intentionally (not “everyone”) - requires discussion with communications and development folks
- Focus initial storytelling efforts around shared issues (e.g., housing, Head Start, healthcare access)
- Emphasize transition models (e.g., moving from 100% dependency to stability)

## **Action Items (Clear + Concrete)**

- Each organization is to identify a “Story Steward”
- Goal is to develop three stories by March
  - Client story selected
  - Consent secured by staff
  - County-specific but anonymized when needed
  - Go through process to determine whether they are a good choice
- Look at the booklet for tools:
  - Storytelling consent forms
  - Photo-use permissions
  - Trauma-informed storytelling guidelines
  - Checklists on how the stories will be used
- We will have an online meeting for next steps

- Begin outlining a shared communications plan - can include
  - Letters to the editor
  - Editorials
  - Social media coordination
  - Press outreach

## Open Questions to Carry Forward

1. Who exactly are we telling these stories to? (We can build a plan to focus!)
2. How do we avoid exhausting communities while still influencing change?
3. How do we honor lived experience without retraumatizing people?
4. What outcomes will tell us this narrative shift is working?
5. How do we “build trust” across counties with different populations and politics?

## Closing Reflection: What’s Possible?

- Stronger regional partnerships
- Shared storytelling that lightens the load for individual agencies
- Deeper empathy across political and cultural divides
- A narrative shift that supports policy, funding, and long-term systems change
- Selecting a Story Steward
- Being intentional with choosing client stories
- Collaboration
- Thank you

*“I think there is something to be said about periodically showing up at lawmakers’ offices, because if you don’t, they’ll assume you’re like everyone else, and Community Action (and the most rural counties of Western North Carolina) are different. You’re usually talking to their staff when you get there, which is sometimes a better thing. You know, the staff, they’re the neck that turns the head.” - Sue*

## Next steps

1. Marketing/Communications/Fund development folks will meet separately to discuss how stories can be directed to specific customers. (General public, decision makers, legislators)
2. Agencies are choosing their Story Steward and reviewing the checklist(s) to think through the processes.
3. “BCC Staff” are working on systems for project (scheduling groups, notes storage, electronic forms) and working on funding proposal.
4. BCC considering how to bring people who haven’t been able to attend a meeting, up to speed without being repetitive for others - maybe an online meeting. Maybe individual phone calls.

**Next meeting: TBD**