



WNC Civic Hub Meeting

Thursday, January 29, 2026

Location - Community Action Opportunities, 25 Gaston St, Asheville

Time: 12pm - 4pm



Purpose

Our Hub will establish a content creator network, foster cross-sector partnerships, and develop systems to share stories, editorials, and videos through media, digital platforms, community outlets, and events. The project will promote civic engagement, connect low-income individuals and community leaders, and elevate marginalized voices—encouraging empathy, reframing poverty narratives, and reducing the “deservingness” barrier to strengthen support for social programs.

Objectives

Amplify Community Voices

Elevate stories from those impacted by poverty and disasters in North Carolina, fostering civic leadership and grassroots media.

Build Trust and Media Integrity

Partner with media and nonprofits to promote trauma-informed, ethical storytelling. Standardize respectful, transparent communication that rebuilds trust and highlights poverty-alleviation work.

Convene Cross-Sector Collaboration

Unite nonprofits, public agencies, media, and creators under shared narratives for advocacy, consistent messaging, and systems change—strengthening trust and social capital.

Shape Public Narrative

Share stories, social media, and news coverage to create new awareness of the symptoms of poverty and to mobilize civic action, policy advocacy, and resources.



Make the Public Safety Net Cool Again

Western North Carolina Civic Hub Gathering

Purpose

Bring community action organizations (and community partners) together to explore how poverty is understood in Western North Carolina and how we can work collaboratively to tell more accurate, dignified stories that support our communities.

Agenda

12:00-12:30 PM
Lunch & Connection

12:30-12:50 PM
Welcome & Setting the Stage

We'll open the day by sharing:

- Why storytelling and narrative matter in Western North Carolina
- Why this work is shared across organizations
- Our intended outcomes
- What participants can expect from today's conversation

12:50-1:10 PM
Introductions & Shared Reflections

Participants will introduce themselves and reflect together on:

- Beliefs about poverty that feel hardest to shift
- What could change if those beliefs shifted
- Frontline programs that we need to focus on

1:10-1:30 PM
The Civic Hub: Purpose & Vision

An overview of:

- The Civic Hub and its goals
- Why intentional collaboration around storytelling and media matters
- What success looks like for this shared work
- Time for questions and clarification.

1:30-2:40 PM
Understanding the Narrative Landscape in WNC

This session includes full-group conversation.

Together, we will:

- Explore common stories and assumptions about poverty in Western North Carolina
- Reflect on why these narratives persist
- Discuss how different experiences and systems shape public understanding

2:40-3:00 PM
Break

3:00–3:25 PM

What We're Building Together

An introduction to shared tools and supports being developed through the Civic Hub, including:

- Communications tools and systems for the project
- Storytelling concepts
- Storytelling platforms
- Shared language and framing
- Collaborative approaches to media engagement

3:25–3:35 PM

Working with Media & Sharing Stories Responsibly

A high-level overview of:

- Organization and client-centered storytelling principles
- How organizations can work together when engaging the media
- How the Civic Hub supports clarity and coordination

3:35–3:50 PM

Next Steps & How to Get Started

We'll cover:

- How organizations can share story ideas and other content
- What communications support is available
- Content suggestions - kinds of stories
- Toolkits on poverty, programs, data
- What happens next

3:50–4:00 PM

Closing Reflections

We'll close with a short reflection on

What feels more possible moving forward

MAKE THE PUBLIC SAFETY NET COOL AGAIN

A Civic Hub Narrative Guide for Western North Carolina

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Most folks around here work hard. Trouble is, hard work doesn't stretch as far as it used to.

– Community action staff member, WNC

Welcome & Purpose

This guide supports community action organizations working together through the Civic Hub to change how poverty is understood and responded to in Western North Carolina.

Our goal is not to convince everyone or win arguments. It is to build shared language, shared values, and shared practices that help the public—and decision-makers—understand the realities of poverty and why coordinated, prevention-focused solutions matter.

This booklet is a working guide.

Use it to reflect, align, and act.

Advocacy & This Work

This project includes advocacy—but it may look different than what people expect.

In the Civic Hub, advocacy is about **helping the public and decision-makers better understand how poverty works in real life**. It is not about telling people what to believe, who to vote for, or how to participate politically.

What Advocacy Means Here

Changing the story is the work.

When we tell honest stories about how systems affect families, workers, and communities, we help expand what feels fair, reasonable, and necessary. That shift in understanding is a form of advocacy.

Stories help make policy visible.

Some stories naturally show the impact of policies related to housing, childcare, healthcare, wages, or benefits. These stories explain what policies do in people's lives, without promoting a political agenda.

Participation is always a choice.

People experiencing poverty may choose to share their stories publicly or in civic spaces—but only if they want to. Storytelling is never required and never tied to services.

What Advocacy Does Not Mean

This work does not:

- Endorse candidates or political parties
- Ask clients to advocate for specific policies
- Use stories to pressure people or institutions
- Blur the line between services and political activity
- Clear boundaries help protect trust, safety, and dignity.

How Advocacy Fits Into the Civic Hub

Agencies decide how they engage in advocacy based on their mission and capacity. Narrative work helps inform policy conversations without directing them.

Why This Matters

In Western North Carolina, many people care deeply about fairness, responsibility, and community. When stories help connect these values to real experiences and systems, communities are better equipped to respond thoughtfully and effectively.

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Why Narrative Matters in Western North Carolina

In Western North Carolina, poverty is often framed as a personal failure rather than a community condition shaped by systems. This belief persists not because people don't care, but because values like self-reliance, pride, and making do are deeply tied to dignity.

Narratives matter because they:

- Shape what feels fair and reasonable
- Influence funding, policy, and public will
- Affect how people experiencing poverty see themselves

Our core narrative shift:

From: Poverty is a personal failure best addressed by charity.

To: Poverty is a community condition shaped by systems—and addressing it strengthens families, workers, and the prosperity of our entire region.



People don't ask for help because it's easy.
They ask because they've run out of options.

— Case manager, rural WNC

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The Western North Carolina Narrative Strategy

Core Narrative Anchors

Stability Is Strength

Support systems allow people to work, care for family, and contribute. Instability —not lack of effort—is the barrier.

Most People Are One Crisis Away

Job loss, illness, rent increases, or disasters can push anyone into hardship. Poverty is often situational.

Systems Shape Choices

Housing costs, wages, childcare, transportation, and healthcare shape outcomes. Choices do not happen in a vacuum.

Community Solutions Work Better Than Going It Alone

Coordination saves time, money, and stress for families and increases impact.

Addressing Poverty Strengthens the Region

Stable families support schools, employers, and local economies.



Needing help isn't the problem. Not having a system that works is.

— Community partner, WNC

Around here, people don't want a handout—they want things to be steady enough to plan their lives.

— Workforce partner, WNC

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The Landscape of Narrative Barriers in WNC

Narrative barriers are not just cultural attitudes. They are reinforced by power, policy decisions, and historical inequities that shape whose needs are prioritized and whose voices are heard.

Key Barriers

Deservingness

Judgments about who “deserves” help—often reinforced by policies tied to surveillance, punishment, or compliance.

Bootstrap Mentality

A myth that ignores unequal access to land, education, credit, and stable jobs throughout Western North Carolina’s history.

Empathy Gaps & Fatigue

Distance, normalization of hardship, and crisis overload reduce urgency and compassion.

Political Veils

Policies are filtered through ideology rather than lived experience.

Systemic Racism & Historical Context

Land dispossession, segregated schools, exclusion from wealth-building programs, discriminatory housing practices, and uneven infrastructure investment continue to shape outcomes today.

Rural Invisibility & Isolation

What is unseen is often underfunded.

Charity Comfort vs. Systems Discomfort

Relief is familiar; prevention and policy change feel abstract or threatening.

Shame & Silence

Narratives and policies produce shame, limiting visibility and collective power.



I hear ‘they should just work harder’ from people who’ve never had to choose between gas and groceries.

— Frontline staff, WNC



Narrative & Power Callout

Narratives do not exist apart from power.
Policies reflect the stories we tell about who matters.



A lot of folks who say they never got help forget who watched their kids, fixed their car, or gave them a break.

– Longtime resident, WNC

When everybody's struggling a little, it stops looking like an emergency.

– Rural nonprofit director, WNC

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Values-Based Framing That Works in WNC

Values-based framing does not avoid power or policy—it makes them understandable.

Effective framing:

- Connects policy to real lives
- Links history to present conditions
- Emphasizes shared responsibility without erasing inequity

Avoid framing that:

- Treats systems as neutral
- Suggests inequality is accidental
- Separates charity from justice



Taking care of people is how you take care of a community.

– Faith leader, WNC

Fairness means people who work hard shouldn't be one bad month away from losing everything.

– Employer partner, WNC

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Story Types to Prioritize

Working Family Stories

Effort + barriers + systems

Prevention Stories

What didn't happen because help came early

Navigation Stories

The cost of fragmented systems

Rural Reality Stories

Geography, distance, infrastructure

Collective Impact Stories

Agencies working together

Poverty Alleviation Programs

Programs that reduce immediate hardship and stabilize people in crisis.

Ex.: emergency food, utility, ACA and transitional housing assistance

Economic Mobility Programs

Programs that improve people's economic position.

Ex.: Job training, financial coaching, transportation support and ACA.



The best outcomes are the ones nobody ever sees
—because a crisis never happened.

— Housing services staff, WNC

People don't fall through the cracks because they don't care.
They fall through because the cracks are everywhere.

— Intake coordinator, WNC



Client-Centered Storytelling Principles

Clients are collaborators, not content

Participation is voluntary

Consent is ongoing and revocable

Safety and dignity come first

No story is required to receive services

Avoid:

Poverty porn

Savior narratives

Worthiness tests

Oversharing trauma



A story that costs someone their dignity is too expensive.

– Communications staff, WNC

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How the Civic Hub Works

The Civic Hub addresses equity gaps and power gaps.

It helps:

Elevate lived experience in policy and media spaces

Align organizations to speak clearly about systems

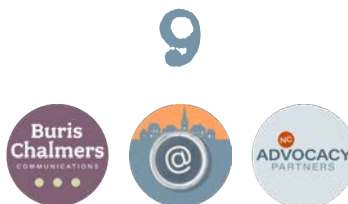
Reduce fragmentation that weakens influence

Shift narratives that justify underinvestment



No one agency sees the whole picture—but together we get a lot closer.

— Civic partner, WNC



Reflection & Application

Which narrative barrier do you encounter most often?

Which story type is most available in your work?

What language do you want to stop using?

What support do you need to participate?



If someone trusts us with their story, our first job is to protect them—not the message.

— Program director, WNC

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Appendices

Appendix A: Client Story Invitation (Plain Language)

Sometimes people choose to share their experiences to help the community understand what life is really like and why these programs matter. There is absolutely no pressure, and your services will never be affected.

Would you like to hear more?

Appendix B: Photo & Media Use Principles

Explain how images may be used

Offer identification options - first name only, full name, no name

Never photograph or record without consent

Consent can be withdrawn

Closing

Changing the narrative around poverty in Western North Carolina requires honesty about power, policy, and history.

Stories can either reinforce systems that concentrate opportunity—or help dismantle them. By grounding our work in lived experience, shared values, and structural analysis, we strengthen our programs and our collective capacity for change. This Civic Hub is one tool in that work.

