

Fair Chance Month:



A narrative
and
messaging
guide for
organizers



Produced by:

Narrative Initiative



FICGN



Introduction

Narratives are the themes and ideas embedded in collections of stories. Dominant narratives reveal who holds power and how those in power use them. When narrative change succeeds, it shifts both power and dominant narratives.

This narrative guide has been crafted to identify deep, harmful, and helpful narratives that emerge when talking about fairness and advancing opportunities for people who were formerly incarcerated. The guide places a special emphasis on community leaders who are also formerly incarcerated, most of whom are executive directors, nonprofit founders, and CEOs.



On Narrative Change and Narrative Organizing

Narrative change happens over long periods of time and seeks to transform deep narratives. Deep narratives are persistent themes and ideas present in collections of stories that have existed for at least 50 years. They may describe what we consider acceptable or restrict what we can imagine as possible. Deep narratives are everywhere, showing up across mediums, platforms and conversations, and shared by many voices, including popular messengers and everyday people.

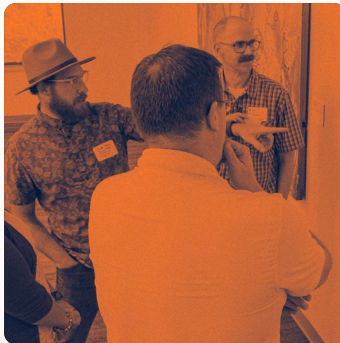
Deep narratives often seem obvious, unavoidable, or natural. These narratives provide a framework for understanding history and current events and inform how we think about our identity, community, and where we belong.

Deservingness — the idea that your identity or status makes you more or less deserving of rights, benefits, and privileges — is a deep narrative governing the lives of formerly incarcerated people and their advocates.

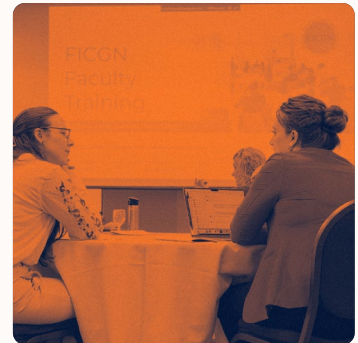
These tools will help you:



1. Tap into coalitions and networks to seed narratives with sustained and distributed efforts that challenge dominant narratives



2. Align groups you are organizing towards a singular narrative.



3. Hold space for long-term narrative shifts by telling stories that are adaptive and responsive to the needs of the movement and the socio-cultural environment

Helpful Narratives

Helpful narratives speed work along and remove obstacles. They often support the redistribution of power or humanity.

1. People are more than their incarceration

- ✎ “[W]e have now shifted to referring to ourselves as “formally incarcerated people” to let them know that we were once incarcerated. But I’m even wrestling with that idea too. I think that we got to move beyond that part of it, because we’re still attaching incarceration. [We say,] “I’m formally incarcerated,” but I’m just a human being.”

2. All people are deserving of humanity and dignity

- ✎ “When we see them as human beings, we can begin to treat them in that manner and see that they deserve fair opportunities, not just one month, they deserve fair opportunity throughout their entire lives, right?”

Harmful Narratives

These narratives hold the work back and make it harder to change systems. It’s usually easier to name harmful narratives than helpful ones, as harmful narratives often have had more years of repetition and more social, cultural, and financial weight thrown behind them.

1. People should be judged forever based on their incarceration record. After you commit a crime, you are irredeemable.

- ✎ “I came into everything understanding there was gonna be a stigma or ... a mark against me. And I think a lot of people come in knowing there’s gonna be more than one mark against them.”
- ✎ “We were the only ones who have embraced that forever tag of “EX-[con]” which, by us embracing the Forever term of “EX-” allows society to embrace the Forever term of our criminal record.”

2. Formerly incarcerated people are less worthy or deserving of humanity.

- ✎ “In prison, people will tell you’re the worst person in the world. You don’t deserve this [good thing]. You don’t deserve that [good thing].”
- ✎ “People still see prison as a place of punishment, stripping a person’s dignity. So even if we change the title, people are still thinking about [how] you were in prison.”

Audience Belief Arc¹

Liberation Ventures, an organization dedicated to winning reparations for slavery in the United States, developed the Belief Arc as a tool to identify the series of beliefs people take from full opposition to active support for reparations. The Belief Arc functions as a map of how to deliver messages in order to get to our destination. We have adapted their Belief Arc model to show the series of beliefs people may have in opposition to Fair Chance Month to full support of Fair and unlimited chances for all people.

Opposition

- ✎ People who have been incarcerated are irredeemable and should be punished for their crime forever
- ✎ **People who have been incarcerated aren't deserving of fair opportunities or easy access to resources, including a second chance**

Persuadables

- ✎ Incarcerated people should not be punished forever
- ✎ Formerly-Incarcerated people should receive a second chance
- ✎ Some people need more than a second chance like a third or fourth chance
- ✎ **Some people never had a fair chance**

Active Support

- ✎ **Everyone deserves a fair chance, regardless of incarceration history**
- ✎ **People deserve access to the resources they need to thrive**



¹ Adapted from [Liberation Ventures and their Reparations Belief Arc](#)

Fair Chance Month Narrative Framework

Deep Narratives:

Dignity & Humanity

The carceral system is a legacy of chattel slavery. Although the 13th amendment abolished slavery, it made a crucial exception for punishment for crimes. The use of the words “inmate,” “felon,” or intake numbers to describe individual people, the fact prisons are essentially a captive labor market, and the on-going social stigma and loss of citizenship rights, are features of the carceral system that parallel the chattel slavery system.

Dignity is the belief that each person is inherently endowed with humanity; it is the opposite of “deservingness,” which links rights, benefits, and privileges to particular identities. “Fair chances,” “formerly incarcerated,” “system-impacted,” or “justice-impacted” are examples of people-first language. Rather than refer to people by their worst deeds and reinforce a system of hierarchy and deservingness, people-first language leads with the humanity of the individuals discussed and imbues their experiences with respect and dignity.

Deservingness

All people deserve a fair chance, which means all people deserve as many chances as it is required to achieve whatever goals they have. There are no tiers of humanity. Opportunity without adequate support is not fairness. It is the appearance of fairness, structured to fail and confirm the very prejudice it claims to overcome.

People must be afforded multiple opportunities and pathways to excel. The harmful “Second Chance” narrative limits people to just one.





Interdependence

The carceral system is set up to remove people from society as punishment for their crime. Once that punishment period, or sentence, is completed, formerly incarcerated people must work for and prove themselves to reestablish their connections to society. Some social connections are forever severed, intentionally disempowering and disenfranchising millions of people. This severance weakens our civic institutions including the electorate, depresses wages, and increases debt.

Interdependence as a deep narrative posits that formerly incarcerated people have just as much to contribute to society as anyone else does and that their contributions help everyone. Removing barriers to access civil rights, employment, housing, and educational opportunities immediately post-incarceration restores not only a formerly incarcerated person's dignity and humanity, but it also relieves the pressure on all people and families who feel the squeeze from the carceral system's grip on their lives. Current harmful narratives assume formerly incarcerated people "don't have anything to contribute to society." This assumption perpetuates the belief that the burden of responsibility to maintain society is up to everyone else.

Both assumptions are patently unfair and wholly false. Our future depends on everyone no matter their current or former carceral status.

Fairness & Freedom

People often see prison as a "fair" punishment for a crime because it takes away someone's freedom and limits where they can go and what they can do. But once someone has served their time, those limits shouldn't continue. People coming home should be able to move freely, get a job, go to school, access healthcare, and build a stable life—just like anyone else.

The idea of fairness and freedom means that after incarceration, people have a real chance to start over. They should be able to work, learn, find safe housing, and get care without facing extra barriers or stigma. That's what true fairness and real freedom look like. For people who are formerly incarcerated, making these narratives central to our work anchors both the organizers and the communities organizers seek to reach.

Fair Chance Narratives:

We Are More Than Our Worst Moments

Making mistakes is human, we all make them. None of us should be reduced to the worst mistake of our lives.



Inclusive Communities

Our communities are stronger and safer when everyone can contribute and everyone has what they need to thrive.



Everyone is Worthy of Opportunities

Every person should be able to participate and contribute to their communities, regardless of past harms or mistakes.



Fair Chances Mean Fair Futures

A just system cannot include lifelong punishment. Fairness means accountability and removing lifelong barriers to accessing housing, education, employment and more.



Freedom Means a Fair Chance to Rebuild

Freedom is more than just walking out the doors of prison. Freedom is being fully able to participate in all aspects of life.



Stories that embody fair chances:

Book Club at Rikers, Retained Humanity

At the notorious Rikers Island prison complex in New York, where people spend months to years awaiting trial or serving their sentence, there is a book club in the women's facility open to all.

Story Function: The story shows that incarcerated people should be seen as people, friends, who love literature and want to discuss books and learn.



Prison Libraries: A Lifeline for Learning

Freedom Reads, led by poet and attorney Reginald Dwayne Betts, installed 500 libraries in prisons across the country after books changed his life while incarcerated.

Story Function: Shows that incarcerated people deserve accessible libraries



Automatic Expungement in California: A Path to Freedom

California legislators approve automatic expungement in some cases for incarcerated people.

Story Function: Uplifts narrative that people shouldn't pay for a mistake the rest of their lives.



Expanding Occupational Licensing in Nebraska

In Nebraska, legislators approved a bill allowing people with convictions to access vocational licenses from which they were previously banned.

Story Function: Uplifts the narrative that justice-impacted people should have the freedom to work and rebuild their lives post-incarceration.



Voter Restoration in Virginia

A judicial ruling in Virginia could automatically restore voting rights to hundreds of thousands of formerly incarcerated people across the U.S.

Story Function: Uplifts the narrative that formerly incarcerated people deserve full social citizenship.



Formerly Incarcerated Legislators Fight for Housing, Healthcare, Expungement

Formerly Incarcerated people serve as legislators in states across the U.S. and work to protect the rights of both system-impacted and non-system impacted people.

Story Function: Uplifts the narratives that formerly incarcerated people belong in decision-making positions and that they deserve access to housing, healthcare and not a lifetime sentence for past mistakes.



Messages:

Dignity & Humanity Messages



- ✎ “Everyone is more than their worst mistake”
- ✎ “Respect and dignity for all”
- ✎ “We are more than a number/statistic”
- ✎ “My crime/conviction does not define me”
- ✎ “We are all human”

Fairness + Freedom = Justice Messages



- ✎ “There should be no barriers to freedom post-incarceration”
- ✎ “We should be able to receive an education at any institution.”
- ✎ “Employment options should not be limited by legislative licensing rules”
- ✎ “Housing must be affordable and available to anyone, anywhere.”
- ✎ “Restoration of civil liberties and civil rights is justice”

Deservingness Messages



- ✎ “We all deserve fairness”
- ✎ “We deserve opportunities”
- ✎ “We deserve to make mistakes and start over again”
- ✎ “We all deserve the opportunity to repair and rebuild”

Interdependence Messages



- ✎ “Society needs everyone to function”
- ✎ “When we work together, we grow together”
- ✎ “The future is for everyone”
- ✎ “We need each other for a just and sustainable future”
- ✎ “Democracy fails when everyone is not allowed to participate”

Quotes

On Fair Chances:

- ✎ “I see that some people can wrestle with that idea. They feel that they never had a fair chance at living in this society, because the factors that contributed to the incarceration is not that they were violent individuals. Poverty played a tremendous role in that right, absence of father, generational poverty, abandonment, single parent home. Those are the factors that lead to incarceration, or lead to violence. So some people may not see it as a fair chance, because they never had an opportunity. They went to engage in a criminal activity or engage in activity that unfortunately caused them to be incarcerated because they were trying to take care of their household.”

On Perception of Incarceration:

- ✎ “Prison has always been a place of discomfort. It’s always been structured from the architect[ure] of the buildings to everything in prison has been a way of stripping the dignity of the individuals and that ... model has always been a part of American culture. We have to change how people see prison. People still see prison as a place of punishment, stripping a person’s dignity.”

On Culture:

- ✎ “If you look at the criminal legal system, it’s not a problem itself. It’s the catch basin of all the other failed systems: mental health, education, access to safe housing, employment opportunities, right? Why are we trying to fix the catch basin or attach to the catch basin when it’s the upstream battle? So you possibly have people in your formerly incarcerated graduates network who have experienced homelessness, who have experienced substance abuse, that root cause resulted in the consequence of incarceration. Incarceration was never the problem. Something led to the incarceration. We keep looking past what led to it [incarceration], right? We want to go to the catch-all net without fixing the upstream battle.”

On Reentry:

- ✎ “So even with the work that I do around reentry, I am still advocating for humanizing those who are transitioning out of incarceration, those who are currently in incarceration...Because when we see them as human beings, we can begin to treat them in that manner and see that they deserve fair opportunities, not just one month. They deserve fair opportunities throughout their entire lives, right?”

On fairness:

- ✎ “The other thing that we hear a lot from people—[and I’m] formerly incarcerated myself, so certainly I felt this as well—[is] the idea of “I served my time.” You told me that this is the sentence for the crime that I was convicted of, and I went and did it. So now you’re telling me when I come home that now all of this stuff is in the way, and that’s not fair.”

On profiteering:

- ✎ “We have just allowed the profiteering to take precedence and dictate instead of us as advocates taking control and putting pressure on the governors to actually hold up to the Constitution. And if it’s a state who doesn’t have it in their constitution, that’s the campaign in that state to get it in the Constitution.”

On Identity:

- ✎ “You ain’t gonna keep calling me a formerly incarcerated person, you know? But we haven’t taken back that power. Because society will say it’s a privilege to be formerly incarcerated.”

After April:

- ✎ “We celebrate Black History only in February, but we know that we played a tremendous role in all parts of this country. [It’s] the same thing with those who are living with felony convictions. We cannot just say one month; this has to be an ongoing process that we got to continue to amplify every day of our lives as individuals, because at the end of the month, after April, we still are living with a felony conviction. We’re still being denied housing, we’re still being denied all of the basic rights as a human being after April.”
- ✎ “I feel like we keep building this branch around us, and we want new policies. We want new language. Why the hell do we need language when we can just be people who have overcome an issue that was focused on marginalization and oppression, right?”
- ✎ “So many of the obstacles that are put in our way are just stupid. They don’t make any sense, they don’t make any policy sense. They could very easily be done away with. And it wouldn’t have any negative impact whatsoever on crime, but it would have a positive impact on reintegrating people back to the community.”
- ✎ “I think ‘second chance’ [language], on an emotional level, especially for people who are more resistant, is more appealing because it’s [more] consistent with their ideology than the idea of ‘fair chance.’ Because fair chance, for some people, brings up this whole hobgoblin of DEI or some world that they’re afraid of [and] they don’t necessarily understand. So I think it’s just gonna be interesting, because I do think fair chance is more pluralistic and more inclusive.”



Narrative in Action

After we've identified available opportunities to insert stories that bolster the helpful narrative, the next step is to think beyond an OpEd, post, blog, video, or article and about a larger, more sustained action, activity, or event.

A narrative intervention can be conducted wholly online, entirely in real life, or some combination of both depending on the issue and the desired reach and scope of the campaign for which the intervention is being utilized. Interventions can be as simple as a letter writing or door knocking campaign to as broad as a storytelling production held to counter a main event uplifting a harmful narrative, or a full scale art exhibition to illustrate the humanity at the center of a politicized moment or statistic.

Narrative organizing around Fair Chance Month can take the form of various interventions to expand the minds of allies, advocates and comrades about what a fair chance really looks like and how to make them available to formerly incarcerated people.



Person First Pledge:

The Formerly Incarcerated College Graduates Network is an organization that has been at the forefront of using narrative strategies to shift the way people think and talk about formerly incarcerated people. One strategy was implementing the Person-First Pledge and asking people to sign up and make a conscious choice to use humanizing language when referring to formerly incarcerated people.





Letter Writing/Lobby Campaign:

Organizing a letter writing campaign with systems-impacted people can be a powerful tactic. State legislators have dedicated lobby days for organizers and movement workers. Formerly incarcerated people can share their story with state legislators and other decisionmakers through a coordinated, sustained campaign to demand change or advocate for a particular issue.



Coordinated Storytelling Events:

Stories about the carceral system are told from the viewpoints of attorneys and law enforcement. Such stories often weaponize the idea of formerly incarcerated to create fear during elections, HOA and neighborhood covenant meetings, employment fairs, PTA meetings, and more. When formerly incarcerated people share their stories and experiences with others, they exercise their narrative power and challenge narratives that have stigmatized everyone affected by the carceral system.

Additional narrative interventions for consideration include:

Narrative Action	Fair Chance Month Examples
Community potluck / Hosted dinners	Bring formerly incarcerated people together to break bread to introduce them to Fair Chances and identify their common needs.
Campus Organizing	Many college campuses across the U.S. hold Second Chance month events. Identifying student organizers who can use Fair Chance Month messages can help toward broad narrative shifts.
Flood the comments social media campaign	Prep your members/audiences to flood comment sections of Second Chance month op-eds and news articles with messages on the need for Fair Chance Month
Conversation with friends/families	Most people's circle of concern is expanded by those closest to them. Encourage followers to share stories about why fair chances are important to them.
Posters/ Flyers/Stickers	Create a visual campaign that can be shared on campuses, at workplaces, and other public spaces that both employers and/or justice-impacted people access.
Social media reel	Correct harmful stories or uplift helpful stories by giving timely analysis

Conclusion

The Fair Chance Framework offers opportunities for both organizers and communicators to infuse their approaches with people-first values, not just language. People directly impacted by the carceral system deserve the same rights and opportunities. A fair chance says, “You are more than your worst mistake,” a message that restores the dignity, humanity, and respect of formerly incarcerated people.

Most importantly, the Fair Chance framework invites people — systems impacted people, organizers, decisionmakers, and new audiences — to consider a different story, one rooted in values of repair, restoration, fairness, and justice, as values connected to the experiences and needs of people impacted by the carceral system.

