

# Creating a Human Rights Message

## Why human rights as a media message

Human Rights often elicit a positive reaction in the public mind. Most people agree that human rights are positive and necessary but few people can articulate how human rights fit into their own lives and surrounding community. US exceptionalism has led many people to understand human rights as a foreign problem. It is up to advocates and those that get the attention of the media to transform this idea.

The objective is to get the public to understand human rights as easily as they understand civil rights. This toolkit offers some examples and ideas for advocates to help shape human rights messages on important issues like homelessness, discrimination, and education. The goal is to expose these issues not just as reoccurring and inevitable problems but human rights violations that call for a government response.

## The case for human rights



**Human Rights offers higher standards than domestic law** in meeting the all the basic needs of human beings to ensure that we are all living our lives in dignity. The standards are articulated in a number of treaties and declarations, and are considered customary law around the globe.



**Human rights dictate that governments be the ultimate guarantor of rights.** In other words, it is the government's duty to respect, protect and fulfill human rights either directly or indirectly. This implies that the government ensures legal protection for human rights, creates opportunities for all to access their human rights and uses all resources to provide for these rights directly.



**Human rights dictate that people be given the opportunity to participate in decisions that affect them.** Participation and transparency in government is a human right. While participation can be achieved through the ballot, meaningful participation is necessary to ensure accountability and give a voice to those most effected by punitive policies.



## Applying the Human Rights Message to Local Issues

Right	Local Issue	Press Messaging Around the Issue
Adequate Housing	While African Americans constitute just 12% of the population, they represent 50% of homeless people.	➔ “The government has the power to adequately fund housing assistance programs, raise the minimum wage, to ensure minority children are properly educated...but the government has not used its power to remedy this historical discrimination, and the Committee today said this is a human rights violation.” (ICCPR: Eric Tars)
Discrimination	Bias is occurring in the FDNY where 91.5% of firefighters are white and 97% of supervisors are white.  Minority school districts consistently receive less funding and offer a lower quality of education.	➔ “The predominantly white FDNY is an embarrassment, considering that the census reflects the vast majority of people are of color.” (New York Daily News, David Saltonstall)
Working Conditions	Domestic workers experience disparities in wage earning and favorable labor conditions.  Women still experience wage discrepancies and sexual harassment in the work place.	➔ The Coalition of Immokalee Workers, tomato pickers for Taco Bell, do not enjoy the same rights, wages, and working conditions as employees in other industries. Workers staged a three year strike against Taco Bell. (ciw.org)

## Practical Tips for Getting Your Message Out

### Stick to the message

- Develop key messages and talking points before interviews
- Speak in sound bites: short, attention-grabbing quotes that contain the main message
- Remember that you are not attempting to communicate with the reporter, but rather, the people who will read/watch her story the next day.
- Answer questions in ways that lead back to the key message.

### Know your audience

- Who does your message target? Policy makers? Politicians? The public?
- Pay attention to the politics of your target area: Is it a small town or a big city? What issues does this area face? Who are the people who live there?

### Work in coalition

- Pool your resources: This includes both people and money
- Share the work
- Plan activities that demonstrate the full impact of the coalition
- Seek recognition
- Share the credit for successes

### Every picture tells a story

- Be creative! Make catchy signs and small handouts. Use clear symbols to convey the message.
- Be aware of photo opportunities: Most people look at pictures first, then text

## New York City Case Study: Human Rights GOAL

Human Rights GOAL (*Human Rights in Government Operations Audit Law*) is a powerful human rights bill being proposed at New York City Council to stop discrimination **before** it happens. Human Rights GOAL will help ensure that all New Yorkers, and all NYC neighborhoods, receive the same standard of service from the city. The law is designed to help catch those who might have or are in danger of falling through the cracks in the system. Most importantly, the law creates positive change, and does not seek to pinpoint scapegoats or engage in a blame game; rather it seeks to address the problems of discrimination before they become entrenched in the system.



Coalition Generated Messages	Resulting Messages From the Press
1. Citizens are entitled to be free from discrimination in order to have access to their human rights.	“The city must be a leader in knocking down barriers for women and minorities. With this legislation, we are responding to a reactive approach that has resulted in disparity and lawsuits, with a proactive approach that will promote equality and opportunity,” Bill Perkins, 2005.
2. The city government is responsible for providing higher human rights standards.	“The city has an affirmative obligation to prevent discrimination and promote equality of opportunity,” Robert Perry, 2005. “Intro 512 asks that we take steps to safeguard the rights of the people of our City rather than seek remedies once the damage is done. It asks that we anticipate rather than litigate,” Former Mayor Dinkins, 2005.
3. Public participation will ensure that New Yorkers have a direct say in the policies that affect their lives.	“This legislation moves the city from a passive system that responds to individual complaints of discrimination to a comprehensive and proactive system that involves partnerships between city agencies and community advocates,” Caribbean Life, Oct. 25, 2005.



Creating a human rights message on the domestic front involves more than communicating about specific human rights violations. Human Rights

messaging also offers an opportunity to educate our target audience about broader human rights principles and to remind ourselves of the relevance of human rights in our lives.

### Key Points

- ✓ Identify duty-bearer of human rights– whose obligation is it to fulfill and protect these rights
- ✓ Connect human rights to mainstream values
- ✓ Claim the moral high ground-- - appeal to a shared sense of humanity