

MOVING MESSAGES

**Employing Media Strategies
in Your Foster Parent Advocacy**



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DEVELOPED BY





About CHAMPS

CHAMPS (Children Need Amazing Parents) is a national policy and communications campaign to ensure bright futures for kids in foster care by promoting the highest quality parenting. With research showing that a loving, supportive family is critical to the healthy development of all children, CHAMPS calls on policy makers, state and local foster care agencies, and foster parents to create a new partnership that can give foster parents, caseworkers, and children the resources and support they need. CHAMPS aims to advance policy reforms in 20 to 25 states to help ensure that children in foster care have access to quality foster parenting.

Learn more at fosteringchamps.org.



About NACAC (North American Council on Adoptable Children)

NACAC is part of the CHAMPS campaign and has put together this toolkit to help prepare you to be a successful advocate and achieve state policy changes. For more than 45 years, NACAC has been advocating for laws, policies, and practices that improve children's chances of having a permanent loving family, and ensure that adoptive and other parents have the support they need. These efforts include helping to create groups of parents, professionals, and youth in communities across the US and Canada that successfully build, improve, and expand supportive services. Learn more at nacac.org.

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Moving Messages:

EMPLOYING MEDIA STRATEGIES IN YOUR FOSTER PARENT ADVOCACY

CHAMPS (**CH**ildren Need **AM**azing **P**arents) is led by a coalition of organizations committed to creating a brighter future for children in foster care. To achieve that goal, it is critical to get the attention of decision-makers and the public.

This toolkit is one of many resources available to those who share both CHAMPS goals and our commitment to prioritize foster parenting within stronger policies and programs. A primary goal of CHAMPS is to drive improvements to foster parenting policies throughout the United States, and a coordinated strategic communications plan is essential.

This toolkit starts by providing details for writing and placing an op-ed in a local, state or national newspaper. This is a way to start moving CHAMPS ideas and practices up the “media food chain” to other news and information outlets. It can be the first step toward broader awareness and public understanding of foster care issues and solutions developed by CHAMPS and our partners.

The ideas and proposals in a published commentary can become central to other media placements. The benefit of this strategy is that you frame the issue in your own words, often without editorial changes beyond copy editing.

The key messages of your op-ed can be written from scratch or come from an adapted speech, newsletter article or paper. Here are a few samples of what other leaders have done:

- In “Let’s Boldly Reimagine Child Welfare Systems to Strengthen Families in a Post-COVID-19 World,” Sandra Gasca-Gonzalez, vice-president of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, uses an opinion piece in *Youth Today* to put forward policies to transform child welfare. She calls for this important audience to be bold, brave and compassionate in innovative approaches to help children and families. <https://youthtoday.org/2020/05/lets-boldly-reimagine-child-welfare-system-to-strengthen-families-in-post-covid-19-world/>
- In an op-ed in the *Colorado Sun*, two foster/adoptive parents talk about the importance of foster parenting, especially during the pandemic, and call for increases in training and support to help encourage other foster parents and relatives to care for children. As they note, “Now is the time to address this challenge. We must make a determined effort to strengthen this critical safety net that keeps kids safe rather than letting a crisis further weaken it. Policies and practices need to ensure that foster and kin families are a critical component of foster care.” <https://coloradosun.com/2020/05/31/colorado-foster-children-casa-opinion/>
- In a *Philadelphia Inquirer* Opinion piece, “To protect Philly’s most vulnerable kids, we must strengthen neighborhoods,” Paul DiLorenzo, a former Casey Family Program manager and interim executive director of the Philadelphia Children’s Alliance, used April as both National Sexual Assault Awareness Month and National Child Abuse Prevention Month to put forward the idea that “we need to think holistically about all of the variables that put children at risk. What can we all do to avoid having so many children and families enter the equivalent of the social services emergency room?” <https://www.inquirer.com/opinion/commentary/child-abuse-philadelphia-prevention-20200323.html>

- In a *Des Moines Register* op-ed, two foster parents detail the new needs of children in care during the COVID-19 crisis and ask national and state leaders to take action. <https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/opinion/columnists/iowa-view/2020/04/26/covid-19-iowa-amid-uncertainty-foster-families-provide-comfort/3004569001/>
- In the *Chronicle of Social Change*, CHAMPS senior policy adviser Lynn Tiede praises federal reforms in the Family First Prevention Services Act and calls on child welfare agencies to take advantage of the changed rules. <https://chronicleofsocialchange.org/child-welfare-2/champs-federal-government-on-foster-home-recruitment-and-family-visitation/41090>
- A 2019 op-ed from our New York CHAMPS state partner highlights celebrating foster parents, including kin: https://www.syracuse.com/opinion/2018/05/celebrate_foster_parents_including_kin_who_step_up_in_a_crisis_commentary.html
- Another 2018 commentary by a CHAMPS partner in West Virginia takes on the more challenging issues of foster parent retention: http://www.newsandsentinel.com/opinion/local-columns/2019/10/op-ed-the-foster-parent-retention-solution-no-one-is-discussing/?utm_medium=email&utm_source=govdelivery

These are just a few examples of pieces that help advance a conversation about CHAMPS's six policy goals:

- Support relationships between birth and foster families;
- Implement data-driven recruitment and retention practices;
- Engage foster parents in decision-making;
- Provide timely access to trusted, dedicated staff and peer support to foster parents;
- Prioritize placements with family members and other family connections; and
- Ensure timely access to physical and mental health services.

The CHAMPS policy playbook features key messages that you can use when developing an op-ed and a strategic communications plan. Key messages for your op-ed might reflect important principles, such as:

- **All children need and do best growing up in families.** When a child needs foster care, quality foster parenting must be a priority.
- **Foster parents are one of the primary interventions** for ensuring the safety and well-being of children in foster care. Quality foster parenting helps children be safe and healthy, experience greater academic success and have more stable lives.
- **Foster parents help children and families heal** and play a central role in creating permanent families. In addition to caring for children, foster parents provide support and mentorship to birth parents, help nurture the parent-child bond, and support other family connections. This is a vital role because half of children who enter foster care return home.
- **Strengthening foster families often leads to strong and stable adoptive families.** Half the children adopted from foster care are adopted by their foster parents.

- **Establishing and prioritizing effective approaches** to recruiting, retaining and supporting foster parents yield better outcomes for children in foster care and can be cost-effective.
- **Foster parenting has often been overlooked** as a solution to achieving better results for the safety, permanency and well-being of children and youth.

Read on to find information about:

- Why you should **write an op-ed**
- **New media trends**
- **What editors want**
- **Tips for writing and framing an op-ed**
- **How to submit and pitch to media outlets**
- **How to leverage a published op-ed for more media placements**
- **Other options: letters** and reader comments
- And more!

All About Op-Eds

As you may know, an op-ed is a guest essay published in the opinion section of a newspaper (**Opp**osite the **Ed**itorial page) or in an online digital media outlet. Surveys show decision-makers and influential people tend to read op-eds and letters more than average subscribers as a way to keep in touch with their constituents' opinions and ideas. Most op-eds are 750 words or less, and outlets usually take submissions by e-mail or fax.

Op-eds allow authors to frame an issue in their own words, usually without editorial changes beyond copy editing.

Why write an op-ed at all? This is a question raised in materials developed by ReThink Media, a nonprofit that helps advocacy groups develop communications strategies: <https://rethinkmedia.org/blog/our-most-popular-op-ed-advice>

Influence. Op-eds can be good at changing minds as outlined by Yale University and the Cato Institute researchers in a peer-reviewed study described in a *Washington Post* article titled, "This column will probably change your mind." The study says "...we find op-eds do change minds." It adds: "Persuasion is possible, even commonplace." Op-eds are not just "preaching to the choir."

The Opinion or Commentary sections in a few media outlets have a strong influence on national debates. *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today* and *The Washington Post* all have major policy impact by reaching national decisionmakers through daily print and online editions. Some influential national magazines may limit their print output to weekly, monthly or quarterly

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editions but now also have online versions with regular updates that reach larger audiences. Cable news outlets including CNN and Fox News post commentary from experts and outside newsmakers on their websites, with some becoming news stories for their networks.

Visibility. Op-eds are often the most highly read pieces on media sites and can generate buzz on social media, extending the news life of your issues. Just go to the section in *The New York Times* website or of your local paper that has a “most read” box, and one or two opinion pieces will usually be listed.

Access for diverse voices. Women’s voices are still underrepresented on opinion pages, and today’s editors are often on the lookout for their work as well as for more diversity in general — especially articles by people of color, community leaders and newer, younger leaders. And foster parents are rarely heard from, so amplifying their voices also adds to the richness of public discussions. Issues related to children, teens and families are of growing interest, especially as related to health, education, jobs and the economy. Editors keep an eye on readership surveys and view counts on their digital sites, as readers’ interests help drive news coverage and opinion piece choices.

A running start. An op-ed placement strategy can be the first step toward moving messages and policy proposals “up the media food chain” to placements on other outlets with broader regional and then national audiences. These strategies can help you bring your messages about important issues and policy solutions related to foster care into a wider public debate.

Newsrooms across the country, large and small, all now use social media both to collect news and send it out. They post on Facebook and Twitter with content reflected on their websites or printed publications. (Outlined below on page 13 are additional strategies on using comments and social media as ways to promote CHAMPS messages and influence journalists.)

Since 2004, the Pew Research Center has issued an annual “Assessment of the State of the News Media” that tracks key audiences and trends within journalism. The Center also issues regular reports and a daily newsletter on developments. These are quick sources for guidance on where to pitch a commentary or op-ed, which can then become a calling card for more media placements. (See details about these strategies [on page 8.](#))

Understanding Media Trends

More and more, traditional print outlets incorporate video and podcasts in their menu of reporting options. At the same time, cable news, broadcast stations and radio provide written transcripts of their programs. Thus, most media today think of their outlets as media platforms that include a range of options — the printed word, photos, video segments or clips, and audio links.

Newspapers with large and influential readerships are swamped with submissions of commentary by non-journalists who want to share ideas and new policy proposals. *The New York Times* gets hundreds of op-ed submissions each day, so the competition is stiff for people new to the editors.

A communications strategy that includes seeking out smaller media outlets and then using a published commentary, op-ed or journal article as a validator for a larger outlet can be a productive approach, creating a stepping-stone to additional media coverage on an issue.

However, the op-ed editors of the top 100 U.S. newspapers still look for local or regional approaches to national issues, diversity in authors, and news developments close to home. And often, the smaller the media market, the easier it may be to get published in print and online, usually without many editorial changes. And then the op-ed or website comment or letter can be leveraged to open opportunities at other larger outlets. As the *Columbia Journalism Review* (CJR) reported recently: "Local newspapers make up the bulk of the American newspaper ecosystem, yet they typically receive less attention from industry watchers than larger, better-known outlets like *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*."

Many trends in journalism today are very discouraging: severe job cuts, revenue losses and charges of disseminating "fake" news. But the CJR article went on to say, "...we encountered a sense of optimism... This confidence is rooted in an understanding that small-market newspapers are often close to their communities — with journalists sharing similar goals and lives to their audience — and a recognition that much of their reporting is not replicated elsewhere." This is especially true of weekly papers that cater to rural, African-American, Spanish-speaking, specific ethnic groups or neighborhood urban audiences.

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What Editors Want

Before hitting your computer keys or putting pen to paper, do some homework. Editors usually have some concrete requirements for their selection of op-eds and commentaries. Most do not run announcements of events, status reports, blatant organizational promotion or fundraising appeals. Editors want readers to say, "Wow, did you see that piece today?" or "Hmmm, that was really interesting." They want their articles to influence the public debate. Factors an editor may consider when reviewing an op-ed include:

- **Timeliness** is an important consideration. Even if your op-ed does not break new ground, you can find a CHAMPS news hook: May is National Foster Care Month, June is National Reunification Month, November is National Adoption Awareness Month, traditional holidays including Mother's/Father's Day, Thanksgiving Day, religious holidays, an upcoming conference, a report, a vote in the state legislature or Congress, pending action by local government.
- **News value.** In the COVID-19 era, a thoughtful piece describing CHAMPS policy proposals as a way to deal with the crisis or establish a new normal was more likely to get placed. Editors want opinion pages to be relevant to ongoing events, especially as they now monitor the most-read articles online.
- **A provocative idea** on any subject. Citing new studies about the impact of trauma, often preventable, on kids in the child welfare system could interest op-ed editors.
- **A strong opinion** on a current issue that is unexpected, authoritative, controversial, or newsworthy. With so much attention on public health during the pandemic, a provocative suggestion might be that child welfare systems would benefit from the strategies of public health systems working to prevent child fatalities.
- **A call to action** on a neglected subject. Transforming child welfare would fit this bill.

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- **A new or unexpected slant** on a current issue. Besides the pandemic, a weather-related disaster (hurricane, flood, earthquake) or other emergency situation can provide new angles. Try to connect with dominant news stories by breaking into breaking news.
- **Bite and wit** on a current issue. Use unusual, humorous or other attention-getting approaches, if appropriate, to make your point. Teens who had been in foster care could write about their successful experiences to spotlight new policies or programs that helped them.

In 2017, Bret Stephens, a longtime New York Times editor, op-ed writer and columnist, wrote “Tips for Aspiring Op-Ed Writers.” Take a minute to read over his insights, which are still reflected today in *Times* op-ed policies and those of op-ed editors nationwide. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/25/opinion/tips-for-aspiring-op-ed-writers.html>

Much of what we have outlined in this tool is included in the Stephens piece, along with tips from other op-ed editors at rural weeklies and major dailies, as well as from writers who have had success in regular placements and organizations that specialize in working with nonprofits on op-ed strategies.

Writing and Framing Tips

- **Determine your goal and define your audience.** It could be starting a campaign to spotlight the role of foster families, increase the public’s understanding of the need for foster parents in their community, or educating readers and policymakers about the CHAMPS agenda and how it can drive better outcomes for children. Decide the audiences that can best help advance your goal — the general public? Young people? Elected officials? Then think about the arguments and facts that can persuade them to your side.
- **Figure out what you want to say and who can say it.** Summarize your point in a single, clear sentence such as: “All children need and do best growing up in a family.” Or “foster parents can be the key to help children return to their birth families.” Find a well-known person (or two) with standing to write on the issue, such as your group’s executive director, a political leader, an expert or academic as someone who will be the article’s byline. Or have the writer be someone with personal experience as a foster parent. Newspapers will usually accept a piece by two authors and occasionally three.
- **Keep it timely.** Link your op-ed to events in the news, a holiday or anniversary, a new report, or any relevant upcoming event — including special days and months related to children and family services, such as May as National Foster Care Month or November as National Adoption Awareness Month.
- **The first sentence is critical.** Try to reduce your point into a single sentence and put it into language that is unexpected or provocative. Examples of a provocative first sentence of a CHAMPS op ed: “COVID-19 [or another disaster] has a silver lining: it presents a great opportunity for child welfare systems here to reinvent family services.”
 - **See if your first sentence passes the “wow” test or the “hmm” test.** If not, the point needs sharpening — whether or not you actually use this sentence in the op ed.
 - **Imagine your target readers:** They are people whose attention you’ve been courting. They are browsing through the newspaper or scanning headlines online on a busy morning, checking for something interesting, gulping coffee, one eye on the time. What first line, related however distantly to your subject, might grab their attention? (For example, “Mary became a foster parent to help change the world.” Or “Being a

foster parent can change the world.”) If you can raise questions of intrigue, surprise, alarm or baffle your imaginary reader past the first paragraph, the op-ed editor might put the entire commentary in the paper, perhaps without asking for many changes.

- **Any point worth making needs to be sharp, defended and understood by readers.** Muster your best four supporting arguments or data bits and write a sharp sentence on each one. Be as specific and as articulate as possible. Try never to start these sentences with the vague and inert “there is/are.” Avoid jargon (such as “practice model”) and the sleep-inducing passive voice (“Mistakes were made.”)
- **Make the rest of it just as compelling.** Illustrate your case with vivid real-life examples. (“Being a foster parent has been the most rewarding part of my life.” “Watching our teens graduate from high school brought joyful tears to my eyes.”) Use memorable facts and defend them with a few strong arguments. Be short and specific. Use a lively, active voice. Give readers the minimum background needed to understand your case. Don’t bog them down with too many statistics or jargon or too much detail.
- **Let yourself become emotional.** Ask yourself: why should your message matter *to the reader*? Use a personal anecdote, your own or another actual case with a name and a colorful description “Put a face on it,” as journalists say. (“Ten-year-old Joey lived with us for a year. He arrived at our house with his belongings stuffed in a garbage bag and left with several gym bags and a new outlook on life. We worked with Joey, his mom, dad, grandma and aunt nearly every week and were so proud when Joey went home. Everyone knew we were here as a new extended family, a bigger bench of love and support.”) Make several points by being dramatic and adding significance, injustice, triumph or outrage — for one paragraph. Write five such paragraphs and choose the best one.
- **Give the minimum background a reader absolutely must have to grasp your point.** Ask yourself again why the reader should care. Write two paragraphs that summarize this background. Work it into the anecdote if you can: “Mary is one of the 200 teens in our county whose lives are being transformed by a simple idea: have birth and foster parents work together with social services as a team to do what’s best for kids in the system. It’s not a one-size-fits-all solution; it’s spending time building trust and lasting relationships.”
- **Now, put these elements together and write the piece.** Write 1,000 words (four double-spaced pages) maximum. Single-space between sentences. Toward the end, circle back to your opening image.
- **Close with your “ask.”** Now that the reader agrees with everything you said, what should happen? What can they do to help?
- **Edit your prose.** Be ruthless with yourself. If you can’t be ruthless, find a friend or family member who can.
 - Make sure the first sentence is a grabber.
 - Rewrite “There is/are” sentences and convert most, if not all, passive-voice lines to active ones
 - Look at every adverb (usually ending in -ly) and eliminate most if not all of them.
 - Examine your metaphors, similes, and pet phrases to make sure they are not clichés.
 - Translate all acronyms and jargon into standard English.
 - Rearrange to make transitions flow. Shorten paragraphs to four lines max. Cut long sentences in two. Inject informality or a human story into dry facts.

- **Keep it short.** Go over what you've written. Eliminate unnecessary words, repetitions and unrelated ideas. Trim words, not ideas. When you are sure that every remaining word is a pearl, if it's still too long, ask someone else to cut it down to no more than 750 words. Better you should cut than the newspaper editor.
- **Finally, pick a title.** It should provoke or tease, but editors will change it anyway so don't sweat it too much. You're done!

Submitting and Pitching Your Op-Ed

Choose your target outlets. Which ones can best deliver your message to your chosen audience? Maybe it's a local weekly paper or a professional journal, a state online news service or a national outlet. Then check their websites. Nearly all media that accept commentary list submission guidelines on their sites. Most are very specific about length limits (usually between 500 and 750 words), whether a photo is required and how best to transmit a draft. Start by searching online with the following words: <name of media> op-ed submission guidelines. Follow the guidelines carefully or you risk immediate rejection.

Basic submission information for the top U.S. on-line and print publications is available on The OpEd Project website: <https://www.theopedproject.org/submission-information>. This website has extensive tools and training opportunities for advocacy nonprofits and would be a useful resource as you move forward with strategic communications.

The nonprofit Climate Nexus also has excellent tips on pitching op-eds. "To reach people and educate them, your op-ed needs to find a home in a news outlet...and you can get it published by pitching it to the right editor, usually over email and briefly explaining what makes your piece different, important and timely." Learn more at <https://climatenexus.org/communications-climate-change/writing-and-pitching-op-eds/>

A few basics:

- **Submit your op-ed to only one outlet at a time.** Most have written guidelines that give details on exclusivity and copyright. The bigger the media market, the more likely they are to require exclusivity. Move on only when you're sure they aren't interested (see below).
- **Start with a strong email subject line.** An important start is getting the attention of the editor and having them open the email. A snappy subject line should focus on your central theme or the writer's credentials or connect to recent news events such as "A silver-lining for kids in these challenging times." Or "Changing the world for kids."
- **Write an effective pitch.** If you have a well-written op-ed with an unexpected point of view, the pitch you include in the introductory section of your email is the best place to explain why their outlet is the very best place for your op-ed. The pitch should include:
 - A brief introduction giving your name, organizational affiliation and the gist of your op-ed in one or two sentences
 - Your relevant credentials
 - The reason your op ed should run now: timeliness, the news hook, its importance to the current debate
 - A note that you will accept any relevant edits
 - A note that photos, videos, audio are available (if they are)
 - Your contact info: name, title, address, email, phone, website link if any.

Your finished piece should be pasted at the end of the email. Include a word count at the end, and a brief bio of the author. *Do not send the piece as an attachment*; and do not include a logo or other visuals, or the entire email may automatically go to a spam file.

- **Follow-up and wait.** You likely will get an automatic response saying the publication received your submission and describing various next steps. After that, don't call the outlet. If they decide to publish your piece, an editor will call or email you. Be ready to make updates and revisions just before publication, especially if several weeks have passed since you submitted it.
- **Set a time limit of a few days to a week before moving on.** If the issue is about breaking news or has immediate relevance, give the editor a few days. If it is evergreen with no impending urgency, then wait a week or two. If you do not hear back, either the email did not get to the relevant editor or they have passed on it. Regardless, send a follow-up email thanking the editors for their consideration and advising that if you do not hear from them by [date], you will assume they have passed and you will submit the op-ed elsewhere. Then go to your back-up plan of submitting to another publication.
- **Say thanks.** As The OpEd Project advises, "Thank your editor, even if they say no. Remember that 'no' can be the beginning of a conversation that can eventually lead to 'yes.' If they publish your piece, thank them -- not for showcasing you, but for giving space to important ideas and issues."
- **Don't be discouraged.** News outlets receive a huge volume of submissions, all competing for space on the page. Send your op-ed to other publications. Keep writing and submitting pieces. Often it is just a matter of your op-ed arriving at the right place at the right time.

Leveraging Your Success: Congratulations!

When your op-ed is published, it means an editor or two has found it meaningful. Other outlets will likely agree, so you can develop a mini communications campaign with it to get additional media coverage. That will help you move CHAMPS messages and action steps to bigger audiences.

Share your op-ed with the world on social media, your website, by email and on paper.

- **Post links to your op-ed** on various social media platforms and on personal and organizational web pages. Give an introductory context to the piece and urge others to share it on their pages. For Twitter, post a summary sentence or two using your strongest arguments, then link to the full piece and urge others to re-tweet. For Facebook, you can post a snapshot of the op-ed on paper or online. Then share the posting and ask others to re-tweet and post a link on their pages. LinkedIn can be a good place to highlight your op-ed and build your profile. If you are on other platforms, take full advantage of these too.
- **Send it around in a group email.** Include other organizations, policymakers, elected officials, donors and select reporters at other media outlets. Use BCC to keep the contacts from being misused.
- **Don't forget print.** Your published op-ed might make a good addition to a print press kit or become a handout for meetings or part of reports and other promotional materials. Design and format a PDF of your op-ed for use in the future to validate the CHAMPS goals you're promoting and your work. Use its proven points and language in speeches, articles, etc.

Try Talk Radio

A radio talk format is especially good for local groups because it is conversational and does not require proficiency at responses in short sound bites, as is the case for television interviews. A handful of radio stations in each media market have regular news segments or longer-format interview shows. Here's how to find the right station and the right person:

- **Send a link of your op-ed to radio stations** that have all-talk or local public affairs programs. Write a careful pitch in the body of an email and offer the author as a guest. Generally, local stations respond quickly to emerging community and national issues. To find a station in your area, see Wikipedia's "List of Radio Stations in <state>" with formats and links to background on each station. Once you choose a possible show, listen to the program to be sure it is appropriate for a CHAMPS discussion.
- **To book a show**, contact the producer or host. Their names are likely to be posted on the station's website. Or do a web search for Producer [name of show and outlet]. Many station websites will offer staff background bios and email addresses. The names of producers and staff are often given at the end of each show.
- **Send background material in advance.** Often it is not necessary for a guest to visit a studio if producers and hosts have proper advance materials: the speaker's biography, a fact sheet about the issue, information about your organization, even suggested questions with your likely answers. The host may have less than five minutes to prepare for you and might be grateful for question suggestions, but be prepared for ignorant or hostile questions too.
- **Arrange a practice session** in advance of the show, giving your spokesperson both easy and hard questions to arm them with succinct, clear responses (or ways to pivot to your messages) and action steps to give the audience. Tape the session and critique it with the spokesperson.

When your op-ed is published, it means an editor or two has found it meaningful. Other outlets will likely agree, so you can develop a mini communications campaign with it to get additional media coverage.

Tips for pivoting from a question to a point you want to make

Think in advance about the three points you most want to make. Use bridges such as the following to move from a question you are asked to what you want to say: "Let's take that a step further..." or "Let me add..." or "That's important, but the real issue is..." or "You should also know that..."

- **Line up a few callers.** Let a few friends and colleagues know when your group will be on the show and suggest they call in with friendly questions or comments. It's always nice for the person fielding incoming calls to hear a friendly voice.
- **Think about streaming.** Most radio stations now stream live on the Internet in addition to over-the-air, meaning your interview can be heard around the world. Many also post programs as podcasts or on-demand programs, allowing you to link to your website.
- **Stay in touch.** After the show, send a short email thanking the host and producer as a way of staying in their minds as a source on these issues. Keep a media list in your personal contacts so you can cultivate the relationship and send along other program ideas.

Test Out Television

Depending upon the size of your media market and the size of the news hole that day or week, you may be able to land an interview or story on your local TV station.

- **Find a skillful, effective, well-trained spokesperson.** This is the vital component for a TV strategy. People born with skills to communicate effectively in every medium are rare indeed. Even experienced spokespeople need some professional training in speaking in concise sound bites, and continued practice to keep their skills up-to-date.
- **Pitch your idea at the right time to the right outlet.** The steps to pitch a story are basically the same as for radio. Each station will have an assignment editor and/or news director who decides the content of local morning, noon and evening shows. If your station has an early-morning show that airs before network programs (NBC Today, ABC Good Morning America, CBS This Morning, Fox & Friends), this might be a good fit for an interview or segment about your topic.
- **Think visuals.** Assignment editors want story ideas that combine news with good visuals. Many local stations already do weekly segments on foster care and adoption, often called Wednesday's Child. The reporter who anchors these segments may help move your story idea or even offer to do the piece. These segments run in dozens of states and cities as part of the stations' commitment to public service.
- **Try a local TV talk show.** These allow your spokesperson to familiarize a larger audience with CHAMPS issues, assuming they are persuasive. Even the Sunday morning shows with small audiences are worth the effort, since they are often posted on the station's website. As with radio, their format is ideal for building awareness of the issues and exploring them in more detail.
- **Be sure to watch the show before you pitch.** Be careful about the show's tone, the host's approach and your spokesperson's experience and readiness for both. You might decide it is not worthwhile to face a hostile host who emphasizes the negative or has a bias against government and foster care. In any case, your spokesperson should have background information about the show and not be surprised. It can also help them choose clothes that don't clash with the colors of the set. Organize a practice session with friends or colleagues a day or so in advance with people shooting questions and comments as the real-life host would do. Arm the spokesperson with answers for any question.

Other Ways to Be Heard

Pitch your message to editorial boards. The publication's editorial page editor or writers will certainly see your piece. Newspaper editorial boards often receive pitches and visits from groups or individuals seeking their attention to pending legislation, lawsuits or regulatory issues.

If your op-ed has an advocacy component, call or email the editor and ask either: 1) to meet in person to make your case at an editorial board meeting, or 2) that the publication take an editorial position in support of your proposal.

If you decide to try for a meeting, put your request in a short but formal written email or letter from your director or a prominent board member that describes what's at stake for the public, your position on it and why that position is the right one. Offer links to further information. Recruit foster family members to send emails, cards or letters making similar points in their own words.

Advocates used this strategy when Congress was considering the Family First Prevention Services Act and as new policies were being developed in child welfare agencies. Keep in mind that editorials are not news stories. They reflect a position, pro or con, on issues.

Papers will often post on their websites the members of their editorial board and their areas of interest, as in this post by the St. Louis Post Dispatch: https://www.stltoday.com/opinion/editorial/editorial-get-to-know-the-people-behind-the-opinion-pages/article_41d54f4e-318e-5b30-a060-6278ba07c4f8.html

Letters to the editor may be a good first step if an op-ed seems too challenging or you're struggling to have one accepted. As with op-eds, readers of Letters sections tend to be the community's most influential people — policymakers, community leaders, business professionals, educators, elected officials and media representatives. A good letter delivers your messages to those people — with the implicit underlining that the newspaper thinks your point is worth making.

In writing a letter to the editor:

- Get it in as quickly as possible, the day the article or event you're responding to occurs, if you can.
- Make a clear point. Avoid nuance or balanced pros and cons. Deliver your message only.
- Use punchy language, vigorous enthusiasm and wit, if appropriate — the editors want well-written items that their readers will enjoy and remember.
- Keep it short — 200 words maximum. Be prepared to trim further if the editors request it.
- Letters columns have policies on language, space limits, submissions methods and conventions of format. Notice what gets published and craft your letter accordingly. Outlets post guidelines on their website, so take note and follow instructions.

A good letter to the editor delivers your message to influential people with the implicit underlining that the newspaper thinks your point is worth making.

- Always mention the title, author and date of the article that sparked your letter. “Dear editor” is enough of a salutation. “Sincerely” is an adequate signoff.
- Identify yourself with a one-line description (foster parent; foster care agency director, etc.). Include your mailing and email addresses and telephone/fax numbers.
- The newspaper may ask to edit your letter, but it should not be published without your approval if changes are made. You do not have to accept any proposed changes, but you will need to keep the word count to their rules.

Reader comments are another way to get your message across to news editors and reporters. The comment section is usually located online just after a posted story. You generally need to register or be a subscriber to the outlet, and to put your name or an identifier as the author. You can assume that the reporter who did the piece will read your comments, so it can help shape their thinking about the issue and provoke ideas for additional stories.

Taking the Next Step

The activities outlined in this toolkit are based on tried and true methods of getting your messages out in your own words. But the best communicators do not rely solely on the tried and true. They are always honing their writing skills and looking for new outlets and fresh approaches that will put their critical issues and organizations on the cutting edge.

The caring people who want to improve systems for children, teens and families have wonderful success stories to tell, innovative proposals for policy change, and a commitment to making their community and the world a better place. Tell their stories to “put a face” on the issue and reach the wider public, including policymakers.

Excellent online resources are available on a range of communications strategies, whether you are an all-volunteer organization or a multimillion-dollar nonprofit. If you have a communications budget, training and skill-building programs are available on a sliding scale.

Develop an assessment of your successes and challenges, see what works and where improvements can be made. Remember to *review, revise and repeat* your messages and to expand or change the narratives around CHAMPS issues to move policy proposals. The best communications plan will always need adjustment based on how it works for you and your organization. As an old saying goes, if at first you don’t succeed, try, try again.

The key is to be flexible and creative, willing to make changes and to try new things. Good media coverage is an earned and prized commodity that over time will help build your organization and move CHAMPS policies to help children, teens, families and communities.

Search the web using the terms “op-ed tips” and dozens of resources will appear — mostly from public relations firms, newspapers with a commitment to their commentary section and large groups and universities who provide background pieces on writing and submitting op-eds for their members or staff.

Three organizations are dedicated to helping other nonprofits develop strategies around op-eds through a variety of issue campaigns. In addition to tip sheets, they run workshops and webinars, often for a modest fee. These are:

- The American Forum is a nonprofit media organization that works to encourage more citizen debate on important societal issues. It works to take “issues from the sidelines to the headlines” and runs state Forums in 23 states by distributing media packets and commentaries to state-wide media. <http://www.mediaforum.org>
- The OpEd Project’s mission is to increase the range of voices and quality of ideas we hear in the world. They provide trainings, fellowships, and resources to help think-tanks, universities and advocacy groups. <https://www.theopedproject.org>
- Rethink Media works to help build movements around Democracy; Right and Inclusion; and Peace and Security. Their website has numerous generic tip sheets focusing on models of collaboration communications. <https://rethinkmedia.org>

Quick Checklist

FOR AN OP-ED OR LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Make a plan

Determine your goal and define your audience. What do you want the op-ed to achieve? Who needs to hear your messages to help make that happen?

Figure out what you want to say to that audience and who can best say it. Summarize your message in a single sentence. Find an author with standing to be a credible messenger.

Keep it timely. Link your op-ed to news events, an upcoming holiday or anniversary.

Write the piece

Start with a provocative first sentence. Does it pass the “wow” test or the “hmm” test? Use a popular image, a vivid personal anecdote. Intrigue, surprise, alarm or baffle the reader.

Muster your best supporting arguments and deal with opponents’ best points. Be specific and use a lively, active voice. Avoid jargon, the passive voice, and too much detail.

Put a face on it. Use an actual case with a name and colorful description. Show emotion and significance, triumph and outrage. Write five such paragraphs and choose the best one.

Finish strong. First draft should be no more than 1,000 words. Single-space between sentences. Close with your “ask” — what can the reader do to help meet your goal?

Edit your prose. Cut repetitions, most adverbs (words that end in -ly), jargon and clichés. Shorten sentences to two lines, limit paragraphs to four lines. Have someone else edit too so that the final is lively, persuasive and no more than 750 words long.

Submit the op-ed

Choose your target outlet. Which can best deliver your message to your chosen audience? Consider small, local publications as well as larger, more influential outlets.

Follow the outlet’s submission guidelines. Send it in an email to one outlet at a time.

Choose a strong email subject line to persuade the editor to open and read the email.

Write an effective pitch. Give your credentials, the gist of your op-ed and why it should run now. Offer photos or audio if available. Provide contact information.

Paste the op-ed at the end of the email. Do not send it as an attachment.

Wait. You will hear from the editor if the piece is accepted. Move on when it is clear they aren’t interested. Send an email thanking the editor one way or the other.

It’s published! Leverage your success to reach larger audiences

Share your op-ed with the world. On social media, your website, by email and on paper.

Try placing your author on a talk radio program. Send your op-ed to local radio and television stations with a strong pitch letter with story ideas. Send background material to the station. Arrange a practice session to prepare your spokesperson for hostile questions.

Consider a TV strategy. Think visuals. Watch the show before pitching an appearance.

Write a letter to the editor. These show that an editor thinks your message is relevant to a current news topic. Speed is key to successful submission.

Submit comments to media website stories. Reporters and editors read comments and it’s a good way to get key messages across.