Sharing personal stories of people affected by your work is a great way to illustrate the importance of your efforts. A compelling story captures your audience’s attention and connects with their emotions. Below are some tips to make sure you are gathering these stories in the most effective way possible.

**Designing Your Story Bank**

**Map it out.** Be sure to carefully think through what you want your story bank to achieve before you get to work. Doing so will help you know what kinds of stories you are looking for and can help you make smart decisions on where you are going to go to get them, how you are going to use them and how you are going to categorize them. Without having this clear first, every other decision that follows is going to be guesswork.

**Make sure it has the potential to make the impact you want it to.** To do this, you should design your story bank to:

* ***Reflect the people you serve*.** This also means the problems they face and the potential solutions you are proposing.
* ***Highlight strategic communities*.** What are the particular audiences you are trying to reach? Are there communities or policymakers we need to reach with our stories? Are there certain media markets we need to reach? They will be most interested in what’s going on in their local areas and hearing stories that affect their communities.
* ***Support your communications strategy.*** It’s important to know how you envision using your stories to advance your communications objectives. This also means considering how you will screen for people who are not comfortable communicating the way you need them to communicate, whether it be on a particular message or through a particular venue such as a press conference or a posting on a public website.

**Building Your Story Bank**

**Build your network.** Do you have direct access to the people you are hoping to gather stories from? If you do, then it’s always best to go to them directly. If you don’t have access to them, who does? Who might be well positioned to communicate with them? This could require additional work to build relationships with additional partners to ensure you have access to the people whose stories you wish to gather.

**Build your materials.** Having strong materials will help you find subjects and give a clear sense of the information you want from them to effectively tell their story. You will need to develop:

* ***Promotional materials.*** Before you can collect stories, you’ll first need to let folks know you are looking for them, why you are collecting them and how you are going to use their story. You’ll want to make sure the materials describe what value particpants’ stories are going to add to themselves or people they care about. You should also consider what the best approach will be to get the attention of the people you are most interested in connecting with – the Internet, posters, hand bills and newsletter articles are just some examples of effective tools. Even if you are relying on individuals to personally ask participants, it would be helpful to provide talking points on how to start the conversation and a one pager to help those doing the asking better understand the effort and why it’s safe and worthwhile.
* ***Collection materials.*** A discussion guide is essential to guide the conversation and ensure you get useful material out of your discussion. Use open-ended questions to encourage open conversation.

**Collecting Your Stories**

Once you have all of this in place, it’s time to start collecting! Here are some best practices for making the most of story collecting.

* ***Collect your stories by conducting interviews.*** The best way to capture a personal story is by conducting an interview. This is more challenging than a questionnaire where you ask participants to fill out the answers to your questions themselves, but it will lead to a big payoff. People tend to tell stories best, and most comfortably, to another person. Using a web form or questionnaire can be effective preliminary steps to gathering potential participant stories and can give you the information you need to determine if their stories might be useful to you, but the most compelling stories come from an interview.
* ***Model a good story*.** Provide a model story that depicts the type of story you are looking for and send it along with the discussion guide to anyone conducting the interview. This will help the interviewer to know what a good story looks like and illustrates why it is important to explore the issues in the discussion guide.
* ***Emphasize that it’s just a guide.*** Make sure your interviewers know that the provided discussion guide is intended to start a conversation, but should not be treated as script or a check list of topics. Otherwise, you risk losing the value that comes from talking directly to people.
* ***Invest in a digital recorde*r.** It’s common to only have one person devoted to conducting an interview. If that person is too busy concentrating on taking notes, they may not be able to think ahead to future questions or ask subjects to expand on an issue or explore a different area. Getting an inexpensive recorder allows the interviewer to have the backup they need to conduct a good interview while they capture pertinent information. You’ll have to make sure your interview subject knows you are recording them and ask for their consent before turning it on.

**Avoid Pitfalls**

* ***Know the law.*** Be sure to know the privacy laws in your state and be prepared to create a privacy release. Consult with someone who is appropriate to give legal advice on legal restraints as you work.
* ***Avoid composite stories.*** If no one person has an experience that fits the story you want to tell, avoid building a story that’s partly one person’s experience, partly another. If your story is successful, the person you are telling it to will want to meet the person you are telling it about. You run the risk of undermining your credibility if the subject of your powerful, engaging story doesn’t exist. As tempting as it is to get a powerful story, try not to get it at the expense of an authentic story.
* ***Don’t forget to celebrate.*** There are few things more personal than asking someone to share a part of their life with you. So, be sure to thank the person who gave you their story. Also, be sure to celebrate the person who collected the story for the work they put into getting it.
* ***If you want a quote, ask for it*.** If you are looking for a particular sound bite, be sure to ask questions that will lead your subject to it. For example, try “if you could say one thing to a policymaker about this issue, what would it be?”
* ***Don’t forget photographs*.** Having a picture of the person you are talking about when you tell a story makes it even more human and therefore more powerful.