

# Storytelling for Lobbyists

## Developing stories of discrimination

Let's say you have a meeting with a legislator about a bill to protect transgender people from discrimination, and you only have 5 minutes. The legislator is busy and doesn't know anything about this issue. Or let's say you are going to testify in support of a transgender non-discrimination bill at a hearing. You are supposed to explain from a personal perspective why it is so important that anti-discrimination protections for transgender individuals in Connecticut are passed.

What are you going to say?

### What makes a good story?

It must be both a good story and a good story in this context, which is achieving trans equality.

SUCCESS = GOOD STORY + ADDRESSES TRANS EQUALITY

**What makes a personal story an effective tool for achieving trans equality?** A well-told story of discrimination that evokes emotion, empathy, and a sense of empowerment to solve a problem, correct an injustice, and improve lives.

This checklist can be helpful in crafting your story:

**PERSONAL & EMOTIONAL.**

Is it personal and emotional? Does it help the listener answer questions like:

- Is this really a problem?
- What are transgender people's lives like? What unique struggles do they face?
- How are transgender people like me?
- Why should I care? Do I care?

**CLEAR.**

Is it clear? Or was it confusing?

**CONCISE.**

Is it concise (1-2 minutes long)? Could parts be dropped?

**COMPELLING.**

Is it compelling? Are there details, facts, and emotions that make the story moving?

**SHOW (NOT TELL).**

Does it “show” and not “tell”? Does it use facts to create the emotion for your audience, vs. simply telling them how it makes you feel?

**BELIEVABLE.**

Are there enough facts to make the story believable? Is it presented in a way that acknowledges the deep emotional and personal nature of the story?

Note: In American culture, we tend to not talk about our emotions, especially negative emotions, in a more than a superficial way. So here, you may need to acknowledge that. For example, you can say: “I normally don’t tell people this, but because you’re a lawmaker I feel like I need to share this with you and how it affected me and my family.” This will add credibility to your story. Also, make sure you have enough (but not too many) facts. If there are not enough facts, the story may not be believable.

**WHO**

Who is the story about? Does the story give a feeling for who this person is?

**DISCRIMINATION**

What was the discrimination? Note that there are different types of discrimination. A powerful story of discrimination could include clear or suspected discrimination, a consequence of trying to avoid discrimination, or a positive story of non-discrimination. All are important for achieving trans equality.

**Different types of discrimination.**

What do we mean by “discrimination”? You may wonder if your story really is one of discrimination. The discrimination may be of different varieties:

- Clear or suspected direct discrimination. For example: Someone who was fired after 15 years of good reviews, or has received no jobs offers after sending out 200 applications, etc. Not getting the job after a person meets you, even though on the phone they were enthusiastic. Harassment at work.
- Consequences of avoiding discrimination. For example: you can't change jobs or leave your job because you fear discrimination at a new place of employment. Or, you don't transition because of fear of discrimination.
- Positive story of non-discrimination. For example: You can show how a school or business didn't discriminate, and everything worked out fine. These positive stories are helpful because; when used in conjunction with discrimination stories, it brings into focus that discrimination is a choice (that businesses/institutions covered by these laws don't inevitably need to discriminate because trans people are disruptive)

**IMPACT OF DISCRIMINATION**

What was the impact of that discrimination on the person and their family? Does it describe the personal impacts of the discrimination so that the audience has no choice but to be empathetic?

People tend to say "I was fired after 20 years and it was bad." but leave out details like: "that meant I could no longer pay for Girl Scout camp for my three kids." Include the emotional stuff. Get across that discrimination is not fair and not right, and no one should have to experience that.

**NEED FOR LEGISLATION**

Does the story relate back to the legislation you are attempting to pass? How will the new legislation make things better?

Ideally, the story will be in one of the areas that would be addressed by the legislation. If you don't have a story directly related to the legislation, tie it back to the legislation some how. Let's say that a family rejected their 17 year old transgender son. That may not be directly related to non-discrimination law, but you can say that the teenager now needs to have protections on the job, since unlike other people, he can't rely on support from his parents if he is discriminated against by his current or future employers. Or he won't have the family home to fall back upon if he is denied housing because he is transgender.

**AVOID DISTRACTIONS.**

Does it avoid messages that, depending on the audience, could detract from the story's impact (bathrooms, religious organizations, health/surgeries, disparaging remarks)?

Avoid messages that detract from a story's impact.

- **Bathrooms.** Avoid bathroom stories or details relating to the bathroom. Polling indicates that concerns over bathroom use can be distracting from our overall points.
- **Religious organizations.** Avoid stories that deal with religious organizations discriminating. It isn't helpful if legislators are worried that these laws could infringe on free exercise of religion. There are already well-established constitutional protections for the free exercise of religion, which this non-discrimination law will not affect.
- **Mental and medical health treatment or diagnosis.** Avoid trans-related mental health care references, medical references and statuses, surgeries, etc, as they can distract as well as narrow the discussion to only one portion of the transgender population. You don't need to say "after he got the surgery, he went back to work" Instead, say, "when it was time for him to come to work as a man..."
- **Disparaging the character of anyone, even the discriminator.** Don't disparage the character of people ("my boss was a terrible, angry man"). Be nice/generous about people who are not nice. It makes us seem more reasonable.

### Sample Testimonies

#### Example story #1:

My name is Tony, I am a transgender man, and I worked for 13 years for a restaurant in Bridgeport as a manager. I transitioned to male while I was working there, about 12 years into my time there. As soon as I told my supervisors that I would be transitioning to male, my direct supervisor began harassing me. I usually don't talk in detail about what he said because I don't want other people to get uncomfortable, so let me just say that he, over and over, asked me about my body parts and about, as he would say, my "sexual preferences." He refused to call me "he" and "him" and often said things like "You are not a real man." Eventually, I was demoted from a high level management position to a low level service position, and he cut my pay. I became depressed about my situation but wasn't sure what I could do about it, since I didn't think other employers would accept me as a transgender person. I hung on to my job, but the harassment kept escalating over some months and finally one day, my supervisor chased me in the restaurant before we opened for dinner, and called me a "freak" and a "b\*\*ch" and threatened me with physical violence. I couldn't handle that situation, so I decided I had to quit. Today, I am working in another restaurant and people are nice to me there, but I am back to

being a waitstaff and I don't think they will ever promote me to management. The hard part for me is that I have a daughter who lives with me (her dad took off when we were young) and I had been able to save money each month to put away for her college when I was a manager, but now I just make enough to put food on our table. I feel like I am a tough person and can handle what comes my way, but I really don't think my daughter should have to suffer like this. This summer, she wants to go to a 4-week camp for band members (she plays clarinet) and I don't think I am going to be able to afford that either, unless I can find someone else who would hire me part time in addition to my current job. That's why I'm asking you to pass this legislation – because I'd like the opportunity to be a hard working and contributing member of society in Connecticut, but these instances of discrimination keep me from doing so.

**Example story #2:**

Hi, my name is Jennifer and I am not transgender myself, but I would like to tell you about my friend Julie, who is a transgender woman who resides on the shore near Bridgeport, and commutes about 30 minutes to work as an engineer at a firm in New Haven. She isn't here with us today because she wasn't sure if she would see someone she knows and that information could get back to her employer. Anyway, Julie is very well educated; she has an MBA, a degree in engineering, and 38 years of work experience. And, while she is out as transgender to her family and friends like me, she continues to go to work as a male because she believes if her employers discover she is transgender she will be fired on the spot. She is also in her early late 50's and the company that she works at is the largest employer for engineers around with no competing firms in the area. She knows that if she was fired for being transgender, she will have a difficult time getting hired anywhere else, and might have to head another state to find another job, if she can even do so, since most employers will assume she was fired for good cause and not because she is transgender, and she has her age going against her, and then also, of course an employer would have to be trans-friendly. She is really afraid to lose her job because her salary accounts for 70% of the family's income; without her income the family would lose their house and would be unable to pay for their daughter's undergraduate education. She is in a terrible situation here, with her strong feelings of needing to provide for her family that depends on her versus her need to be herself. I can see the stress on her too, since her hypertension has been getting worse and her health seems like it is deteriorating in general just from the continued stress of this. If it was illegal to discriminate against her, she would be in a much better position. But for now, she is really stuck. All I can do is be an emotional support for her, and I feel really powerless. That is why I am here to talk to you, since you are in the position to do something about this by passing this legislation.