Narrative as a Tool for Health
A Step-by-Step Guide to Establishing a Storytelling Event
Storytelling is one of the first communication tools we learn as children, and remains the most powerful and effective throughout our lives. Stories have a transformative impact on the way we see the world around us and provide an entry point to understanding different perspectives and experiences. As public health practitioners and community mobilizers, storytelling provides an opportunity to engage in an inquiry and exchange process to design and improve human-centered services and programs. A human-centered public health model that is informed by meaningful community engagement focuses on building empathy with priority populations to efficiently address critical issues impacting health outcomes. We learn directly from the people we are designing for/with by immersing ourselves in their lives. This process has the ability to influence all those who are involved.

The Baltimore City Health Department (BCHD) utilizes the model described below to engage with LGBTQ community members and health providers through their Baltimore in Conversation (BIC) storytelling series. BIC provides a space where community members from all over the city engage in conversation, listening, and reflection around the daily trials and triumphs of LGBTQ people. The free event showcases captivating personal narratives from multiple storytellers addressing what it takes to build trust, hold space for mentorship, and challenge our biases to build stronger communities. Together the stories depict confrontations with homophobia and transphobia, health provider perceptions and biases, leadership development, medical mistrust, and structural oppression.

Stories are data with emotions. It is important to remember that public health data is representative of the communities we serve and live in, and are therefore representative of our friends, neighbors, loved ones, and ourselves. Storytelling allows us to bridge the gap between public health providers and the communities we serve.

The steps outlined below are informed by presentations and materials from UCHAPS member jurisdiction, the Baltimore City Health Department, and describe their process for developing a storytelling event. Community organizations and health departments can use this information to replicate the success of BIC’s storytelling events in their communities.
STEP 1  Setting the Stage

- **Develop a discussion theme or question**
  Define the purpose of the storytelling initiative and the target audience from which your storytellers and audience will be drawn. Frame the question/discussion topic in a way that highlights the assets of the intended community, rather than deficits or disparities. Specify the outcomes expected to result from this engagement, and develop an evaluation procedure for the planning process, engagement outcomes, and community partner experiences.

- **Identify the decision-makers in the process**
  It is important to identify committed leadership who can support this work and act upon any outcomes or findings. Without this institutional commitment, it will be difficult to take meaningful action based upon the stories shared, potentially increasing levels of mistrust and apathy among community members towards institutions. Leadership should be actively engaged throughout the event process.

- **Determine which community stakeholders need to be engaged in the decision-making and/or storytelling process**
  Equitable and inclusive community engagement is necessary for successful event planning and execution. Without this, there is a risk of making decisions that could have negative unintended consequences, particularly impacting communities already burdened by inequity.

- **Form an advisory committee comprised of representatives you are interested in engaging**
  Seek representatives who are trusted by the community and have a track record of success in working with the communities you are interested in engaging. Note that many communities often grown weary of receiving invitations from institutions to engage in community initiatives with limited or no success, or that fail to provide a tangible recognition for their participation. This is a very real challenge that can only be overcome by organizations demonstrating accountability and commitment to taking meaningful action, and ensuring individuals are able to benefit.

- **Identify the mechanisms that will be used for evaluation of the event**
  Assessment of the planning process, event outcomes, and participant experiences is necessary to understand the impact of the event and in order to make improvements on processes in the future. Determining how evaluation will be conducted early on the process ensures that critical information is documented through all phases of the planning and execution of the event. Individuals from the communities we serve should be invited to participate in all phases of evaluation activities, and properly recognized for their contributions.
In partnership with the advisory committee, develop an outreach strategy to connect with potential storytellers.
Use a variety of techniques to recruit speakers from the intended communities. Ensure that the techniques used are relevant and accessible to the members of these communities.

Determine what supports or accommodations may be needed for potential storytelling participants.
Storytellers should ideally come from a wide swath of the intended community, so it is important to consider what supports are necessary for an inclusive event. Consider the need for accommodations such as translation services, interpreters, childcare, transportation, stipend, etc.

Select an appropriate location for the storytelling event.
Choose a location where the storytellers will feel comfortable. The location should help foster a supportive atmosphere that allows participants to engage bravely and safely. Select this location as early in the planning process as possible.

Begin marketing for the event within the selected communities.
In order to find storytellers and event participants, use connections made from a wide variety of community meetings and events to cultivate a network of people prepared to share and engage.
STEP 3
Centering the Narrative

- **Work with storytellers to develop their narratives.**
  
  Provide coaching to the storytellers as they develop their narratives and work to structure their stories around the strength-based discussion theme or question. While participants are sharing their own individual stories, work with them to highlight the systems that played a role in their struggle and success.

- **Identify the appropriate format for the storytelling event.**
  
  Depending on the intended outcomes for the event, the format of the storytelling session may deviate from the traditional version of a small group of storytellers sharing their individual stories to a wider audience. Discuss with the event participants and stakeholders how the purpose of the storytelling event can best be achieved by the chosen format. The following formats are used by the Baltimore City Health Department.

  - **CELLS** — Small story circles are organized to feel the pulse of the community. One to six people from a specific community, background, or identity are brought in to share their stories. The cell replicates as additional smaller groups emerge from the original cell. Prompts are provided and group members self-moderate. Conversations held in these groups provide qualitative data on language, shifting trends, etc.

  - **STORYTELLING NIGHT** — Personal stories from both public health providers and community members are shared with a wider community audience. In between stories, participants are allowed to reflect on the stories told by writing on post-its. People reconstruct, contextualize or simply comment on what they have just heard. The information from the post-its are also collected for program evaluation.

  - **PHOTOSPEAK** — Project Presence, a community organized visual storytelling exhibition, focused on exhibiting the lives and narratives of LGBTQ people through the use of photography. In presenting visible peer role models, the exhibition confronts the social stigmas around sexual identity and sexual health. The photos have also generated dialogues online.
Meet with event stakeholders for production meeting(s).
Production meetings provide a space to discuss elements such as set design, visual aids, props, and event logistics, as well as an opportunity to bring together the storytellers to sign any necessary release paperwork.

Before the event, be sure to do a dry run of the storytelling event.
During rehearsal, have participants practice telling the story as they would on the day of the event, paying attention to voice intonation, character building, plot development, visual aids, and emphasis on the event theme.

Create a call sheet outlining the logistics of event
The call sheet should present a timeline of the event, beginning with call time for event participants and staff and ending with the start time for the post-event debrief. The call sheet serves as a timed outline for the flow of the storytelling event, and should provide information on who is expected to do what, when and where they are expected to do it, and how long they have to complete their designated task.

Decide if and how the event will be shared with the wider community
Discuss with both participants and stakeholders how the stories can be shared beyond the event. Could they be transcribed or recorded and shared online? Could they be incorporated in the organization’s future communications such as a newsletter or on a website?
Create safe, reflective spaces for storytellers and participants.
Provide storytellers with a space off stage to relax and prepare for their storytelling scenes. During Baltimore in Conversation, organizers created a “healing room” for both storytellers and event participants to speak with licensed clinicians during the events. Determine the appropriate accommodations for your audience and storytellers and discuss the best methods of implementation.

Allow the audience to participate in some capacity.
Audience reaction and participation is an important part of the storytelling process. Baltimore in Conversation utilized a system of post-its notes to allow for audience members to record their thoughts, ask questions and post them in the room. Depending on the context of the event, a Q&A period following the storytelling or a group debrief may work as well.

Collect feedback from event attendees as determined by the evaluation plan.
This may take the form of filling out a survey, providing written feedback, or conducting a group debrief session depending on the size of the group.
Debrief with all involved participants.
Following the event, check in with the participants about how they feel the event went. Discuss what went well, what changes they would recommend be made moving forward, and what they’d like others to take away from their stories and the event. If possible, share what action steps your government or community organization plans to take following the event.
Reconnect by sharing results with storytellers, participants, and the community.

Celebrate community partnerships and accomplishments. This is essential to building trust and sustaining long-term relationships and engagement with communities. Identify successes and roadblocks encountered along the way, and articulate the reasons behind them. Transparency and accountability builds community trust in the institutions that serve them.

Explore possibilities to continue partnerships between involved community members and your organization to achieve sustainability and continued trust.
For additional resources or to request technical assistance on storytelling, please contact UCHAPS at info@uchaps.org or call 202.945.2060.