

# Voices of Housing and Energy Policy

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## Prologue

The scene opens in a conference room. At a table sits two policy experts: a housing policy expert and the policy director for an environmental organization. The policy experts are joined at the table by two influential decisionmakers: a well-placed representative from a large electric utility and a long serving member of a public service commission. All well intentioned souls, these men and women are trying to find the best way to deliver reliable, affordable energy to the customers of Fabula City. The policy people from the environmental and housing organizations (heretofore referred to as policy wonks) have come to these meetings armed with proof – reports, budgets, and memorandums – of why it serves the best interest of everyone in Fabula City if the most energy burdened among them received help from the local government and utilities to install energy efficiency measures in their home. The wonks get some incremental change, but they seem to always have to make the case for energy efficiency in every meeting. Wouldn't it be great if it were common knowledge that the benefits of energy efficiency outweigh the costs and helps us achieve a more sustainable, more equitable society?

So, with their sleeves rolled up, eyes open, and hearts in hand, the policy wonks set out on a journey. In a tale as old as Edison's light bulb, a battle of wills, man versus man, the policy wonks are out to convince their fellow policy makers that energy efficiency in affordable multifamily housing MATTERS. Armed with a few simple tools, our policy wonks dive into the unventured frontier of storytelling, hoping to find the emotional core of their work, carry it with them to their subsequent meetings, and give energy efficiency in housing policy the stature that it deserves in the public dialogue.

## Setting

Energy Efficiency for All (EEFA) is doing transformational and visionary work as it relates to advocacy efforts, coalition development, and capacity building in the U.S. However, the story of the urgency and impact of energy efficiency as a solution to address a myriad of issues in the nation remains largely untold. Energy efficiency measures can both impact and help us adapt to climate change, sustain affordable housing, alleviate poverty, and create healthier living conditions for populations most at risk of exposure to environmental toxins; yet, these facts do not seem to resonate with a large percentage of the population including key decision makers that could make energy efficiency more accessible for everyone.

In 2017, EEFA set out to remedy this problem. We sought to tell our own story and uplift the stories of communities that struggle to pay for energy to efficiently heat, cool, or light their homes. By listening to the stories of home and comfort, we hope to connect and understand the challenges and benefits people face. We launched Voices of Energy and Housing Affordability (Voices) with the mission of diversifying our coalitions and creating stronger links between policy makers and the communities we serve. In the process, we wanted to make sure the

conversation around energy efficiency did not just focus on energy savings, but also on the vulnerable communities who are served by more efficient housing.

Like any good story, our journey is full of twists, turns, and appearances of unexpected obstacles. We grew, we learned, we changed. Sometimes we were the protagonist of the story, but most of the time the storytellers themselves were the unsung heroes, and we played a supporting role to lift up storytellers to tell their truth. Our mission in story collecting was to no longer be just the policy wonks trying to convince everyone else of the benefits of energy efficiency, but to tell stories that listeners remember far after the fact sheet has been read. In fact, our hope was to use these stories to speak truth to power. A year into developing Voices, we've not only learned the importance of storytelling and story collecting, but also a process that we think will serve as a model for anyone to access their story capacity.

## **Plot**

In the current political landscape, federal programs essential to the housing, health, and safety of vulnerable communities are under threat by steep cuts to non-discretionary spending including the Weatherization Assistance Program (WAP), Low-Income Heating and Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), and the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (Housing Credit). Furthermore, almost every assistance program funded by the already stagnate HUD budget including rental assistance are drastically reduced by proposed 2018 budgets in both the White House and House of Representatives.

Energy policy is not grabbing the public's attention. In February 2018 when Gallup asked Americans about the most important problem facing the United States, responders that placed energy or the lack of energy resources as a first priority were a statistically insignificant minority.<sup>1</sup> Energy ranked lower than 33 other non-economic problems. Held up against tax, healthcare, and immigration reforms, competing for attention on the national policy agenda requires that we all become experts in communications. The lack of robust messaging around energy burdens and its associated economic, health, and social costs to Americans makes energy policy less sticky in the minds of the public and policy makers. Energy policy has failed to capture the popular imagination, and the public and their representatives fail to connect energy efficiency to healthier, safer, and more resilient communities.

In an effort to address this issue, Voices made uplifting the experiences of residents of multifamily housing a priority. Working with state coalitions, Voices visited affordable housing residences with energy efficiency upgrades to hear first-hand the benefits of these services.

Leveraging one of EEFA core strengths, a national network, Voices identified several opportunities for storytelling. Partnering with an affordable housing developer, the National Housing Trust – Enterprise (NHT-E), dozens of interviews were collected across properties in Washington, D.C., South Carolina, Georgia, Virginia, and Maryland. The story team always comprised at least two individuals: someone to record the interview and someone to conduct the interview. The actual interview process was aided by the preparation of our props before the launch of Voices.

## **Props**

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<sup>1</sup> Gallup, Inc. (2016, December 19). Economy Top Problem in a Crowded Field. Retrieved March 20, 2018, from <http://news.gallup.com/poll/200105/economy-top-problem-crowded-field.aspx>

### ***A Toolkit!***

In the Fall of 2017 we developed and launched a story toolkit that focused on the theme of collecting “voices of housing and energy policy”. The toolkit is a 101 resource for EEFA staff/coalition partners to collect stories to build out a story bank of profiles that put a human face on highly technical issues. We hosted a webinar to train our coalitions in using this toolkit, which includes a story report form where folks can upload their interviews.

### ***A Website!***

Voices leverages the EEFA website to host storytelling materials including video and blogs. The benefit of using digital media is that it can be easily shared on multiple social media platforms. Furthermore, collecting stories to put on the website gave us the added benefit of having a resource to directly point stakeholders to. On future Hill Days, we will be able to bring dozens of stories into the offices of Senators and Representatives on our laptops and tablets, bringing their constituents and what they care about right to Capitol Hill.

### ***A Storybank!***

We generated a Google form to standardize the look, feel, and tone of our stories. Providing a template for both interviewing and translation is an invaluable resource for novice interviewers. Our story bank includes two types of products: resident profiles and video.

## **Characters**

### **The Residents**

What remained central to Voices was the centering of the people who live in affordable housing. Through stories, we were bringing their experiences directly to decision makers. One particular political engagement activity proved the pertinence of resident stories. In 2017, EEFA organized a Hill Day. Coalition members and partners from across the country flew into Washington, D.C. to meet with their representatives and make the case of the combined benefits of energy efficiency and housing affordability. What we heard in office after office was that the representatives and senators wanted to hear directly from their constituents. With this in mind, we created a series of residential profiles focused on how the utility savings and comfort provided by energy efficiency improved quality of life.

Voice and authenticity are essential components of a successful story, and identifying and centering these components can often be the hardest part of storytelling. Voices focuses on the lived experiences of residents of affordable housing whose homes have been made more comfortable, safer, and affordable through energy efficient retrofits. Residents can best speak to the conditions of their rehabilitated housing including the benefits of lower utility bills, better appliances, and better health outcomes. Residents represent the nexus of energy and housing affordability policy. As the beneficiary of energy efficient upgrades, capturing their improved outcomes provides the strongest basis for allocating more funding in the future from utility and public agencies.

## The Policy Wonks

EEFA comprises a diverse and, yet, particular set of energy advocates. Among our memberships we have people who work in preservation, engineering, law, public relations, and the environment. Across all these different sectors, we focus on the specific intersection of energy and multifamily affordable housing policies. Storytelling sounded like an exciting idea, but most of us had no experience in story collecting. Our early struggles with shaping the EEFA narrative made apparent that storytelling was not yet a core competency of our coalitions. We relied heavily on data and policy analysis to make our case to every possible stakeholder regardless of their motivations. Voices of Energy and Housing Affordability provided us with a wealth of stories to add context to our analysis-heavy advocacy.

## Multifamily Housing

An apartment building is not just a building. It's a home, it's a nursery, it's a neighborhood, it's a classroom. We know the importance of healthy housing and in the U.S. approximately 30 million homes contain toxins or have been found to be substandard spaces with structural issues.<sup>2</sup> Nearly one-third of all Americans and 50 percent of renters are housing burdened, meaning they spend more than a 1/3 of their income on housing costs.<sup>3</sup> At a time when someone making minimum wage cannot afford a one bedroom city in any city in America, housing affordability is one of the largest challenges facing American cities today. EEFA's mission is to bring energy efficiency into multifamily homes to make them safer, more comfortable, and maintain affordability. Our stories always highlighted the necessity for affordable multifamily housing.

## Decision Makers

We wanted to tell our story, but quickly realized that decision makers – the commissioners, the governors, utility and program administrators, etc. were hard to reach. To be fair, they are not heartless; we just hadn't homed in on their motivations. During this time, we began to relate our work to, fittingly, another story – *The Rider and the Elephant*.<sup>4</sup> First told by psychologist Jonathan Haidt, *The Rider and The Elephant* imagines that everyone's mind acts as two separate entities – a rider - controlled by logic - and an elephant – driven by emotion. When the rider and the elephant have the same destination in mind, everything is great. The elephant carries the rider and the path to the destination is free of obstruction. A smooth ride for everyone involved. However, when the rider and the elephant have two different destinations in mind or when unforeseen obstacles block the path the ride can be bumpy, uncomfortable, or may not happen at all. The rider with all her strength cannot force the elephant to do what she does not

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<sup>2</sup> Campbell, A. F. (2016, July 25). Gas Leaks, Mold, and Rats: Millions of Americans Live in Hazardous Homes. Retrieved March 20, 2018, from <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/07/gas-leaks-mold-and-rats-millions-of-americans-live-in-hazardous-homes/492689/>

<sup>3</sup> Interactive Maps. (n.d.). Retrieved March 20, 2018, from <http://www.jchs.harvard.edu/research/interactive-maps>

<sup>4</sup> Haidt, J. (2006). *The happiness hypothesis: Finding modern truth in ancient wisdom*. New York: Basic Books, a member of the Perseus Books Group.

want to do. Despite having the capacity to reason, the strength of the elephant is too much to overcome. With this metaphor, Haidt is arguing that logic cannot override emotion, and that emotions with all their complexities can easily guide logic. At the end of the day, our decisions and where they lead us, are largely based on emotion.

What does this mean for storytelling? For EEFA, it means that every graph, chart, and statistic needs to be part of a compelling narrative that indelibly links energy to equity and to people. “Stories help us learn, assess needs and strength, and evaluate approaches,” says Roger-Mark de Souza, director of population, environmental security, and resilience for the Wilson Center from 2013-2017. “It helps us organize and to build strength and leadership within organizations. It helps us exchange strategies.”<sup>5</sup>

The promise of energy savings alone may not be enough of an incentive for the local utility to invest in a low-income energy efficiency program, but the thousands of families who stand to benefit from the programs might move regulators to implement rules that directly benefit poor, working class families, and communities of color. The more we can relate our work to the real experiences and real people, the more accessible our policy becomes to policy makers who want the best for their constituents.

## **The Stories**

EEFA holds a wealth of compelling, unheard stories of lives that have been made better by affordable housing and energy efficiency. *Voices* is only a modest attempt to tell some of those stories.

### *Tashianna*

“I was homeless. I have family here, but they are not in my life because of my sexuality.” At 21 years old, Tashianna is the youngest and one of the newest residents at Phoenix House, an affordable housing development in Georgia. She says she feels lucky to have found a new home after being kicked out of her family’s house at the age of 19 for being gay. “I had to figure out life on my own,” she says.

Tashianna spent two years on the streets of Atlanta, struggling to find permanent housing. Some nights she stayed with friends, other nights she managed to get enough money from her job as a hair stylist to pay for a hotel room, but most nights, she slept outside in a tent.

In 2018, alone, nearly 1.6 million LGBTQ youth like Tashianna will experience homelessness in large part due their identity.<sup>6</sup> Their vulnerability is often compounded by increased risk of mental illness and targeted sexual violence. Shelter and supportive services like the ones offered at Phoenix House represents some of the far too rare opportunities for LGBTQ youth to find safety and security after being forced onto the streets with no place to call home.

“Finally, I got housing,” was all she could think when Tashianna saw her soon to be home at Phoenix House. “I was so relieved.”

Only two years before, Tashianna arrived, the fate of the Phoenix House was at stake. Face steep maintenance and operational costs, the building needed an influx of capital.

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<sup>5</sup> Storytelling Is Serious Business: Narratives, Research, and Policy. (2013, October 29). Retrieved March 20, 2018, from <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/storytelling-serious-business-narratives-research-and-policy>

<sup>6</sup> Our Issue. (n.d.). Retrieved March 20, 2018, from <https://truecolorsfund.org/our-issue/>

Fortunately, a partnership between three nonprofit developers combined energy efficiency with Housing Credits to keep the Phoenix House open.

Freed from the stress of finding a safe place to live, Tashianna now focuses on the future. She is planning to get her General Equivalency Diploma and Child Development Associate Certificate so she can pursue her passion - working with children experiencing homelessness. “I see a lot of children panhandling on the street. I just want to help them.”

Supportive housing services provided Tashianna the lifesaving tools she needed to find stability in her life. Now, Tashianna wants to pay it forward and become a social worker like the ones that helped her find Phoenix House. Affordable housing is more than just a roof to Tashianna. It also represents the opportunity to lead the life she dreams of.

### *Yasmine*

Yasmine Romero Latin revels in being called headstrong. She defines her life by the battles she has fought and won. From moving from El Salvador and becoming United States’ citizen to ensuring the continued vibrancy of her Columbia Heights community in Washington D.C. Yasmine never takes no as an answer including her fight for fair rents and safe living conditions from an absentee landlord.

Yasmine and her neighbors lived in slum-like conditions with a laundry list of issues including the near complete absence of working fire alarms in the 114 unit apartment building. This negligence came to a head in 2008 when the basement of the apartment building caught fire, and the entire building was soon engulfed by the first five alarm blaze that the District had seen in 30 years. In the face of disaster, the tenants fought for their lives, helping to remove seniors and children from their homes to safety. Some residents were forced to escape through windows. By the time emergency crews were able to put the fire out, the damage had been done. Nearly 200 people were now homeless.

Undeterred by tragedy, Yasmine continued her fight against the ownership. When a nonprofit offered to help Yasmine and the tenants buy their building under D.C.’s Tenant Option to Purchase Act, she knew their chance for a safe home had arrived.

Working diligently with NHT-E, the apartments were rebuilt with improvements that ensured safe, comfortable homes for everyone who wished to return. To help maintain affordability, NHT-E incorporated numerous green elements into the renovation and worked with tenants through the design process to find green solutions that met their needs. Renovations to the building incorporated sustainable elements, including solar panels on the roof to heat hot water, a vegetation green roof to slowly absorb water, and the use of environmentally friendly materials.

At the ribbon cutting for the new building in 2014, the building was rechristened Monseñor Romero after the Salvadoran Archbishop who spoke out against poverty, corruption, and social injustices. He is also Yasmine’s hero.

Today, Yasmine chairs the tenant association and works hard to keep the Monseñor Romero community vibrant, sustainable, and affordable.

## **Challenges**

Story collection does come with challenges. As a new venture, Voices encountered a few stumbling blocks that initially slowed our effort. Overcoming the challenges became easier as

our experience grew. We also believe that these are common barriers that any organization new to story collection encounter.

### *Labor*

Collecting stories takes time. Finding someone to interview, traveling to interview, the actual interview, writing, editing, and follow-ups require organization and an eye for detail. Often, story collecting needs the support of a team to keep the process flowing smoothly. For individuals unaccustomed to this process, finding the time to do storytelling might represent a substantial barrier.

### *Choosing an Audience*

There is no such thing as a one-size-fits-all story. Different stories will appeal to different people; thus, critical thought must go into who the story is for. Story gathering should be guided by the identified audience. Early on, Voices struggled to appeal to a wide range of audiences for different purposes. Identifying appropriate stories became much easier once we narrowed down our audience to certain types of stakeholders or decision makers and understood their motivations.

### *Finding the Story*

Tenants that receive energy efficiency retrofits may not understand the impact these policies have on their day to day lives. Does a tenant know what WAP is? Or do they just know they got new windows? Through our interviews, we learned to focus less on the technical aspects of the upgrades, but, instead, the kind of life that energy efficiency makes possible. The laundry list of installed measures is less interesting than the life-saving drugs that a formerly homeless mother is now able to afford thanks to low utility bills.

## **Epilogue**

Voices is an evolving project. We've begun to explore video storytelling and finding new ways to share our stories via social media platforms. Like many endeavors, the key to Voices has been a willingness to fail at some points to find what works.

The goal of our story telling effort was not only to integrate stories into our work, but to also make it an essential component of a winning strategy. Voices attempts to re-center the policy conversation to focus on the material improvements that housing and energy efficiency makes in the lives of low-income people. Storytelling can serve not only as a mechanism to amplify the voices of marginalized communities, but as a leadership pipeline that place peoples from affected communities into decision making positions. As we continue our work, we hope that other energy advocates also explore their talents for storytelling.

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