

MEMORANDUM

To Partners
From Ed Walz, Vice President for Communications
Date February 2012
Re To Our Health – Drew Westen messaging recommendations on Medicaid and children’s health



This memo attaches research and messaging recommendations developed by Dr. Drew Westen to defend investments in Medicaid and children’s health. It also describes why First Focus commissioned this research and offers practical examples to help advocates, policymakers, and candidates for public office put Dr. Westen’s recommendations into action.

WHY WE COMMISSIONED THIS RESEARCH

Just a few short months ago, Congress and the White House were locked in a pitched battle over legislation to raise America’s debt ceiling. The debate was framed almost exclusively in budgetary terms, with no focus on more fundamental questions about the underlying purpose of the federal government’s budget and the needs it is intended to meet.

The resulting congressional “supercommittee” failed to deliver a set of budgetary recommendations, setting in motion a preordained set of budget adjustments that are likely to put children’s issues in the crosshairs. And, though the debt ceiling law protects Medicaid from automatic cuts, political attacks on this fundamental health investment are likely to increase as the presidential campaign season intensifies. And, again, candidates and pundits are likely to approach Medicaid and children’s health as budgetary issues, neglecting the more basic dialogue about national values.

Advocates want to have those more basic conversations. We want to challenge the conventional wisdom and ask the real questions. What do we care about as a people? How can we build a budget that protects what matters most? Policymakers and candidates for public office who champion children’s issues, on both sides of the aisle, want to have those conversations too.

To serve these communities and prepare ourselves to compete in an emotional marketplace dominated by fiscal messages, we commissioned messaging research by Dr. Drew Westen. Dr. Westen, a professor of psychology and psychiatry at Emory University, is also a widely sought-after advisor to political candidates seeking his counsel on developing emotionally-resonant communications that inspire action.

During the summer of 2011, Dr. Westen and his team developed and tested a set of competing messages about Medicaid and children’s health. The result, *To Our Health: Protecting Medicaid and Children’s Health*, is a playbook for advocates, policymakers, and candidates who want to do just that.

As Dr. Westen’s memo details, the research shows that we can win. We can protect Medicaid and children’s health from budgetary attacks, beating opponents by 40%-65%, if we stop talking like wonks, stop talking like partisans, and use the “kitchen table” language our audiences – voters – use.

WHAT THE MEMO IS

The memo is a toolbox. Not every advocate will use every message every time. That's OK, because Dr. Westen found that we can choose from a wide range of winning messages to effectively defend Medicaid and children's health. In practice, most of us will acquaint ourselves with the two or three that feel most consistent with our own organization's approach, and stick with those.

The important thing is consistency – the more consistently our audiences hear our message, the more it will “stick” and the greater its persuasive power. Fortunately, Dr. Westen's messaging recommendations are designed to be used flexibly – whole “narratives” can be explored in longer-form settings like a speech or an op-ed, while short and simple “talking points” can be invaluable for talk radio appearances, social media, or other short-form opportunities.

WHAT THE MEMO ISN'T

The memo is not magic. Some of the messages Dr. Westen recommends proved persuasive with respondents representing wide bands of the political spectrum. But even the most effective Medicaid narrative left one in five respondents opposed. Be careful not to get trapped trying to convince everyone – focus most of your energy on persuading the swing voters who determine the critical mass of public opinion.

The memo is also not everything you'd say. Messages provide a framework, and the facts, figures, and stories from your state's experience can strengthen that framework. For example, the “Last Place to Turn” narrative in the memo illustrates why Medicaid's more important today than ever through the powerful story of a working mom named Jennifer. Use the story of a real parent in your state to make that story more real and more relevant for you and your audience.

The memo is not a script. If you are not comfortable calling out “health insurance companies,” change it to “giant corporations” instead. The closer you can stay to the research-tested recommendations, the more effective your communications, but consistently conveying these concepts is more important than getting hung up on the specific words.

APPLYING THE MESSAGES

The cliché goes that the restaurant business is about 3 things: location; location; location. In communications, it's repetition, repetition, repetition. The more consistently you integrate the Westen messages into everything you say on Medicaid and children's health, the more quickly those messages will dominate the conversation. Fortunately, the recommended messages are flexible, so they're useful in a wide range of communications opportunities, including:

In-Person

- Talking points for a rally
- A presentation to a partner or policymaker
- Debate prep
- Talking points for a candidate forum

Through Traditional Media

- Op-ed or letter to the editor
- Quote for a press release
- Interview with a reporter
- Appearance on a local broadcast public affairs show

Online

- Social media post
- Blog post
- Website description of your work

EXAMPLES

Everything's easy in theory, but application can sometimes be harder. We thought it might be helpful to offer a few examples of practical application of these messages, in the form of an advocates' op-ed, a policymaker's newsletter article, and a Twitter tweet. Each example is highlighted to illustrate the Westen messages' application.

Op-Ed (532 words)

First Focus drew elements of the recommended messaging into a more comprehensive op-ed designed to signal support for a range of critical kids' investments. This op-ed ran in the Baltimore Sun:

Protect programs that keep kids out of poverty

Supercommittee must not target initiative that Maryland children rely on

By Bruce Lesley, [Baltimore Sun](#), October 31, 2011

Rep. Chris Van Hollen of Maryland and other members of the congressional "supercommittee" created by this summer's federal deficit ceiling law are charged with making a plan to reduce the federal budget deficit. That's a daunting task. But as new Census Bureau data shows, kids in Mr. Van Hollen's 8th District and in Maryland as a whole face an even more daunting one: staying afloat as more and more of them sink into poverty.

First Focus, a national bipartisan children's advocacy organization, has crunched the numbers, and the Census figures show that an alarming 16,000 children in Mr. Van Hollen's district lived in poverty in 2010. That's an increase of 78 percent since 2006, and it shows that a bad economy is hitting Maryland kids and their families hard. The decisions Mr. Van Hollen and other supercommittee members make will determine whether federal initiatives can continue to protect kids in Maryland and all over the country from the economic downturn's worst effects.

Today, Medicaid and Maryland's Children's Health Insurance Program ensure that 616,000 Maryland children don't have to become uninsured if their parents lose a job. Today, federal nutrition initiatives deliver nutritious meals to 434,000 kids during the school day and provide nutritious foods at home to kids who might otherwise go to bed hungry. And today, the federal Earned Income Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit prevent tens of thousands of children from falling below the poverty line.

Federal investments like these also deliver real value for Maryland's communities and the entire state. Keeping kids insured through Medicaid and the state Children's Health Insurance Program means Maryland uses health care dollars cost-effectively, to keep kids healthy instead of ignoring small problems until they become big ones that require expensive emergency room care. Federal nutrition initiatives mean hunger doesn't stand in the way of learning, at a time when Maryland schools already face enough hurdles. And federal family tax credits help to keep families afloat, and that means their neighborhoods and communities don't face the broader social problems that result when families fail.

Will critical federal initiatives be there to protect Maryland kids tomorrow? If they are, will they have the resources they need to continue to make a difference? The decisions Mr. Van Hollen and the 11 other members of the supercommittee make over the next few weeks will answer those questions and help decide the future of Maryland children.

Right now, we don't know which way it will go. Lawmakers are facing extreme pressures to cut wherever they can. That's why it's so important for parents, educators, pediatricians, PTA members, advocates, faith leaders and every citizen who cares about the future of Maryland kids to speak up. Mr. Van Hollen and the rest of Maryland's leaders in Congress need to know that when less than 10 percent of the federal budget is focused on kids, deeper cuts to the lifelines holding so many Maryland children and their families up is not the way to solve our budget problems.

If those leaders make the right choice, Maryland families and communities will be better able to weather the economic storm today, and children will be better able to lead the state tomorrow.

Bruce Lesley is president of the First Focus Campaign for Children.

Newsletter Article (317 words)

This sample article might fit nicely into a state or national lawmaker's constituent or campaign newsletter.

I Defend Medicaid Because Medicaid Protects STATE Families

In STATE, we teach our kids not to kick someone when they're down. And, because the recession's not over for STATE families, a lot more of us are down these days. That's why I'm committed to protecting Medicaid from political attacks.

When Wall Street imploded, costing millions of Americans their jobs and their health insurance, Medicaid was there. Thanks to Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program, losing your job doesn't have to mean you and your kids become uninsured.

Medicaid is there for STATE families every day. It ensures that our parents and grandparents can get the nursing home care they need. And it helps our neighbors with disabilities get the wheelchairs, hearing aids, and other supports they need to lead full lives and contribute to our community.

Some politicians want to blame Medicaid for economic problems. But Medicaid didn't make millions of Americans unemployed – corporate mismanagement did. And some want to blame the people Medicaid serves – but that's us. Whether it's to keep the kids healthy and our families afloat during a tough economy or to get the nursing home care we need in our golden years, Medicaid serves all of us.

But cutting funding for the policy department in the middle of a crime wave isn't my idea of smart budgeting. Neither is cutting Medicaid in the wake of a recession, because just as the police protect our safety, Medicaid protects our health.

Yes, STATE government has a budget problem, but there are smarter ways to fix it. Let's start by making sure giant corporations and millionaires who pay lower tax rates than their secretaries finally play by the same rules that apply to the rest of us.

I'm committed to protecting parents, seniors, children and our neighbors with disabilities who depend on Medicaid every day. Because a lot more of us are down right now, and in STATE, we don't kick someone when they're down.

Twitter Tweets

Each of these tweets is short enough to fit a retweet. Some also illustrate how key messaging concepts can reach broader audiences through creative use of Twitter "hashtags."

Tweet	Characters	Notes
#Medicaid provided #flu shots for 15,000 STATE kids last year. If that's what politicians target, time to rethink their priorities.	131	Could substitute a particular politician's hashtag.
#Children's #health is more important than corporate profits. Let's #InvestInKids. http://wxo.rzffja	102	Link to article on corporation quarterly revenue numbers.
Unemployment up again but #children still get #health care thanks to #CHIP & #Medicaid. #DontCutKids, #InvestInKids. http://wxo.rzffja	134	Link to article on the unemployment rate.

NEXT STEPS

We welcome your feedback. In fact, we really, really want it. Your feedback on the messages themselves would be helpful. But your feedback in a month, or in two months, after you've integrated the messages into your communications, will be even more valuable. We want to know what's worked, and what hasn't. We want to know how you tweaked the messages to be even more relevant in your state. And we want to know what else we can do to help you make the case for children's health and Medicaid.

So please send me questions. Please send me examples of your applications of the messages. And please keep the feedback coming.