

# Spring Learning Week 2026

**Shifting How We Think About Social Change**

*April 7, 2026*

# Share in the Chat

- Your name and organization or affiliation (if applicable)
- In a short phrase, how would you describe the importance of your organization to community change?

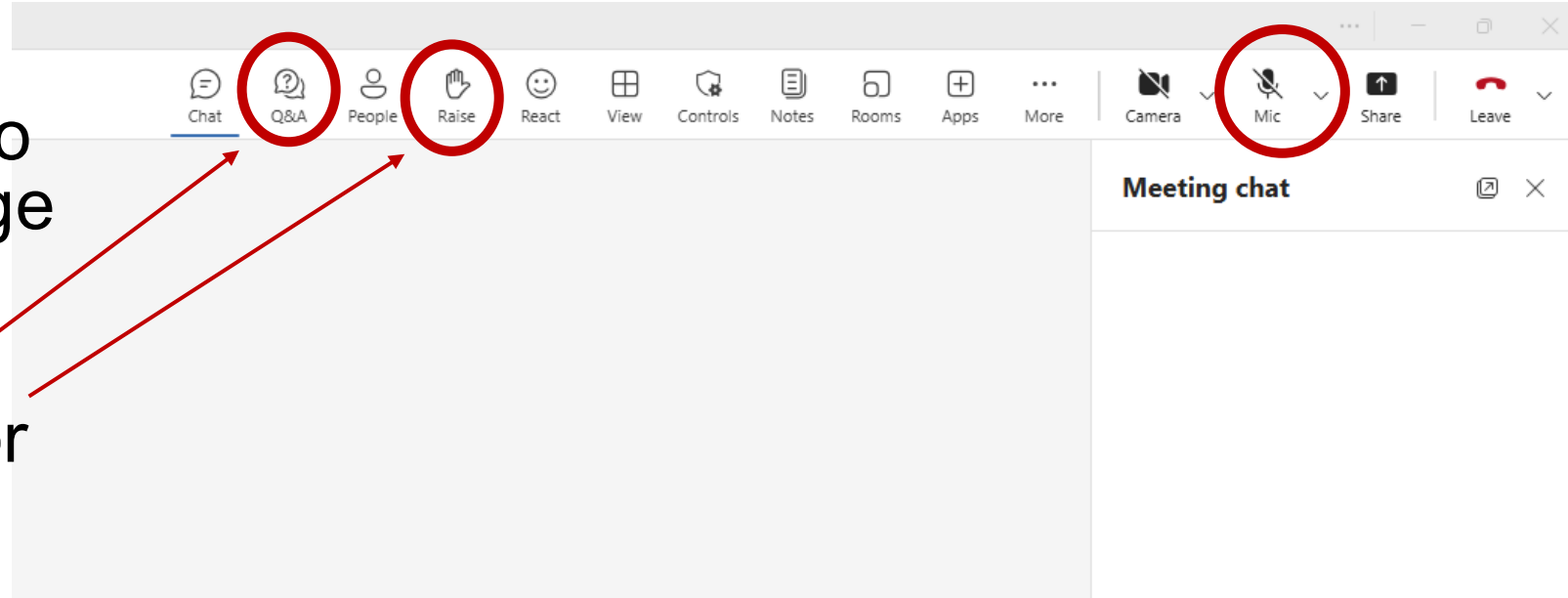
*Example: “United Way mobilizes our community to create lasting change so all can thrive.”*



# Quick Logistics

Please keep your microphone muted

- Please use the Chat box to share comments or engage with fellow attendees.
- To ask a question, please type it into the Q&A box or “raise your hand”. We will respond to questions throughout the session.
- This session is being recorded. A link to the recording and slides will be shared with you via email after the event and posted on our website.



# Agenda

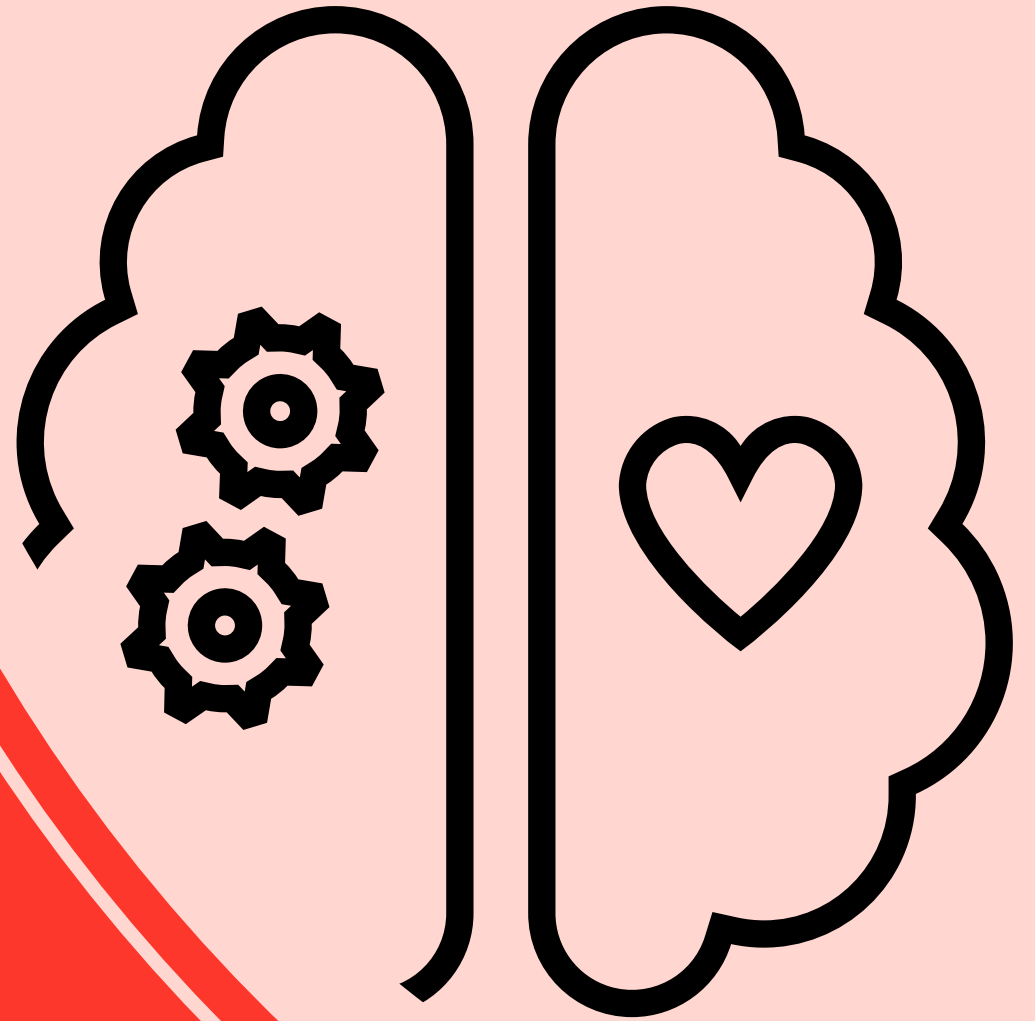
- **Welcome** | *Dami Okunade*
- **Introduction to Narrative Change** | *Dami Okunade*
- **Partner Experiences + Panel Q&A**  
*Michelle Toney, FamiliesForward*  
*Aimee Shinkle, Mercy Neighborhood Ministries*
- **Breakout Labs** | *All*
- **Closing & Next Steps** | *Dami Okunade*

# Session Key Takeaways

- How we talk about our work shapes how people understand challenges
- Key messaging principles on how to galvanize people to support your community solutions
- Learn how other organizations about how reframing their communications expanded reach and shifted mindsets
- Refine your own messaging



# The Power of Reframing



# Identifying Narratives and Framing

**Narrative:** Telling of a story or a sequence of events

**Framing:** The choices you make in what you say and how you say it, including what is emphasized, how and what is explained, and what is left unsaid. These choices affect how people hear you, what they understand and take away and how they act.

# Framing as a (Fast) Thinking Pattern

Here are a few common thinking patterns that have created dominate framing in the U.S.-

- **Individualism:** People assume it's an individual's responsibility to change their outcomes (think “pull yourself up by your bootstraps”).
- **Separate Fates:** People don't feel connected to people they don't know and assume other people's fates must be separate from their own fate or that the outcomes of certain groups are “just the ways things are”. This often shows up in “othering.”
- **Fatalism:** Assuming big issues are inevitable or impossible to change.
- **Facts Don't Fit:** People tend to use facts to validate their own experience or beliefs **even when** the evidence or data is presented to contradict their beliefs/ understanding.
- **Thin understanding of cause and effect:** Most people don't understand root causes.

# Framing Tips & Watch Outs

Framing Tips	Framing Watch Outs	UWGC Example
<p><b>Start with the Vision</b> Lead with what change could look like and quickly follow with evidence that change is possible</p>	<p>Leading with crisis or anchoring on everything that is wrong Balance facts about community with evidence that progress is possible</p>	<p>We lead with a positive vision: “United we Thrive” and share bright spots of progress</p>
<p><b>Focus on “We”</b> Build in a need for wide support, collaboration and cooperation</p>	<p>Use of terms that create a feeling of “us” versus “them”</p>	<p>We use phrases like “<b>our</b> community”, “<b>our</b> neighbors”, “<b>we</b> can’t do this alone”</p>
<p><b>Widen the Lens</b> Pair individual stories with community context and describe cause &amp; effect to broaden understanding</p>	<p>Black and white thinking; limited explanation of how things work. Don’t only talk about an individual’s ability to change their situation or assume people will automatically connect dots</p>	<p>We connect dots by explaining what things mean or the impact of community conditions “Economic well-being, in simple terms, refers to how well people are doing financially”</p>
<p><b>Use Person-First Language</b> Describe the situation impacting people</p>	<p>Using a specific attribute, experience or aspect of someone’s identity to fully define that person Ex: “homeless people”, “poor person”</p>	<p>We use phrases like “families being outpriced from their homes” to explain situation instead of describing the family themselves</p>

# Panelists



**Michelle Toney**

VP of School Age Services; Learning Grove  
Executive Director; FamiliesFORWARD  
[mtoney@learning-grove.org](mailto:mtoney@learning-grove.org)



**Aimee Shinkle**

Managing Director  
Mercy Neighborhood Ministries  
[ashinkle@mnministries.org](mailto:ashinkle@mnministries.org)

# Narrative Change: Shifting How We Talk About Social Change



## Elevating Voices of Change/ Widening the Lens

Presented by: Michelle Toney, VP of School Age Services, Learning Grove



# From Conversation to Action

One thing we emphasized early on is that this work can't stop at conversation. Narrative change only matters if it changes how we show up. So, we've encouraged people to take small but meaningful actions:

## **Actions:**

- Build relationships
- Show up in community
- Mentor / support
- Reflect on role



# Action in Practice (Students)

## **Post-session commitments:**

- Checking in with students
- Attending school events
- Offering mentorship

## **Impact:**

- Builds trust
- Turns ideas into lived experience





# Student Reflections

- “Adults listened differently when I talked about solutions”
- Increased confidence + connection

## Participant Reflection:

- What assumptions shifted?
- What changed in perspective?



# Key Takeaway

• *Narrative change =  
**Words + Actions + Relationships  
aligned***

***When students are positioned as  
leaders:***

→ *The story changes*

→ *Outcomes shift*

# Closing:

“We don’t just tell new stories—we practice them until they become the norm.”





# Narrative Change: Shifting How We Talk About Social Change

Aimee Shinkle, Managing Director  
Mercy Neighborhood Ministries

## Dominant Narrative We Are

### Dismantling:

People who receive public benefits do not want to work.

## Counter Narrative We Are

### Championing

Individuals who receive work supports are motivated and resilient problem solvers moving towards creating a stable and hopeful future for themselves and their family.



## ELEVATING VOICES CIRCLE

Share the stories celebrating your successes and navigating life's challenges while building a hopeful and stable future for yourself and your family.

Saturday, August 17th

10AM to 12PM

Mercy Neighborhood Ministries

1602 Madison Road

Cincinnati, Ohio 45206

513-751-2500

Light breakfast will be provided

Door prize raffle for those in attendance

Small transportation stipend for those in attendance

Have questions or need  
more information?

Robin Brenner

[rbrenner@mnministries.org](mailto:rbrenner@mnministries.org)

(513) 487-1905

# *What Gives You Hope?*



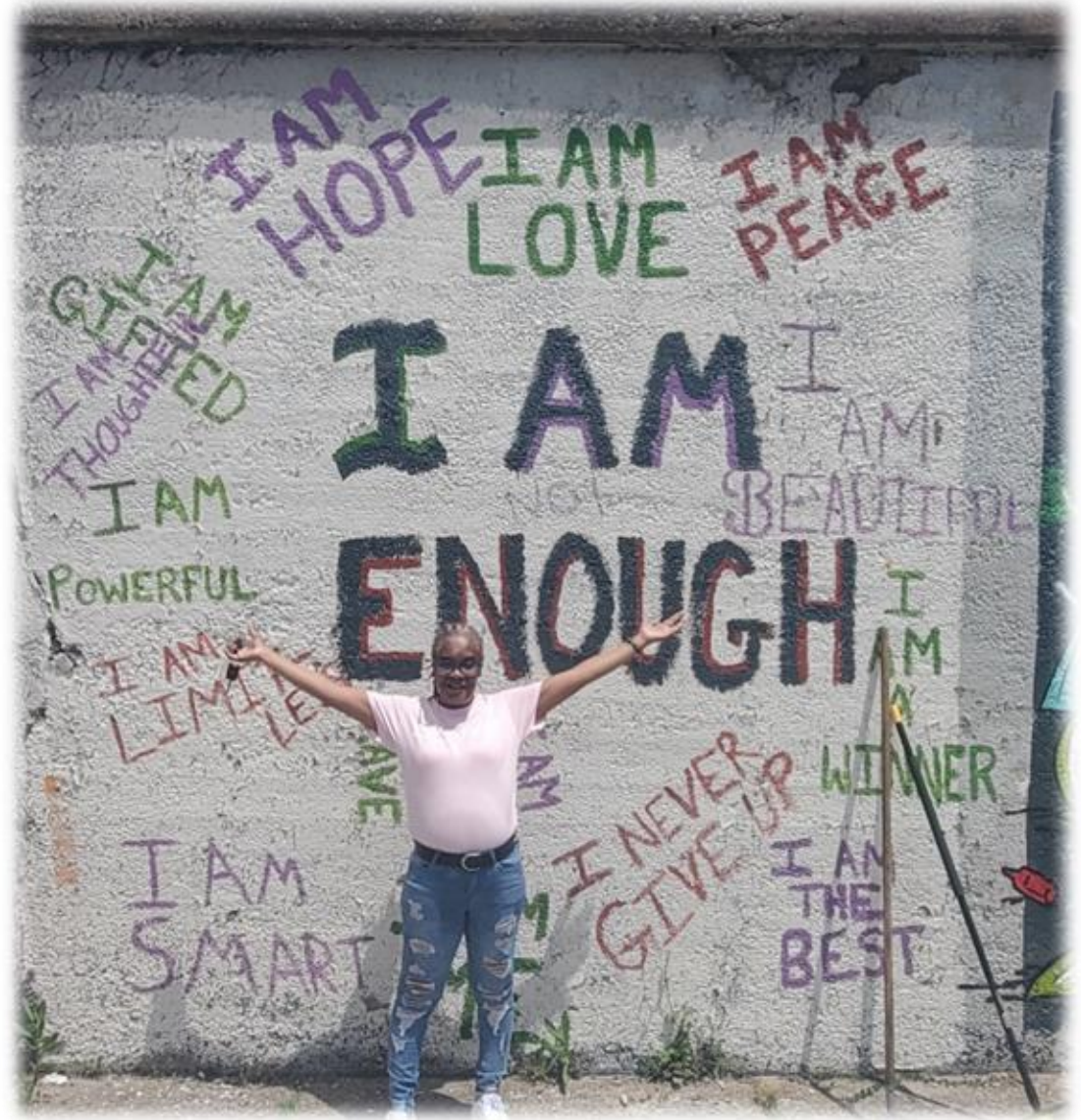
- **My children and their dreams are my everything.**
- **Each day is chance to begin again.**
- **I look back and see what I have already overcome.**
- **I am never afraid to start over.**
- **Remembering you only fail when you stop.**
- **If I am in a dark place I know better days are coming.**



# LEARNING IS CONTINUOUS!!

- Narrative change does not happen overnight – incremental change is ok.
- Be patient and give grace to yourself and your team and most importantly to those you serve.
- Look at internal documents to review language and make subtle language shifts.
- Shift your lens and perspective in program design.
- Know your audience.
- Be open to change and feedback.

**When you intentionally elevate someone you serve to the level of EXPERT, you are not exploiting them and their story.**





# Questions & Discussion





What did it take internally at your organization to start applying these framing principles consistently?

Where did you encounter challenges, and how did you work through them?





For partners who are just starting this work, what's one practical step they can take this month to begin shifting their messaging—and what would you do differently if you were starting over?



# Breakout “Labs”

Test & Reframe



# Breakout Lab Instructions

## **Share your messaging example.**

*What content did you bring? Who is the audience?*

## **Reflect on Framing Principles.**

*Identify where current messaging aligns with framing principles.*

## **Use ChatGPT to Refine.**

## **Compare messaging & Strengthen**

*What changed between the original and revised version?*

# Reflections.....

- What part of this process felt most challenging (or easy/natural) for you?
- What did you notice about how your message changed as you worked through the steps?
- What is one change you plan to apply right away after this session?

# Session Key Takeaways

- small **shifts** in language can lead to **BIG** shifts in meaning
- This is a process—not a one-time exercise



# Next Steps



# What's Next?



- Communication Toolkits
- Framing Resources
- UWGC Office Hours
- UWGC follow-up email
- Learning Week Events

The screenshot shows the website's navigation bar with the United Way Greater Cincinnati logo and links for 'Make an Impact', 'See the Impact', 'About', 'FIND HELP', and 'DONATE'. Below the navigation bar is a section titled 'KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE EVENTS' with a sub-header 'Our thought leadership forums are a great way to share data and analysis with community partners to improve community well-being.' Three event cards are displayed: 1) 'Knowledge Exchange - EVICTION PREVENTION' with a yellow background and text stating 'United Way of Greater Cincinnati has partnered with various organizations...' and a 'READ MORE' link. 2) 'Putting Money Back in Hardworking Families' Pockets' with a photo of a group of people and text stating 'United Way's latest Policy With a Splash of Coffee focused...' and a 'READ MORE' link. 3) 'Knowledge Exchange | We Agree There's a Problem, But How Do We Fix It? Reframing Housing Issues' with a photo of a group of people and text stating 'Recording Highlights Couldn't tune into the Knowledge Exchange live? Check...' and a 'READ MORE' link. Below the event cards is a button 'EXPLORE PAST EVENTS' and a paragraph: 'Knowledge Exchange offers a variety of regular publications as well as learning and capacity-building sessions. These opportunities focus on strengthening data-informed approaches to impact efforts, deepening understanding of the root causes of economic inequity, spurring innovation and supporting advocacy.' At the bottom of the section are two buttons: 'UPCOMING EVENTS' and 'SIGN UP FOR EMAILS'.



**UNITED WAY**  
**Greater Cincinnati**