

## Quick Tips for Talking About Poverty and Taxes

October 2017

We all want to live in a country where everyone enjoys full and equal opportunity. But recent tax cut proposals from leaders in Washington, D.C. would dramatically undermine the ability of all Americans to ensure their own economic security. The Opportunity Agenda compiled the following quick tips for discussing these tax cuts and changes to our nation's tax system.

1. **Lead with Values.** Emphasize the values of community and a strong and thriving society. Describe the foundations of a strong and prosperous society that taxes make possible. We all rely on roads, schools, first responders and so many other foundational aspects of our society that we jointly pay for through taxes.

**Sample Language:**

*We all know the ingredients of a great community: Schools with good teachers, well-maintained streets, emergency response to keep us safe, access to high quality healthcare— these basics help communities thrive. Are we doing all we can to make sure our communities have them?<sup>1</sup>*

2. **Promote effective solutions and successes.** After establishing values, follow with a systemic story about how these various public structures, along with other critical programs, can create a path from poverty to economic participation for many in our country.

**Sample Language:**

*Reclaiming the promise of opportunity means demanding an economy that works for everyone, not just corporations/businesses. Robust employment opportunities are important, but even at a 4.9% unemployment rate, 43 million of us are still living in poverty. We need to work together to shore up programs like social security, welfare, and job training initiatives so that we all have a chance to live in economic stability.*

3. **Balance out a story of spending with a story about people paying their fair share.** We need to close loopholes that give huge breaks to the wealthy so that everyone, including the workers who contribute to the profits of the very wealthy, gets the support they need to provide for their families. Our government's role should be to make sure everyone has access to education, jobs, and healthcare, not to let the very wealthy out of paying their fair share at the expense of these things.

**Sample Language:**

*You can't get something for nothing. We all want and deserve thriving communities with great schools, parks, modern roads and bridges; and we chip in to pay for that. That's what taxes are for. But our tax code needs serious reform; it is riddled with out-of-control tax breaks that are syphoning off the resources that would be better used in our communities. Should we be spending on things that benefit all of us and make our communities thrive, or on tax breaks that mostly benefit a few?<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Topos Partnership, Taxlandia. March 2016: <http://bit.ly/topos-taxlandia>

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

**4. Show how spending can lead to more equal access to economic opportunity.** Most audiences don't understand the root causes of poverty in any detail, particularly when it comes to the forces behind the disparate impact of poverty based on race, ethnicity, and gender. It's therefore difficult for people to see how something like taxes can play a role in creating and sustaining a more equitable society. We have to tell a story that connects the dots from how particular government agencies, policies, and programs play a role in paving a path from poverty to economic participation, and also knocking down the barriers of racial, ethnic and gender discrimination that hold many back.

**Sample Language:**

*We all want to live in a country where everyone enjoys full and equal opportunity. But we know that this isn't true yet, and that a lot of opportunities depend on what someone looks like or where they came from. When you add together current circumstances caused by old prejudices—and the everyday bias and discrimination that we all know exists—some groups face a lot more barriers than others. One way we've addressed this is by passing laws so that we can protect people from housing and employment discrimination, or to make sure that kids can get a good education. We can all agree that these laws are central to equal opportunity and that we have to enforce them. Our taxes pay for that enforcement, and eliminating funds for the important agencies that do that work just makes it harder for us all to realize real equality and equal opportunity.*

**5. Build a message with VPSA.** We recommend including four elements in your tax messages: Value, Problem, Solution, and Action.

**Sample language:**

**Value**

*Our nation aspires to be a place where everyone enjoys full and equal opportunity.*

**Problem**

*However, our economy is out of balance, with significant barriers impeding the ability of many people to care for their families. Moreover, current political circumstances are increasing threats to the political underpinnings of many of the elements that provide for a basic standard of living for millions of people. The release of the administration's tax plan illustrates this problem: the very wealthy will pay less and less at the expense of policies designed to provide pathways out of poverty.*

**Solution**

*Instead of this step backwards, we need to protect and improve programs like social security, welfare, and Medicaid, which can provide the tools people need to make ends meet and move out of poverty.*

**Action**

*Contact your representatives and urge them to support tax policies that protect opportunity.*