



The Power of Narrative:

Empowering Local CVI through National Strategy

MAY 2026

This report is part of the **Community Violence Intervention Action Plan**. We are grateful to every supporter and funder who made this convening possible. We also appreciate community partners whose leadership, presence, and unwavering commitment continue to strengthen this work.



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Executive Summary

In February 2025, a national cross section of leaders came together at a fundamental moment for the Community Violence Intervention (CVI) field. Ninety seven leaders representing sixty six organizations convened in Miami for a two day CVI Narrative Change workshop. This convening was led by the *Narrative Change Initiative* as part of the [CVI Action Plan](#), one of the most comprehensive and coordinated efforts ever undertaken to define what it will take to strengthen and sustain this field.

The CVI Action Plan strives to save lives, reduce community violence in Black and brown communities, and support CVI workers who have committed their livelihoods to ending violence. Community Violence Intervention (CVI) is a healing centered approach that uses proven strategies to proactively reduce violence in real time through tailored community-centered initiatives. This convening signaled a next step toward greater alignment, shared purpose, and a more unified strategy to advance evidence-based approaches to public safety.

“The CVI Action Plan strives to save lives, reduce community violence in Black and Brown communities, and support CVI workers who have committed their livelihoods to ending violence.”

— the 2024 CVI Action Plan report

At the center of this convening was an intentional commitment to support local CVI leadership and practitioners in the field. The narrative workshop was also designed to empower frontline workers to help shape solutions. Their valued voices and lived experience brought essential perspectives and authenticity to this work. Forty five community-based organizations helped guide the direction of a national narrative strategy, supported by a broad coalition of philanthropic partners, government agencies, and leaders from academia, media, and consulting. This level of cross-sector collaboration reflects the need for collective support of the entire CVI ecosystem.

This Narrative Change report is designed to share insights from this convening in a clear, actionable framework for how the CVI field communicates its value, impact, and vision. This report is intended for practitioners, policymakers, healthcare leaders, funders, and advocates who are responsible for shaping public understanding and advancing solutions that work.

Participants were aligned on a central challenge and opportunity: while the evidence supporting CVI continues to grow, the field lacks a consistent, widely accepted narrative that defines what CVI is, why it works, and how it fits within a broader vision of public safety. Without this clarity, even the most effective strategies risk being co-opted, underfunded, or overlooked.

This report directly responds to that need. It outlines a national narrative strategy grounded in three core pillars that move the field beyond fragmented efforts toward a unified, systemic approach to violence prevention. These pillars focus on **transforming public understanding, strengthening policy** and **advocacy alignment**, and building the infrastructure necessary for sustained coordination across the field.

The group agreed that a clear definition of CVI was necessary as part of the narrative strategy campaign. The following definition for Community Violence Intervention emerged from a breakout session during the **CVI Action Plan's Setting the Standard** convening in June 2025 and received broad support from CVI leaders:

“Community Violence Intervention (CVI) is a healing centered approach that uses proven strategies to proactively reduce violence in real time through tailored community-centered initiatives. These multidisciplinary strategies intensively engage and respond to individuals and groups who are most likely to engage in violence to prevent and disrupt cycles of violence and retaliation to deliver services that save lives, address trauma, provide opportunity, and improve outcomes. CVI is conducted by trained professionals knowledgeable of their communities and violence.

—Setting the Standard Report

Although the CVI Action Plan offers a definition and core components, participants noted a strong need for a nationally aligned understanding. The ideas in this report can help shape that shared direction.

The path ahead requires urgency and unity. Community violence continues to deeply affect Black and Brown communities, driven by long-standing inequity. While long-term change must address these systemic issues, there is also an urgent need for strategies that save lives today. CVI provides that link, pairing immediate support with long-term prevention in ways that are grounded in evidence and informed by community experience.

To build momentum, participants called for a stronger, more coordinated narrative. This includes setting clear goals, improving data systems, and lifting up trusted voices, particularly those of survivors and frontline practitioners. Establishing a national working group with clear leadership and fast-response capability will help keep messaging consistent and address emerging risks. Together, these efforts will deepen public understanding, strengthen commitment, and unlock resources to expand what works.

This moment presents an opportunity to own the narrative around CVI and redefine what works as public safety solutions, one that recognizes prevention, healing, and community leadership as essential components of safer, healthier communities.

Effective communication and the power of narrative are not just supporting function. These strategic tools are a core driver of impact and long-term sustainability for the CVI field. Evidence alone will not scale solutions. To fully realize the potential of CVI, the field must also reshape how violence is understood, who is seen as responsible for addressing it, and what constitutes true public safety.

INTRODUCTION

The Power of Narrative

We are at a pivotal moment in how the country understands and addresses community violence and invests in evidence-based solutions to scale the community violence intervention ecosystem. For too long, violence has been treated as inevitable rather than preventable. In reality, it is a public health challenge rooted in healing, care, and safety.

Community Violence Intervention (CVI) strategies have contributed to meaningful and sustained reductions in violence, with landmark research demonstrating reductions in violent reinjury and related outcomes by as much as 50 percent when individuals are engaged in care and support.

This is not incremental progress. It is transformational.

Yet evidence alone is not enough. If we are to scale what works, we must also reshape how people understand violence, who they believe is responsible for addressing it, and what real public safety looks like. Too many Americans continue to hold harmful and outdated assumptions about violence, its causes, and its solutions—narratives that obscure the effectiveness of CVI and limit the field's ability to grow and sustain impact.

This is why the power of narrative change matters.

This report from the Narrative Change Workshop captures the outcomes and recommendations from a national convening of CVI leaders, hosted by the Health Alliance for Violence Intervention and led by the Narrative Initiative. Bringing together a diverse cross-section of practitioners, advocates, researchers, and funders, the convening focused on advancing a coordinated narrative strategy to strengthen the field and support local impact.

One of the most fundamental insights emerging from the workshop, and reflected in this report, is the need for greater alignment around shared language. There is a need for definitions that authentically reflect the values, practices, and impact of CVI. Without a common framework, the field remains vulnerable to misrepresentation, dilution, and fragmentation. Participants emphasized that building this shared language must be grounded in the lived experience and expertise of frontline practitioners—those closest to the work and to the communities most impacted by violence. Establishing clarity around key concepts, including who is considered “high risk” and who qualifies as a “credible messenger,” is critical to strengthening both public understanding and field integrity.

Ultimately, advancing CVI requires more than scaling programs, it requires shifting the narrative with input from frontline workers. By launching a coordinated national narrative change strategy, elevating credible and diverse voices, and equipping organizations with the tools to communicate effectively, the field can build the public will, policy support, and cultural understanding needed to sustain and expand this life-saving work.



What is Community Violence Intervention?

The following definition was crafted during a group breakout session in the convening and was broadly supported; however, time did not allow for individualized feedback and thorough consensus building:

“Community Violence Intervention (CVI) is a healing centered approach that uses proven strategies to proactively reduce violence in real time through tailored community-centered initiatives. These multidisciplinary strategies intensively engage and respond to individuals and groups who are most likely to engage in violence to prevent and disrupt cycles of violence and retaliation to deliver services that save lives, address trauma, provide opportunity, and improve outcomes. CVI is conducted by trained professionals knowledgeable of their communities and violence.

—Setting the Standard Report

Narrative Change: Priorities and Goals



Narrative Change Priorities

Public Narrative Shift

Shifting public perception and media framing of community violence intervention

Policy & Legal Advocacy

Advancing legislation and policy frameworks that support CVI at every level

Standardization

Establishing consistent definitions, practices, and metrics across the CVI field

Narrative Change Goals

Reframing

Define and change how the issue is understood

Pivoting

Redirect conversations toward solutions

Amplifying

Elevate voices and stories that matter

Countering

Challenge harmful misconceptions

Attaching

Connect CVI to broader public values and public health

CVI Narrative Change Workshop Materials

Together, we can shift the narrative around community violence intervention—building safer, healthier communities for everyone.

To access the slides from the CVI Narrative Change Workshop held in Miami in 2025, [click here](#).



Helpful vs. Harmful Narratives



Strategic Communications vs. Narrative:

What is the Difference?

Strategic Communications

Tactics for creating frames, messages, and stories to influence short- or medium-term policy or practice outcomes (e.g., supporting pending legislation or policy approaches).

Narrative

Narrative refers to the underlying themes and ideas that shape how stories are told, understood, and remembered over time.

Deep Narrative

Deep narrative is made up of long-standing themes and ideas that influence how people think, often shaping beliefs and perspectives over decades.



Shifting Narratives

Narratives, whether harmful or helpful, operate across multiple layers, spanning core values and worldviews to images, stories, messages, and policy positions. Meaningful narrative change requires sustained effort across each of these levels simultaneously.

Levels

Policy Positions

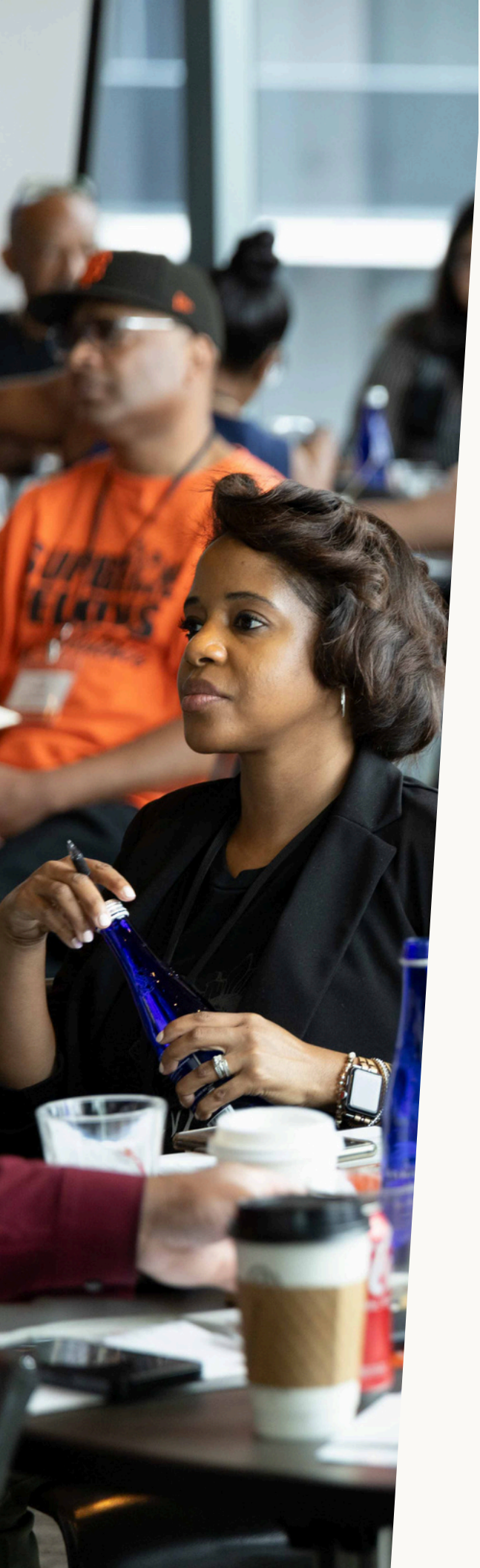
Messages

Stories

Values

Images

Worldview



Harmful Narratives

Harmful narratives are widespread but inaccurate perceptions the public holds about community violence, including its causes, who is most affected, and how it can be reduced.

These narratives often frame violence prevention as solely the responsibility of law enforcement, disconnected from broader factors such as poverty, racism, and systemic inequities. They are frequently reinforced through media coverage and social media platforms.

Harmful Narratives

These are the most common misconceptions that undermine CVI efforts and must be actively countered through strategic narrative work.



CVI does not hold people accountable

Violence cannot be prevented

People cannot change



CVI is too soft on crime

CVI is anti-law enforcement

Criminal justice is unrelated to public health



Investing in CVI takes funds away from law enforcement



Helpful Narratives

Helpful narratives emphasize the roles that healthcare, law enforcement, and community members can play in building a **coordinated, public health centered response** to reduce community violence.

These narratives underscore the positive impact of CVI strategies in **strengthening public safety, advancing harm reduction, and supporting trauma-informed care.**

Helpful Narratives

These are the core messages that advance the CVI field and build public understanding and support.

CVI is rooted in healing, care, and safety.

Those closest to the problem are the solution.

Everyone wants to be safe.

Law enforcement cannot do this on its own.

CVI is part of the public safety ecosystem.

Everyone has a role to play in ending community violence.

The CVI ecosystem works to help address the root causes of violence.

Less-violent communities yield better economic outcomes.

Audience Mapping Framework





How to Identify Target Audiences



Constituencies

Those impacted by community violence and frontline workers in the field



Allies

Advocates who share our mission and help advance narratives in support of CVI



Decision-Makers and Policy Leaders

Those creating or influencing laws and policies that can hurt or benefit CVI



Opponents

Detractors and distractors



Identifying Audiences



Direct Roles in Violence Prevention

- Government officials
- Healthcare workers
- Community leaders
- Teachers
- Media



Indirect Roles in Violence Prevention

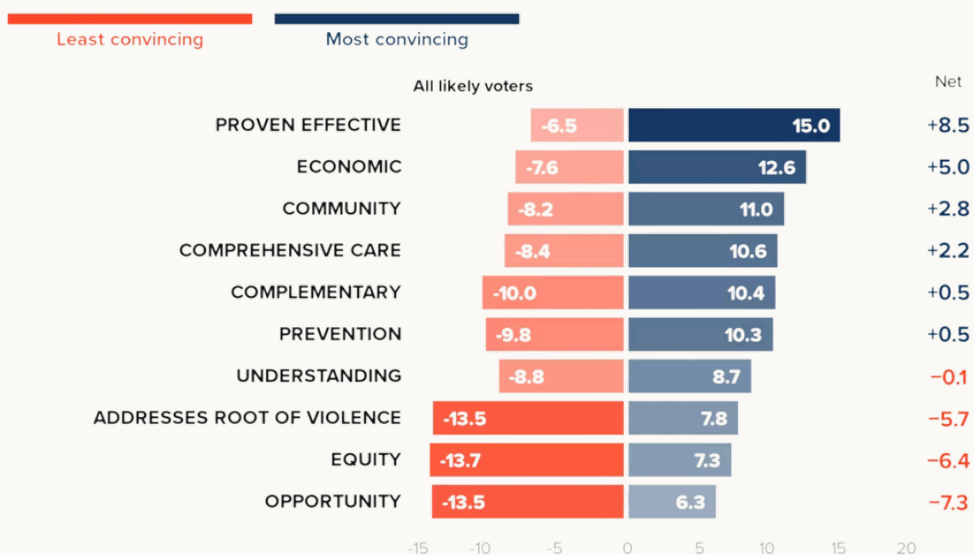
- Firearm violence survivors
- Families of survivors
- Judges and legal professionals
- Law enforcement
- Peacemakers

Audience Landscape: Community Violence Intervention Message Testing

The HAVI partnered with Data for Progress to conduct the first national message testing study on community violence intervention.

Respondents selected the messages they found most and least convincing in connection with supporting increased funding for CVI programs

All Likely Voters



July 21–23, 2023 survey of 1,284 likely voters

DATA FOR PROGRESS

Download [the full report here](#).



Message Test Results

Trusted Messengers

The effectiveness of messaging depends on the credibility of the messenger. Gun injury survivors rank among the most **trusted and impactful voices**.

Problem + Solution + CTA

Messengers must define both the **problem** and the **solution**. They must also provide a clear and **specific call to action** that is essential.

Law Enforcement's Role

Law enforcement officers are the most trusted messengers on public safety among the public. Messages that emphasize support from law enforcement and strengthen trust between officers and the communities they serve are particularly effective.

Target Audience Matters

Effective messaging requires alignment with the intended audience. Healthcare professionals, for example, are more likely to view an emergency room physician as a more credible messenger than a police officer.

Key Insights from Message Testing

1

Safer, Healthier Communities

Messaging focused on creating "safer, healthier communities" resonates well across audiences.

2

Facts and Empathy

Both evidence of solution **efficacy (facts)** and **stories** that foster **empathy** matter.

3

Equity

Messages focused on equity are not the best fit for broad audiences, though they land well with Black and Brown community leaders.

4

Economic Benefits

Messages that emphasize the economic benefits of addressing violence as a public health issue resonate most when framed in positive, asset-based terms, and can be counterproductive when centered on deficits or cost focused narratives.

Next Steps and Recommendations



Goals for the CVI Field

Funding and Support Structures

Secure sustainable, independent funding streams that are not dependent on government sources, supporting CVI organizations in their administrative structures.

Empowering CVI Workers

Value CVI workers alongside other frontline professionals; provide structural and financial support; and educate the public about its transformative role.

Standardization and Integration

Achieve a concise, universally accepted definition of CVI, ensuring it is integrated into the public safety infrastructure.

Goals for the CVI Field

Advocacy for CVI Sustainability

Normalize CVI as a crucial part of public safety, serving as a complement to law enforcement across the nation.

Public and Political Engagement

Change public and media narratives about violence and CVI; generate broad public support; and build political will for sustainable funding.

Education and Community Engagement

Educate skeptical and impacted community members about the effectiveness of CVI, engaging next-generation leaders for community-led safety initiatives.

Narrative Change

Priorities & Funding Recommendations

1 — **Launch a National Narrative Change Campaign**

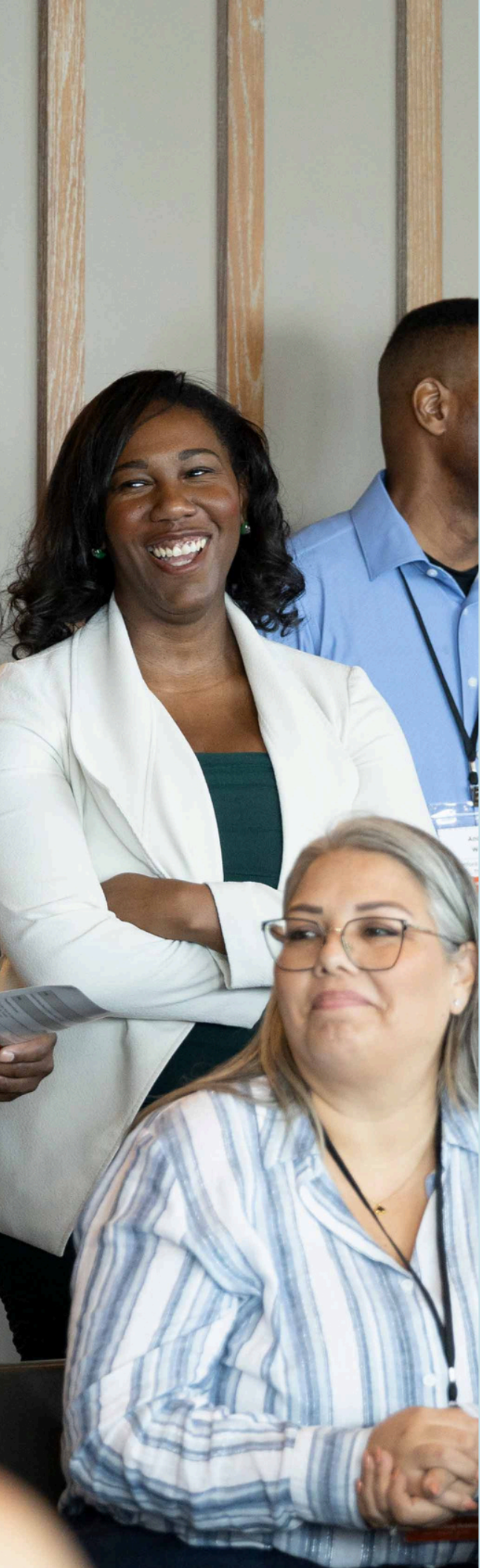
- Develop and implement a national narrative change strategy to achieve the core goals of the field.
- Expand the body of research on messaging and audience penetration to identify compelling language and reach key stakeholders.

2 — **Lift Up Culturally Competent Black and Brown Voices & Organizations**

- Support organizations that provide a platform for diverse voices in their storytelling.

3 — **Support National and Local CVI Organizations in External Affairs**

- Develop a communications database accessible to CVI organizations across the country.
- Build infrastructure and capacity for public affairs strategies and tactics.



Narrative Change Goals

By establishing the following subcommittees, the field will support the CVI infrastructure through communications efforts, narrative strategy, training, and rapid response.



1. Research

Needs for narrative and communications strategies.



2. National Working Group

Decision-making, information flow, and narrative strategy.



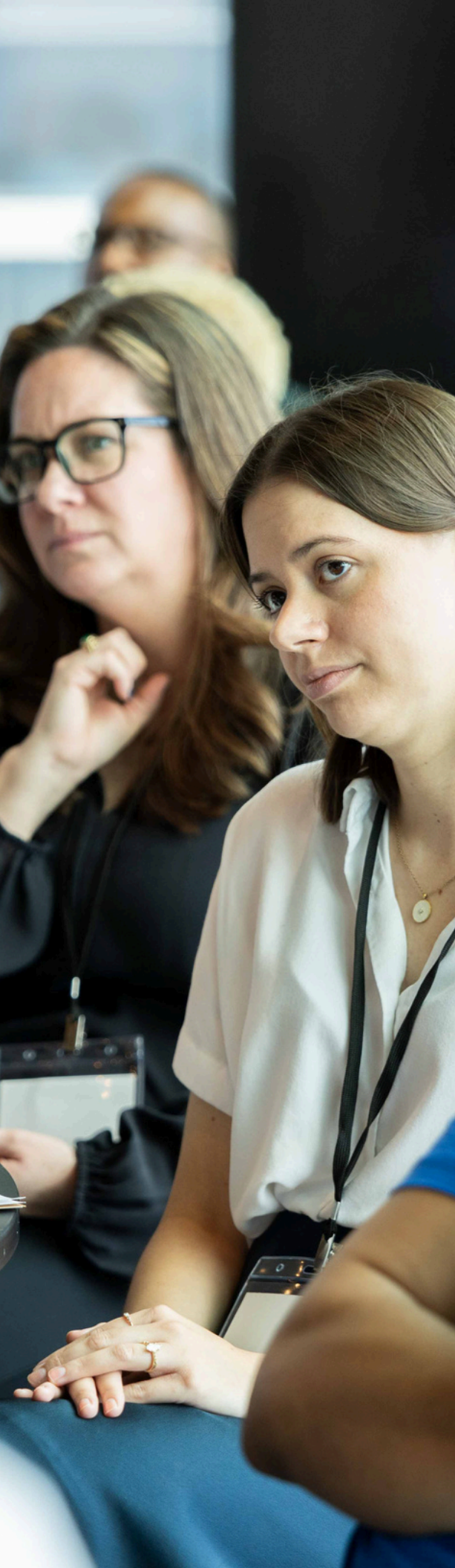
3. Infrastructure

Training, staffing, tools, and more.

Research

This subcommittee will identify research needs for narrative and communications goals, including:

-  **Defining success metrics**
Convene communications leaders, researchers, and community stakeholders to co-develop clear, measurable indicators of success.
-  **Cross-sector data infrastructure**
Establish formal data-sharing partnerships with key stakeholders to improve access to real-time statistics and fact-based storytelling.
-  **Core communications toolkit**
Produce, regularly update, and distribute message pillars, talking points, creative assets, FAQs, fact sheets, and templates.
-  **Survivor-centered storytelling**
Establish a structured, trauma-informed program to support survivors in sharing their stories, including story coaching and media training.
-  **Hyperlocal messaging partnerships**
Co-design messaging with local community groups and cultural leaders to reflect unique contexts, languages, and lived experiences.
-  **Cross-organizational task force**
Establish a task force of communications leads from partner organizations to align strategies, share tools, coordinate narrative opportunities and tackle challenges.



National Working Groups

Recommend a fieldwide working group for those who want to work on narrative strategy. This national working group would advance this work by:

Governance Structures

Establish clear processes for decision-making, information-sharing, feedback loops, and coordination across organizations and teams.

Narrative Threat and Rapid Response

Sustain ongoing monitoring and analysis of narrative risks, including disinformation, cooptation, and backlash, and establish rapid response protocols to effectively mitigate harm.

Shared Narrative Principles

Convene key stakeholders to co-create and formally adopt shared narrative principles as a foundation for storytelling and communication alignment.

National Working Groups

Launch a mechanism to align narrative campaigns, reactive messaging, and long-term storytelling work.

Centralized Coordination Hub

Establish a mechanism to align narrative campaigns, reactive messaging, and long-term storytelling work.

Living Glossary

Develop a living glossary of key terms and concepts to support consistency, prevent misinterpretation, and reduce the risk of narrative co-optation.

Narrative Talent Pipeline

Invest in identifying emerging leaders; providing ongoing training and mentorship; and creating roles for narrative strategists, storytellers, and cultural organizers.



Infrastructure

Build a system to support training and staffing within organizations to better support the work, including:

Needs Assessment

Identify infrastructure gaps within partner organizations, including training, staffing, tools, and overall capacity, to inform a strategic investment plan.

Audit Existing Infrastructure

Perform a comprehensive review of current narrative-related platforms, systems, partnerships, and resource availability to identify strengths and areas for upgrade.

Align Decision Making Across the Field

Create a tiered governance model at local, regional, and national levels with clear roles, escalation paths, and communication channels.

Infrastructure

Resource Distribution Hub

Establish a centralized hub that provides public education materials, templates, infographics, social media content, and op-eds, along with training and coaching on messaging and media engagement.

Protect Core Messaging

Develop and maintain core messaging frameworks and definitions grounded in shared values and goals.

Measure Impact and Amplification

Develop systems for tracking the reach and resonance of narrative efforts.



Credible Voices and Messengers

Promotion of Credible Messengers

CVI has credible messengers who provide authentic, community-driven narratives. Allow community members to narrate their own stories without interference.

Accessibility and Clarity

Use plain language and avoid jargon so that the CVI narrative is easily understood by the target audience.

Broader Understanding and Recognition

Establish public understanding of CVI comparable to that of traditional policing, which requires significant educational outreach to elevate CVI's recognition and legitimacy.

Inclusivity and Visibility

Ensure survivors and victims of violence are visible and represented within the CVI narrative, including frontline workers and diverse voices from the Southern U.S. and rural regions.

Authentic Voices and Messaging

Focus on genuine, nonmanipulated expressions from those directly involved in or affected by community violence, promoting truthful and impactful messaging.

Themes / Messages

Core Messaging about CVI

Emphasize consistent, concise messages positioning CVI as an effective, community-led strategy that complements law enforcement. Key messages: **"Violence is expensive," "Safe neighborhoods are good for the economy,"** and **"CVI is true public safety."**

Economic & Emotional Aspects

Highlight economic benefits through narratives like **"Violence is a symptom—the CVI ecosystem addresses root causes."** Emotional appeals include: **"You are loved," "You are appreciated,"** and **"Everyone deserves safety."**

Community & Inclusivity Focus

Assert that CVI is driven by those closest to violence and is community-led, not law enforcement-led. Supported messages include: **"All communities are worth care and investment"** and **"Everyone deserves redemption."**

Public Safety Redefined

Reinforce that public safety is owned by the public, with CVI as a pivotal component. **"Police cannot prevent crime"** underscores the necessity for complementary strategies like CVI.

Conclusion: Sustaining Narrative Momentum for CVI



CONCLUSION

Sustaining Narrative Momentum for CVI

The strategies outlined for advancing CVI narrative change reflect a fundamental truth: effective communication is not a supporting function, but a core driver of impact and long-term sustainability in community violence intervention ecosystem. By strengthening research, aligning national coordination, and investing in organizational infrastructure, the CVI Action Plan sets the foundation for a unified, credible, and enduring narrative, one that accurately reflects the field's value and builds broad-based support.

A shared commitment to defining success metrics, building a coordinated data infrastructure, and elevating credible, authentic voices will strengthen the evidence base and deepen public understanding of CVI's impact. A national working group, grounded in clear governance and rapid response capacity, will further safeguard the narrative while ensuring alignment and consistency across the field.

Sustained investment in infrastructure, including needs assessments, resource hubs, and talent development, will equip local leaders to embed compelling, authentic storytelling into their work. Together, these efforts will drive long-term impact and advance a broader recognition of CVI as essential to achieving safer, healthier communities and a holistic vision of public safety.