

Reframing Primary Prevention and Opioid Use Reduction in the Construction Industry

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**FRAME
WORKS**

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- **Contextualizing information about the construction industry is missing or misleading.** Working conditions in the trades are unlikely to be well understood by non-trade-employed audiences, but few of the communications we reviewed explain in detail how the construction industry works. That kind of information is necessary to increase support among key constituencies for adopting more and better primary prevention strategies to reduce workplace injuries and opioid-related problems among the construction workforce. For example, without an understanding of how factors such as weather, readiness to work when called, and overtime affect workers' health (including mental health), financial stability, and job security, as well as their opioid use rates, non-expert audiences are far less likely to see how systemic changes—rather than personal decision-making—are the answer.

— ~~Labeling OSHA as the "gold standard" for workplace safety is not helpful, as OSHA is not a trade organization and its standards are often outdated.~~

In the next section, we share several evidence-based framing recommendations that, taken as a whole, can advance a more effectively framed narrative about the solutions to the opioid-related challenges facing the construction workforce. The strategies below have been tested for their ability to divert audiences' thinking away from their most unproductive interpretive tendencies and towards greater understanding of what can be done to improve primary prevention, expand access to alternative pain management options, and reduce opioid use disorder among this at-risk population—and why taking action should matter to us all.

Recommendation #1: Carefully link causes and consequences to increase support for structural solutions.

What to do

Use “explanatory chains” to connect the root causes of opioid use disorder among construction workers to systemic solutions.

How to do it

Explanatory chains are tools designed to help non-experts and members of the public see how root causes can lead to problems that require specific kinds of solutions. By explicitly showing how “A leads to B leads to C,” they fill in gaps in understanding that might otherwise leave audiences to draw their own conclusions based on faulty or incomplete knowledge.

Strong chains contain the following links:

- **Initiating factor:** What is the root cause of the problem or issue?
- **Mediating factor(s):** What is set in motion by the initiating factor?
- **Final consequence(s):** What are the effects?
- **Solution:** How can we address the problem effectively?

Below is an example of how an explanatory chain can be used to explain the importance of paid sick leave benefits:

Construction workers are especially at risk for sprains, strains, and other musculoskeletal injuries that can lead to chronic pain (**initiating factor**). To recover from these injuries, workers need to take time off to heal. Often, however, workers do not report or seek treatment for these injuries because they are under pressure to keep working (an underreporting of injuries known in the industry as “bloody pocket syndrome”). For example, some crews receive bonuses if they work a certain number of consecutive days without work-related injuries (**mediating factor**). Other workers may not have paid sick-leave benefits, making it financially impossible to take time off to heal and leading them to continue to work despite an injury (**mediating factor**).

Below is an example of how the metaphor can be used to explain prevention's crucial role in addressing opioid use disorder in the construction workforce:

Before:

The construction industry has one of the highest injury rates when compared to other industries and opioids have commonly been prescribed to construction workers to treat the pain caused by these occupational injuries. Since use of opioids has led to addiction and overdose deaths, it is important for workers to understand the risks and alternatives.²

Reframed with *Upstream/Downstream*:

The construction industry has one of the highest injury rates when compared to other industries and opioids have commonly been prescribed to construction workers to treat the pain caused by these occupational injuries. These cascading effects put construction workers at much higher risk of developing an opioid use disorder—but if we work to change upstream conditions like workplace safety practices, we can prevent injuries and the risk of opioid use disorder from developing downstream.

Why it works

From improved workplace safety practices to robust sick-leave policies and thoughtful pain treatment options, experts recognize the centrality of prevention efforts in reducing rates of opioid use disorder. However, prevention is largely not on the radar for non-experts,³ making it difficult to generate support for necessary primary and secondary prevention solutions.

Originally tested to communicate about the importance of various kinds of environmental health work, FrameWorks' research has found that the *upstream/downstream* metaphor is highly effective at raising the salience of preventive work.⁴ The metaphor has been proven to help both members of the general public, as well as health and business sector professionals, recognize the need to work far upstream in health systems to screen out and remove potential sources of harm—and to move away from highly individualistic understandings of substance use and health.

Framing for industry professionals

Many of the solutions proposed by CPWR rely on the support of the construction industry for implementation. FrameWorks' research on how the public health field can most effectively communicate about the importance of their work to other sectors has found that a *downstream/upstream* message is especially helpful in bringing the business sector on board with public health initiatives.⁵

We recommend that communications aimed at the construction industry prime this audience by using the value proposition. Here's an example of how you might use this value:

The economic impact of substance use disorders in the US is over \$442 billion every year. You can make a big difference in preventing substance use disorder in your workforce and helping workers get support and treatment so they can stay healthy—and stay on the job. It's the right thing to do, and it can help your bottom line.

Importantly, this idea is already present in some of the existing communications that FrameWorks has reviewed—but for it to be most effective, it must be used at the beginning of messages to prime the audience for what follows.

Recommendation #3: Choose examples that illustrate what effective interventions look like.

What to do

Expand audiences' ability to envision the spectrum of effective primary prevention solutions available by offering concrete, easy-to-visualize examples.

How to do it

Remember the “5 C’s” of strong examples:

- **Concrete:** Is the example specific enough to be easy to imagine?
- **Collective:** Does it focus on systems change, policy adoption, or group action (rather than on individuals)?
- **Conceivable:** Is it feasible or believable?
- **Causal:** Does it clearly address or disrupt the cause-and-effect cycle of the problem?
- **Credible:** Is it disinterested (e.g., aimed at the common good, with no profit or political motive)?

The “before and after” model below demonstrates how to use concrete examples to make a message more effective and accessible:

Before (no example):

Labor unions are part of the efforts to reduce opioid use rates among construction workers.

After (example added):

Labor unions are part of the efforts to reduce opioid use rates among construction

Recommendation #4: Provide non-experts the context they need to interpret unfamiliar concepts and data.

What to do

Remember that you are not your audience. Consistently provide definitions of terms and explanations of data that will ensure audiences interpret information as it is intended to be interpreted.

How to do it

The recommendations offered throughout this brief all work to provide people with the deeper knowledge they need to understand (and support) the work that you do. When communicating data specifically, several additional strategies can help to ensure that any numbers you provide are easier to understand:

- **Select the most relevant data to present.** Data should always support your message, not be your message. It should be used sparingly to be most impactful. When communicating to a non-academic audience, provide only compelling data points that enable people to understand problems and solutions more robustly.
- **Make sure data is working for you, not against you.** Some data points may reinforce existing, unproductive ways of thinking about issues. For example, prevalence statistics may remind people that opioid use disorder is a widespread, critical problem. On their own, these statistics are likely to make people feel like the problem is too big to solve—which ends up undermining support for solutions. Consider the implications of any data you use before you use it, and pair statistics about problems with clear calls to action and concrete solutions.

Compare the examples below. The second one guides the interpretation through cues that can help people unfamiliar with the issue make sense of the data.

- **Data without solutions:** In 2017, more than 72,000 people died in the US from an overdose—over 49,000 of which involved an opioid. One study showed that more than half of those who died from an overdose had suffered at least one job-related injury.⁷
- **Data with solutions: Workplace safety practices decrease injuries, which in turn decreases opioid use and overdose.** In 2017, more than 72,000 people died in the US from an overdose—over 49,000 of which involved an opioid. One study showed that more than half of those who died from an overdose had suffered at least one job-related injury. **Job-related injuries can be prevented when employers provide safe workplaces.**

Recommendation #5: Use solutions and attributions of responsibility to expand thinking beyond individual-level factors and interventions.

What to do

Direct people's attention to systems-level change by:

- Focusing on who is responsible, not who is affected
- Naming systems, organizations, and groups as actors
- Emphasizing systemic solutions.

How to do it

- **Make sure communications explicitly name who or what is responsible for the problem or for taking action to address it.** The public has a strong tendency to blame health-related problems on individual choice and lifestyle, so it's important to name—specifically and repeatedly—the systems or actors involved in causing or preventing opioid use in the construction industry. These agents may include workplace safety regulations, the healthcare system, the nature of work in the construction industry, employers who do not enforce workplace safety, and other social or environmental determinants. Explicitly naming other actors involved will help keep audiences from defaulting to harmful assumptions about the people who use and/or become dependent on opioids.
- **Prioritize systemic solutions over individual-level solutions.**

Framing strategies for talking about labor unions

Communicators who want to have productive conversations about labor unions' role in addressing opioid use and opioid use disorder in the construction industry must be strategic about how and when they raise the subject.

FrameWorks' prior research has shown that the US public lacks knowledge about labor unions and their role in the workplace. A long-term decline in membership and laws barring many workers from unionizing means that few American workers have directly experienced the benefits of collective bargaining or understand how unions work. For example, in a project on framing teachers' professional development, FrameWorks' researchers found that a majority of Americans believe that labor unions are exclusively interested in pay and benefits. The public also perceives that unions serve the interests of only a select group of people rather than American society as a whole. These assumptions make it difficult for people to imagine other contributing roles for labor unions in the workplace.¹¹

More broadly, FrameWorks' research suggests that other dominant patterns of reasoning may feed people's negative perceptions of labor unions. That, in turn, may limit people's

Instead of this ...

Labor unions need to play a central role in addressing the challenges presented by opioid use in the construction industry. They are responsible for protecting their members and therefore are key stakeholders in solving this problem.

Construction work is physically demanding and can lead to injury more often than other types of work. But construction workers can't work safely if they're injured. To get them back to work quickly, health care professionals are more likely to prescribe opioids to construction workers than to the general population. That opens the door to a number of problems, including increased risk of opioid use disorder.

Unions have a responsibility to their members to make sure workplace safety regulations are enforced. Unions can also take the lead in advocating for the inclusion of alternative treatment therapies in worker health and welfare plans, so that workers have greater access to non-opioid options.

Try this ...

The construction industry is a vital part of the US economy—what happens in the building trades has social and economic implications for our communities. Construction work is physically demanding and can lead to injury more often than other types of work. But construction workers can't work safely if they're injured. To get them back to work quickly, health care professionals are more likely to prescribe opioids to construction workers than to the general population. That opens the door to a number of problems, including increased risk of opioid use disorder.

This is a serious problem without an easy answer. Instead, we need all stakeholders—employers, the healthcare system, insurance companies, and labor unions—to work together to solve it. For example, employers can work with the healthcare industry to make job-site health counseling available to workers. Labor unions are already involved, using their unique position to disseminate information to workers about alternatives to opioids and offering them access to peer-to-peer support for navigating pain management and opioid use...

The version in the right-hand column makes several framing moves ! o ! introducing labor unions into the discussion. It first:

- Establishes the big picture (“this affects all of us”)
- Provides necessary background information (“here’s why opioids are of special concern to this industry”)
- Introduces the many stakeholders involved (“we need all hands on deck”)
- Offers an example of how multiple stakeholders can participate (“different players have different roles”).

By intentionally engaging readers through these steps, the passage reduces the likelihood that it will activate readers’ automatic assumptions about labor unions and shut down the conversation before it starts.

Note that the version in the left-hand column not only jumps into a discussion of unions right away but also does so with word choices that may unintentionally activate readers’ least productive perceptions; for example, “unions protect their members” may reinforce the belief that unions *only* protect the interests of a *single* group of people.

#2: Appeal to the value of **Pragmatism** to increase support for unions' role in the workplace.

FrameWorks' prior research shows that priming people to associate labor unions with the cherished American ideal of pragmatism moves their support for workers' issues beyond pay and benefits.

To apply this framing strategy, begin messages with an appeal to the need to take a sensible approach to opioid use in the construction industry. For example:

Worker injuries in construction are contributing to our communities' opioid problems. We need to implement smart, practical solutions that make sure injured workers get the care they need without leaving them at risk for opioid use disorder. One sensible approach is to support and expand labor unions' efforts to connect members of the workforce to peer-to-peer counseling and non-opioid pain management therapies. As a strong network of workers in the industry, labor unions can disseminate and scale resourceful solutions at workplaces across the country.

User notes:

- It's the idea of pragmatism, not the word itself, that matters in using this strategy. In the example above, words like *practical*, *smart*, *sensible*, *resourceful* and *sensible* all convey the concept of the value, so adapt the strategy to your own voice and words.
- Values appeals work best at the start of a message because they guide the reader's interpretation of the information that follows. Don't stop there, though: repetition of the value within a message and across communications channels will reinforce

- Negotiating better access to alternative, non-opioid treatment options and pain therapies in collective bargaining agreements

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Conclusion

Strategic framing—with the right values, explanatory tools, and well-chosen data—helps a field tell an effective story about its work. By incorporating these research-based framing strategies into its communications, CPWR and its partners can establish a new narrative about opioid use in the construction industry, how to help the construction workforce stay safe—physically and mentally, and why it is our shared responsibility to do so. The next step for CPWR is to incorporate these recommendations into communications collateral and activities. Using these strategies consistently and creatively across different message channels will amplify the importance of addressing this overlooked piece of the story on opioid use and primary prevention strategies to reduce opioid use disorder in the US.

Endnotes

1. Moyer, J., L'Hote, E., & Levay, K. (2019).

10. Nichols, J., Levay, K., Volmert, A., & O'Neil, M. (2019). *Construction Industry Opioid Use Reduction*. [https://www.opioidinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Construction-Industry-Opioid-Use-Reduction.pdf](#)

About FrameWorks

The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organization's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis®, offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multi-disciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will, and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing, through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks®, toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

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