

HOUSING •   
NARRATIVE LAB

# MESSAGING GUIDANCE on Homelessness Messaging

# Messaging Guidance on Homelessness Messaging

**People want elected officials to address housing and ensure everyone can afford a place to live.** Our core challenge in mobilizing support for a progressive homelessness and housing policy agenda is focusing and sustaining attention on the issue.

Messaging needs to clearly articulate a positive vision of the future we can achieve and contrast bad policies that benefit politicians and corporate developers with those that benefit everyone, regardless of our income bracket, zip code, or the color of our skin. Our base constituencies and persuadable audiences are drawn to solutions-focused and action-oriented messaging that makes our desired vision for the future both tangible and irresistible.

**Our top messages lean into the Race Class Narrative (RCN) by explicitly naming the diverse communities “we” come from.** The RCN principle of naming our shared values across race and class and how certain actors deploy deliberate division for their own gain applies to homeless messaging in both value statements and narratives. Our top performing messages all emphasize inclusion, e.g. “Whether we’re Black or white, Latino or Asian, Native or newcomer, most of us want the best for our families” and “No matter what we look like or what’s in our wallets...”

**Our top value statements invoke a shared desire for everyone to get and keep a roof over their heads, link housing to the ability to get and hold onto a job, and talk about the precarious financial situations that make stable housing difficult for some. They frame homelessness as an issue we ALL need to solve.**

- *No matter our race, gender, or income we all want to get and keep a roof over our heads*
- *We need to solve the homelessness issue in our communities because shelter is a human need*
- *Without a job, you are likely to struggle to get and keep a roof over your head*
- *Every person deserves a safe, quality, and affordable place to live no matter what we look like or where we come from*
- *Without an address or a roof over your head, you are likely to struggle to get and keep a job*
- *We all struggle with something, no matter our gender, race, or income -- and for some of us, that includes being able to afford a quality place to live*
- *For some of us, getting laid off or having huge unforeseen expenses means a rough patch, but for others it means homelessness*

**Support for our policies is high, even with exposure to right-wing framing around personal responsibility, but cynicism and differing priorities threaten our success.** We need to reinforce that we can, and have, successfully implemented solutions in housing and homelessness when working together. Going beyond stating “proven solutions” alone and explaining what those solutions are help bolster our messages.

## Methodology

*Phase One:* Lake Research Partners, ASO Communications, and HIT Strategies designed and conducted 4 online focus groups among select audiences around homelessness, housing, and racial and economic inequality in October 2020.

*Phase Two:* Lake Research Partners, ASO Communications, and HIT Strategies designed and administered an online dial survey conducted January 5 – January 10, 2021. The survey reached a total of 1,401 adults nationwide along with oversamples of 100 African American adults, 100 Latinx adults, 100 Small Business Owners, and 100 Gen Z (age 18-23) adults. Survey respondents were drawn from an online panel of listed adults. Small Business Owners were screened to be owners of a for-profit small business with under 100 employees in the U.S. Small business owners who are the sole employee of their business were capped at 25% of the sample. The margin of error for the base sample is +/- 2.6%.

# Core Messaging Recommendations

## Establish the Shared Value

- Establish a shared value across race and class before naming the problem.

Shared values include:

- ✓ *“no matter what we look like or where we come from, most of us want to provide for our families and know that hardship won’t mean homelessness”*

## Highlight Divisive Tactics Used by Bad Actors

- Highlight the divide-and-conquer tactics bad actors employ and connect them to the barriers they create (which is important for motivating our base). Use caution in the current environment to avoid coming off as too divisive ourselves.

- ✓ *“some of the wealthy and powerful few ... are trying to divide us based on our race or our neighborhood”* or *“...point the finger at people struggling to make ends meet or divide us by race and by place”*
- ✓ *“certain politicians hold down our wages while corporate landlords jack up our rents”*

## Name Race in Creating Unity

- Talk about race when articulating an agenda to make housing within reach for people and families.

- ✓ *“Whether we’re Black or white, Latino or Asian, Native or newcomer”*
- ✓ *“Whatever our color, background or zip code”*

- Create a unity of purpose by describing people working together.

- ✓ *“we must come together to rewrite the rules, regulate rents, and build options people can actually afford”*
- ✓ *“we can make the better world we imagine our reality by joining together”*

## Provide a Compelling Call to Action

- Instead of dwelling on problems, provide a positive call to action grounded in unity and the change “we the people” can deliver. Be clear in what and how the proven solutions can bring about change.

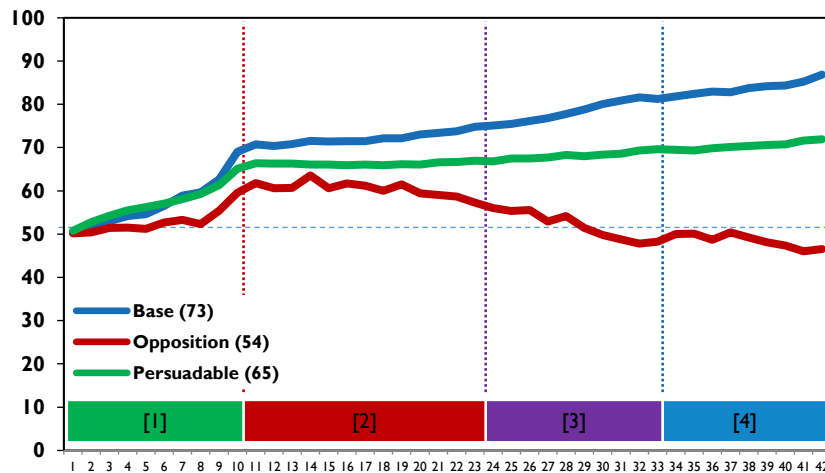
- ✓ *“together, we can demand proven solutions”*
- ✓ *“we all have a place to live our lives and raise our families, no exceptions”*
- ✓ *“joining together to make the wealthiest few pay their fair share so all of us can have what we need”*

Base (24% of adults)	Persuadables (66% of adults)	Opposition (10% of adults)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Think people of color face greater barriers to economic success than white people, wealthy Americans were given more opportunities than others, and prefer government strengthen the social safety net and create opportunities for advancement.</li> <li>• Strongly support policy agenda.</li> </ul> <p><i>They are more likely to be women, Latinx, and Democratic.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have views that at times reflect base adults, for example, wanting government to strengthen the social safety net and create opportunities.</li> <li>• At other times they reflect opposition adults, for example, thinking housing is a private responsibility, people experience homelessness because of lack of personal discipline, and there is little we can do to solve homelessness.</li> <li>• Small business owners are most likely to be persuadable.</li> </ul> <p><i>They are more likely to reflect the demographics of the national population but are more likely to be Millennials.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Think wealthy Americans worked harder than others.</li> <li>• Oppose government role in policy agenda and prioritize stopping the spread of COVID, creating good paying jobs, and lowering taxes over housing priorities.</li> </ul> <p><i>They are more likely to be male, Boomers, white, college-educated, and identify as a Republican.</i></p>

# Top Message

Messages were tested for moment-to-moment responses in the online survey. Below is the best message tested. The lines on the graphs are the moment-to-moment reactions to an audio recording of each message by our base, opposition, and persuadables. People dialed positively (above 50) when they had a favorable reaction to the words, and negatively (below 50) when they had an unfavorable reaction. The number in parentheses represents the mean dial rating for that message.

## “Housing First”



Housing First is anchored on the shared value of wanting the best for our families.

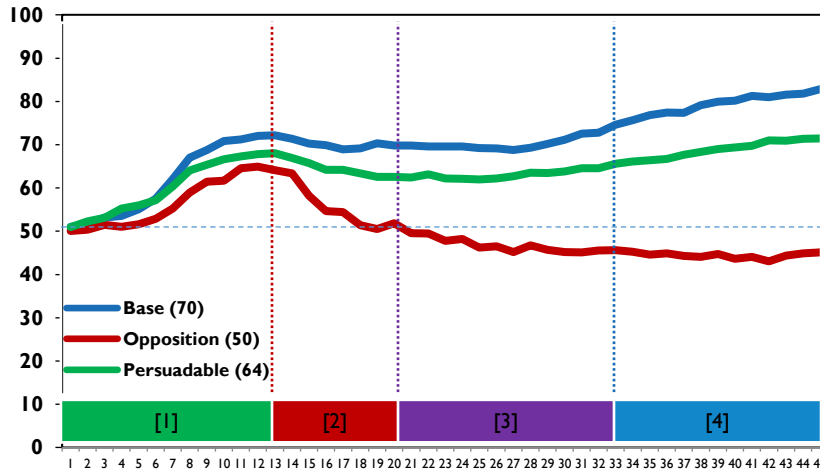
Linking “having a roof over your head, an address, or a place to shower” to “landing or keeping a job” is powerful.

The ending could potentially be made stronger by uniting “rewrite the rules” with joining together and adding other specific actions.

Text of Message	Messaging Notes
<p><b>[1] Whether we’re Black or white, Latino or Asian, Native or newcomer, most of us want the best for our families.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leads with inclusive, values-based language that anchors the message in strong shared values across race.</li> </ul>
<p><b>[2] But not having a roof over your head, an address, or a place to shower -- or having to sacrifice putting food on the table in order to pay rent -- can make landing or keeping a job an impossibility.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Speaks to the sacrifices people make in order to provide for their families.</li> <li>Demonstrates the catch-22 of needing a job to get housing and needing housing to get a job</li> </ul>
<p><b>[3] Providing housing to people who have been pushed into homelessness is a proven approach that ensures people can rebuild their lives.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>While the opposition is alienated by this language, our base constituencies are convinced at the mention of “proven approach” and adults overall like the positive goal of helping those pushed into homelessness rebuild their lives.</li> <li>The “pushed into” phrasing implies it is not the individual’s fault.</li> </ul>
<p><b>[4] To make this a place where all of our families can thrive, we must rewrite the rules to ensure everyone has shelter.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We see modest dialing up as the message concludes by tying the call to action back to the opening shared value of ensuring all families can thrive.</li> </ul>

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Top Message

### “Joining Together”



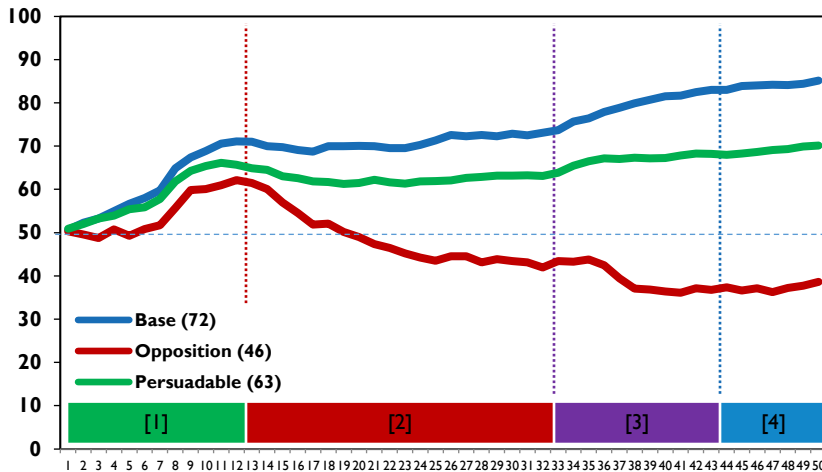
Joining Together unites us across both race and income level by expressing what most of us want: to provide for our families, have a roof over our heads, and pursue our dreams.

Using the phrases “joining together across our differences,” “we can enact proven solutions,” and “we all have a place to live our lives...no exceptions” brings unity and efficacious action to the message.

This message could be further strengthened by solutions language.

Text of Message	Messaging Notes
<p>[1] No matter what we look like or what’s in our wallets, most of us want to provide for our families, have a roof over our heads, and pursue our dreams.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leads with values-based language across race.</li> </ul>
<p>[2] But today, certain politicians are trying to divide us based on our race or our neighborhood,</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Calls out dog whistling by certain politicians, alienating our opposition and making it clear who the bad actors are, while activating our base and persuadables.</li> </ul>
<p>[3] so we’ll look the other way when their corporate developer donors rig the rules to hoard ever more profits for themselves while making it impossible for many of us to afford a place to live.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gives a clear and compelling origin story for the problem and shows that it is human-made -- and thus we as humans can solve it.</li> </ul>
<p>[4] By joining together across our differences, we can enact proven solutions and fund programs that ensure we all have a place to live our lives and raise our families, no exceptions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ending on a call to action anchored in “joining together” which unites and galvanizes people into believing they can enact the proven solutions needed to ensure all have a place to live.</li> </ul>

## “Proven Solutions”



Proven Solutions taps into the desire to provide for our families so that any hardship won't mean homelessness.

People are comfortable blaming politicians for not doing enough.

People positively respond to a closing that ends with a vision of what we can achieve when we work together.

Text of Message	Messaging Notes
<p><b>[1] Whatever our color, background or zip code, most of us want to provide for our families and know that hardship won't mean homelessness.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Begins with a core value. It helps to use “us” and “our” to make this personal for the audience.</li> <li>• Position the desire to provide for our families as universal – whatever our color, background, or zip code. Explicit mention of race works.</li> </ul>
<p><b>[2] But today, certain politicians point the finger at people struggling to make ends meet or divide us by race and by place while corporations profit off this pandemic even as millions lose our loved ones and livelihoods, and families get evicted and forced onto the streets.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explains how the certain politicians try to divide us by race and by place – core element of the Race Class Narrative approach.</li> <li>• It provides an origin story for the problem and inoculates against opposition dog whistles.</li> <li>• Refers to corporate profits which taps into economic populism.</li> </ul>
<p><b>[3] When we join together, we can demand the wealthiest few pay their fair share so that homelessness is a choice we don't need to keep making.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acknowledges what we can do when we join together and demand the wealthiest few pay their fair share.</li> <li>• Populism is especially strong with the base.</li> </ul>
<p><b>[4] Together, we can demand proven solutions that ensure every family has a place to call home.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ends with a positive vision of what we can achieve together and a clear call to action.</li> <li>• Refers to proven solutions which helps with efficacy.</li> </ul>

## Words to Embrace and Words to Replace

Say This...	Instead of	Because
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ensuring everyone can afford a place to live</li> <li>Ensuring everyone has a place to live</li> <li>Ensuring every person has a roof over their heads</li> <li>Ensuring every family has a place to call home</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Making stable housing more affordable</li> <li>Creating programs that make housing affordable</li> <li>Developing affordable housing units</li> </ul>	<p>Puts people front and center and personalizes this issue. We must consistently remind people that shelter is a basic human need, as our opposition tries to frame housing first and foremost as a commodity.</p> <p>We also must illustrate the positive outcome that we will achieve, which is far more compelling than the process we choose to get there.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We need to solve homelessness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ending homelessness</li> <li>Reducing homelessness</li> </ul>	<p>“Solving” implies that homelessness is a collective social problem we can tackle together, as opposed to an individual failing.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Local programs and services</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Government programs and services</li> </ul>	<p>People are more favorable toward, and less cynical about, the ability of local programs and services to solve housing and homelessness issues.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No matter what we look like or where we come from</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Everyone, no exceptions</li> <li>No matter our income level</li> </ul>	<p>Centers race and origin, and with it, realities of discrimination and systemic inequities, instead of reinforcing the opposition’s idea that housing issues are a product of income only, which primes individual solutions.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increasing the minimum wage to a living wage</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increasing the minimum wage</li> </ul>	<p>At both the national and state level, base and persuadable adults are more likely to say increasing the minimum wage to a living wage is a top priority.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We need to solve homelessness because shelter is a human need</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We need to solve homelessness because of the impact it has on our local businesses</li> </ul>	<p>Again, we must put people front and center and keep our audiences grounded in shelter as a human need, rather than priming a right-wing economic frame that obscures our humanity.</p>