

NARRATIVE ESSENTIALS

The actions communities take to deal with housing insecurity and homelessness often reflect the misguided - and sometimes false - perceptions held by the public, elected officials and other decision makers. In order to build the public will for investments, resources and policies proven to solve homelessness, we must grow the public's understanding about who is forced into homelessness and housing instability and why.

National and grassroots organizations and the philanthropy community have undertaken various **narrative research projects** (housingnarrativelab.org/resources) to help us build power so we shift the direction of the current instead of swimming against the tide of dominant and false narratives about people experiencing homelessness. While the research and approaches vary, they share commonalities we can use to build narrative power. **Here are essentials highlighted in all of the research:**

ESTABLISH SHARED VALUES

- ▶ Value statements that invoke a shared desire for all to get and keep a roof over our heads are strongest for adults overall, our base, and persuadable adults.
- ▶ Establish a shared value across race before naming the problem.
- ▶ Use tested, values based messages to break through the dominant "housing as commodity" frame, frame home holistic.
- ▶ Deploy and reinforce values that have a demonstrated ability to connect people to housing justice.
- ▶ Emphasizing ways in which housed and homeless people share the same struggles and hopes provides an on-ramp to empathy.

EMPHASIZE SYSTEMIC ROOT CAUSES

- ▶ Help people connect the causes and effects of housing insecurity: clear, evidence-based, and "sticky" explanations that pinpoint the sources of rising housing problems and connect them to actionable changes in public policy.
- ▶ Acknowledging the exclusionary policies that have worked to the detriment of many groups of people.

NAME RACE/DIVERSITY/INCLUSIVITY

- ▶ Explicit references to race test well. "Whether we are Black or white, Latino or Asian, Native or newcomer..."
- ▶ Center race in messaging & narrative: People want to take action to address existing inequities, and people need to see themselves in the story.
- ▶ "Everyone has the right to a decent place to live, regardless of race or income;" "we need to ensure we build communities where people from different incomes, beliefs, and backgrounds can live, work...;" "inclusive, hopeful future"
- ▶ Creating affordable housing opportunities means equity for all.

FOCUS ON LIVED EXPERIENCE

- ▶ Show how people are affected by housing instability and homelessness.
- ▶ Show how policies such as Housing First solve homelessness.
- ▶ Avoid wonky and bureaucratic language or a heavy focus on numbers or acronyms to persuade.
- ▶ Ask people with lived expertise how they want to describe their situation: To be homeless, forced into homelessness, experience homelessness.

FOCUS ON SOLUTIONS

- ▶ We need to reinforce that we can, and have, successfully implemented solutions in housing and homelessness when working together.
- ▶ Use robust examples that show how new housing policies worked.
- ▶ Engage base and persuadables in solution-oriented campaigns.

CONNECT HOUSING TO OTHER ISSUES

- ▶ The linkage of jobs to housing is strong, especially with the persuadables.
- ▶ Bring the connection between housing and other issues into sharper focus: Communicate that housing intersects with almost every other social issue and outcome, from education and health to employment and public safety.
- ▶ Connect housing to related narratives in racial justice, health and wellbeing, education, transportation and climate change.
- ▶ Stable housing means making sure everyone has the opportunity to succeed.
- ▶ Make it clear that where you live affects you.
- ▶ The security of housing is critical to well-being.

CREATE UNITY OF PURPOSE: 'JOIN TOGETHER'

- ▶ Create a unity of purpose by describing people working together.
- ▶ “know that when we bring people together from all different walks of life, we’re able to spark new ideas, pioneer groundbreaking innovations, and solve big problems;” “our shared future”
- ▶ Tell a story of us rather than story of them: It is key not just to make the problems collective, but to also make it clear that there are collective benefits in addressing housing affordability issues.
- ▶ Call together a broad-based coalition. Help more people see their stake in this issue.

COUNTER FALSE NARRATIVES, CAREFULLY

- ▶ Redirect misinformation. Don’t engage into direct tit-for-tat or repeating negative messaging, which can reinforce the misinformation that we are trying to counter.
- ▶ Avoid reinforcing stigma and myths. When speaking to the public about homelessness, it’s important to walk a fine line between addressing these concerns and reinforcing myths about the prevalence of addiction and mental illness.

NAME THE ACTORS RESPONSIBLE FOR SOLVING HOMELESSNESS

- ▶ Widen the public’s view of who is responsible for taking action and resolving outcomes: Position government as one of many partners in our reform efforts.
- ▶ Highlight the divide-and-conquer tactics some groups employ and connect them to the outcomes they create.
- ▶ Refer to “Local programs and services” rather than “government programs and services” to avoid triggering cynicism about government.

PROVIDE A 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.
- ▶ Allow people to be heroes in solutions by giving them easy ways to get involved.

AVOID SAYING ‘AFFORDABLE HOUSING’ (and anything wonky or numbers driven)

- ▶ Say things like “Ensuring everyone has a place to live” rather than “Creating programs that make housing affordable” or “Developing affordable housing units.” This puts people front and center and personalizes this issue. It also illustrates the positive outcome that we will achieve, rather than the process we choose to get there.
- ▶ Avoid leading or over-relying on the terms “housing” or “affordable housing”: It is more effective to talk about how much a “home” means to individuals or families.

RESOURCES: