



Section 4: Narrative and Communications

PAST HOUSING REFORM EFFORTS and social justice movements have shown that communications with the public will not change systems alone but it can engage more people in the change process. This requires replacing the negative narratives about housing that are deeply entrenched throughout society and then using communications strategically to identify and engage affordable housing supporters, educate those skeptical of housing solutions, and address any strong opposition.

KEY TERMS

Narratives: An array of related stories and messages that highlight values, frame the problem/causes and determine the solutions/actions. Some narratives have been repeated and reproduced over time to produce deeply and widely held values.

Communications: Using stories, words, images, and/or sounds that convey an idea or belief.

Narrative and Communications Frameworks

Effective communications with the public start with developing a strong case for housing solutions. Fortunately, research-informed communications frameworks exist to effectively engage supporters of housing justice while also reframing dominant negative narratives about housing for audiences who are skeptical or vehemently oppose housing solutions.

The **Housing Justice Narrative Initiative's** research¹ found a strong majority of Americans view housing insecurity as a top issue and see a role for government to intervene to address the housing. But even the best-intentioned communications strategy could prove inefficient and ineffective in promoting housing solutions if they do not use research-based best practices. This includes replacing the existing racialized housing narratives prevalent

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1 Housing Justice Narrative Initiative, "Findings from Focus Groups and Dial Survey", 2021

throughout society. Without this approach to communications and narrative change, communications may even cause harm by repeating the criticisms of housing solutions and reinforcing harmful narratives.

Addressing race through a universal frame

Housing communications must address issues of inequality and racism, while using a universal frame, meaning all community members' have a stake in an equitable future. It is not a matter of whether to address race and racism but how. This is paramount given that much of today's housing policy mandates are rooted in civil rights era legislation. Communications research² has found developing communications with a universally beneficial frame addressing issues of race – rather than avoidance – moves people toward progressive housing solutions. The toolbox's definition of housing justice is a good example of this style.

Housing justice³ is the process and outcome of establishing a housing system in which housing is a human right and a public good and therefore everyone has access to affordable and dignified housing. Housing justice is grounded in an understanding of our country's history of systemic racism and its racialized housing system and centers on the lived experiences of people who have been detrimentally impacted by these systems.

Research finds audiences who are unsure or unaware of race's specific role in housing inequities will not readily support housing solutions that center racial equity. This is true even if they already recognize and voice angst about the growing economic and racial divide in other parts of society.⁴ These audiences respond well to messaging that leads with shared aspirations for housing justice, points to the systems that need to change, and uses new housing narratives that position equity as the pathway to justice (as an end goal).

Research has also shown people like and agree with messages delivered by a multiracial cast.⁵ However, as the planning field has grown more racially diverse, staff of color are often asked to do the labor of attending to mostly white housing critics. Racial equity practitioners from privileged backgrounds have a communications role to play alongside their colleagues; presenting materials, fielding questions, and facilitating conversations with their white peers and the broader community.

Replacing negative narratives with positive narratives

Negative racialized narratives⁶ about housing⁷ are dominant throughout American society and constrain public support for housing solutions. Navi-

2 Ibid

3 Definition developed by Ground Works Consulting and the Leading with Equity Workgroup

4 [Housing Justice Narrative Playbook for the Bay Area](#), Nonprofit Housing, 2020

5 ["Let's Talk About Race"](#) Center for Social Inclusion, 2015

6 See the [GARE Communications Guide](#) for "Common Myths about Race and Racism"

7 ["You Don't Have to Live Here" Why Housing Messages Are Backfiring and 10 Things We Can Do About It](#) Dr. Tiffany Manuel, PHD and Nat Kendall-Taylor, PhD, 2016

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gating and reframing these narratives in communications materials is essential to keeping any housing justice effort on track. [PolicyLink's Housing Justice Narrative Toolkit](#) can help communications staff craft communications materials using the positive new narratives which research has shown will increase support for housing solutions.

The table below lists some powerful dominant negative housing narratives to avoid and research informed equity-focused positive narratives to use instead.⁸

Negative Narratives	Positive Narratives
<p>Housing is earned by those who work hard and make good choices (i.e., bootstrap individualism).</p> <p>Housing is a scarce commodity so someone will always lose out (i.e., scarcity mindset or zero sum thinking).</p> <p>We shouldn't help people without good housing while hardworking taxpayers make our economy run (i.e., takers vs. makers).</p>	<p>The shared fate of a community is dependent on everyone have safe and stable housing Housing is a basic human need and public good for all of society.</p> <p>Holding down a well paying job and expanding economic opportunities for all is dependent on everyone having access to stable housing.</p> <p>Low-income households and households of color are positive contributors to society and the economy.</p> <p>Everyone should be able to live in a neighborhood with good schools, grocery stores, parks, and libraries. Being denied where to live based on race, family status or disability is discrimination.</p>

“Never, ever, ever repeat negative narratives, stereotypes, lies or misinformation”

Dr. Tiffany Manuel

Racial bias is often hidden within these negative narratives to trigger fear and critiques about “who” is worthy of good housing and the wealth-building opportunities embedded within homeownership. Housing opportunity should not be viewed as a “zero-sum” game, whereby, if low-income or marginalized

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communities stand to gain, wealthier or more privileged residents lose. These types of critiques often omit historical housing and economic discrimination, which led to the existing housing and wealth-gap experienced by many people of color today.

Dominant narratives can be countered by seeding new narratives and anchoring the conversations around solutions. The definition of housing justice offers inspiring new narratives about housing as a public good and human right (rather than a scarce commodity for speculation). Reframing low-income households and households of color as positive contributors to society and the economy can unseat the “takers vs. makers” narrative. An exceptionally compelling narrative invokes the shared fate of a community such as.⁹

“Our city is experiencing unprecedented economic growth but not everyone is benefiting from this prosperity. We are all better off when we invest housing resources and focus policies on closing gaps experienced by those most impacted by housing insecurities and racial disparities.”

Using effective housing messages and communications techniques

Dr. Tiffany Manuel’s [“10 Core Principles of Strategic Case-making”](#) provides a communications framework to guide the creation of communications materials:

1. **Connect to people’s aspirations** by first listening to their aspirations and then connecting them to our collective aspirations for racial equity and fair housing¹⁰:
2. **Naming the urgency of this moment to make a better future** and highlighting their personal power and agency to affect change.
3. **Telling people what they (and all of us) will lose if they sit on the sidelines** and our society continues to see increases in housing insecurity and related racial disparities¹¹.
4. **Navigating the dominant narratives** ingrained in our society about housing and equity that can derail your case and replace them with positive frames.
5. **Anchoring and validating solutions** that are future oriented rather than focusing on problems.
6. **Make inequitable systems the villain** rather than blaming individuals and their choices.
7. **Tell the story of “us” by using the power of storytelling** to widen the lens and make clear that housing issues have broader impacts for everybody.
8. **Foster collective ownership** so people understand how housing injustice affects their own lives and gives them a reason to be part of the solution.

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9 See the [“GARE Communications Guide”](#) for more examples

10 See PolicyLink’s [“Equity is the Superior Growth Model”](#) for shared aspirational language.

11 See Manuel Pastor’s [“Equity, Growth, and Community”](#) analysis of regions.

9. **Clarify your value proposition** for those who want to know more about why you are best positioned to make a housing justice agenda become a reality.
10. **Share your roadmap and metrics for success** to show supporters a clear path to the final goal with stops along the way to report on progress.

Race Forward's "[Housing is a Basic Human Need: A Messaging Guide for Housing Justice](#)" summarizes the Housing Justice Initiative's research findings about which messages are most popular generally and with specific audiences. It provides tailored communications materials to help communications staff focus resources and tailor messaging to those most likely to support solutions and those that can be persuaded.

Navigating negative disrupters¹²

Negative disrupters differ from dominant narratives. "Disrupters" provide often valid but unproductive objections to housing solutions that distract conversations away from the solutions and render discussions unproductive. Examples include:

- Criticizing more affordable housing as being insufficient to fully solve other related social problems like income inequality or homelessness.
- Concern about changes to neighborhood character.
- General statements of resignation about an inability to solve the housing crisis.

Distinguishing between a narrative and a disrupter is an important skill when crafting a response that will keep conversations on track. Challenging negative disrupters and dominant narratives is tricky work. It is best to strategically pivot these conversations toward productive solutions.

The Pivot¹³

When an unproductive conversation threatens to derail the work, using a pivot can help. Not everyone must be on board to achieve the goals. Try finding something positive in a statement of opposition, relabel using a bridging statement, and then return the conversation back to the topic. Examples of a bridging statement are:

- "One of the things I hear in that is that you value [shared value]. Is that right?"
- "Thank you for saying that, I share your concerns for the community, it reminds me...."
- You put a number of big issues on the table and to me, it all comes back to... [shared value]

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¹² [Strategic CaseMaking: The Field Guide for Building Public and Political Will](#), Dr. Tiffany Manuel, 2020.

¹³ Ibid

Using the Toolbox

Begin by familiarizing yourself with the communications resources in this section and listed in the [Resource Library](#). Then invite colleagues and your communications team to practice making a case for housing justice by answering these questions:

- Who is your audience (housing supporters or reasonable skeptics)? What are their aspirations, and how do they connect to our collective aspirations for racial equity and fair housing?
- What is the urgency of this moment to make a better future? How can people use their personal power and agency to affect change?
- What will people (and all of us) lose if they sit on the sidelines and/or society continues to see increases in housing insecurity and related racial disparities?

Next, prepare for opposition by listing the common dominant racialized housing narratives. Then next to each list the housing justice narratives you will use to reframe them. Roleplay pivoting from the dominant narratives to introducing the new narratives in conversations.

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