

How to Talk About Homelessness

A Messaging Guide from
Shift the Bay and All Home

Photo: Faye Saechao for All Home

The most extreme situations of unsheltered homelessness loom large in the public's mind, even though they are not representative of the full reality of homelessness in our region. Polling and focus group research from Shift the Bay, All Home, and EMC Research in 2022 found that too many people still don't connect housing as the solution to homelessness.

This messaging guide is grounded in those findings to help advocates:

- communicate the truth about homelessness;
- clarify its systemic causes;
- connect with values and empathy;
- respond to common misperceptions, and
- highlight proven solutions.

It is a resource for those working on homelessness at all levels: when more people understand the true root causes of homelessness, they're more likely to support real solutions, so that everyone in our communities can have a safe, stable home no matter their race, income, or zip code.

How to Use this Guide

This guide uses **The Opportunity Agenda's Value, Problem, Solution, Action (VPSA) messaging structure**. Each step in this framework builds on the previous one, leading to a clear opportunity for action. You can use the principles in this guide for any issue, and feel free to use these sample messages verbatim or adapt them as needed for your context.

KEY PRINCIPLES



Establish shared values and benefits

Lead and close with inclusive, values-based language that reaches across race and class to remind your audience what we all have in common. Show how addressing homelessness benefits our entire community.



Explain that structural forces push people into homelessness

"Pushed into" evokes the systemic and economic forces at play: decades of underbuilding and underfunding affordable housing, and generations of systemic injustice and discrimination.



Focus on solutions

Everyone knows there's a problem, they want to know more about how to solve it.



End with a call to action

Give your audience something to do, a next step to take to be part of the solution.

shift
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ALL
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EXAMPLE MESSAGING



Establish shared values and benefits

"No matter what we look like, how much we earn, or where we lay our heads down to sleep, we all need a safe place to call home."



Explain that structural forces push people into homelessness

"But years of failing to invest in affordable housing while adding thousands of high-wage jobs in the Bay Area has driven up rents and pushed more and more people into homelessness. And unfortunately, people who already face discrimination in housing, employment, education, or the criminal justice system are more likely to be forced into homelessness."



Focus on solutions

"Finding permanent housing is the proven long-term solution. Equally important are immediate interim options that provide safe places for people who are unsheltered to live while they get connected to permanent housing, and homelessness prevention to reduce the number of people in need."



End with a call to action

"By working together, we can demand bold action that makes the Bay Area a place where everyone has a roof over their head and all of our neighbors can thrive."

AN IMPORTANT NOTE

Throughout this guide, there are examples of how to **center homelessness as an experience, not an identity**. Reducing stigma about people experiencing homelessness starts with reminding our audiences to tap into what it would feel like to try to keep a steady job, go to school or take care of a family without a roof over one's head. Our messaging needs to build empathy and compassion in order to build stronger support for homelessness solutions.

Here are examples of ways you can center homelessness as an experience:

- We all have a time in our lives where we need care to get by. When we care for our neighbors who are struggling, our whole community is stronger for it.
- Many of us don't have the savings or personal support systems to bounce back after a traumatic event like a job loss, health crisis, or fleeing domestic violence.

ANSWERING FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What are the real root causes of homelessness?

Help people look beyond individual circumstances to understand the **structural and systemic causes of homelessness**. This can help avoid the stigma and negative assumptions (e.g. blaming substance use, mental illness, personal failings as the main causes), and create a more productive conversation oriented toward the solutions we need.

- **Establish shared values and benefits:** *"Regardless of our circumstances, we all need a safe place to call home."*
- **Explain structural causes:** *"A lack of homes that are affordable, paired with a rapid increase in high-wage jobs in the Bay Area, led to rising rents and homelessness. Our housing and economic systems are designed to leave some people out in the cold."*
- **Focus on solutions:** *"The simplest way to reduce the number of homeless people in the Bay Area and California is to make more homes affordable."*
- **Include a call to action:** *"Support solutions that address the root causes that put so many people at risk of homelessness."*

In this example, centering the experience of homelessness in your response can look like this:

“With high housing costs and few affordable homes available, more and more people are being pushed into homelessness—seniors, families, even working people. All it takes is one missed paycheck, one unexpected expense, or piece of bad luck. And the longer someone experiences the trauma of homelessness, the harder it can be to get back into safe, stable housing.”



Photo: Faye Saechao for All Home

What are proven solutions to homelessness?

Focus on **permanent homes** as the first and best solution to homelessness, and also explain the importance of **interim/emergency housing and prevention**. Remind audiences that their **government is a necessary partner**, and they have the power to influence the government’s priorities.

- **Establish shared values and benefits:** *“We all deserve access to basic needs and a safe home. We’re in this together and ending homelessness will make our entire communities stronger, more inclusive, healthier, and more resilient.”*
- **Explain structural causes:** *“Failing to invest in affordable housing for decades helped get us where we are today, so we need to make it easier, faster, and cheaper to build affordable homes all over the Bay Area.”*
- **Focus on solutions:** *“It’s common sense, and studies have proven it time and again: What people experiencing homelessness most need is a home. All Home’s 1-2-4 Framework for Homelessness Solutions highlights the need for simultaneous investments in three strategies: For every one investment in interim housing units, there should be at least two investments in permanent housing and four homelessness prevention interventions.”*
- **Include a call to action:** *“This is all of our problem to solve — and it’s exactly what our government is for. But the kind of big, ambitious change we need won’t happen unless more of us demand bold action and investments in proven solutions at a scale we haven’t yet seen.”*

In this example, centering the experience of homelessness in your response can look like this:

“Being homeless makes it incredibly difficult to keep a steady job, go to school, take care of a family, or even take care of basic health and wellness. A home is the first, most basic foundation we all need to build stability and make everything else possible.”



Photo: Faye Saechao for All Home



Learn more: allhomeca.org/1-2-4-framework

How can I help build support for real solutions?

Address resistance, skepticism, or defeatism by **connecting to shared values** and showing how reducing homelessness benefits our whole community. **Reject a scarcity mindset** and insist that change is possible if we take collective action.

- **Establish shared values and benefits:** *“Safe, stable homes are the foundation for strong communities. Good schools, good jobs, safe neighborhoods — those all depend on people being housed. For example, for small businesses struggling to stay afloat, to attract customers and skilled employees, making housing more affordable is critical.”*
- **Explain structural causes:** *“Homelessness is a symptom of even bigger problems that affect everyone in the region — housing costs that go up and up, and wages that don’t keep pace.”*
- **Focus on solutions:** *“Decades of bad policy and inaction got us here, but we can do better. Many great policies and programs are already making a difference that we can expand on and replicate. We have the resources, if we choose to prioritize them, for people who are most in need.”*
- **Include a call to action:** *“It’s time to let go of our frustration, lean into the solutions that are in plain sight, and join together to demand a future that works better for everyone.”*

In this example, centering the experience of homelessness in your response can look like this:

“The pandemic reminded us how interconnected we all are. The health, safety, and stability of our communities and neighborhoods depends on the health, safety, and stability of every one of our neighbors. If the people who are struggling the most to survive were a little better off, everyone would be better off.”



Photo: Bay Rising and East Bay Alliance for a Sustainable Economy

MORE HOUSING NARRATIVE RESOURCES

Shift the Bay (shifthebay.org) and All Home (allhomeca.org)

For more examples of solutions-oriented messaging

The Opportunity Agenda (opportunityagenda.org)

For a deeper dive into the framework we used in this guide, see *Vision, Values, and Voice: A Communications Toolkit*

We Make the Future (wemakethefuture.us)

In particular, look for the *Race Class Narrative*

Housing Narrative Lab (housingnarrativelab.org)

We recommend reading *Narrative Essentials* and *Messaging Guide for Communicating about Homelessness*

Frameworks Institute and Dr. Tiffany Manuel (frameworksinstitute.org)

We learned a lot from their publication *You Don’t Have to Live Here*

Chan Zuckerberg Initiative (cadreamtoolkit.org)

Useful tools for housing advocates to understand their audiences and change the narrative

