

To build support across race, income, party, and ideology, we need to connect rising housing costs to local people's stories and day-to-day experiences of housing shortages. We must then present specific, concrete housing choices and the community benefits they will produce.

Across the country, the high cost of housing hurts Americans from all walks of life, in big cities and small towns. Yet in most places, a failed status quo restricts affordable choices, resulting in a shortage of homes, cutthroat competition, and the displacement of local workers and families.

Americans are ready for change. A broad majority sees housing as a crisis—but a solvable one. While many voters do not naturally connect high costs to short supply, most recognize negative consequences of shortages in everyday life and support policies to allow more housing in their communities, from backyard cottages to small apartments; and majorities favor solutions to foster affordable, connected, convenient city neighborhoods.



Developed by Welcoming Neighbors Network and Sightline Institute collaboration with FM3 Research, Global Strategy Group, and Grow Progress

THE PRO-HOUSING FRAMEWORK

Through extensive testing, including qualboards, research journaling, and two national surveys of American voters and political influentials, followed by randomized controlled trials, we have developed a five-step framework for policymakers and advocates to advance housing policy. The messaging framework connects tactical policy changes to the real experiences and aspirations of real people and communities.

Meet people where they are: **costs are too high**

Across policymakers, thought leaders, and the general population of American voters, **high costs are the key entry point** to the housing issue. Leading with costs establishes common ground with people across identities and ideologies.

"Housing is too unaffordable today because there are not enough homes to rent or buy that meet people's needs and budgets."

1

Point to **competition** to connect costs to **shortages**

While people do not easily grasp the economics of housing markets or the cost impacts of regulations and zoning, they can see ways that shortages increase housing costs. Point to familiar ways **shortages drive competition**—from wait lists for rentals to bidding wars for homebuyers—to **connect the shortages to cost**.

"Not having enough homes to rent or buy creates cutthroat competition and drives up prices."

2

Emphasize the **people affected** in our communities now

Focus on **sympathetic community members** who are hurt by the shortage—families trying to stay where they grew up, workers that communities rely on who can't afford to live where they work—to **forge an emotional connection** to policies that will help unlock more home choices people can afford. **Shift the focus** from housing structures to the **benefits for people**.

"Right now, people our communities rely on—like teachers, childcare workers, and service and retail workers—can't find homes they can afford in the places they serve."

3

Be **specific** and **concrete** when presenting changes

Jargon, abstractions, and the implication of drastic change can cause fear of policy changes. But voters and decision-makers respond favorably to **specific, familiar home types and discrete, focused regulatory fixes**.

"We can allow smaller homes to be built on small lots to create affordable starter homes, and we can make it legal to convert a basement or garage into an apartment for a family member or caregiver to live in or to rent out."

4

Highlight how **more home choices benefit people** and their communities

Paint a compelling picture of positive community outcomes and the ways people stand to benefit. Create a powerful emotional response by **illustrating how the lives of sympathetic community members will be better** through policy changes that allow more home choices.

"A mix of homes, of all sizes and prices, will give more people a chance to own their home, build wealth, and provide solid foundations of economic stability and opportunity for themselves and the next generation."

5

RESEARCH-BASED TIPS FOR POWERFUL PRO-HOUSING MESSAGES:

Instead of “supply and demand,” use people’s day-to-day experience of competition to frame the shortage	Make clear the status quo is due to policy choices and is changeable, not set in stone	Position more housing options as a way to protect people from displacement	Frame abundant housing options as a vehicle for working people to gain long-term wealth	When talking to policymakers and influencers, tie housing to workforce
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DOs AND DON'Ts: FRAMING AND TERMINOLOGY

Adopt everyday wording, familiar examples, and friendly visual language.

Avoid anti-housing frames, scare tactics, exaggerations, and jargon.

Housing shortage	Housing crisis
More choices and availability	Building and construction
Allow homes of all shapes and sizes; lift local restrictions preventing affordable home choices	End single-family zoning; rezone; upzone
More affordable home choices for people with jobs here; workers the community relies on	Growth projections; population boom
More available homes give renters and home buyers more leverage and power	Allow supply to meet demand
Allow smaller starter homes on smaller lots	Reduce minimum lot sizes
Bans on affordable housing choices like [housing type]	Single-family zoning
McMansions and luxury remodels	Single-family homes
Homes	Units
More homes choices; more housing options	Housing supply
More home choices in convenient; connected communities	Density
More home choices in cities; home choices near jobs and transit; homes tucked into existing neighborhoods	Infill; urban infill
Affordable; unaffordable	Expensive; inexpensive
Small apartment buildings up to [proposed number of] stories	Multifamily housing; mid-rise apartments; 5-over-1s
Duplexes, triplexes, fourplexes, and townhomes	“Missing middle”; small multifamily
Displacement	Gentrification
Working family housing	Workforce housing

USING THE FRAMEWORK

Examples of top-performing messages that can be plugged into the five-step narrative framework in support of pro-housing policy change.

- 1 Meet people where they are: costs are too high
- 2 Point to competition to connect costs to shortages
- 3 People affected in our communities now.
- 4 Specific and concrete changes.
- 5 More home choices benefit people and their communities

Homes that **local workers** who serve our communities can afford

- Define the Problem**
- 1 Housing is too unaffordable today because there are not enough homes to rent or buy that meet people's needs and budgets. Not having enough homes to rent or buy creates cutthroat competition and drives up prices.
- 2
- 3 Right now, people our communities rely on—like teachers, childcare workers, and service and retail workers—can't find homes they can afford in the cities they serve. And when there are not enough homes, the wealthy will always outbid working people, and everyone else has to move farther away.
- Present the Solution**
- 4
- 5 Allowing more homes of all shapes and sizes, like fourplexes and apartments, makes our cities and towns more affordable for local workers, shortening commutes, helping local businesses hire locally, and supporting a thriving community for everyone.

This type of messaging is also particularly effective for **policymakers**. For this audience, use messages that are community-focused rather than individualistic. Emphasize a vision of the future and how these changes will benefit the people they represent.

Starter homes build solid foundations of economic stability and opportunity

- Define the Problem**
- 3 If you or someone you know is looking to buy a home, you know that housing is just too unaffordable today.
- 1
- 2 Most people can't afford the big, expensive homes on the market, McMansions and luxury renovated houses. It is almost impossible to find an affordable starter home, townhouse, or condo, to get a foothold.
- 3
- Present the Solution**
- 4 Our communities can change current laws to allow more homes of all shapes and sizes that people can afford, from townhomes and duplexes, to fourplexes and sixplexes, to apartments.
- 5 Allowing more home choices will give people the opportunity to own their own home, build wealth, and build up solid foundations of economic stability and opportunity.

This was the most effective message for increasing support across **all income and education levels**.