

How to Talk About Homelessness

A messaging guide from



When more people understand the true root causes of homelessness, effective solutions come into focus. This messaging guide can help anyone better understand and communicate the systemic drivers that push people into homelessness, respond to common misperceptions, and build support for proven solutions. Together, we can help make the experience of homelessness rare and brief, and ensure that everyone in our communities has a safe, stable home no matter our race, income, or zip code.

Sample Message

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.

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.

Being homeless makes it incredibly difficult to keep a steady job, go to school, or take care of a family. Having a safe home is the first, most basic foundation we all need to build thriving lives and strong communities.

Providing housing to people who have been pushed into homelessness is a proven approach that ensures people can rebuild their lives. We also need to do more to prevent homelessness and provide safe, dignified places for people who are unsheltered to live while they get connected to permanent housing.

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 families can thrive, so that all our neighborhoods can be safe, diverse, and strong.

Important 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.

Center homelessness as an experience, not an identity. Connect with the humanity of your audience and the people who are suffering.

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

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

Polling and focus group research from Shift the Bay, All Home, and EMC Research in 2022 found that many people don't always connect homelessness with housing solutions. Also, 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 the region. This messaging guide is grounded in those findings to help advocates communicate the truth about homelessness, clarify the systemic causes, connect with values and empathy, and highlight proven solutions.

🏠 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**.

- **Explain structural causes:** The single biggest reason that so many people are homeless in the Bay Area and California is simple: there aren't enough affordable homes. Pair that with growth in high-wage jobs and rents will rise, then so does homelessness. Individual circumstances of course play a role, but our housing and economic system is designed to leave some people out in the cold.
- **Center the experience of homelessness:** When people have a safe, stable home they can afford, it makes other challenges — like health problems, unemployment, substance use, or mental illness — more manageable. Providing a safe place to stabilize is the first step to enable people to rebuild their lives.
- **Center the experience of homelessness:** 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 once someone experiences the trauma of homelessness, it can be very hard to get back into safe, stable housing.

🏠 What are the 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 government is a necessary partner, and they have the power to influence government's priorities.

- **Focus on solutions:** It's common sense, and studies have proven it time and again: What people experiencing homelessness most need is a home. Building more permanent affordable homes is the long-term solution to unsheltered homelessness.

- **Explain structural causes/focus on solutions:** Failing to invest in affordable housing for decades got us where we are today, so in order to solve homelessness we need to make it easier, faster, and cheaper to build affordable homes all over the Bay Area.
- **Focus on solutions:** In addition to more affordable homes, we need simultaneous investments in homelessness prevention and safe, dignified interim housing options. [All Home calls this the 1-2-4 Framework for Homelessness Solutions \(allhomeca.org/1-2-4-framework\):](https://allhomeca.org/1-2-4-framework/)
- **Interim housing** is non-congregate living space with privacy, security, and supportive services to help people stabilize and find a permanent home. It can address immediate safety and health/wellness needs while people are getting connected to permanent housing. Interim housing is important because the streets should not be the waiting room for a permanent home.
- **Homelessness prevention** uses emergency financial assistance and services to keep people in their homes, because the easiest way to solve homelessness is to prevent it from happening in the first place. This also keeps shelters from becoming overwhelmed. Across the Bay Area, three households are being pushed into homelessness for every one that is housed through homeless response systems.
- **Call to action/ shared benefits:** This is all of our problem to solve — and it's exactly what government is for. But the kind of big, ambitious change we need won't happen unless state and local leaders hear from us that they must do things differently. More of us need to demand bold action and investments in proven solutions at a scale we haven't yet seen. We're in this together and ending homelessness will make our entire communities stronger, more inclusive, healthier, and more resilient.

🏠 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**.

- **Focus on solutions:** We've seen what happens when we fail to make housing a priority: more and more people are pushed into homelessness. Investing in real solutions now is the right thing to do for those experiencing homelessness — and for our whole community.
- **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.
- **Shared values and benefits:** Safe, stable homes are the foundation for strong communities. Good schools, good jobs, safe neighborhoods — those all depend on housing. For example, for small businesses struggling to stay afloat, to attract customers and skilled employees, making housing more affordable is critical.
- **Shared values and benefits:** 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.

🏠 How should I talk about people experiencing homelessness?

Challenge stereotypes and focus on the impacts of homelessness on a person's life to **enhance empathy** and develop a more complete understanding.

- **Center the experience of homelessness:** Homelessness isn't always visible, and all kinds of people can be pushed into homelessness—including families, working adults, seniors, veterans, students. Many of us don't have the savings and personal support systems to bounce back after a traumatic event like a job loss, health crisis, or fleeing domestic violence.
- **Center the experience of homelessness:** 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, including hygiene. A home is the first, most basic foundation we all need to build stability and make everything else possible.
- **Explain structural causes/racial disparities:** People who already face discrimination in access to housing, employment, education, credit, or the criminal justice system — including Black people, people of color, people with disabilities, and LGBTQ people — are more likely to experience poverty and be forced into homelessness.

Homelessness and Housing Narrative Resources

Housing Narrative Lab

Guidance on Homelessness Messaging: housingnarrativelab.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Message-Guidance-Homeless-Narrative-Communications.pdf

Narrative Essentials: housingnarrativelab.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Narrative-Essentials-v2.pdf

All Home

Solutions Library: allhomeca.org/solutions

Shift the Bay

Messaging Guide: shiftthebay.org/resources/message-guide

We Make the Future

Race Class Narrative: wemakethefuture.us/history-of-the-race-class-narrative

Frameworks Institute and Dr. Tiffany Manuel

You Don't Have to Live Here: frameworksinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/You_Dont_Have_to_Live_Here.pdf

The Chan Zuckerberg Initiative

The California Dream Toolkit: cadreamtoolkit.org