

# The Good Neighbor:

A Strategic Communications Approach to Strengthen Support for Safe, Stable, and Affordable Housing Policies

Published: July 2024



The Colorado Health Foundation™



**wonder**  
strategies for good

# Table of Contents

---

- I. [Guide at a Glance](#)
- II. [Audience Research Process](#)
- III. [Humans are Heartwired](#)
- IV. [Tested Housing Policies](#)
- V. [Insights About Audiences](#)
- VI. [Messaging Recommendations](#)
- VII. [Messaging Principles in Action](#)
- VIII. [Putting It All Together](#)
- IX. [Research Methodology & Team](#)
- X. [Index](#)



# Who Should Use This Guide?



**This guide is focused on building and deepening public support for inclusive housing policies across Colorado.** We have heard from housing advocates that they often face opposition—whether that is at local planning meetings, the ballot box, or the state Capitol—when trying to advance policies that address the housing crisis happening across the state.

While there are many ways to overcome opposition to enacting progressive policy change, **this guide is designed for advocates looking to build support by: activating audiences who are already supportive to take further action; persuading audiences who are conflicted; and neutralizing audiences who are firmly opposed and will not change their minds.**

The Heartwired messaging framework outlined in this guide is grounded in a psychologically-informed understanding of how human beings change. It acknowledges that people's emotions, attitudes and perspectives on emotionally and socially complex

issues like housing can be complicated and often seem contradictory. Even those with shared values might waver on support when concerns hit close to home—but by using effective persuasive messaging, we can bolster our audiences' support for specific housing policies.

**This guide is based on research conducted among Colorado voters,** demonstrating how persuasive messaging can activate the Supportive Base, persuade Conflicted Empathizer and Concerned Skeptic audiences, and help neutralize Opposition Base audiences. (See [page 21](#) for definitions of these four audiences from the research.)

It's important to note that persuasion is not the only avenue for change, and not everyone within your organization or allied organizations needs to be a persuasion messenger. For those who are engaged in persuasion work, this guide provides a framework and example messaging to use in your work to build support.

# Guide at a Glance

## Insights About Audiences

### 1 **Housing is a deeply personal issue: all Coloradans have lived experiences with it, and it has a direct impact on their day-to-day lives.**

Everyone has lived experiences with, and a need for, housing. Unlike other issues that are more dominantly influenced by political ideology, our audiences' support for or opposition to policies on housing—and adjacent issues like homelessness, mental health treatment, and addiction—is often rooted in meanings they have ascribed to their own lived experiences.

### 2 **Audiences and advocates often share many deeply-held values.** For advocates doing this work, it may or may not be a surprise to learn that they hold many similar values as our audiences—such as **community, family, health and well-being, and agreement that everyone should have a home where they feel safe and secure.** Audiences may describe these values differently than advocates based on their lived experiences. At their core, because these values are rooted in the same fundamental principles, they can be important sources of fuel for supporting proposed policies (for more on this, see [pages 15-16.](#))



Section continues on next page 

## Guide at a Glance: **Insights About Audiences**

3

**Other factors, like audiences' lived experiences, emotions, values and beliefs, can cause internal conflict which inhibits their ability to become or remain supportive of proposed policies.**

For example, in this research we heard from audiences that on the one hand, they value community and want to support and help others (e.g., by supporting more affordable housing). On the other hand, their personal experiences living in or near affordable housing led to concerns about safety or effects on their property values, and therefore their own physical and financial security.

For homeowners, being able to buy a home can also be a representation of their own sacrifice and hard work. Therefore, anything that they see as posing a risk to the value of their home may also feel like a threat to their independence, agency/self-determination, and the ability to provide and care for themselves and their families.

Our audiences' internal conflict can also be shaped by implicit biases, including racial and class biases—for a deeper dive into this, see [pages 27-29](#).

4

**To deepen support, messaging needs to help audiences manage their internal conflict.**

The messaging recommendations in this guide are designed to help key audience segments—including Supportive Base, Conflicted Empathizer, and Concerned Skeptic audiences—manage their internal conflict and move to greater support of proposed policies.



# Messaging Recommendations

Based on the messages, messengers and stories tested in this research, we identified five principles that contribute to successful messaging interventions. Together, these five messaging principles are a framework for communicating effectively on emotionally complex housing issues. The principles are summarized here and described in greater detail starting on [page 30](#).



## Build trust

Establish trust to effectively communicate and connect with your audiences.



## Acknowledge complexities

Demonstrate that you are aware of the complexities of these issues and the concerns that audiences may have.



## Calm concerns

Address the powerful emotions that audiences may experience on these issues by modeling how to manage their internal conflicts.



## Nurture compassion

Show audiences the harms caused by the lack of proposed policies—and why they should care.



## Activate hope

Spotlight effective programs and policies to inspire optimism and hope.

## Guide at a Glance: Messaging Recommendations

The five messaging principles in this guide are informed by our audience research as well as the science of how people relate to and make decisions about social issues.

For audiences to see and consider ideas in a new way, especially to have a change of heart, they need the opportunity to process those decisions through their own values and beliefs. **If audiences initially feel undecided or conflicted, being told what to think and how to act by advocacy messaging can trigger strong negative emotions, stemming from the feeling that their agency is being taken away or threatened.**

A consistent finding in both psychology studies and real-world messaging campaigns is that this often activates an argumentative state of mind that leads audiences to disagree, because it doesn't feel good to have their agency taken away from them.

The Heartwired messaging approach shared in this guide aims to maintain a sense of agency for audiences, and importantly, equip them to use that agency to arrive at their own support for effective housing policies and programs.



### Dig Deeper

The recommendations in this messaging guide were developed based on original research (see [page 73](#) for an overview of the research methodology). These recommendations were also informed and supported by best practices from multiple fields and disciplines including psychology, neuroscience, cognitive linguistics, and public interest communications. **To learn more about key concepts which shaped our recommendations, look for the magnifying glass icon shown above.**



Build trust



Acknowledge complexities



Calm concerns



Nurture compassion



Activate hope

# Welcome from the Colorado Health Foundation

## Dear Reader,

### **Housing is deeply felt and top of mind for Coloradans.**

As housing costs rise and the availability of affordable homes dwindles, stress and uncertainty are taking a toll on the physical and mental health of Coloradans.\* The housing crisis is not just an economic issue, but a challenge to health and well-being that requires urgent attention and action.

At The Colorado Health Foundation, we have heard from advocates across the state that the policies that could make the biggest difference for people living on low incomes and people of color—whether they are currently renters, prospective homeowners, or experiencing homelessness—will require broad-based and sustained support from adoption to implementation.

They are also areas ripe for opposition. Advocates report organized lobbying by industry and special interest coalitions, as well as resistance from local homeowners and community members.

Another challenge we face is that many federal, state and local housing policies and practices are grounded in racism, discrimination, and bias. Advocates have shared frustration that opposition interests often counter proposed solutions by using racially coded language and messaging that upholds an unjust status quo.

**To meet these challenges and achieve broad support for policies that advance housing justice, we need a strategic communications approach to activate our supporters, persuade those who are uncertain, and neutralize messages from the opposition.**



---

\*In 2023, 82% of respondents on the [annual statewide Colorado Pulse poll](#) reported that the cost of housing is an extreme or very serious problem (up from 67% in 2020). Nearly 3 in 10 respondents (28%) said they were worried they could lose their home in the coming year due to high costs of rent or mortgage. This worry jumped to 49% of Native Americans and renters, 47% of African American and Black respondents, and 36% of people living on low incomes.

*Message continues on next page*





That is why we engaged [Wonder: Strategies for Good](#) and [Goodwin Simon Strategic Research](#) to conduct deep audience research and develop messaging strategies on the housing crisis in Colorado—with particular attention paid to **policies that would strengthen renter protections, increase the availability of homes that are affordable, and create more supportive housing**. This multiphase project used qualitative and quantitative research to better understand the mindsets and experiences of Colorado voters.

**This messaging guide outlines key components of persuasive messaging strategies, along with recommendations on how to best deploy them.**

This guide also includes quotes from Colorado voters who participated in the research, and reflections from Colorado policy advocates, to allow their perspectives to be represented in their own words.

The research in this guide uncovered many valuable insights about messaging on the housing crisis in Colorado, and it also did not address every question we have, particularly questions about how to tackle opposition that is rooted in racial discrimination and bias head-on. In partnership with this research team, CHF is launching a new research project in 2024 specifically to develop evidence-based messaging about racism and discrimination as they relate to policies addressing health equity. We look forward to sharing the results from that project.

**Our hope is that the audience insights and messaging framework in this guide can help grassroots and community groups across the state build a housing future that works for everyone in Colorado.**

Kyle Rojas Legleiter  
Senior Director of Policy Advocacy  
The Colorado Health Foundation

# Deepest Thanks to our Advisors and Advocates

---

The audience research and recommendations shared in this messaging guide were deeply informed by an advisory committee of advocates working on housing and justice issues in Colorado, as well as important contributions from others working in this space.

We are indebted to the following individuals who provided time, perspectives and expertise stemming from both their professional work and lived experiences. These folks guided the specific policies we tested, provided strategic guidance during the research process, and worked with us to share their stories and lived experiences in the messages we tested.

**Cathy Alderman**

Colorado Coalition for the Homeless

**Maribel Cifuentes**

**Lucille Echohawk**

**Olga Gonzalez**

**Robin Kneich**

**Hassan Latif**

**Lloyd Lewis**

**Sophia Mayott-Guerrero**

**Tamara Pogue**

Summit County Commission

**Julie Reiskin**

Colorado Cross-Disability Coalition

**Daniel Ramos**

Colorado Democracy Alliance

**Brian Rossbert**

**Laura Rossbert**

**Desiree Westlund**

United for a New Economy

**Emily Wheeland**

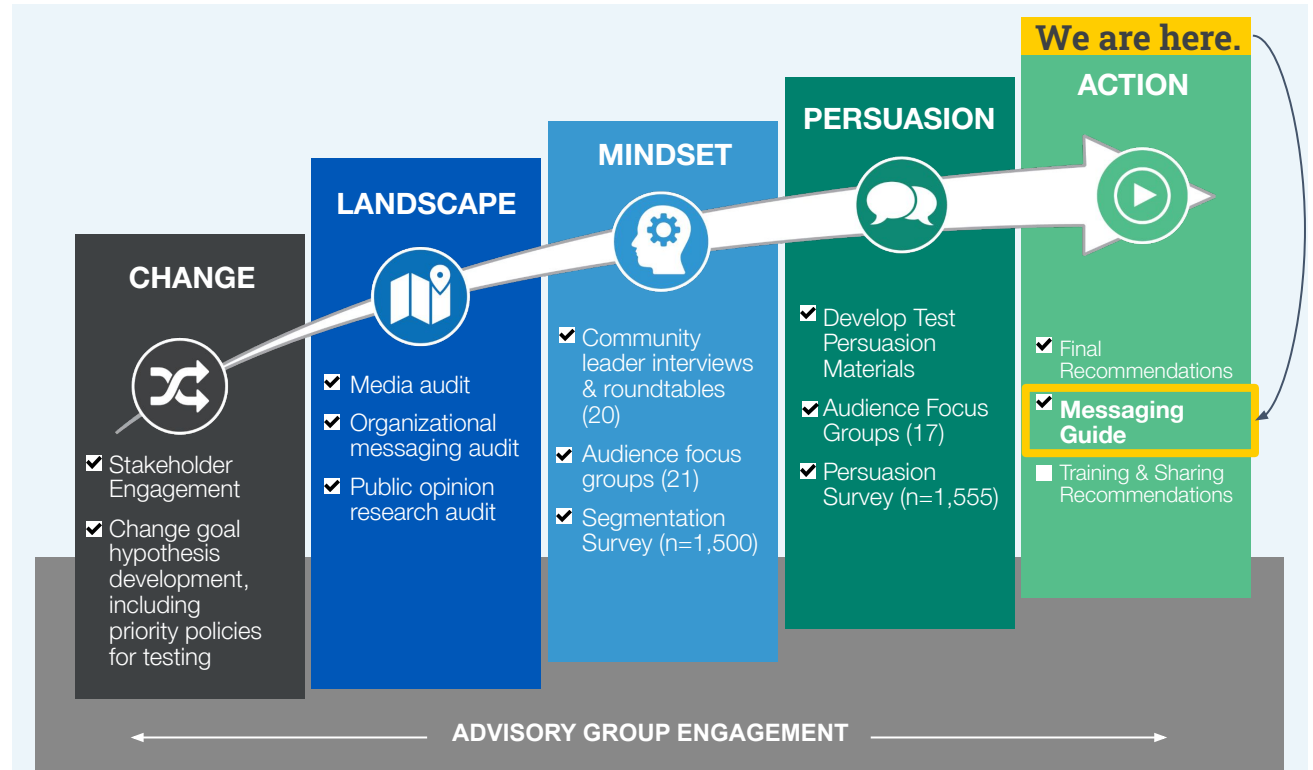
**Jake Williams**

Healthier Colorado

# Audience Research Process

The audience research in this guide was conducted between 2019 and 2023. It included: a review of the current messaging landscape on housing via an audit of media coverage, key organizations' current messaging, and existing public opinion research; interviews, focus groups, and a statewide audience segmentation survey to understand audiences' existing mindsets toward housing issues; and focus groups and another statewide persuasion survey to test persuasion messages.

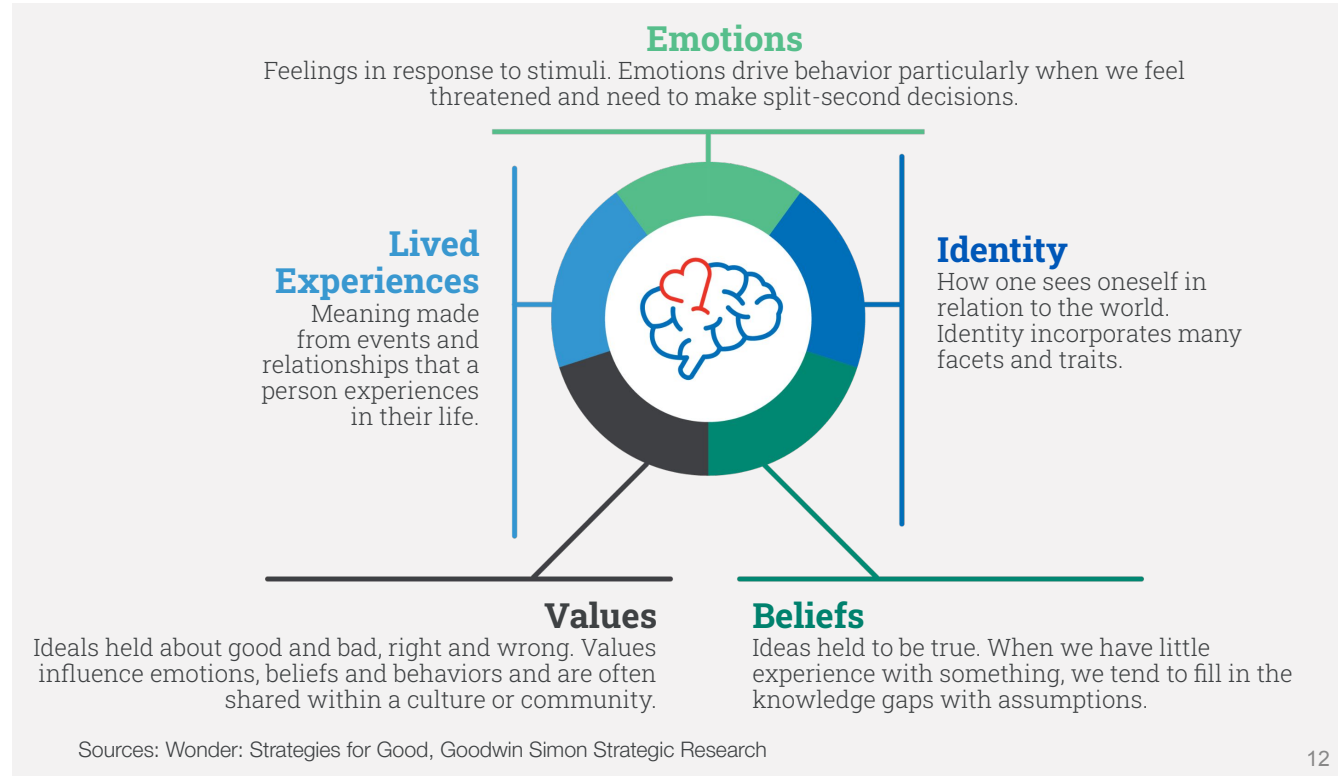
The advisory committee was involved throughout the process to provide guidance and strategic input.



# Humans are Heartwired

**When it comes to making emotionally complex decisions, people are Heartwired. Five Heartwired factors—emotions, identity, values, beliefs and lived experiences—combine and often collide to shape how people think and behave.**

When there is alignment between all five Heartwired factors, decisions are straightforward. When there are internal conflicts, decisions can be more difficult. These internal conflicts can also present opportunities for people to be persuaded, either by opposition messaging or by our messaging.



# How Housing is Different

---

For many social policies or issues, especially those which feel like they may not affect people's day-to-day lives, political ideology (e.g., liberal or conservative) may be a dominant driver of audiences' support or opposition.

**In contrast, housing is a deeply personal issue: everyone in Colorado has personal lived experiences with it**, and their support for or opposition to policies on housing—and adjacent issues—is often firmly rooted in the meaning they have ascribed to their own lived experiences, both past and present.

Proposed housing policies may also feel especially personal for Coloradans because of how these policies might directly affect their rent; their ability to buy a house or live close to where they work; and/or the types of buildings in their neighborhood.

**Coloradans' lived experiences can also shape their beliefs and interact with their strongly-held values** (described in greater detail in [Insights About Audiences](#)) to determine their support or opposition. For example, many Coloradans have personal experiences with living near or in affordable housing. These lived experiences often directly impact their attitudes towards affordable and supportive housing—including sometimes fueling conflict and opposition rather than bolstering support.

In addition, **the personal nature of housing also produces strong emotions**. Coloradans have deep emotional connections with their homes and neighborhoods. They take pride in their homes and communities, and may feel fear at the thought of changes (e.g., new affordable or supportive housing nearby).

They may worry these changes could negatively impact their safety and security, stability, home value or other characteristics of their neighborhood.

Lived experiences, beliefs, values, emotions and personal identities all shape audiences' mindsets, or the ways in which they think about a topic and form support/opposition.

Our audience mindset findings emphasize that when messaging on housing is intentional about **reflecting audiences' values, demonstrates respect for their sense of self as experts about their own lived experiences, and helps them name and work through their emotions**, audiences are more likely to be able to support associated policy proposals.

# Tested Housing Policies

**We worked with an advisory committee of Colorado advocates to develop and test descriptions of eight different housing policy areas,** in order to measure potential audiences' support or opposition to each, and gauge the impact of specific messages in increasing their support—including in the face of opposition messaging.

These are the eight policy areas tested, and how they were described to audience members who participated in this research.

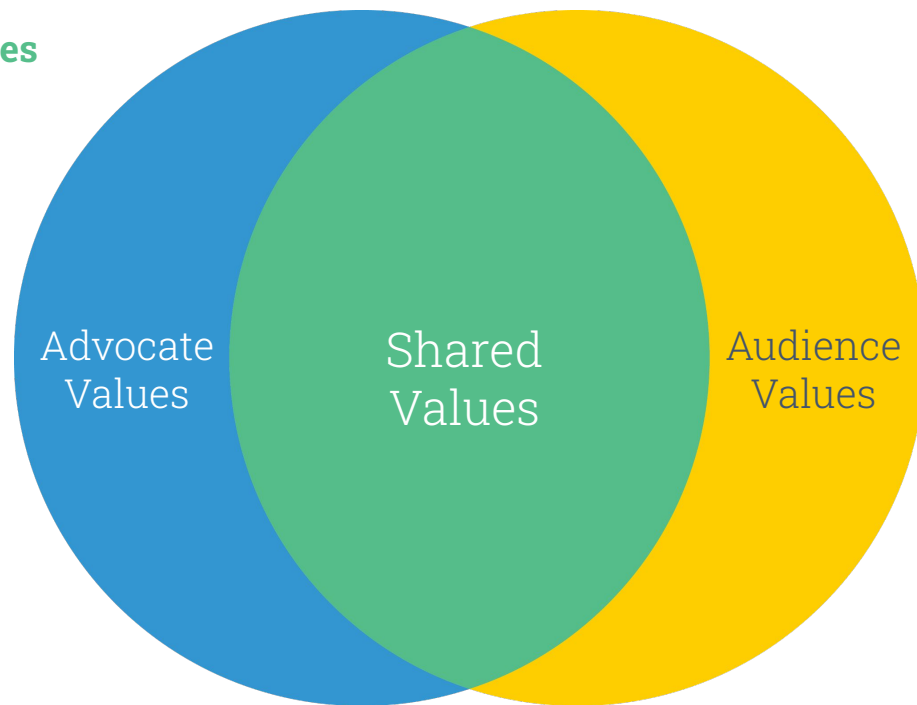
POLICY AREA		POLICY LANGUAGE TESTED
<b>Stabilizing rents</b>	➤	Allowing counties, cities, and other local jurisdictions to limit how much landlords can raise a current tenant's rent each year.
<b>Limiting upfront money required of renters</b>	➤	Limiting the total amount of money landlords can require tenants to pay up front to sign a lease.
<b>Eviction protections</b>	➤	Making it harder for landlords to evict tenants when the tenant has not violated the lease, including at the end of a lease.
<b>New housing for people with different incomes</b>	➤	Building more housing in your community for Coloradans with different levels of income.
<b>Converting vacant/underused buildings into housing for people with different incomes</b>	➤	Converting existing, but underused or vacant, buildings in your community into housing for Coloradans with different levels of income.
<b>Supportive housing</b>	➤	Making more housing options and support services available in your community for people who are homeless.
<b>Lower-income housing mandates for developers</b>	➤	Requiring developers who are building housing in your community to also include housing for lower-income Coloradans.
<b>Streamlining the approval process for new housing</b>	➤	Making it easier to build new housing in your community by streamlining the approval process.

# Insights About Audiences

## Audiences and Advocates Share Many Values

For advocates working in this space, it may or may not be a surprise to learn that they hold many similar values with audiences, especially because advocates and audiences may define and describe specific values differently. (See [page 21](#) for definitions of the key audience segments we identified in this research.)

At their core, these values are often rooted in the same fundamental principles and thus can be important sources of fuel for audiences to support proposed policies. On the next page we show similar values across advocates and audiences that we repeatedly heard in this research.



## Insights About Audiences: Audiences and Advocates Share Many Values

Examples of similar values across advocates and audiences that we repeatedly heard in this research include:

**Family:** Love and care for family; being a good parent, sibling, daughter/son.

**Community:** Caring for, seeking support, and nurturing strong bonds from communities that we are part of—such as friend groups, neighborhoods, ethnic or racial communities, congregations and faith communities.

**Safety & Security:** Care and concern for personal safety and security—for ourselves, our families, friends and communities.

**Health & Well-Being:** Care and concern for the physical, mental and emotional health of people—ourselves, our families, friends and communities.

**Caring for One Another:** A desire to care for our friends, neighbors and community members and to receive that care and support in return.

**Environmental Conservation & Protection:** Caring for natural lands and waterways, and taking action to protect clean air and combat climate change.

**Reciprocity & Fairness:** A desire to be treated fairly and to respond to others in kind.

**Agency & Self-Determination:** Having autonomy in our lives and the power to make decisions that feel fundamental to having a good life.



### “Safety” as a Shared Value and a Core Human Need

Safety and security are universal basic human needs, as identified by psychologist Abraham Maslow in his well-known Hierarchy of Needs. It is also true that **opponents of housing policies sometimes weaponize the need to feel safe** as a talking point for problematic (and racially coded) “tough on crime” rhetoric.

In messaging, rather than denying safety and security as core human needs, **we can instead lean into them as shared values to connect with audiences.** Then we build on that connection to **equip audiences to manage their concerns around safety.**

For example, we tested effective messages that uplifted the need and desire for safety and security as shared across audience members and those who would benefit from proposed housing policies: *Everyone needs a good, safe place to live. It’s a tool for building a good life where you can take care of yourself and your family.*

Effective messages also helped show how proposed policies would help meet this shared value and need: *Finding a safe, stable place to live is like a game of musical chairs, with the chairs being stable housing. We need more supportive housing to help equip people to get back on their feet.*

## How Audiences Express Values

### Family



"I grew up in Pueblo and I still live in Pueblo. I have two adult children. I have one granddog and what I value most in life, honest to God, has to be family, period."

– **Hispanic\* female research participant**

### Community



"I don't want to move [people who need affordable housing] from the place that they have lived their whole lives. Like their kids probably grew up there. Why are we pricing them out of their own homes?"

– **White female research participant**

### Safety & Security



"I think that people obviously deserve a safe home. I think having something like that can be the difference between life and death for some people."

– **Native American female research participant**

### Caring for One Another



"[Supportive housing] is a one-stop shop to help people get back on their feet. You don't do that by making people feel different or feel like the other or feel like an outcast. Instead, put them in a situation where they can start working on their self-esteem and start feeling better about themselves, and then they can put themselves in a place where they can find opportunities."

– **Black male research participant**

\* Consistent with what the research team heard in our focus group discussions and surveys, a [2022 Pew Research survey of 3,030 U.S. Hispanic adults](#) found that 53 percent of Hispanics prefer to describe themselves as "Hispanic," 26 percent prefer "Latino," two percent prefer "Latinx," and 18 percent have no preference.

# Where Do We Get Stuck in Making Change?

If audiences and advocates share so many similar values, why haven't we already achieved the vision of the world that we want to see? What's stopping us from achieving broader support for more progressive housing policies?

**We can get stuck when our audiences' Heartwired factors create internal conflict that inhibits their support, and potentially makes them susceptible to opposition messaging.**

For example, audiences' lived experiences—and how they make meaning of those experiences—can contribute to beliefs that create internal conflict for them.

In their own words, audience members often expressed deeply conflicted perspectives such as:

“

“I found myself many years ago suddenly as a single, divorced mom, cleaning houses, and **needed affordable housing. For me, that allowed me to keep my job and have a reasonable rent, and go to school, and now I'm in aerospace. I don't think that I would have been able to progress in life the way that I have except for that.** ...At the same time, having seen things firsthand, [I'm concerned about having affordable housing nearby because] **what I know is that when people don't have... they go across the street to take from the people that do have.** Being somebody that has worked very, very hard and diligently to get where I'm at, I really don't want that for myself.”

– White female research participant

“

“**Housing is a human right.** You should be able to have a house no matter how much or how little money you make. [But] I didn't rate myself at [the strongest level of support for creating affordable housing nearby] because **I am a homeowner myself and unfortunately a cog in the capitalist machine, so I feel as if developing more affordable housing in my neighborhood might actually make my house value tank, which is my biggest investment.**”

– Native American female research participant

Another source of internal conflict can be rooted in implicit biases, including racial and class biases. For more on how these internal conflicts show up, see [pages 27-29](#).

# Moving Audiences Toward Support by Meeting Their Emotional Needs

When diving deeper into audiences' mindsets to understand how to connect with them and move them to greater support, **it's crucial to remember that empathy does not equal agreement**. In other words, understanding and acknowledging audiences' lived experiences doesn't require validating or agreeing with all of their values, beliefs or opinions about proposed policies.

The goal of the recommendations in this guide is to equip audiences to manage the conflicts they experience in ways that help them arrive at support for proposed policies. By better understanding audiences' emotional needs, we can develop messaging strategies that allow audiences to consider these policies using their own thinking and tapping into their existing values and sense of self.

**In other words, the messaging strategies described in this guide aim to broaden audiences' perspectives in a way where they feel supported and equipped to feel and think about issues in new ways, rather than feeling dismissed, attacked, or talked down to.**

“What's really foundational to this work is asking ourselves, ‘am I meeting my audiences’ needs to help persuade them, or am I reacting from trying to meet my own emotional needs as an advocate’? For example, if someone shares with us her own experience of living in affordable housing, and shares specific concrete concerns based on her own lived experience—and we get upset and ‘correct’ her for demonizing other people who live in affordable housing—then we have just lost her. **There's no pathway forward because we've just disregarded her concerns.** We haven't listened to her own personal experience that she's voluntarily disclosed. Not everyone wants to say they used to live in affordable housing, and she's made herself vulnerable [by doing so]. And now we've lost any opportunity to build a connection with her.”

– Colorado economic & housing justice advocate

# Advocates are Heartwired Too



---

Advocates have emotional needs when it comes to this work as well. **It can feel uncomfortable or frustrating to have to persuade audiences about something that feels morally right.**

And we also know that many housing policies in the U.S. are overtly racist and have reinforced white supremacy and racism. So, understandably, advocates can also feel frustration, anger, or other negative emotions when communicating to audience members who don't yet see these connections.

In this heightened emotional state, advocates, like our audiences, may lose access to empathy with the feelings or experiences of others. In other words, they may want to react by telling audiences that their beliefs are wrong. However, doing so—especially initially—does little to calm the negative emotions our audiences are experiencing or prompt them to live their best values. Instead, it often closes the door on conversation before it can really begin.

Instead of ignoring or not addressing their own internal conflict, advocates who recognize these emotions in themselves have an opportunity to reframe this gut reaction.

It may be helpful to remember that because advocates and audiences share many similar values—like family, community, and caring for one another—the goal of communications to these audiences is to help them see that these values aren't being realized in the current status quo.

**Advocates can thus reframe by showing audience members that they share their values, how the current housing situation doesn't live up to those values for Colorado, and that we need their help to make meaningful change.**

# Who are Our Key Audience Segments?

Within each of the eight tested policy areas, we found four key audience segments, each with their own implications for messaging. It's important to note that although each segment has similar characteristics across policy areas, there were also differences. **In other words, it was not necessarily the case that an individual Colorado voter would be in the same audience segment for all eight policy areas.**



## Supportive Base

Strong supporters of proposed policies even when faced with opposition messaging.

### FOR MESSAGING:

If activated and equipped with effective messaging, they can be social ambassadors and help us grow support in their own networks.



## Conflicted Empathizer

Start as either weak supporters or opposed/unsure who become more supportive with effective messaging.

### FOR MESSAGING:

A key target for messaging. By addressing their concerns and persuading them to support, we can ultimately grow our base.



## Concerned Skeptic

Tepid supporters of proposed policies, but can become neutral or opposed when faced with opposition messaging.

### FOR MESSAGING:

In order to not lose them to the opposition, messaging should address their concerns (rather than dismissing) and aim to neutralize opposition arguments.



## Opposition Base

Not convinced by supportive messaging and firmly opposed to proposed policies.

### FOR MESSAGING:

Not a high-priority target for messaging, as they are unlikely to be persuaded. However, messaging can help neutralize the effects of their arguments on other audiences.



“Compared to the amount of time we often spend reacting to opposition messaging, our time instead really needs to be spent tending our base and moving audiences [like Conflicted Empathizers and Concerned Skeptics]. Too often, we are just feeding into the opposition because we get hung up on trying to change their minds, instead of having the patience to move those who are actually persuadable.”

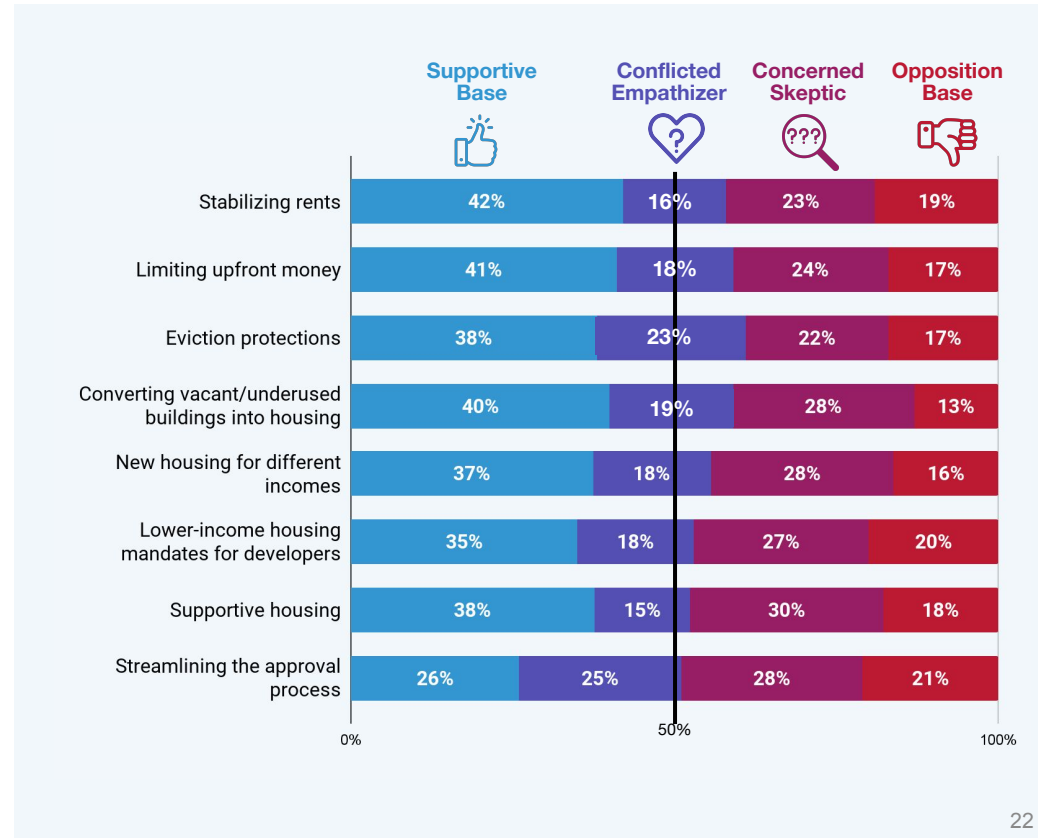
– Colorado progressive policy advocate

# The Opportunity and Importance of Persuasive Messaging

When we look at the proportion of audience segments for each of the eight tested policy areas, we see both promise and opportunity—and a striking reminder of the importance of persuasive messaging.

For all eight policy areas, the Supportive Base is larger than the Opposition Base. And yet for all eight policy areas, **the Supportive Base alone does not reach the 51% majority that would be needed to pass these policies.** Without intentional messaging to move Conflicted Empathizer and Concerned Skeptic audiences, as well as to keep our Supportive Base activated and engaged, progress will remain challenging.

In addition, the people who make up each audience segment vary by policy area, and many people supported some policy areas while remaining skeptical of others. **Therefore, our messaging cannot assume that people are unequivocally “for” or “against” housing policies.** Instead, because audiences have nuanced opinions depending on the policy area and their specific concerns, it is even more important to create persuasive messaging that addresses their emotional, psychological and informational needs.



# How Do We Build Toward a Robust Supportive Majority?

When thinking about how to create long-lasting social and policy change, **our messaging approach is informed in part by Diffusion of Innovations Theory**—first developed by Everett M. Rogers—which explains how ideas gain momentum and spread over time.

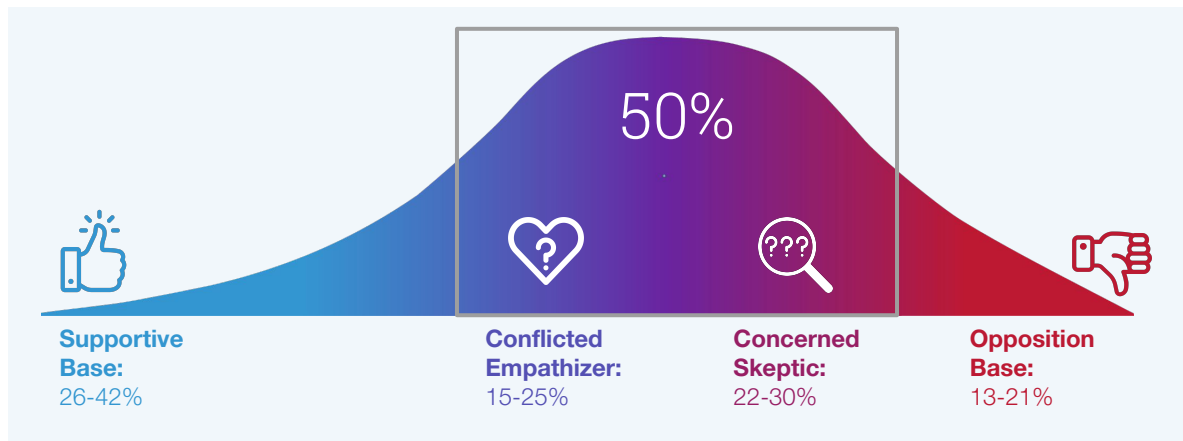
According to the theory, the adoption of new ideas or attitudes does not happen simultaneously for everyone. Instead, ideas spread along a continuum, with one audience segment influencing the next, in a pattern that aligns closely with the audience segments we found in this research.

Those who are part of the Supportive Base are often “innovators” and “early adopters” **who help to spread a new idea if equipped with effective messaging to use**. Conflicted Empathizers, who may be conflicted but persuadable, **can be moved to become part of an “early majority” that moves an idea toward greater support**—often reaching

either just above or just below a consistent 51% majority. It’s important to then also reach Concerned Skeptics, who can **potentially become part of a “late majority” that helps achieve a robust supportive majority**.

This graph shows the Diffusion of Innovations theory for our eight tested policy areas, taking into account the fact that the size of audience

segments varies by policy area. (For example, the Supportive Base ranged from 26-42% of the audience across the eight policy areas—see the graph on [page 22](#) for full details). As this shows, it may be particularly important to ensure that messaging meets the needs of Conflicted Empathizer and Concerned Skeptic audiences, in order to grow support toward a strong and consistent majority.



# Example Audience Profiles

Our audiences are real, living, complex, Heartwired human beings. To help bring to life their humanity and nuance, so that you can better understand what might persuade them, on the next page are two example audience profiles.

As you develop your own messaging, try to hold this kind of person in your mind as your target audience, instead of just thinking about them in the abstract. Having a specific person in mind can help you create more emotionally connected messaging.

**How does the messaging you are developing meet the emotional, psychological and informational needs of each of the people on the next slide, in ways that make persuasion possible?**

(Note that these are composite example profiles only—not all audience members in these segments will have all of these characteristics.)



## Example Audience Profiles

(Note that these are composite example profiles only—not all audience members in these segments will have all of these characteristics.)

### AUDIENCE PROFILE

## Conflicted Empathizer



**Conflicted Empathizers are open to being supportive, yet they have their own concerns which they want to be acknowledged.**

#### AN EXAMPLE CONFLICTED EMPATHIZER:

- Identifies as middle class; while they are doing okay financially, they feel anxious about the rising cost of living—and may even be working more than one job.
- Often knows someone (in some cases themselves) who has lost housing due to rent increases, and understands that sometimes circumstances beyond one's control can have a profound impact on one's life.
- Is motivated by avoiding financial emergencies, and therefore value self-sufficiency.
- Doesn't blame others for needing help, and also wants their own struggles and concerns to be recognized and acknowledged.
- Wants everyone to be able to have their basic needs met.
- Wants "help" to meet people's basic needs but not be "over the top" (e.g., affordable housing that is nicer than the market-rate homes they live in).

### AUDIENCE PROFILE

## Concerned Skeptic



**Concerned Skeptics are likely to prioritize self-sufficiency and independence as core values.**

#### AN EXAMPLE CONCERNED SKEPTIC:

- Holds fairness, family, hard work, personal responsibility, community, reciprocity, and self-sufficiency as important core values.
- Understands that circumstances beyond one's control can affect life circumstances, yet are still more likely to ascribe someone's situation to the choices that person has made, including their choices about how to respond to things outside their control.
- Is less satisfied with state government, which leads to skepticism about government efficacy and concerns about tax increases due to inefficient or misdirected government programs.
- Is open to policies they believe will support or equip self-sufficiency and help someone get back on their feet, as long as they perceive that person as wanting to take responsibility for their own life.
- Wants people to have access to the tools they need to be self-sufficient; at the same time, is concerned that programs that support people in need may promote dependency, and therefore has a strong emotional need for policy guardrails.

# Messaging Considerations for Conflicted Empathizers and Concerned Skeptics

When communicating to Conflicted Empathizers and Concerned Skeptics, focus on using messaging that:

## For both audiences

- Lifts up stories of Coloradans who have found themselves in difficult times through external factors outside their control (an accident, unexpected medical emergency, etc.) and shows how they have been trying to recover.
- Includes policy details that address audience concerns about how supportive or affordable housing may impact them or their community.
- Shows how proposed policies would benefit wide swaths of Coloradans, beyond focusing only on people most immediately in need. (See [pages 50-51](#) on Targeted Universalism to dive deeper into this recommendation.)
- Shows the benefits that affordable & supportive housing can have for the community as a whole, and acknowledges that solutions need to be tailored to the community they are in.

## Particularly for Conflicted Empathizers

- Acknowledges Conflicted Empathizers' own real economic considerations & anxieties.
- Uses relatable messengers who can reference their own feelings about having to work so hard just to get by, and also expresses empathy for others who are struggling too but need some extra help to get back on their feet.



## Particularly for Concerned Skeptics

- Uses trusted and potentially unexpected messengers who share and express the values and concerns of Concerned Skeptics, e.g., small business owners who can speak to how their concerns about having supportive housing nearby were listened to in the planning process and thoughtfully addressed.
- Includes non-profits, faith-based organizations, and/or the private sector as mechanisms of policy implementation— not relying solely on state government. This can calm concerns about government being ineffective and about programs that they perceive as raising taxes.
- For supportive housing especially, shows how people being served have agency and how supportive housing is helping them take their next step toward regaining their stability.





Dig Deeper

# Disrupting Implicit Bias by Showing How People Are Part of Our In-group

**Implicit bias, including racial bias, can be a barrier to our audiences' support for housing policies.** There are also complex reasons that shape our audiences' attitudes and support for affordable housing, not all of which may not be connected to bias.

Many Colorado voters perceive those who would benefit from affordable housing, supportive housing, and renter protection policies as different than themselves and those who already live in their neighborhoods. **In other words, those who would benefit most are seen as an out-group.**

As with many other social issues, how people experience and express their concerns related to housing has shifted as part of broader cultural changes following George Floyd's murder in 2020. Research conducted since 2020 across the U.S. (including by members of this research and strategy

team) has consistently found that many voters—across races and ethnicities, and including liberals, moderates, and even some conservatives—increasingly express genuine openness to reflecting on, discussing, and confronting their own and others' individual-level racism. This openness stems from a sincere belief that interpersonal acts of racism are wrong and should stop.

**It is also true that many voters, including in Colorado, still have far to go on understanding, acknowledging and dismantling the ways in which racism is not only interpersonal, but fundamentally embedded in the systems and dominant cultural narratives underlying housing policy.**

In this research, few audience members directly expressed race or class as reasons for their conflict or even opposition. However, audience members

often named concerns that advocates recognize as examples of implicit bias, and/or the result of centuries of systemic racism that have fueled harmful beliefs about how the people who would live in or benefit from affordable and supportive housing are different. For some audience members, these racial biases are subconscious—meaning they do not consciously recognize their biased attitudes and behaviors. For others, these racial biases are conscious, but not stated explicitly.

Examples of such concerns, shared frequently by research participants across races and ethnicities (Black, Hispanic, Native American, and white), included that affordable or supportive housing would make their neighborhood less safe; bring unwelcome disruptions (e.g., drug dealing, more police calls; negatively affect their neighborhood's property values; or look rundown because residents would not care about taking care of their property.



## Dig Deeper: Disrupting Implicit Bias by Showing How People Are Part of Our In-group

**Regardless of whether our audiences' racial biases are subconscious or conscious, our messaging interventions need to address and disrupt these biases.** In our focus groups, one Spanish-speaking, Hispanic research participant shared that he felt conflicted about supportive housing because he thought it should be built “far away, but also within the community.”

The internal conflict he named—holding concerns about supportive housing and wanting it to be “far away,” but also wanting people to have homes and be part of the community—**shows how audience members' internal conflicts can be an opening for us to disrupt their biases in a way that allows them to become supportive.**

**We found that one important opportunity to disrupt our audiences' biases is to show how those who would benefit from housing policies are already part of their in-group.** We can do this by elevating shared values, motivations, and identities. Examples of effective messaging using this strategy are on [pages 53-55](#) and [pages 60-62](#).



### **Forthcoming Messaging Strategies to Disrupt Racial Biases**

In 2024, The Colorado Health Foundation will begin a new audience and messaging research effort—in partnership with the research team that created this guide—to more deeply investigate what additional strategies can be effective for messaging about racism, discrimination, and anti-Blackness in housing and other health equity-related policy areas. As with the research in this guide, our new project will be guided by an advisory committee of advocates representing racial justice and progressive advocacy groups in Colorado. We look forward to sharing our results, which we expect will be an important addition to the recommendations contained in this guide through a more specific racial justice lens.



## Dig Deeper: Disrupting Implicit Bias by Showing How People Are Part of Our In-group

**Using “out-group to in-group” messaging is only one example of a strategy to address biases, including biases rooted in racism, classism, and othering of people with different lived experiences.** For example, the messages we tested did not name racism or classism specifically, and additional messaging strategies could be used to confront these biases more explicitly (which we will also explore in upcoming research).

Finally, an important note for disrupting biases: many of our audiences, including those who are Black, Hispanic, Native American, and white, hold complex tensions between individual and collective values. Hispanic audiences, for instance, often value, seek and provide support within their extended families. Native American audiences often deeply value mutual support within their communities and have an historic understanding of the violence and racism that their communities have experienced, particularly related to land and property rights.

**Many members of these audiences also have deeply-held values around personal agency, responsibility, and individual accountability.** Therefore, messaging about the impacts of systemic biases or uncontrollable life circumstances on people’s housing situations was dismissed or rejected by many audience members, including Black, Hispanic, and Native American audience members, if they perceived it as portraying them as victims, and/or going “too far” in erasing their own and others’ personal agency to shape the trajectory of their life.





Dig Deeper

## Upstairs v. Downstairs Brain



**“Imagine your brain is a house, with both a downstairs and an upstairs.** The downstairs brain includes the brain stem and the limbic region, which are located in the lower parts of the brain, from the top of your neck to about the bridge of your nose. **Scientists talk about these lower areas being more primitive because they are responsible for basic functions (like breathing and blinking), for innate reactions and impulses (like fight or flight), and for strong emotions (like anger and fear).**

Your upstairs brain is completely different. It’s made up of the cerebral cortex and its various parts—particularly the ones directly behind your forehead. **Unlike your more basic downstairs brain, the upstairs brain is more evolved and can give you a fuller perspective on your world.** You might imagine it as a light-filled second-story study or library full of windows and skylights that allow you to see things more clearly.”

We can apply this understanding of the brain to our messaging. When our downstairs brain—also known as the amygdala—is calm, our upstairs brain has the capacity to pause, be reflective, and make rational decisions. **But when the downstairs brain is triggered, it produces emotional noise that makes it difficult for the upstairs brain to listen to or consider thoughtful reasons to be supportive of an issue.**

**Our job as communicators is to acknowledge complexities and help audiences to calm their concerns, discomfort and other downstairs brain reactions.**

As neuroscientist Gregory Berns says, “Familiarity calms the amygdala.” With familiarity, trust, and emphasis on shared values and hope, we can help audiences to manage all the negative emotions they are feeling to tap into different perspectives, decisions and ultimately, actions.

# Messaging Recommendations

## Calm the Downstairs Brain & Engage the Upstairs Brain

Effective messaging will accomplish these two important psychological processes.

### STEP ONE

#### Calm the downstairs brain

Familiarity calms the downstairs brain. Familiarity can come from shared values and motivations; relatable, trusted messengers; and shared lived experiences.

It may also include acknowledging the complexities of an issue and modeling how others were able to manage their internal conflict.



### STEP TWO

#### Engage the upstairs brain

Next, successful messaging interventions move people toward hope, optimism and compassion.

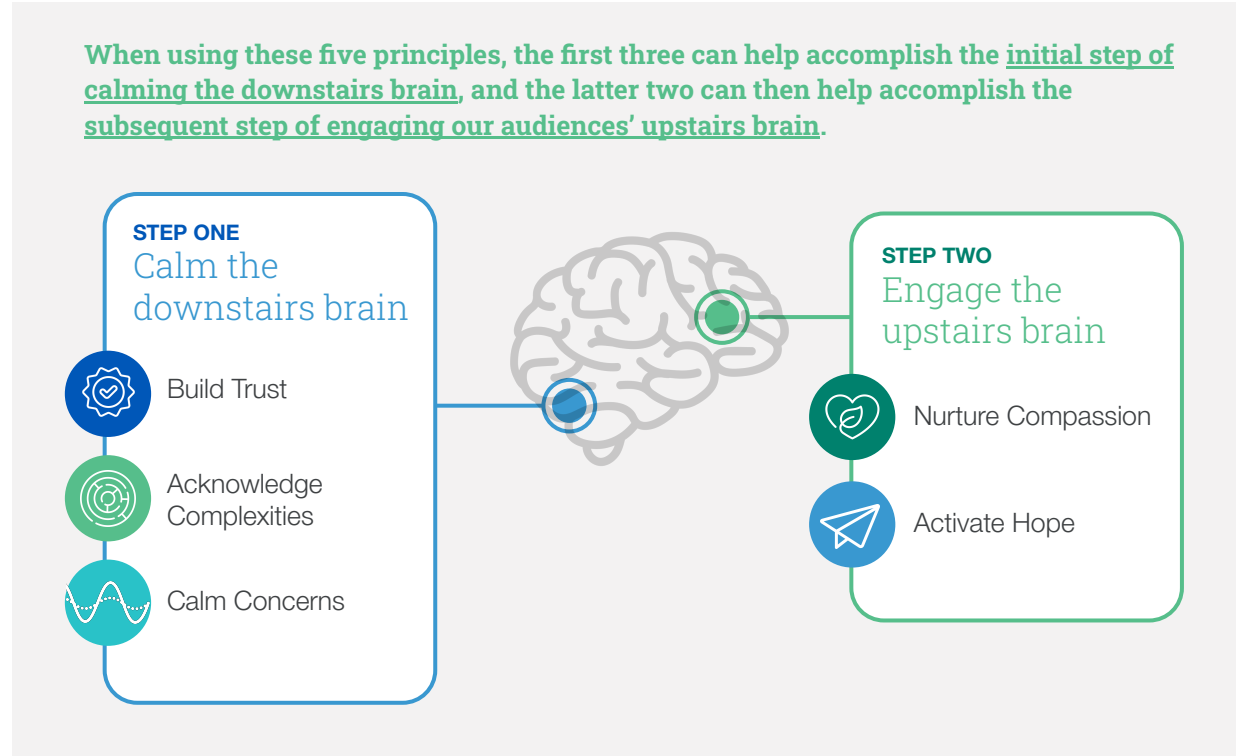
When audiences are experiencing compassion, they relate to the challenges and aspirations of those who would benefit from proposed policies, and they want to help them. They are also hopeful that change is possible.

# Equip Audiences to Arrive at Support for Effective Solutions

To calm the downstairs brain and engage the upstairs brain, implement messaging strategies that connect to the five psychologically aligned principles shown on the right.

Not every single communication will include all of the five principles. **Note that audiences are most persuadable when we help them to initially calm their downstairs brain (first three principles) BEFORE we dive into engaging the upstairs brain (last two principles).**

This [messaging checklist](#) can also help you analyze your overall communications strategy to assess how your messages are—or aren't—using these principles to meet the emotional, psychological and informational needs of your audiences.



# Equip Audiences to Arrive at Support for Effective Solutions

For people to be persuaded, especially to have a change of heart, they need the opportunity to process those decisions through their own values and beliefs. **Effective messaging gives audiences the tools they need to sort through and manage their conflicts.**

If messaging simply tells them how to think, feel and act, they are more likely to react argumentatively because they don't like the feeling of having their decision-making agency taken away from them. A common example is telling audiences that a proposed policy is "effective," as opposed to demonstrating through success stories and carefully-chosen facts, and allowing them to feel agency in concluding from this information that the policy was effective.

Thus, our challenge is to understand the nature of our audiences' internal conflicts, and how to meet their emotional needs in order to move them to support. **The messages shared in this guide help audiences manage their conflict in a way that can lead to longer-term change, by allowing them to integrate their own values, beliefs, sense of self, and lived experiences to feel agency over their decision to support.**

“

“One of the things I know is that **when a person genuinely changes, it is from the inside out.** That means real, lasting change happens when communications give voters an opportunity to use their own identity, their own way of thinking, and their own values to sort through an issue and arrive at a thoughtful decision.”

– **Dr. Phyllis Watts, clinical and social psychologist who has advised many campaigns and progressive causes on messaging and audience research**

”



Step One: Calm The Downstairs Brain

## Build Trust

**Trusted messengers are core to this first messaging principle.** Communications experts have long known that messengers are as important as the message, and that messages are more powerful when they come from a specific person. To build trust, message, messenger and story all matter deeply.

Since audiences often approach housing-related issues in an agitated emotional state and with their guard up, it's especially important to feature messengers whom they will see as trustworthy and credible.

**To build trust, audiences need to feel that messengers understand their concerns and are taking them into account.**

Audiences need to feel a connection to messengers, so it is important to **spotlight diverse messengers**—people of different races, genders, class, geography, occupations, perspectives and lived experiences—in order to reach diverse audiences.

Additionally, it can be helpful for messengers to explicitly name identities upfront that they likely share with audiences—for example, parent, son, daughter, co-worker, friend or neighbor—**along with their motivations for speaking out and shared values such as family, community, safety and security.**

On housing-related issues, audiences are prone to distrust messengers who they perceive to have a financial stake in the policy at hand—for example, the housing developer who would be building a new affordable or supportive housing project. Therefore, these messengers will face extra challenges, and if featured it is especially important for them to lead with non-financial motivations and shared values as reasons why they are speaking in support.

*Section continues on next page*





## Step One: Calm The Downstairs Brain

# Build Trust

Beyond just sharing characteristics or lived experience with audiences, it also is critical for messengers to have **credibility, authenticity, and communicate in an accessible plain-spoken way that your grandparents could understand** (aka avoiding jargon that is not commonly understood outside policy spaces—for example, *no cause eviction*, *wraparound services*, or referring to government agencies and programs only by acronyms). In our research, focus group participants named things like **warmth, compassion and expertise as important attributes for building trust and relatability** when reacting to video messengers.

For specific tested examples of trusted messengers and what made them successful with audiences, see [pages 53-55](#), [pages 60-62](#), and [pages 68-70](#).



## Principle in action

Let's say you want to draft an op-ed in support of building new housing that is affordable in your community. The first paragraph of that op-ed is a critical opportunity to build trust by identifying your author, why they're speaking out about this issue, and how your audiences can relate to them. Skipping over these details may diminish the impact of the rest of the message.



## Step One: Calm The Downstairs Brain

# Acknowledge Complexities

When making an argument in support of a position, it is understandable to want to make the most compelling argument—one that projects confidence and rejects uncertainty. **In other words, it may feel like acknowledging complexities in your argument is signaling weakness.**

The challenge with that approach is that it fails to recognize the internal conflict and ambivalence that audiences often bring to socially sensitive issues like housing. More importantly, it does not give these audiences the tools to sort through and manage their internal conflicts.

Housing is deeply personal for our audiences because they all have lived experiences with it, and it has such a direct impact on their day-to-day lives. When someone has had a negative lived experience with affordable housing, for example, it is critical to listen to and acknowledge those experiences. Failing to do this can weaken advocates' positions in the minds of audiences who feel dismissed or ignored.

**Remember: Acknowledging someone's experiences or beliefs does not require that you agree with them.**

For instance, messaging that includes **acknowledgement structures** can show conflicted audiences that you are aware of their concerns, which helps to calm their downstairs brain (see [page 37](#) for more on acknowledgement structures).

When discussing affordable or supportive housing, focus group participants were forthright in naming their concerns about the buildings (appearance, management, maintenance) or the kinds of challenges (drug use, loitering, police) they associated with these types of housing. **The most successful messages we tested were those which acknowledged and then addressed those concerns head-on.**



## Principle in action

This principle can be particularly important in a face-to-face meeting, for example with a homeowner. Before you get to making your case, you're very likely to have to acknowledge the other person's concerns and address some of the complexities they see.



Dig Deeper

# Acknowledgment Structures

Acknowledgement structures can be a powerful way to connect with audiences and help move them on a journey towards support. **Acknowledgement structures help calm the downstairs brain by beginning the conversation with recognizing a potential concern, then shifting to your messaging point.**

Acknowledging concerns, without necessarily agreeing with or validating them, is impactful because it helps audiences feel seen and builds connection in a dynamic where people might be on opposing sides of an issue. **Throughout this research, acknowledging the challenging nature of housing-related problems and proposed solutions consistently helped to build trust with audiences.**

Acknowledgements also create space for people to share their concerns and where they are coming from, which allows for deep listening to gain a greater understanding of the barriers to someone's support. This can help you to tailor your response to what they need to hear.

## Some examples of acknowledgment structures include:

**Acknowledge:** It's important that we address the issues which contribute to homelessness, instead of only providing housing where folks cycle in and out of temporary stays...

**Assert:** ...Which is why this proposed supportive housing project will include job training and support to equip people with the tools they need to get themselves back to financial stability long-term.

---

**Acknowledge:** There are concerns in our community about how the neighborhood could change if they build more affordable housing here.

**Assert:** ... Yet many of us are struggling to keep up with the cost of housing, and we want to ensure that there is enough housing for Coloradans like us to afford at all income levels.

---

**Acknowledge:** Mom-and-pop landlords can be put in a very difficult situation if their renters violate their lease—for example, by damaging property or refusing to pay rent.

**Assert:** Yet, corporate landlords are evicting renters who are in good standing with their lease, just so that they can charge higher rent—which is why we need stronger protections to ensure responsible Coloradans aren't kicked out of their homes.



## Step One: Calm The Downstairs Brain

# Calm Concerns

The previous principle is about acknowledging the complexities and concerns of audiences so that they feel seen and heard. This principle is about how to help audiences calm those concerns.

One way is to help audiences to **practice emotional regulation, or the ability to manage one's emotions, especially negative emotions.** It's also helpful to **model how others were able to manage their concerns.** Note that this does not require having absolute certainty that a policy or approach will work. Instead, it's about giving audiences the ability to imagine more positive results than negative in a proposed policy or practice.

What our messaging can do is to help audiences to notice their negative emotions, to name those negative emotions, and to normalize those negative emotions as innately human.

We can do this by **telling the story of another person who experienced negative emotions such as anxiety, fear or frustration** at an idea like affordable housing being built in their neighborhood. Sharing anecdotes of others who were experiencing negative emotions helps to normalize those emotions for audience members.

**It is then important to model how others have managed this internal conflict, for example by telling a change-of-heart story from a relatable and trusted messenger** (see [page 39](#) for more on change-of-heart stories).

Finally, it's important to avoid judgmental tones in messaging. When audiences hear judgment, it keeps them trapped in their downstairs brain and makes it more challenging for us to nurture compassion for the people and communities we seek to support.



## Principle in action

Storytelling, particularly change-of-heart stories, can be an effective way to connect with skeptical audiences and calm concerns. Storytelling can be used in short and long form communications such as in blog posts, opinion pieces, or on social media.



Dig Deeper

# Change-of-Heart Stories

Consistently, messaging research on socially sensitive and emotionally complex topics shows that **change-of-heart stories—stories in which the messenger describes how they have changed their perspective over time—are one of the most effective messaging interventions.** When messages tell us directly how to act or feel, we are more likely to disagree or counterargue, because it doesn't feel good to have our agency taken away from us.

Storytelling is uniquely powerful at lessening these negative reactions, because **stories allow us to decide for ourselves how we feel and relate to the people whose experiences are spotlighted**—especially if we have similar experiences, values, or beliefs with the people featured in those stories.

Showing how someone has changed over time because of their experiences, new information, or deeper reflection makes a story more authentic, believable and accessible.

In particular, **it is important for audiences to hear from messengers with whom they can identify.**

Using stories and concrete language to “show” why someone like them—who was once unfamiliar, uncomfortable with, or even opposed to an idea—has come to support a policy is more emotionally impactful and persuasive than a “tell” approach, like simply saying “a majority of people in your neighborhood support this policy, so you should too.”

---

## An example formula for a change-of-heart story might be:

*“I am [identities, values, and intentions that the messenger is likely to share with their audiences]. I used to [think/feel this way about a problem and/or proposed solution]. Then I [learned more about the nature of the problem and proposed solutions, and/or had an experience that was surprising and challenged my deeply held beliefs]. Now I feel/realize [a new way of thinking and feeling about the problem/solution].”*

See [pages 68-70](#) for an example change-of-heart story on supportive housing.



Step Two: Engage the Upstairs Brain

## Nurture Compassion

While the first step of this process is about turning down the temperature in audiences' downstairs brains, the second step focuses on **the need to tap into their compassion and desire to help those who are struggling.**

Telling stories about people who are experiencing the worst kinds of harm is important, but it is essential to also tell stories about all kinds of people in the community. **Our audiences need to see that even if they don't think they are directly impacted by housing issues, there is harm being done to people in their community, and thus feel motivated to help alleviate those harms.**

When people are agitated emotionally, it is easy to slip into a scarcity mindset and frame the debate in terms of "us versus them." Instead, **successful messaging needs to expand the "circle of care"**—that is, the people whom audiences consider to be part of their community and with whom they therefore give and receive care—**so that they see those impacted by housing struggles as part of their in-group.**





## Step Two: Engage the Upstairs Brain

# Nurture Compassion

Expanding the circle of care can be done by telling the stories of housing struggles for essential workers, those who work seasonally at resorts, small landlords, renters in their 20s, and young families in their 30s. Or by making the connection for homeowners that while they may not be personally impacted by renters' issues, their kids or other younger people in their lives are being hurt by the lack of renter protections.

**It's important to share stories that show these harms, rather than simply telling audiences that the harms exist.** Stories help audiences feel a deeper emotional connection and motivation to help by seeing the harms for themselves.



## Principle in action

One great way to nurture compassion: Profile real people impacted by your work, and share their stories and photos. Avoid stock photos and instead seek out photos that capture the real people involved in and benefiting from your work.

## Lead with the Problem, Then Move to Solutions

One key takeaway from focus groups was that **emphasizing the problem and related harms too much could backfire and drag people into their downstairs brain, where the problems felt insurmountable and solutions seemed impossible.** We found that many Coloradans are already prone to feeling that housing-related issues, such as homelessness and addiction, are simply intractable, and are skeptical of the government's ability to "solve" these challenges.

**For these reasons, it is important to weave together problems and solutions,** which combats cynicism and roots our audiences in a shared understanding of the problem. In your communications, it's helpful to make a connection to harms, but be careful not to linger too long there before moving on to possible solutions.



Dig Deeper

# Mental Templates and Asset-Based Framing

**A mental template is a set of images and associations that people have with something—or someone—they encounter out in the world. It subconsciously impacts their emotional reaction to others.**

The idea was developed by Dr. Phyllis Watts, a social and clinical psychologist who advises change-makers on the psychological dynamics that prevent progress on tough social issues.

As noted earlier, everyone in Colorado has personal lived experiences with housing—and many Coloradans have personal experiences living near or in affordable housing. If those experiences were negative, then their mental templates are also likely to be negative, which may lead to opposition to proposed affordable housing policies.

**Our job as communicators and advocates is therefore to help them expand their mental templates about the people, families and communities that would benefit from affordable housing policies.** We want to help them see beneficiaries of housing policies as having similar values and motivations, and as part of their in-group—rather than different from them because they have moved past their personal need for affordable or supportive housing.

For example, messaging might highlight how the people being hurt by the lack of affordable, quality housing are those who are already working hard and providing invaluable contributions to our communities.

Note that **these contributions should not just be about the paid jobs that people have.** We should recognize and uplift all the ways that someone can contribute to the community, from the people who help take care of our kids at daycare or in school, to those who work at grocery stores or restaurants, or those who provide unpaid caregiving and emotional support for family and community members.

Another way to disrupt flawed mental templates can be to shift from deficit to asset-based framing. Asset-based framing focuses on **painting a fuller picture of and uplifting the personal agency, skills, aspirations that people have, and the contributions they make**, to disrupt the flawed mental template that what people are looking for is some type of government handout or intervention.



## Step Two: Engage the Upstairs Brain

# Activate Hope

### Coloradans need to feel that change is possible and see progress being made.

While the struggles around housing are highly visible, solutions are often quieter and can go unnoticed even when effective, so it is key to highlight real-world examples either happening locally or in other communities that are comparable in size and demographics.

To demonstrate that proposed policies and programs are effective, **mix personal stories with one or two powerful “facts with impact”—i.e., statistics and data that demonstrate proof of concept.** Residential housing is not a space that is typically associated with innovation, so being able to show creative ideas can help give energy to the space and push against the idea that these problems do not have solutions.

At the same time, **be careful not to overstate the efficacy of proposed approaches, which can come across as “too good to be true.”** When it comes to issues such as homelessness, avoid sweeping language such as “solving” or “eliminating” problems, as these promises are often not seen as believable.

Lastly, **ending messages on a positive note** can help audiences to feel hopeful and that change is possible.



## Principle in action

For advocates, thinking of “solutions” often brings specific policy changes to mind. It’s critical to avoid using jargon or insider shorthand to describe those policies in messaging. Ask yourself whether your grandparents, for example, would understand and be able to engage with the terms you’re using. Use plain-spoken language to elevate the impact of the solutions you’re suggesting, not the nitty-gritty policy details.



Dig Deeper

# Using Persuasive Facts with Impact

Stories are a critical aspect of persuasive messaging. **Data and statistics also have an important role to play!** The key is not to rely on data and facts alone to persuade audiences.

**It is important to introduce carefully-selected data points after you have calmed audiences' downstairs brains.** When audiences are able to be thoughtful and reflective—once they are in their upstairs brain—facts and data can provide proof that change is possible.

For example, one of the most compelling statistics for our audiences was from the city of Houston, which was able to reduce its chronic homelessness population by 65% over a 10-year period by building supportive housing.

**This statistic was persuasive when:**

- It was always paired with a description of "supportive housing" that calmed the downstairs brain by connecting to audiences' values and addressing their concerns, such as how supportive housing would equip people with the tools to be on a path to supporting themselves.
- It provided intentional specifics, including the type of homelessness and period of time over which the change occurred. Without these specifics, audiences assumed that the statistic was over one year or a shorter period of time, and the success rate and size of the effect felt unbelievable to them.
- It was accompanied by stories and broader messaging about how and why the city was able to make that kind of change.



Dig Deeper

## Curse of Knowledge and Reasoning Chains

In their book, *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Stick and Others Die*, authors Chip and Dan Heath introduce a concept that is very relevant to messaging efforts: **the “Curse of Knowledge.”**

In order to make progress—to connect with, engage and move audiences on housing issues—it is critical to recognize when we are suffering from the Curse of Knowledge and communicating in a way that our audiences cannot easily understand.

“

“Lots of research in economics and psychology shows that **when we know something, it becomes hard for us to imagine not knowing it. As a result, we become lousy communicators.** Think of a lawyer who can’t give you a straight, comprehensible answer to a legal question. His vast knowledge and experience render him unable to fathom how little you know. So, when he talks to you, he talks in abstractions that you can’t follow. And we’re all like that lawyer in our own domain of expertise.

Here’s the great cruelty of the Curse of Knowledge: The better we get at generating great ideas—new insights and novel solutions—in our field of expertise, the more unnatural it becomes for us to communicate those ideas clearly. **That’s why knowledge is a curse.”**

Section continues on next page





Dig Deeper

# Curse of Knowledge and Reasoning Chains

**The Curse of Knowledge can also lead to assuming that audiences are making connections between issues when they are not, which can then lead to broken reasoning chains.**

A reasoning chain is the way people's associations and connections lead them to develop premises and assumptions, which then take them to a particular conclusion.

**Broken reasoning chains form when people don't have the information they need to fully understand an issue or problem.** Without enough information, they are forced to connect the dots themselves, often making flawed leaps of logic in order to complete the reasoning chain and reach a conclusion.

For example, when people do not have a deep understanding of the roots of the housing crisis in exploitative economic systems, they can make unfair and false assumptions. They might form a broken reasoning chain that connects needing supportive or affordable housing to individual failings or lack of ambition, rather than systemic causes.

What this means is that **messaging needs to carefully and intentionally help audiences form complete reasoning chains.**

They need the A to B, not A to Z, version. Without that A to B version, audiences make their own connections and associations, which can create broken reasoning chains that lead them to solutions which do not solve true root causes.

# Messaging Principles in Action

This section dives into the practical application of language and messaging strategies that effectively move our audiences toward support.

Based on insights from the statewide persuasion survey and focus group discussions, **this section presents the most impactful messages for each policy area we tested: affordable housing, renter protections, and supportive housing.**

Research showed that the five messaging principles focused on calming the downstairs brain and activating the upstairs brain were broadly applicable across key audience segments: Supportive Base, Conflicted Empathizer, and Concerned Skeptic.

Therefore, the audience-tested messages in this section are a toolkit you can use to **help equip the Supportive Base to be effective ambassadors, move Conflicted Empathizers members to support, and keep Concerned Skeptics from being swayed by opposition messaging.**

**We have also created a [messaging checklist](#)** that you can use to assess your messaging for the most important recommendations, avoid common pitfalls, and adapt your messages in response to feedback.



## Messaging Recommendations

# Affordable Housing

### Phrases that Resonate:

***Housing working people can afford*** is the most appealing description of affordable housing for respondents. When word count is limited, options like ***affordable homes*** also work well. Many audience members think of themselves as “working people,” and also associate the phrase favorably with well-liked professions like firefighters, so phrasing that centers working people aligns with their personal values and experiences. (See more on [page 49](#) about using the term “working people.”)

Although the phrase ***affordable housing*** appeals to some, for other audiences it has become overused to the point of feeling like a meaningless catchphrase, or it triggers negative associations—some flawed—of government that does not work or public housing in disrepair.

**We also found that the phrases which are most persuasive for increasing support are those that can be interpreted to apply to wide swaths of Coloradans**—such as ***middle class, working people, and those living on low incomes***. In contrast, phrases that narrow the scope of those who benefit (e.g., focusing only on those most in need) may narrow the level of support. (More about applying this finding on [pages 50-51](#) about Targeted Universalism.)

## The Emotional Power of “Home” vs. “Housing”

Since this research was focused on specific housing policies, we tended to use the word “housing” when testing messages. However, there is also deep emotional power in using the word “home” when talking about these issues.

The idea of a home is deeply ingrained in our collective imagination and is often associated with feelings of safety, love and stability. **The phrase *affordable homes* tested well as it taps into these universal emotions, making the message more powerful and persuasive.**

## Importance of Specificity

The idea that Colorado needs to build more housing has become so popular that the language can be co-opted by corporate landlords looking to build luxury apartments and housing. That is why it is important to clarify and be specific in our messaging about the types of housing and who it is for.



Dig Deeper

## Contribution Frames & Expanding Who's Included in "Working People"

Because humans spent tens of thousands of years in small tribes and communities, our brains are hardwired to care deeply about fairness and reciprocity. In other words, we want to make sure that people who are part of our community are contributing.

This does not mean that everyone who benefits from housing policies must work a traditional "9 to 5" job—especially considering that not all members of our communities can, or do, work a paid job.

It does mean that **our messaging should spotlight all the ways that people—including retired and disabled people—contribute to the community:** by working and paying taxes; through their volunteer work; and by emotionally supporting or caring for others.

That's why being expansive about who benefits from affordable housing—e.g., the middle class, working people and those living on low incomes—**and lifting up the many contributions that people make to their families,**

**communities and the economy** helps avoid the rhetorical trap of positioning those who would benefit as "takers." (See more on [page 42](#) about Mental Templates and Asset-Based Framing.)





Dig Deeper

## How to Employ Targeted Universalism

“Targeted universalism is an approach that supports the needs of the particular while reminding us that we are all part of the same social fabric.”

In a primer entitled “Targeted Universalism: Policy & Practice,” published in May 2019 by the Othering & Belonging Institute at UC Berkeley, authors John A. Powell, Stephen Menendian, and Wendy Ake describe how policymakers and leaders often use either universal strategies (meant to serve everyone) or targeted strategies (meant to serve specific populations in need) to attempt to solve a specific problem or set of problems.

On housing issues, we found that **audiences responded more positively to messages that could be interpreted to apply to a broad range of people, often including themselves**—for example, phrases which described policy solutions as being for *middle class, working people, and those living on low incomes*.

At the same time, we have also heard from advocates that **an equitable vision for housing policy can require specifically targeting policies** at certain communities based on income, race, or other factors.

**Targeted universalism offers a way to do both:** introducing a universal goal that is shared and applies to all, but then targeting the strategies to reach that goal based on different groups’ unique barriers (especially barriers which have disproportionate impact on some more than others).





Dig Deeper

# How to Employ Targeted Universalism

For example, the **universal goal in our messaging might be that we need to have affordable housing accessible to all Coloradans**, including those who are in the middle class or living on low incomes.

We can then say that because community members living on lower incomes—or those who have been discriminated against in the housing system because of their race, disability, or other factors—are currently further from that goal than others, **the first place we need to start toward achieving the universal goal for everyone is by targeting those communities with early or additional policy solutions.**

This approach also allows us to push back against any one-size-fits all solutions, and instead refocuses messaging on **a shared universal goal that can be achieved by employing targeted strategies for different communities.** Placing messages in a targeted universalist framework can build support and proactively neutralize opposition messaging.



---

To learn more: Targeted Universalism: Policy & Practice, May 2019;  
<https://belonging.berkeley.edu/targeted-universalism>

# Effective Audience-Tested Message on Affordable Housing

This was our most effective audience-tested message on affordable housing:

“There simply isn’t enough affordable housing in Colorado’s urban, suburban, and rural areas. Many people work multiple jobs to make ends meet, and one unexpected event—like a car repair or medical bill—might push someone onto the street where their physical and mental health can worsen. It shouldn’t be this hard. We need more affordable housing in every community across Colorado so nobody has to worry about losing their home because of an emergency expense.”

## How it uses the message elements

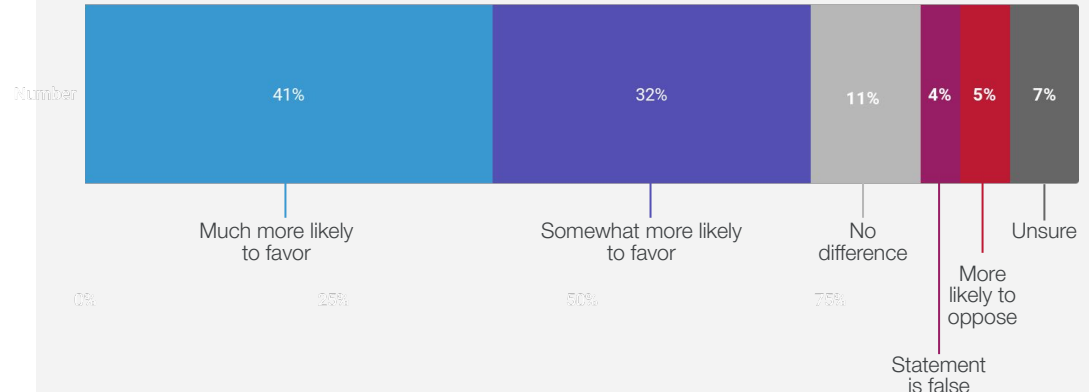
**Nurtures compassion:** The belief that working people should be able to afford homes and keep their homes in an emergency is an appeal that resonates with many.

**Appeals to shared values:** This type of message can be especially impactful when it spotlights people who are exercising their agency and determination to do right for themselves and their family through hard work.

**Protects from opposition:** Emotional appeals that center working people, as well as shared values like family and community, are effective at rebutting opposition messaging.

## How well it tested

A strong majority of persuasion survey respondents said that this message made them more likely to favor affordable housing policies.



## Heartwired Story: Robin

This video message about housing issues, including affordable housing, comes from Robin Kneich, former Denver City Council member. On the next page, we break down how her message uses Heartwired principles to reach our audiences.



Video not working? Watch it [here](#).



**How well it tested:** [click here](#) to see how persuasion survey participants responded to Robin's message. This version of the video shows aggregate data from survey respondents who were asked to watch the video and move a slider bar in real time as Robin was speaking, to indicate how compelling they found that part of her message (from 0 [not at all compelling] to 100 [extremely compelling], with everyone starting at 50 [neutral]). The lines on the screen track participants' average responses at each moment of the video, with higher lines meaning that participants found that part of the video more compelling on average.



# Heartwired Story: Robin

## VIDEO MESSAGE PARTIAL TRANSCRIPT:

My name is Robin Kneich. I'm an at-large member of the Denver City Council. I have been working on housing issues for probably close to 20 years. I grew up in a working class family and my parents were union members. And so we learned a lot about the value of work.

I never saw myself as running [for office], honestly, until I was asked by others. And I'm glad that I took that leap.

Over time, as the Colorado economy recovered from the recession and we saw this massive growth in population, all of that housing crunch really transformed into something that is now impacting moderate income households.

People who thought they were doing okay, thought they were earning a decent salary, [are] now struggling to stay in their home, to be able to buy a home, to be able to have their kids come back after college and be renters in the community where they grew up and went to school.

## WHY IT WORKS:

Since audiences can be wary of politicians, it is important that as an elected official, Robin starts the message by **building trust**. She does this by sharing the story of her family as well as her values, lived experiences, and wholesome motivations for running for office and speaking up about housing.



Robin builds connection with the audience by **acknowledging their lived experiences**, including their own financial struggles and concerns.



She also starts to **bring those who may need affordable housing into the in-group** by showing how wide swaths of Coloradans are affected by rising housing costs. She expands the circle of care to include those who were once doing moderately well and who are now experiencing challenges in the current economy. She also **uplifts important shared values** that are held across Coloradans who are struggling: home, family, kids and community.

Bringing folks who need affordable housing into the in-group can help disrupt implicit biases based on race, class, or other factors that may be shaping our audiences' reactions (see more about this on [pages 27-29](#)).





# Heartwired Story: Robin

## VIDEO MESSAGE PARTIAL TRANSCRIPT:

Government doesn't necessarily have a solution to all of those challenges but we do have strategies that can help, and they are showing effectiveness.

In my community, the way that has occurred is by funding affordable housing to build more of it, funding rental assistance, funding eviction defense services, and making sure that we have policies that protect people. I can also use that same set of tools to help someone buy a home like through down payment assistance. So each of these strategies can help someone at a variety of incomes and help really make more housing stability available to the people of Colorado.

A lot of times funding is not the biggest challenge. Community acceptance is a challenge. And so what I think sometimes occurs is that we create this idea that affordable housing is for someone else. Most of us have people in our own friend circles, our own family circles, who've struggled with the things that can impact someone's ability to have housing, or just worked a low wage job.

There's not one approach that's going to make the biggest impact. Only together, when you add up all the approaches, do you see that there's now tens of thousands of people being helped with housing.

## WHY IT WORKS:

Since many audience members may be skeptical of governments' ability to address the housing crisis, Robin **acknowledges this concern** and names that while governments can't solve all these problems, there are still plenty of things that government solutions can achieve.

Robin follows up on her acknowledgement of concerns by describing what government is able to do. This helps to **calm audiences' concerns** about government while also **activating hope** that change is possible.

Robin **nurtures compassion** and helps **bring affordable housing residents into the in-group** by encouraging audience members to think about their own friends and family whose life circumstances have impacted their housing stability. Rather than think about affordable housing being for "someone else," she reminds the audience that their loved ones (or even themselves) may find themselves in a position to benefit from affordable housing.

Robin **activates hope** by showing how tackling the housing crisis through many different solutions can have a significant cumulative impact. By not overstating the solution, and acknowledging that there is no one magical solution that will solve the crisis, she is able to invoke hope without triggering audience skepticism.



# Other Effective Messages on Affordable Housing

---

Here are other examples of affordable housing messages that tested well with audiences.

1

---

“Too many of our neighbors, friends, and family in Colorado can’t find a safe, affordable, stable place to live. We need updated policies that protect renters and homeowners, and help those experiencing homelessness. We need more housing that Coloradans across the state at all income levels can afford—including starter homes, multifamily homes like townhouses, apartments, in-law units, and mobile home parks—more supportive housing for those experiencing homelessness, and stronger protections for renters.”

2

---

“Essential workers—like teachers and healthcare, grocery, and public safety workers—keep us going. In Colorado, we reward hard work, grit, and determination, yet too many essential workers can’t afford to live in or even near the communities they serve. We need to build more housing—including starter homes, multifamily homes like townhouses, duplexes and apartments, in-law units, and mobile home parks—in urban, suburban, and rural communities across the state.”

3

---

“The high cost of housing affects our health and well-being. When rents or mortgages are high, we have less for food and utilities, as well as for unexpected expenses like a hospital bill. The financial burden creates stress, and when the only affordable housing is far from work, the long commutes are bad for our mental and physical health. We need to make sure that every community has enough housing that’s affordable for Coloradans of all incomes, including the middle class and working people.”

4

---

“Too many Coloradans can no longer afford to live near where they work. They are sitting in traffic for hours in cars and buses. Not only is this bad for their own health, but it contributes to pollution, which affects everyone. We need enough housing across the state that’s affordable for everyday Coloradans like teachers, nurses, and grocery and restaurant workers, to live in the communities near where they work.”

# Renter Protections

---

Across all eight of the tested policy areas, **stabilizing rents and limiting the upfront money required of renters were two of the most strongly favored policy areas after messaging interventions**, making them strong choices to lead housing policy packages.

## Phrases that Resonate:

Across multiple phases of this research, we heard that many Coloradans are sympathetic with small “mom and pop” landlords. They may know small landlords personally or even be one. It is therefore important to specify when messaging about corporate landlords, as opposed to including mom and pop landlords, and to move away from an antagonistic “all renters versus all landlords” framing. Instead, audience members reacted positively to messages that emphasize **balancing the needs of responsible tenants and responsible landlords**.

**Be specific in naming the actions and harms of bad corporate landlords**—for example, charging excessive upfront money, rent gouging, evicting good tenants to raise the rent.

Instead of renters’ rights or rent control, use the phrase **renter protections** to signal that renters are part of our community who we want to ensure are not taken advantage of by greedy corporations.

**Avoid jargon** such as *Section 8* and *just cause or no-fault eviction*, as they are not well understood.

Although not everyone is a renter, **make connections to people in the community who are** (someone’s son or daughter, their child’s teacher, their local barista, etc.) so that homeowners can connect to these issues.

# Effective Audience-Tested Message on Renter Protections

This was our most effective audience-tested message on renter protections:

“Too many Coloradans are being priced out of their own communities. Rents in the Denver metro area, for example, have gone up 20% since 2019. People who have built their lives here shouldn’t have to start over just so landlords can make more money. We need to balance the rights of responsible tenants and landlords by banning rent gouging and stopping corporate landlords from evicting tenants just so they can charge new tenants much higher rent.”

## How it uses the message elements

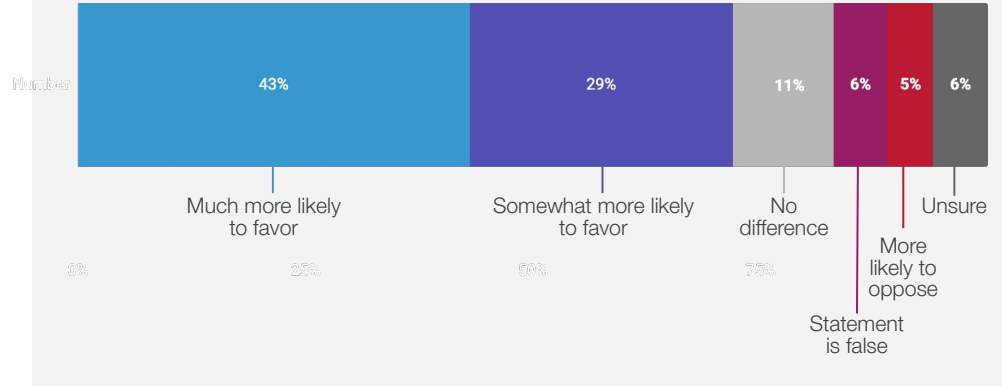
**Nurtures compassion:** Successful messaging reminds homeowners of the stresses and harms renters face on a regular basis in the current environment.

**Appeals to fairness:** The idea that corporate landlords are evicting tenants just to make more money evokes strong negative reactions for many people.

**Acknowledges complexities:** Balancing the rights of renters with landlords is a critical foundational message, because audiences are inclined to sympathize with “mom and pop landlords.” Tested messages failed to improve favorability for rent policies unless they clarified that proposed policies are specifically about addressing exploitative corporate landlord behavior, and acknowledged that in other instances renter and landlord rights need to be balanced.

## How well it tested

A strong majority of persuasion survey respondents said that this message made them more likely to favor renter protection policies.



# Supportive Housing

---

## Phrases that Resonate:

Descriptions of supportive housing that center people and stability are the most resonant, with top rated phrases being **supportive housing for individuals and families in crisis** and **affordable housing combined with services that will support tenants to become stable again**. (Note that while we tested the latter phrase using “affordable housing,” we also learned from persuasion survey responses that “affordable homes” may be even stronger framing, as [described on page 48](#).)

The idea of an individual or family “in crisis” implies something short term—a situation or moment in time that they have not brought on themselves. This framing can thus help expand mental templates of who needs help (see [page 42](#) for more on Mental Templates and Asset-Based Framing). **In crisis framing therefore elicits more compassion than phrasing about families in need**, which can be associated with a perpetual state brought on by your own actions, rather than a moment in time that will pass.

The idea of “stability” was called out by many research participants in a positive way. Invoking stability as a shared value can help nurture compassion among those who may have more negative associations with social programs and affordable housing.

**Stable housing with support services** is a viable shorter phrasing. Or, **services that will support tenants / residents to become stable again** can be used to imply agency without triggering concerns about people avoiding individual responsibility.

**Avoid wonkier jargon** that is confusing to audiences, like *wraparound services* or *case management*. Instead of these shorthand jargon phrases, name and describe specific examples of the types of services that would be provided.

## Heartwired Story: Hassan

This video message about supportive housing comes from Hassan Latif, founder of Second Chance Center and Providence at the Heights (a supportive housing center in Aurora, CO). On the next page, we break down how his message uses Heartwired principles to reach our audiences.



Video not working? Watch it [here](#).



**How well it tested:** [click here](#) to see how persuasion survey participants responded to Hassan's message. This version of the video shows aggregate data from survey respondents who were asked to watch the video and move a slider bar in real time as Hassan was speaking, to indicate how compelling they found that part of his message (from 0 [not at all compelling] to 100 [extremely compelling], with everyone starting at 50 [neutral]). The lines on the screen track participants' average responses at each moment of the video, with higher lines meaning that participants found that part of the video more compelling on average.



# Heartwired Story: Hassan

## VIDEO MESSAGE PARTIAL TRANSCRIPT:

My name is Hassan Latif and I'm the founder of Second Chance Center in Aurora and in Denver, and have been blessed to be involved in this work.

The way I would describe supportive housing is the answer to homelessness is not just a roof over people's heads. It's dealing with the issues that brought them to that place in their lives.

[Our supportive housing] comes with those kinds of things that help people deal with their mental health issues, [and] with their substance abuse issues.

It's very hard to find a job, go to work every day if you have to go from an environment that's unstable. If you got these issues, then we want to, first, get you housed and then we want to make available to you the kind of support that could help you deal with some of these other issues.

We just try to do what we can to give them the tools and the skillset to kind of refine a vision for themselves going forward.

## WHY IT WORKS:

Hassan **builds trust** by establishing his credentials on these issues. He also **names and models his wholesome motivations**, saying that he is "blessed to be involved in this work."



Throughout this video, Hassan **speaks in a clear, plain-spoken way that avoids jargon**, as in this description of supportive housing.

Hassan also **shows the complexity of supportive housing**: how it's more than giving people a roof over their heads, it's addressing substance use and mental health issues.



While showing complexity, it is also important to **bring folks experiencing homelessness into the in-group**. This ensures that they are not defined only by the challenges they are facing, like mental health or addiction issues. It can also help disrupt implicit biases based on race, class, or other factors that may be shaping our audiences' reactions (see more about this on [pages 27-29](#)).

Hassan **nurtures compassion**, and **brings folks who have experienced homelessness into the in-group**, by showing how they have the same needs and values that many of us do: needing a stable home, and getting and keeping a job.



Hassan also shows how supportive housing can address these needs by giving people the tools to create a good life for themselves.



# Heartwired Story: Hassan

## VIDEO MESSAGE PARTIAL TRANSCRIPT:

[Originally] people thought we were building a halfway house, so right away we were going against these sorts of images. People were saying we were going to build this monstrosity of a building. They were fearful of their property values going down. I'm not saying that these are invalid concerns. We had to go through a pretty extensive hearing. We continued to have good neighbor meetings even after we were given the approval to go forward. We have 24-hour desk coverage. The Aurora police department were concerned as well, but if you ask them now, they will tell you that they don't have a problem with Providence at the Heights. This is an apartment that just happens to have support.

What we've seen is that when people are able to get into a setting like this where they have support, and they're able to invite their loved ones to come in and see where they're living—a lot of times it opens up the avenue of reintegration with family.

We've been open almost two and a half years now. Our folks have become a part of the neighborhood.

## WHY IT WORKS:

Here, Hassan **acknowledges concerns**, including those that may stem from implicit biases. Naming and acknowledging is an important first step in disrupting biases and then calming concerns.



He can then start to **calm concerns** by showing how they worked with the community and stayed in dialogue to address community feedback—including holding ongoing good neighbor meetings, and ensuring 24-hour desk coverage.



Hassan further **brings Providence at the Heights residents into the in-group** by emphasizing how they are residents of a neighborhood apartment building that simply receives some extra support.

The importance of family is a deeply-held shared value among our audiences. Hassan helps **nurture compassion and bring supportive housing residents into the in-group** by showing how supportive housing residents also value and want to connect with their families.



In these two sentences, Hassan **activates hope** by offering proof that supportive housing can exist in neighborhoods as a positive part of the community, and making a difference for those experiencing homelessness.



Hassan also **brings residents of supportive housing into the in-group** with an uplifting note: "Our folks have become part of the neighborhood."

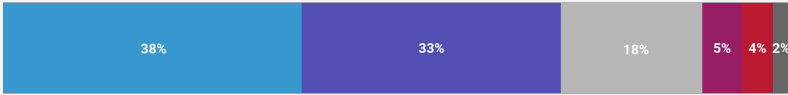


# Heartwired Story: Hassan

## How well it tested

A strong majority of persuasion survey respondents said that Hassan’s message was compelling, and made them more likely to favor supportive housing in their community.

### How compelling was this video for you personally?



- 38% Extremely compelling
- 33% Very compelling
- 18% Somewhat compelling
- 5% Not very compelling
- 4% Not compelling at all
- 2% Unsure

### Based on what you saw and heard in this video, does this message make you more inclined to support policies that would increase supportive housing in your community?



- 38% Strongly agree
- 31% Somewhat agree
- 6% Neutral
- 8% Somewhat disagree
- 7% Strongly disagree
- 3% Unsure

# Other Effective Messages on Supportive Housing

---

Here are other examples of supportive housing messages that tested well with audiences.

1

---

“Supportive housing has real-world, proven success in reducing homelessness. In Houston, residents opened their communities up to supportive housing once their initial concerns about how the programs might be run were addressed. The result is a 63% reduction in chronic homelessness since 2011. Supportive housing strengthens our communities by helping to reduce chronic homelessness.”

2

---

“The high cost of housing, combined with the lack of support for people with mental illness or drug and alcohol problems, is pushing more Coloradans into homelessness in urban and rural areas. Homelessness hurts everyone—the people who become homeless, and the communities where they struggle to survive. We need more supportive housing to help people get back on their feet, and more affordable housing for them to live in once they are ready.”

3

---

“The cost of housing means more Coloradans are struggling with homelessness. And in our rural communities there are different challenges than in places like Denver, Colorado Springs, or their suburbs, because there are fewer support services. We need to create more non-profit supportive housing, which gives people a stable place to live and the tools they need to get back on their feet, in our rural communities. The entire community will benefit because we can get people back into the workforce and strengthen the local economy.”

# Putting It All Together

## Part 1: An Aspirational Vision

Here is an audience-tested example of how to put together our messaging recommendations into one vision statement..

**“Ensuring that communities across Colorado have homes that everyone can afford is the foundation of a healthy and vibrant community. People can live close to their jobs. We can spend less time driving and more time with our families. That’s why we need to build more starter homes, duplexes, and apartments. We should also ban rent gouging and stop landlords from evicting tenants just so they can raise the rent. To reduce homelessness, we need to create supportive housing—nonprofit apartment buildings that offer job training, addiction counseling, and mental health services.”**

On the next page, you will see how audience members reacted to this vision when asked to highlight any words or phrases that they found especially compelling (darker green = more highlights).

## Putting It All Together: Part 1: An Aspirational Vision

Ensuring that communities across Colorado have homes that **everyone can afford** is the foundation of a **healthy and vibrant community**. People can live close to their jobs. We can spend less time driving and more time with our families. That's why we need to build more starter homes, duplexes, and apartments. We should also **ban rent gouging and stop landlords from evicting tenants just so they can raise the rent**. To reduce homelessness, we need to **creative supportive housing** — nonprofit apartment buildings that offer **job training, addiction counseling, and mental health services**.

**Centers shared values**

**Inclusively defines affordability**

**Taps into existing frustrations**

**Avoids jargon like *no fault eviction***

All text highlighted in green was selected by **30% or more** of respondents (n=376) as being compelling to them.

The most highlighted text (darkest green) was selected by **53%** of respondents as being compelling.

## Part 2: Audience-Tested Heartwired Story Example

A fundamental aspect of the Heartwired approach is understanding that **human beings experience the world through stories, and that stories are therefore key to helping audiences understand issues and policy proposals.** Stories can capture audiences' attention by engaging them emotionally; create vivid mental images and connections that are remembered much more easily than other types of information; and foster connection with messengers or characters in the story with whom they identify and relate.

In a final example of tying all of our recommendations together, **here is an example story we created that was particularly successful with research audiences,** along with a breakdown of how and why they found it compelling.



# Audience-Tested Heartwired Story: Skeptic to Supporter

## Opinion: I went from being a skeptic of supportive housing to a supporter

As a father with kids in elementary school, **I have struggled to explain to my children why people are living on our streets in Colorado.** As adults, we may turn away from this suffering. Our kids do not.

**I own a neighborhood market** in Colorado Springs and **my family's home** is a few blocks away. We often had to deal with homeless people at the store—loitering, asking for money—and it was getting worse. **While I felt bad for people having a hard time, I also had a store to run.** Two years ago, I learned of a proposal to convert an old motel into supportive housing.

The proposal described **“supportive housing”** as an apartment building that provides reliable housing with on-site health and addiction recovery services for people who were chronically homeless. All this just a few blocks from my store and home. **The idea didn't help my blood pressure.**

The op-ed author starts **building trust** with audiences by describing his **identity** and **motivations for speaking out** that many of them likely share or can relate to: that of a caring father.



He then **nurtures compassion** by acknowledging the difficult experiences of those experiencing homelessness.



Throughout the op-ed, he **acknowledges the complexities** of **concerns and negative emotions** he has experienced.



## Audience-Tested Heartwired Story: Skeptic to Supporter

### I went from being a skeptic of supportive housing to a supporter

New Horizons, the nonprofit proposing the project, hosted a community meeting where they asked us to **list all the concerns** we had. Among the concerns we raised: “Public safety. Drug use. Panhandling. Public urination.” They also asked us what standards felt reasonable to have in place for the property. **“No drug use, no loitering, no violence”** were among the things on the list.

I was impressed with how much they listened to our concerns. They held the next meeting at a New Horizons supportive housing property. I was amazed because it looked totally normal. They explained that part of the deal when building supportive housing is that they are required to **match the character of the neighborhood**.

During my visit I met Ashley, one of the residents. Ashley grew up in foster care. She had had a fast food job, but she couldn’t always get enough hours for rent, so often crashed on friends’ couches. This went on for years. She struggled with depression and started drinking. She eventually got fired from her job and started sleeping on the streets.

Here, he further **acknowledges complexities and concerns**, which his audiences may likely share on these topics.



Next, he starts to **calm concerns** by explaining how these concerns were addressed and the positive emotions that he felt.



In this section, he begins to **nurture compassion** by spotlighting someone who has benefited from supportive housing.



## Audience-Tested Heartwired Story: Skeptic to Supporter

### I went from being a skeptic of supportive housing to a supporter

When she got into supportive housing, it was the first time she had a **safe, stable roof** over her head as an adult. She was able to get into **counseling** and **take classes** to get her GED. She felt so proud to feel like she was finally on the right path.

**It made me realize** how important it is for everyone to have the **opportunities** to support themselves and live a good life. While the supportive housing was helping Ashley right now, it was also providing her the **tools for self-reliance** in the long run.

I went to that first meeting worried about the impact on my business and neighborhood. Now, I volunteer as part of the business advisory council for New Horizons and talk to other small business owners about **solutions**—like supportive housing—that actually work. I can now speak honestly to my kids about homelessness and what **our family is doing to make a difference.**

Ashley’s story helps to **expand mental templates** of supportive housing residents, and **uplift the values, hopes, and aspirations that they share with audiences** (e.g., to support themselves and feel safe and stable).

Ashley’s story also helps to **activate hope** by showing that solutions like supportive housing can be effective.

The author **builds trust** by bringing it back to a relatable **identity** as business owner, and **activates hope** by modeling what he and others can do to make a difference.



# Messaging Checklist

---

As a summary of our recommendations, we created this “cheat sheet” of key to-dos that you can use to assess messaging you are creating or delivering.

Remember that not all messages will necessarily tick all of these boxes, but when you evaluate your overall communications strategy, we recommend you work to integrate all checklist items across your entire suite of communications efforts.

## Does Your Messaging:

- Spotlight diverse and relatable messengers—e.g., across race, gender, class, geography, occupations, perspectives, lived experiences.
- Have your messengers name or describe identities they may share with our audiences—e.g., parent, son, daughter, co-worker, friend, neighbor—along with shared values like family, community, safety and security, etc.
- Have messengers be specific about naming their wholesome, relatable motivations for speaking out and why these issues are important to them personally.
- Acknowledge the challenging nature of these issues and your audiences’ likely (or known) concerns.
- Help audiences to notice their own negative emotions, name those emotions, and normalize these emotions—e.g., by sharing stories of others who experienced those emotions as well.
- Share stories of how others managed their internal conflict—e.g., learning more about the issue to address concerns, through a gradual change of heart, or an important a-ha moment.
- Share stories of the harms caused by rising housing costs, lack of strong renter protections, and/or homelessness, including both direct and indirect harms to the entire community.

# Messaging Checklist

## Does Your Messaging:

- Expand audiences' mental templates of the people, families and communities that would benefit from our proposed policies.
- Spotlight the relatability of those who would benefit from policies and programs by highlighting the values, motivations, hopes and aspirations they are likely to share with your audiences, and/or how situations out of their control may have led them to experience housing insecurity or financial difficulty.
- If naming "villains" or bad actors, be as specific as possible to avoid perpetuating false perceptions of mutual exclusivity (e.g., specify "corporate landlords" in order to not pit all landlords against all renters), and specify the harmful behaviors of bad actors.
- Use a targeted universalism framing where relevant, including a shared universal goal that will benefit Coloradans across the income spectrum, as well as the importance of targeted policies to help everyone reach that goal.
- Nurture hope by sharing how similar policies and practices have had a positive impact in comparable communities or states—using both personal stories and a few powerful statistics or "facts with impact" to demonstrate proof of concept.
- Use non-jargony language that someone like your grandparents would be able to understand.
- When sharing positive outcomes and an aspirational vision for the future, also be realistic and honest about potential efficacy of proposed policies, rather than making them sound "too good to be true."
- When possible, highlight private / public or nonprofit partner efforts, versus only naming government solutions.
- If possible, end your message on a hopeful note that lets audiences see that change is possible.

# Research methodology

## Three phases of research contributed to the recommendations included in this guide.

### Phase 1 Landscape\*

Included a review of a sample of 235 print news media stories from local outlets across Colorado; social listening analysis of reader comments on relevant articles and media's Facebook, and Twitter; structural messaging audit of 20 key organizations' current messaging via their online presence (website, blog posts, social media, etc.); and an audit of relevant existing public opinion research.

### Phase 2 Mindset\*

Consisted of in-depth interviews with 12 community leaders and seven roundtable discussions with more than 80 advocates in May and June 2020.

Phase 2 also consisted of 16, two-hour online focus groups among 109 Colorado residents, conducted between September - October 2020. Separate groups were conducted among Black women, Black men, Hispanic women, Hispanic men, Native American women, Native American men, white women and white men. Twelve groups were in English and four were in Spanish, and facilitators shared racial or ethnic identities with participants.

Mindset research also included a four-day online discussion board focus group among 32 Colorado residents conducted in January 2021. All focus groups included a mix of participants based on their overall attitudes, and a mix of political ideologies, party identification and geographic areas from across Colorado.

The final part of Phase 2 included an online audience segmentation survey of 1,500 registered voters from across Colorado in June 2021.

### Phase 3 Persuasion

Consisted of a four-day online discussion board focus group among 28 Colorado residents conducted in June 2022, and 16, two-hour online focus groups among 105 Colorado residents, conducted between September - October 2022. Fourteen groups were conducted in English and two were conducted in Spanish, and facilitators once again shared racial or ethnic identities with participants. As in the Mindset research, all focus groups included a mix of participants based on their overall attitudes, and a mix of political ideologies, party identification and geographic areas from across Colorado.

The final part of Phase 3 consisted of an online persuasion survey of 1,555 Colorado adults ages 18 and older, including 50 who took the survey in Spanish. The survey was conducted in May 2023, and respondents include a mix of political ideologies, party identification and geographic areas from across Colorado.

\*The Landscape and Mindset phases included in-depth qualitative and quantitative research on attitudes Coloradans hold about five broad areas related to health equity in Colorado: 1. health care, 2. housing and homelessness, 3. jobs, the economy, and quality of life, 4. racism, polarization, and discrimination, and 5. mental health and substance misuse. The Persuasion phase focused on policies related to housing and homelessness.

# The Research & Strategy Team

---



The Colorado  
Health Foundation™

## The Colorado Health Foundation

is a statewide philanthropic organization that champions the overall health and well-being of every Coloradan by advocating for and investing in solutions and policies that drive health equity and racial justice. Bobby Clark, Taryn Fort, Kyle Rojas Legleiter, Austin Montoya, David Proper, Emily Rader and Jace Woodrum contributed thought leadership and review to this guide.

---



## Wonder: Strategies for Good

is a network of experts in messaging, storytelling, psychology and public opinion research. Corinne Hoag, Julia Liao, Tamara Murray, Kelly Osmundson and Robert Pérez contributed research, thought leadership, writing and review to this guide.

---



## Goodwin Simon Strategic Research

is an independent opinion research firm with decades of experience in polling, social and political marketing, policy analysis, messaging strategy, and narrative change for clients in the public and private sectors. Amy Simon, Naser Javaid, James Telesford and Nicole Fossier contributed research, thought leadership and review to this guide.

# Index

---

## A

[Audience Profiles](#)

[Acknowledge Complexity \(Messaging Recommendation\)](#)

[Acknowledgment Structures \(Dig Deeper\)](#)

[Activate Hope \(Messaging Recommendation\)](#)

[Affordable Housing \(Principles in Action\)](#)

[Aspirational Vision](#)

## B

[Build Trust \(Messaging Recommendation\)](#)

## C

[Calm Concerns \(Messaging Recommendation\)](#)

[Change-of-Heart Stories \(Dig Deeper\)](#)

[Contribution Frames & Expanding Who's Included in "Working People" \(Dig Deeper\)](#)

[Curse of Knowledge and Reasoning Chains \(Dig Deeper\)](#)

## D

[Disrupting Implicit Bias by Showing How People Are Part of Our In-group \(Dig Deeper\)](#)

## H

[Heartwired Analysis: How Housing is Different](#)

## K

[Key Audience Segments](#)

## M

[Mental Templates and Asset-Based Framing \(Dig Deeper\)](#)

[Messaging Checklist](#)

## N

[Nurture Compassion \(Messaging Recommendation\)](#)

## P

[Persuasive Facts with Impact \(Dig Deeper\)](#)

## R

[Renter Protections \(Principles in Action\)](#)

[Research Methodology & Team](#)

## S

[Shared Advocate & Audience Values](#)

[Supporter-to-Skeptic Story Example](#)

[Supportive Housing \(Principles in Action\)](#)

## T

[Targeted Universalism \(Dig Deeper\)](#)

## U

[Upstairs Brain vs. Downstairs Brain \(Dig Deeper\)](#)