

## *Strategies for Talking About Housing So People Will Listen, Think, and Act*

Presentation Summary

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### Strategies for Talking About Housing So People Will Listen, Think, and Act

Home for All | San Mateo County

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Strategic framing looks for communications strategies (e.g. values, metaphors, examples, tone, explanations) that can help a general audience think about issues like community development and the availability of safe, quality, affordable homes in new ways.

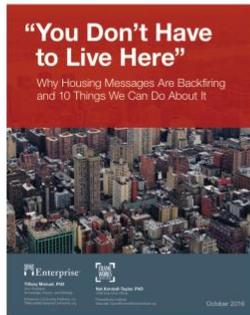
**Frames** are sets of choices about how concepts are presented:

What to emphasize, where to start, how to explain it, and what to leave unsaid.

**Frame effects** occur when small changes in presentation lead to measurable, significant changes in people's response.

More specifically, FrameWorks Institute's research empirically tests frames that avoid unproductive assumptions about housing and community development. Examples of these assumptions, called *cultural models*, include the idea that homes are primarily a consumer good you pay for (rather than an element of community wellbeing), that the government is powerless to create more affordable housing, or that the term 'affordable' housing only means subsidized housing.

## Frames can backfire in multiple ways



- The **Crisis and Fatalism** backfire
- The **Mobility and Personal Responsibility** backfire
- The **Zero-Sum Thinking** backfire
- The **Data Doesn't Sound Right** backfire
- The **NIMBY** backfire
- The **Why is this Happening** backfire

Empirically tested frames also help communicators avoid the *backfire effect*. A *backfire effect* occurs when a frame or message cues a preexisting assumption about an issue. When it comes to affordable housing and community development, FrameWorks' research has found that messages about affordable housing can backfire in at least six ways. These *backfires* are described in the report titled *You Don't Have to Live Here*. The report is available on the FrameWorks Institute's website: [https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/PDF/You\\_Don't\\_Have\\_to\\_Live\\_Here.pdf](https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/PDF/You_Don't_Have_to_Live_Here.pdf).

Today we'll cover four strategies for avoiding the backfire effect.

The first strategy FrameWorks recommends is describing the problems communities face around making safe, quality homes available.

**Strategy #1:**  
**Shift from affordability to availability**

## The limits of *affordability*



- Cues consumerist thinking
- Restricts solutions to “effort” and levels of income
- Does not drive thinking to **availability**
- Does not drive thinking to housing policy

The goal of reframing an issue like housing and community development is to avoid triggering the backfire effect as well as unproductive assumptions about housing. Across FrameWorks’ testing, using *affordability* as the main theme for conversations about housing did not reliably curb assumptions about housing as a consumer good. *Affordability* also did not help research participants see the connection between public policy and how housing is created.

## What’s the real problem?

### ***A Housing Availability problem statement***

Americans are facing a housing crisis—quality rental homes are incredibly scarce and breathtakingly expensive, yet wages are stuck in place. Families caught in the crisis are one paycheck or one unexpected expense away from homelessness. If we don’t address the rental housing crisis now, the problem will only get worse, and millions more Americans will soon be in real danger of homelessness. To address the rental housing crisis, we need to make affordable housing a top priority and take steps to help people who are facing this serious and growing threat.

This explanation of the “housing crisis” uses language about the limited availability of homes. This strategy is an alternative to using language about the cost burden of homes. FrameWorks’ research suggests that focusing on the limited availability of housing makes audiences more likely to support creating more housing.



## Strategy # 2: Frame with values

Values are a framing tool that allow communicators to explain why their issues matter. FrameWorks routinely experiments with values as a tool for building audiences' sense of efficacy, collective responsibility and support for policies that increase housing affordability and availability.



### ***Fairness Across Places***

Our zip codes—where we live—shouldn't determine our success in life. That's why we need to make sure that all communities share the critical resources they need, like good homes that people can afford.



### ***Regional Interdependence***

Our region only prospers when all of the communities in it prosper. That's why we need to make sure that all communities have the critical resources they need, like good homes that people can afford.

FrameWorks recommends *Fairness* and *Regional Interdependence* as strategies for presenting housing availability as a collective, community issue. Framing housing as a collective issue is an effective strategy for avoiding “us versus them” thinking and the “Personal Responsibility” backfire effect. To learn more about how to implement these values, review the *Piecing it Together* playbook. The playbook is available on FrameWorks' website:

[http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/housing/enterprise\\_housing\\_playbook.pdf](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org/assets/files/housing/enterprise_housing_playbook.pdf).



**Strategy #3:**  
**Connect availability to  
policy**

Only about a quarter of resources for housing from the government go to households who make less than \$40,000 a year. This means that people with lower incomes have to spend more of their money on housing, which puts them at a disadvantage in other areas of life by having less to spend on things like health and education. What this means is that we are giving the least help to those who need it most. We must change this and use our resources so that everyone can afford a decent place to live.

The third recommended strategy is linking public policy to the availability of homes that are affordable.

This sample explanation details how current policies impacting housing are disadvantaging some groups. A similar statement detailing how current policy can unfairly advantage some groups was also effective at boosting support for creating more affordable housing. You can read more about this portion of the project in the *Piecing it Together* playbook or *Finding the Frame on Housing* report.



**Strategy #4:**  
**Use a positive tone**

Finally, using a positive tone is an effective framing strategy. A “positive” tone emphasizes how creating more housing will benefit communities, and points to concrete solutions and next steps for addressing an availability problem. A “negative” tone focuses on the severity of housing problems without pointing to solutions. A positive tone also emphasizes what communities lose when they fail to create more housing. A positive tone in particular can help communicators balance a sense of “urgency” with a sense of “efficacy” around housing.

## Each strategy helps avoid a backfire

### Strategies to use

- Shift the big idea to focus on availability
- Use *Regional Interdependence + Fairness* to explain why homes and policy matter
- Connect policy to housing availability
- Balance urgency and efficacy when describing problems and solutions

### Backfires to avoid

- Avoid the “consumerism” frame and *Personal Responsibility* backfire
- Avoid the *Crisis + Fatalism* and *Personal Responsibility* backfires
- Avoid the *Crisis + Fatalism* and *Zero Sum Thinking* backfires
- Avoid the *Crisis + Fatalism* backfire

The four strategies discussed today help communicators avoid the backfire effect and counterproductive frames.

To learn more about the research presented here, please visit our website at [www.frameworksinstitute.org](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org).