

FRAMING & MESSAGING

FOR HEALTH AND HOUSING INITIATIVES





Strategic communication is key to advancing policies and initiatives that will support access to safe, stable, and affordable housing. Once practitioners have identified a solution and determined the steps needed to implement it, it is essential to develop messages that can build or reinforce support from decisionmakers.¹ The relationship between health and housing is complex and multidimensional, and practitioners can get bogged down in the details of their work when trying to communicate with other audiences. This section provides key steps to develop and strategically communicate values-based messages that can strengthen support for health and housing practices.

What Is Framing?

The term “framing” describes the way information is shaped and presented in order to influence the meaning people derive from it.¹ Framing an issue involves understanding people’s existing ideas and considering those as context, so that they receive new information in a way they can comprehend and integrate. The existing ideas or established way of thinking are referred to as the default frame.¹

In the culture of the United States, the default frame is often individualism.²⁻⁴ This frame attributes socioeconomic status, access, and opportunity to an individual’s own life choices – a view that is particularly salient when forming opinions related to social policy, including housing.¹ As a result, public opinion generally holds that it is solely a family’s own responsibility to work hard enough to afford a safe home in a thriving and healthy community.

Practitioners must recognize how many perspectives are rooted in an individualistic default frame to effectively reframe the benefits and burdens of comprehensive healthy housing for decisionmakers. The following findings from message framing research conducted by the Frameworks Institute demonstrate how individualism infuses many perspectives about housing, and how those perspectives lead people to conclude that healthy and affordable housing is not a public concern.

- **Self-makingness** is the perspective that people are “self-made” and have agency. Therefore, housing is a consumer choice, and people who are not satisfied with their home or neighborhood should move. If they cannot afford to move, it is because they have not worked hard enough.
- **Separate fates and zero-sum thinking** is the perspective that other people’s housing problems are “not my problem.” In this frame, issues like housing insecurity and sacrifices made to maintain housing are simply the result of unfortunate circumstances.
- **Not-in-my-backyard and natural segregation** is the perspective that efforts to create racial and economic integration are not necessary because people want to live in communities composed of people similar to themselves.
- **Facts don’t fit the frame** describes what happens when new data presented doesn’t align with a person’s existing understanding or anecdotal experiences related to housing. Often this causes the person to disbelieve or challenge the data, rather than adjusting their opinions.

Whether communicating to local officials, a school board, a foundation, community members, or their representatives, remember that many people operate according to the default frame, and almost everyone is influenced by public opinion to some extent. The individualistic perspective underpinning many people’s thinking about housing will affect how decisionmakers react to health and housing initiatives and how to message about those initiatives.



Develop Effective Messages

Move from Portrait to Landscape Frames

Not surprisingly, the default frame of individualism is often reflected in news coverage of housing issues. Many stories about affordable housing begin with an anecdote about someone struggling with housing insecurity.^{1,2,5} However, these stories rarely expand the scope of the problem to include larger factors bearing upon the subject's experience. This type of limited framing is referred to as the portrait (or episodic) frame, because it points the audience's focus toward an individual person or family. While these stories may capture attention and stir up emotion, the audience is left to determine the cause of the problem on its own, and will often fall back on a default frame of blaming the victim for his or her circumstances.²

To effectively advance health and housing initiatives, practitioners will need to use a landscape (thematic) frame when developing messages. This frame includes the individual but “pulls back the lens”² to describe contextual factors affecting the individual and to point toward systemic solutions. In other words, messages that practitioners create should illuminate the systems that prevent access to comprehensive healthy housing so the audience can begin to understand why a systemic response is required to solve what might otherwise be thought of as personal problems.¹

Address 3 Message Levels

Effective messages are crafted to address 3 conceptual levels: identify common ground with the audience around shared values, describe the issue at hand, and present solutions.^{2,6} The first level of the message is the most important. Values, not details, are a motivating force that can pull an audience out of the rugged individualism rut.² Messages that emphasize

values like shared prosperity and community health can help counter the individualistic default frame. They can present healthy housing as a way to bring us closer to achieving personal and community conditions we all consider important: cohesive families, healthy lives, safety. Rather than positioning housing issues as individual problems, anchor the issues to something we all care about and can get behind.³

3 Message Levels

- 1 Express overarching values
- 2 Share the issue being addressed
- 3 Give details about the policy proposed to address the issue

The Los Angeles County Department of Public Health (LACDPH), for example, used this structure to develop messages for staff around the connection between health and housing. It began with concise sentences establishing core values, including:

- Affordable housing is a foundation which enables people to live longer, healthier lives.
- Stable housing facilitates healthy, cohesive families and communities.
- High-quality housing is central to the health of individuals, families, and communities. All of us benefit when we have a safe place to call home.

At the second level, messages should present the issue an institution is working to solve – in this case, a dearth of safe, stable, and affordable housing. The message should link the housing problem with its contextual drivers to provide a more complete picture.³ “Pulling back the lens” by presenting the cause and effect of an issue reduces the chances that an audience will devise its own explanation, which typically leads to the familiar individualistic default frame.



Again using LACDPH as an example, the second portion of the message provides a concise explanation of how a lack of affordable housing affects a family's risk of being exposed to overcrowding and pollution:

When families have limited options for affordable housing, they are more likely to live in homes that are crowded, poorly maintained, and located in communities with higher levels of pollution.⁷

Level 3 should communicate the policy goals that will help address the issue. From LACDPH's messages:

Inclusive, transit-oriented communities can generate a range of benefits, including opportunities for physical activity, increased affordable housing, value and revitalization of existing communities, and reduced greenhouse gas emissions⁷

Advocates and practitioners, who are immersed in the issue and strongly invested in solving it, tend to get bogged down in providing data and detailing viable solutions.^{2,6} But it is critical to remember that values, not details, are stronger motivators for change.² In fact, too much data can trigger audience members to challenge the evidence if it does not fit with their existing knowledge of the issue.³ Avoid burdening them with too much detail or triggering their confirmation bias. Overall, when the message is complete, the first-level values frame should be most prominent, clear, and at the forefront, helping to galvanize an audience into supportive action.

How to Develop Effective Messages

Start with an overall strategy. It's important to understand goals and to target decisionmakers for influence. Understand who the allies and base are, and how they and the decisionmakers will be reached. This will guide other decisions about messages.

Understand the default frame in U.S. culture is individualism. Messages and talking points should provide an alternative vision and solution. While it's important to understand the default frame to engage in strategic communication planning, avoid repeating it and instead focus on reiterating the message.

Use a landscape (thematic) frame when developing messages. Messages should demonstrate how other factors besides the individual drive housing issues and help solve them.

Follow the 3-level strategy and focus on shared values. Don't get bogged down in details. Use language and examples that will resonate for the intended audience and expand their understanding of the issue.



Learn More

Learn more about evidence-based message framing in the Frameworks Institute study “[You Don’t Have to Live Here.](#)” For more information about how to identify solutions, see “[Using Indicators to Inform Health and Housing Initiatives.](#)”

Endnotes

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