Message Guide

**A PSH Framework:
Pragmatism,
Stability, Humanity**

HOUSING
NARRATIVE
LAB

CSH

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Supportive housing is a proven and cost-effective solution that provides an affordable place to live and the support services people need to get off the streets and rebuild their lives. CSH, a national nonprofit that helps communities plan, finance, build, and manage supportive housing, engaged the Housing Narrative Lab in 2025 to conduct public opinion narrative research and test messaging. The goal was to assess public understanding of supportive housing and identify which messages resonate with a broad audience. CSH and Housing Narrative Lab also partnered to develop effective messages that increase support for and investment in this long-lasting solution.

This work is especially timely. Today's narrative landscape increasingly questions the efficacy of supportive housing, fueling messages and policies that make homelessness and housing insecurity worse rather than providing the housing and services people need to thrive.

This guide provides a framework to shape messages and stories about supportive housing as a solution to homelessness and housing instability that makes our communities vibrant, healthy and thriving. The research provides practical insights you can use to communicate more effectively and build durable public support for supportive housing.

METHODOLOGY

The Housing Narrative Lab conducted three phases of narrative research to inform this guide.

1 **Grow Progress** conducted an Audience Understanding Survey between July 17-18, 2025 among a national panel of 1,005 adult respondents. This qualitative survey identified three primary values — safety/stability, compassion and freedom — to test in messages in the second phase of the research.

2 **Lake Research Partners** administered the second phase of the research, which was a national online dial survey conducted from Aug. 26 - Sept. 3, 2025, with 1,200 adults including oversamples of 100 Black Americans and 100 Latinos/as.

3 **Grow Progress** tested the persuasiveness of six messages among different audiences to see which ones changed their minds in favor of supportive housing.

▸ Housing and support services have a high baseline of support as solutions to homelessness.

▸ Respondents overwhelmingly support stable housing combined with services to solve homelessness with 9 out of 10 supporting it and 6 out of 10 strongly supporting it. And almost the same number (88%) support more government funding for programs that solve homelessness and housing instability. This means audiences are primed to support us so **we can focus on showing people that supportive housing is the most effective and humane way to solve homelessness**.

▸ People support housing plus services so we don't face an opposition problem, but we face a cynicism problem. People may agree that the idea of housing and services is a good one, but some mistrust it will work because of concerns about waste, fraud and abuse.

▸ Respondents say the best reasons to **SUPPORT** affordable housing with services include the fact that it combines affordable housing with tailored support, it gets people off the streets and out of encampments and it provides stability for individuals and families.

▸ The top reason respondents say they **OPPOSE** affordable housing and support services is their worry that people who do not need help will take advantage of the program.

▸ Housing policies that focus on fining and jailing people are unpopular with a large percentage of respondents, and support for these policies decreases further after hearing our messages.

▸ Arguments supporting jailing and fining homeless people have traction — though they are weaker than our side's messages — because of the worry that "people who don't really need help [will take] advantage" of the programs, particularly with half of Republican respondents. This finding shows that the public's resistance is not necessarily a lack of compassion but a fear of waste, fraud and abuse.

▸ **An effective counter-narrative must proactively address all of this by highlighting the cost-effectiveness of supportive housing and emphasizing the vetting and management that ensures resources are directed to those with the most pressing needs.**

▸ Of concern is that a majority of adults (slightly more than half) agree that "because all of our families are struggling, we shouldn't spend more of our hard-earned tax dollars on programs that only help certain groups of people." There is sensitivity in how taxpayer dollars are used across demographics including among Black adults.

► The term "services that help people stay housed long term" received a more positive response than "permanent supportive housing," which suggests that the word "permanent" may evoke a sense of an indefinite, non-reversible commitment that makes some respondents, especially those in the persuadable middle, wary. This subtle refinement for messaging can help build trust and reduce resistance by framing the support in a way that feels both responsible and humane. It also implies this will "work" and be effective rather than never-ending.

► Adults feel positive toward a variety of reasons why supportive housing is needed for specific groups of people with complex needs, such as physical and mental disabilities, young adults leaving foster care or people with mental health issues.

► **We can change people's minds.** The percentage of people who said it was "more important" to prioritize funding for housing and support services grew from 52% before hearing our messages to 60% after it. This cause-and-effect relationship provides tangible proof that sustained communications is not just about preaching to the choir but can actually increase public support and concern.

The big narrative is the big idea or ultimate goal that forms the foundation of all your stories and messages. It is a statement of the values at the heart of why we do this work, including equity, health, compassion, community and safety.

No matter our race, gender or income, we all need a safe place to call home — it's the foundation of a healthy and thriving life. When we invest in housing with support services, we provide a proven, compassionate solution to homelessness and housing instability that helps people with complex needs get off the streets and rebuild their lives. That makes our communities healthier, safer and stronger.

The top messages are those that resonate and persuade across audiences, race, geography and other demographics. They help us fine tune how we talk to different audiences.

MESSAGES THAT PERSUADE

The most persuasive messages led to the most bipartisan support for housing and services.

Shifting Resources

Our strongest messages, *Shifting Resources*, persuaded people that we should invest in and provide housing with support services for people experiencing homelessness. This message is especially persuasive among people who identify as Republican, have a conservative ideology, are majority white, live in suburbs, are people 55 and older and homeowners.

> *Everybody wants to solve homelessness but how we do it matters. Housing along with supportive services like job training and substance use and mental health treatments help people get off the streets and rebuild their lives. It's common sense — everyone needs a home and some people with disabilities, health issues, or young people leaving foster care need more help. It's time to shift our resources toward compassionate and effective approaches like providing stable, affordable housing with support services like job training, mental health care and substance use treatment, to improve life for everyone in our communities.*

Personal Story

Our second most persuasive message, *Personal Story*, was effective with our base, persuadable and segments of the opposition. It was particularly effective among people 55 and older, majority white, Republicans voters, with conservative ideology and homeowners.

> *For years, I was trapped in a cycle I couldn't break. I lost my home because I couldn't afford both medical bills and rent. I bounced between shelters and the streets. It took courage and hard work to get my life back on track, but I also really needed some support. I'm glad I found supportive housing. Now I have my own housing, a place to cook a meal, help paying my rent, and access to the services I need. I'm working part-time, building savings, and rebuilding my life. Supportive housing gave me a second chance.*

Lake Research Partners uses the labels Base, Persuadable and Opposition to describe audience segments. The Housing Narrative Lab uses Likeminded for the base and Least Moveable for the opposition.

The primary audiences to build public support for investments in affordable housing and services are the base, who are like-minded and are a committed group *(please note that insiders, such as advocates, organizers policy makers or those working in the housing or progressive fields, are* **NOT** *the base)* and persuadables, who represent the country as a whole and share ideology with the base and opposition.

Our findings highlight that a one-size-fits-all approach to messaging is ineffective. **A nuanced strategy is essential**, with tailored narratives for the three primary audiences. Notably, the persuadable audience responds most strongly to arguments rooted in community safety and fiscal responsibility.

BASE/LIKEMINDED (35% of the population)
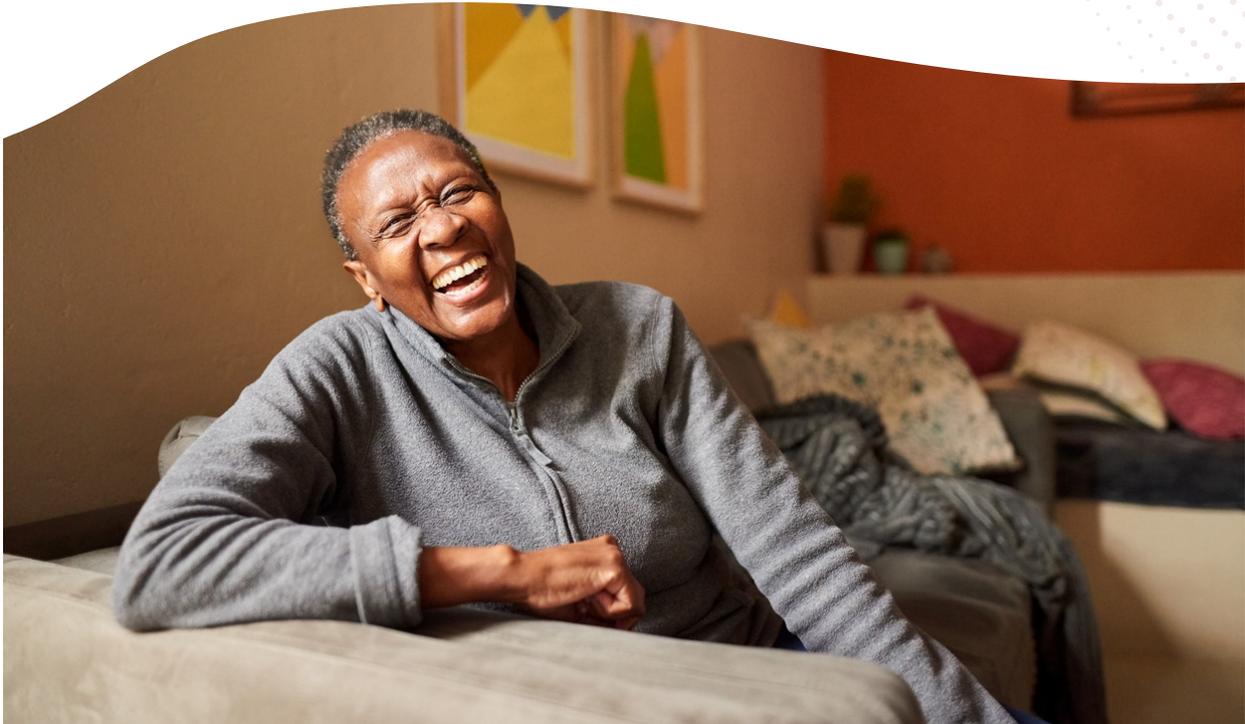
WHO THEY ARE AND WHAT THEY BELIEVE

- ▶ Base adults are who you want to mobilize to support and push for investment in housing and needed services.

- ▶ This group is made up of adults under 30, with greater numbers who live in the West and in cities. They are more likely to be Black, renters, majority Democratic with a liberal ideology and do not have children under 18 living at home. They have a high rate of direct or indirect experience with housing instability or homelessness.

- ▶ This group believes people of color face greater barriers to economic success than white people, and that the government should do more to solve problems and help meet people's basic needs. They believe housing is a basic human need that we should ensure everyone can get.

- ▶ Messages that focus on the values of **dignity, shared responsibility and systemic change** resonate most with this audience.

- ▶ **This group responds best to** *Personal Story,* **then** *Shifting Resources* **messages.**

BASE/LIKEMINDED (35% of the population)

WAYS TO TALK TO THEM BASED ON WHAT THEY CARE ABOUT

▶ Use value statements such as, "No matter our race, gender, or income we all want to get and keep a roof over our heads." "Having a safe, stable place to call home is foundational to our children's and grandchildren's well-being and benefits all of our futures." "Everyone across the country should have a safe, stable place to call home so that our communities are healthy, vibrant, and thriving."

▶ They respond to the emotional tug of "home." This group is part of our choir; this language validates their world view.

▶ Offer them statements they can share with others who might not be part of the choir yet, such as, "Supportive housing is evidence-based — it keeps people housed, reduces costly emergency services and makes communities safer."

▶ "We know what works, and it's time to invest in it."

▶ Use language that frames action as systemic change, such as, "This is how we break the cycle of homelessness" or "Instead of jailing or fining people, we should invest in proven housing solutions."

# PERSUADABLES (36% of the population)

WHO THEY ARE AND WHAT THEY BELIEVE

▶ Persuadables are the key to expanding public support beyond the already committed base. This group aligns with base adults in their beliefs toward housing and a role for government, but lean toward the opposition when thinking about why people of color struggle to get ahead.

▶ This group is politically diverse, including Independents (28%), Democrats (34%) and a significant Republican contingent (36%). This means that a successful message cannot rely on partisan language or appeals.

▶ This group is more likely to be lower income and least likely to identify as a likely 2026 voter.

▶ It is a balanced mix of homeowners (51%) and renters (42%), which means messages should appeal to both the security and stability concerns of homeowners and the affordability concerns of renters.

▶ Persuadables are more racially diverse than the opposition but less so than the base, with white respondents making up two-thirds of the audience. The largest share of Latino respondents fall into the persuadable audience, larger than in the base or opposition.

▶ While concerned about homelessness, this group is more skeptical of government action than the base and worry more about high taxes and people taking advantage of government programs.

▶ The challenge with this audience is what can be called the "Sympathetic-Skeptic Paradox." They are concerned about the problem of homelessness but are deeply distrustful of the institutions and programs designed to fix it.

▶ A successful narrative bridges this gap, using emotional, people-centered stories to provide tangible evidence that a pragmatic, cost-effective solution is both compassionate and effective. **This group is motivated by results, not ideology.**

▶ **This group responds best to** *Shifting Resources* **and** *Personal Story* **messages.**

PERSUADABLES (36% of the population)

WAYS TO TALK TO THEM BASED ON WHAT THEY CARE ABOUT

▶ Lean into community benefits. "Stable housing plus services gets people off the streets and makes neighborhoods safer" or "Supportive housing means fewer tents, safer streets and stronger communities."

▶ The research shows language like "gets people off the streets" or "out of encampments" and "provides stability" were top-cited reasons to support housing and services. Persuadables respond to concrete, visible benefits tied to safety.

▶ Frame supportive housing as "smart spending," not as more spending. Underscore how this concept is cost-effective. Consider phrases like, "This is about spending smarter, not more — shifting money from costly ER visits and jail stays to proven housing solutions."

▶ "Supportive housing saves taxpayer dollars by reducing emergency costs."
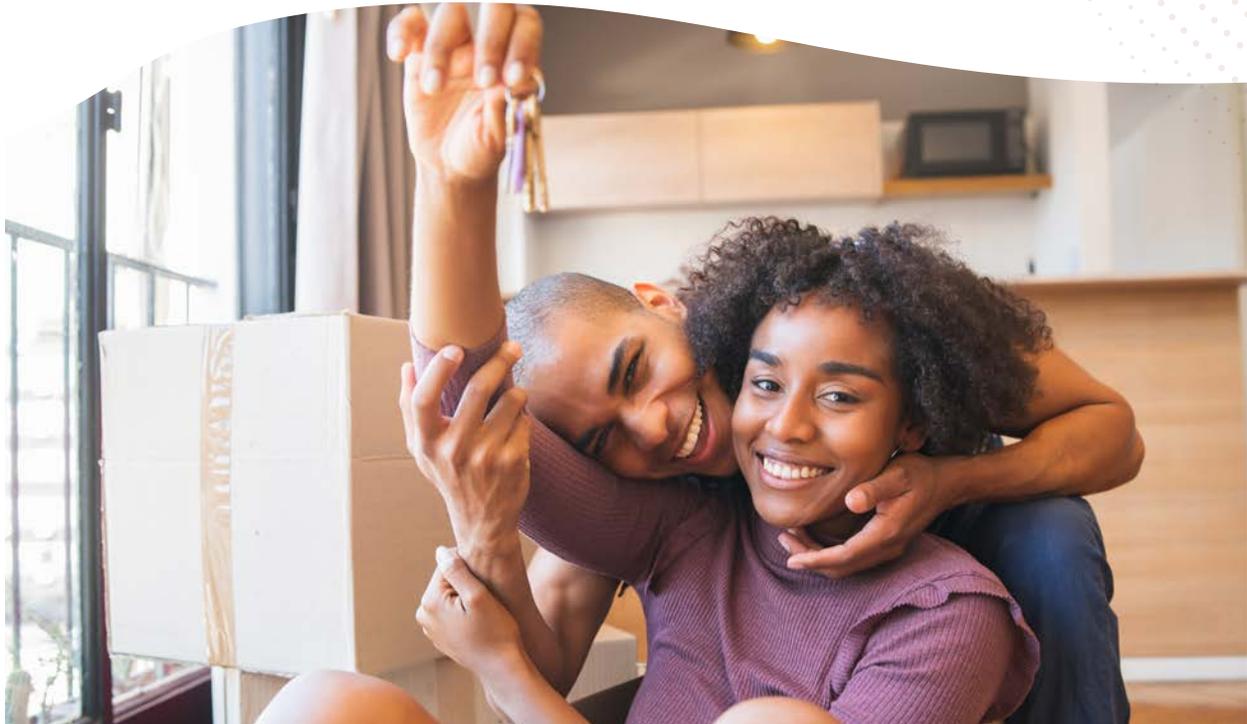
LEAST MOVEABLE (29% of the population)

WHO THEY ARE AND WHAT THEY BELIEVE

► This group is least aligned with solutions that provide supportive housing and services. Therefore they are the least likely to change their minds. Messaging to them aims to reduce their opposition. They either believe housing is a private responsibility that everyone must handle for themselves or they strongly support increasing government funding for programs that force homeless people off the streets and into jails and mental health and substance abuse treatment institutions.

► This group also believes people of color who cannot get ahead are mostly responsible for their own condition or the government does too many things better left to businesses and individuals.

► This group is concerned about people taking advantage of supportive housing programs and worry that limited resources might not go to people with real need. They also worry about program effectiveness and efficiency.

► They lean male, are more likely to be over 65, are majority white, Republican, with a conservative ideology, higher income and homeowners (hence more concerned about decreased property values and crime).

► They are more likely than the base and persuadables to self-identify as a likely 2026 voter. They are overwhelmingly defined by conservative and individual-responsibility viewpoints.

► **This group responds best to the *Personal Story*, then the *Shifting Resources* messages.**

LEAST MOVEABLE (29% of the population)

WAYS TO TALK TO THEM BASED ON WHAT THEY CARE ABOUT

► Use language that shows our solutions are pragmatic and efficient and that appeals to their sense of fiscal responsibility: "Shift resources to what works."

► Avoid "permanent supportive housing." Use "stable housing" or "supportive housing." This moves away from the view that this group has about government resources being "handouts".

► Emphasize "voluntary support services, such as job training, substance and mental health treatment." While this group supports mandatory treatment, the research shows they will still support "voluntary services" over "permanent" or "non-time limited housing and services."

► Frame supportive housing as a tool that "gets people off the streets and out of encampments." This addresses their top concern about safety and public order.

► Tell personal stories that show how housing and services got people on a path to self-sufficiency. This appeals to this group's value of personal effort and responsibility.

ELEVATOR PITCH: WHAT IS SUPPORTIVE HOUSING

Supportive housing provides affordable housing and supportive services to people with complex needs, including veterans, young people aging out of foster care and people with physical and mental disabilities. Tailored services include substance use treatment, tenant support, job training and mental health care — whatever people need to get and stay healthy, stable and housed. It's a proven, cost-effective solution to homelessness that gets people off the streets and helps them rebuild their lives.

CRAFTING A STRONG MESSAGE

Establish inclusive shared values

The foundation of a successful supportive housing message can be built on universal human values that offer an affirmative, inclusive vision that galvanizes people and prevents them from tuning-out. The statements below received the strongest levels of agreement and can serve as a kind of public "permission slip" to support supportive housing. They tap into a deep, shared desire for security for ourselves and our families. These values allow us to create a bridge between a voter's personal desire for stability for their family and the collective goal of solving homelessness. This shifts the debate from a contentious political issue to a shared community value.

▶ No matter what's in our wallets or where we're from, we want to live in safe communities where everyone has a place to live and the health care they need.

▶ No matter what's in our wallets or what challenges we face, we all need a stable place to live.

▶ Having a safe, stable place to call home is foundational to our children's and grandchildren's well-being and benefits all of our futures.

Name the problem

Use plain language to highlight the structural/systemic struggles people are experiencing (e.g., wages, jobs, lack of affordable housing options) and the reasons for it, which humanizes the issue.

▶ But today, thousands are experiencing homelessness because rent is high, jobs don't pay enough, and there aren't enough treatment programs for those who need them.

▶ Some people lose their housing because of job loss, escaping domestic violence or rents rising too high, and they can usually get back into stable housing with some financial help. Some lose their housing because of other struggles.

Don't be afraid to call out the choices or policies of elected officials and the impact of those actions on communities or individuals **after you've framed the values**. You can name names or say it broadly, depending on your particular strategies.

▶ Homelessness is a big problem but elected officials are focusing on expensive and ineffective ways to solve it. And now the government plans to round up homeless people and force them into mental health and drug treatment before receiving housing help. This was the old approach that kept people cycling in and out of jails and the streets, making homelessness worse and costing taxpayers more in jails and mental facilities.

CRAFTING A STRONG MESSAGE

Identify the solution(s) and provide a clear call to action

End the message with a clear vision of how stable, affordable housing combined with support services benefits individuals, families and everyone. Show how it is more effective to achieve real stability for people.

We face cynicism that our solution works, not opposition to the concept, so we have to repeatedly show how housing plus services are proven and cost-effective solutions.

▶ Getting people into housing that also has support services like job training and substance and mental health treatment is a smart and proven solution to homelessness that makes our communities safer and better for everyone.

▶ Providing stable and affordable housing combined with services like voluntary substance use treatment or job training, for as long as it's needed, helps people rebuild their lives.

▶ It's time to shift our resources toward compassionate and effective approaches, such as providing stable housing with support services like job training, mental health care and substance use treatment.

✓ Say this...	✗ Instead of this...	? Why
EMBRACE	**REPLACE**	**WHY**
Supportive housing as needed Stable, affordable housing Stable housing combined with support services Supportive housing for people with complex or different needs, like disabilities, leaving foster care or having mental health issues Stable housing with services that support recovery	Permanent supportive housing Non-time limited housing Stable housing with support services for a limited time Housing First	The word "permanent" may evoke a sense of an indefinite, irreversible commitment that makes some voters, particularly those in the persuadable middle, wary. The phrase "as long as needed" is more flexible and compassionate, and implies a needs-based relationship rather than an open-ended entitlement. It also suggests effectiveness. For advocates, this is a valuable refinement for messaging that can help build trust and reduce resistance because it frames the support in a way that feels both responsible and humane. Finally, it provides immediate, empathetic language that describes the impact. Short explanatory, human-centered language makes it easier to understand the impact.
Support services like job training, counseling, mental health and drug use treatment, and help finding and securing a home	Support services generally Housing with wraparound services	People come to the conversation with the belief that people experiencing housing instability and homelessness need help finding work and medical services. Messages that reflect this are well received.
Affordable or stable housing with support services **tailored to individual needs** and helps people stay housed	Stable housing with support services as people need it	People like tailored services to meet individual needs.
Providing **affordable** housing with support services gives people the help they need to overcome homelessness or address their complex needs	Providing **long-term** housing with support services gives people the help they need to overcome homelessness or address their complex needs	Though both value statements test well overall, about 1 in 10 disagree when "long-term" is used. Saying "affordable or stable housing with support services tailored to individual needs and helps people stay housed" or "stable housing with support services for a limited time" are stronger options.

CONCLUSION

This research supports what we know from behavioral and cognitive science, which is to speak to audiences based on their shared values so they listen. We can tap into the public's underlying frustration about homelessness and housing instability with messaging that positions supportive housing as a smart, proven solution and demonstrates the action and leadership voters want from government officials. People strongly agree that homelessness is a problem and that the government has a major role to play in solving it. With that, our narratives need to focus not only on ways to address homelessness, but also show how supportive housing is a cost-effective solution that benefits communities and individuals in the long run.