



Message Guide
For Using the Results of
Valuing Housing:
Public Perceptions of Affordable
Housing in the Chicago Region

Survey and Focus Group Research

For Housing Illinois

April 2003

Introduction

The following Message Guide is a companion to the survey and focus group research conducted for Housing Illinois (*Building a Constituency for All*, January 2003), and aims to assist housing advocates in the Chicago metropolitan region make the case for more affordable housing, with the public generally and with individual target audiences. Thus one of our goals is to provide advocates with advice they can use to raise awareness of the problem and the availability of good solutions generally so the overall climate is conducive to supporting affordable housing. Another goal is to help advocates find ways to present the needs and solutions in particular settings in ways that maximize agreement.

This guide provides some thoughts on support and opposition; it offers advice on image and language; and it suggests the fundamental elements of a message that need to be kept in mind. Then the guide discusses how to express an overarching message about moderate and low-income housing; it suggests messages honed to specific audiences; and finally, it offers answers to questions often asked in order to help with interviews, speaking engagements, talk shows, op eds, *etc.*

--Nancy Belden and John Russonello

1. Opposition and support

The survey tells us there is awareness of a lack of affordable housing and broad support for expanding access to it. However, only about a third are strong supporters of bringing more housing for low- and moderate-income people to their own communities. And we also know that in many specific instances when moderate and low-income housing is proposed, more opponents than supporters appear on the scene. Indeed, advocates for increasing affordable housing well know that as projects are brought forward – be they zoning changes, remaking an old building into housing for low-income residents, or other mechanisms – opposition can be fierce. The challenges are to turn a passive majority that does support more affordable housing into an active force to advance it, as well as to address opposition effectively.

While each effort to expand affordable housing options may encounter opponents, the survey includes a representative sample of all members of the public and thus documents what the public overall believes, regardless of whether they are making themselves heard on an issue. Minority voices can be vocal, and in fact they are often more vocal than those who hold to the majority view. This is a phenomenon we see over and over again on abortion rights, foreign assistance, justice issues, and many other issues. The citizens who feel passionately about a housing proposal – regardless of their numbers -- are the ones who will make themselves heard about it and often persuade policy makers. Nevertheless, that does not mean they hold the majority point of view.

Also, while the survey reveals a big picture of a the public which values and supports the idea of providing decent housing for people up and down the socio-economic ladder, that should not obscure the fact that public opinion in an area may run contrary to a *particular* proposal that a community finds undesirable or unnecessary.

The bottom line is that there is a reservoir of understanding among the public of the importance of helping everyone in a community have a decent home, but in any particular application this understanding may come up against experiences and fears – real and imagined – that must be answered, if affordable housing is to be significantly expanded. The following pages are designed to provide advocates with help in communicating about the benefits of affordable housing, building support and confronting opposition.

2. Language and image

- *Define affordable housing as broadly as possible.* The more broadly we can present the issue of affordable housing, the more we will reinforce the message that it benefits all of us. The goal is to give as expansive a definition as possible to affordable housing, so that we can make it a personal issue for many people who are not poor, and we can make it about how everyone benefits. By starting with reference to an overall communal message, we believe advocates have the best chance of communicating in a way that breaks through to people who have not thought of themselves as supporters of affordable housing.
- *“Affordable housing” is a useful term for advocates.* The research tells us that the words “affordable housing” are a broad term that can mean different things – just one of which is housing for low- and moderate-income people. Advocates can use the all-encompassing nature of the term to help people with many different attitudes to open up their hearts and minds. It can be used to help make associations between and among people in very different places socio-economically.

Because it can mean different things, it is important that advocates continuously define it as something positive – well built, well maintained, appropriate for its community, and so forth.

Also, it should be noted that the term “moderate- and low-income housing” is not a negative term by and large, and advocates should not be afraid of using it to describe their efforts honestly. It just does not give you as much mileage as “affordable housing.”

- *Address the big negatives.* The other side will say you want to burden them with gangs, drugs, and crime – and depress property values in the process. If you don’t answer that, you lose. Your goal must include presenting a new image. Some of this is accomplished with language – especially talking about neighborhood or community – and some of it with visuals and examples of attractive, respectable dwellings and people. Your work must include *describing anew* what affordable housing looks like, how it is managed, how it is cared for, and how it fits in and contributes to healthy communities and neighborhoods.
- *“Neighborhood” or “community” is a valuable communications concept.* Communications should reference *neighborhood* or *community*, a warm concept about people, families, streetscapes, schools, *etc.* -- as opposed to focusing on *housing* per se, a colder concept about buildings, houses, and structure. Affordable housing is the means to the end: solid, safe, pleasant neighborhoods.

3. The principles that govern good message

We believe three principles need to be represented in a good message. A successful message will:

- *Appeal to the values* that are seen to support or advance the issue.
- *Describe how these values are threatened.*
- *Offer a solution* or solutions (program, policy, legislation, actions) consistent with the values.

4. Applying the principles of messaging to what we know about values and opinions on affordable housing

The Housing Illinois public opinion research informs us how to shape a message about increasing the availability of housing for low- and moderate-income people, applying the three principles. The research tells us that two most decisive values associated with support for affordable housing are:

- *Community self-interest* (It is going to help me and my community if there is affordable housing to all.)
- *Responsibility to others* (We have a responsibility to help other people who need help.)

Thus, advocates need to incorporate the first two principles by appealing to the values and describing how they are threatened:

»Express the value of community self-interest, by showing how the community succeeds when affordable housing is available. The central idea of communal self-interest might be conveyed as: affordable housing is something that helps all of us, or everybody wins when there is adequate affordable housing (a win-win); housing matters to everyone and is a foundation for success in life.

»Reference the value of responsibility, by showing the face of humans in need. Demonstrate this need with concrete examples that show individuals as well as neighborhoods that are threatened in some way by a lack of housing.

Advocates also need to apply the third principle of effective communications by presenting solutions:

»Lay out and illustrate programs, policies, or projects that help solve the crisis.

Some of the time, advocates will be presenting specific projects or policies. A campaign may also satisfy the solution principle with more generic ideas. Just be sure to include some credible way to address the problem; don't leave your audience without a solution.

Also, when presenting solutions, it will be important to reference or illustrate with existing affordable housing projects that are well kept and safe - in order to address the fear of unattractive, unsafe additions to neighborhoods.

Remember, too, that other values such as fairness and opportunity are broadly appealing, so there is no harm in referencing them in other messages. We have focused here on responsibility and self-interest because those are the values that are the most predictive of support for affordable housing.

The message should be monotonously consistent in its appeal to values, but flexible enough to describe the different circumstances where those values are threatened for different audiences. Also, for some audiences, the order in which you include the components (values/threat/solution) may change - but those elements should always be present.

5. Overarching message for all audiences

The overarching message opens with an appeal to values that everyone can agree with: “Neighborhoods* succeed when housing is affordable.” Our general message recommendations is as follows:

Values	Neighborhoods succeed when housing is affordable. When elderly residents can keep their older homes, when young people can find that first apartment, when parents and children can put down roots in the community with confidence, then our whole community benefits.
Threats	But today neighborhoods or communities in the Chicago metro area are under pressure. Over one hundred thousand families in the region are doubling up with others in small apartments because of a lack of housing they can afford. Lack of affordable housing is displacing older neighbors and causing families to move frequently - disrupting their lives, hurting their ability to make a living and threatening their children’s success in school.
Solution	It does not have to be this way. Let’s make more housing more affordable and our neighborhoods more successful. Don’t be silent. Let your city council and mayor know you support measures to make housing more affordable in your community.

* We have used the word “neighborhood” as it generally suggests a small area that one relates to personally. However, “community” by and large connotes the same qualities as neighborhood, and may be a more appropriate term in some instances or places.

6. Specific message for particular audiences

In devising messages for particular audiences, we start with the same universal call on the values and then tweak the appeal to concerns particularly important to specific audiences (as revealed in the Housing Illinois research). Also the sequence of the components (values, problem, solution) may at times vary – when it is important to state a problem or solution early so that the audience knows what you are talking about.

The research tells us, when composing for a specific audience, the message needs to be altered only somewhat because the values cut across population groups. Thus advocates can safely use the values paragraph in the main message or its close cousin with everyone.

However, in a targeted message the second component, that is, how the values are threatened, will differ so that it speaks directly to the concerns of the particular audience. Some instances in which the threat or problem and the solution vary by audience segment and location include these: The residents most prepared to embrace affordable housing now – African Americans and elderly residents of Chicago – will be more receptive to a message that addresses discrimination and threats of dislocation, while many white suburbanites need to be reminded about the plight of children whose lives are disrupted when their families cannot find housing that is decent and affordable; or when people who work in and contribute to their community cannot afford to live there (*e.g.*, fire, police, teachers, nurses).

And of course the statement of solutions varies, depending on what aspect of expanding affordable housing one is addressing and/or what interests the target audience. What follows here are suggested ways of targeting the message to different types of audiences.

- **City dwellers who are middle to lower income**

For city dwellers who are experiencing or witnessing gentrification that undoes existing neighborhoods and drives out people of modest means, the message can be fitted as follows:

Neighborhoods succeed when housing is affordable. When elderly residents can keep their older homes, when young people can find that first apartment, when parents and children can put down roots in the community with confidence, then our whole community benefits.

But today, too many of our neighborhoods are under pressure. Older, long-term residents, and families with moderate and low incomes are being pushed out of their Chicago neighborhoods as housing becomes more expensive. We have a responsibility to save and improve our Chicago neighborhoods.

Support the (Coalition for Successful Neighborhoods.)

XXX is working to make sure INSERT POLICY. Support XXX by ACTION.

- **Suburban homeowners**

For many suburbanites -- especially white, married men and homeowners -- who are less concerned with housing for moderate and low-income people, the inclusion of the well being of children helps make the message important.

Neighborhoods succeed when housing is affordable. When parents and children can put down roots in the community with confidence, when elderly residents can keep their older homes, and when young people can find that first apartment, our whole community benefits.

But today too many of our neighborhoods are under pressure. Thousand of families across the Chicago region are forced to move repeatedly as rents and property taxes escalate, and their children's lives are disrupted, making it hard for them to succeed in school.

If we have an adequate supply of safe and affordable housing, our neighborhoods will be more stable and our community's children will have a better chance of success. We can help families find affordable homes by INSERT POLICY/PROGRAM.

- **Older well-off suburbanites**

For older, well-off suburbanites who believe that there are more important places for a city to invest its money, cast affordable housing as a sound neighborhood investment by showing renovation that will maintain property values and promote safe and stable places to live for years to come. Show it is a way to bring more investment to their existing neighborhoods. This audience is interested in bottom line, not paying for more services and taxes. If you can make an efficiency argument, do it here. Thus, the message might read:

Neighborhoods succeed when housing is affordable. When parents and children can put down roots in the community with confidence, when elderly residents can keep their older homes, and when young people can find that first apartment, our whole community benefits.

But today many of our neighborhoods are under pressure because we are not making the investments we need to in housing and development. We need to put resources into existing neighborhoods to preserve their value and to enable long-term residents and families to continue to live in a place that is safe and stable.

We can help our neighbors find affordable homes by INSERT

- **Older fixed-income suburban homeowners**

Elderly homeowners do not want to get pushed out of their neighborhoods, and many express concerns about property taxes and preserving existing buildings. Yet many are disinterested in helping poor people find housing. Thus the second paragraph for them also may go right to solutions.

Neighborhoods succeed when housing is affordable. When parents and children can put down roots in the community with confidence, when elderly residents can keep their older homes, and when young people can find that first apartment, our whole community benefits.

We need to reduce property taxes on elderly people living on fixed incomes so they are not pushed out, and offer hope to those people who are saving for a new home.

Support the (Coalition for Successful Neighborhoods.)

- **Middle-income city residents**

For many middle-income residents of Chicago, another important message to get across is the contribution affordable housing can make to enhance the beauty and livability of neighborhoods. Highlighting popular solutions, such as renovating older buildings and putting new investment in older neighborhoods, is a way to address indirectly what they consider the threats to their values. At the same time, it reinforces the need for improvements in affordable housing stock. Thus, the

message for middle-income city dwellers moves a reference to solutions up as follows:

Neighborhoods succeed when housing is affordable. When parents and children can put down roots in the community with confidence, when elderly residents can keep their older homes, and when young people can find that first apartment, our whole community benefits.

To make this a reality in our city, we need to make a major new investment in our older neighborhoods, including the renovation of XXX apartment buildings.

Support the (Coalition for Successful Neighborhoods.)

7. Q&A

Answering questions about affordable housing should be approached as an opportunity to present the overall campaign message.

Neighborhoods succeed when housing is affordable. When elderly residents can keep their older homes, when young people can find that first apartment, when parents and children can put down roots in the community with confidence, our whole community benefits.

But today too many of our neighborhoods are under pressure, *etc.*

When advocates for more affordable housing take their campaign and message public, others who question their efforts will of course challenge them. Below we have attempted to help anticipate some of the questions that will be raised in communities, and ideas about responding positively. Always keep in mind:

- In any exchange about housing, the objective should be to include the overall messages as much as possible. Repetition of the message -- that neighborhoods or communities are more successful when housing is affordable -- is crucial.

Q: Why should I pay for *them*?

A: Neighborhoods succeed when housing is affordable, and the price of failure is higher than the price of success. People act as good citizens when they have a decent place to live and can afford it. They contribute to society rather than becoming a drain. Having affordable housing for all is a win-win.

Q: We like our village the way it is. Why do you think you can shame us into accepting subsidized housing that will bring in drugs, crime, gangs and more subsidized people?

A: Your view of affordable housing is not what we are talking about. We are proposing to build attractive, well-maintained, safe housing. It will give older people a place to live, young people the ability to find their first home, and families a place to put down roots.

Q: Who or what kind of people will it bring in?

A: What it will bring in is attractive, well maintained homes that benefit the whole neighborhood. The people who live there may be families with small children, young single people or older folks.

A: It will attract people who care about the upkeep and the safety of their homes and their communities, because it will not just be affordable...it will also be safe, well-managed and attractive. It will be the elderly couple who ... (pick up message)

Q: How will safety be impacted?

A: Affordable housing must be synonymous with safe and attractive neighborhoods. In fact, some examples of this are...

Q: What will be the impact on property values?

A: Property values will not decline and in fact, may even go up because we are proposing to build attractive, desirable homes. Offering people more choices for housing will make the community more attractive to young people to find ... help families with young children, *etc...*

Q: How does this impact local schools and other infrastructure?

A: It should improve schools, because when families can afford to stay and put down roots rather than moving their children from school to school, the schools can plan better, there will be less disruption, and all children can learn more. The whole community wins.

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