

Inspire the Bay Area to value and include people with extremely low incomes as vital members of our communities.

Scale of Impact: Narratives underlie our understanding of stories and messages; they determine many of our thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. Changing hearts and minds in ways that build both empathy for people who are struggling and understanding of the systemic issues behind those struggles could create new possibilities for policy change at all levels. Successful narrative change—even just among key target audiences—can be a force multiplier that makes all the Big Moves easier to enact.

Background

In order to make unjust housing and economic systems work better for people with extremely low incomes, we need to change the way decision-makers and the public think about those systems and people. Public opinion and political will are connected, and neither are currently working in favor of the change we want to see.

Multiple recent public opinion polls and focus group results from around the Bay Area have shown that **the general public has a relatively superficial understanding of homelessness and the people who experience it.** Many voters, including those who have more progressive values on other housing and equity issues, hold more conservative positions when it comes to homelessness, even though many recognize that homelessness is a structural problem.¹ **Although in reality a minority of people experiencing homelessness have serious mental health issues, mental illness looms large in the public imagination when they think of homelessness.**² People equate all homelessness with the most visible forms of unsheltered homelessness, are overwhelmed by the problem, and are unaware of many of the solutions that could make it better.

Luckily, there is considerable momentum gathering behind efforts to shift public perceptions and narratives about homelessness, housing affordability, and the people who are most impacted by these issues. The Housing Narrative Lab and Chan Zuckerberg Initiative have sponsored important research on the topic in recent years, leading to concrete messaging guidance for practitioners in the

1 EMC Research for the Nonprofit Housing Association of Northern CA, "Poll of registered voters in the nine-county Bay Area," conducted between May 26 - June 4, 2022.

2 EMC Research for All Home, "Four focus groups of registered voters in the nine-county Bay Area," conducted on August 24 and 25, 2022.

field.³ The Nonprofit Housing Association of Northern California leads a robust regional network of housing justice communicators called *Shift the Bay*, where All Home is a leader on issues of homelessness and housing for people with extremely low incomes.

Here are some examples of common negative narratives around homelessness, and the shift that is widely seen as needed.

Narrative to shift	Target narrative
<p>Homelessness is forever</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We're spending all this money and not seeing results. • The problem just keeps getting worse, not better. • Governments don't seem able to address the issue. 	<p>Homelessness is solvable</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We know how to solve homelessness, we just need to do it at scale. • Proven solutions are working all around the region. • What's lacking are resources and political will.
<p>Homelessness is an individual problem</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual behaviors like drug addiction and mental illness are the main drivers of homelessness. • Some people don't want to be housed and can't be helped. • Homeless or poor people are victims of their own bad decisions or inability to do right. 	<p>Homelessness is a systemic problem</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homelessness can happen to anyone, especially when housing is scarce and costs too much. • The main drivers of homelessness and poverty are high housing costs, a history of discriminatory housing policy, and a lack of affordable housing. • People who have been disadvantaged in the past are more likely to end up homeless in a tight housing market.
<p>Someone else's problem</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • That's a problem for the people experiencing it, but not for me. • I've got mine, other people are responsible for themselves. • Homeless people are ruining <i>my</i> community. 	<p>Collective impacts and responsibility</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homelessness affects every member of our community, not just those experiencing it. • We'll all be better off if we can fix our housing crisis and get people housed. • Everyone has a role to play in solutions.

These negative narratives are reinforced by systemic racism, and often feed into racist stereotypes, which in turn can lead people to oppose proven solutions. **See the full report for more on how systemic racism has impacted who experiences housing and economic insecurity in our region and how the Big Moves would help repair that injustice.**

3 Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, *The California Dream: Advancing Housing Solutions for Our Shared Future*, 2022. Accessed at: <https://cadreamtoolkit.org/>. Housing Narrative Lab, *Public Opinion Research on Homeless Messaging*, May 2021. https://housingnarrativelab.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Public_Opinion_Research_on_Homeless_Messaging.pdf.

Implementation Steps

The goal of this Big Move is to have different conversations about our unjust housing and economic systems, the people who are most directly impacted, and the benefits to every Bay Area resident in solving these challenges. By focusing our narratives and messages on solutions, collective responsibility, and the systemic issues that perpetuate homelessness and poverty, and empowering more people with lived experience to join the conversation, we hope to build public support and political will for the change we seek. That goes for both Regional Action Plan implementation and enacting the Big Moves into law and policy. All Home and the Regional Impact Council will collaborate with partners to shift the narrative on homelessness and poverty with a two-part strategy.

1. **Build awareness of the root causes of homelessness and poverty, and grow support for proven solutions, and**
2. **Empower more people with lived experience to share their personal stories.**

We Can Do This:

Counter the pervasive narrative of failure and defeatism by building awareness of and support for proven solutions, provide solutions-focused communications resources to our partners and allies, and be the voice of the vision we want to see.

Audiences: Housing/homeless advocates, decisionmakers, media. Activate our base/partners as messengers to persuade those who are open to our message but not active.

Potential tactics:

- Promote the **All Home Solutions Library** as a resource and inspiration with concrete examples of progress, new models, and what's working.
- Create **messaging guidance**, including social media resources, memes, talking points, etc. for our partners.
- Coordinate response to negative media portrayals with **letters to the editor or opinion pieces**.
- **Host an awards event** or otherwise honor frontline staff, non-profits, or formerly unhoused people.
- **Produce a compelling short video** showcasing the full variety of proven solutions needed.

Partners: RIC members, Shift the Bay coalition members, funders.

Lifting up Lived Experience

Change hearts and minds by empowering more people to share their personal stories of facing or overcoming housing and economic insecurity. Support the CBOs/service providers who often do the time-consuming work of supporting community members to share their stories on an ad-hoc basis. Let the resilience, contributions, and humanity of people who are overcoming adversity inspire everyone in the Bay Area.

Audiences: People with lived experience, service providers who work with them.

Potential tactics:

- **Work closely with CBOs/service providers** to design this initiative and support their clients/members. Do direct outreach to engage unaffiliated people with stories to tell.
- Provide ongoing **trainings and communications support** on storytelling, media relations, and other relevant topics.
- **Create a Storytellers Corps** of trained spokespeople who are ready to speak with reporters, at public meetings, at events, or in small groups to affect change.
- Eventually develop a **story bank, social media content** campaign, or countless other mechanisms to disseminate powerful stories.

Principles:

- Use stories with consent and respect, “nothing about me without me.”
- Compensate people for their time and stories.
- Provide a ladder of engagement to grow leadership.
- Build confidence and professional skills.
- Choose which stories to use, not which stories people can tell.

Partners: Shift the Bay coalition, key service providers, funders

Implementation Roles

Actor	Role	Timeframe
State elected officials and staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen to constituents' stories, and take action to meet their needs. • Share your own personal stories of housing and economic insecurity to show that these problems can happen to anyone, and what it takes to work through them. 	Ongoing
City and county elected officials and staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen to constituents' stories and take action to meet their needs. • Share your own personal stories of housing and economic insecurity to show that these problems can happen to anyone, and what it takes to work through them. 	Ongoing
Philanthropy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fund narrative change work and general communications capacity among all grantees, and share the learnings and resources that come out of collective narrative change efforts. 	Ongoing
Nonprofits & CBOs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tap into regional and statewide narrative shift research and collaboration efforts. • Adopt messaging best practices and integrate them into all forms of external communications. • For those who work with people experiencing homelessness and poverty, take advantage of new resources and training infrastructure to support these people in developing and sharing their personal experiences with others. 	Ongoing
Business community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilize talking points and resources (developed through this Big Move and other efforts) to counter false narratives within your companies and the communities where you operate. 	Ongoing

Supporting Actions

Many small nonprofits and CBOs lack sufficient communications staff capacity to learn about and implement messaging and narrative best practices. Organizations should prioritize communications in their staffing and budgets, and funders/philanthropy should adequately resource these important functions and activities among grantees.