

Talking about health, housing, and COVID-19: Keeping equity at the forefront

a message guide from Berkeley Media Studies Group

Advocates across the country have long been working to ensure that everyone has access to healthy, safe, and affordable homes. COVID-19 has brought to the forefront solutions that advocates have called for — tenant protections, stopping the sweeps of people who are unhoused, and more — as advocates push for additional, urgent ways to ensure people are sheltered during this pandemic.

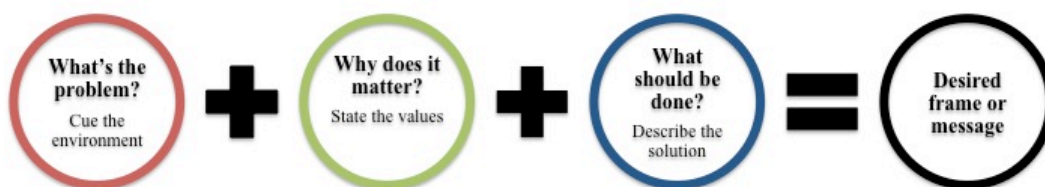
For those working at the intersection of housing and health, the link is **clear**, yet the connection is rarely apparent in the news media. In national news coverage from March 2020, we found that fewer than 1% of stories about COVID-19 or coronavirus also mentioned housing issues like evictions, foreclosures, or homelessness. The news media play a significant role in reaching decision-makers. If the link between housing and health is not explicit in the news, decision-makers and the public may not prioritize addressing housing needs.

At this moment, we must highlight the urgent need to ensure everyone has safe shelter during the COVID-19 pandemic *and* emphasize that homes are a crucial foundation for a healthy society. As Tram Nguyen from the Alameda County Public Health Department put it, “We want safe and affordable housing to be increasingly seen as a social good — a human right — that market-based solutions will not necessarily provide.” Just like the benefits of education extend beyond students in classrooms to the society they build or how child care helps the families who use it and boosts our economy because it allows parents to work, housing is fundamental to a society as interconnected as ours. Investments we make in housing will create benefits that extend far beyond any individual during this pandemic and beyond.

We developed this working document to support public health practitioners, community organizers, and others who are striving, amid COVID-19, to elevate equity-focused solutions in housing and health news and before policymakers. The guide is focused on shifting the narrative from safety during the pandemic to the importance of treating housing as essential to public health. As we continue to work closely with partners on housing and health, we will adapt it and provide other **tools**. We would love to hear about what you are learning — and what you seek guidance on — as you bring equity to the fore in your communication about housing and health.

Components of a COVID-19 message about housing and health

Whatever the circumstances are in your city or region, when you talk about housing and COVID-19, make sure your message includes **values**, the **solution**, and a quick overview of the **problem**, whether you are writing talking points, news releases, handouts, or other pieces.



- **Lead with values.** An effective message reaches people not just in their heads but in their hearts. Whatever the specific housing solution we're seeking, our messages need to explain why they matter for everyone, even those who may not always see their personal connection. The values part of the message expresses how we are connected to one another. Our values — like unity, dignity, and justice — are what motivate us, far beyond facts or figures. Use the word "our" to convey interconnection and illustrate that we are in this together with our neighbors and our community. Express your values to build a vision of where we want to go together that includes what housing should look like during this urgent moment and in our future.
- **State the problem clearly.** We have a problem when people don't have shelter; this is easy to illustrate in the context of COVID-19. Our message can move from a narrow definition of the problem like the spread of coronavirus (portrait) to a broader definition that focuses on why all people and communities need safe, secure, and affordable homes (landscape). The definition of the problem should lead logically to the specific system change or policy we are seeking in the moment.
- **Name a specific solution.** Clear solutions help people avoid the feeling that the problem is so big that nothing can be done. Housing advocates are proposing solutions that will address the urgent needs around COVID-19 and that support the long-term health of our communities. These include moratoriums on evictions

and foreclosures, banning rent increases, finding immediate and then permanent shelter for people who are unhoused, and ensuring banks and credit card companies suspend fees, foreclosures, and payments, including mortgages, for residents and small businesses. Policies will differ by jurisdiction and audience; in your message, include the solution that is your current priority. People are more likely to believe change is possible if they see tangible examples, so be concrete about the solution and direct about demanding who should do what. This level of specificity can help people understand that our housing problems are the result of policy decisions made by people and can be changed to shape the community we want to create.

Tips for developing messages about housing in the context of COVID-19

- **Bring racial equity to the forefront.** The housing solutions we need for COVID-19 cannot be separated from the racial inequities embedded in housing policy. [Research](#) shows that we can talk about how race and class impact us — and that our messages do better when we express our unity and name how race is being used to divide us. The discussion around COVID-19 has prompted people from all walks of life to say, “We are in this together”; we can connect that core value to what we want to say about housing.
- **Be wary of portrait frames.** Often reporters, and other storytellers, will want to focus on the personal aspect of the story and the impact of COVID-19 on individuals. These are important stories, but they sometimes do not go far enough if they keep the solutions focused on individuals. And they can do damage when they create an “us versus them” narrative. Language like “ticking timebombs,” to describe what might happen if an outbreak occurs in an area where many people are unhoused, equates encampments with disease and fear. Only use portrait frames when it is clear the problem is the system, not the people; doing so also helps us avoid otherizing language.
- **Instead, bring the landscape into view...** Of course, stories do need characters: When you tell personal stories, tie them to their context — a landscape that can bring the environment surrounding those characters into the picture. For example, you could talk about the actions tenants and their supporters are taking to create systems that are better for us all. Systems are the link between the problem and the solution. We have

problems now because we have created systems that deny people basic access to health care, affordable homes, and employment protections; COVID-19 has vividly surfaced the limits and dangers of our failing systems.

- **...but be strategic.** Our messages should make the landscape around housing easier to see, from the history of how the problem got this way to the communities, agencies, and organizations that can be enlisted to repair it, as well as the vision of where we can go together. In a quick sound bite to a reporter, you won't be able to include all of the landscape, so select one thing that is most important to include at this moment for the specific solution you seek. For example, if you are seeking eviction moratoriums you could mention that local and state governments can and must act. With that statement you are bringing the landscape of political actors into view. Or if you are seeking to ensure that people who are unhoused get immediate and then permanent homes, then you could highlight the empty apartments and public lands that could be converted to housing. That statement helps people see that the solutions are within reach.

Overall tips for effective communication

Speak plainly. No matter who your audience is, avoid jargon and “insider” language. That can be challenging, since sometimes we may not even recognize our words are jargon. Have someone outside your field and from your target audience review your message to be sure what you are saying makes sense to them. If you need to use terms your audience may be unfamiliar with, define them.

Use active language. The passive voice obscures who is taking action, whether it's our organization, coalition, community, or policymakers. For example, instead of saying “people are unhoused” we can say “policymakers have made decisions that have made housing inaccessible for many families in our community.” Use language that clarifies who has the power to make changes that will put the housing solutions in place.

Acknowledge people's discomfort and fear. Because COVID-19 is new and there is a lot of fear and uncertainty around what will happen next, we need to acknowledge our audiences' unease in a way that does not overwhelm them to the point that they shut down. We do not have to fully resolve their fears; simply acknowledging them establishes a connection with our audience and develops

the trust needed to get their support for the actions we want to take. People then will be more likely to have faith in our ability as a society to make needed changes and will more easily see that our health is dependent on the well-being of our neighbors and whole community.

Additional resources

Layers of Strategy: This document outlines BMSG's four-stage approach to media advocacy planning, a process we call the Layers of Strategy.

Message guide: Use this worksheet to practice developing messages for your target audience, based on the components of a message we describe above.

BMSG resources on housing and health: Find news analyses, tools, and tips on bringing equity to the fore in your communication about housing and health.

COVID-19: Addressing discrimination and racism: Local health department support guidance is a guide BMSG developed with the Public Health Alliance of Southern California.

Have questions, suggestions, or examples to share? Contact Shaddai Martinez Cuestas, cuestas@bmsg.org.

Keep reading to see examples of how values, solutions, and problem statements appeared in op-eds about COVID-19, health, and housing.

OPINION // OPEN FORUM

Two Alameda County supervisors: We must come together to halt evictions and foreclosures

By Keith Carson and Wilma Chan | March 24, 2020



A foreclosed home is shown in Mountain View during the Great Recession in May 2009. Photo: Paul Sakuma / AP 2009

Now more than ever, access to a safe and stable home environment is essential to the well-being of our residents and communities. In the past week, Alameda County has seen most of its businesses, organizations and schools close in an effort to slow the spread of COVID-19. But while these steps are necessary to ensure public safety, thousands of individuals now face unemployment, loss of income or reduced work hours as a result of having to shelter in place. Coupled with an already high cost of living, these factors pose a serious and immediate threat to countless residents already living paycheck to paycheck.

As county supervisors, we must take every appropriate step to ensure that individuals and families left economically vulnerable as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic have the resources necessary to stay safely housed during this crisis. On Tuesday, our board will provide that support by enacting an ordinance that halts evictions and foreclosures in our county's unincorporated area resulting from the economic impacts of COVID-19. The ordinance, which will be in effect for a minimum of 30 days, will safeguard any residents whose loss of income or employment prevents them from meeting their full rent obligations.

This urgent step is also necessary to prevent the worsening of our state's homelessness crisis. Our lowest-income households stand to bear the most severe economic impacts from COVID-19 — particularly low-income and hourly-wage workers who will find it harder to earn a living as workplaces are closed, events are canceled and more people are forced to take care of loved

ones. Given that these individuals are already severely rent-burdened, any sustained period of reduced wages will only push more people out of their homes and onto the streets.

The new ordinance will instead allow these residents to focus on the safety of their families without the stress and fear of an impending eviction.

Our actions this Tuesday will also bring Alameda County in line with Gov. Gavin Newsom's executive order of March 16 that authorizes local governments to implement eviction moratoriums for renters and homeowners affected by COVID-19. While the intent of the governor's order is clear, each city and county government in California remains responsible for passing legislation that makes this order enforceable on a local level. We urge our colleagues statewide to immediately pass similar moratoriums in the interests of public health and community safety.

Time and again, our county has demonstrated the resiliency needed for us to weather even the worst crises. Countless residents are already generously supporting friends and neighbors whose employment has been impacted by COVID-19, and our communities continue to stand united during this unprecedented time. As county supervisors, no less can be expected from us. Alameda County bears an important obligation to ensure our residents remain safely housed during this global pandemic, and as such we are proud to stand with the governor and communities across the state at this critical juncture in our nation's history by adopting this critical ordinance Tuesday.

Alameda county Supervisor Keith Carson represents the Fifth District, which includes Albany, Berkeley, Emeryville, Piedmont and parts of Oakland (North Oakland, Rockridge, Grand Lake, Fruitvale and Dimond District neighborhoods). He is vice president of the Board of Supervisors. Supervisor Wilma Chan represents District 3, which includes the cities of Alameda, San Leandro, parts of Oakland including Chinatown, Jack London, Fruitvale and San Antonio neighborhoods, and the unincorporated communities of San Lorenzo and Hayward Acres.

<https://www.sfchronicle.com/opinion/openforum/article/Two-Alameda-County-supervisors-We-must-come-15152412.php#>

Values

Solution

Values

Problem

Value: duty to the collective good

Solution

Solution and values

Problem

Solution and values

Solution

Values

Value: we are in this together

Value: unity

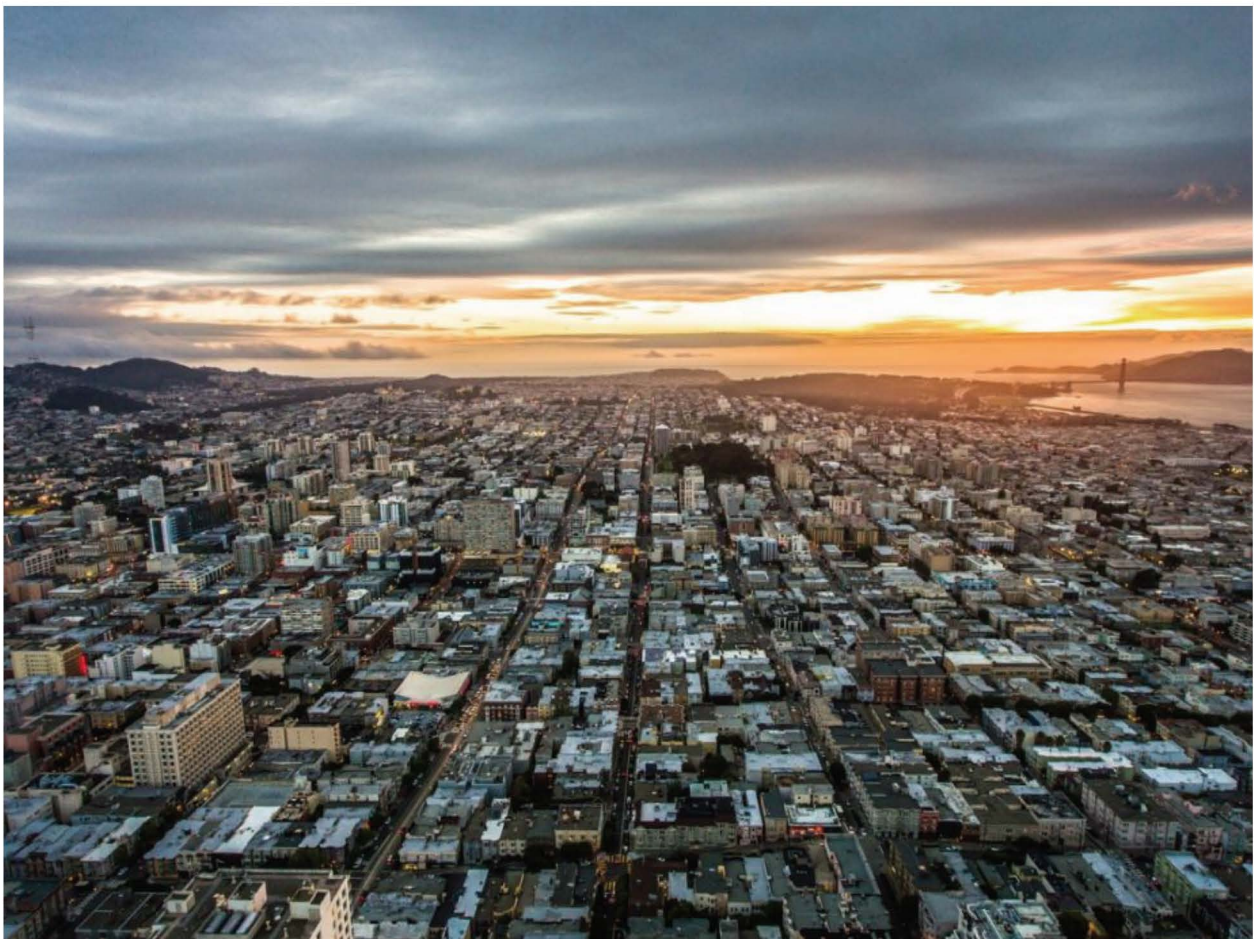
Value: duty to the collective good

Value: pride of place

2008 Was A Disaster. Here’s How California Should Respond to Save Its Affordable Homes

Solution: Headline shows op-ed is solution-focused

Lisa Hershey, Peter Cohen, and Heather Hood | Op-ed May 5, 2020



(Image by Adam Derewecki from Pixabay)

Having a stable and safe home has never been more critical to the health of our residents and communities. However, California faced affordability and homelessness challenges long before Covid-19 emerged. While the pandemic did not create our housing conditions, it is exposing, and exacerbating, the structural inequalities that already existed. As we prepare once again to receive state and federal recovery funds, we need to get our response right.

Values: framing housing as health

Problem: Highlight structural inequalities

Solution

As affordable housing advocates and practitioners, we must take every appropriate measure to ensure that no person or family gets left behind, especially our communities of color and low-income neighborhoods. This includes being proactive and creative in how we respond to the long-term economic and health impacts of this recession. Local successes in affordable housing preservation provide a roadmap forward for how we can best leverage emergency funds.

Values: inclusivity

Solution: showing success

As missed rent and mortgage payments mount, some are already predicting a significant rise in home foreclosures, as well as a “potential bonanza” in sales of multifamily rentals. While we have been sheltering in place and working tirelessly to support the health of our communities, opportunistic private equity firms are raising funds to the tune of \$1.5 trillion globally, ready for a shopping spree when property owners are pressed to sell homes and apartment buildings.

Problem: assigning responsibility

If this sounds familiar, it should. While the current crisis has different origins than the crash of 2008, both crises illustrate the shortcomings of our housing system and the vulnerability faced by hundreds of thousands of lower-income homeowners and renters across the state.

Problem: illustrating the landscape with history

During the “Great Recession” of 2008, the federal government rolled out several programs aimed at stemming the tide of foreclosures sweeping across the country. Despite some successes, these interventions were piecemeal, not focused on those with the most need. The result? Millions of foreclosures, mass displacement, and a widening of the racial wealth gap, particularly in California.

Problem: assigning responsibility

This time we need to lay the groundwork for a strong, community-focused recovery response. Fortunately, we don’t need to reinvent the wheel. Over the last several years, cities and counties have developed programs to buy and stabilize existing properties where tenants are at risk of displacement — what’s most needed now is to direct recovery funds to efforts happening locally.

Values: community, “we’ve done this before”

Solution: showing success

As Enterprise Community Partners’ recent report illustrates, local housing departments and community-based organizations in the Bay Area — like San Francisco’s Mission Economic Development Agency, Oakland Community Land Trust, East Bay Asian Local Development Corporation and others — have successfully demonstrated models to purchase and renovate occupied properties, ensuring permanent affordability for existing residents. In Southern California, organizations like TRUST South LA, East LA Community Corporation and Restore Neighborhoods LA are also creating models to preserve housing affordable to low-income tenants.

Solution

Scaling this work to meet the needs of our communities will require:

Solution: naming specific solutions and explaining how they will solve the problem

1. Funding. We will need to marshal enough federal, state, and philanthropic resources to respond effectively and quickly to the coming changes in the real estate market. That means carving out sufficient capital to buy, renovate, and maintain the affordability of properties as they become available.

2. Building Capacity. We need to invest in the capacity of our community-based organizations to execute this work. Performing resident outreach, assessing properties, overseeing construction, and managing operations requires a skilled, diverse, and well-supported workforce. Philanthropic and public grants will be needed to hire new staff, provide necessary training, and create more efficient systems.

3. Statewide Right of First Offer Policy. We must ensure tenants and nonprofit organizations have a fair chance to purchase at-risk residential buildings before they are lost to speculative investors. A statewide right of first offer policy will give these stakeholders an opportunity to act before a property hits the market. While cities and counties may develop their own variations, such as San Francisco’s Community Opportunity to Purchase Act, a statewide policy would provide a foundation and clear guidance for local jurisdictions.

Values: reinforce housing as health, community, leadership, equity

The pandemic is showing us more than ever that housing is a critical part of our public health and economic infrastructure. We have seen our state and local leaders recognize this through eviction moratoria, mortgage relief, and other critical short-term measures that will keep people housed today. But the long-term choices will be just as critical, especially for communities of color that are bearing the brunt of both the health and displacement impacts. We have the opportunity to not only survive this crisis, but emerge with a more equitable system for all our communities.

Heather Hood is vice president and Northern California market leader for Enterprise Community Partners, a national nonprofit organization delivering tools for the affordable housing industry. Peter Cohen is co-director of the Council of Community Housing Organizations, a San Francisco-based affordable housing coalition and advocacy group. Lisa Hershey is Executive Director of Housing California, a statewide affordable housing and homelessness advocacy organization.

<https://nextcity.org/daily/entry/2008-was-disaster-heres-how-california-should-respond-save-affordable-homes>



Solano Voices: Protect public health, housing stability in Solano

By Daily Republic

We at the Vallejo Housing Justice Coalition believe that housing is a human right and that everyone deserves to have a safe and stable home regardless of race, culture, age and sexual orientation.

The essential role that housing stability plays in protecting the health of Solano County residents is even more visible and critical while in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. That's why the Solano County Board of Supervisors should move quickly to adopt their proposed countywide eviction moratorium, which will ensure county residential and commercial tenants are safe, protected and healthy.



Solano Voices: Cristal Little, Vallejo Housing Justice Coalition organizer

Having a roof over your head matters for everything from diabetes, to depression, to surviving the novel coronavirus pandemic. Studies have shown that housing insecurity can force families to make unhealthy trade-offs between paying for rent and paying for medical care, food or other basic needs.

Thousands of families in the county, particularly people of color, live in neighborhoods where a lack of basic necessities such as healthy food and primary care providers negatively affects their health. Families are already facing barriers to health and with many of our residents losing their jobs, being forced out of their homes as well will undoubtedly contribute to their health concerns, including increased exposure to Covid-19.

Many families in Solano County were struggling to afford a home even before Covid-19. The California Housing Partnership reports that Solano County renters need to earn \$36.06 per hour – three times the state minimum wage – to afford the median rent of \$1,875. Additionally, 80% of extremely low-income households pay more than half of their income on housing costs compared to just 4% of moderate-income households. Research from Bay Area Regional Health Inequities Initiative found that African American families in the Bay Area are nearly five times more likely to pay half their income on housing than whites families.

The Covid-19 pandemic has only exacerbated the housing crisis as many low-income residents have lost income, don't know when they'll be able to return to work and are struggling to make hard choices between feeding their families and paying rent that's due May 1.

It is more important than ever during this time of hardship to protect our most vulnerable neighbors from eviction and foreclosure. While some tenant protections exist at the state level, there are gaps in who and what is protected.

The Vallejo Housing Justice Coalition is working with local tenant attorneys and community organizations to advocate for a temporary emergency countywide eviction moratorium that will fill those gaps by prohibiting late fees, freezing rent increases, removing rent accrued during the emergency as a grounds for eviction and requiring landlords to inform tenants of their rights. The inclusion of commercial tenants in this ordinance will enable businesses to more quickly rehire their staff, which in turn will enable employees to more quickly pay back their rent.

These measures will help Solano County put health at the forefront of our Covid-19 response and recovery.

The Board of Supervisors on Tuesday will consider an eviction moratorium, which will protect residential and commercial tenants from evictions during stay-at-home orders through the immediate recovery period. We urge county residents to join us in taking immediate and collective action to protect Solano County residents in this time of crisis.

You can do this by signing our petition at change.org (Search for Solano County Eviction Moratorium) and by making your voice heard at the meeting Tuesday. To learn more about the Solano County public meeting protocol in response to Covid-19 and to submit a comment in support of the eviction moratorium, go to solanocounty.com, select Board of Supervisors from the drop-down menu, then select the link to the new meeting procedures.

For more information about the Vallejo Housing Justice Coalition, visit our Facebook page or contact me by phone at 510-374-2949 or our office by email at VHJC.info@gmail.com.

Cristal Little is an organizer with the Vallejo Housing Justice Coalition. Reach her by email at cristal@urbanhabitat.org.

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<https://www.dailyrepublic.com/all-dr-news/opinion/local-opinion-columnists/solano-voices-protect-public-health-housing-stability-in-solano/>

Values: protection, health, stability

Values: equity, inclusivity

Values: framing housing as health, interconnectedness

Solution: Name decision-makers who must act

Solution: Housing is health

Problem

Problem: Highlight systemic inequities

Problem: Using data judiciously to illustrate problem (1-2 strong facts)

Problem

Values: protection, inclusivity

Problem

Solution: explain how the solution will address the problem

Values: pride of place, leadership, can-do spirit

Solution: Call to action for allies

Solution: how to & Values: democracy