

## Six Ideas Summary

1. Start by reinforcing people's sense of community
2. Discuss criminalization and how it affects communities
3. Move quickly to alternative solutions
4. Broaden people's concept of who experiences homelessness
5. Tell systemic success stories
6. Build your message using the Value, Problem, Solution, Action Formula

**1. Start from community** – the idea that we share responsibility for each other and that our fates are linked.

- We don't need to state this explicitly, but we do need to come from the mindset that we're better off when we look out for each other, when we work from a position of compassion and care over only looking out for ourselves.

- Talk about what kind of community we all want to live in: one that values people and works together to solve problems.

- We can do this by framing all communications from a systemic level – we're talking about how to address this at a policy level, not encouraging people to think about homelessness on a case-by-case basis, or inviting audiences to judge individual people's circumstances or choices. Instead, we want to emphasize that we all have the power and responsibility to address this issue. And we should do that at a policy level.

- This outlook is in contrast to a "you're on your own" mindset of extreme individuality, which encourages people to blame individuals for their own situations.

**Sample language:** *We're all better off when we live in communities that look out for each other and work together to solve problems. No one wants to see people forced to live on the streets, but housing costs prevent too many folks from being able to get into good, affordable housing.*

*We need to call on our elected officials to think beyond just shelters, a band-aid fix, to real housing solutions. [List examples]*

# HOUSING NOT HANDCUFFS

## Messaging:

### Six Ideas for Talking About Housing Not Handcuffs

*We'd all like to believe that if we're facing challenges or even crisis, our community will step up and help us through, with respect and compassion. That's how community should work – we share responsibility for each other and come together to face challenges. When people are experiencing poverty, homelessness, and other economic crises, they want what we all want: to be met with support, respect and compassion.*

**2. Discuss criminalization and how it affects communities.** Criminalization is illogical, expensive and does not work. Many people understand that arresting someone for being homeless does not make sense (although the level of agreement drops quickly if they think the person has done something “wrong” or “illegal”). For some groups of people, the cost/efficacy argument can be particularly effective.

- Tie the policy to the result: why would we want to do something that makes it harder to exit homelessness?
- Too often authorities take the short-sighted, expensive, and ultimately unethical path when dealing with homelessness. This approach doesn't serve our communities, and it makes people criminals for doing day-to-day things like sitting, sleeping and eating.
- Be specific about the laws that need to change.

**Sample language:** *I just know that I want to live in a community that tries to solve problems and not ignore them if they seem too hard. When it comes to homelessness, we know what's worked in other places. But instead, we're passing laws that disproportionately affect people who are homeless and then locking them up. This doesn't make any sense and I think we can do better.*

*People are criminalized for homelessness through overly broad local vagrancy, loitering, and encampment laws that lead to ticketing, fines, and even arrest. Low-income people are also saddled with crippling high fines and fees for minor traffic tickets, civil offenses, and even misdemeanor crimes that are not normally punishable with jail time. When they are unable to pay, they experience devastating consequences, including incarceration, that affect their future employability, family stability, and communities. This isn't an effective way to keep our communities safe and it's disruptive to families and communities.*

**3. Focus on alternative solutions.** What can we do instead of criminalizing these actions? Where should people do these things? What policy level change will help to solve the problem of homelessness? Here we can introduce the idea that stable

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and sustainable housing forms a foundation from which people can build on other parts of their lives. How would our community benefit from this approach?

- Remind audiences how difficult it is to apply for a job, address health issues, attend to family needs without a stable physical space to call home. Because a stable, sustainable home is so crucial in stabilizing one's life, it's something we should make sure everyone has access to. And the most effective way to do this is to ensure everyone has immediate access to housing appropriate to their needs.
- Emphasize success and specific solutions: This approach works. When our communities step up to provide housing along with needed healthcare and other social services, that whole package costs less than to jail someone, or even to provide emergency care and shelter. And ultimately, this approach reduces homelessness.

**Sample Language:** *We know what works when it comes to reducing homelessness: housing. If someone's trying to get an income, move beyond health and other issues, get an education, it's a lot easier to do if they have a stable place. And not just shelter, but fully adequate, appropriate housing. [Give examples of how to best provide this].*

- 4. Broaden people's concept of who experiences homelessness.** In our lives, we are all more than one label.
- When talking about people experiencing homelessness, remind audiences of the other identities people have: mothers, children, workers, veterans, brothers, musicians, friends, and so on.
  - Include a broad selection of identities to consistently move audiences past the most public faces of homelessness. At the same time, don't appear to disparage those folks either, thus creating a deserving vs. undeserving divide – just work to broaden people's concept of who experiences homelessness.

- 5. Tell systemic success stories.** Describe where and how communities – local or state – have addressed homelessness with success.
- Counter audience's tendencies to consider homelessness as inevitable or something that we can't solve with examples of solutions and successes.
  - Assign responsibility: who needs to do what in your community, or in our national community, for this to happen.
  - Individual stories of success can be powerful, but they can also underscore the idea that success happens only because of individual

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effort. Many folks will see an individual success story and think “that’s great, why can’t everyone else just do that?” We need audiences to understand that policy-level solutions lead to long-term success.

- Connect the dots on a range of solutions. People experience homelessness mainly because there is not enough affordable housing. As

a result, they are often caught up in the criminal justice system because of laws that give them nowhere to go. Making sure that people have access to housing makes a lot more sense than fining people who can’t pay, and then incarcerating them because they have outstanding tickets.

## 6. Build Your Message Using the Value, Problem, Solution, Action Formula

### VPSA: Value, Problem, Solution, Action.

One useful approach to tying these lessons together is to structure communications around a Value, Problem, Solution, and Action, meaning that each message contains these four key components: Values (why the audience should care, and how they will connect the issue to themselves), Problem (framed as a threat to the shared values we have just invoked), Solution (to avoid issue fatigue), and Action (a concrete ask of the audience, to ensure engagement and movement).

### Sample Script 1:

#### **Value**

*We’d all like to believe that if we’re facing challenges or even crisis, our community will step up and help us through, with respect and compassion. That’s how community should work – we share responsibility for each other and come together to face challenges. When people are experiencing poverty, homelessness, and other economic crises, they want what we all want: to be met with support, respect and compassion.*

#### **Problem**

*However, too many communities are using handcuffs instead of housing to address homelessness issues, aggressively deploying police to address every level of community disturbance or problem. This erodes community trust, further exacerbates the challenges that poverty and homelessness already pose to people, and does nothing to increase community safety. As people are funneled from police interactions into the criminal justice system, it’s also a far more expensive strategy than providing access to stable housing.*

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#### **Solution**

*Local and state governments should prohibit law enforcement from profiling individuals on the basis of perceived housing status and invest in more comprehensive long-term housing options; improve police training on interacting with homeless communities, and ensures that homelessness is not treated as a crime.*

#### **Action**

*If you want to see an end to homelessness in your community, join our campaign for Housing Not Handcuffs, learn more about the best practices that are working around the country, and call for an end to criminalization and more support for housing so we can all enjoy a community where no one has to sleep on the streets or beg for their daily needs.*

#### **Sample Script 2:**

##### **Value**

*Together, we have the opportunity—and responsibility—to do better for the worst off amongst us. Everyone can agree that it does not make any sense to arrest people for being homeless. And we can also all agree that we don't want to see people sleeping on the sidewalks.*

##### **Problem**

*But instead of solving homelessness, we have expensive policies that make it worse. Unfortunately, too many places in this country are ignoring data/common sense and are using handcuffs rather than housing to address homelessness. But when anyone experiencing homelessness faces criminal*

*punishment for simply trying to survive on the streets, these criminal records only make it more difficult to hold a job, and regain housing.*

*Not only do these policies make homelessness harder to solve, they also cost MORE taxpayer dollars than the policies that actually work.*

#### **Solution**

*But there is a better way. We've seen in city after city that where they change their laws and policies to reduce their reliance on law enforcement and instead invest in affordable, supportive housing, it gets homeless people off the streets far more effectively, and, as it turns out, far more cheaply than endlessly cycling people through courts, jails, and back onto the streets.*

*Because housing provides the stability needed for someone to take advantage of other programs, and get back on their feet.*

#### **Action**

*If you want to see an end to homelessness in your community, join our campaign for Housing Not Handcuffs, learn more about the best practices that are working around the country, and call for an end to criminalization and more support for housing so we can all enjoy a community where no one has to sleep on the streets or beg for their daily needs.*