EFFECTIVE MESSAGING STRATEGIES FOR
Housing as a Solution to Homelessness

Funders Together
TO END HOMELESSNESS
SAN DIEGO

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Executive Summary

Compared to many other US cities that implemented successful evidence-based interventions to homelessness, the concept of adopting "Housing First" models has been comparatively less well received in the San Diego region despite the foundational role it plays in the region's homeless service system. Locally, various forms of messaging centered around solutions have been used, but a large variance in how local leaders talk about the issue has translated to a lack of consistent messaging and slow movement towards implementing proven solutions.

Over the past year, Funders Together to End Homelessness San Diego (FTEHSD) led a multi-faceted research campaign to **determine which messaging is most effective in ensuring that San Diegans consider housing as a solution to homelessness.**

What did we learn? While there is consensus on the need for action to solve homelessness – the County, City of San Diego, and Regional Task Force on Homelessness (RTFH) have aligned their policies – there is a large variance in how local leaders talk about the issue. In order to bring consensus around the idea that housing is the solution to homelessness, the best messaging has to be consistent and ideally center around the "opportunity" that Housing First presents.

While this campaign has planted a seed by determining effective messaging to educate constituents, here is what now needs to be done moving forward:

- Providers get on the same page about messaging
- Local officials and providers agree about housing as the solution to homelessness
- City and county officials properly and realistically plan by considering a timeline for solutions
- Community Leaders build public support for current RTFH, SDHC & City/County priorities
- Involve the City's Office of Race & Equity and County's Office of Equity and Racial Justice moving forward
- Government officials find immediate housing today to support more permanent housing solutions for tomorrow

The time to act is now, and **we must act together.**

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INTRODUCTION

The Need for Effective Messaging

While many US cities have implemented successful evidence-based interventions to homelessness by adopting "Housing First" models, the concept has been comparatively less well received in the San Diego region despite the foundational role it plays in the region's homeless service system.[1] Locally, various forms of messaging centered around solutions have been used, but a large variance in how local leaders talk about the issue has translated to a lack of consistent messaging and slow movement towards implementing proven solutions.

Determining which messaging is most effective guides San Diegans to see permanent housing as a solution to homelessness.

Messaging that is frequently included in the research and communications from leading advocacy organizations at the national, state and local levels uses themes that include any combination of collaboration, compassion, community, opportunity or Housing First. Determining which messaging is most effective guides San Diegans to see permanent housing as a solution to homelessness.

Over the past year, Funders Together to End Homelessness San Diego (FTEHSD) led a multi-faceted research campaign to determine which messaging is most effective in ensuring that San Diegans consider housing as a solution to homelessness. This campaign included reviewing national messaging research, identifying what San Diego area leaders are saying, conducting polling of San Diego constituents and implementing a 5-month digital marketing research project to see what works locally.

CRITERIA FOR EVALUATING DATA

Key Assumptions and Methodology

When producing recommendations, it is important for one to understand the key assumptions and methodology underlying the analysis. What are the pros and cons? What is feasible? What are the predictable outcomes?

To arrive at its findings, FTEHSD used the following methodology:

Reviewed national messaging research.[2] Many US cities have adopted the Housing First model with success and have highlighted the importance of narrative as an approach to social change.[3] However, at the local level, this has been a struggle for the San Diego area. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the messaging used in other areas, what works and what does not and the best ways for implementing.

Conducted a quantitative San Diego area scan of media coverage on the topic of homelessness. Messaging is only effective and causes movement when reaching a larger audience. The media service Meltwater was used to monitor media coverage across both news and social media and understand what local media is saying, which platforms the public is using to retain information and the means that messaging is being digested.

Conducted polling of San Diego constituents. Polling interviews were conducted among high-propensity moderate voters, split evenly across San Diego County Supervisor Districts 1, 3, and 4 through voter file-matched live cell phones, landlines and email accounts. Interviews were limited to under 10 minutes to eliminate open-ended questions and directly test statements used. Over 400 participated in the poll and the results had a +/- of 5%.

Conducted a qualitative analysis of what San Diego area leaders are saying.[4] To gauge what messaging frame providers and politicians currently use, FTEHSD reviewed the media quotes and social media posts of city council members, county board of supervisors and RTFH representatives to determine if an absence of cohesive messaging exists to collaboratively create "brand" building and cohesion.

Implemented a 5-month digital marketing research project to see what works locally. Using the same messaging for county and city districts, constituents' assumptions about homelessnes were tested through social ads. Social media allows a greater amount of people to be reached and the data availability makes it possible to gauge when sentiment is being moved. To mimic the high-propensity moderate voters targeted through polling, social ads were limited to County Districts 1, 3 and 4 and the City of San Diego. While social media is good for growing awareness, it can not always be measured how likely one will take what they see on a given platform and turn it into action.

ANALYSIS

Understanding Successful Messaging

To confirm our hypothesis, a separate public opinion poll and survey were conducted to determine constituents' positions on permanent housing as a solution to homelessness.

In the county of San Diego, more than 53% of residents believe that the homeless situation is getting worse in their immediate area. Furthermore, 75% rate the performance of their local government officials when addressing the homelessnes situation as ineffective, poor or just fair.[5] Quite simply, there's consensus on the urgency of the situation and the need to do more.

53%
of residents believe that the homeless situation is getting worse in their immediate area

75%
rate the performance of their local government officials when addressing the homelessnes situation as ineffective

75%
would be comfortable having homelessness solutions offered in their immediate area
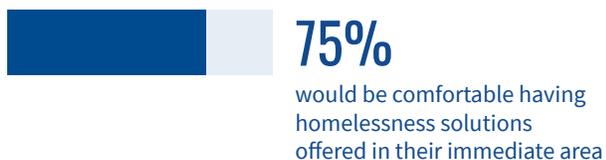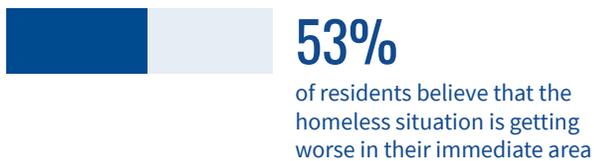
At the same time, constituents are open to various programs to solve homelessness. In fact, 75% of those polled would be comfortable having homelessness solutions offered in their immediate area,[6] and more than 72% believe that programs such as subsidizing housing costs, increasing housing supply, creating job opportunities, repurposing abandoned buildings and providing mental health services would be effective.[7]

The public has yet to develop a clear understanding of both the formal and informal support that is necessary.

While it is clear from this polling and survey data that constituents feel it is necessary to solve homelessness, there are confounding issues that get in the way of understanding Housing First as the primary path to achieve that goal. The first being that Housing First does not literally mean housing only, but that housing creates a foundation and stability for those to re-enter the workforce and attend programs for their well-being.

Another issue is the basic understanding that Housing First is for everyone. This includes whether one is "compliant" with rules, whether one has a criminal record or not, or whether one has been on the streets for one day or ten years.[8] Ultimately, the public has yet to develop a clear understanding of both the formal and informal support that is necessary.

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This lack of understanding can be seen in the public's perception of which programs are most necessary. For example, 86% believe that providing mental health and substance abuse services and resources for people experiencing homelessness would be effective.[9] This type of initiative showed to have more support than any other program, however, it also plays into the stigma that the majority of homeless have mental health or substance abuse disabilities when this is not the case. Those with disabilities are overrepresented in San Diego's unsheltered population, however, less than 40% of those unsheltered report having a mental health or substance abuse disability.[10]

In order to better understand which issues were more likely to engage key demographics in the County of San Diego, FTEHSD conducted a targeted 5-month digital marketing research project as a final test to confirm the messaging hypothesis and to see what works locally. This was done by implementing paid social media campaigns throughout a five month period with each month representing a different message focused on various housing issues.

In order to reach a wide audience and study the various ways that personas constituents throughout the county and city levels engage, it was determined that the campaign would meet a mixture of personas from the Baby Boomer, Generation X and Millennial generations. Personas take target demographics deeper to help understand not only who the audience is but also how to talk to them. When one understands a persona's motivations, they can more easily speak to their questions, desires and needs through marketing materials.

In an effort to weed out the most severe cases of conservative and liberal biases, the campaign focused on reaching moderates in San Diego County districts 1, 3 and 4 and all City of San Diego districts. Before launching the campaign, FTEHSD ran a testing phase to determine which messaging theme resonated the most between its audience and using language centered on the following themes:

Collaboration
The multi-sector movement, incorporating how education, health, racial equity and economic mobility are connected to housing.

Community
Housing as a means to serve communities as a whole. The community contributes resources as a whole towards community based investments and initiatives.

Housing First
Represents an innovation in social policy regarding accommodations for people experiencing homelessness.

Opportunity
Creating affordable housing opportunities means talking about equity – race, class and age. To attain affordable housing for all, public support must be built by shifting narratives away from homelessness as a choice and personal responsibility.

Compassion
Caring for individuals and meeting their needs. The notion of listening to the housing narrative with one's heart.

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From this testing, it was clear that opportunity messaging created the most engagement amongst all audiences.[11] A conclusion can be drawn that the reason the opportunity messaging resonates the most is because it uses a combination of clear and direct language, allows relevant data to be highlighted, can be empathic and relatable, and showcases actionable solutions.

After messaging was selected, content for the campaign was with similar pictures and videos, all using the "opportunity" theme, to provide a constant throughout its entirety. The issues tested through the ads were as follows:

Month 1	General opportunity messaging (control)
Month 2	Programs/ Services
Month 3	Costs
Month 4	Racial equity
Month 5	General opportunity messaging (control)

The same ads and messaging were used in both months 1 and 5 to determine how the audience was moved from the beginning to end of the campaign and learn if the various issues in the middle of the campaign shaped their opinion over time.

From the campaign data collected, it can be concluded that there are both regional and demographic differences in responses to the ads. For example, throughout the course of the campaign, the audience in the City districts were twice as likely to watch an ad featuring video compared to in other areas of the county.

On Facebook, Baby Boomers engaged twice as much as Generation Xers and two main themes emerged in the sentiments expressed:

- Moderate criticism of City Council members and Mayor Todd Gloria.
- Disorganization of local government and the inability to get on the same page with policies to meet the needs of San Diegans.

For example, through a Facebook survey, more than 70% of respondents rated the performance of their local government as poor and less than 5% rated efforts as good or excellent.[12]

On Twitter, Generation X viewers were more likely to respond to content that included polling while Millennials were more likely to those without. Millennials were also more likely to engage on Twitter compared to Instagram. This can be attributed to the fact that some millennials may view Twitter more as a platform for sharing ideas and catching up with news and trends around the world versus Instagram being a platform more for casual and visual content.

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FINDINGS

Using Consistent Messaging to Reinforce the Right Solutions

In order to move forward with public agreement with housing as the solution to homelessness in the San Diego area, it is necessary to debunk the interpretation of what Housing First actually is. As already highlighted previously, more people than not believe that homelessness is getting worse in their area and are leaning on their public officials to do more. Meanwhile, an overwhelming majority of constituents believe that all of the following programs would be effective in some way:[13]

- Provide mental health and substance abuse services (86%)
- Repurpose abandoned buildings into low-cost beds and rooms (83%)
- Create job opportunities aimed specifically at people experiencing homelessness (80%)
- Increase the supply of housing (72%)
- Subsidize the cost of housing for people based on their income level (72%)
- Limit the amount that rents can be increased each year (57%)

Based on an assessment of how the media covers the topic throughout the region, there is a large variance in the way nonprofit leaders talk about the issue, even though they are all sitting around the same table.

While public opinion shows these programs to be the highest priorities, it does not necessarily reflect best practices as solutions. Elected officials should use this data to address these common beliefs and educate the public on real solutions.

Meanwhile, throughout the past year, more traditional media outlets are covering the topic of homelessness more and more.[14] Based on an assessment of how the media covers the topic throughout the region, there is a large variance in the way nonprofit leaders talk about the issue, even though they are all sitting around the same table. This confirms the assumption that there is a good opportunity to bring everyone together around a common message.

From the media assessment, one can also gather which outlets are the most influential in sharing messaging. For example, three publications account for 50% of the volume share of mentioning "homelessness" among the top 25 San Diego publications. Those publications are:[15]

- The San Diego Union-Tribune
- KPBS
- The Voice of San Diego

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While knowing which publications are most useful in spreading the message, it is also important to realize which influencers are the most prominent, as well. Three people in the area account for more than a third of the volume share of mentioning "homelessness" amongst San Diego influencers. Those three people are:[16]

- Andrew Bowen (KPBS)
- Debbie Sklar (Times of San Diego)
- Ken Stone (Times of San Diego)

In addition to publications and influencers, in today's age, social media plays a huge role in getting a message across in a fast and productive manner. Based on the multi-month campaign, it is evident that video causes much more engagement than still imagery. Polling also is more likely to generate high impressions and engagement, as well. Lastly, social platforms such as Facebook

and Twitter are more likely to draw engagement compared to Instagram, even when trying to reach an audience as young as Millennials.

While it is helpful to know which publications and people are most influential in spreading the message, there is also the necessity for messaging to be consistent, as well. Messaging centered around an opportunity theme is the most effective way to engage an audience. An example of using opportunity messaging would be as follows:

"Helping end homelessness means making sure every San Diegan has the opportunity to succeed, to have a job, and to live in high-quality, affordable housing, regardless of their circumstances. Programs designed to help people increase their income are critical to providing the economic security and access to stable housing required to end homelessness."

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Messaging Triangle

In an effort to hone messaging and shape consistent communications, FTEHSD recommends using and adapting the following triangle internally to guide the way providers, community leaders and government officials communicate on housing as a solution to homelessness:
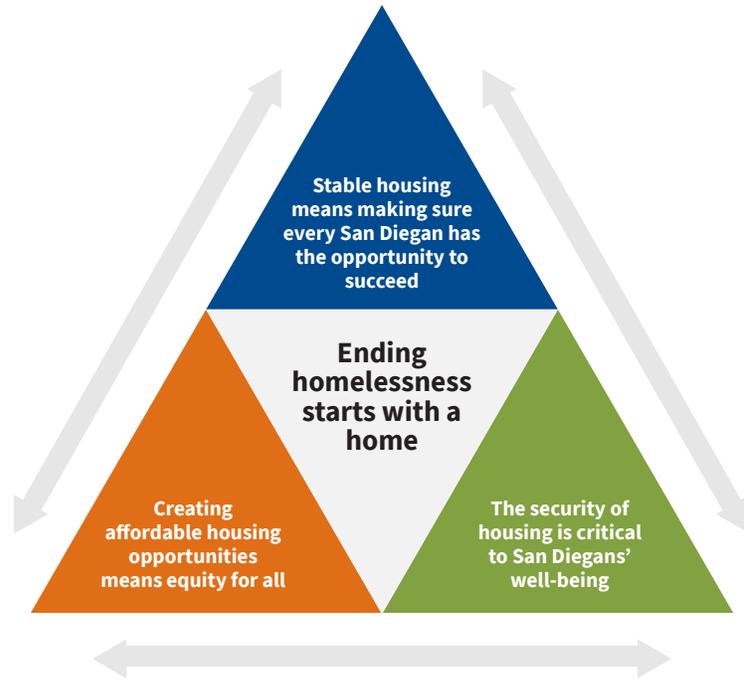
Stable housing means making sure every San Diegan has the opportunity to succeed	Creating affordable housing opportunities means equity for all	The security of housing is critical to San Diegans' well-being
• Everyone deserves to have a job, and to live in high-quality, affordable housing, regardless of their circumstances • Programs designed to help people improve their economic well-being are critical to providing the security and accessibility to stable housing required to end homelessness • Making sure everyone has access to the support and services they need to afford a home will help us accomplish this goal	• Large discrepancies in homelessness based on race, class and age • Those with disabilities are overrepresented in San Diego's unsheltered population • Homelessness is not a choice nor personal responsibility • Housing is a right and a need for all	• Housing offers safe and stable environments to help people manage serious, chronic issues • We can support people on their path to positive mental health with programs like: social inclusion services, care that addresses trauma and crisis intervention • Housing creates a foundation for those to re-enter the workforce

Generally, people are confused and/or overwhelmed when it comes to homelessness, but when using a combination of the correct messaging (opportunity), the right videos and/or photographs of real life people to inspire more compassion and the most prominent platforms for spreading the word, providers can drive a consistent message that will reinforce the right solution to end homelessness with voters and elected officials.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Next Steps for Educating Constituents

While gathering the public's opinion, testing different types of messaging and analyzing what public leaders are saying is helpful, it is all for naught if clear next steps and recommendations are not laid out. This campaign has planted a seed by determining effective messaging to educate constituents.

Here is what now needs to be done moving forward:

Providers get on the same page about messaging. A consistent message creates a pattern the public can come to expect, and then develop a subconscious comfort level. Specifically, using messaging based on the "opportunity" theme will more likely resonate with the public.

Local officials and providers agree about housing as the solution to homelessness. This plays into the idea of agreeing about messaging. If the public is getting one message from providers and another from their local leaders, it is not productive. With almost 40,000 unhoused people served in 2020,[17] a pandemic that created significant job loss and a recovery that is far from complete, there has never been a greater need in the area for improved residential stability. The RTFH, as the lead Continuum of Care agency, regularly convenes a large number of member organizations that serve this population. As such, it can play an important role educating hundreds - if not thousands - of local professionals on using messages that have the power to consistently bring San Diegans aboard the notion that permanent housing is the solution to homelessness.

City and county officials properly and realistically plan by considering a timeline for solutions. Building housing takes significant time, therefore leaders should plan accordingly. Unkept promises will not be tolerated. With recent funding opportunities having yet to generate demonstrable results or consensus in the public eye (such as 2020's Measure A; Project Roomkey or ARPA-designated funds during the pandemic), local residents are asking for plans that include clear goals and regular, transparent progress reports to know if the region's on track with those objectives.

Community Leaders build public support for current RTFH, SDHC & City/County priorities. When community leaders in the homeless system have the opportunity for messaging, they should be on the same page. The City and County of San Diego both promote evidence-based approaches to solving homelessness including Housing First. Consistent and effective messaging is needed to support the County Board of Supervisors, City Council Members and Mayor for their continued leadership in advancing essential policies to end homelessness.

In addition to policy support, the effects of successful policies and progress of the City of San Diego's Homeless Action Plan and the RTFH's Regional Community Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness should be highlighted. As support for effective policies are advocated, it is important to center the voices of people with lived experience of homelessness.

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Involve the City's Office of Race & Equity and County's Office of Equity and Racial Justice moving forward. While measuring sentiment in social media ads is difficult to gauge, interest from the audience peaked when ads ran on the subject of equity and race compared to those focused on housing costs and various programs/services. So much so that the average watch time for the video version was almost twice as long as the standard viewing time of a Facebook video.[18] What is evident is that people are listening and that the general public is ready to have this conversation. This tells us that the two agencies newly dedicated to ensuring systemic change across all government departments play a critical role in any ongoing implementation of strategic messaging.

This also is an opportunity to support the work of the RTFH Ad Hoc Committee on Addressing Homelessness of Black San Diegans. According to the 2020 Point-In-Time (PIT) count, Black persons accounted for 21% of the unsheltered population and 30% of the sheltered population, while only accounting for 5.5% of the general population in San Diego County. The purpose of the Ad Hoc Committee is to explore the factors contributing to disparities among Black persons experiencing homelessness, listen and engage in extensive public dialogue with community stakeholders, and to develop a series of recommendations that the CoC can take to better address the impacts of systemic racism and its effects within the homeless crisis response system.

Government officials find short-term solutions today to support more permanent housing answers for tomorrow. Trying to make something perfect can actually prevent us from making it just good. While cities such as Salt Lake and Houston[19] present adaptive strategies that prioritize giving people housing and help over temporary solutions, we must acknowledge that San Diego is a different housing market where inventory, land use and regulations provide specific limitations. Permanent housing solutions take time, but there needs to be an urgency for immediate solutions. In the interim, there are short-term fixes such as shared housing, rental subsidies and reducing criminalization that can be used to move people off the streets and bridge to more permanent opportunities.

CONCLUSION

Bringing Consensus through Consistent "Opportunity" Messaging

In the San Diego area, there is an overall lack of public understanding of homelessness and this lack of understanding is only amplified by the scarcity of consistent messaging to reinforce the right solutions. The number of first-time homeless people in San Diego County grew by almost 80% from 2018 to 2020 and there are over 8,000 total homeless in the county.[20] The "Community Action Plan to End Homelessness" identifies housing as a critical high impact solution and that "leaders across the City have articulated a similar sentiment: The time to act is now, and we must act together."[21]

There is an overall lack of public understanding of homelessness and this lack of understanding is only amplified by the scarcity of consistent messaging to reinforce the right solutions.

While there is consensus on the need for action to solve homelessness – the County, City of San Diego, and RTFH have aligned their policies – there is a large variance in how local leaders talk about the issue. Meanwhile, constituents do not feel their local officials are doing enough despite being open to various programs to help aid the area's homelessness population. There is a vital need for the County, City of San Diego and RTFH to improve their messaging strategy and how they communicate with the public.

Housing is an effective solution as outlined through "model" cities[22] that have drastically addressed the issue to the San Diego area's own action plans that, between their key strategies, look to "improve service and options to people experiencing homelessness through evidence-based approaches."[23]

In order to bring consensus around the idea that housing is the solution to homelessness, the best messaging has to be consistent and ideally center around the "opportunity" that Housing First presents.

Currently, there are various forms of messaging centered around solutions to homelessness that are used with key audiences. In order to bring consensus around the idea that housing is the solution to homelessness, the best messaging has to be consistent and ideally center around the "opportunity" that Housing First presents.

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FTEHSD works to build a San Diego County collaborative of funders who are committed to solving homelessness through leadership, education, and advocacy; strategic collaboration, alignment and focus of resources; and effective promotion and replication of evidence-based practices in our community.

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