



The Essential Foundation:

How to Talk to Coloradans About Housing



About Housing Colorado

Housing Colorado is a statewide membership organization committed to providing advocacy, professional development and issue expertise for the housing community. We help unite and empower the broad diversity of organizations that work to make quality housing available to more Coloradans in order to build a strong economy and healthy communities. Learn more at www.housingcolorado.org

About Mission Minded

Housing Colorado partnered closely with Mission Minded, an independent branding firm that works exclusively with nonprofits, to create this guide. Learn more at www.mission-minded.com

About the Guide

This guide is intended as a tool for housing advocates across Colorado to ensure that clear, consistent, and cohesive messages are populating conversations around the state. The guide is part of a larger project, funded by Colorado Health Foundation and Colorado Housing and Finance Authority, that aims to shift public consciousness and the narrative around housing in Colorado.

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Introduction

As an advocate for more housing in your community, you share a vision with other housing advocates across Colorado. And though you have a lot in common, the details and intricacies of your organization and the housing solutions that best meet the needs of your community are unique.

So how do you advance your shared goals while further explaining the impact and importance of your work?

The following guide provides communications best practices and sample messages that will unite your work with that of housing advocates and providers across the state and give you the tools to make the case for housing at the community level.

How will shared language help us achieve our individual and collective missions?

- Sending consistent signals will build momentum and support for more housing among key audiences and decision makers across the state, by
- Putting a human face on the issue and creating empathy for those who need housing,
- Closing information gaps that lead to misperceptions about housing,
- Neutralizing the effects of ‘Not In My Back Yard’ (NIMBY) arguments, and
- Attaching the need for housing to widely shared values that unite people around solutions.

Housing is The Essential Foundation

This guide was developed to enable you to position the issue of HOUSING—all housing—as THE essential foundation necessary for improving nearly every other social issue people care about—making it relevant to every community and individual.

When housing advocates all across Colorado tell a clear, concise, and consistent story about housing and why it matters, we will shift public discourse and opinion on the issue.

Housing is essential in order to pursue life, liberty, and happiness and to sustain healthy, vibrant communities.

The Importance of Audiences

The hard truth is that some audiences hold more sway or influence in advancing or delaying housing projects than others. With that in mind, we identified a set of audience types commonly associated with delaying or disrupting projects.

While each community has its own, unique audiences, certain audience types came up consistently in our workshop and discussions with housing advocates from across the state. The messages in this guide respond directly to the concerns of those audience types in a way that will lead to more productive conversations with all of your key audiences.

Take the time to understand who your primary audiences are, not just demographically (age, gender, income, etc.) but also psychographically (their hopes, fears, values, etc.), and you'll know what your organization must promise and deliver in order to appeal to them.

Prioritizing your organization's key audiences and favoring **what they need to hear over what you want to say** leads to genuine engagement and mission success.

A photograph of a group of people outdoors. In the center, an elderly man with white hair and a beard is laughing joyfully. He is wearing a dark polo shirt. Several people are embracing him from behind. One person in the foreground has long, dark dreadlocks. The background is a soft-focus green landscape with trees. The overall mood is warm and supportive.

Key Messages for Housing Advocates

About These Messages

The following messages incorporate the combined wisdom of housing advocates from across Colorado, as well as concepts from existing studies of housing advocacy communications. These messages are specifically designed to help you present your organization and/or project in a way that will engage your key audiences while introducing a consistent narrative around the need for housing. With consistent use of these messages, housing advocates across the state can shift mindsets and policies to support Coloradans who need a place to call home.

While the values and desires of each audience type points to a different communications strategy, all audience-specific communications benefit from positioning housing as the essential foundation upon which every other social issue people care about is built.

How To Use These Messages

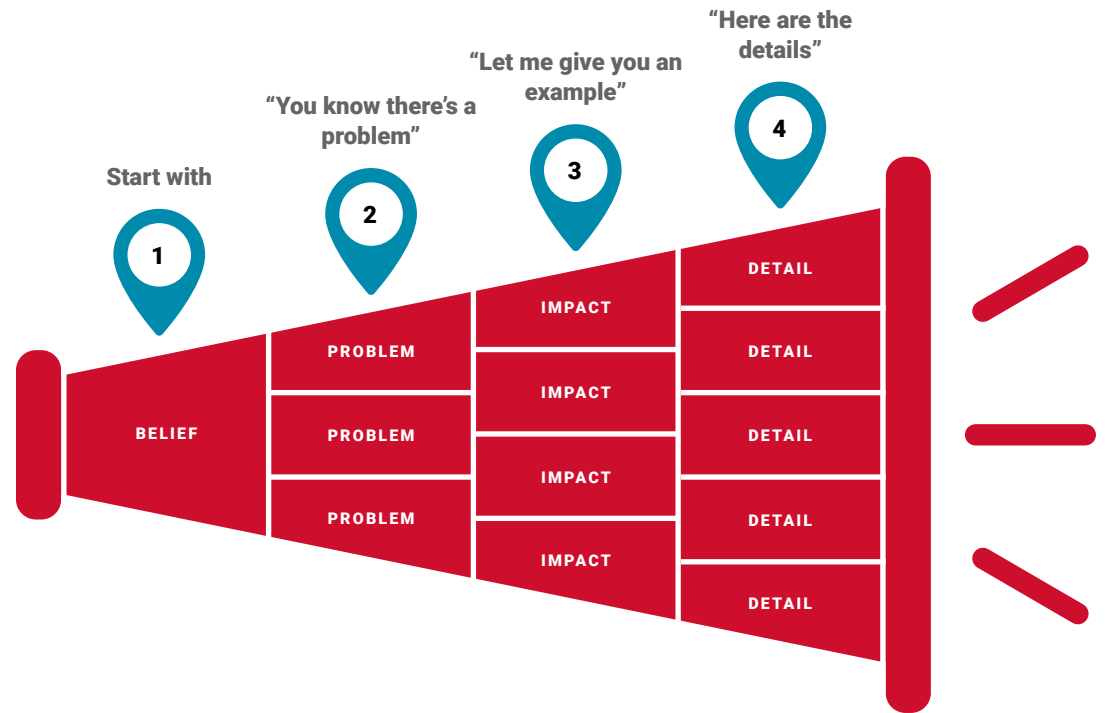
The Minute Message Model:

This four-step messaging process has been used by hundreds of nonprofits to help raise awareness for important causes, while shifting attitudes and building movements.

1. Belief: Begin with a common belief message that doesn't change in order to establish trust and common ground between all advocates and listeners.

2. Problem: Rally your audience around a societal problem *they* care about.

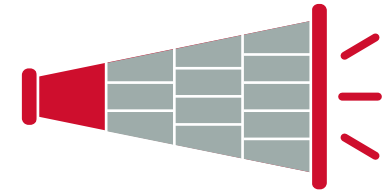
3. Impact: Put a human face on the problem with a real life, local impact story that demonstrates the impact your project or program has or will have on real people.



4. Detail: Finish by describing the benefit of the project or program you're advocating for (i.e., how it helps solve the problem your audience cares about) before describing what the project/program is.



Step 1: Belief Message



When you have just a minute to introduce yourself as a housing advocate, don't waste time on details. Instead, speak in clear, broad terms about the big, exciting idea—the belief—that motivates your work.

Housing Colorado encourages all housing advocates to use the following belief message in order to create momentum across advocacy groups, to position housing as the essential ingredient that it is, and to avoid unintended interpretations and biases related to housing.



Step 1: Belief Message

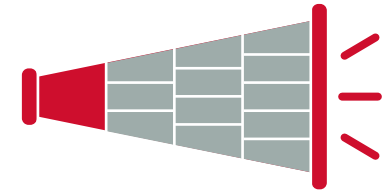
Belief Message

We can't build a healthy and stable community—or life—on an unstable foundation. Everyone needs a safe, stable place to call home to realize their potential.

But for too many of our hardworking neighbors, a safe place to live is simply out of reach. That's why Coloradans* must work together to create solutions that provide more safe, stable housing options of all kinds.

To secure the foundation of our community and what we all love about living in Colorado,* we must ensure everyone in Colorado* has fair access to a place to call home.

* These lines are designed to be localized by your organization. For example, 'That's why Coloradans...' becomes 'That's why Fruita residents...', and '...living in Colorado... everyone in Colorado...' becomes 'living in Fruita... everyone in Fruita...'

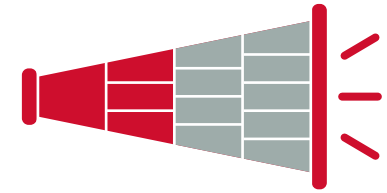


Where to use it:

- **In an elevator**
- **When introducing yourself to a group**
- **When speaking to funders, policy makers, community members**
- **On your home page**
- **On social media**



Step 2: Problem Message



1. Start with the Belief Message

2. Next, add one of the following Problem Messages

You only need ONE Problem Message following the Belief Message to complete step 2.

For example, you may know that your audience cares about living in a community that is economically sustainable, but they don't understand how housing access and fair housing policies relate to the well-being of their whole community. In that case, use one of the Problem Messages that emphasizes how housing will benefit their entire community, such as “We love our community—let's plan to keep it that way.”

The headline of each Problem Message is the important point. You can use the rest of the message as is or edit it to best fit the specific problem your project or program addresses.

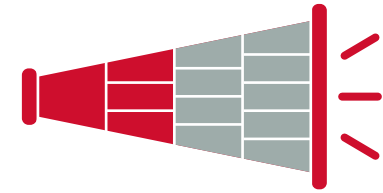
When deciding which Problem Message to use, make sure it responds to the concern of your audience.



Step 2: Problem Message

Our households come in all shapes and sizes—so should our homes

The way we approach housing in Colorado is completely out of step with the needs of our communities. We need more kinds of housing that meet the needs of a wide range of livelihoods, ages, and households. Planning for only certain kinds of housing strangles our potential to create diverse and economically stable communities, walkable, connected neighborhoods, more open space, and a strong sense of place that benefits everyone. If we create more housing access, we create housing stability for everyone in our community, while preserving the open spaces we cherish, relieving traffic congestion, and protecting Colorado's limited water supplies. Let's work together to create housing options that meet everyone's needs.



Where to use it:

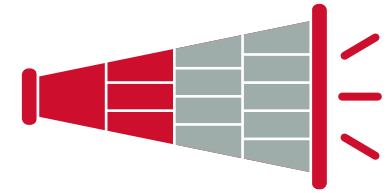
- **With any audience**
- **In response to the question, “Why do we need more housing in our neighborhood/city/town?”**
- **At the start of a meeting with a potential funder, partner, or community group**



Step 2: Problem Message

Property values rise when we invest in the health of our community

If you want to protect or enhance your home's value you have to also invest in your community's value and desirability. Our communities are more interconnected and interdependent than ever before, yet the way we prioritize the development of large, single-family homes hasn't evolved. Our natural environment, city infrastructure, and the finances of the younger generation, are being stretched beyond their limits, undermining stability for all of us. Only when we look at the health of the entire community and the systems that support it can we protect the quality of life we all value. If we plan for a variety of housing throughout our community, we can create an array of safe, stable housing options for everyone while preserving the neighborhoods and the homes we cherish.



Where to use it:

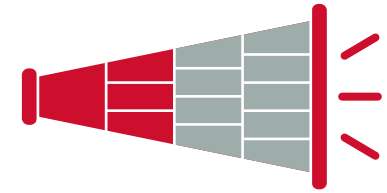
- **With audiences opposed to new housing**
- **In response to the question, "Won't my property value go down if you put this kind of housing in our neighborhood?"**



Step 2: Problem Message

Our young people can't find housing that's affordable

If we don't create more available housing options, we stand to lose the next generation of hard-working Coloradans and the vitality they bring to our communities. Fortunately, Colorado is just the pioneering place to innovate new policies, financing products, housing designs and infrastructures to support healthy, connected communities where young people who want to contribute their skills and talents can find a place to live in the towns they grew up in, where seniors can remain supported by their communities, and where newcomers are welcome. This is the foundation we need for our communities to thrive.



Where to use it:

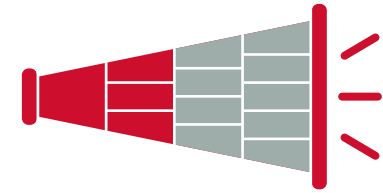
- **With audiences opposed to new housing**
- **In response to claims that the community doesn't need 'that kind of housing'**



Step 2: Problem Message

The high cost of housing is dragging down our local economy

As residents of our town/city spend more and more on housing, there's less and less left in their pockets to provide for their families, putting them one paycheck away from losing their homes. It also means that most of our young people are forced to move away from their families and the communities they grew up in while we lose their talents and economic contributions. If we stabilize the cost of housing in our community, the people we care about will be able to cover the costs of childcare, healthcare, food and transportation. It means more revenue for local businesses, a stronger tax base, increased productivity, and a more economically vibrant future for our entire town/city.



Where to use it:

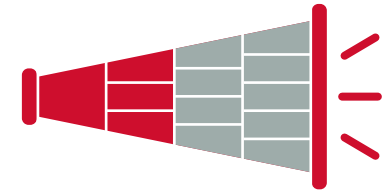
- **With audiences opposed to new housing**
- **In response to concerns about the 'makeup of our community' or questions about who needs the housing you're proposing**



Step 2: Problem Message

Let's preserve our community's integrity as it grows

Currently, over 25% of Coloradans spend more than 50% of their income on housing. This doesn't just put individuals and families in a financially precarious position, it actually destabilizes our whole community, because safe, stable housing is inextricably linked to nearly every other challenge communities struggle with, from education and jobs to the environment. If we fail to create housing that meets diverse needs, our town/city will be less secure and safe. Meanwhile, as our hard-working neighbors get pushed farther out, we'll all have to deal with more traffic and pollution. These harms can be avoided with smart planning. Let's plan ahead to make sure our community remains a place where we all want to live, play, and work.



Where to use it:

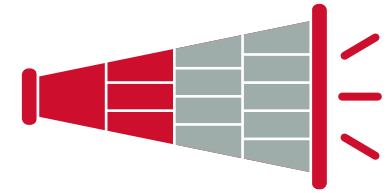
- **With audiences who are unsure/unclear about the need for more housing options**
- **In response to concerns about safety, traffic, environmental impacts, how the community will change with the addition of more housing**



Step 2: Problem Message

We love our community—let's plan to keep it that way

We agree that this a great place to live. The people who live and work here make it great. But fewer and fewer of the people who grew up in our town/city/county can find a place to rent or buy here. Most hard-working, middle-class families are completely priced out of the local housing market, if a home can even be found. As a community, we can make a plan to change the available housing options. None of us can do it alone, but together we can advocate for the resources and policies to make sure this remains a great place to live.



Where to use it:

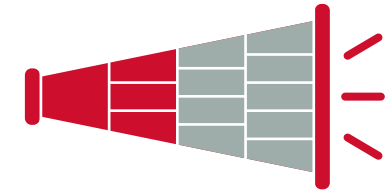
- **With audiences who are unsure/unclear about the need for more housing options**
- **In response to questions about how the integrity/quality of the community will change as new people move in**



Step 2: Problem Message

It's time to right the historical wrongs of redlining and racist housing policies

For many Coloradans, home ownership is a primary means of building wealth. Yet, generations of Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color have been systematically shut out of paths to home ownership in the United States. And even though blatantly discriminatory housing practices and policies are now outlawed, things like 'detached, single family housing-only' zoning laws continue to limit home ownership for low and middle-income People of Color. One of the hard lessons of 2020 was how much more we need to do to fix systems and policies so we have a foundation that is fair and stable for everyone. We need to remove the barriers that keep diverse individuals and families from accessing stable, safe, respectable housing. We can do this by asking the people directly impacted what kinds of housing they need and want, making sure financing options are open to them, and designing our communities to value diverse abilities, backgrounds, cultures, and incomes. Bringing equity to our approach to housing means also opening access to things like high quality schools, good jobs, health care and transportation.

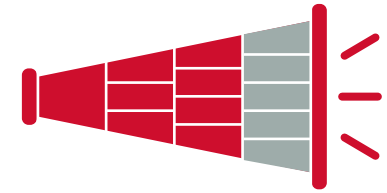


Where to use it:

- **With audiences who care about social justice, but don't see the connection to housing**
- **In response to people who express a desire for more equitable access to healthcare, jobs, education, clean air, etc.**



Step 3: Impact Message



Put a human face on housing

1. Start with the Belief Message
2. Next, share a Problem Message
- 3. Then, share an anecdote (Impact Message)**

If you have an effective Belief Message and a powerful Problem Message, chances are your audience will want to hear more. Now's your chance to prove that your organization is effective. This is best done with a story rather than facts, figures, or charts.

To craft an Impact Message, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Who's the protagonist? (pick a real life person and get their permission to share their story)
2. What's the problem or conflict?
3. What's the outcome or resolution?

Each story should put an 'us' face on the issue by demonstrating how having more safe, stable, respectable homes impacts the life of an individual/family *and* your larger community. The following page presents an example Impact Message. You should develop your own Impact Messages in partnership with people who benefit from your work.



Step 3: Impact Message

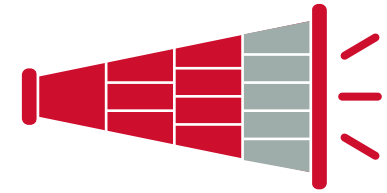
Example Impact Message

A Home Is Just the Beginning

Anna is busy—she’s a full-time student, a mother of two active kids, a restaurant manager and a foster youth advocate. Ever since Anna’s divorce three years ago, finding a safe, stable place for her family to live has been a challenge. Our organization was excited to partner with Anna so that she and her kids could have a stable place to call home.

Not only did Anna and her family find a place to live, but she discovered other life-changing resources at her disposal. We were able to connect Anna to a scholarship program, and she’s now pursuing a BA in Social Work at [local college], with her Master’s degree up next. While Anna’s kids had been struggling in school during their 2-year period of frequent moves. This year, they were able to focus on school and are both back to reading at grade level.

[Our organization’s name] partners with individuals like Anna to bring safe, stable housing within reach, and whenever possible we connect our residents with additional opportunities so they can build a good life and make their contribution to our community. Because everyone needs a safe, stable home in order to realize their potential.

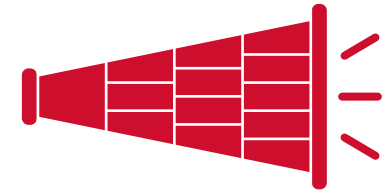


Where to use it:

- **When your audience shows interest in knowing more**
- **During a speech**
- **In an article in your newsletter**
- **On your website (not your home page)**



Step 4: Detail Message



What can we do?

1. Start with the Belief Message
2. Next, share a Problem Message
3. Then, share an anecdote (Impact Message)
- 4. Expand on the specifics of your program via a Detail Message**

How to write a Detail Message

1. Begin with the benefit (why this project or program matters to your audience)
2. Briefly describe what your project/program/proposal will do

If you want your audience to take action (e.g. you need volunteers, you need their agreement or support behind your project, you need their funding), the time to ask is after the Detail Message. Be concrete: what exactly do you need and what will it help you accomplish?

The following page presents an example of a Detail Message.

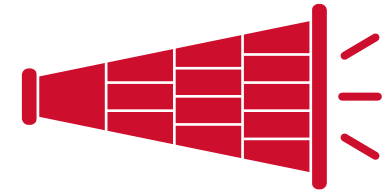


Step 4: Detail Message

Detail Message

Resident Services Coordination

We all need the foundation of stable housing in order to build a good life. Housing is the foundation for our residents, but whenever we can we also help them access help with utility bills, healthcare, transportation, food security, and much more. Because we know these things are also essential for good quality of life.



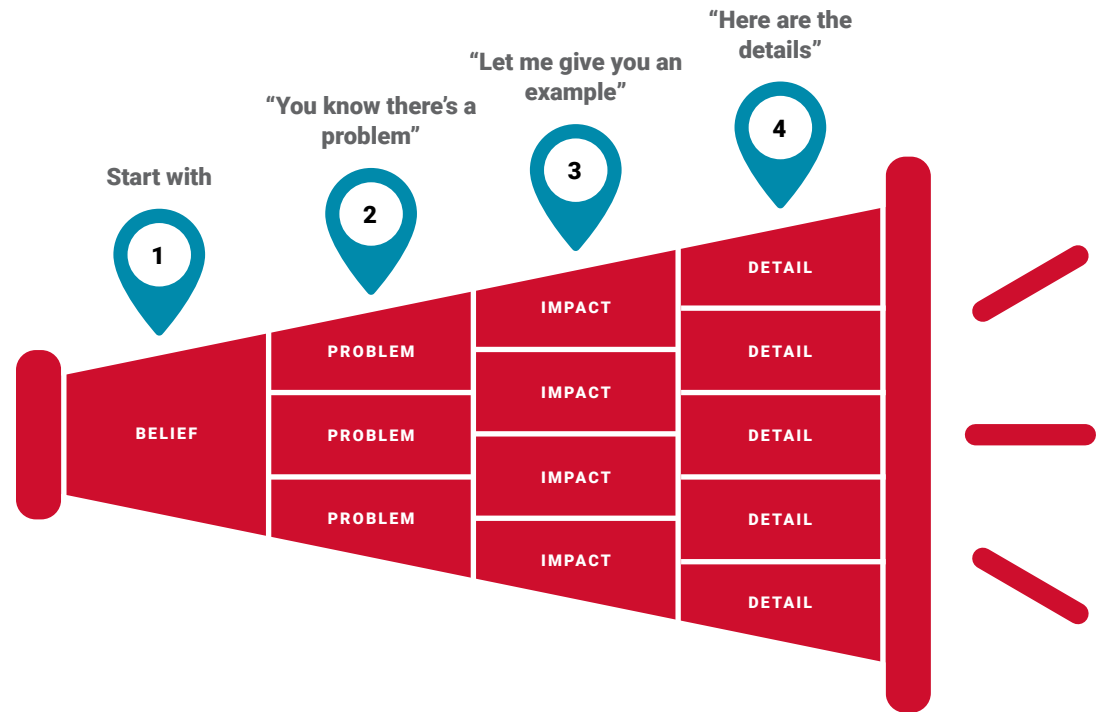
Where to use it:

- **On your website (not the homepage)**
- **In a specific request to a funder, partner, or policy maker**
- **When your audience asks for the details of your work**

Putting it All Together

In summary, follow these four steps:

- Introduce your organization using the **Belief Message**.
- Then use a **Problem Message** to identify a problem that you solve.
- Next, add an **Impact Message** that shows your audience how *your* work plays out in real life.
- Then (and only then) talk about program specifics using a **Detail Message**, explaining how your program or project helps solve the problem.



A close-up photograph of a woman with dark curly hair holding a baby. Another woman with long dark hair and glasses is leaning in from the left, looking at the baby. The scene is outdoors with green foliage in the background.

Communications Best Practices

Communications Best Practices

Use Your Full Name

Your organization's name can convey a great deal of information about what you do in a way that an acronym can't. Avoid using shorthand for your organization's name, even with audiences familiar with your organization.

Never Assume

Your audiences don't know nearly as much about how housing works as you hope they do. What's the problem you're addressing and why should they care? Don't be shy about reminding them every time you have a chance.

Repeat, Repeat, Repeat

You will likely get sick to death of repeating your message while waiting for your key audiences to absorb it. Remember that we're bombarded with thousands of messages every day and it takes a lot of repetition for any one message to really sink in. Make sure that message is yours.

Add Benefits, Subtract Features

Features are what your organization does. Benefits are what happens as a result of that work. People don't get engaged or motivated because of features; they act to get results.

Communications Best Practices

Avoiding Housing Jargon

In addition to using the best practices above, we further recommend that you avoid using jargon or words/phrases that conjure stereotypes in the minds of your audiences. Messages can only inspire excitement when listeners and readers fully comprehend and can relate to them.

Instead of This	Say This
Affordable housing	'Housing that's affordable' or 'more kinds of housing' or even, 'access to housing'
Low-income families/individuals	'Our neighbors' or 'our hard-working neighbors', people we care about, people we rely on
AMI, LURA, PSH, CHFA, HUD, etc.	If it becomes necessary to use these insider terms, always use the full name instead of the acronym and define it for your audience (what it is and why it's relevant)

Would you like to learn more about how to amplify your impact as a housing organization?

Learn more at HousingColorado.org

