

Community Concerns

Many veterans' housing and service providers find that community members are most concerned about the impact of the veterans themselves on their neighborhoods and quality of life. Neighbors of proposed developments often believe that veterans, particularly those who are homeless, will be addicted to drugs, have severe mental health issues or be likely to bring harm to children.

Evidence abounds that affordable and supportive housing increases the safety of communities and can even raise property values, but these facts are unlikely to be convincing. Community members' perspective on housing for veterans is shaped by frames, patterns of thinking triggered by words and phrases depending on an individual's past experiences. By inadvertently using language that triggers negative frames, we run the risk of turning community members against our residents and our work.



Tool 1: Talking to Community Members

Neighbors of proposed veterans' housing developments raise many of the same objections to development as are brought in the case of affordable or supportive housing for other types of residents. But the fears most frequently expressed in the case of housing for veterans are about the veterans themselves. Veterans' housing and service providers can proactively shape community opinion by framing the issue in a positive light. Well-planned community engagement and support from elected officials and local government employees can bring benefits as well.

Exercises

When you understand what your audience cares about, you can leverage those values to frame your work in a positive way. This exercise will help you think through those values and write messages that may resonate better with your audience.

› **Imagine your audience.** Based on your personal experience, what you've learned from research or even from taking a look at Census or other demographic data, can you come up with one to three profiles of typical neighbors of your proposed development? Think about areas like education, employment, age, and cultural or religious influences, as well as economic or social issues that may be relevant in the community. Write these profiles at the top of a sheet of paper.

› **Consider what matters.** Choose one of the neighbor profiles you created and think about what matters to that person. Does this person care about safety? Education? Opportunity? What about things like tradition, service or work? These are the values you want to leverage. Draw a line down the middle of your paper below the profiles and write these words or phrases down the left-hand side.

› **Your perspective.** Now, switch gears and think about why housing for veterans is important to you. Ideas like justice, fairness and reward for service might be aspects of veterans' housing you care about. These are your values. List them on the right-hand side of your paper.

› **Create a message.** Take a look at your lists of values—your values and your audience's values. Do any of them match up? These are the values that can form the basis of an effective message. For example, residents in a transitional neighborhood may be concerned about their own safety.

Communications Solution: Reframing the Conversation

Our first task is to understand the perspective of our "audience:" neighbors of proposed veterans' housing and service developments. Does the neighborhood already have a lot of affordable housing? Is the community prosperous, or is it struggling to bounce back from the economic downturn? Do neighbors have past experiences with affordable housing, as neighbors or as tenants? Do they see a shortage of affordable housing as a social problem to be solved, or as the inevitable working of the market?

Understanding community members' perspectives helps us understand their values and find frames that will appeal to them. For example, "homeless veterans" may trigger a negative frame, inspiring images of shelters and queues for services, which could be viewed as particularly harmful by communities struggling to recover property values after the recession. A phrase like "veterans struggling with housing and employment" avoids stigma and may be more relatable in this kind of community.

Outreach Solution: Cultivating Allies

While local government officials and community leaders may provide good suggestions as to the people whose support it is essential to obtain in a community, veterans' housing developers and service providers should do their own research early on in the site selection process to identify both potential opponents and potential allies. This affords housing providers early opportunities to learn about and allay concerns, and to organize the people and groups who can offer a positive contribution to the conversation.

Elected officials can be particularly important to this effort. Some veterans' housing developers refuse to move forward with a housing development without the vocal, visible leadership and support of local elected leaders. Their role in demonstrating a jurisdiction's support for veterans' housing and in setting the tone for the conversation about a proposed development cannot be overstated.

Very often, it's a vocal minority that opposes the development of veterans' housing. Common public outreach techniques— for example, public meetings featuring unmoderated open comment periods— can give minority opinions outsized weight in conversations about a proposed veterans' housing development. One-on-one conversations, facilitated small-group activities during larger meetings, and charrettes or poster-based comment sessions can allow ample opportunity for education and exchange between community members and developers while making room in the conversation for a diversity of voices.

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Written by Amy Clark, Director of Marketing and Communications, National Housing Conference