



Building a
Year-Round



COMMUNICATIONS Campaign



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The Need for Year-Round COMMUNICATIONS

In an effort to draw greater attention to the issues surrounding affordable housing, it is important to increase public awareness about those issues on a regular, ongoing basis. There are many issues to explore, including educating people about the need for affordable housing, reducing the fears associated with affordable housing, and countering the common obstacles to developing affordable housing, to name a few.

By continually communicating with media, legislators, advocacy groups and service providers, among others, we build a reservoir of goodwill and understanding. It is also important to routinely communicate with state and local agencies, the religious community and those in the health, social welfare and education fields—as well as the general public. Keeping housing issues on the front burner is key to building momentum and increasing awareness throughout the year.

While national housing advocates typically take this approach, planning and implementing your own, more localized campaigns throughout the year will heighten public consciousness in your own community. An effective awareness program reaches people in all the places where they live their lives, such as at work, home, school, shopping and recreational activities. Year-round awareness creates an essential foundation of support on which all other efforts build. It need not be expensive or showy. It does need to be consistent and lasting with simple, consistent messages. It is important to generate clear, succinct messages that will be reinforced throughout the year. Also, awareness messages need to flow along different communications channels. People learn by seeing, hearing and experiencing. Therefore, a variety of channels is required - print, television, radio, community activities and visual (posters, for example).

The following strategies, guidelines, messages, tips and materials should be used to help create an effective campaign for year-round communications about affordable housing in your community.



Strategies for a YEAR-ROUND CAMPAIGN

The following strategies have been outlined to assist as you begin planning your year-round communications campaigns.

Focus broader issues back to housing.

Many North Carolinians see the high-profile issues of job loss and underemployment but don't see a housing affordability problem. This can undermine the case of housing affordability and allow people to say that the problem is really about jobs and incomes rather than housing, especially during an economic recession. Keep your messages and materials totally focused on tying these structural issues back to housing costs to emphasize that housing must be paid for first before other household needs can be met.

Avoid using terms such as low-income to describe individuals and families in communications and materials.

Using the term low-income is less effective than referring to actual income ranges—i.e., people respond more positively when the need is referenced for working families making less than \$25,000 a year than when it's referenced for low-income working families. Ideally, your communications will define affordable housing as sufficient available housing to meet the needs of families at all income ranges within a community and highlight the real numbers spent on housing in terms of overall dollars and percentages of total income.

Present clear, common-sense solutions when communicating about the problem of affordable housing.

The research reveals that many North Carolinians are optimistic that the problem of affordable housing can be solved and are willing to embrace fair, workable solutions. But if solutions and initiatives are not presented clearly, many just dismiss the problem as unsolvable. Don't just report on the problems; identify and clearly communicate the tangible solutions and recommendations for action advocated by your organization and the North Carolina Housing Coalition.

Be prepared to substantiate information and facts.

Many in the general public are likely to be skeptical about the practicality and fairness of proposed housing solutions and hold negative perceptions related to property values and the impact of affordable housing developments on neighborhoods. This is especially true for those citizens who are actively involved in their communities. NCHC has crafted messages to reassure and persuade this important audience segment. See the NIMBY section for more details on page 79.

Focus on the needs of young adults, working families and other sympathetic groups such as children, teachers and people on fixed incomes.

Focusing on groups perceived to be especially worthy of affordable housing makes audiences more receptive to the issue. In some ways, the general public sees aiding such groups as an investment in their community rather than as an expense or handout. They also see these groups as more deserving of the opportunity to live in safe, decent homes. Also emphasize the levels of screening and the rigorous qualifying criteria for applicants to further suggest a level of quality control as appropriate for proposed developments.

Emphasize collaboration in solving the problem.

Both community leaders and average citizens in North Carolina are attracted to the idea of collaboration between the public and private sectors—i.e., many groups working together to solve the problem suggest an increased chance for success. The North Carolina Housing Coalition exemplifies this kind of multifaceted partnership.

Promote the positive themes of family, community and opportunity, but also actively work to neutralize fears and concerns.

Housing is very personal. Almost everyone has a point of reference based on first-hand experience, and many are defensive about their current standing. If faced with the possibility of a development in their own neighborhood, even advocates of the broader concept can have negative reactions based on their fears about the impact of a development on their quality of life and property values. Many perceive the downside risk of increased affordable housing as very great and the upside as uncertain. It is helpful to have ready-available examples in these circumstances, of affordable housing developments that have positively impacted a community. Be sure to bring up the studies of the unsubstantial effect on property values, and even the possible increase of property values with the addition of a well-managed, and well-maintained affordable housing development.

TOOLS FOR INVOLVEMENT

- Identify and seek other allied groups and grassroots organizations in your area.
- Publish an article about local affordable housing issues in your newsletter.
- Send letters to your members of Congress.
- Meet in person with members of your congressional delegation.
- Send a letter to the editor of your local newspaper.
- Distribute information about the need for affordable housing at your meeting.
- Work with local media to promote the campaign.
- Sample materials for your use are included later in this section of the resource manual.

Following the example of the Housing Minnesota program, the North Carolina Housing Coalition additionally advises framing the issue of affordable housing differently for different audience segments as well. Suggested approaches include:

Faith-based:

Do you have the security of coming home every day to a safe, permanent, affordable house or apartment? Thousands of North Carolinians don't. They may live in apartments they can't afford or in overcrowded shelters. They may have to move every six months as their rent climbs. They may dream of buying their own homes with a yard for their children to play in, but can't afford the mortgage. *North Carolina has allowed quality housing that is affordable to households making \$25,000 or less to become scarce and expensive.* As communities of faith, we are called to action when others are in need. If you are blessed with the stability of a secure home, join your friends and neighbors in speaking out for social justice and creating solutions to this housing crisis.

Business:

Does your business find it difficult to attract and retain employees? Is your business reluctant to fund or advocate for affordable housing because doing so seemingly produces no tangible returns? It might be time to reconsider the issue of affordable housing from a bottom-line perspective. *Employers in urban, suburban and rural North Carolina are beginning to realize that the crisis in affordable housing compromises their growth and the stability of their work force.*

Potential Residents:

If you feel stressed, frustrated or powerless because you can't find an affordable place to live, you are not alone. There are twice as many low-income renters competing for affordable housing as there are apartments or houses available. This competition for housing pits you against thousands of others in the same situation when you could be allies—partners in the solution. The crisis in housing is affecting thousands of people. *You are not powerless. You can speak out and share your stories - individually and collectively.* Elected officials, employers, neighbors and the media need to hear how the housing crisis affects the day-to-day lives of ordinary North Carolinians. They need to understand the difficulties of finding a place to call home. By working together, we can make affordable housing a top priority in North Carolina.

Sample Communications MATERIALS AND TIPS

The press can be great allies in letting people know that an investment in housing is one solution to solving economic issues in your community. Keeping the media involved as you prepare special events and activities will help your organization garner local visibility and attention to the important issue of affordable housing. This section provides samples of media materials with tips on using them for your media relations efforts and for use in educational, awareness raising and action planning.

Included are:

- Helpful Hints for Writing a News Release
- Draft Press Release
- Tips on Getting an Editorial Placed
- Suggestions for Writing a Letter to the Editor
- Sample Public Service Announcements
- Tips for Contacting Policy makers

Tips for Writing A PRESS RELEASE

Many news stories are triggered by a timely, well-written press release. Sometimes small newspapers will run the release word-for-word or with minor changes. Most media, however, will use it as background information. Following are some tips to help you in writing your own release to promote your organization's news.

- **Always have a good reason for developing a release.** To be useful, a release must be newsworthy. For example, you might issue a release if your organization:
 - Announces the results of a poll, survey or study that is relevant locally
 - Launches a new public education program
 - Begins a new type of service or makes significant changes to existing services
 - Hires a new director or high-level staff person
 - Receives a large grant or donation
 - Wants to publicize the local impact of a national news event
 - Plans local activities to tie into a well-known day, week or month
 - Honors an individual or organization
- **Keep it short.** Press releases have a better chance of getting read if they are kept to about a page in length. They should contain short sentences and paragraphs.
- **Stick to the format.** At the top of the page, include the name and phone number of a contact for more information. The release should begin with the name of your city and the date. If the release is longer than one page, type “-more-” at the bottom of each page except the last. Signify the end of the release by typing “###” centered after the last sentence.
- **Give the most important details first.** Begin with a headline that summarizes the release. The first paragraph should answer the five questions “who, what, where, when, and how.”
- **Put the local connection at beginning.** Local connections catch the attention of the reader.
- **Be careful with language.** Avoid using slang or technical terms. If necessary, explain them.
- **Check for accuracy.** Make sure to verify all spelling, statistics, names and titles.
- **Write factually.** Editorial comments or other opinions should be expressed only in direct quotes.
- **Seek placement.** Distribute your release to local print and broadcast reporters in your community. Follow up to encourage them to write or air a story. Try to schedule an interview with an official of your organization. Collect samples of any resulting coverage to document your outreach efforts.
- **Be sure to include quotes.** Quotes make a press release more interesting and gives support for your ideas.
- **Use letterhead.** If you print the press release or send a pdf, it should be on organizational letterhead.

Emailing

A PRESS RELEASE

The most convenient form of sending a press release is through email. When emailing a press release it is important to keep an updated contact list of newspaper editors, radio shows and other possible recipients. The following tips are unique to emailing a press release.

- **Use simple text in the email.** Fancy formatting is not necessary and may be changed due to conversion problems when sending the email to recipients. Make sure everything is justified on the left.
- **State “press release” in the subject line.** In your subject line identify that you are writing regarding a press release. Be sure to say something intriguing to catch the editor’s attention. Sample subject line, “press release: Craven County Home Saved from Foreclosure”
- **Send press releases early in the day.** The best time to send a press release is around lunch when people are checking their emails. By late afternoon, many are too busy don’t have time to read a press release.
- **Email press releases before Friday.** Often times, newspaper staff are overwhelmed with putting together the weekend papers on Friday. If you would like your press release to be included in the weekend paper, you would need to send it earlier in the week.

[The news release is to be printed on your organization's letterhead]

SAMPLE RELEASE

Media Contact: <Insert your name>
<Insert the name of your organization>
<Insert your telephone and fax numbers>
<Insert your email address>

North Raleigh Affordable Housing Development Wins Recognition

Madison Glen is the result of community partners including First Union/Wachovia

<YOUR CITY> <DATE>—A coalition of affordable housing allies has been awarded the North Carolina Housing Finance Agency's annual "Housing North Carolina" Award. <Organization> received the award for its partnership role in affordable housing development. The Housing Finance Agency selected <project name>, a mixed income apartment community in <location>, for its exemplary real estate development. Commended as a model for other communities, outstanding ratings were given to its affordability, creative financing, attractive design, cost-effective construction and services offered to residents.

<Organization>, a non-profit housing developer, developed the community, with support from the city of <Name> and <County>. <insert name> Bank Community Development Finance Group provided a \$5 million letter of credit to enhance the construction loan provided by <insert source name>.

"The success of <project name> was made possible by the shared vision that building solid communities requires innovative partnerships with businesses and organizations," said <organization executive director>. "The common goal of this team effort was to focus on helping to develop strong neighborhoods that enhance quality of life for residents."

Bank <insert name> will continue its support of projects such as <project name>, committing \$6 billion in community development lending and investments in its markets over the next 12 months. "Our success as a company is forever linked to the success and health of the communities we serve," said <insert bank official's name>. <Project name> was built as an economically diverse community that blends with the surrounding neighborhoods. Fifty of the development's 120 apartments serve households with incomes at or below 50 percent of median income (\$33,050); four of the units are reserved for participants in <Your county> County's Work First program. By combining market-rate units with apartments financed with federal tax credits, <organization> was able to provide amenities, including a clubhouse, business center, fitness center and swimming pool.

—MORE—

About Your Organization

Add pertinent information about your organization. (One or two lines about the organization. Be sure to include the organization's web address.)

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Tips on getting an Editorial IN YOUR NEWSPAPER

Editorials, that is, opinion pieces written by the newspapers' editors, don't just appear out of the blue. Advocates meet with editorial boards and try to convince them of the importance and immediacy of their issues and then ask the editorial board to take a position on the issue. Meeting with editorial boards takes some preparation but is very rewarding when a good editorial is written. Below are some steps for getting editorials.

- 1. Do your homework.** Read some of the editorials previously published in your newspaper and pay attention to the patterns of positions they take. Does the newspaper tend to favor public investment in housing and other important programs? If the newspaper is against public spending or has an anti-housing angle, it's probably better not to meet with them. You could invite an editorial against affordable housing, which is a step in the wrong direction. If the paper has a positive angle on issues relating to housing and social welfare problems, it's a good idea to meet with their representatives.
- 2. Find out who the editors are and schedule a meeting.** The editors' names are usually listed just above the editorials and/or on the newspaper's Web site. Jot down the names and positions. If there is an administrative assistant or scheduler for the editorial board, note that too. Call the newspaper office and tell them you'd like to schedule a meeting with the editorial board. They will ask for information about who you are, what your issue is and who will be coming with you. It's very rare to have a meeting with the full editorial board; usually, one or two editors will meet with you.
- 3. Build a coalition to attend the meeting.** Think about what angles on the affordable housing issue would be important to this paper and make sure they are represented. Consider bringing low-income residents who can tell their stories about struggling to find housing, shelter directors facing bed shortages, developers who can't find the money to build affordable housing, or elected officials who are supportive of affordable housing. Brief everyone on how long they have to talk at the meeting (usually five minutes each or so) and to make sure to mention your organization in their comments. Remember: You requested this meeting so you control the agenda. Make sure you arrive prepared to make a presentation.
- 4. Bring helpful information in packets.** You will want to include in the packet some data on affordable housing in your area that shows the local problem and any information you have about the local housing crisis, such as the rate of people turned away at overflowing local shelters, the length of the Section 8 Voucher waiting list, or personal stories from low-income residents. Be sure to include possible solutions for these housing problems. People tend to become more engaged with a cause when there is hope that change can be achieved, especially when an organization has clear steps to move forward.. Include also basic information about your organizations and what they do and about the attendees at the meeting. Make sure you also bring business cards.

5. **Make your case in the meeting.** Remember that you're trying to convince the editors to take a position. Be persuasive, be factual, be timely and be prepared to answer questions about the issue. Make sure you give them a reason why it's important for the paper to take a position and write an editorial on the issue this week instead of six months from now, like winters' approach making homelessness more dangerous than ever, or new numbers on unemployment showing more people will need affordable housing, or shelters at capacity. At the end of the meeting, ask them if they think they'll write an editorial about the issue. Make sure you give them your contact information in case they have more questions, and follow up later in the day to answer any questions you couldn't answer in the meeting.
6. **Follow up.** Call the editors you met within three to five days and ask them if they need more information. Ask them if they're planning on writing on the issue and offer to give them more information or contacts, if that is helpful.
7. **Call or email every time a story is run about your issue.** This does not have to be long, just be sure to thank them for bringing attention to the issue. In addition, let them know that you are available to answer questions if they do articles on this topic in the future.
8. **If your release is about a report, attach it in a pdf.** All attachments should be in pdf format to prevent it from getting blocked or losing formatting.

Tips on Writing a LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Be brief, be quick and leave your phone numbers. These are the three most important things to remember when writing letters to the editor.

Be brief, there's a lot of competition for a small amount of space. Letters to the Editor should be no more than 200 words. Write the letter within one or two days because the best letter in the world won't get printed if the newspaper gets it three or four weeks after the article it refers to was printed. Include your home and work phone numbers on your letter because many papers won't print letters unless they can verify the author.

Contact information is located on the editorial page. Many papers accept letters by fax and email as well as regular mail these days. It never hurts to both fax and email. And you can be most certain by either faxing or emailing and then following up with a phone call to make sure the appropriate person got your letter.

Other tips:

- 1. Use statistics sparingly.** They can get confusing and overwhelming very quickly.
- 2. Mention an article already printed by the paper.** This dramatically increases the chances that your letter will be run.
- 3. Remember your audience.** In most cases, you're trying to sway the public, not your adversary. Therefore, you should make an effort to seem moderate and fair. This doesn't mean you should be bland. But you should write with the average person in mind and use phrases and arguments that resonate with them. You don't want John Q. Public to be turned off by your rhetoric and think, "Well, both sides are extremists."
- 4. A catchy first line is helpful.** Instead of "I'm writing to respond to the Post editorial of August 3..." try "The August 3 editorial left me wondering if Post editorial writers live in the real world."
- 5. Don't mention criticism that has been leveled against you.** Avoid saying, "I am not a crook, thief and a liar as reported in last week's Post." Better to say, "Post readers wonder who's telling the truth in the controversy over..."
- 6. Use short, punchy sentences.** This makes it easier for the reader to follow your thinking and easier for the editor to cut the letter if necessary (better to have an edited version of your letter printed than none at all).

Tips for Contacting POLICYMAKERS

Although speaking with policy makers about affordable housing may seem difficult and intimidating, often the biggest challenge is making the first phone call or writing the first letter. It's important to remember that advocacy does not always take place on the Capitol steps—often it's the conversations with local decision-makers that truly make the difference. Meetings with local officials also can be a great source of information about local issues affecting the availability of affordable housing in your community.

State senators and representatives receive less mail than you might think—many say three letters on one topic is considered a flood of mail. Taking the time to write to your elected officials is an excellent way to show your concern, and it prompts them to pay attention! Here are some tips for writing to your elected officials.

- 1. Personalize your letter—relate your own experiences or those of your friends or neighbors.** Elected officials want to understand what's going on in their districts.
- 2. Keep it short.** A one-page letter in your own handwriting or from a word processor is long enough to convey your concerns, but short enough to ensure that they'll read it.
- 3. Always include your home address so that your elected official is sure you're a constituent.** Mail from constituents is taken much more seriously than letters from outside the district.
- 4. Always ask for a reply, in writing or on the telephone.** This will let your official know that you're watching him/her and waiting to see where he/she stands on the issue.
- 5. Encourage your friends and neighbors to write letters.** Offer to give them information or share a copy of your own letter to help them out.
- 6. Use these links to find your NC State policy makers.**
For State Senators, <http://www.ncga.state.nc.us/Senate/Senate.html>
For State Representatives, <http://www.ncga.state.nc.us/house/house.html>
- 7. Use these links to find your NC Federal policy makers.**
For NC Senators, http://www.senate.gov/general/contact_information/senators_cfm.cfm?State=NC
For NC Representatives, <https://writerep.house.gov/writerep/welcome.shtml>