



## Common Sense Pointers for Talking About Supportive Housing

### Talking Points & Strategies for

#### DO

- **Educate neighbors, business owners and community leaders.** If they approve, the elected officials and other decision-makers will follow.
- **Listen.** Sometimes, building a relationship means listening to and acknowledging fears in a sympathetic manner, without commenting on the validity or blaming the speaker for being uninformed.
- **Humanize the object of the fear.** Most people fear supportive housing because of stereotypes of prospective residents. In some cases, meeting prospective tenants can help, replacing abstract concerns with a human face and sympathetic story. First-person testimonials are often effective with media.
- **Select a single spokesperson to deal with media and questions.** This will minimize the risk of providing a conflicting message.
- **Use local supporters strategically.** Consider using a respected leader from local government, the faith community, business or civic organization to publicly support your project. However, carefully assess their local reputation, ensure that they are educated on the issue, and ensure that their own concerns are addressed before asking them to lend their support to your project.
- **Build relationships, one person at a time.** Engage key people and opponents in a series of conversations that include consistent and accurate information, making and keeping promises, and respecting their positions. Your project will be judged by your character and credibility.

#### DO NOT

- **Be secretive.** If you treat your project as a secret, the community will assume you have something to hide. Communicate your belief in your work with truthful information and “good news” stories.
- **Be defensive.** Instead, assume that most people’s concerns are reasonable and deserve to be addressed. Don’t assume that every question, expression of concern or initial opposition is coming from a discriminatory enemy. If opponents are giving false or misleading information, correct it and then move on. Consider also using direct communication to their network, e.g. direct mail, flyers delivered to their door, with a phone number to call for further information.
- **Be impatient.** Remember that homelessness, disability and affordable housing are complex issues and most people have never had a compelling reason to learn about them.
- **Be inflexible.** Consider the concerns raised and seek ways to incorporate them into your development, provided they don’t compromise your project goals. By compromising, you demonstrate your respect for the community and avoid entrenchment.
- **Assume skeptics and questioners are opponents.** This can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Quite often, former skeptics can become very powerful allies if they perceive that their concerns are addressed.
- **Fight your fights through the media.** If neighbors and public officials first learn about your project through a newspaper reporter, your battle for community support will be long and hard.

## Talking Points & Strategies for Supportive Housing Projects

### How to Talk About Supportive Housing:

- **Basic Talking Points**

- *Supportive housing works.* Many residents go to school, work and pay taxes; meanwhile emergency rooms, mental health facilities, police and other resources are not overburdened. Medicaid inpatient expenses fell 71% for people who moved into supportive housing according to a recent study. There are already over 2,000 units in the state working well.
- *Supportive housing helps rebuild lives that once had few or no prospects.* Give specific examples of people who are working and have turned their lives around.
- *Supportive housing is a great neighbor* (the property is well-managed, well-maintained and well-supervised). Most supportive housing developments cannot be identified as such by their outward appearance.
- *People who live in supportive housing are not that different from anyone else.* They work hard, they want the same things for their kids, etc. Mental illness and addiction to alcohol and drugs know no geography – it is as commonplace in suburban communities as in cities. Many people are fortunate to have the support of their family and friends – but many others have lost everything – their home, their job, their family. Supportive housing is a chance at rebuilding, reconnecting and being a contributing part of the community again.
- *Supportive housing is a very effective, humane and less expensive way to deal the problem of homelessness.* It is far less expensive than temporary shelters, emergency rooms or mental hospitals. Supportive Housing residents are more likely to be able to keep a job, pay their rent, raise their families, and be members of a community. Supportive housing is a lasting solution.
- *Supportive housing is a good investment.* It brings back \$3.43 in new economic activity for each \$1 invested in its development.
- *Supportive housing does not have a negative effect on property values.* Property values went up more than 30% at eight local pilot sites recently studied. National studies have also shown that it doesn't raise the crime rate.

- **See additional info on See [How to Address Common Community Concerns](#))**

- **Use real stories of people who will be able to live better lives.**

- People respond more favorably if they think a project can offer positive and tangible results.. *“Ed Montaine, a Vietnam veteran, who will be one of the first residents of the \_\_\_\_\_, will be moving into the first real home he has had since coming back from the war. For the first time in many years he will be able to attend to his multiple health problems.”*

- **Develop messages about your project that will appeal to a wide range of people, i.e. –**

- “People with disabilities share the same dreams as everyone else: a secure home, an opportunity to work, and a healthy place to build community.”
- “Supportive housing is good for people and for the neighborhood. It helps people to reconnect into the community and live more independently, and it strengthens the surrounding neighborhood.”

- **Tailor your message to the audience –**
  - When speaking to neighbors, talk about the impact on property values (as opposed to the cost savings in the health care system)
  - When speaking to public officials, focus on the quality of the housing, security measures and the property management
  - When talking to the press, stress the importance of affordable housing to people who need entry-level jobs, to families with young children, to people with chronic health conditions, etc.
  
- Acknowledge that the affordable housing movement has learned many lessons over the past decade, including the importance of good design and quality management.
  
- **Listen** to the questions asked and respond in kind, working in your essential messages.
  
- Challenge inaccuracies, i.e. –
  - “This is *housing*, not a program or a halfway house.”
  - “Drug dealing and disruptive behavior will not be permitted.”
  
- If you don’t have the answer to a question, give yourself and your team permission to say: “I don’t know; I’ll have to get back to you,” and be sure to follow-through with the answer.
  
- **Choose your words wisely. Avoid words that have negative associations.**
  - **Research shows that people respond well to the broad term “*affordable housing*” as well as “*neighborhood*” and “*community*”**
  - ***Avoid using words like “project,” “shelter,” “transitional program” or “rehab program.”*** Emphasize that we are talking about people’s homes – and helping people who may be without homes – rather than “the homeless.”
  - ***Don’t use the phrase “substance abuse” or “substance abusers.” Substance addiction is better.***
  
- ***Don’t avoid talking about controversial issues. Some people will say advocates want to burden them with gangs, drugs, and crime—and depress property values in the process. The goal must include presenting a new image. Some of this is accomplished with language—especially talking about neighborhood or community; some of it with visuals and examples of attractive, respectable dwellings and people; and some of it with refuting inaccuracies head-on (see [How to Address Common Community Concerns](#)).***
  
- ***Avoid self righteous moralizing. Emphasize community self-interest. Instead of making people feel guilty and defensive by shaming them or making them feel as if they should be doing something (“you have so much, they have so little, you should give them more”), the better approach is one that offers a logical and effective solution to the problem at hand – one that benefits society as a whole. “Neighborhoods endure when housing is affordable.” “Supportive housing is more effective and less costly than the alternative,” etc.***

## **Who to Talk to About Supportive Housing:**

Anyone who lives within several blocks of the project	Nearby business owners and employees
Present and former local government officials	State and federal legislators and their staff
Influential business people	Neighborhood organizations
Friends of known supporters	Local professional colleagues (i.e. developers, architects)
Chamber of Commerce	League of Women Voters
Local school officials	Political and civic clubs
Faith congregations	Police, fire and public health officials
Media (esp. if friendly)	Housing Authority staff
Local service providers	Disability rights advocates
Potential tenants	People on waiting list for other affordable housing