

Building Community Support for Affordable Housing in Litchfield County:

A PLAYBOOK



January 2024



This is what affordable housing looks like in Litchfield County



The Center for Housing Opportunity works to produce and preserve housing for people of all incomes, ages, and backgrounds in multiple regions of Connecticut. Each Center operates as a place-based strategic partnership that offers housing practice, policy, advocacy, and resources to address regional housing affordability.



Activating New Champions for Affordable Housing in Litchfield County

Executive Summary

When we talk about affordable housing in our communities, we often hear pessimistic comments like, “this problem is too big for us to address locally,” or “there is not enough money, time, or expertise to solve this problem.”

This way of thinking discourages people from supporting the solutions we know work. Also, it’s not true. ***We know how to access the money and expertise needed to create housing opportunities in Litchfield County. We’re already doing it. What we need is to activate a broader group of people to support these solutions.***

For decades, across Litchfield County, small non-profits and volunteer committees have been creating, supporting, and caring for affordable homes and apartments. These groups are driven by local volunteers who support the types of housing development that fits their community’s needs and scale. Residents are taking advantage of these housing options. New families are putting down roots. Businesses are hiring and keeping workers who can now afford to live nearby. Retirees are able to stay in the towns where they have lived and worked for decades.

Advocates need to begin changing these perceptions by telling positive stories which demonstrate that affordable housing is an asset, that it advances equity, and that residents have the power to support and create it.

Many people, however, are not hearing these success stories. This is partially because we haven’t invested the resources needed to get these stories out to the public in a consistent and ongoing way. It’s also because positive stories can be overshadowed by negative stereotypes around affordable housing. When affordable housing is seen for what it is—a benefit that adds value to the community and creates a more equitable housing system—people become more receptive to it and new voices lean in to support it.



Stuart Farms (Kent Affordable Housing)

We can broaden and deepen the support for our work and activate new champions by talking about affordable housing in a different way. The following strategies, detailed in this playbook, can shape how you talk about this issue with your community in order to build more support for it:

- 1. Build optimism** - focus on success stories, solutions, and local control.
- 2. Navigate disruptive comments** and emphasize what we all have to gain when we create housing opportunity.
- 3. Share stories** of people AND the inequitable systems responsible for housing affordability challenges.
- 4. Develop an authentic, ongoing community engagement strategy.**

A Little Background: Litchfield County's Center for Housing Opportunity (LCCHO) conducted surveys during the summer of 2023 to better understand residents' attitudes towards housing and related issues like education and economic development. LCCHO thanks Dr. Tiffany "DrT" Manuel and her team at TheCaseMade for their research reflected in this report, based on DrT's Strategic CaseMaking™ Framework outlined in her book *Case Made!: 10 Powerful Leadership Principles that Win Hearts, Change Minds, and Grow Impact*. Based on this research and our survey findings, LCCHO is offering the strategies and recommendations detailed in this playbook to help housing advocates reframe affordable housing as a community asset that benefits everyone. Use the strategies in this playbook to activate new champions in your community to join us and stay with us on this journey to create more housing opportunity and a more equitable housing system.

1. Build optimism – focus on success stories, solutions, and local control

Build residents’ optimism. Focus on solutions and use success stories—not the negative consequences of the housing shortage—to build support for affordable housing.

Why

People naturally experience a fight or flight response when confronted with a challenge. The housing shortage in particular can be an intimidating challenge, so it’s not surprising that people often choose flight when they’re asked to do something about it. Plus, while data is an asset for housing advocates, it can also be intimidating and hard to visualize. Stories about real residents and housing development in your community appeal to someone’s heart instead of their head and humanize the housing crisis.

How

Identify people in your community who need affordable housing, or people who would like to live in and contribute to your community but cannot afford to. Identify successful affordable housing developments in the region, like the Town Center Rentals (Norfolk, CT), Bonney Brook senior housing (Cornwall, CT), Vincent Farm homeownership (Washington, CT), Sarum Village (Salisbury, CT), Stuart Farm (Kent, CT), Gagarin Place (Litchfield, CT), etc. Center these people and places in your advocacy. Show people that positive change is possible—in fact, it’s already happening. Tell a story that makes one want to choose fight over flight.

Recommendations in Action

TALKING POINTS TO HELP CHANGE THE CONVERSATION

At the Norfolk Town Center Rentals, five existing buildings were renovated into 12 affordable apartments. These buildings look virtually the same as they always have, and the same as countless other older homes in Litchfield County. “Everyone here that works—and not everyone works, some are retired—is working in the local economy and supporting the schools or the local grocery stores,” says Kate Briggs-Johnson, President of the Foundation for Norfolk Living, which renovated the buildings.

“There are a lot of big problems in our society that are largely out of the control of our local community—climate change, our healthcare system, etc. Housing is one problem that is almost entirely under local control. Our communities can do something about it if we want to! That’s a huge reason why I got involved with housing. We can literally build the housing we need and create positive change in a concrete and meaningful way.”

*– Justin Potter,
President,
Kent Affordable Housing*



Show residents how much control they have over what types of housing are available in their towns and how local housing non-profits made up by their neighbors are already creating and rehabilitating affordable homes for the people who live and work there. Tell stories of past challenges the community has faced and addressed together.

Why

Restrictive zoning policies and large-scale changes in the real estate market are making it harder and harder for people to buy homes or rent anywhere, including in Litchfield County. When you remind residents that these larger systems impact people’s ability to find homes, the conversation becomes about more than just personal responsibility (e.g. “I could afford to buy here, why do we need to make it easier for anyone else?”). In addition, local towns exercise almost total control over land use policies. This means towns-i.e. residents-can change these policies and help create the housing we need.

LCCHO has helped produce multiple short films about affordable housing in Litchfield County including An Investment in the Community and Housing Our Neighbors: Creating Affordable Housing in Rural Connecticut. Consider showing these films at a community forum in your town to illustrate what affordable housing looks like in our region and who helps create it.

How

Consistently point out the ways in which residents can participate in land use decision-making in their community. Understand your community’s zoning regulations, including what types of housing can and cannot be built in the community. Build consensus around the types of housing which need to be built, then demonstrate how your community’s regulations can either help or hinder efforts to create the types of housing your community needs. Point to successful policy or zoning changes in your community or in nearby towns in order to demonstrate that change is possible. There are also other ways our towns can help to create housing options and support local housing non-profits including having a town housing commission, starting a town housing fund, or making town-owned land available to local housing organizations. It is important for residents to support these efforts as well.



Peter Halle (left) Anne Kremer (right) Salisbury Housing Committee, Inc. Volunteers

2. Navigate disruptive comments and highlight what we all have to gain

We know that there are some deeply engrained beliefs and negative stereotypes that can stand in the way of broader support for our work.

Some of these narratives appeared consistently within our survey results such as: affordable housing is a handout; affordable housing doesn't fit in our community; questionable people live in affordable housing; the government should not be involved in housing. **TheCaseMade** calls these types of comments "disruptive comments." Below are TheCaseMade's suggested steps for dealing with these comments.

HERE'S HOW YOU DO IT:

Step One

Start a running list of the disruptive comments you encounter when you are out making a case for your work.

Step Two

Find something you can agree with. Agreeing with someone is the single best way to diffuse tension and opposition. Rather than repeating opposing viewpoints, though, relabel them in a positive way through a bridging statement.

Step Three

Confidently return to your message about the better future we'll all achieve by investing in your solution. **Even though you may not convince your opponents, remember that your real audience is often the bystanders who are quietly sizing up how you respond.**



Click on the images above or visit thecasemade.com to learn more

Here are some examples of disruptive comments many of us have heard and how you can navigate these conversations.

CONCERN	SAMPLE RESPONSE
Affordable housing is a handout.	<i>I know you worked hard to be able to afford your home and I did too. Residents of affordable housing also work hard to pay their rent or mortgage costs. The difference is, with more affordable housing, these residents will be able to spend less than a third of their income on housing, instead of spending half of their income on housing, as some residents do now. The residents who live in affordable housing in our communities include teachers, grocery store workers, emergency service volunteers, and seniors that have retired after decades of working. I think we can agree that buying a house today is very unlike buying a house 15 or 20 years ago. Housing costs have risen much more quickly than wages and our housing system does not have a range of housing options that are affordable to many people who work here. We can create these options for working and retired residents.</i>
Housing development threatens our rural nature and open space.	<i>I also love the rural nature of our town and am happy to live near so many preserves and outdoor recreation opportunities. That is why I advocate for sustainable development-building multiple energy-efficient homes on a single parcel in an appropriate location. This allows for more land to remain open and rural as compared to the same number of homes on multiple parcels.</i>
Property values will go down.	<i>The value of my home is important to me, too. What I have learned is that communities with a diverse range of housing options are ultimately more desirable to homebuyers of all ages and to small businesses. Ensuring that we have enough families to keep our schools open and enough workers to maintain our local shops and restaurants is what will continue to make this community more attractive to homebuyers.</i>
Crime will rise.	<i>I worry about the safety of my family, too. Luckily, we know from our State Trooper that neighborhoods with affordable housing are just as safe as other neighborhoods in our community.</i>
Government should not be involved in housing.	<i>I agree that it would be great if our local housing non-profits led by volunteers in our community could single-handedly build housing without government assistance, incentives, or mandates. The more we can support these non-profits, the more they can do. It is also worth noting that governments are already involved in housing, through local zoning regulations. These regulations can make it difficult to build a diversity of housing options in our community. The great thing about local control over zoning is that it gives us the power to change restrictive zoning policies so that we can build the housing options we need.</i>
Our taxes will go up.	<i>I agree that we need to think carefully about anything that may impact our tax burden. This is why I advocate for housing options that can help our local fire and ambulance volunteers stay in town so we don't see an increase in taxes to pay for fire and ambulance service. Also, we have seen how we can create these housing options utilizing longstanding state, federal, and regional programs without impacting local property taxes.</i>
Traffic and speeding will get worse.	<i>I agree that we need to be thoughtful about how any new development affects our ability to get around safely. Let's reduce the number of folks who drive hurriedly down main street at 5 p.m. on the way back to the house they can afford an hour away. Instead, let's make sure that the people who work here can live here.</i>

Navigate away from negative narratives like the ineffectiveness of government, or the need to move out of Litchfield County to find housing options.

Why

Negative narratives can suck up all the air in the room. The more time you spend trying to refute someone else's negative vision, the less time you spend building and sharing your own positive vision. Plus, you're allowing others to set the tone for the conversation: you're talking on their terms. Our research found that one of the most common negative narratives is one that suggests people who can't afford to stay here must inevitably move away. This robs people of their agency: they're essentially giving up instead of choosing to advocate for change.

How

Reframe conversations away from negative narratives and towards your own positive vision for housing in your community. Constantly pivot back toward the common ground. For example, focus on the things people love about Litchfield County. Talk about the tremendous control that local governments have over land use decisions and our terrific local housing non-profits, emphasizing that we have the power to make positive change at the local level. Use success stories to demonstrate that moving away is not inevitable. In other words, don't fall into someone's trap: set the tone for the conversation and ground it within the lived experience of your community members.

Highlight what we all have to gain

When we are at public meetings or talking with our neighbors and "disruptive comments" or "negative narratives" arise we need to react to try to navigate them. We also need to be proactive to seed new positive narratives in our communities about what we all have to gain from more affordable housing in a robust and ongoing way. The last part of this playbook describes how you can create a communications strategy to do this. New narratives you might want to talk about in your community are detailed below. Proactively seeding new narratives like this will take time, practice, and strong coordination. LCCHO will be happy to support you with this.

Describe how thoughtful investments in housing now will support diverse housing options for every stage of life across all communities in the region.

Why

Through our research, we found most residents recognize the housing stock in Litchfield County does not support residents through all stages of their life. In particular, it does not support retirees on fixed incomes or young people seeking starter homes. Everyone has parents and wants to see them age gracefully. Many people have children and want them to have the option to live nearby. Ground your advocacy in these common experiences.

How

Tell the stories of actual older adults or young people who would like to find affordable housing in your community but cannot. Identify the types of housing these demographics need, then identify the types of housing your community already has. (Your town's local affordable housing plan likely includes a housing needs assessment which has this information.) The difference between those two will show the types of housing your community needs, like starter homes for new families or one-bedroom apartments for older adults, and give you something tangible to advocate for.

Lift up what residents love about Litchfield County, like the small-town quality of life, and demonstrate that we can create affordable housing and preserve those characteristics.

Why

Calling people to action always starts by tapping into their own hopes and aspirations about the place they love. During our surveys, virtually all survey respondents spoke fondly about the small-town quality of life in Litchfield County. Ground your housing advocacy in this universal experience and it will become easier to find common ground with others and vice versa. Further, demonstrate that affordable housing and small-town quality of life are not opposed. Instead, they exist in harmony and complement one another.

How

Connect what people love about Litchfield County to the need for more housing opportunity. Do people appreciate the farms and local produce? Local farm workers need affordable housing. Do people want local jobs filled by people who live locally and can volunteer for the fire and ambulance services? Those workers and volunteers need housing options that they can afford to move here or to move back. Highlight some of the existing affordable housing developments in your town or in the region.

Demonstrate that housing opportunity is foundational to the quality of life that residents enjoy, and a solution to many common challenges in our communities. Show how we can work together to create a more equitable housing system where everyone has the opportunity to live in our communities.

Why

Housing is connected to many of the common challenges residents face in their community, like declining school enrollment, declining volunteers for fire and ambulance services, difficulty accessing and affording healthcare, young people leaving and not being able to return, and more. When we help people understand how housing can deliver on their aspirations and solve their challenges, the conversation changes. This can also help you motivate other sectors (business, healthcare, education, etc.) to support local housing efforts.

How

Talk to those who provide goods and public services in your community and learn how their challenges relate to housing. Talk to those who need housing in your community and learn how it impacts their ability to access goods and services. Tell their stories as part of your advocacy. At the same time, build a strong sense of agreement with others about the issues your community faces, like your inability to attract new families, or maintain a stable workforce. Then, present affordable housing as a way to address those issues. For examples of these stories, see [Our Home, Our Future](#) written by Mary Close Oppenheimer.



"In my mind, affordable housing is workforce housing. I cannot staff our buildings and provide the care people need without folks that want to live in this area. It's as simple as that."

– Kevin O'Connell, CEO, Geer Village

Highlight how affordable housing options can create a more equitable housing system and address economic and racial diversity.

Why

Let's put the facts out there. Litchfield County is 88% white, much less racially diverse than the state as a whole (66% white). We know there has been a history of racial discrimination in housing and employment opportunities for people of color and that more than half of Black and Latino households in Connecticut are housing cost burdened, compared with less than a third of white households. In many of our towns there is a huge income gap between the people who work at our local grocery stores and the people who shop there.

Many Litchfield County residents appreciate and understand the value of economic and racial diversity within their community, and they are concerned the rising cost of housing will reduce diversity. They worry that "essential workers" like those at the grocery store are being priced out of their communities and forced to make unsustainable commutes to work.

How

See the tips below from TheCaseMade on how to have a conversation about race and equity in your community. Point out that our housing SYSTEM is inequitable and lacks the range of housing options we all need.

Name the tension caused by differing perspectives:

How we label what we're seeing can help our case or hurt it. To engage all kinds of new champions in our work, we need to be mindful of our audiences—especially as we center race and equity. Naming how people label inequities differently can get us to a more productive conversation right away. For example, say something like this:

Families of color haven't had the same access to resources or opportunities to own homes, rent apartments, or find shelter as others in our community. Some of us will call that reality "unfair." Others will call it "discriminatory." And still others will unflinchingly say it's "racist." We may not all agree on what to name it, but whatever you call it, let's agree not to take it into our shared future! We envision for ourselves a future where everybody thrives, and that requires that we redress and remove the things that are dividing us.

Prepare for each audience:

Imagine you're teaching calculus to students who have different backgrounds in math. For the whole class to succeed, you can't jump straight into derivatives. In some spaces, starting the conversation with equity can backfire on you. In others, you'll lose the room if you *don't* lead with a strong statement about our legacy of racism. As CaseMakers, we must consider each audience and tailor our approaches accordingly. Don't back down. But be strategic about getting people on the road to justice.

Create space for a learning journey:

Race-based discrimination in America is built on a history that many people never learned and some actively deny. Those who genuinely want to learn it may need more time to understand how opportunity was unfairly withheld from families in their community who only wanted to own homes, build careers, accumulate wealth, and create the kind of future for their children that we all want.

Source: "Building the Public and Political Will for Ending Homelessness and Creating Communities Rich with Abundant Housing" - TheCaseMade

3. Make people *and* systems the main characters in your stories

We often tell stories about the individuals that need affordable housing or we invite them to tell their own stories. However, research shows that stories which focus on individual circumstances can often encourage people to try and fix those specific circumstances, instead of encouraging people to try look at the bigger picture and change our housing system as a whole.

Below are **TheCaseMade's** suggestions for how to use storytelling to activate people to support our work to change the housing system and create more housing opportunity.

HERE'S HOW YOU DO IT:

Center the experiences of people who are directly impacted in our communities.

Make space for people to narrate their own stories and encourage them to do so authentically. Encourage them to include the ways in which the systems around them supported or undermined their ability to thrive.

Make people AND systems the main characters in your stories.

Tell fascinating stories about the ways our education, healthcare, housing, and workforce systems make a difference in people's lives and the ways that we need those systems to be reimaged to deliver a better tomorrow for all of us.

Direct attention to the dignity, strength, and resilience of the people in your stories.

Remind people that we ALL benefit when everyone in our community has what they need to thrive. Don't describe what's wrong with the people and where they live—that only invites othering and exclusion. Lead with language that invites people to a conversation about our strengths.

Tell visionary, future-oriented stories about the way our systems could be operating to help us meet challenges.

We all know that most of the systems that are meant to keep us strong in our communities are in deep crisis. It doesn't help to keep reminding people of that. Help people see that there are already real-world solutions and all we need to do is mobilize our communities to lift them up.



Click on the images above or visit thecasemade.com to learn more

Here are some examples of stories that focus on people’s dignity and strength, while highlighting the systems that support them:

DON'T DO THIS	DO THIS
<p>Andrea is a single mom with three kids who works in the local school system. The house she was renting was sold and there are no homes available to rent that she can afford. Help families like Andrea’s stay in our community by supporting our project.</p>	<p>Like many who work in our school system, Andrea works full time but cannot find a home that she can afford. The home she was living in was sold during the pandemic housing market boom. Our town, which already had very few rental housing options, lost many of them in that boom. Like any parent, Andrea worries about what will happen if she has to move her kids away from the school system they’ve grown up in. Join us to create a more equitable housing system where people who work in our community can afford a stable home for their children here.</p>
<p>“My name is Dan Smith and I retired from years of running a plumbing business. I survived a long fight with cancer but the healthcare costs ate into my retirement savings to the point where I have to decide each month whether to pay my mortgage or fill my prescriptions. I need housing that I can afford so I can stay in this town.”</p>	<p>“My name is Dan Smith and I used to love going to emergency plumbing calls in the night, people were always so appreciative. I am retired now and like many seniors I have dealt with some difficult and expensive health challenges. That is why I am here at this Planning & Zoning Commission meeting to support this project so that seniors and families in town have housing options they can afford to get them through life’s rough patches without having to leave their community.”</p>



For more example stories, see Salisbury, CT resident Mary Close Oppenheimer’s booklet of articles called “Our Home, Our Future”.

Recommendations in Action

TALKING POINTS TO HELP CHANGE THE CONVERSATION

The people who have lived in your community for decades are some of the people who need, and are beginning to benefit from, affordable housing. For example, Sharon Hamilton moved from Danbury to Salisbury in 2001 after raising two children and working in a number of different careers. Her long term rental apartment was in a building that was sold when property values skyrocketed during the pandemic. Sharon scrambled to find an affordable place to rent, and finally found out that a friend had an accessory apartment that had just become available. “It has been a godsend,” she says. You may know Sharon from her work at LaBonne’s Market in Salisbury over the past few years.

The owner of the Black Rabbit Bar and Grill in Lakeville, Kendra Chapman, had less than three months to find a new home after the house she rented was put on the market during COVID-19. Kendra and her fiancé, Bryan, searched for an affordable rental or a house in their price range and found none in their area. Then they learned about the non-profit Salisbury Housing Trust, which builds and renovates homes using donations from local families. The Trust retains ownership of the land, so the buyer only pays for the dwelling, reducing the cost 30-50%. Through the Trust, Kendra and Bryan bought an affordable home near Salisbury Central School. “It felt like a miracle had happened,” Kendra said. With greater investment in organizations like the Trust and their counterparts in other towns, we can make housing in our area more affordable.



4. Develop an authentic, ongoing, targeted community engagement strategy

In order to build optimism, share stories, and proactively seed new positive narratives as described above, we will need a community engagement strategy in each of our communities.

This could include activities like:

- ▶ Developing a monthly, bi-monthly, or quarterly e-newsletter or email update to residents in your town that covers the three themes described above
- ▶ Cultivating a list of people willing to share their stories at public meetings such as Planning & Zoning meetings, Board of Selectmen meetings and town meetings
- ▶ Letters to the editor
- ▶ Social media posts
- ▶ “Tabling” at town events like fall festivals or farmers markets
- ▶ Hosting community conversations or special presentations

Who specifically do we want to activate?

As you think about an engagement strategy for your community, make a list of who specifically you would like to engage and consider the strategies that will reach them and engage them in a consistent way. We know trust and relationship building takes time. Here are some ideas from **TheCaseMade** on how to identify different stakeholders that you might want to activate.

Identify stakeholders that you might want to activate

Make a list! Who do you need at the table?

How do we reach beyond our usual champions and activate different stakeholders across our communities? Understanding the universe of people we need on our side is where we must start our will-building ground game.

Public brings leverage—

People with lived expertise, residents, voters, seniors, environmentalists, realtors, builders, etc.

Institutions bring resources and power—

Healthcare institutions, large employers, school districts, community foundations, faith-based communities, food pantries, student groups, land trusts, etc.

Champions bring energy and focus—

Your board, key elected officials, key faith leaders, key business leaders and healthcare executives, school superintendent, key community influencers, etc.

Don't be overwhelmed!

LCCHO would be happy to help you develop and implement a community engagement strategy for your community. We also have community engagement grant funding available through Foundation for Community Health and Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation to help! Also, see our "Toolkit" for examples of these strategies that you can use to get started. We look forward to supporting you on this journey and to activating more champions for affordable housing in all our communities.



Litchfield County’s Center for Housing Opportunity (LCCHO) facilitates a coordinated, regional response to address housing affordability in Litchfield County, aligning and delivering critical resources, data, and technical assistance to municipalities and non-profit housing organizations including: community engagement, education, and advocacy; capacity building support; housing plan implementation assistance; and collective impact approach.

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Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation

Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation strengthens communities through philanthropy and leadership. Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation responds to regional priority issues while addressing their root causes, expanding the role of philanthropy as a force for change.



Foundation for Community Health (FCH)

Serving the greater Harlem Valley of New York and the northern Litchfield Hills of Connecticut, FCH works to create the conditions required for health, well-being, and equity. To accomplish their mission, FCH makes grants, conducts research, provides technical assistance, and supports collaboration and advocacy.



The Housing Collective

The Housing Collective is a CT-based nonprofit agency that applies a Collective Impact framework to deliver solutions to the most pressing housing problems. Focused on ending homelessness and creating equitable housing opportunities for all, the Housing Collective provides the leadership and support that enables productive, regional collaboration across organizations and sectors and drives systems change.



Northwest CT Community Foundation

Northwest CT Community Foundation seeks to enrich the quality of life for residents of Northwest Connecticut by inspiring local philanthropy, convening stakeholders in community welfare, strengthening the regional nonprofits network and fostering collaborative funding partnerships.



Partnership for Strong Communities (PSC)

PSC is a statewide non-profit policy and advocacy organization dedicated to ending homelessness, expanding affordable housing, and building strong communities in Connecticut. PSC creates and promotes proven solutions for homelessness, supportive and affordable housing, and community development and connects key state and federal policymakers, local officials, corporate leaders and non-for-profit organizations.



Regional Plan Association (RPA)

RPA is an independent non-profit civic organization that develops and promotes ideas to improve the economic health, environmental resiliency, and quality of life of the New York metropolitan area. RPA conducts research on the environment, land use, and good governance, and advises cities, communities, and public agencies.

To learn more, visit cthousingopportunity.org or write to jocelyn@thehousingcollective.org

