

Toolkit

Where We Thrive:

Communicating about Resident-Centered Neighborhood Revitalization

**A Communications Toolkit
produced in partnership with
Purpose Built Communities**

Jessica Moyer, PhD, Senior Principal Strategist, FrameWorks Institute
Criscillia Benford, PhD, Senior Fellow, FrameWorks Institute
Nico Connolly, Principal Strategist, FrameWorks Institute
Moira O’Neil, PhD, Senior VP for Research Interpretation, FrameWorks Institute

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Getting Started

If you want to build support for place-based initiatives and communicate effectively about neighborhood revitalization—and in the process change the public narrative about the root causes of concentrated poverty in the United States—this toolkit is for you.

Neighborhood revitalization is community building work that cultivates fellowship, mobilizes resources, and addresses social challenges like structural racism and poverty. It is essential to ensuring families of all backgrounds and zip codes can thrive. Too often, however, this work is invisible, devalued, or just misunderstood. The *Where We Thrive* framing strategy was developed for people who carry out and want to amplify this invaluable work. It offers guidance for sharing successes, communicating remaining challenges, and outlining the work that lies ahead. Ultimately, it's a strategy for productively shifting the way Americans think about poverty, race, our universal need for social connection, and most of all, the importance of place.

The framing strategy presented in this toolkit, and the research methods that inform it, are detailed in the [*Where We Thrive Strategic Framing Brief*](#) and the [*Where We Thrive: Methods and Data*](#) supplement, respectively. This complementary toolkit includes:

- A summary of the narrative shift that is needed to prompt more productive public thinking and attitudes (see 'Toward a New Narrative' below),
- A quick overview of the framing strategy to help communicators get started right away (see '5 Framing Recommendations'), and
- 4 annotated examples of the framing strategy in action (see 'Sample Communications').

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Toward a New Narrative

The ways we talk as a society are influenced by the ways we think, and vice versa.

A narrative is a big idea that circulates through public discourse; a discernible pattern in the stories we tell each other and ourselves. Narratives play important roles in the establishment of social norms, the creation of public policies, and the shaping of civic life. For example, existing dominant narratives reflect and reinforce the status quo, while alternative counter-narratives challenge it. To understand how a particular narrative works, it's important to identify the underlying cultural assumptions and associations—the mindsets—it activates, as well as the mindsets it neglects. After all, people are capable of thinking about a single topic like neighborhood revitalization in lots of different and even conflicting ways. (Full descriptions of relevant cultural mindsets, which were identified through rigorous research involving a nationally representative sample of participants, can be found in our report entitled [*Communicating about Intergenerational Urban Poverty and Race in America: Challenges, Opportunities, and Emerging Recommendations*](#).) Mindsets that are less frequently activated point to the possibilities for narrative change.

The graphic on the following page outlines two competing narratives on neighborhood revitalization and the corresponding mindsets within American culture they reflect and shape—all of which were identified through empirical research. The first narrative is based on the toxic assumption that *Poverty is a Choice*. This narrative is currently dominant within public discourse and overwhelmingly reflected in public thinking as well. It represents the problematic messages, and corresponding mindsets, that advocates for place-based initiatives must push back against. ***Note to readers: The Poverty is a Choice narrative deploys harmful stereotypes about Black people and other people of color. As such, it may be distressing to confront.*** The second narrative outlined below is built on the idea that *Prosperity Starts with Place*, which reflects the wisdom of countless partners in neighborhood revitalization, most of all residents. This counter-narrative must be lifted up, and its corresponding mindsets must be activated, in order to productively shift the way we in the United States talk and think about neighborhood revitalization.

In order to shift the narrative on neighborhood revitalization...



The Toxic Narrative We're Up Against: *Poverty Is a Choice*

In the United States, poverty can be overcome with enough determination and hard work. Black and Brown communities have failed to make the most of available opportunities. As a result, those communities experience disproportionately higher rates of illness, crime, and poverty. Social services and public assistance programs contribute to the problem by offering special treatment and handouts—all of which fuel complacency and discourage the required behavior change. We should eliminate the various forms of public support that enable laziness and dependency. Instead, we should let people learn for themselves that success has to be earned and prosperity takes grit.



A More Productive Counter-Narrative: *Prosperity Starts With Place*

We have a shared responsibility to ensure that all communities are treated fairly, no matter where they're located. Public policies have long prioritized the needs of White neighborhoods, devoting much less attention and far fewer resources to neighborhoods of color. As a result, some neighborhoods have what they need to thrive—like quality schools, homes, parks, transportation, and medical care—while others lack basic services and critical infrastructure. To remedy this, place-based initiatives harness lessons from history and draw on the knowledge of residents themselves to revitalize neighborhoods and support flourishing communities everywhere.

We need to understand the different mindsets at play.



An undercurrent of American culture and society is the ideal of the “self-made” individual. This is reflected in the belief that each person has both the capacity and the duty to shape their own life experiences and outcomes. This ideal obscures social, environmental, and historical context, thereby effectively dismissing racial discrimination and its compounding effects.



Non-White cultures are easily seen as dysfunctional or inferior, and Black Americans in particular are routinely assumed to be inherently less capable of leading successful, productive lives.



Many people subscribe to the thinking that, because of anti-discrimination laws, welfare, affirmative action and other government policies, “the system is rigged” in favor of “undeserving” minority groups.



In line with the individualist mindset described above, poverty is frequently seen as an indicator of ineptitude or insufficient effort. Accordingly, the thinking goes, it should be met with scorn rather than rewarded with access to services or other supports.



The principle of fairness has broad appeal and can be helpfully leveraged to activate a civic mindset about what all neighborhoods in all parts of the country need to thrive — and which of them may not have been given a fair shake.



A widely held perception in the United States is that government policies, practices, and procedures disproportionately serve the interests of the well-connected and well-to-do. According to the mindset, “the system is rigged” in favor of the rich and powerful.



While it's not always fleshed out or top-of-mind, most people have a basic sense that our surroundings—most of all the places we live—structure the opportunities available to us, and therefore impact our life experiences and outcomes. When this mindset is activated, people can reason that underinvestment and disinvestment in certain neighborhoods actively harm the residents who live in them.



Most people recognize (at least when prompted to do so) that carefully designed, well-resourced, and thoughtfully maintained neighborhoods are vital to the health and flourishing of their residents.


5 Framing Recommendations

At the heart of the *Where We Thrive* framing strategy are the following five practical communications recommendations:

- 1. Lead with the idea that we have a shared responsibility to ensure fairness across all neighborhoods.**
 - Appeals to a principle that is deeply valued and widely resonant
 - Productively sets up conversations about equity
- 2. Feature prosperity as the goal rather than poverty as the predicament to avoid racialized stereotypes.**
 - Reduces fatalism through a forward-looking and asset-based focus
 - Avoids reinforcing the conflation of Blackness with poverty
- 3. Illustrate the impact of disinvestment on places to link harmful policies—past and present—to negative modern-day outcomes.**
 - Connects past to present, and causes to symptoms
 - Moves structural racism from abstract and elusive to real and concrete
- 4. Demonstrate how residents and community organizations work together by highlighting the knowledge and resources they each bring.**
 - Residents = active participants, not passive beneficiaries
 - Organizations = supportive collaborators, not directive benefactors
- 5. Share stories of successful neighborhood revitalization to inspire collective action and galvanize support for place-based programs.**
 - Celebrates place, people, and history
 - Shows what it looks like when we reinvest in communities

Sample Communication #1: Newspaper Article

Sharing success stories about place-based initiatives that have produced powerful and inspiring results is a compelling way to demonstrate the feasibility and potential benefits of collaboration. For an example to serve this function optimally, however, it should contain certain component parts. The most critical features to highlight in any showcased example of collaboration are modeled and explained in the sample communication below.



Article

Photo Credit: Lift Orlando

“What About the Park?”

This question, posed by a resident of Orlando’s Lake Lorna Doone neighborhood, sparked a multi-year, multi-million dollar renovation.

Tangia Smikle cherished her childhood memories of Lake Lorna Doone Park in Orlando, Florida. It was a place for families and friends to celebrate special occasions and gather for everyday fun and relaxation. When Smikle, a second-generation resident of the Lake Lorna Doone neighborhood, returned to raise her daughter, she was saddened to see how the rollback of public funds over the years had transformed the historic park for the worse.

So, in one of the many community meetings convened by Lift Orlando and residents of the five West Lakes neighborhoods to address the history of disinvestment in the area, Smikle raised the issue. Such meetings have been key to the success of an exciting collaboration between the residents of these neighborhoods and local community and business leaders. Propelled by the idea that everyone should be able to live healthy, successful lives no matter what ZIP Code they’re in, this public-private coalition between neighborhood residents,

Set the scene in a vibrant neighborhood with a dynamic and closely connected community.

Make partnerships between residents and community organizations the real hero of the story.

Connect the work to the idea that we have a shared responsibility to ensure fairness across all neighborhoods. Appeals to fairness inspire a “common good” mentality, and help lay the groundwork for more involved discussions about the various circumstances that different communities face, and the need for tailored responses to social inequities.

Newspaper Article continued

Lift Orlando, Florida Citrus Sports, the City of Orlando, and donors works to preserve the area's cultural heritage and build pathways to stability, power, and generational wealth.

Feature prosperity as the goal rather than poverty as the predicament.

The current challenges residents and community partners face are deeply rooted, and so is using collaboration to solve problems. In the late 19th century, Orlando began developing customs and legal codes to restrict where Black people could live, work, shop, learn, worship, and play—as well as how they could vote and travel. Despite systematic and even violent efforts to maintain these dehumanizing systems, Black Orlandoans worked together to create vibrant communities built upon foundations maintained by social organizations, churches, owner-occupied homes, and thriving commercial centers. Black-owned businesses provided lodging, entertainment, food, and other services. There were law offices, schools, nurseries, dry cleaners, tailors, beauty parlors, barbershops, doctor's offices, and auto mechanics. In Orlando, the businesses catering to Black residents filled three pages of the Negro Chamber of Commerce's business directory.

Tell stories that celebrate race and place itself to counteract harmful stereotypes about Black people and Black communities, and other communities of color.

Transformations to the physical landscape of these communities—brought about by the Reorganization Act of 1939 and the Highway Act of 1956—eroded the foundation of community health that previous generations had worked so hard to create. The infrastructure projects greenlit by these acts, combined with discriminatory urban renewal projects, led to the destruction of thousands of homes and commercial and community buildings, reinforcing both physical and experiential divisions between Black and White communities in Orlando in ways that supported racialized economic and social inequality. In neighborhoods designated as Black, rising population density, shrinking opportunities for employment, and reduced access to essential services and community meeting spaces led to rising unemployment, increased prices in goods and services, and declines in community health.

Terms like “structural racism,” “systemic racism,” and “institutional racism” can feel abstract to audiences who are unfamiliar with these terms, and are often polarizing too. Whenever possible, use specific examples and plain-language explanation to illustrate the processes these terms refer to.

The number of resources funneled into a neighborhood affects how safe, comfortable, and nurturing it is for its residents. Today, investments made because of community planning and action have allowed the same coalition that spearheaded the renovation of Lake Lorna Doone Park to lay a new foundation for a thriving, inter-connected community of neighborhoods where multiple economic engines work for the good of current and future residents. With each

Make sure your story indicates that unemployment, poverty, and declines in community health are not the root problem. Rather, they are symptoms of under- and dis-investment.

Reiterate and reinforce the *Fairness* value whenever possible.

Feature prosperity as the goal rather than poverty as the predicament.

Newspaper Article continued

of the West Lakes projects, the coalition maintains a commitment to provide access and opportunity for minority-owned contractors to participate in the bidding process and win vital jobs.

Early coalition projects included award-winning mixed-income and affordable apartment homes, a community wellness center providing direct access to holistic health and financial services and community meeting spaces, a state-of-the-art early learning center, and a Boys & Girls Club providing culturally relevant arts and technology programs, as well as spaces for reading, socializing, and staying active. Opportunity-generating projects like these become possible when local people come together to realize a vision of community health and sustainability—not just increased economic activity.



Residents and Community Leaders, including Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer and District 5 Commissioner Regina I. Hill, celebrate the reopening of the park.

Renovations to Lake Lorna Doone Park began in 2019 and were completed in the summer of 2021. They included removing the part of Rio Grande Avenue that once split the park in half and building the city's first splash pad and fully accessible playground. The newly renovated park also features the Winnie Palmer Nature Walk around the lake, an interactive art garden, a football field, the Arnold Palmer Putting Experience, fitness stations, two basketball courts with covered seating, lake overlooks, a community garden, and a covered performance pavilion. Today's Lake Lorna Doone Park is "a creation of the neighborhood's vision," said District 5 Commissioner Regina Hill. "Their memories and the history of this park fueled the plans to create a place where the families, friends, and the community gather."

All families should have access to green parks—not just families living in the "right" ZIP Codes. Thanks to the persistence of the residents of West Lakes neighborhoods and community partners, Lake Lorna Doone Park is once again a beautiful place for West Lakes families and all who call Orlando home to come together to exercise, play, and unwind.

Share stories of successful revitalization projects to inspire collective action and productively address fears, mostly held by Democrats, that neighborhood revitalization efforts could lead to displacement and gentrification.

Depict residents as knowledgeable and active participants in neighborhood revitalization, rather than as passive beneficiaries.

Return to the value of ensuring *Fairness* across places at the end of your story to offer a compelling takeaway.

Sample Communication #2: Elevator Speech

“What do you do?”

The routine interaction prompted by this question is a great framing opportunity, so make the most of it. Instead of sharing your job title and responsibilities, appeal to the value of fairness, which has been shown to help people understand why neighborhood revitalization matters and how we can all support it.



My work is about helping to ensure that no matter where people reside, they have what they need to live healthy, fulfilling lives.

Amplify GR partners with neighbors in and around Boston Square, Madison Square, and Cottage Grove neighborhoods, as well as local manufacturing businesses, hardware stores, design firms, community development organizations, and philanthropies, to make it so that every family has access to the resources they need to thrive. Together, we create jobs, improve housing, support our schools, and promote wellness for everyone.

Community members dedicate their time, knowledge of the region's history and culture, and shared love of this area to every project we take on. We're committed to building on current strengths and driving economic revitalization in neighborhoods that were routinely denied critical infrastructure investments in the past.

We believe strong and stable neighborhoods widen the pathways to prosperity for all neighbors. Our mission is ultimately about making sure every neighborhood delivers on that promise.

Connect your work to the value of fairness across places right out of the gate to let people know why this work is important. Refer back to it frequently to make sure the value is understood.

Share info about the unique assets of a neighborhood to generate excitement about the targeted work you are doing in the community.

Keep the message positive by focusing on how to ensure residents can prosper and thrive, rather than on addressing poverty and its associated harms.

Talk about what people bring to the table in neighborhood revitalization efforts. If you have time and space, be specific about what each party (residents, businesses, nonprofits) contributes to the partnership.

Keep the focus on place rather than people when referring to the negative impacts of harmful past policies. Also, if you have a few extra seconds in the elevator, offer a detail or two about how the neighborhood was negatively impacted by a particular decision that was made.

End on an aspirational note. Instead of speaking to the challenge of addressing poverty, which many people think of as a hopeless endeavor, reaffirm our responsibility to fairness and our goal of advancing shared prosperity.

Sample Communication #3: Social Media Post

Posts like the following can be adapted for multiple different social media platforms. For example, you can pair them with photos or split them into bite-size messages that make up a longer thread. Just remember to apply the framing recommendations to any visuals too.

Friend Name
Today at 19:33

We have a responsibility to ensure fairness across ALL neighborhoods. Great things are possible when communities come together to merge past lessons with future goals and make it so everyone can live their best life, no matter where they call home. In the Kendall-Whittier neighborhood in Tulsa, Oklahoma, a 1967 decision to build a highway divided the community in two. Nearly 50% of businesses were forced to close, employment opportunities were cut in half, & hundreds of #affordablehousing units were razed to the ground. But social ties and community pride can't be bulldozed! Residents have combined their local insights to guide reinvestment in the neighborhood over the past decade, with support from partners @gttulsa & @NatlMainStreet who bring resources and experience tackling systemic barriers. A recent win came in the form of Tulsa's 1st mixed-income neighborhood trust: the Kendall-Whittier Neighborhood Trust. It's helping more residents build their lives and plan their futures in the community. Community members are united in the cause: "I know many families who have had difficulty finding safe and affordable housing in Tulsa, so I was eager to get involved with the program and serve my community as a representative" - Gabriela Rodriguez, Kendall-Whittier resident. Moral of the story = when neighbors and locally-based organizations come together to tackle structural barriers, revitalize businesses, and expand access to housing, we improve health and wellbeing for everyone.



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- Introduce fairness as a guiding principle early on.
- Emphasize the importance of place — specifically, the places where people work, play, and live.
- Connect harmful past policy decisions to their tangible impacts on a neighborhood to explain how environments shape the wellbeing of people and communities. Data can help drive this point home!
- Point to the unique contributions of residents as well as local partners and organizations to demonstrate how community collaborations work and showcase the value that each group brings.
- Share concrete successes to illustrate that improvements are under way and further change is possible.
- Feature residents as leaders, visionaries, and drivers of place-based revitalization — not simply its beneficiaries.
- Maintain an aspirational vision throughout, even when explaining structural challenges and barriers yet to overcome. Promoting long-term health, prosperity, and a community's ability to thrive is a much more empowered and inspiring mission than simply alleviating poverty.

Sample Communication #4 : Grant Application

Prospective funders of place-based partnerships always want to know how proposed initiatives will respond to pressing challenges, and current funders love to hear about how the programs they support are making a positive difference in people's lives. Responding to questions from funders offers a great opportunity to build understanding and support for place-based work and to help a more productive narrative about neighborhood revitalization gain traction.

How is your work improving educational equity in the community/communities you serve? If successful, could the results be replicated in other fields or communities?

Children in every neighborhood should be able to attend a high-quality school. Seventy Five North is working with Omaha Public Schools and Purpose Built Communities to make sure Howard Kennedy Elementary is just that. Since its founding at the beginning of the 20th century, Howard Kennedy has faced significant challenges—from segregation policies and underfunding to inadequate housing options for students and their families in the surrounding area. For example, hundreds of barracks-style public housing units, which were designed for maximal capacity rather than to support community health or children's learning, have been in operation since the 1950s. It's no wonder that until recently Howard Kennedy ranked among the lowest performing schools in the state. Thanks to the vision of long-time community residents, however, and the place-based partnership launched in 2011, the school's prospects are looking up today.

Howard Kennedy has made substantial gains in academic growth over the past decade and has been upgraded from "Needs Improvement" to "Good" in the Nebraska State Education School Classification System. This win can be credited to the partnership between the school, Seventy Five North, OPS, and countless neighbors. Together, we've helped Howard Kennedy adopt a new and improved teaching program that includes project-based learning and a STEAM instructional model. As part of an integrated, holistic neighborhood redevelopment effort, we've also committed significant resources to an extended school day, a new curriculum, and increased staff and leadership development.

Our approach can be easily adapted for various communities and replicated in other neighborhoods. What underlies our growing success is a genuine partnership structure involving a community-based organization, a school district, a managing partner, and neighborhood residents. All of these groups are committed to youth programming for strong youth development—whether in a school, after-school, or informal education setting—so each one offers a unique skill set and perspective. Bringing them together around a shared vision, relevant fundraising goals, and the Purpose Built model of resident-centered neighborhood revitalization creates the necessary infrastructure for long-term stability and community prosperity.

Provide critical historical context by naming past policies that have led to negative present-day outcomes.

Use data to highlight and explain the impact of harmful policies on a particular place. Detailed descriptions can help too.

Remind audiences that the underlying problem that must be addressed is neighborhood underinvestment/disinvestment, and that outcomes like low school performance are merely symptoms.

Feature residents by emphasizing their knowledge, commitment, and active involvement in neighborhood revitalization efforts, beyond simply the ways they benefit.

Offer as many specifics as possible to paint a vivid picture of ongoing neighborhood revitalization efforts and especially recent successes.

Name the different partners working together on a place-based initiative, and describe their respective contributions. If possible, describe the nature of the partnership itself, including how the different parties communicate and collaborate.

Related Toolkits

Further details and more explanation about the recommendations modeled in this toolkit can be found in the *Where We Thrive Strategic Framing Brief*. Additionally, FrameWorks has created a host of other toolkits on closely related social issues that may be useful supplemental resources for advocates of neighborhood revitalization, including the following:

Piecing It Together: A Communications Playbook for Affordable Housing Advocates

<https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/publication/piecing-it-together-a-communications-playbook-for-affordable-housing-advocates/>

Changing the Narrative on Public Education: A Communications Toolkit

<https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/toolkit/changing-the-narrative-on-public-education/>

Reframing Family, School, and Community Engagement: A Communications Toolkit

<https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/toolkit/reframing-family-school-and-community-engagement/>

Making History Matter: A Toolkit for Communicators

<https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/publication/making-history-matter-toolkit-for-communicators/>

Framing the Foundation of Community Health: A Communications Toolkit for Public Health Professionals and Advocates

<https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/toolkit/framing-the-foundation-of-community-health/>



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