



# Reframing Affordable Housing

Turning communication backfires into a blueprint for framing  
research

Invited by  
Housing Virginia

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Mackenzie Price, PhD, *Associate*  
Research Interpretation and Application Unit

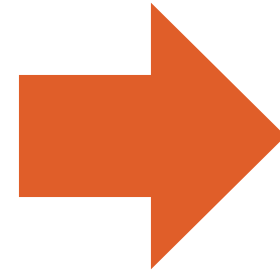
# What is a **Frame**?

Frames are sets of choices about how information is presented:

What to emphasize, how to explain it, and what to leave unsaid.

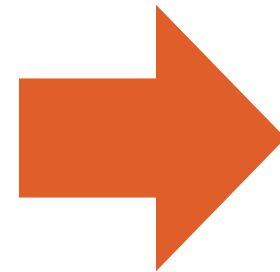
# Understanding Is Frame Dependent

**Given the importance of free speech,** would you favor allowing a hate group to hold a political rally?



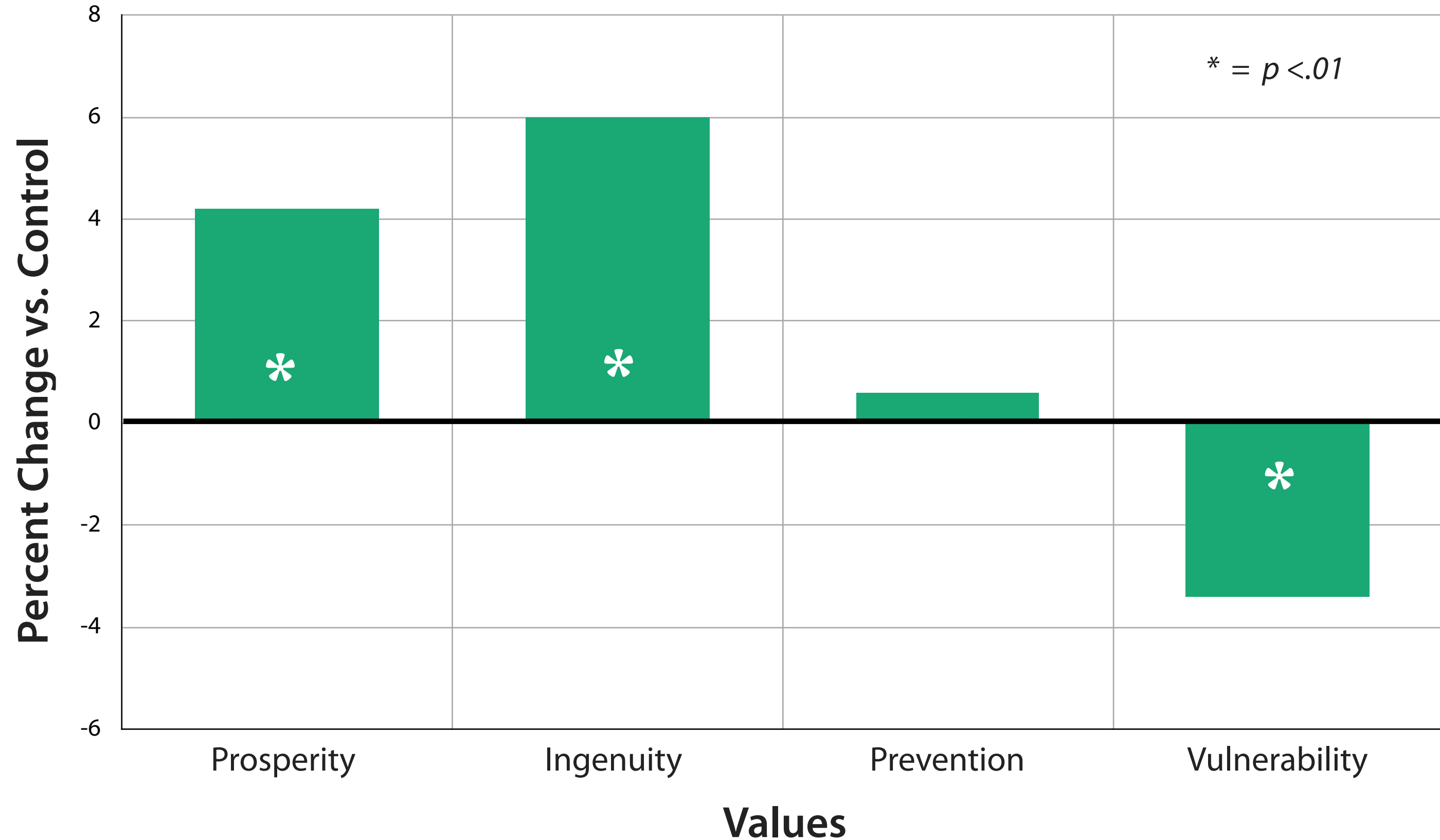
*85% in Favor*

**Given the risk of violence,** would you favor allowing a hate group to hold a political rally?

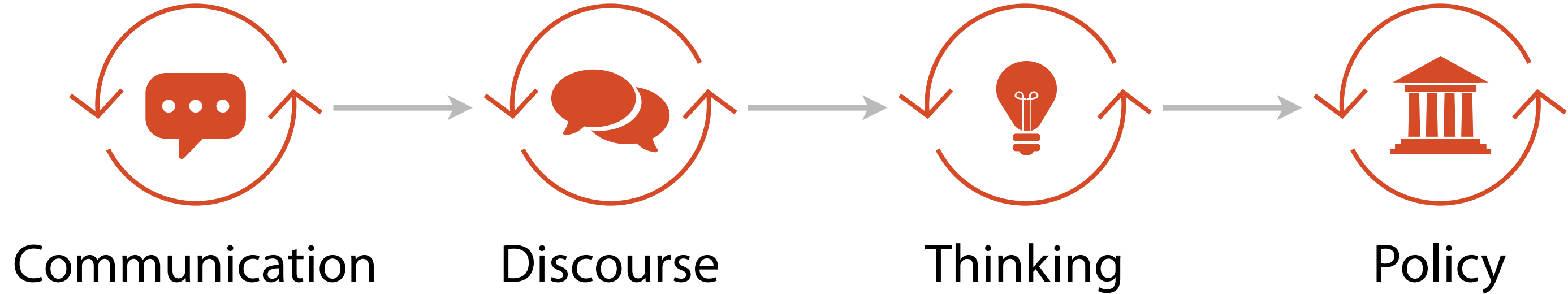


*40% in Favor*

# Understanding is Frame Dependent



# Frames Can Help Make Change



# You Say ... They Think

**CULTURE!**

It's not fair that are groups p  
country who simply cannot  
housing. It's important that  
policies and design progr  
quality housing affordable  
these people.

community have housing.  
rd and it may be difficult,  
I know has four walls and  
head. Why should another  
ity to pay their rent be my

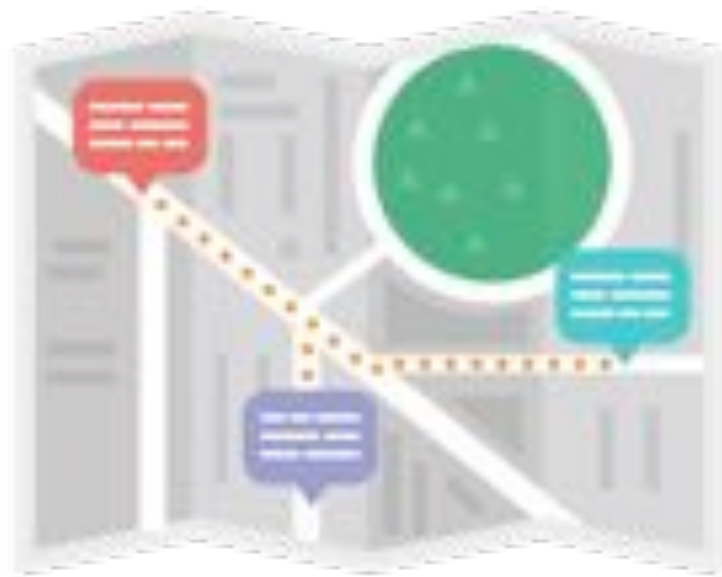


**Expert/Advocate**



**Public**

# What does it take to reframe an issue?



Understand What  
You're Up Against



Map the Gaps



Develop/Test  
Frames and Stories

**Backfires are one step of  
reframing work**



# Backfires reflect patterns in thinking

**Patterns can  
block issue  
engagement**

- 📌 *Mobility, Personal Responsibility, and Self-Makingness*
- 📌 *Separate Fates and Zero-Sum Thinking*
- 📌 *Thin Understanding of Cause and Effect*
- 📌 *Crisis and Fatalism*
- 📌 *Segregation is Natural*
- 📌 *Facts Don't Fit the (Pre-existing) Frame*

**“Housing” =  
Assisted Housing**

**Fatalism**

**Individualism**

- Mentalism
- Individual Responsibility
- The Good Old Days
- Evil Slumlord

**Government**

- Responsible for Regulating Rentals
- Inefficient and Corrupts

*What's in the swamp of...*

**Housing**

**Context**

- Protection from Outside World
- What Surrounds Us Shapes Us
- Open Children

**Consumerism**

- Rising Costs
- Just the Basics
- Segregation is Natural

**Housing as Threat**

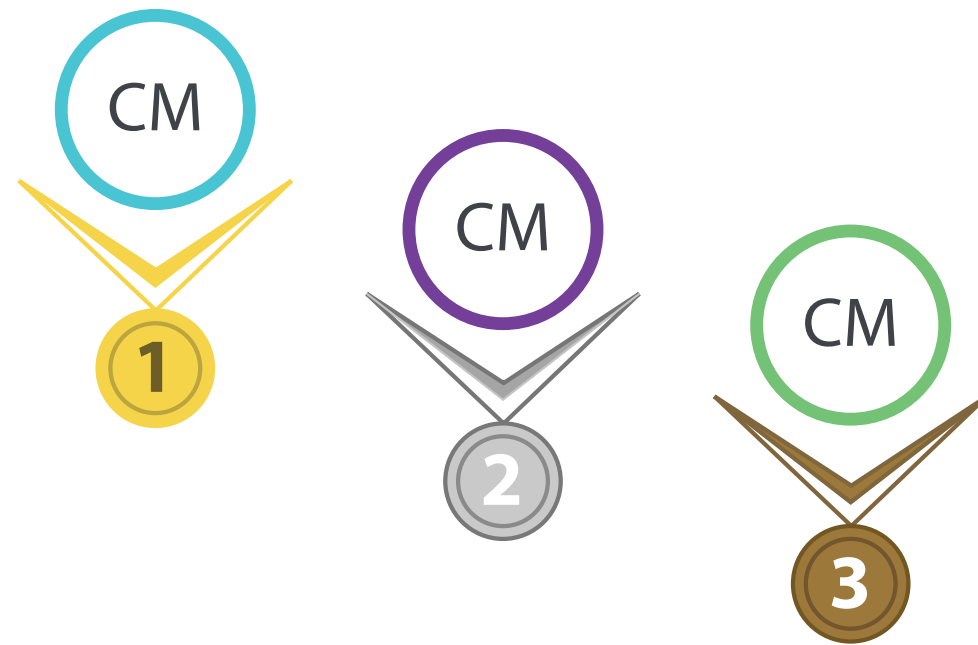
- Healthy Housing = Do No Harm
- Visible Contaminants
- Stress Affects Health

# Cultural Models:

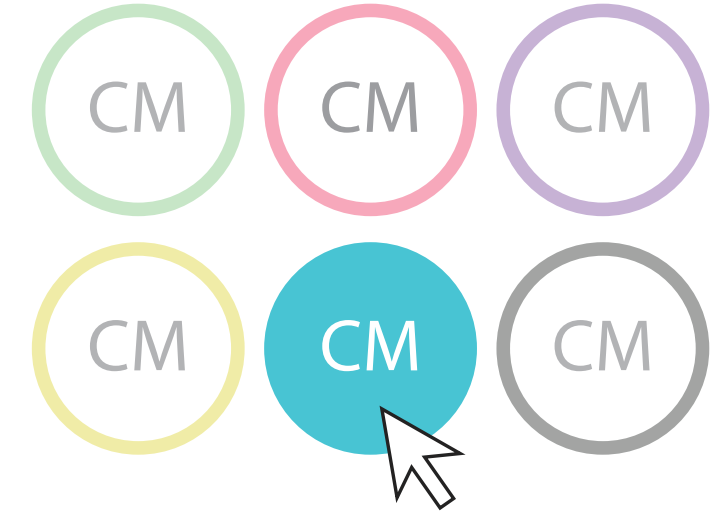
## The Basis of Strategic Communications



Multiple models available



Some are more productive than others



Choose the cues that activate productive models



# **Tools to Navigate the Swamp**

# Frame Elements Shape Understanding

**tone** establishes the issue as explanatory and reasonable and for “everyone,” not just those who already agree with the point of view being expressed.

**values** remind people of what’s at stake, helping them connect their existing ideals and principles to an issue.

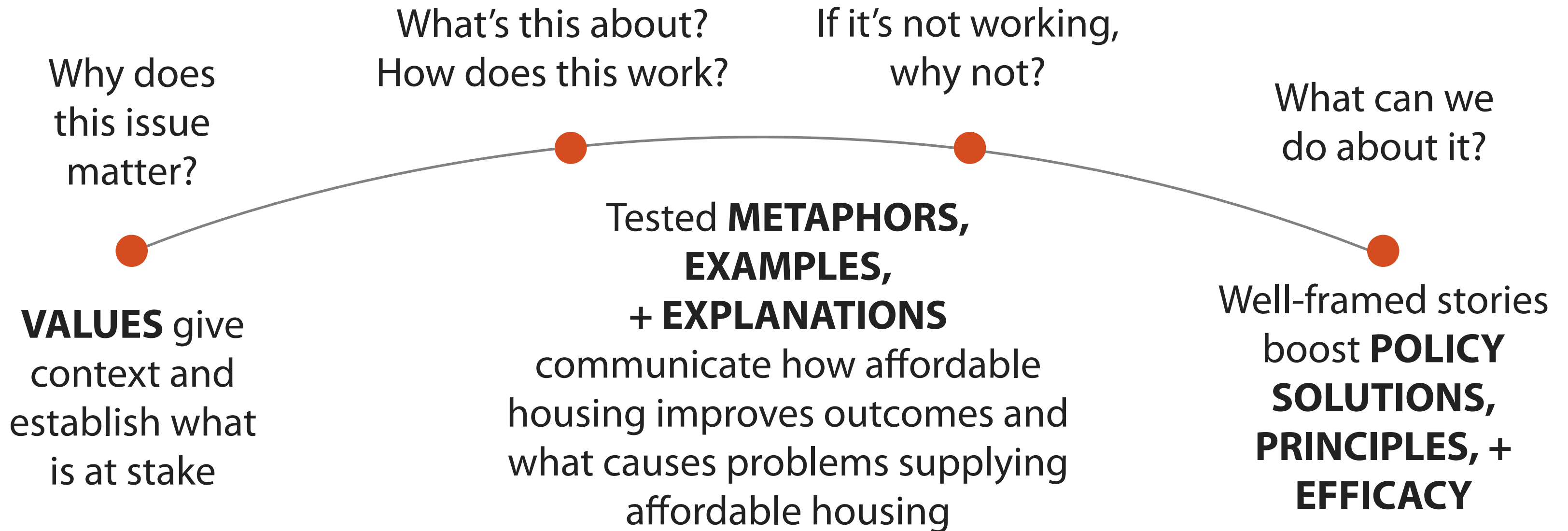
**EXPLANATORY METAPHORS** recruit people’s everyday knowledge to help them understand how social issues work and reason more effectively about public solutions.

**EXPLANATORY CHAINS** illustrate and illuminate a concept, focusing on aspects that deepen understanding, motivate engagement, and drive policy support.

**NARRATIVE** uses familiar cognitive paths to lead people to a new, but satisfying, understanding.

# A narrative for affordable housing

Answering the public's big questions



# Housing Affordability Explanation

**The current lack of affordable rental housing is the result of problems with the housing market.** In recent years, tight standards for mortgage loans and high home prices have made it impossible for many people to buy homes, causing more people to become renters. Large numbers of renters and a scarce supply of rental housing have driven up rents. As rents have increased, wages for low- and middle-income households have not, which forces more families to spend larger portions of their incomes on housing, leaving less money for other needs, like nutritious food, good healthcare, and quality childcare. To make sure people can get decent housing at reasonable costs, we need to take steps to fix these problems with the housing market.



# **Diffusing *Consumerism***



# Within a *Consumerism* frame



- “You get what you pay for” thinking is naturalized
- Disparities in housing quality are natural and acceptable
- The suggested solutions are often individual (e.g. financial planning education)
- **Framing Recommendation:** Talk about community/neighborhood level solutions. Avoid framing individuals as consumers and a focus on housing choices.

# Field Notes: Peer Discourse Sessions



- Conversations about affordable housing often slip into conversations about employment.
- Data and unframed facts cue fatalistic thinking.
- *Opportunity with Interdependence* values messaging can redirect away from consumerist and individualist thinking.
- **Framing Recommendation:** Provide examples of policies that increase affordability.

# What Else Does it Take to Reframe an Issue?



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Map the Terrain



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Develop a Strategy to  
Navigate to Higher Ground



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Build a Caravan,  
Equip the Travelers,  
and Start Moving

# Thank you!



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