



**MESSAGING PLATFORM  
FOR**



**COMMUNICATIONS  
ACTION NETWORK**

**Wainger Group, LLC  
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# CAN MESSAGING

## OVERVIEW

Launched in 2012, The Communications Action Network (CAN) is a regional communications campaign created to raise the visibility of the importance of housing affordability for all people throughout the Greater Washington DC region. More than 200 organizations and businesses have joined CAN in this effort, led by four founding members, BB&T, Housing Association of Nonprofit House and Economic Development (HAND), the Coalition for Nonprofit Housing and Economic Development (CNHED) and the Northern Virginia Affordable Housing Alliance.

In its first year, in addition to engaging 200 organizations, CAN developed a website, and sought to garner media and other attention through its Parade of Homes event to showcase positive housing affordability stories. In its second year, CAN seeks to engage the business community beyond those in the housing development industry in its efforts.

While CAN can be proud of bringing so many and varied organizations into its effort, its ultimate effectiveness in raising visibility and changing the conversation about housing affordability lies in its ability to deliver a powerful message beyond the fact that housing opportunities for people of all incomes is good. CAN must tie the issue of affordable housing to larger issues that the region is facing such as recruitment and retention of workers, economic competitiveness, education, health and wellness and transportation.

Moving the messaging about affordable housing away from the traditional moral and social frames to economic benefits and necessities is extremely challenging and will take time. Interviews with business leaders, even those who care about the issue, reveal that it is difficult to make the link between housing affordability and the success of their business, especially when other issues like transportation and education seem more pressing. For CAN to be successful in its quest, it must develop more aggressive, bolder messaging supported by relevant research and data. In addition, CAN must also focus its efforts, initially on workforce housing and not try to engage businesses on all the areas of the housing spectrum.

The objectives of this messaging work are to crystalize CAN's messaging to:

- Support the efforts to engage the business community in advance of the forthcoming Business Summit April 25.
- Align all of CANs supporters and participants around a unified message so that they can be better ambassadors for the issue but that can be tailored for their own organizations, and
- Put a firm and powerful stake in the ground to move the campaign forward.

## METHODOLOGY

Wainger Group was retained to help guide CAN to develop clear and compelling messaging that articulates its expanded mission both internally to staff and Board, and externally to the business community, real estate community, and government agencies and elected officials, and partners. As part of the process to develop a messaging platform, Wainger Group:

- Interviewed CAN staff, Board, donors and influencers in the area of housing affordability in the District of Columbia
- Reviewed a media/communications audit conducted earlier this year
- Researched the organization, its history and the environment in which it operates
- Reviewed collateral materials, and
- Conducted a message development workshop with partners and staff members.

## MESSAGING CHASM

The phrase “affordable housing” has a long history of framing that hasn’t always been positive. As part of effective communications, we must recognize that this framing and the long-held perceptions associated with it are deeply embedded. CAN must work diligently to shift this framing to communicate effectively and articulate its most important messages. The chart below highlights the gulf that must be crossed for CAN to break through years of apathy and negative impressions about housing affordability.

<b>LEGACY FRAMING</b>	<b>FUTURE FRAMING</b>
Affordable Housing	Housing Affordability
Public Housing & Homelessness	Housing for Hardworking People
Morally (Ethically) Right	Economically Right
Unfair	Competitive
Fragmented and Silo'd	Unified Voice
Jurisdictionally Focused	Region-Wide
Anecdote-Driven	Data-Driven
Ongoing	Urgent
Pie-in-the-Sky	Achievable
Government is the Answer	Business is part of the solution.

## ISSUE PROMISE AND VALUE PROPOSITION

### Issue Promise

**Future growth and economic competitiveness.**

### Issue Value Proposition

**A region that continues to thrive and prosper.**

## CAN POSITIONING PLATFORM

The building block of a successful communications effort is the development of a messaging platform, that is, a hierarchy of communication points created specifically for internal use to help the entire organization articulate the essence and excitement of its work. The platform is a kind of playbook to guide organizations in expressing and continually reinforcing the importance and relevance of these issues, especially to business audiences.

The answers to the following five questions form the platform components – the basis for successful messaging.

### Platform Components

**Who You Are** – Launched in 2012, CAN is a regional communications campaign focused on raising the visibility of housing affordability among key audiences, such as the business community and policy-makers. CAN has engaged about 200 professionals from the business, nonprofit, and public sectors who are committed to facilitating housing choices that are affordable so people can live near where they work.

**Burning Problem** – The issue of housing affordability has not been viewed as equally critical to economic health as education and transportation. More and more people, especially entry-level workers and those in traditionally lower paying fields, must pay a greater percentage of their income for housing, barely able to make ends meet. Those who find housing at greater distances from work pay dearly in automobile and other transportation costs. As a result, businesses and other interests may find it harder to recruit and retain valuable talent. And accompanying this is more traffic and a greater strain on an already stressed and aging infrastructure.

**Unique Opportunity** – On the cusp of an improved economic climate, the industry has the opportunity to reach out to the business community and those who make and implement housing policy, to encourage and help them see housing affordability through a different lens, and invite them to partner as contributors to innovative ways to address the issue.

**The “So What?”** – The Washington, DC region and its businesses cannot thrive in the long term without a workforce that has access to housing that is affordable.

**The Call To Action** – For business leaders and policy-makers and implementers, join us in seeing housing affordability through a different lens and the issue as on a par with education, health and transportation as critical to the region’s future. Join and support us in finding new and different ways to address the issue.

## THE MESSAGING TRIANGLE AND MESSAGING HIERARCHY

There is a sequence to delivering messages that avoids the common pitfall of trying to deliver too much at one time. The triangle centers on an overarching “core” phrase that speaks to the essence of CAN’s capabilities and how it hopes to be perceived. Why are we communicating? What is our goal for action?

Supporting the core message are three value messages – anchor or thematic messages that speak to the “who, what, why, and how” of its actions – key ideas and themes that we want our target audiences to remember. These should be persuasive, memorable.

This messaging triangle and the messaging hierarchy that follows provides an effective way to organize messages, and serves as a roadmap for anyone in your organization to ensure consistency without sounding robotic. Depending on the audience with which you are communicating, you may wish to lead with different points of the triangle, and support your points with different anchor messages.

### MESSAGING TRIANGLE



## MESSAGING HIERARCHY

<b>CORE MESSAGE</b>	<b>Affordability of housing is essential to the future of our region.</b>		
<b>VALUE MESSAGES</b>	<p><b><u>The Thrive Message</u></b> Housing that is affordable is essential to regional economic growth, a thriving business community and high quality of life.</p>	<p><b><u>The Compete Message</u></b> Housing that is affordable is essential to a regional economy that can compete effectively for talent in the workforce and a marketplace that can attract new business and industries.</p>	<p><b><u>The Diverse Message</u></b> Housing that is affordable is essential to economically and culturally diverse communities.</p>
<b>ANCHOR MESSAGES</b>	<p>Housing that is affordable is as essential as transportation, health and education to the long-term economic viability of our region.</p>	<p>Ensuring that there is housing that is affordable will help us maintain our competitive edge for the long term.</p>	<p>Housing that is affordable ensures diverse neighborhoods where people patronize local businesses and drive local economic growth.</p>
	<p>When people can afford to live near their workplace, it contributes to greater individual business success and a more stable regional economy.</p>	<p>Housing that is affordable can fuel high-growth industries, such as healthcare, hospitality, and technology, because they may be able to attract and retain the best of the best.</p>	<p>Housing that is affordable assures a diverse and inclusive workforce that may help businesses avoid the high costs of employee turnover.</p>
	<p>When people have manageable housing costs, they have additional dollars to support local businesses within their community.</p>	<p>When workers can afford to live closer to their work, they will eliminate wasted time sitting in traffic.</p>	<p>Housing that is affordable may contribute to a cultural diversity that is essential to competing in today's global economy.</p>
	<p>When people are able to afford housing, they contribute the tax base of their community, which supports schools, law enforcement, roads, and other critical public services.</p>	<p>When housing is affordable, businesses have ready access to a supply of hardworking talent at all levels.</p>	
	<p>When people have access to housing they can afford, they can put down roots, which creates strong and stable communities.</p>		
<b>PROOF POINTS</b> <i>(not a complete list; just examples)</i>	<p>Housing costs have increased significantly faster than incomes in the greater Washington region.</p>	<p>Median household income has increased 46%, rents rose by 69% and home values increased by 144% in the past 40 years.</p>	<p>Over the past two years, existing home prices have risen 18 percent, while personal incomes have risen just 2 percent to 4 percent in that same time, pushing housing affordability to a 5 year low.</p>

## Name Change

In this age of short attentions and quick sound bites, the name of the initiative should help people understand its purpose. CAN could refer to almost anything and does not communicate what the effort is all about. Wainger Group recommends that the initiative consider a name change to:

*Housing CAN.*

## Elevator Pitch

*In Washington, DC, region, one of the most prosperous in the world, far too many hardworking people are spending so much on housing that they have a hard time paying for the other basics of life. "Housing CAN" is a coalition of more than 200 professionals who are asking business and policy makers and implementers to help develop new and different ways to ensure that there is enough housing that is affordable so that our region thrives.*

## Housing CAN Boilerplate

Launched in 2012, Housing CAN is a regional communications campaign focused on raising the visibility of the issue of housing affordability among key audiences, such as the business community and policy-makers. CAN has engaged about 200 professionals from the business, nonprofit, and public sectors who are committed to facilitating housing choices that are people can afford so they can live near where they work. For more information, [www.caninitiative.org](http://www.caninitiative.org).

## Proposed Tag Lines

Ideally, your tag line should express benefit to your primary audience, while addressing the uniqueness of your enterprise (without repeating your name). The following are offered for consideration as a tagline – brief, memorable phrases that play to the CAN brand promise and the singular nature of its work and goals.

### ***Housing CAN***

*A communications campaign to keep our region competitive, diverse and strong.*

## APPENDIX A CAN Messaging Session

November 13, 2013

The following is a top-line overview from the Messaging Workshop discussions of November 13, based on a consensus surrounding opportunities for communicating the importance of housing affordability.

### **What is the problem we are trying to address?**

- *Hardworking people must spend so much on housing that they have a hard time paying for other basics.*
  - Applies to rentals + purchases
  - Emphasis is on entry level professionals, low wage earners particularly in traditionally low paying fields such as hospitality, health care supporting workers, teachers, police/firefighters as well as retired seniors
  - Helps the entire community and has an impact on traffic, schools
  - More than the cost of homes – drives other costs as well, such as transportation, energy consumption
  - Ranks with two other empirical priorities and part of a three-legged stool for thriving of the region: Transportation, Education

### **Why is this issue urgent now?**

- Economic development and job growth and : the attraction and retention of workers
  - Business corridors are developing where their workforce can afford to live
  - Impacts tax revenues
  - Affects future growth: to grow our economy, resources must attract workers.
  - Economic competitiveness of our region.

Top factors:

- Business community must be thriving and competitive
- Traffic—not only movement of people but movement of goods and services
- Cultural and economic diversity—important to retention and attraction of employees and our ability to provide services that we need—education, protection/public safety, construction, etc.
- Ripple effects on education, health, stability of families, safety

### **What is the ask?**

- Recognize that housing affordability IS one of the big three pivotal regional issues: together with education and transportation
- Recognize that housing affordability is a basic human right and workforce need critical to the thriving of our region.
- Look at housing affordability in a different way: engage and participate in innovation and tap collective creativity to help us solve this problem.

**Critical Audiences**

- Public sector: elected and agency officials; policy-makers and implementers
- Business community members
- Community members, from the general public to community-based organizations

**Next Steps:**

- Develop a positioning platform with messages that are simple to remember, and meet target audiences where they are in order to grab and hold their attention and begin to motivate for action
- As part of a positioning platform developed for CAN, members will have boilerplate language and talking points to send a consistent message to key target audiences
- Positioning will include language that speaks in terms people can see (talk “tools” instead of “programs”)
- Positioning will address target audiences with issues like worker retention and competitiveness, to emphasize what housing affordability brings to a successful region.