

NEW YORK CITY: Housing First!

CASE STUDY IN BRIEF

- Housing First! relies on a broad base for earning credibility among elected officials.
- The group has a very narrow focus, targeting just the mayor and city council.
- By developing a detailed plan to produce new affordable housing and building its campaign around that platform, Housing First!'s message is specific, clear and resonates well with public officials.
- The campaign "takes affordable housing out of the 'poverty box'" and stresses that this is an issue that affects everyone.
- Housing First! emphasizes the links between good housing and other important issues, such as education, health care, and public safety.
- The group also stresses that the affordable housing crisis is a solvable problem.

In the fall of 2000 housing advocates in New York City seized upon a "terrific political opportunity," said Joe Weisbord, and formed Housing First!, an alliance of community, business, civic, labor and religious organizations concerned with stimulating significant new investment in New York's housing infrastructure. With the city's new term limits law, the mayor and 35 of 51 city council members were all set to turn over, and Housing First! set about to frame affordable housing as a critical policy issue that officials and candidates must address.

Housing First! is particularly unique in the breadth of its base. Supportive housing groups, CDCs, homeless organizations, intermediaries, and banks are all "the usual suspects" said Weisbord, staff director, but the coalition also includes other types of community-based groups, tenants, landlords, developers, and faith

based groups. "It is monumental to have all these groups on the same page."

That breadth helped the coalition quickly gain credibility, said Weisbord. "Because candidates saw that we had everybody in the room, they saw meeting with us as a way to latch on to housing and please everybody. We helped candidates see the political upside to carrying this message. It is a real issue with voters, particularly as increasing numbers of middle income people realize they can't afford housing in the city anymore." Candidates would then campaign and proudly state that they had met with Housing First! when they sought credibility on their affordable housing platforms.

The coalition's first order of business was to develop a policy agenda that would drive their public education campaign. "You can't just have advocates running around yelling 'housing!'" said Weisbord. "You need something new. So we sat down with representatives of dozens of groups and framed a very specific plan, a ten-year, ten-billion dollar initiative to produce and preserve 185,700 units of housing."

The first message in Housing First!'s platform is that affordable housing is an issue that affects everyone, from firefighters to teachers to businesspeople, and therefore includes a broad continuum of housing choices, including rental, homeownership, special needs housing, single family and multifamily housing. "This was successful because it took housing out of the poverty box," said Weisbord. "Talking about how housing is about everybody, about choice and opportunity, pulls the issue to the center."

The second part of the message had to do with the very name of the organization, said Weisbord. "We never intended to suggest that housing is more literally important than top issues, like jobs, education, safety or health care, but that they are all joined at the hip with housing. We demonstrated the connections between affordable housing and educational attainment, reduced crime, positive health outcomes, and workforce success."

Finally, Housing First! sought to project the message that the affordable housing crisis is a solvable problem. “If you talk about an issue like education,” said Weisbord, “there’s discussion about governance and control, safety, teacher recruitment and training, and all these unresolved issues about which there’s great debate. You don’t have that in housing. All you need is political will and resources. We know we have the infrastructure to do it. It’s a black and white issue, rather than one of conflicting strategies and approaches.”

Housing First! has quickly become established as a major voice on affordable housing in New York City, and can point to significant successes. Housing First! persuaded Mayor Michael Bloomberg to release a housing plan by the end of his first year in office. When the Mayor accepted an invitation to speak at the New York Housing Conference’s annual luncheon, “we released it as ‘the mayor will be making a major policy address on housing’ and it effectively upped the ante. He came out with a big plan, and since we were all over the media it was all framed in terms of our analysis and commentary.” Press releases and personal contacts with the media help ensure that the organization is contacted whenever housing issues are being covered.

“Our aim was to dominate the media around housing issues,” said Weisbord. When the mayor released a report on his housing plan, Housing First! was quoted in newspaper articles before the administration. When the mayor held a press conference about housing, said Weisbord, the reporters’ follow up questions were all about housing, rather than the usual attempts to change the subject to something else. “We could take 100% credit for that.”

Housing First! carefully tracks the Mayor’s statements and remarks on housing and uses his own quotes liberally. “When he says ‘housing is critical to the city’s economic future’ we use that. Nothing is better than to have the mayor restating your messages for you.”

By exclusively targeting the mayor and city council, and more broadly the candidates for these positions, Housing First! has relied mostly on direct contact with officials for pressing its agenda. “We’re not trying to shift mass public opinion, but to influence key decision makers and thought leaders,” said Weisbord.

“To get penetration with a message in a market like New York City is a very different proposition than in a smaller city,” said Weisbord. “Advertising costs and the amount of background noise makes it very difficult.” Instead, by working to drive the city’s policy agenda around housing, the organization has strong name recognition and has successfully advanced its agenda through free media..

“The way to be successful in getting that kind of free media is by being a credible source of information, and by being forthright about your advocacy agenda but not being seen as ideological,” he said.

Weisbord is Housing First!’s sole staff member, and the group is able to keep costs low since they don’t produce large publications or buy advertising. The group relies on partner organizations for policy research, and contracts with individual consultants for media outreach work and other support.

Ten foundations and banks have each committed \$50,000 over the past three years for operational funding for the organization. Weisbord said that success measures that he reports to funders include hard commitments on developing new housing from the city; the degree and quality of media coverage of the organization and the issues it is promoting; the extent and quality of dialogues and contacts with high level officials; and what he called a “ripple effect,” the number of groups that have not traditionally taken on housing advocacy but are beginning to do so. In all of these areas, Weisbord said, Housing First! can point to some degree of success after only a few years of operation.

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