

## ILLINOIS: Finding the YIMBYs (“Yes, in my...”) *HousingIllinois*

### CASE STUDY IN BRIEF

The Housing Illinois’ campaign seeks to:

- make the public and policy makers more aware of the need for affordable housing and convince them it is both important and feasible to solve the problem
- increase community acceptance of affordable housing among residents and local leaders.

Phase I consisted of extensive consumer research. Conducted during 2002, focus groups and telephone interviews led to the publication of "Valuing Housing: Public Perceptions of Affordable Housing in the Chicago Region." The report revealed that the majority of Chicagoans is aware of and troubled by the lack of housing for people of low- and moderate-incomes, and would accept the development of affordable housing in their neighborhoods if it were well-designed and maintained. Forty percent of those polled were undecided and need additional information to be convinced.

Phase 2 of the campaign, underway in 2004, seeks to influence the undecideds in order to gain their active support of affordable housing. This phase includes development of creative communications materials, training and support for Housing Illinois members to increase their capacity to communicate effectively with the public, and the development and implementation of a communications campaign that couples mass media strategies with face-to-face efforts of Housing Illinois members.

Television and radio commercials, print ads, and a brochure are all being developed, aimed at addressing two fundamental issues limiting the acceptance of affordable housing: the appearance and design of the housing itself and the nature of the people who live in it.

The lack of affordable housing in the Chicago metropolitan region is a problem of enormous proportions. Housing costs continue to escalate while the supply of rental housing has declined. Gentrification is beautifying many neighborhoods but pushing long-time residents out. And the high cost of single-family housing throughout the region is causing some families to double up. Many families have little money for food and clothing because they spend so much on rent. A minimum-wage worker would have to work 140 hours a week to afford the average two-bedroom apartment.

To Housing Illinois, these problems are exacerbated by a lack of public awareness about the issue, and the group is working to change that. Housing Illinois is a coalition of over 30 housing advocates, planning organizations, faith-based institutions, non-profit developers, public agencies and financial institutions from the Chicago area seeking to raise public awareness and encourage leadership on behalf of affordable housing through research, advertising, and communications.

Housing Illinois was launched in 2002 and is staffed by Chicago Rehab Network, a 26-year-old citywide coalition of 43 non-profit groups dedicated to increasing affordable housing and support for its creation. The Housing Illinois communications challenge is to change people's perceptions about affordable housing. "We need a compelling message that will break down misunderstandings and misleading stereotypes," said Chicago Rehab Network Executive Director Kevin Jackson.

Housing Illinois has formulated a multi-stage plan to develop and implement its communications strategy. Phase I entails public opinion research. Phase Two concerns message development, and Phase III involves media planning and campaign implementation.

With support from foundations, banks, and other private and public sources, Housing Illinois hired a Washington, D.C.-based public opinion polling firm, Belden, Russonello & Stewart (BR&S), to conduct research into public awareness and attitudes toward affordable housing in the Chicago metropolitan region.

In October 2002, BR&S conducted ten focus groups and surveyed 1,000 residents in the six-county metro region. The findings were published in a report, "Valuing Housing: Public Perceptions of Affordable Housing in the Chicago Region."

The research revealed that the majority of Chicagoans is aware of and troubled by the lack of housing for people of low- and moderate-incomes and would accept the development of affordable housing in their neighborhoods if it were well-designed and maintained. Eight in ten said it is important to have more housing for low- and moderate-income people.

The research also revealed challenges to building community support for affordable housing. Fully one-third of those surveyed opposed building more affordable housing. The most often-cited concerns were poor maintenance and appearance of affordable housing and increased crime. These attitudes were most strongly held among upper-income respondents, particularly suburbanites.

In addition to quantifying the attitudes and support for affordable housing, the survey also looked at messages that could build support for affordable housing. The most important values people cite for providing more affordable housing are fairness and opportunity. More than eight in ten agree that "Having a decent place to live is a key to opening the door to opportunity for people to better themselves." Among the strongest reasons to support more affordable housing is the desirability of diversity and the importance to children's well-being.

Despite the fact that the majority supports affordable housing and the positive outcomes it brings, the researchers caution that a vocal minority can stymie such efforts. They recommend building support among those who are currently undecided on the advisability of affordable housing in their community.

Hoy McConnell, Executive Director of Business and Professional People for the Public Interest and Housing Illinois co-chair, noted that while more than 25% of people surveyed about affordable housing are unqualified proponents wanting to "just do it," some 40% of those polled are undecideds who would become supporters with the proper message. "We need to convince these fence-sitters and activate their support," he said.

In 2004, Housing Illinois is in the process of developing creative materials to support a multi-media communications campaign. It has hired Zimmerman & Markman, a California-based public policy and communications consulting firm, to create television, radio and print advertising as well as brochures and posters for local distribution. At the same time, Housing Illinois members are being trained to use the local *Valuing Housing* research results to educate communities and their leaders about affordable housing.

During this time, creative materials will be completed; media strategies and plans will be finalized, setting the stage for launching the Housing Illinois communications campaign. Overall, success of the campaign will be measured against two main goals: its ability, first of all, to make members of the public and local leaders alike more aware of the benefits of affordable housing; and second, to build support for innovative policies that promote development and/or preservation of affordable housing in communities throughout the Chicago region.

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