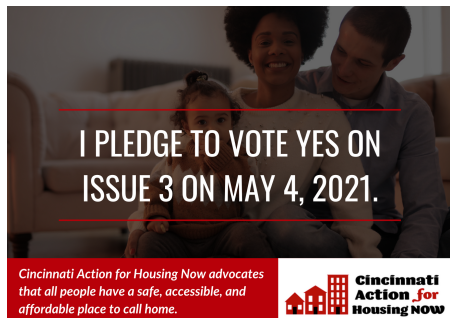


BOLD SOLUTIONS SHIFTED THE NARRATIVE

LED BY CINCINNATI ACTION FOR HOUSING NOW

Supported by Community Change



What happened in Cincinnati?

Cincinnati Action for Housing Now led a ballot initiative with a **bold solution** to a longstanding problem of housing instability and homelessness. The \$50 million ask would have made Cincinnati's housing trust fund the highest per capita for any city in the United States and would have given governance to **people who are directly impacted or work with directly impacted people**. This spring, Cincinnati voters had the opportunity to vote on

Issue Three, which asked voters to decide if the city should set aside \$50 million annually into their housing trust fund to pay to build, renovate, or support affordable housing units. According to a 2017 study by the Community Building Institute (CBI) at Xavier University, Cincinnati, OH, has a deficit of approximately [28,000](#) affordable **homes for low-income and working-class families**. The initiative would have also established an oversight board made up of those directly impacted by housing instability and those who work with them. The \$50 million would have produced or preserved at least 500 housing units every year using the logic that \$100,000 will pay for one housing unit with a goal of at least 500 units a year.

Win or Lose: Bold Solution caused a Narrative Shift

Issue Three was a **people-powered** initiative that made the local government respond. Residents generated the urgency for a solution to their housing crises and disrupted the cliché rhetoric that housing is a secondary issue and shouldn't be a priority for funding. The boldness of the initiative sparked a vision that galvanized community members to be a part of an action that could potentially change their living conditions. Throughout the campaign, the [opposition](#) admitted that affordable housing is an important issue, especially for working-class families. The campaign's bold and urgent solution allowed the community to lead on what they wanted and needed.

The **push for urgency. Exciting the base. Leading with equity and values. Uplifting the experiences of people directly impacted**. These elements of the campaign were a demonstration of the housing justice narrative elements in action. The [housing justice narrative](#) is a set of messaging tools and narrative strategy that centers race to advance housing justice campaigns. The tools are intended to build power to make change by exciting a 'base.' The best people to articulate solutions are the people who are directly affected by the problem. The person-first campaign and

the \$50 million commitment excited the base in Cincinnati. The campaign led with values the community aligned, including centering racial equity, children and families, and neighborhood stabilization.

These acts of solidarity had such significance they caused the local government and mayoral candidates to react and respond. Six **mayoral candidates made affordable housing a priority on their agendas**. Furthermore, the top candidate in the primary amplified the need for affordable housing and the \$50 million price tag in his victory speech. When the initiative qualified for the ballot, the city's first response was that the initiative would cut essential jobs and services to the city. In the last weeks of the ballot campaign, city council members proposed [two initiatives](#) totaling \$85 million for affordable housing. Housing would not have been a hot-button issue during the May primary if it wasn't for this ballot initiative.

Issue Three did not pass, but **affordable housing will eventually win**. The people-led campaign is now [well-positioned](#) to push for the housing solutions they need. Despite the outcome on May 4th, the narrative has shifted in favor of real housing solutions for low-income and working-class families.

Community Response

The **strength of the community** was apparent throughout the campaign. The campaign attracted more than 200 volunteers, many of whom were active in an issue campaign for the first time. Through social distancing mandates, in the fall and winter, organizers and volunteers managed to gather over 9,500 signatures to get Issue 3 on the ballot. To fuel, the campaign volunteers posted flyers, conducted phone banking, cookouts, and community canvassing to spread support for Issue Three.

The lead organization [Cincinnati Action for Housing Now](#) hosted a 12-part series that focused on bringing different community perspectives to understand how the ballot initiative is a great step in the right direction for the city to address the affordable housing crisis. In March, supporters gathered at Cincinnati City Hall in a caravan to show their support for the initiative. So not only did this campaign **mobilize a community** to improve their conditions, but it also expanded the housing community. [Supporters](#) of the campaign included religious coalitions, city council candidates, civil rights and advocacy organizations, and student organizations.



Lessons Learned

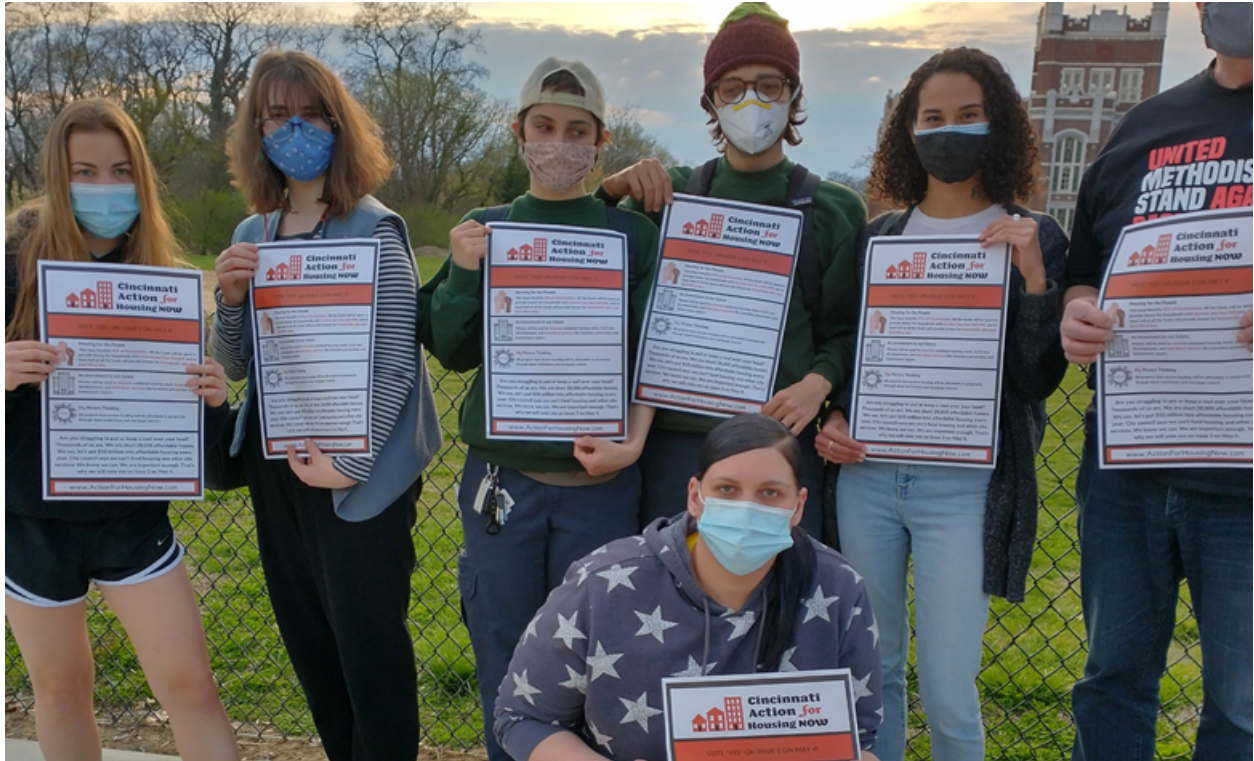
There are lessons we can learn from this campaign that can be replicated in other localities, including:

- **Bold solutions:** The \$50 million solution resonated with Cincinnatians because they understood the magnitude of the problem. The bold ask shifted public

imagination of what's possible in an issue debate. And created excitement in the public sphere that generated attention to the issue and momentum for getting people involved in providing a solution.

- **A message that mobilized community members:** The campaign's messaging always led with the fact that the campaign was about the people when discussing homelessness and Cincinnati's underhoused populations -i.e., "people experiencing homelessness," "families using too much of their monthly income on rent." The messaging provided a vision for what is possible — an equitable Cincinnati where everyone has a safe place to call home.
- **The ballot led to a response from "power":** Getting the \$50 million solution on the ballot caused local government to address the crisis, giving urgency to the problem and focusing the narrative on the community. Opposition came out strongly against Issue Three, arguing \$50 million would cut other city services and jobs. They even went as far as changing the [language](#) on the ballot. Despite all of these challenges, the opposition agreed that housing is and should be a priority and eventually recommended new ways to address the issue. Additionally, the campaign made it apparent the power people have when they challenge existing power structures.
- **Catching media's attention:** The campaign received an overwhelming amount of earned media throughout the campaign. The attention of the media, of all kinds, including social, brought prominence to the housing crisis. In addition, the media's attention illustrated the burgeoning narrative that housing is now a priority for both supporters and the opposition to Issue Three.
- **Response of mayoral candidates:** All six mayoral candidates endorsed housing as a top priority for their campaigns. The strength of the campaign helped candidates understand that the ballot initiative was people-driven and that people wanted the housing crisis urgently addressed. With all candidates supporting a solution, a path forward is made to address the housing crisis equitably.
- **Capacity:** The grassroots campaign was led by Cincinnati Action for Housing Now (CAHN), founded in early 2020, to help Cincinnati pass legislation that will begin to solve the affordable housing crisis in their city. CAHN primarily relied on the efforts of volunteers for the entire campaign. Earlier in the campaign, monetary and human resources would have allowed for a more extensive field operation and voter mobilization.

We also want to acknowledge that past housing trust fund campaigns have contributed to the opportunity of the Cincinnati housing trust fund campaign. In 2018, in [Baltimore](#), Maryland, and [Pittsburgh](#), Pennsylvania, grassroots organizations led campaigns that set a precedent. The campaigns proposed bold solutions that caused their respective local governments to come to the table with directly impacted individuals and families to speak directly to power. Altogether, these campaigns brought people power but didn't shift the narrative. Cincinnati's campaign was a tipping point in the narrative shift.



Partnership

For over 50 years, Community Change has partnered with grassroots organizations nationwide. Building and strengthening coalitions of grassroots groups — and uniting these coalitions to wield power — is a crucial component of our work. We work with these groups in shared projects that benefit from flexibility, accelerated learning, and radical experimentation. Through technical assistance and strategic support, we strengthen our partners' capacity for tactical and strategic innovation, organic leadership, narratives that work, and a deep and nuanced power analyses. Community Change supported on-the-ground operations by helping petition and gathering signatures for the ballot, brought in consultants, and co-developed the field plan to meet capacity needs. We also provided training and one-on-one support to phone bankers, staff, and volunteers. Technical assistance included providing access to VAN and running relational organizing campaigns through Impactive. Finally, the campaign was subgranted \$10,000 to pay canvassers, send out mailings, and phone banking in the last few weeks of the campaign.

For more information feel free to contact Senior Field Organizer, Katy Heins at kheins@communitychange.org or Housing Trust Fund Project Director, Michael Anderson at manderson@communitychange.org.