THE SHORTEST DISTANCE BETWEEN TWO PEOPLE IS A STORY.

Patty Digh

OPPORTUNITY

The challenge of addressing our housing crisis is exacerbated by the myths and misperceptions about its victims—who they are and how they came to be without this most basic need.

STRATEGY

In the beginning of 2022, we dedicated a full-time position to Community Engagement. That work brought to our attention a collection of stories about our community’s battle with housing insecurity. Since the problem seemed to be invisible to so many, we chose to team up with photographer Kate Simon to share those stories through an art exhibit.

This is Home had its debut on the stage of The Wayne Theatre during our 50th anniversary celebration on November 9. At the same time, we launched a website to house the photos, stories, accompanying podcasts, and select statistics. Since then, we have been securing public venues to host the exhibit and initiating public conversations about housing insecurity.

Community partners for this project include: the Valley Community Services Board, the Central Shenandoah Planning District Commission, local Housing Authorities, local school districts, shelters, and other nonprofit organizations addressing our residents’ housing needs.

OUTCOMES

cfcb.org/thisishome has welcomed 1,100 unique visitors during its first four months. The project has been covered by local media and shared extensively on social media. Blue Ridge Community College installed the exhibit for two months in their student center, culminating in a campus-wide conversation about resilience. The exhibit has also inspired local public officials to come to the table to participate in the discussions about solutions to housing insecurity.

LESSONS LEARNED

Community engagement requires time, deep community connections, the willingness to listen to residents, and the ability to tell stories. It is storytelling and not statistics that became our best means of engaging community leaders and securing partners for the critical next steps towards developing and investing in the solutions to this problem.

NEXT STEPS

This is Home will be shared with area public schools and universities, coffee shops, libraries, and galleries so that we may engage residents in thinking about housing. This will set the stage for our regional Housing Summit to take place later in 2023.

We believe if we can lower the barriers to compassion, we might create a foundation ready for solutions.