



# Connecting People Returning from Incarceration with Housing and Homelessness Assistance

People returning from incarceration need stable housing to successfully reenter our neighborhoods and communities. Many studies have shown that reentry initiatives that include housing assistance reduce recidivism rates. More than just a roof over one's head, housing is a stabilizing force, giving people a consistent base from which they can access employment, services for mental health or substance use disorders, and other support services. It also helps people make or restore connections with community resources, with family, and with positive social networks.

Unfortunately, many people leaving jails or prisons have significant challenges finding safe and affordable housing. As a result, many wind up homeless. National data shows that nearly 50,000 people a year enter shelters directly after release from correctional facilities. Many of these individuals are caught in a revolving door between homelessness and incarceration, bouncing week after week between the streets, shelter, and jails.

This document provides practical tips for how corrections agencies, reentry service providers, state and local governments, and community partners can help break such cycles of homelessness and incarceration by helping people exiting the criminal justice system connect to available housing resources and find stability in their lives.

## Partner with Housing and Homelessness Assistance Systems

A good starting point is to identify and engage the key agencies, systems, and providers that administer or control access to affordable housing and homelessness assistance resources in your community. While these entities face many competing demands for their scarce housing and services resources, they are often interested in identifying creative ways to help address housing needs for diverse populations, including among justice-involved people. Some public housing agencies (PHAs), for example, are working with community-based organizations to develop reentry programs that allow returning citizens to reunite with their families who live in public housing.

Start by getting to know staff at key agencies or planning bodies. These providers can help you navigate local coordinated entry systems for supportive housing and homelessness assistance programs, many of which prioritize the most chronically homeless and vulnerable people for housing assistance. These include:

- The **local Continuum of Care (CoC)**, a collaborative planning body that oversees the use of federally-funded homelessness assistance programs, like supportive housing
- The **PHA**, which oversees programs like Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers and public housing
- **City and county housing departments and your state housing agency**, all of which help finance and regulate affordable housing

- **Faith-based and neighborhood organizations**, which often have resources that assist people experiencing homelessness

Make sure you understand the range of housing programs available in your community. Some options include:

- Family Reunification
- Affordable Housing
- Rapid Rehousing
- Transitional Housing
- Supportive Housing, which combines affordable housing and supportive services

You can also access a [map of local homelessness resources](#) funded by the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

### **Assess Housing Status of People Involved with the Criminal Justice System**

It is important to understand the unique circumstances of each individual involved with the criminal justice system who is at risk of experiencing homelessness, as the level of intervention needed varies from person to person. Not all individuals will need intensive programs like supportive housing or long-term rental assistance.

You should:

- Determine whether people were **experiencing homelessness before they were incarcerated** and whether they are likely to return to homelessness upon exit.
- Ascertain whether they have **family members or social supports to which they can reunify**.
- Help them **determine how much they can pay for rent** through projected employment and/or other income.
- Identify what kind of **tailored approach** would be most appropriate for each individual. Interventions could include short-term or long-term housing assistance, or connection to mainstream resources.

<i><b>If the individual...</b></i>	<i><b>Then he/she may need....</b></i>
Has family members or social supports who can provide them with a place to live	Help with reunifying with family, including mediation and counseling and/or some limited financial assistance
Has barriers to employment or limited work history	Connections to workforce services for help obtaining employment alongside short-term rental assistance through rapid re-housing
Is on fixed income due to a disability or age with limited options for other income	Longer-term rental assistance or affordable housing through programs like Housing Choice Vouchers, public housing, low-income housing tax credit housing, Section 811, or Section 202
Has a history of chronic homelessness along with disabilities like mental illness or substance use disorders	Access to supportive housing with a range of services appropriate for addressing behavioral health needs

## **Use Data to Assess Need and Increase System Effectiveness**

Develop and implement data systems to understand the overlap between incarceration and other sectors that work with formerly incarcerated individuals, including homelessness assistance, health care, and behavioral health. Cross-system data analysis can be used to make the case for collaborations that serve shared clients. It can also help to identify high-need, high-cost individuals who have multiple needs and for whom housing solutions can produce cost savings and improved outcomes.

For example, the Frequent User Service Enhancement (FUSE) program in New York City provides supportive housing to people who are high users of both the shelter and criminal justice systems. It has been shown to improve housing outcomes and reduce incarceration among program participants, as well as save money.

One study found that, after 12 months, 91% of FUSE participants remained housed, while just 28% of the comparison group was in housing. FUSE participants also spent an average of 19.2 fewer days incarcerated – a 40% reduction over the comparison group. Finally, for FUSE participants, the total per person average cost of shelter and jails went from \$38,351 in the 24 months prior to FUSE to \$9,143 in the 24 months after enrollment in the program – a 76% reduction.

## **Identify Gaps in Resources and Expand the Supply of Housing Options**

While there are a range of programs available for people at risk of or experiencing homelessness, there are not enough resources to go around. Corrections agencies and reentry programs have a role to play in expanding housing options to support successful reentry. Engage in planning sessions with criminal justice stakeholders and housing service providers to explore ways to expand housing assistance for justice-involved people, including ways that criminal justice resources can contribute to providing housing assistance in your community. Some potential approaches include:

- **Using criminal justice resources to fund short-term rental assistance programs**, like rapid re-housing
- **Financing and creating new permanent supportive housing programs**, for example, for frequent users of jails and homelessness services
- **Asking PHAs to adopt a Housing Choice Voucher or public housing admissions preference** for people who are justice-involved and are connected to services and supervision

## **Work with Housing Providers to Adopt More Reasonable Tenant Screening Criteria**

PHAs and other housing providers must follow federal laws in their tenant screening policies, but they also have local flexibility. Many housing providers use their flexibility to adopt strict screening policies that go beyond the federal regulations and can lead to the exclusion of formerly incarcerated individuals from homes.

All PHAs can consider making modifications to tenant screening and eligibility policies and procedures to remove barriers to housing assistance for people with criminal histories. You should:

- **Ensure** that PHAs are aware of [guidance from HUD](#) around tenant screening and arrest records.

- **Discuss** the facts and share positive experiences with landlords to help mitigate unfounded preconceptions and to promote the adoption and implementation of policies that consider applicants on a case-by-case basis.
- **Identify** concrete ways that services providers or community supervision (parole or probation) can provide support to individuals to help ameliorate real and perceived risks to PHAs and to private landlords.

### **Address the Legitimate Concerns of Landlords**

It is important to listen to the concerns of landlords and neighbors and invite them to participate as partners in creating and sustaining a safe community. In support of such engagement, you should:

- **Discuss** the fact that housing helps to improve public safety by facilitating re-integration for people returning to communities who otherwise might not have a place to live.
- **Consider** establishing a “risk mitigation” reserve with flexible funds that can mitigate concerns from landlords that they will have to pay for damages or costs if a tenant fails to pay rent or must be evicted because of problem behavior.
- **Partner** with existing Housing Navigators, and/or expand such roles within your community’s system, to help people apply for rental assistance and search for apartments, as they work to establish relationships and negotiate with landlords to get people housing.

### **Support People’s Lasting Stability and Success**

Finally, once people returning from incarceration are stably housed, it is important to set them up for success throughout their tenancy by ensuring that all of the interventions provided have an adequate level of services. Those services may also encourage housing providers to be more willing to accept people returning from jails or prisons, because they help tenants achieve stability and intervene quickly if challenges arise. Service providers can also work in partnership with community supervision (probation or parole) to support people in meeting their supervision requirements.

Working together, reentry and housing service providers have an opportunity to break the cycle of homelessness and incarceration. For more information on housing and criminal justice, visit the websites of the [U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness](#), the [Federal Interagency Reentry Council](#), and the [Council of State Governments Justice Center](#).