

Developing Reentry Programs

Lessons from Public Housing Authorities

Access to safe and affordable housing is a human right. Vera Institute of Justice

It provides a foundation for everyday tasks such as employment, offers a place to spend time with family, and can offer a place of sanctuary and reprieve. However, this right is often not afforded to formerly incarcerated people—challenges such as affordability, restrictive housing policies, lack of employment and credit history, and the stigma of having a criminal conviction may hinder one’s chances of securing a place to live.

For people who have once lived in or wish to reunite with their families in public housing after a criminal conviction, the task of securing or returning to a home managed by public housing authorities (PHAs) is often more difficult, if not impossible. Studies reveal that many PHAs have policies that temporarily or permanently ban people with conviction histories, making the possibility of securing safe and affordable housing or family reunification a daunting prospect. For people recently released from prison or jail, these restrictions may carry more weight, because that time period is often marred with uncertainty, and housing and support from family are critical to one’s successful transition into the community.

PHAs were generally considered staunch proponents of strict “law and order” policies, adopting a series of restrictive regulations such as the “One Strike and You’re Out” rule. However, some PHAs are challenging these once-accepted standards. Across the country, they have revised policies or implemented programs that welcome returning citizens back into their communities, instead of excluding them or adding onerous restrictions.

Action Areas

Housing and support from family are critical to one’s successful transition into the community after release from prison or jail.

My team in Vera’s Center on Sentencing and Corrections have worked with 11 of these PHAs since November 2016 to document their innovations for a new guide, *Opening Doors: How to develop reentry programs using examples from public housing authorities*. The guide reveals components of a reentry program that PHAs should consider (such as partners, funding, eligibility criteria) when developing an initiative to support formerly incarcerated people and their families, and also offers practical methods to sustaining a program model and sparking larger policy reforms. The guide is intended for PHAs interested in developing their own programs and other community stakeholders who wish to partner with their local PHAs to launch such initiatives. Vera also brought the 11 PHAs together for an event in November 2016—you can watch some of the conversation [here](#).

The 11 PHAs in *Opening Doors* are offering solutions to a decades-old problem, especially in jurisdictions where affordable housing is scarce. Further, they are easing the burden of housing-service providers that work with formerly incarcerated people. These reforms

signal a shift in the way formerly incarcerated people are perceived, and point towards a growing consensus that housing is a human right.