

HOUSING AS A KEY COMPONENT OF PUBLIC SAFETY

Reducing Homelessness for People With Criminal Backgrounds

RECOMMENDATION: Prioritize housing as an intervention to promote public safety and reduce recidivism for those with criminal backgrounds.

Intersection Between Housing Stability, Homelessness, and Risk of Jail and Prison Recidivism

One of the most pressing societal problems is the number of people released from jail and prison who are ill prepared for re-entering community life. Too often, those with criminal histories re-offend and end up back in jail or prison. For example the re-incarceration rate in Virginia is 29 percent.¹

Parolees released to homelessness are at greater risk of returning to jail or prison than parolees who do not experience homelessness.² More than 10 percent of those coming in and out of jail and prison experience homelessness in the months before their incarceration. For those with mental illness, the rates are even higher—about 20 percent.³ According to Homeward, a planning and coordinating organization for homeless services in the greater

Richmond region, 70 percent of the single adult population experiencing homelessness in the Greater Richmond region report having spent time in jail or prison.

Ex-offenders face many barriers to re-entry into society. Sixteen percent of Virginia's local and regional jail inmate population are known to experience mental illness.⁴ Almost half (49 percent) of the mentally ill population and 9 percent of the general population of Virginia jails have been diagnosed with a serious mental illness.⁵ Serious mental illness is defined as a diagnosis of schizophrenia, delusional, bipolar or major depressive disorder. About 74 percent of the mentally ill jail population have a co-occurring substance abuse disorder.⁶

In addition to mental illness and substance abuse issues, those released from jail and prison face housing and employment restriction barriers. Many public housing authorities bar those with criminal records from living in publicly subsidized housing. Often, private landlords bar those with criminal records from housing occupancy.

Best Practices to Overcome Housing Barriers for Ex-Offenders

Example 1: Establishing relationships with landlords

The Housing Broker Team (HBT), pioneered by the Planning Council in Norfolk, is a program that builds relationships with landlords to expand rental opportunities for those experiencing and at risk of homelessness.

The HBT is part of Norfolk's Central Intake / Rapid Exit program which works with families often considered high risk, including those with histories of evictions, domestic violence, incarceration and other barriers. Through outreach and regular marketing of the program, Housing Specialists recruit landlords into the program with the reassurance that clients will have access to services that will increase the likelihood of long-term housing stability.

Efforts to entice landlords to enter into a rental agreement with clients of the program include:

- Providing ongoing case management that links families and individuals to other needed support and resources in Norfolk
- Offering assistance and mediation to landlords and tenants in resolving crises or conflicts that may threaten housing stability

FACTS

- The re-incarceration rate in Virginia is 29 percent.
- More than 10 percent of those coming in and out of jail and prison experience homelessness in the months before their incarceration. For those with mental illness, the rates are even higher—about 20 percent.
- According to Homeward, 70 percent of the single adult population experiencing homelessness in the Greater Richmond region report having spent time in jail or prison.
- Sixteen percent of Virginia's local and regional jail inmate population are known to experience mental illness.
- Almost half of the mentally ill population and 9 percent of the general population of Virginia jails have been diagnosed with a serious mental illness.
- About 74 percent of the mentally ill jail population have a co-occurring substance use disorder.

- ♦ Absorbing the cost of an unsuccessful housing placement by paying for excess damages.

Strong, positive relationships and reputations with landlords allows program staff to maintain a large roster of low-barrier housing for placing those families and individuals that may eventually cycle through the costly homeless assistance system. Word of mouth spreads and referrals to other landlords and properties increases the pool of affordable housing units in Norfolk. Consistent oversight and contact with the clients also allows them the opportunity to develop a stable rental history that will facilitate their return to permanent housing and improve their quality of life.

Offender Aid and Restoration (OAR) of Arlington County also cultivates relationships with landlords to assist clients in accessing rental housing. Sometimes landlords are initially hesitant to rent to people with criminal records. One strategy successfully used by OAR staff is to provide information on how housing significantly reduces recidivism. In addition, OAR staff break down stereotypes of those with criminal records by helping landlords to understand the circumstances which may have driven a person to commit a crime. For example, life style crimes (such as arrest for sleeping on a park bench) would not have occurred had the person not been experiencing homelessness at the time.

Example 2: Establishing relationships with employers

Similar to the philosophy and strategy of the Housing Broker Team described above, Gemeinschaft Homes Inc., in Harrisonburg, has built relationships with landlords to assist ex-offenders with obtaining employment. The hallmark of the program is the cultivation of relationships with employers and the role of Gemeinschaft in mentoring their clients to ensure preparedness for employment. Many of the same principles of the Housing Broker Team apply.

Example 3: Expanding permanent housing and permanent supportive housing options

Housing and services have been shown to reduce recidivism. A Virginia Tech study evaluated the impact of education/vocational training in prisons and demonstrated 6.5 percent lower recidivism, 24 percent increased outcomes, and higher employment rates and stability.

Stable housing has been shown to reduce recidivism. Data has demonstrated that permanent housing with wrap around services has created a:

- ♦ 76 percent reduction in days spent in jail/prison in Denver
- ♦ 57 percent reduction in the rate of prison incarceration and a 30 percent reduction in the rate of jail incarceration among those with mental illness in New York
- ♦ Decreased recidivism rate from 50 percent to 7 percent in Maryland.

Example 4: Diverting those experiencing mental illness from jail and prison.

Norfolk created a Mental Health Court which offers individuals living with a mental health disorder the opportunity to accept treatment instead of going to jail. Participants have been found guilty of a non-violent crime that is symptomatic of their illness. In fiscal year 2008, the Mental Health Court saved \$1.63 million in jail costs, according to an 18-month evaluation study by the Social Science Research Center at Old Dominion University. Jail time was reduced by 11,610 days during enrollment in Mental Health Court and by 9,600 days after program completion. Only 3 out of 24 graduates reoffended after completion of the program.⁷

Recommendations

- ♦ **Review redevelopment and housing authority policies restricting tenancy of those with criminal convictions.** Public housing authorities create their own rules and regulations governing publicly subsidized housing. Federal law only prohibits occupancy of any person convicted of manufacturing or producing methamphetamine on the premises⁸ and a person subject to a lifetime registration requirement under a State sex offender registration program. It provides that a public housing authority may prohibit occupancy of a person convicted of a crime but does not establish it as a requirement.⁹

Virginia Focuses on Prisoner Re-Entry

In his Address to the Joint Houses on January 18, 2010, Governor McDonnell stated: "...Tough sentences are only half of the equation in making Virginia safer. We must provide real opportunities to prisoners to turn their lives around, and to become responsible and contributing members of society when their sentences have concluded. A failure to do so only leads to more crime, and more victims. I will work with faith-based and community organizations to create an effective prisoner re-entry program to keep people out of jails and prisons. It's smart government, and will save money. I've seen firsthand the good that can happen when we do."

The Virginia Senate Committee on Public Safety recently stated: "We are all in agreement that coordinated efforts among our state and local agencies to assist inmates in returning to their home communities, finding a place to live, and finding a job, will help reduce crime in the future."

♦ **Implement landlord and employer relationship building programs.**

Relationships are the hallmark of mostly every successful strategy. While landlords and employers are sometimes initially fearful of the repercussions of renting to this population, many have found that the time and effort invested in cultivating these relationships is well worth it. These programs do not cost much to begin and sustain and may involve a shift in the use of current resources.

♦ **Prioritize the provision of permanent housing for those exiting jail and prison as a method for reducing recidivism.**

Stable housing is proven to reduce jail and prison recidivism. Many nonprofit providers as well as local and state governments are reviewing housing as a method to reduce the public cost of prisons and a way to reduce overcrowding in jails.

♦ **Divert people experiencing mental illness from jail and prison.**

A survey of jail mental health treatment needs and services, conducted by the Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services (DBHDS), found four key problems or barriers contributing to high rates of mental illness among the jail population. Barriers include the lack of basic community resources (housing and mental health services) which promote homelessness and impede prevention of arrest of persons with mental illness. Another barrier is the lack of jail diversion programs and resources statewide (pre-booking, post-booking, post-sentencing). A focused local and state effort to encourage collaboration of stakeholders will address many of these barriers. ♦

Endnotes

- 1 Boone, D. L., Schnabel, D. P., O'Boyle, E., Stone, A. & Pridemoore, S. (2006). 2006 Summary Evaluation of Virginia's Offender Reentry Programs. Department of Corrections, Virginia. November 2006.
- 2 Corporation for Supportive Housing. Re-entry Supportive Housing.
- 3 U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, Re-Entry Policy Council, and National Alliance to End Homelessness. Homelessness and Prisoner Re-Entry
- 4 Commonwealth of Virginia Compensation Board. 2009 Mental Illness in Jails Report. Richmond, Virginia: November 1, 2009.
- 5 Ibid
- 6 Ibid
- 7 Virginia Association of Community Services Boards, 2009 Annual Report - Recovery and Independence: Investments return positive outcomes for consumers and communities. Richmond, Virginia: 2009.
- 8 Cornell University Law School. http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/html/uscode42/usc_sec_42_00001437---n000-.html
- 9 Cornell University Law School. http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/42/usc_sec_42_00013663---000-.html



The Virginia Coalition to End Homelessness is the statewide nonprofit organization dedicated to preventing and ending homelessness in the Commonwealth of Virginia through community collaboration, capacity building, education and advocacy.