

Expanding Public Housing Access for People with Conviction Histories: Policy Implementation and Stakeholder Perspectives

Contents

Introduction.....	3
Background.....	4
Housing barriers for formerly incarcerated people.....	4
Public housing policies and conviction histories.....	4
Methodology and Data Collection.....	5
Study Sites.....	5
Key research questions.....	7
Data sources.....	7
Findings.....	10
Comparison of PHAs.....	10
Implementation fidelity.....	11
Policy reach and impact.....	12
Stakeholder perceptions and engagement.....	15
Recommendations.....	16
Conclusion.....	18
 Acknowledgments.....	19
About Citations.....	19
Credits.....	19
Suggested Citation.....	19
Notes.....	19

When people return to their communities following incarceration, access to safe, affordable housing can serve as a foundation for successful reentry. This evaluation examines the strides made by some public housing authorities (PHAs) in adopting more inclusive admissions practices for people with arrest and conviction histories, offering hope for more equitable and stable housing outcomes.

“They gave me a chance. . . . They saw me as a person, not my past. That chance gave me a stepping-stone to focus on what I needed to do.”

—PHA resident with a conviction history

Introduction

Securing stable housing is among the most critical challenges people face when returning to their communities after incarceration. Stable housing underpins a person’s ability to find employment, establish community ties, reconnect with family, and avoid recidivism.¹ Despite this urgent need, many people encounter systemic barriers to accessing housing.

The private rental market often excludes those with conviction histories through background checks and other screening criteria that people recently released from incarceration often cannot meet. Requirements like high security deposits, while common, can be especially prohibitive for people with conviction histories due to the financial instability and employment barriers they often face after incarceration. Public housing could provide a viable alternative, but traditionally, PHAs have implemented stringent screening rules that extend beyond the federal restrictions. Under federal law, a lifetime ban applies only to two groups: people convicted of manufacturing methamphetamine in federally subsidized housing and those subject to lifetime registration on sex offense registries.² Yet, local add-ons often exclude many more system-involved applicants. These PHA-specific rules frequently include lengthy lookback periods—the number of years into an applicant’s past that staff review for disqualifying convictions—and blanket bans that together shut many people with conviction histories out of this crucial safety net, despite offering little to no demonstrable benefit to housing providers.³

Between 2021 and 2025, the Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) conducted an evaluation of changes to PHA rules across three jurisdictions that had adopted more inclusive admissions processes for applicants with conviction histories. Drawing on administrative data and interviews with staff, residents, and community partners, this report explores how these three PHAs implemented inclusive admission practices, what challenges they encountered, and where further refinements might increase housing access for people with conviction histories and their families. This evaluation fills a crucial gap in the research literature by documenting how these policy changes were implemented, the motivations of various stakeholders, and the outcomes experienced by both the PHAs and the applicants they serve. The findings provide valuable insights and recommendations for other housing authorities and landlords considering similar changes.

Background

Housing barriers for formerly incarcerated people

Research consistently demonstrates that stable housing significantly influences reentry outcomes. It serves as a foundation for employment stability, family reunification, community integration, and reduced recidivism.⁴ However, formerly incarcerated people disproportionately experience housing instability during reentry; formerly incarcerated individuals experience homelessness at rates nearly 10 times greater than the general population: 203 per 10,000 compared to significantly lower rates among the general public.⁵ Additionally, another 367 people per 10,000 experience precarious housing situations, including temporary stays and frequent relocations.⁶

The challenges in securing housing stem from multiple sources:

- **Private market barriers.** Private landlords often employ blanket exclusions based on criminal background checks, regardless of conviction type, age, or relevance to tenancy.⁷
- **Economic obstacles.** People who were formerly incarcerated often face limited financial resources, poor credit histories, and requirements for excessive security deposits. Additionally, people with conviction histories frequently encounter significant barriers to employment, including widespread discrimination by employers, preventing a stable source of income often required by housing providers.⁸
- **Systemic restrictions.** Both formal policies and informal practices create additional hurdles, particularly in public and subsidized housing. For example, some cities enact “crime-free” or “nuisance” housing ordinances that pressure landlords and PHAs to refuse applicants with a conviction history or evict tenants when police actions involving these tenants are reported.⁹ Through data sharing agreements, law enforcement agencies can notify housing providers even when the incident takes place off the premises, resulting in an eviction.¹⁰

These housing challenges directly impact other aspects of reentry. People who are formerly incarcerated experience significantly higher rates of housing instability, which correlates with diminished employment opportunities, lower income levels, and economic insecurity, perpetuating cycles of instability and recidivism.¹¹

Public housing policies and conviction histories

PHAs occupy a unique position in addressing housing needs for people who are system-involved. Federal regulations set by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) explicitly bar people with two types of convictions from public housing: sex offenses with lifetime registration requirements and convictions for manufacturing methamphetamines on federally subsidized property.¹² Despite these limited federal restrictions, many PHAs have traditionally implemented broader exclusion policies, imposing lengthy lookback periods or blanket bans that exceed these federally mandated conviction prohibitions. In 2011, a national review of more than 300 PHA policies found that 24 agencies imposed no time limit on disqualifying conviction history, 10 agencies used a blanket seven-year lookback period, 12 used a lookback period of 10 years, and several used a lookback period of 20 years.¹³ Eleven agencies treated one or two arrests (rather than charge or conviction) within three to seven years as grounds for denial.¹⁴ More recently, Vera examined PHAs in Michigan (116) and Oklahoma (101) and reached similar conclusions: most PHAs in the study imposed lookbacks that last longer than five years, and several counted arrests, eviction records, or “patterns” of alleged misconduct—not just convictions—when screening applicants.¹⁵

Some people returning from incarceration move in with relatives. However, if those relatives live in public or subsidized housing, the arrangement may violate the lease, exposing the entire household to possible

eviction and displacement. Although these exclusionary policies are often justified as necessary to promote community safety, research suggests they may not achieve this goal effectively. A 2015 multi-site study found no statistically significant link between a conviction history and unsuccessful tenancy.¹⁶ A larger 2019 analysis of 10,500 affordable housing households reached a similar conclusion, finding that most offense categories were not associated with increased risk of negative housing outcomes such as lease violations or non-payment of rent, after controlling for observable factors.¹⁷ However, this study has limitations that constrain its generalizability. It relied on data from a small number of housing organizations in one region, used a definition of conviction history that may misclassify low-level offenses, and excluded a substantial portion of the sample due to missing data, raising concerns about bias and unmeasured influences that were not included in the analysis. Still, the findings align with a broader body of research questioning the effectiveness of blanket exclusions based on criminal records.¹⁸ In response, many scholars and advocates have urged PHAs to tailor screening narrowly, using only conviction types demonstrably relevant to tenancy and adopting reasonable lookback periods rather than “one-strike” models that limit access to housing for people with any record.¹⁹

Methodology and Data Collection

This evaluation employed a mixed-methods approach to (1) examine how the three PHAs implemented their inclusive admissions policies and (2) assess the impact of these changes. The study was conducted between 2021 and 2025. Primary data collection for this evaluation began in November 2021 and concluded in April 2025. Administrative datasets obtained from participating PHAs trace resident records back to 2018, the time period following admissions policy changes for these two PHAs (see Figure 1 on page 6 for a summary of policy changes for each PHA). More details about the timeline of data collection are discussed in “Study Sites.”

Study Sites

The evaluation focuses on three PHAs that had adopted changes to their admissions processes in recent years, offered geographic balance, had an existing working relationship with Vera, and were willing and able to share the data needed for a mixed-methods assessment. The three PHAs examined in this evaluation conduct individualized assessments that allow applicants with conviction histories to be considered for housing. While each adopted a different admission screening procedure (see Figure 1), all moved away from blanket bans of people with conviction histories and toward more nuanced evaluations. These changes occurred within distinct local contexts and timeframes, providing a comparative foundation for understanding implementation challenges and successes.

Maiker Housing Partners (Maiker) serves Adams County, Colorado, a fast-growing suburban and rural county north of Denver. Maiker operates mixed-finance developments to serve low-income households.²⁰ In 2023, Maiker reported that 39 percent of its residents had extremely low income (30 percent or less of the local area median income, as defined by HUD).²¹ Its 2017 admissions policy changes cut lifetime bans to a five-year lookback period and introduced a unanimous, three-member individualized assessment panel. Drawn from three different departments, the panel meets with any applicant flagged by the criminal history screen, conducts an interview, and weighs each case against HUD’s “substantial, legitimate, non-discriminatory” standard (See the Data sources section on page 7 for more information on data collection and sources).

Winnebago County Housing Authority (formerly known as NI ReACH) in Rockford, Illinois, comprises 297 public housing units across its developments.²² Starting in 2019 and reinforced by Illinois’s Public Housing Access Law, Winnebago County Housing Authority shortened its lookback period from five years to two, and ultimately to six months, while instituting its own individualized, case-by-case review. See the Data sources section on page 7 for more information on data collection and sources)²³

The Providence Housing Authority, in Providence, Rhode Island, operates the state’s largest PHA—2,606 public housing units across 13 developments.²⁴ In 2023, Providence reported that 72 percent of public

housing residents had extremely low income.²⁵ In 2017, the PHA board eliminated automatic denials, removed their one-strike policy, and halved its lookback period from 10 to five years from the date of conviction. See the Data sources section on page 7 for more information on data collection and sources).

Figure 1

Summary of policy changes

	Marker Housing Partners (Adams County, CO)	Winnebago County Housing Authority (Winnebago County, IL)	Providence Housing Authority (Providence, RI)
Pre-change: lookback period and approach	Up to 99 years for serious offenses, minimal chance for applicants to provide mitigating information.	Five years for most felonies, with disqualification for violent/drug offenses; few individualized considerations.	10 years for violent or drug convictions, resulting in automatic denials; arrests also weighed in disqualifications.
Post-change: lookback	<p>2017 Five-year limit for most offenses; anything older than five years typically not disqualifying.</p> <p>2021 Overhauled rules to reduce lookbacks to two years and adopt individualized reviews.</p> <p>2023 Illinois's Public Housing Access law went into effect, further reducing lookback periods to six months for all Illinois PHAs.</p>	<p>2021 Overhauled rules to reduce lookbacks to two years and adopt individualized reviews.</p> <p>2023 Illinois's Public Housing Access law went into effect, further reducing lookback periods to six months for all Illinois PHAs.</p>	<p>2017 Reduced from 10 years to five years from date of felony conviction. Eliminated lookback period for misdemeanors. Reduced lookback for "use of illegal drugs" from two years to six months.</p>
Post-change: treatment of arrests	Not considered under revised policy.	Not used as a sole basis for denial (arrests or dropped charges given "negligible weight"). ²⁶	No longer considered as grounds for denial post-2017 (previously counted as "criminal activity"). ²⁷
Post-change: individualized review process	Three-member panel assesses flagged applicants. Must be unanimous decision to deny. Applicant can present mitigating evidence.	Case-by-case review with chance to submit mitigating information. No automatic denials solely for having a record. Must show a "clear current threat" to justify denial.	Case-by-case assessment rather than blanket exclusions. Applicants with recent convictions may provide context, rehabilitation documents. Staff weighs risk vs. safety.
Key policy goals	Shift from "lifetime" lookbacks to a five-year window. Reported no increase in safety incidents post-change.	Shifted from a five-year standard to two years in 2021, then to six months in 2023. Reentry pilot showed high housing stability.	Halved the lookback period from 10 to five years. Ended automatic denials.

Key research questions

The evaluation focused on three primary research questions:

- **Implementation fidelity:** did each PHA enact the new policy as designed?
- **Policy reach and impact:** how many people with conviction histories were affected by these revised criteria, and what were the patterns in application and admissions?
- **Stakeholder perceptions and engagement:** how do PHA staff and leadership, external partners, and tenants view the policy's successes and challenges?

Data sources

The evaluation drew upon multiple data sources to triangulate findings:

- **Document review.** Vera analyzed policy documents, implementation guidelines, training materials, and procedural manuals from each PHA to understand the formal design of their inclusive admissions approaches.
- **Stakeholder interviews.** From November 2021 to January 2023, Vera researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with 30 people across four stakeholder groups:
 - **PHA leadership (five)** and **frontline employees (three)** who oversee admissions and conduct individualized assessments;
 - local stakeholders such as **public officials** and **community organizations (five)** who approved or shaped the new policy, and who support reentry efforts and provide referral or supportive needs; and
 - **housing applicants and residents (17)** who are directly affected by the shift in admissions policies, including those with and without conviction histories. This includes individuals with conviction histories who had applied for public housing and been denied, those who had applied and been accepted, and other PHA residents with no conviction history.

PHA leadership and frontline employees were recruited for interviews based on their job roles and availability. Local stakeholders were recruited for interviews in a variety of ways, including referrals from PHA leadership, residents, and other community organization leaders. Interviews with PHA leadership, PHA employees, and local stakeholders were conducted remotely via secure Zoom connection. PHA current residents without conviction histories were recruited via PHA mailing list and physical flyers posted on site. PHA applicants and residents with conviction histories were identified by the PHA administration, and Vera researchers reached out to them directly via email, phone, or physical flyers left at their front door. PHA applicants and residents were compensated for participation with a \$50 Visa gift card. Interviews with applicants and current residents were conducted in person at the respondent's home or at a public location, depending on the respondent's preference. All interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed and deidentified.

- **Administrative data.** Two PHAs provided deidentified, individual-level administrative resident data, including conviction history, tenancy history, household size, household income, demographic characteristics of the head of household, and whether the applicant went through an individualized review process. While limited in size, this data allowed Vera to evaluate the scope of the impact on these policies on tenants in these two jurisdictions, as well as the potential administrative burden on staff. It is important to note that this data is limited to approved residents, and does not include the total number of applicants over this time period, with or without a conviction history.

Figure 2

Data sources

Research Question	Document Review	Stakeholder Interviews	Administrative Data
RQ1: Has the policy been implemented as designed?	x	x	
RQ2: How many housing applicants are impacted by this change in policy?			x
RQ3: How do stakeholders view the new policy?		x	

Administrative data review

The quantitative component of this study was designed to complement the qualitative evaluation by providing a descriptive picture of residents with conviction histories at the PHAs where Vera conducted interviews. At project launch, both qualitative sites—Maiker Housing Partners and Winnebago County Housing Authority—agreed to share individual-level administrative data. During the course of the study, Colorado enacted a comprehensive consumer-data privacy statute that tightened restrictions on the transfer of any record that could be identifiable, and Maiker was no longer able to participate in the quantitative portion of the study. To preserve a two-site design, Vera researchers invited and obtained participation from a third agency, the Providence Housing Authority in Rhode Island, which maintains an individualized review policy for applicants with conviction histories. Consequently, the data that follows draws on administrative records from Winnebago County and Providence Housing Authority.

Due to the length of time captured in the data, as well as the events of interest being relatively rare, the tables that follow are intended to be purely descriptive. They contextualize the qualitative findings, illustrating basic tenancy outcomes and rates of residents with conviction histories, rather than testing hypotheses. Sample sizes are insufficient for reliable multivariate modeling, and cross-site comparisons should be read as illustrative rather than causal or generalizable to other PHAs.

Providence Housing Authority shared intake data about their tenants at the time of application, including whether each tenant had a prior eviction, whether they had a conviction on record, the age of the applicant, household size, household annual income, children under 18, as well as elderly and disability statuses. Disability status indicated that at least one household member self-identified as having a physical, mental, or developmental impairment or received disability benefits. Elderly status indicated that the head or co-head of the household was 62 years or older. Winnebago County Housing Authority also provided resident data on some key fields including successful applicants' prior eviction and conviction histories at time of application, age, number of children, and any documented instances of late rent or non-payment (see Figures 3 and 4 for more information on administrative data from each PHA).

The administrative records supplied by both Winnebago and Providence indicate that residents with conviction histories constitute only a small fraction of their total caseload. For instance, in Providence, only 59 of 1,366 residents captured within the study window (2018 to 2025) had a conviction history—approximately 4 percent. In Winnebago, the proportion was even lower: two out of 197 residents (captured between 2018 and 2024), or about 1 percent. These figures confirm that even after policy changes intended to widen access, the population directly affected remains modest relative to overall program size.

However, it is important to note that as neither PHA shared data on how many applicants were denied housing on the basis of a conviction during this period, it is difficult to determine whether the low number of housed individuals with conviction histories reflects limited applicant volume, continued barriers within the

screening process, or both. This also suggests that having a formal conviction history is only one of many ways in which formerly incarcerated people are disadvantaged. Factors such as income, limited rental history, and health needs continue to shape housing outcomes even after policy barriers are reduced, highlighting the multifaceted nature of housing disadvantage for people with conviction histories.

Figure 3. Snapshot of administrative data on Providence Housing Authority applicants, 2018–2025

Snapshot of Residents at Providence Housing Authority							
	History of Eviction	Average Age	Average Household Size	Disability Status	Elderly	Average Household Income	Any Children
No Conviction History (1,307)	55 (4.2%)	51.85 (15.97)	2.10 (1.51)	517 (39.6%)	409 (31.3%)	\$18,230.22 (16442.81)	471 (36.4%)
Conviction History (59)	2 (3.4%)	47.95 (13.70)	1.66 (1.04)	43 (72.9%)	10 (17.0%)	\$13,783.27 (8338.265)	16 (27.1%)

Captures residents who moved into the PHA from January 2018 - January 2025. Note: History of eviction at time of application. For variables shown as counts, values are presented as count (percentage). For averages, values are presented as mean (standard deviation).

Figure 4. Snapshot of administrative data on Winnebago County Housing Authority applicants, 2018–2024

Snapshot of Residents at Winnebago County Housing Authority				
History of Eviction	Average Age	Any Children	History of Late Rent or Nonpayment	
No Conviction History (195)	40 (20.5%)	51.50 (1.21)	39 (20%)	95 (48.7%)
Conviction History (2)	0	28 (5)	0	1 (50%)

Captures residents who moved into the PHA from February 2019 - December 2024. Note: History of eviction at time of application. For variables shown as counts, values are presented as count (percentage). For averages, values are presented as mean (standard deviation).

Findings

This section presents the key insights from the evaluation, organized around three main themes. First is **implementation fidelity**—how closely the PHAs’ actual practices aligned with their stated policies and the challenges that emerged during that implementation. Next is **policy reach and impact**, focusing on who benefited from these changes and what barriers limited their effectiveness. Finally, **stakeholder perceptions and engagement** highlight how different groups—from PHA staff to residents—reviewed and experienced these policy shifts. Together, these findings reveal both the promise of more inclusive housing policies and the practical challenges that must be addressed to fully realize their potential.

Comparison of PHAs

Maiker Housing Partners initiated its policy transition in 2015, led by the chief executive officer, who was granted autonomy and discretion by his board: “I was able to move in a way without a lot of political interference,” he explained. This autonomy allowed him to convene biweekly, cross-departmental workshops to systematically map existing processes that exposed how lengthy lookback periods were excluding the very residents that the PHA aimed to house. Over a two-year period, and with the April 2016 HUD guidance providing external validation, Maiker

- reduced felony lookbacks to seven years, and misdemeanor lookbacks to five years,
- replaced automatic denials with a multidisciplinary appeal panel, and

- explicitly embedded inclusive screening into organizational values.

By early 2017, the revised policy had been fully operationalized and staff who had previously expressed reservations cited successful tenancies as evidence that earlier concerns were unfounded.

Winnebago adopted a more incremental course. The executive director, drawing on operational experience and case-level knowledge of misclassified denials, leveraged external partnerships to build consensus within a board that was attentive to balancing both the safety concerns of current tenants and the needs of the reentry population. The resulting change effort reduced the lookback period from five years to two years in 2021, with an explicit commitment to reassessing the threshold after performance data was compiled. Winnebago also introduced a grievance-settlement meeting that precedes any formal hearing, which has eliminated the need for formal hearings during the first six months of policy implementation. In January 2023, after the interviews had been completed, the Public Housing Access Bill went into effect in the state of Illinois, reducing the lookback period to six months for all PHAs in Illinois.

These approaches reflect two distinct theories of change. Maiker approached their policy changes primarily as a cultural enterprise: leadership sought to embed inclusive screening within organizational identity, ensuring that values, rather than solely rules, would govern frontline conduct. Winnebago prioritized codification, aiming to construct written procedures that would “out-live the personality of the person [enforcing them].” Its emphasis on clear thresholds, structured grievance steps, and uniform staff discretion was designed to secure consistency amid staff turnover. While Maiker demonstrates how a values-led transformation can galvanize staff and sustain policy changes, Winnebago illustrates how carefully drafted rules and governance mechanisms can insulate policy from individual variance.

Notwithstanding differing governance structures and strategies, the PHA leadership at both agencies reached several parallel conclusions. First, staff apprehension diminished only after direct exposure to successful applicant outcomes. One manager remarked about their PHA, “We’re not seeing folks that have moved [through] this process demonstrating behaviors that would cause concern compared to someone without a conviction history . . . so let’s treat people with dignity and grace.” Second, neither PHA reported an increase in adverse incidents following implementation, countering initial fears of heightened risk. As one housing authority leader noted, “We got through this, and the Board and my staff saw . . . it wasn’t the end of the world. The world didn’t turn upside down.. We didn’t open the flood gates to horrific gangs and criminal activity.” Third, staff at both PHAs conceded that they still lack comprehensive data systems to track denials, appeals, and long-term outcomes, limiting their ability to quantify success of policy implementation. Finally, each PHA recognized the importance of proactive communication. Maiker’s limited outreach left some residents unaware of the revised criteria, whereas Winnebago’s comprehensive waiting list notifications and partner engagement have yet to generate the anticipated rise in applications—suggesting that psychological barriers persist even when formal policies change.

Providence Housing Authority is not included in this comparative section, as it provided quantitative data, but did not participate in qualitative interviews.

These observations frame the thematic analysis that follows.

Implementation fidelity

Unclear implementation

Throughout the housing authorities’ efforts to implement more inclusive housing policies, frontline staff reported uncertainty about how to interpret and apply new guidelines. Although the policies themselves outlined procedures for reviewing applicants with conviction histories, staff described receiving limited training on how to weigh individual circumstances or determine whether prior convictions should result in denial.

Program contradictions

In one jurisdiction, the housing authority's own Emergency Housing Voucher (EHV) procedures clashed with its otherwise more inclusive admissions policy. The PHA had already shortened its lookback period and adopted individualized reviews. Yet, for EHV applicants, it layered on a stricter conviction history screen. With an intention to increase racial equity, partnering service providers first prioritized referring people with conviction histories to the PHA, but those same residents were denied during the PHA's EHV criminal background checking process. Service providers reported submitting numerous appeals to overturn these determinations. While some denials were reversed, many eligible applicants lost access to vouchers that they had been selected for.

Organizational processes, infrastructure, and lack of performance tracking

The PHAs lacked consistent systems for measuring outcomes related to their revised policies. As one PHA leader candidly acknowledged:

I don't really feel like we've evaluated this program at all in any meaningful way. . . . I think it's the first time we actually [pulled the data together]. . . . I would need to look at the data and try to understand what we have been able to do and what haven't we been able to do to start to figure out whether or not there's something different that we should be doing.

Vera's document review confirmed that the policies did not mandate data collection and tracking, creating a significant oversight gap. Without structured methods to gather information on denials, appeals, and housing outcomes, the PHAs lacked the evidence base to refine or justify their practices. Some PHAs had begun addressing this through incremental policy revisions and additional staff training, but systematic outcome monitoring remained limited.

In sum, the experiences of stakeholders at both Maiker and Winnebago County Housing Authorities illustrate how well-intentioned changes can face obstacles when training might be inconsistent, staff are already managing heavy workloads, and systematic monitoring is not in place. The EHV initiative experience referenced above showcased how misaligned policies can produce confusion and create new barriers—even for the very applicants the program is designed to support. Going forward, clearer implementation plans, consistent data collection, and robust staff training will be critical to ensure that more inclusive housing policies truly serve system-involved people.

Policy reach and impact

Limited public knowledge

In our evaluation, interviewees with conviction histories who had been successful in obtaining public housing typically learned they may be eligible for PHA housing through informal channels rather than official communications. Most reported learning about the policy changes through word of mouth from friends or family members already living in public housing or through referrals from community organizations that facilitated the application process.

"I didn't even know that [the PHA] five years ago was allowing [people with conviction histories to live in public housing]. . . . I literally thought that I was gonna lose everything."

—PHA resident with a conviction history on the importance of clear communication

Despite Winnebago engaging in outreach on social media, through partner organizations, and to applicants on their waiting lists regarding their change in policy, there were some residents who were still uncertain about their eligibility at the time of application. One interviewee stated that he had given up on applying for public housing because his friends and family had told him he would not be eligible due to his felony. In interviews, neither Maiker nor Winnebago reported upticks in the volume of applications after the policy changes took place. None of the three PHAs reported administrative data on nonresident applicants before or after the policy change.

Even residents without conviction histories demonstrated confusion about existing policies. A tenant who served as a community committee member at their PHA incorrectly claimed that the PHA did not conduct background checks at all, while others we spoke to remained unaware of policy changes despite having lived in PHA housing for years. Several residents only learned about the policy changes during interviews with Vera researchers. One resident expressed surprise upon learning that [the PHA] permitted people with conviction histories into their building, emphasizing that the policy had not negatively impacted the community:

I didn't know that [the PHA] did this. . . . In the last five years, I haven't seen my community flooded with a bunch of people . . . my neighbors who have moved in [as a result of the policy changes] deserve it.

Missed opportunities for reunification

The consequences of unclear communication were illustrated by a resident whose terminally ill husband remained in a halfway house because she feared that his conviction history would result in her eviction. It was only after he was permitted a brief visit home, during which he passed away, that she realized he might have been eligible to live with her under the new policy.

My husband, my best friend of 25 years . . . was coming home from prison. I was willing to lose my housing for us to create a home because if he had [come] home legally, we were gonna be evicted. He was too sick [in the halfway house, so] they let him come home for a visit and he passed away when he was here. That means the world to me, but . . . I didn't know [the PHA] had changed its rules; I thought I was gonna lose everything. Our mistakes of our past [should not] define our future.

This case underscores the critical need for transparent communication about housing policies to ensure they reach and positively impact those they intend to help.

Perceived ineligibility and self-exclusion

Several system-involved people described a pervasive fear that their conviction history would automatically disqualify them from housing opportunities. This perceived ineligibility often prevented them from applying at all. "If the felony part of the application process was gone . . . put it at rest immediately. So many of us feel like the felony is gonna disqualify us for so much, we don't try to move around, we don't try to change our environment . . . just terrified of my own felony," one participant explained. Another noted, "My felony from 1997 could still put me in a homeless situation—I'm not rocking the boat, I stay grounded." This self-selection out of the applicant pool may explain why some

frontline staff observed limited changes in application patterns despite policy changes, even in the absence of restrictive screening criteria.

Given this belief in ineligibility, partnerships with trusted reentry service providers and local Continuums of Care (CoCs) are essential. These partners are often best positioned to disseminate accurate information about revised eligibility criteria and to provide individualized support that encourages potential applicants to engage with the housing process. Without intentional efforts to counteract misinformation and fear, policy change alone may not be sufficient to reach those most affected.

Appeals process burdens

Nearly all interviewees with conviction histories we spoke to described the appeals process as invasive and burdensome, requiring detailed, often stressful discussions about their past convictions. They reported feeling scrutinized and disrespected during this process and pointed out inadequate support and insensitive timing. One tenant who had been hospitalized during the appeals process said:

They kept asking and asking . . . wanted every little detail. . . . If you don't want me to move into your complex, just say so. They questioned me two days straight in the hospital, never once said, "Hey, look, why don't you get better?"

Applicants also expressed frustration at being asked to relive aspects of their past they were actively trying to move beyond. In one case, an applicant recounted being told that the PHA could not rent to them if they could not provide a full history of residential addresses for the previous seven years—something they could not recall due to housing instability. They described feeling judged for having lived in too many places and having had too many different jobs.

Both Maiker and Winnebago retained lookback periods for certain types of convictions. Applicants whose records fell within these time frames were flagged for further review and typically informed they would be denied unless they pursued an appeal. At one PHA, the applicant was explicitly asked whether they wished to proceed with an appeal; at the other, the case was automatically escalated to the appeals process. In both cases, applicants were given an opportunity to provide additional information and documentation for an individualized assessment.

This process required what was perceived as extensive documentation of rehabilitation and character references on the part of the applicant, creating barriers for applicants without strong support networks. Frontline PHA staff also acknowledged the difficulty of the appeals process, with some advocating internally for improvements. However, despite early concerns, Maiker and Winnebago did not experience substantial administrative strain from the individualized review processes. This trend was corroborated by frontline staff who reported in their interviews that there was little change in intake flow after the policy revisions. Both PHAs attributed this to assessment procedures becoming more streamlined over time, but also to the limited number of people with recent conviction histories who applied in the first place. According to administrative data on accepted residents, only two individuals with recent conviction histories moved into Winnebago housing between February 2019 and December 2024.

External community organizations and service providers often played an important role in supporting applicants through appeals, providing guidance that the PHAs themselves did not offer. Many applicants succeeded on appeal because community organizations helped them, often advocating or acting as a reference for them. This reliance on external advocacy created inequities for applicants without access to these supportive services.

Stakeholder perceptions and engagement

Overall, PHA staff and other stakeholders expressed support for the policy changes, while tenants' opinions tended to align closely with their personal experience (or lack thereof) with the criminal legal system.

Evolving institutional mindsets

PHA staff and leadership described a shift in their institutional mindset toward becoming more inclusive of people with conviction histories. Initially, leadership openly discussed their apprehensions and concerns. One leader articulated these initial reservations by highlighting institutional fears and perceptions of risk:

For other housing authorities, it's first and foremost giving them the grace to say this is scary. If you've been in this industry a long time, you may have been conditioned based on your experiences to be averse to these types of initiatives.

However, housing providers described that, over time, these reservations transformed into a recognition of PHAs' core responsibility as community anchors. Leadership described a newfound awareness of their unique position as entities capable of bridging social divides and fostering inclusivity:

This approach, this initiative, is the crux of why we exist. We're landlords, but we also have a responsibility to disenfranchised, marginalized community members to ensure they have a greater seat at the table.

Leadership further stressed the importance of their dual role of balancing landlord responsibilities with community advocacy, emphasizing the central role that PHAs play in addressing societal inequities: "We're landlords and trusted entities embedded in communities. We understand the push and pull between stakeholders and needs, which is precisely why we exist as housing authorities."

Ultimately, the decision to embrace inclusive policies was not only ethical but practical, driving stable housing outcomes and fostering organizational growth and learning: "Through this learning journey, inclusivity became cemented in our culture. We now have a lot of strong outcomes that we wouldn't have had previously."

Impacts of housing access

Participants with conviction histories described emotional, psychological, and relational impacts from housing decisions. Interviewees who had previously experienced exclusion from public housing highlighted family separation, continued institutionalization, and psychological distress. One participant described the strain housing denial placed on his marriage: "I told my wife to go live with her daughter and I'd just figure it out myself because it hurt to see her suffer. Watching her cry because I couldn't provide a roof over our heads—that hurts deeply."

Conversely, tenants with conviction histories who were able to secure housing through the new policies often expressed how stability enabled them to reclaim autonomy and pursue personal goals. "They gave me a chance. . . . They saw me as a person, not my past. That chance gave me a stepping-stone to focus on what I needed to do," one resident explained.

"We believe in people and I think that changing the policy represents that. . . . We allow people to be heard . . . and we're displaying that by our actions."

—PHA frontline staff member

Many described how housing stability created ripple effects of positive community engagement: “We all fall into holes and sometimes just need a hand up. That’s why we now help others experiencing homelessness because we’re giving back what we received.” Even some tenants we interviewed with no conviction histories shared positive anecdotes about interactions with other tenants with conviction histories. In one such interview, a tenant with no conviction history described meeting a fellow resident who had been incarcerated for 40 years and recognizing his efforts to rebuild his life: “And even talking to him, he says, ‘You know, I, I made a mistake.’ And I said, ‘Yeah, we all make mistakes and then we gotta live through those mistakes. But, it’s pretty cool, you know, you’re out doing your thing and putting your life back together.’”

Community reception

Community perceptions of the changes to PHA admissions policy were mixed across respondents. One resident described feeling discriminated against by other PHA tenants and frontline staff who, despite not being involved in their application screening process, learned of their conviction history through informal conversations and word of mouth. Residents without conviction histories expressed mixed feelings about housing people with conviction histories. Although some appreciated the second chances the policy afforded, others had reservations about safety and accountability.

Overall, the majority of residents without conviction histories saw value in giving second chances through careful, individualized screening. They emphasized the importance of transparency, rigorous evaluations, and supportive programs to facilitate successful reintegration and expressed appreciation for the policy’s balanced approach. For instance, one resident expressed support for second chances: “Everybody deserves to have a chance of having a better job, living in a better environment, living in a place that makes them feel good and safe.” Another resident, underscoring a common humanity, stated, “It’s a good opportunity for those that want to change their life around. We’re not all perfect and we all make mistakes.”

When asked about their living experiences, tenants often raised concerns about general community conditions, such as noise, maintenance issues, or interpersonal conflicts with neighbors. In one instance, a tenant associated these concerns with residents with conviction histories, though this was based on perception rather than direct evidence or experience. Overall, if complaints were expressed, they appeared to reflect broader neighborhood dynamics and common challenges in multi-unit housing rather than issues specific to people with conviction histories.

While supporting reintegration opportunities, these residents also emphasized the importance of thorough screening, particularly for violent offenses. However, most indicated trust in the PHA’s evaluation process and ability to manage potential issues: “Most people are going to go above and beyond and not return to their situation. . . . I could still live with that because I trust the eviction process.”

Recommendations

PHAs seeking to improve inclusive housing policies should take the following steps:

- 1. Develop tenant data collection and tracking mechanisms.**

The experiences recounted above highlight the importance of having structured systems in place to monitor the outcomes of inclusive screening policies. Although some PHAs have taken initial steps, such as conducting staff training and refining internal procedures, guidelines for consistent data collection remain limited. Without clear processes for tracking key data points such as denials, appeals, and outcomes upon housing placement, it becomes difficult to assess whether policies are being implemented as intended or to identify opportunities for improvement. Strengthening data infrastructure would support continuous learning and program refinement. Additionally, well-developed data tracking

would provide insights into patterns in applications, which may reveal broader information gaps, such as lack of awareness of and education regarding the policies.

2. Enhance communication about eligibility policies.

PHAs should develop comprehensive, accessible communication strategies to ensure that policy changes reach the people who could benefit from them. This communication should include clear public messaging, partnerships with criminal legal system agencies for direct referrals, and explicit outreach to current residents about reunification opportunities. This may also include partnering with other community-based organizations serving formerly incarcerated people to leverage their communication networks.

3. Make the application and appeals process more accessible.

For PHAs, detailed interviews and multiple forms of documentation ensure a thorough, defensible decision. Applicants, however, often perceived these same requirements as intrusive and burdensome. A balanced approach could keep the elements essential for careful screening while eliminating redundancies. PHAs should simplify applications, reduce repetitive paperwork, provide clearer guidance about required documents, and train staff to conduct interviews with greater sensitivity and respect. Policy changes may have little noticeable impact on the volume and composition of applicants reaching the PHA if other barriers, such as the PHA's remote location and the difficulty many low-income households face in traveling to interviews, prevent applicants from attending their eligibility appointments.

4. Implement comprehensive staff training specific to the needs of formerly incarcerated people.

At Maiker Housing Partners, leadership framed training as a vehicle for reshaping institutional identity: workshops on trauma-informed care, adverse childhood experience awareness, and “member-centered” language were designed to embed the principle that every applicant is a community member, not a liability.²⁸ By contrast, Winnebago concentrated on codifying discretion through certification courses, grievance-process drills, and written guidance. Taken together, these two models suggest that effective implementation requires both cultural orientation that enables frontline staff to internalize inclusive values and rigorous procedural instruction that helps ensure that those values are applied consistently across cases and over time. PHAs should develop standardized staff training programs that address both technical policy knowledge and the interpersonal skills needed for fair, consistent implementation. Training should cover implicit bias, trauma-informed approaches, and the evidence base regarding housing outcomes for system-involved people.²⁹

5. Promote collaborative relationships between housing authorities and community service organizations at the time of policy changes.

The evaluation revealed that external organizations often filled critical gaps in policy implementation. PHAs should formalize these relationships with community organizations, particularly those that serve formerly incarcerated people, through collaborative program design, clearly defined roles and responsibilities, and shared outcome goals. As one external stakeholder suggested, “Instead of saying, ‘We have this program; we need a housing authority, come help us,’ it probably should be, ‘Help us design this program,’ so that they have buy-in and investment.” To maximize reach and impact of policy changes, PHAs should actively cultivate partnerships with local Continuums of Care, reentry service providers, and other relevant governmental agencies. These partnerships can play a crucial role in identifying eligible applicants, addressing psychological and logistical barriers to application, and ensuring that those most in need are aware of and supported through the housing application process. Formal linkages with these partners can also enhance trust, expand outreach capacity, and support sustained alignment between housing access and broader reentry efforts in the community.

“We really need to work together in lockstep in order to make significant changes in the community and to reduce homelessness.”

—External stakeholder

This evaluation demonstrates that policy change alone is insufficient to ensure housing access for system-involved people. Although revised screening practices represent progress, their impact depends on effective implementation, clear communication, accessible procedures, and strong community partnerships. Furthermore, without reliable metrics, success remains anecdotal and there remain opportunities for evidence-based refinement. Future efforts must therefore pair policy changes with a dedicated data infrastructure so that housing authorities can demonstrate impact, calibrate practices, and strengthen the case for broader adoption.

Conclusion

The experiences documented in this evaluation offer valuable insights for PHAs—and other housing providers—considering similar changes. By addressing both the technical and human dimensions of policy implementation, housing authorities can more effectively fulfill their dual role as property managers and community anchors—ultimately supporting successful reintegration and community stability.

The PHAs in this study have taken important steps toward more inclusive housing practices, though implementation challenges remain. Their experiences highlight both the transformative potential of these policy changes and the need for careful attention to implementation details. These findings challenge the assumption that admitting people with conviction histories poses a greater risk to housing stability or community safety. The lack of evidence linking conviction histories to poor tenancy outcomes underscores the need to reevaluate exclusionary policies that may cause more harm than benefit, particularly by contributing to family separation and housing instability.

As one PHA leader reflected, these inclusive approaches represent “the crux of why we exist” as housing authorities. By continuing to refine these policies and implementation approaches, PHAs can better fulfill their mission of providing safe, affordable housing to community members, including those with conviction histories.

Acknowledgments

The work that provided the basis for this publication was supported by funding under an award from Fiscal Year 2021 from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The substance and findings of the work are dedicated to the public. The author and publisher are solely responsible for the accuracy of the statements and interpretations contained in this publication. Such interpretations do not necessarily reflect the views of the Government.

The authors would also like to thank Cindy Reed for developmental editing of the report, Lisha Nadkarni for editing the report, and James Cui for editorial support.

About citations

As researchers and readers alike increasingly rely on public knowledge made available online, “link rot” has become a widely acknowledged problem for creating useful and sustainable citations. To address this issue, the Vera Institute of Justice is experimenting with the use of Perma.cc (<https://perma.cc>), a service that helps scholars, journals, and courts create permanent links to the online sources cited in their work.

Credits

© 2026 Vera Institute of Justice. All rights reserved.

The Vera Institute of Justice is powered by hundreds of advocates, researchers, and policy experts working to transform the criminal legal and immigration systems until they’re fair for all. Founded in 1961 to advocate for alternatives to money bail in New York City, Vera is now a national organization that partners with impacted communities and government leaders for change. We develop just, antiracist solutions so that money doesn’t determine freedom; fewer people are in jails, prisons, and immigration detention; and everyone is treated with dignity. Vera’s headquarters is in Brooklyn, New York, with offices in Washington, DC, New Orleans, and Los Angeles. For more information, visit vera.org. For more information about this report, contact Kelsie Chesnut, research associate, at kchesnut@vera.org.

Suggested citation

Kelsie Chesnut and Jennifer Yang, *Expanding Public Housing Access for People with Conviction Histories: Policy Implementation and Stakeholder Perspectives* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2026).

Notes

¹ Demelza Baer, Avinash Bhati, Lisa Brooks, et al., *Understanding the Challenges of Prisoner Reentry: Research Findings from the Urban Institute's Prisoner Reentry Portfolio* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2006), 8–9, <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/42981/411289-Understanding-the-Challenges-of-Prisoner-Reentry.PDF>; and Lucius Couloute, *Nowhere to Go: Homelessness Among Formerly Incarcerated People* (Northampton, MA: Prison Policy Initiative, 2018), <https://perma.cc/T7R7-JEUB>.

² The Quality Housing and Work Responsibility Act of 1998 established a permanent ban on lifetime sex offender registrants; the Independent Agencies Appropriations Act of 1999 barred households with any member who was convicted of producing methamphetamines in public housing. See Lahny R. Silva, "Criminal Histories in Public Housing," *Wisconsin Law Review* 5, no. 4 (2015), 375–397, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2773776.

³ Marie Claire Tran-Leung, *When Discretion Means Denial: A National Perspective on Criminal Records Barriers to Federally Subsidized Housing* (Chicago: Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law, 2015), 11–12, <https://perma.cc/WFF7-SJ9U>; Amanda Geller and Marah A. Curtis, "A Sort of Homecoming: Incarceration and the Housing Security of Urban Men," *Social Science Research* 40, no. 4 (2011), 1196–1213, 1197, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/46443188>; Marta Nelson, Perry Deess, and Charlotte Allen, *The First Month Out: Post-Incarceration Experiences in New York City* (New York, NY: Vera Institute of Justice, 1999), 16, <https://perma.cc/J37Z-FSH8>; and Rebecca L. Naser and Nancy G. La Vigne, "Family Support in the Prisoner Reentry Process: Expectations and Realities," *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation* 43, no. 1 (2006), 93–106, <https://perma.cc/U7C2-XNV7>.

⁴ Baer et al., 2006.

⁵ Couloute, 2018.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Merf Ehman and Anna Reosti, "Tenant Screening in an Era of Mass Incarceration: A Criminal Record Is No Crystal Ball," *NYU Journal of Legislation and Public Policy* (2015), 1–27, <https://perma.cc/V8N3-DZ9U>.

⁸ Chidi Umez and Joshua Gaines, *After the Sentence, More Consequences: A National Report of Barriers to Work* (New York: Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2021), <https://csgjusticecenter.org/publications/after-the-sentence-more-consequences-national-report>.

⁹ Deborah N. Archer, *You Can't Go Home Again: Racial Exclusion Through Crime-Free Housing Ordinances* (Washington, DC: American Constitution Society, 2019), <https://perma.cc/99SE-7HKB>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Amanda Geller and Marah A. Curtis, "A Sort of Homecoming: Incarceration and the Housing Security of Urban Men," *Social Science Research* 40, no. 4 (2011), 1196–1213, 1197.

¹² See Lahny, 2015, 389–392.

¹³ Tran-Leung, 2015, 11–12.

¹⁴ Ibid., 18.

¹⁵ Niloufer Taber, Jacqueline Altamirano Marin, and John Bae, "Public Housing Eligibility for People with Conviction Histories," *Cityscape: A Journal of Policy Development and Research* 25, no. 2 (2023), 73–90, <https://perma.cc/QA75-8MAZ>.

¹⁶ Ehman and Reosti, 2015.

¹⁷ Cael Warren, *Success in Housing: How Much Does Criminal Background Matter?* (Saint Paul, MN: Wilder Research, 2019), <https://perma.cc/3WNQ-MNSM>. The 11 offense categories with no significant effect included marijuana possession, minor drug-related offenses, alcohol-related offenses (other than DUI), prostitution, disorderly conduct, domestic violence, other minor violence-related offenses, DUI/DWI or reckless driving, minor public order offenses (for example, loitering and trespassing), serious traffic offenses (other than DUI), other violent offenses. See Warren, 2019.

¹⁸ Tran-Leung, 2015, 2–3.

¹⁹ Rebecca J. Walter, Jill Viglione, and Marie Skubak Tillyer, "One Strike to Second Chances: Using Criminal Backgrounds in Admission Decisions for Assisted Housing," *Housing Policy Debate* 5, no. 5 (2017), 734–750, <https://perma.cc/T8VS-3H4N>.

²⁰ Mixed-finance developments combine public and private funding sources and often include both subsidized and market-rate units to serve low-income households.

²¹ Maiker Housing Partners, *A Year of Growth and Gratitude: 2023 Annual Report* (Westminster, CO: Maiker Housing Partners, 2024), <https://perma.cc/V798-8B34>.

²² U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Open Data—ArcGIS Hub, "Public Housing Authorities," dataset (Washington, DC: HUD, updated March 24, 2025), <https://hudgis-hud.opendata.arcgis.com/datasets/HUD::public-housing-authorities-1>. (Search "Winnebago County Housing Authority" under *Formal_Participant_Name* filter and refer to *Total_Units*). Winnebago County Housing Authority does not publish a resident-income breakdown, but under Section 16 of the U.S. Housing Act (42 U.S.C. § 1437n) and 24 C.F.R. § 960.202, all PHAs may admit only households below 80 percent of average median income and must reserve at least 40 percent of new admissions for extremely low-income households.

²³ Illinois SB 1367 (2023). In 2021, the Illinois General Assembly enacted the Public Housing Access Bill, which amended the Housing Authorities Act to curb blanket criminal record exclusions by PHAs. The statute limits criminal history lookback periods

to six months, requires that applicants be given an opportunity to present mitigating evidence before any adverse decisions, and bars discretionary bans that exceed the two lifetime prohibitions set by HUD. For a discussion of the Public Housing Access Bill, see Destiny Carter and Nelson Gonzalez, “Illinois Bill Makes History, Highlights Criminalization-to-Homelessness Pipeline,” Vera Institute of Justice, February 23, 2021, <https://www.vera.org/news/illinois-bill-makes-history-highlights-criminalization-to-homelessness-pipeline>.

²⁴ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2025, (Search “Housing Authority Providence” under *Formal_Participant_Name* filter and refer to *Total_Units*).

²⁵ Providence Housing Authority, *Resident Characteristics Report* (Providence, RI: Providence Housing Authority, 2023), 15, <https://perma.cc/R522-ALBL>.

²⁶ An arrest record can open a line of questioning/investigation, but cannot, by itself, influence the eligibility decision. Winnebago County Housing Authority, *Admissions and Continued Occupancy Policy*, § 3.III.D. “Screening for Eligibility” (2022), Rockford, IL.

²⁷ In the case of an unadjudicated arrest, the PHA will place applicants in a “deferred status” where the PHA will continue processing the application until the arrest has been adjudicated.

²⁸ Adverse childhood experience awareness refers to understanding how early exposure to potentially traumatic experiences—such as abuse, neglect, or household instability, can impact long-term health, behavior, and housing stability. See Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “About Adverse Childhood Experiences,” September 24, 2025, <https://perma.cc/P8T5-7WNE>. Member-centered language emphasizes dignity and inclusion by referring to applicants and residents as community members rather than using stigmatizing terms. See for example HousingPlus, “Centering the Person,” <https://perma.cc/LG52-W8AA>.

²⁹ Implicit bias refers to unconscious attitudes or stereotypes that can impact a person’s understanding, actions, and decisions. In the housing context, it can manifest as unintentional discrimination against applicants with conviction histories based on unconscious associations between conviction history and other characteristics, such as race, trustworthiness, and competence. These biases can influence screening decisions even when staff intend to be fair and objective. See Mahzarin Banaji and Anthony Greenwald, *Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People* (New York: Delacorte Press, 2013). Trauma-informed approaches recognize, understand, and respond to the effects of trauma. In housing contexts, this means designing processes that avoid retraumatizing applicants, particularly those with histories of incarceration who may have experienced significant trauma. Key principles include creating physical and emotional safety, building trust through transparency, offering choices to maximize applicant control, collaborating with applicants as partners, and recognizing cultural and historical factors that influence experiences of trauma. See Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, SAMHSA’s *Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach* (Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014), <https://library.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/sma14-4884.pdf>.