

Opening Doors: Safely Increasing Access to Public Housing for People with Conviction Histories

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Fact Sheet

Why it matters

For more than 600,000 people leaving prison and the nearly 11 million cycling through jails annually, research shows that safe, affordable housing is essential for them to succeed after they are released.¹ At present, admissions criteria across much of the country's public housing restricts people with conviction histories from either moving back in with their family members or obtaining their own housing on release. While all public housing authorities (PHAs) must, by law, place lifetime exclusions on people who are lifetime-registered sex offenders or who have been convicted of producing methamphetamine on public housing property, most housing authorities also temporarily or permanently exclude people with many other types of criminal histories, using their broad discretion when crafting screening and eviction policies. Some people with criminal histories can wait up to seven years after the dates of their convictions, and sometimes longer, before they become eligible for public housing—or they must go through a lengthy appeals process.²

In recent years, there has been growing momentum to ease restrictions around housing for formerly incarcerated individuals. In 2011, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) publicly encouraged PHAs to give formerly incarcerated people a second chance at housing by adopting policies that achieve a sensible and effective balance between allowing individuals with criminal records to access HUD-subsidized housing while maintaining the safety of all residents.³ In 2015, HUD released further guidance to PHAs stating that arrest records may not be the basis for denying admission, terminating assistance, or evicting tenants. It also emphasized that HUD does not require PHAs to adopt “one strike” policies.⁴

A number of PHAs across the country have begun to adopt policies to provide formerly incarcerated people with the opportunity to live in federally-subsidized housing more quickly than their policies had permitted in the past. Many of these PHAs have also begun programs to help such people receive reentry case management services to further aid their transitions home. Their goals in creating these policies and

programs are often the same: improving the lives of formerly incarcerated people, helping residents become self-sufficient, and keeping public housing communities safe.

In 2017, the Vera Institute of Justice (Vera) launched the Opening Doors to Public Housing Initiative to expand access to housing for people with conviction histories. For this phase of the initiative, Vera—with funding from the U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA)—has selected four sites that will receive up to 12 months of technical assistance to plan and implement reentry programs and/or change their admissions policies regarding people with conviction histories.

The goals of this BJA-funded Opening Doors initiative are to

1. safely increase access to housing for people with conviction histories;
2. improve the safety of public housing and surrounding communities through the use of reentry housing strategies; and
3. promote collaboration between public housing authorities, law enforcement agencies, and other criminal justice stakeholders to effectively reduce crime and improve reentry outcomes for people leaving prisons and jails.

Selected public housing authorities

Two individual housing authorities and two consortia of agencies were selected for this initiative. These eight public housing authorities vary in geography, the number and types of units managed, metropolitan population, and resident diversity. All of the PHAs have demonstrated a commitment to partnering with local law enforcement and other stakeholders.

These sites join a growing cadre of PHAs making similar policy and practice changes, including seven PHAs of all sizes that Vera has worked with in Asheville (NC), Kearney (NE), New Orleans, New York City, Providence (RI), Springfield (MA), Tacoma (WA), and a state agency in Colorado.⁵

The BJA-funded cohort of sites are:



Lafayette Housing Authority - Louisiana

“Housing is a key component of our criminal justice reinvestment, and certainly it is critical to establishing stability for our returning citizens. It is imperative we do everything we can to set up releasing offenders to succeed. I applaud the Lafayette Parish Criminal Justice Coordinating Committee, the Lafayette Housing Authority, and the Vera Institute for their unwavering commitment.”

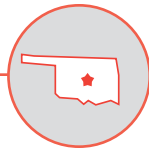
—James M. Le Blanc, Secretary, Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections



Housing Authority of the County of San Diego in collaboration with five housing authorities - California

“The San Diego County District Attorney recognizes that homelessness has a significant nexus to public safety and a key factor in reducing recidivism are wraparound services for the homeless population. The District Attorney’s Office is committed to working with local housing authorities to create solutions that are inclusive to the justice-involved population, while ensuring public safety.”

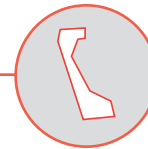
—Summer Stephan, San Diego County District Attorney



Oklahoma City Housing Authority - Oklahoma

“Increasing access to public housing for formerly incarcerated people or those with conviction histories improves safety in all our communities. Securing safe, decent housing is often a prerequisite for employment, maintaining a healthy lifestyle and managing a successful transition to becoming a contributing member of society. With Vera’s assistance, we can work collaboratively on reviewing policies and implementing programs to better serve the justice population.”

—William Citty, Chief, Oklahoma City Police Department



State consortium of five agencies led by the Delaware State Housing Authority

“We are pleased to be working with all of Delaware’s public housing authorities on this important initiative that will contribute to Delaware’s efforts on reentry and criminal justice reform. The assistance provided by the Vera Institute will help review public housing policies for Delawareans with criminal histories, with the goal of creating a family reunification program with supportive services that will lead to better outcomes.”

—Anas Ben Addi, Director, Delaware State Housing Authority

Endnotes

- 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), <https://perma.cc/KZ4V-NJ2D>; and 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), at 26-27, <https://perma.cc/4H7B-7BEL>.
- 2 Marie Claire Tran-Leung, *When Discretion Means Denial: A National Perspective on Criminal Records Barriers to Federally Subsidized Housing* (Chicago, IL: Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law, 2015), 12-14, <https://perma.cc/ZUV5-ZF2P>.
- 3 Letter from United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), to Public Housing Authority Executive Directors (Washington, DC: HUD, June 17, 2011), <https://perma.cc/9TED-GH2F>.
- 4 HUD, Office of Public and Indian Housing, *Guidance for Public Housing Agencies (PHAs) and Owners of Federally-Assisted Housing on Excluding the Use of Arrest Records in Housing Decisions: Notice PIH 2015-19* (Washington, DC: HUD, November 2, 2015), <https://perma.cc/X3U7-EX8N>.
- 5 See for example John Bae, Kate Finley, Margaret diZerega, and Sharon Kim, *Opening Doors: How to Develop Reentry Programs Using Examples from Public Housing Authorities* (New York: Vera Institute of Justice, 2017), <https://perma.cc/7ZJ6-HHPB>.

For more information

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The Vera Institute of Justice is a justice reform change agent. Vera produces ideas, analysis, and research that inspire change in the systems people rely upon for safety and justice, and works in close partnership with government and civic leaders to implement it. Vera is currently pursuing core priorities of ending the misuse of jails, transforming conditions of confinement, and

ensuring that justice systems more effectively serve America’s increasingly diverse communities. For more information, visit www.vera.org.

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