

The Issue

For many persons with chronic health and/or mental health challenges, serving time, being homeless, and returning to jail or prison is a familiar cycle. Every year, over 650,000 people are released from prisons and more than 7 million individuals are released from jails in the United States.¹ Nationally, about 54% of homeless persons in shelter report histories of incarceration—49% report previous time spent in jail and 18% report previous time spent in prison.² In addition, 16 percent of inmates in federal prison have mental health problems, and 27 percent of federal inmates have substance dependence or abuse.³ More often than not, people leaving incarceration return to impoverished communities with inadequate safety-net institutions (such as hospitals, clinics, shelters, and public agencies) that are struggling to meet the needs of this growing population. In addition, the longstanding fragmentation of health care, social service, and housing delivery systems seems to exacerbate these problems, rather than improve them.

By providing housing and services that are often difficult for formerly incarcerated people to access upon release, supportive housing can provide a meaningful opportunity for stability for those whose untreated chronic health, mental health, and addiction problems would otherwise likely lead to a quick return to homelessness, relapse, and/or recidivism. A growing body of evidence suggests placing people in supportive housing, as opposed to jail or prison, provides more efficient use of scarce public resources; improvement in human condition and outcomes; and enhancement of public safety.

The Solution: Re-Entry Supportive Housing

The essential model of supportive housing – affordable housing closely linked to coordinated supportive services – works well for people exiting incarceration with complex needs, people with mental illness, substance use, and/or chronic health conditions. However, when providing supportive housing to people involved in the justice system, communities and housing and service providers must consider the unique needs of these individuals in shaping effective responses.

- **Adapting the Services Strategies:** For previously incarcerated people, additional considerations to be factored into the services strategy include:
 - Conducting jail and prison “in-reach” to engage and develop relationships with people who are still incarcerated.
 - Providing an initial burst of very intense services to engage and stabilize the person immediately upon release.
 - As appropriate, engaging parole, probation, law enforcement and courts as part of the service team
 - Screening in people with criminal backgrounds (often counter-intuitive to housing providers, but essential).
 - Offering peer support services that model transformation from criminality to successful re-entry.
- **Creating Appropriate Housing Models:** A number of different housing models and strategies can work for re-entry supportive housing, including tenant-based approaches that provide rental subsidies to enable tenants to live in scattered or clustered housing, single site congregate housing, or housing set-aside within affordable developments. However, there are considerations to be considered that are unique to this population. Because of the real or perceived risk of the justice involved population, housing providers may mitigate risk (real and/or perceived) by providing a rent loss reserve fund to limit financial risk. In addition, unlike traditional supportive housing models, re-entry supportive housing may include terms on the length of tenancy and conditions of probation or parole as part of the service approach.
- **Engaging Partners and Programs:** In creating supportive housing for individuals leaving prison and jail, stakeholders may need to engage new partners, including state and local corrections, court systems, District attorneys, law enforcement, employment agencies, veterans agencies, and children and family services.

Mainstreaming Re-Entry Supportive Housing

While many states and local communities across the country are developing comprehensive re-entry plans, they often do not include plans for supportive housing. Among critical components to integrating supportive housing into comprehensive re-entry strategies are the following:

- Wherever possible, conducting data matching and integration efforts to quantify the scale and scope of the intersection and overlap of people with histories of incarceration, homelessness, mental illness, and other disabling conditions
- Developing or using existing mechanism for inter-agency collaboration that will provide a venue for planning, financing, implementing, and providing oversight for an initiative.
- Drafting a memorandum of understanding or similar commitment to a written plan that outlines the roles and expectations of public and community partners.
- Committing to collaborate with corrections, housing, and human service agencies to identify and secure resources to support a pilot program (with the scope to be determined based on jurisdiction).
- Agreeing to use (or allow the use of) existing funding or contracts to make investments in re-entry supportive housing for defined target population(s).
- Building and supporting a network of providers in the community willing and capable of effectively serving the target population, including direct in-reach and other efforts to connect people from jail or prison to the community

Current Opportunities

Significant opportunities are emerging to increase and expand the role of re-entry supportive housing at the local, state, and national levels. Just a few of opportunities ahead include the following:

- **Passage of the Second Chance Act:** This Act authorizes grants to government agencies and nonprofit groups to provide numerous services that can help reduce recidivism and violations of probation and parole. The Act addresses supportive housing in a number of ways, including:
 - Using grant funds to provide housing directly or assist people in securing housing from the private market or other housing programs.
 - Requiring states to address housing in their strategic plan and monitor housing
- **Mentally Ill Offender Treatment and Crime Reduction Act (MIOTCRA) Grants:** The Department of Justice recently announced grantees for 2008 that will provide resources to communities to plan and implement efforts to better serve mentally ill people in the criminal justice system. The program was reauthorized in 2008 and there are many opportunities for supportive housing to complement efforts under this program.
- **Prevention and Viable Alternatives to Incarceration:** The proliferation of specialty courts (mental health court, community court, etc.) and other diversion efforts have led to more demands for resources and housing in the community to “divert people to.” These new courts and diversion programs create an intercept point for engagement with people in the criminal justice system.

¹ Bureau of Justice Statistics, (2007). “Prison Inmates at Midyear 2007.”

² Burt, Martha R.; Aron, Laudan Y.; Douglas, Toby; Valente, Jesse; Lee, Edgar; Iwen, Britta; “Homelessness: Programs and the People they Serve – Findings of the National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients”, Interagency Council on the Homeless.

³ Bureau of Justice Statistics, (2006). “Mental Health Problems of Prison and Jail Inmates.”