The Returning Citizen:  
Turning to the Community for Reentry Housing  
Collaboration between Public Housing Authorities and Civil Society to Promote Reintegration  
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Abstract
What can the average citizen do for the nine million men and women who are released from prisons and jails each year? Caring for returning citizens in a time of mass incarceration when the United States holds 25 percent of the incarcerated population and three out of four incarcerated people are rearrested within five years can seem to be a daunting and unrelated task for civil society. As issues of mass incarceration and reintegration are brought to the forefront of public discourse, it can be easy to look solely to the Bureau of Prisons to fix the broken transition from incarceration to freedom. However, being a neighbor to the returning citizens in our communities, churches, businesses, and neighborhoods is more essential than many realize. People of faith have a unique opportunity and responsibility to extend hospitality to returning citizens in the United States. Safe and supportive housing for men and women as they come home from incarceration is absolutely essential to their successful reentry, and improving the reentry process to keep returning citizens from returning to prison requires an integrated effort from individuals alongside government and civil society institutions.

Editor's Note: The following article includes excerpts from the forthcoming 2019 Hatfield Prize (formerly the Student-Faculty Research Prize) reports, an annual student-faculty research prize for undergraduate Christian scholars. Prize winners incorporate faith with academic scholarship, pursuing today’s pressing social challenges through a public justice framework which recognizes the unique roles and responsibilities of government and civil society. You can read the entire 2019 Hatfield Prize report in September at www.SharedJustice.org.
Why Housing is Important for Returning Citizens

“Coming home” means something different to everyone, but for the nine million men and women who will be released this year from prison, returning “home” might not include a warm welcome from the neighborhood or a physical house. In the United States, when one person is incarcerated, it affects the whole community. Families are pulled apart as mothers and fathers disappear, workplaces are drained of their talent, school funding is depleted, and homes are foreclosed or left vacant. As returning citizens come home from prison and begin reintegrating into their families, neighborhoods, and workplaces, this transition back into the community can be awkward and unsettling. Statistics show that upon release, 36.8 percent of returning citizens experience recidivism, or are rearrested within the first six months of civilian life, 56.7 percent within the first year, and 76.6 percent within the first five years of their release.

While there are several contributing factors to recidivism and interconnected components to successful reentry, supportive housing is particularly important because of the way it supports the many aspects of the returning citizen’s life. A home not only provides shelter, but it gives the returning citizen a permanent address in order to apply for jobs, receive mail, promote community, and provide a space for families to reconnect and reestablish relationships.

The first few years of transition for men and women returning from prison are extraordinarily difficult. While it might seem that everything should return to “normal” after the returning citizen has served time and paid his or her dues to society, many returning citizens find themselves homeless, unemployed, socially disconnected, under-resourced, and struggling to cope mentally. During the transition when returning citizens should be focusing on adjusting to their new lives, re-establishing family and community connections, and searching for employment, many must concern themselves with securing basic shelter and spend copious amounts of time and energy to find landlords in the private market who will rent to someone with a criminal record. According to statistics, the first few years after release, anywhere from 10 to 20 percent of returning citizens will become homeless at some point, while many others will face substantial obstacles as they try to secure suitable housing arrangements and make payments. Those who become homeless during this transition are 11 times more likely to be reincarcerated. This reality is the symptom of a failing reentry system that cannot effectively rehabilitate and reintegrate returning citizens back into society. While access to shelter cannot single-handedly solve mass incarceration, accessible, holistic, and stable housing can provide a sense of normalcy for returning citizens and ease the difficult transition from incarceration to successful reentry in a newly established life.

A Public Justice Perspective on Housing for Returning Citizens

The Center for Public Justice (CPJ) recognizes the role of government, but also the role of civil society (churches, faith-based organizations, citizens) to aid in promoting justice. CPJ has published guidelines that help Christian citizens view the role of government and civil society through a public justice lens. The CPJ guideline on welfare states that “the call to be a “neighbor” – to help those who are in need – is addressed to all people and all institutions. Receiving assistance should enable those in need to reach or return to self-sufficiency and be in a position to help others.” As Christian believers, the call to love and care for our neighbors and those in need is explicitly given in Matthew 22:36-40. Working to ensure that returning citizens have available housing is part of our Christian mandate to love our neighbor.
While it is recognized that the responsibility for housing returning citizens does not solely fall on the government, there are some functions that are under the purview of the government. CPJ’s guideline on welfare goes on to note that government has a role in addressing poverty, and one way that is should do that is by ensuring access to effective education, good health care, and decent housing.

Promoting flourishing among citizens requires adequate and decent housing. To that end, government agencies partner with non-profit organizations like Habitat for Humanity, Interfaith Neighbors, and others to assist individuals in securing decent and affordable housing. These types of partnerships show that government, along with institutions of civil society have a shared responsibility to care for our nation’s disadvantaged citizens, including returning citizens.

**Barriers to Housing**

Unfortunately, returning citizens often face great barriers when it comes to accessing housing. While they are frequently strapped for resources before incarceration, upon release, returning citizens find themselves in a dire situation with gaps in employment histories, unsteady income, a criminal record, and, often, poor credit records. They are often in debt, required to pay restitution, and unemployed. As a result, they struggle to meet financial eligibility requirements set by landlords. Although landlords are not allowed to implement blanket policies that deny rental applications to anyone with a criminal record under the Federal Fair Housing Act, landlords can reject applicants based on their specific criminal record. Individuals seeking to purchase a house with a criminal record are often charged higher interest rates than those without a criminal record.

**Public Housing Assistance**

The financial instability of many returning citizens, combined with their limited connections and criminal records often inhibit or prevent returning citizens from participating in the housing market. Thus, returning citizens must resort to alternative sources to secure shelter, ranging from homeless services, government programs, and halfway houses that can facilitate the reintegration process.

Housing assistance comes primarily from two sources: the government, through the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and civil society institutions. HUD provides housing assistance to five million Americans annually through public housing, Housing Choice Vouchers (HCV), subsidies for future homeowners, and emergency housing assistance grants for individuals and families in crisis. Of the housing programs that HUD provides, public housing is one of the primary forms of temporary housing services with the potential to support low-income returning citizens as they transition into civilian life. HUD provides 1.3 million households with federally owned public housing apartments and houses that are specifically leased to low-income renters. The federal government acts as the landlord, and tenants pay a reduced rental rate that can range from $0 to 30 percent of their adjusted gross income. Tenants can receive housing as long as they continue to meet eligibility requirements. In cases of mental illness and disability, public housing can also function as a long-term housing arrangement.
Most public housing units are owned by a local Public Housing Authority (PHA) that manages the housing units. The local PHA conducts a background check on qualified applicants to verify the applicant will be a good tenant, and according to HUD, “will deny admission to any applicant whose habits and practices may be expected to have a detrimental effect on other tenants or on the project’s environment.” PHAs make home visits to the applicant’s place of residence before approving applications and are given significant discretionary power to determine eligibility based on local PHA indicators.

**Public Housing Eligibility and Barriers**

Not surprisingly, many returning citizens are not considered to be “good tenants” because of their criminal records and are subsequently denied access to public housing. While PHAs can use their discretion to approve or deny housing assistance to applicants with a record, there are several felonies that can disqualify a returning citizen for life. If applicants are registered sex offenders or have been convicted of selling, producing, or using methamphetamine near public housing facilities, they are automatically disqualified. Beyond these two disqualifications, each PHA sets its own regulations and restrictions, many of which deny housing to many men and women with a criminal record and prevent them from dwelling with their families that live in public housing.

If a returning citizen qualifies for public housing, there is little guarantee that there will be appropriate housing available within a timely manner. Public housing is extremely limited and the average waitlist ranges from 9 to 19 months. During this waiting period, low-income returning citizens are very vulnerable and are more likely to experience recidivism.

Public housing is an important social service that HUD can provide for returning citizens, but current public housing policies are not inclusive or supportive for that population. However, there are certain policy changes HUD can implement at the federal level to support the restoration and reintegration of returning citizens, protect them from discrimination, and uphold their human dignity. In some cases, it may be appropriate for HUD to provide stricter guidance to local PHAs to ensure that returning citizens are receiving equitable and dignifying treatment.

**Recommendations for HUD to Improve Public Housing Access**

1. **PHAs could discontinue using records of arrest to determine housing eligibility, deny housing access, and evict tenants.**

   HUD must be careful to monitor seemingly neutral policies and practices that could be racially and socioeconomically discriminatory. It is critical that each of PHA’s eligibility restrictions is based on legitimate concerns for safety that are communicated transparently and supported by data instead of assumptions. Roughly one third of Americans and half of African-Americans have a criminal record. More than 75 percent of these records, however, are from arrests and not convictions. When PHAs have policies or practices that deny housing access to people with any kind of record, or evict current tenants because of an arrest, this can actually discriminate against minority populations. In 2016, HUD released a new guideline for PHAs that prohibits them from solely using a record of arrest to determine housing eligibility. While this is an important step for HUD, histories of arrest are still used as supplemental information to determine eligibility, even though an arrest does not indicate guilt and is not legitimate grounds for incarceration. If the tenant has a criminal record and is arrested while residing in public housing, this can permanently
disqualify the tenant from receiving public housing, even if there was no conviction. If the arrested individual is residing with family, the family can be evicted as well.

2. **HUD could consider easing general eligibility requirements that restrict returning citizens from returning to their families who are receiving housing assistance.**

While HUD has relatively few eligibility restrictions for returning citizens on a national scale, individual PHAs can have quite extensive eligibility requirements that prevent many returning citizens from dwelling with their families in public housing. Since the majority of returning citizens have a non-violent criminal record, less restrictive eligibility requirements from PHAs would open up additional opportunities and increase access to stable housing. In 2013, for example, HUD advised the PHA of New York City to loosen its public housing restrictions for individuals with criminal records. Before the PHA of NYC started this pilot program, family members living in public housing units were unable to be reunited with their returning loved ones due to harsh stipulations that prevented the cohabitation of public housing recipients and their returning family members. Some returning citizens had resided in public housing units before their incarceration and found themselves homeless and socially isolated upon release. The pilot program was successful, and after two years, only one individual out of the 84 participants was convicted of a new crime. The success of this program was not solely due to the reduced eligibility restrictions but was also linked to the cross-sector collaboration between reentry organizations and corrections officers that was part of the program. Tenants were connected to social services, counseling, and other community development programs that helped support their reintegration process.

3. **Local PHAs that deny services to particular groups on the basis of their offenses can create an alternative housing plan that addresses these populations.**

In addition to denying public housing to registered sex offenders and those involved in the production of methamphetamines, each local and state PHA has its own set of rules that can deny housing access to larger segments of the returning population.[2] While it is reasonable to deny public housing to registered sex offenders for safety concerns, these individuals will still need housing upon release. A failure to address the needs of this population, and others like it, fails to affirm their human dignity and address the well-being of the entire community. If nothing is done, the nonaction may ultimately enable deviant behavior in cases where the alternative housing solution is disruptive or harmful. HUD needs to consider alternative forms of housing assistance and plan for these populations to improve the likelihood of successful reintegration and reduce the probability of recidivism. These alternatives could be generated in collaboration with local and national NGOs focused on specific populations of returning citizens. New Person Ministries, located in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, is an example of a nongovernmental organization that provides housing, professional development, and spiritual counseling to returning citizens with serious crimes that disqualify them from receiving housing from HUD. While New Person Ministries does not currently receive any government funding, close collaboration between HUD and organizations like New Person Ministries would strengthen both public housing and reentry systems.
4. HUD can develop a housing assistance program that specifically addresses the needs of men and women with a criminal record in cities with large populations of returning citizens and high rates of recidivism.

Given the unique housing barriers that returning citizens face in meeting eligibility requirements and their particular needs and challenges, HUD should develop a program that specifically works with returning citizens and the civil society organizations that serve them to reduce recidivism and improve the reintegration process as they transition to the private housing market. Especially in a city like Philadelphia with high rates of incarceration and a closed public housing waitlist, PHAs must make an intentional commitment to addressing the needs of returning citizens within the first few years when they are most at risk of experiencing recidivism. This may require close collaboration with the Bureau of Prisons, housing market, and civil society institutions that have experience working with people with a record. HUD can use its network of connections and funding to partner with relevant social services and community organizations to make sure that the needs of low-income returning citizens are met in a holistic manner. The time-sensitive response to the housing needs of returning citizens by a department of professionals who understand their needs could best address this population. While some PHAs have implemented successful trial programs that work specifically with returning citizens to provide them with either public housing or Housing Choice Vouchers, the breadth of the programs is generally small, and HUD has not yet implemented any sort of nationwide initiative.

Community-based Reintegration

Given the rich diversity of our American communities and the complex challenges that returning citizens face, solutions to housing for returning citizens must be equally complex and especially innovative as demographics within communities change. Solutions must be community-based as civil society and government learn to address the particular strengths and needs of each city and collaborative as more civil society institutions become involved with reintegration. HUD can continue to implement guidelines and policies, as well as promote programs and block grants that support returning citizens and their families. Strategic partnerships between government, local churches, faith-based organizations, nonprofit organizations, and businesses can contribute to restoring dignity to returning citizens, reducing recidivism, and creating healthier communities.

Looking Forward: Community-based Solutions

Every community member can play a part in the reentry process for a returning citizen. People of faith have the unique ability and calling to treat returning citizens as inherently valuable human beings created in the image of God. People are called to love their neighbor, not because their neighbor is particularly good or deserving, but because the image of God is in their neighbor. This extends to every person—those with a criminal record and those without, and the affirmation of the human dignity of the neighbor is actualized within community.

David Garlock, a formerly incarcerated person and advocate for criminal justice reform, stresses the importance of this kind of support for returning citizens. After he was released from prison, Garlock was fortunate to have a network of supportive community members who aided in his transition.
“It was a seasonal group of people that poured into me and wanted to see me succeed. They wanted to be a part of my life and the transition in where I’m going. It’s like the african proverb: it takes a village to raise a child... it takes a village for a returning citizen to be successful,” said Garlock.

Since supportive communities are essential to successful reentry for returning citizens, and since civil society institutions are vast and diverse, there are many ways that individuals can promote successful reentry for returning citizens through their businesses, organizations, coalitions, churches, and communities. Formerly incarcerated pastor Jon Kelly is a compelling example of how church communities can be a transformative power for returning citizens. His church is decidedly not another social service agency; it is a prophetic ministry of transformation that addresses whole persons and whole communities. Kelly’s church takes a four-step approach that encourages its congregation members to get to know the demographic of returning citizens in their community, including identifying where the closest prisons are located, how many returning citizens come home annually, how old they are, what their needs are, and which churches already provide them with resources and welcome them into their community. With this understanding, congregation members are to invest deeply into the lives of a few returning citizens by sharing meals together, assisting in finding employment, providing housing with a spare bedroom, or watching their kids on date-night.

As citizens, neighbors, and people of faith, civil society must take seriously the challenges that their formerly incarcerated neighbors are facing and pursue just solutions as a community. While there are serious adjustments that HUD can and should implement to make public housing more supportive and inclusive for returning citizens, there is much to be done simultaneously by civil society. Each community member has the opportunity and responsibility to promote the reintegration, reconciliation, and the revitalization of communities to ensure that upon release, every returning citizen can truly come home.

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