

Housing and Community Reintegration in Contra Costa County

A REPORT BY THE SAFE RETURN PROJECT



About the **Safe Return Project**

The Safe Return Project is a participatory research and action initiative led by a group of formerly incarcerated Richmond residents carrying out research, community organizing, and policy advocacy to improve community reintegration after incarceration. The Safe Return Team advances community health and safety by engaging formerly incarcerated and other community members in developing solutions to address the challenges facing residents coming home. The Safe Return Project ensures that critical information and voices from the people with direct experience of what it takes to successfully reintegrate will inform policies and programs supporting this community. The Safe Return Project was launched in 2010 through a partnership of the Pacific Institute, Contra Costa Interfaith Supporting Community Organization (CCISCO), and the Richmond Office of Neighborhood Safety.

About this **Report**

This report was co-authored by Andres Abarra, Clarence Ford, Charles Newsom, Eyal Matalon, Eli Moore, Jonathan Perez, LaVern Vaughn, Johnny Valdepena, and Tamisha Walker. The report is part of a series that shares the research and recommendations arising from Safe Return's data collection and engagement with thousands of community members, service providers, elected officials, technical experts, and others. Each report focuses on a critical aspect of community reintegration in Contra Costa County. In addition to this report, the other topics in the series are:

- Rebuilding Family and Community Ties
- Employment and Community Reintegration
- Public Benefits and Essential Reentry Services
- Access to Quality Health Services after Incarceration
- Mass Incarceration and Community Reintegration
- Community Reintegration and AB109 Realignment

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About the **Safe Return Survey**

In 2011 the Pacific Institute and the Safe Return Team designed and conducted an extensive survey of formerly incarcerated residents of West Contra Costa County. The survey instrument included 144 questions that were created by the Safe Return Team or adapted from the Returning Home survey instrument developed by the Urban Institute.¹ We surveyed 101 individuals over age 18 who were on parole or felony probation. All had been released from incarceration within the previous 3-18 months. Interviews were conducted outside the parole and probation offices in Richmond, CA, and on-site at a transitional housing facility. Respondents signed informed consent forms and were provided with a gift card as a thank you.

Acknowledgments

This report reflects the insight of thousands of people affected by and involved in the issues. All those who have participated in Safe Return leadership meetings, public forums, focus groups, campaigns, and one to one interviews have shaped our views and made this work possible. We are also thankful for the specific input on this report provided by Michelle Rodriguez, Rhody McCoy, Catalina Garzón, Linda Evans, Willie Hicks, Devone Bogan, Sam Vaughn, Adam Kruggel and Sal Vaca.



Special thanks to the graduates of the Collective Impact Institute, 2014, for your inspiration and leadership



What is at Stake: Housing and Community Reintegration

Finding a secure place to sleep is often the foremost concern the first night out of a correctional institution. Lack of a stable home and address is not only a housing issue, but also creates obstacles to obtaining a job, developing positive relationships, and avoiding re-incarceration. Research has found that housing is a "platform" for successful reintegration after incarceration².

In the immediate term, the most available housing arrangement might be with a friend or family member—indeed, surveys of individuals a few months out of prison found that most stay with relatives or acquaintances in the period immediately after release³. In the long term, the most suitable housing arrangement will depend on the circumstances of the individual. Formerly incarcerated persons who have healthy family relationships would greatly benefit from being able to stay with parents, siblings, partners, or children. Those struggling with substance abuse may be best supported by a well-run residential treatment program. Renting or leasing housing on the public or private market may be the best option for individuals with greater self-sufficiency. Whatever the arrangement, procuring housing is integral to the reintegration of formerly incarcerated individuals in their communities.

Given that most formerly incarcerated individuals do not have a steady source of income upon release, the *affordability* of housing is crucially important. Most criteria for affordability say housing costs should amount to no more than 30% of household income; those who stay under 30% are more likely to have sufficient funds for meeting other basic needs, such as food and healthcare⁴. Indeed, adults who pay for housing beyond their means have been shown to be in poorer health than those living in affordable housing⁵. Housing *stability* is equally vital as frequent moves, overcrowded conditions, and evictions all contribute to stress, depression, and general hopelessness⁶. Finally, all individuals should have access to a healthy home environment. A healthy home, one that is physically comfortable and up-to-code and whose residents are mutually supportive, can go a long way in offering stability to the formerly incarcerated⁷.

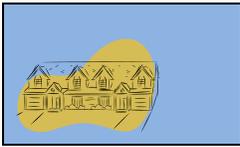
Parolees returning to New York City who had some form of housing were **seven times** less likely to abscond than those who had shelter⁸. Supportive housing programs in particular—those that offer subsidized rent alongside a range of social services and peer support—have been shown to significantly improve the odds of reintegration. Residents of supportive housing, especially those with a history of residential instability or mental illness, are not only more likely avoid re-

incarceration but also experience fewer visits to the emergency room and inpatient hospital stays⁹. This strong link between access to housing and lower recidivism has inspired some to call housing a “platform” for successful reintegration.

A survey of residents returning to Contra Costa County from jails and prisons showed that in the first month after release 21% lived in a short-term shelter or were homeless.¹⁰ The cost of this extreme instability is not only felt by the individual. Emergency shelter housing is generally just as expensive as or more costly than providing transitional or permanent housing, and individuals that become homeless are more likely to use high cost health services and less likely to receive regular and preventative care that would help normally help reduce such costs.¹¹ Reentry housing is an important priority for healthy, safe communities with the resources necessary to address their own needs.

In My Own Words

My name is Misty Valdepena. I am married to Johnny Valdepena, a formerly incarcerated resident of Richmond. In 2013 when the housing list for Richmond opened and was accepting applications, my husband I quickly submitted ours. Because of our income status and three small children, we knew that we would be accepted. We planned on moving into a home that we could afford and would be a decent size for our family. We then waited for nearly six months for a response from the City Housing Authority for a decision. In late August of 2013 we received a letter of denial from the City of Richmond for our housing application. My husband and I were devastated. I have never heard of someone in the situation I was in being denied help. I was low income, going to school, had three small children and my husband was no longer on parole. Why would they deny me? Soon after receiving my denial letter, I called the City Housing Authority and after getting no response for a few weeks, I finally made contact with someone. I was told that due to my husband's criminal history, my family had been denied the help that we so desperately needed. My hope in writing this letter is that no other family will have to feel like there is no help. Men and women should be able to come home to their children and spouses after incarceration without the fear of being kicked out of their homes. I feel that if more families had easier access to housing programs, it would take one more worry out of their day to day lives. Men and women will be able to focus more on their children and finding work. Our crime rate will also drop because the formerly incarcerated will not be out there in the streets struggling to get by without family support.

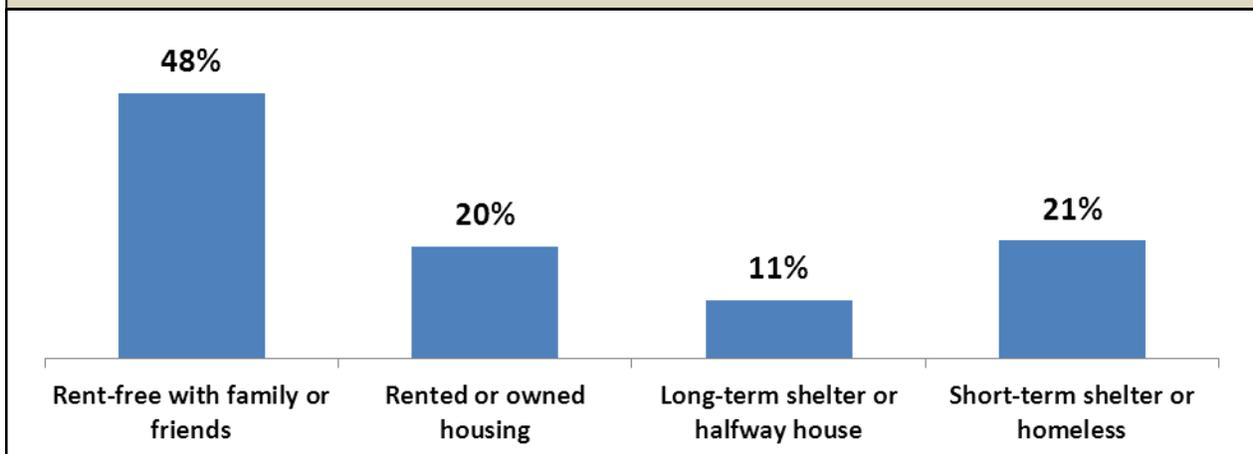


Current Housing Needs and Opportunities

Stable housing is essential for obtaining employment, rebuilding relationships with family and community, and other components of reintegration. Some 69% of people coming home to West Contra Costa County rely on short-term solutions – staying with family or friends or at homeless shelters. This rate may be higher now given that the survey was carried out before Realignment, and the shift of people from parole to probation means fewer people have access to the greater transitional housing options available to parolees. The county probation department reported in September 2012 that 90% of people on AB109 probation had housing. This higher rate included people staying at homeless shelters, and others with unsustainable and inhumane arrangements, such as an individual who was living in a tool shed. The County Reentry Strategic Plan estimates housing needs at 30% to 50% of the reentry population.

Findings from the Safe Return survey paint a troubling picture of housing insecurity among formerly incarcerated residents. In their first month after release, the majority of respondents did not have stable housing. Nearly half of all respondents were staying rent-free with family or friends, a typically unstable arrangement. One of every five respondents said they were homeless or stayed in short-term shelters during their first month out. Of the 31% of respondents who did have stable housing during that period, the majority stayed in a room, apartment, or house they rented or owned and the rest were residents in a long-term shelter. Additionally, one third of respondents had lived in at least three different places since their release from prison or jail.

Individuals returning to Richmond from incarceration face several significant barriers to stable and affordable housing. The majority do not receive any housing-related counseling or support prior to release and may not even know where they will stay their first night out. In fact, 22% of respondents reported that they could not find a safe place to sleep during their first three days after release. Without income from a job or any significant savings, many try to find the least expensive housing option. Nearly 3 in 4 survey respondents said they did not have enough money to pay for rent, a deposit, or even a credit check. Over half of Richmond renters pay 30% or more of their gross income toward housing costs,¹² meaning that lack of affordability and living-wage jobs is a problem for many residents, and this problem is even more of an obstacle for someone returning from incarceration with limited employment options.

Figure 1: Living situation of in the first month after release (94 respondents).

However, those who turn to subsidized housing often encounter a lengthy and cumbersome application process and long waiting lists. Many individuals need support navigating the public housing system or assistance with filling out an application, but are unlikely to receive any during or after their incarceration. Even more are turned away by eligibility requirements barring those on probation or parole or with a past conviction. The Richmond Housing Authority's (RHA) Housing Choice Voucher program expressly prohibits individuals who are on parole or probation, who are registered sex offenders, or who have a drug-related or violent criminal history in the past three years¹³. In other words, all the survey respondents (who were all on probation and parole) were ineligible to receive RHA housing vouchers at the time of the survey and many will continue to be disqualified for years to come. And even when individuals become eligible for a voucher, they often have to deal with months or years of waiting between qualifying and actually receiving a voucher. The ban on housing subsidies for drug offenders extends not only to tenants but also to their guests and families who by providing shelter individuals with a drug conviction face risk of eviction from their home.

For those individuals who are not categorically banned from public housing or the Housing Choice Voucher program, housing authorities have a high amount of discretion when determining whether someone receives housing resources. Budget constraints for housing programs at the federal level may play a role in whether local housing authorities are willing to place a formerly incarcerated person in public housing, if the housing authority deems that not enough supportive services are able to be offered in public housing to accommodate a reentering resident with such needs. While there is an appeals process for denials to public housing requests, residents may not always be aware of or feel empowered to be a part of such a process.

Another source of publicly subsidized housing are the affordable housing units built in Richmond through programs such as the Low Income Housing Tax Credit program, the HOME Investment Partnerships program, the Community Development Block Grant program, and

many other small federal programs. These units are usually available to community members based on certain income brackets, and their admissions policies vary—some are less concerned with criminal background, while others may prohibit returning citizens and maintain obscure appeals processes.

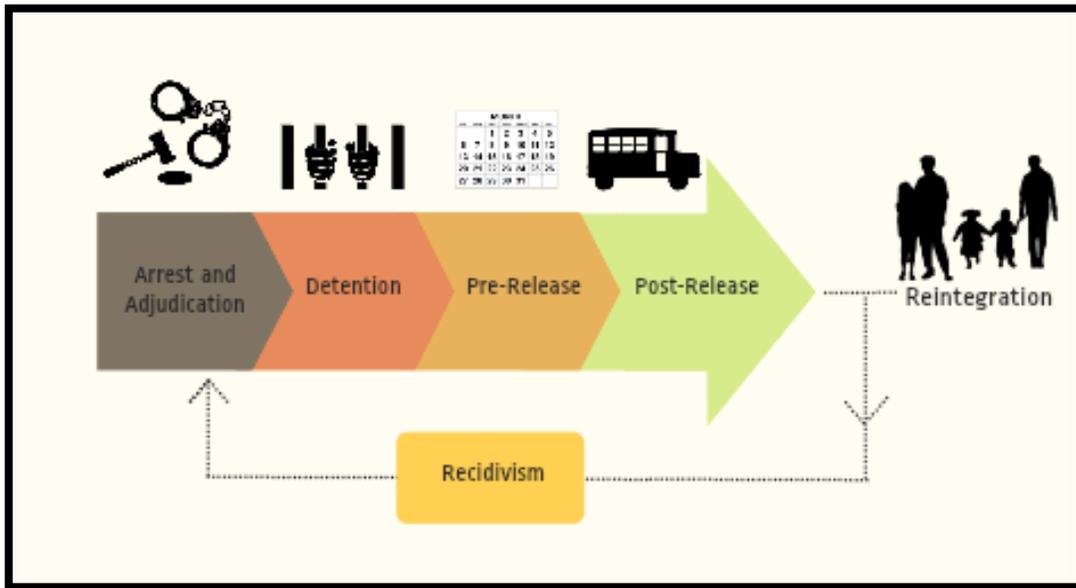


Figure 2. Phases in the Reentry Process

Formerly incarcerated individuals who seek out supportive housing or a bed in a long-term shelter will find that their options are limited. Currently, the only transitional housing in the Greater Richmond Area is for individuals in recovery from substance abuse, though more resources may be developed through AB 109 community housing allocations. Currently, many programs have limited space and cannot meet demand. This also leaves no transitional housing options for the estimated 33% of formerly incarcerated individuals who do not have substance abuse problems. Some community members report being so desperate for housing they got inebriated and presented themselves to a residential program, despite no need for a recovery program.

In addition to the resources listed below, reentering Richmond residents may seek lodging at any of a number of homeless shelters within Contra Costa County, but these living situations are extremely temporary and unstable. They also may not offer supportive services that individuals often need to achieve overall stability.

Table 1. Richmond Transitional Housing Resources

Name	Location	Housing Services Offered	Specific Reentry Resources?
Bay Area Rescue Mission	2114 Macdonald Avenue, Richmond, CA 94801	Emergency shelter, 12-month transitional housing, drug & alcohol rehabilitation	No
Brookside Shelter	847-C Brookside Drive, Richmond, CA 94801	Emergency shelter	No
Catholic Charities: Family Center	224 Macdonald Avenue, Richmond, CA 94801	None currently (deposit assistance in past, will open transitional housing option in Oct. 2013)	No
Greater Richmond Interfaith Program (GRIP)	165 22nd Street, Richmond, CA 94801	Emergency shelter, transitional housing, rental/utilities payments, permanent housing for dual diagnosis	No
Neighborhood House of North Richmond	820 23rd Street, Richmond, CA 94804	90-day residential drug & alcohol rehabilitation	No
Nevin House (Anka Behavioral Health, Inc)	3215 Nevin Avenue Richmond, CA 94804	Dual diagnosis 6-month transitional housing	No
REACH Fellowship	1662 3rd Street, Richmond, CA 94801	Emergency Shelter	No
Rubicon Programs	2500 Bissell Avenue, Richmond, CA 94803	Master leasing, shared housing, upcoming landlord appreciation event	In development
Shelter Inc.	1815 Arnold Drive, Martinez, CA 94553 (Admin Office)	Rental/utilities payments, transitional housing, self-sufficiency planning, permanent housing	In development
Ujima Family Services	3939 Bissell Avenue, Richmond, CA 94805	90-day residential drug and alcohol rehabilitation for pregnant women and women with young children.	No

Finally, even the private housing market is an unrealistic option even for formerly incarcerated people who do have sufficient income. The over-use of criminal record reports from third-party online providers enable private landlords to routinely perform criminal background checks on applicants for a small price. Studies have found that applicants with past convictions are the most likely to be rejected, particularly when local demand for housing is high¹⁴.

Unfortunately, studies have shown that having a criminal background is not the only type of prejudice that many returning citizens face. Returning citizens are disproportionately black and Latino, and research shows year after year that blacks and Latinos are more likely to face discrimination in the search to find housing than whites. While instances of the most blatant forms of discrimination have decreased dramatically over the years, whites still receive preferential treatment in terms of the number of units they are shown when seeking housing.¹⁵

It is difficult to understand the high rates of housing insecurity as anything but inevitable outcomes of criminal justice practices and policies. When correctional institutions fail to provide any preparation for release and a criminal conviction effectively guarantees discrimination on housing applications, the inability of formerly incarcerated persons to secure stable and affordable housing should come as no surprise. The stress and volatility of unstable housing seriously undermine other pathways towards reintegration, such as finding a job, accessing needed health services, and restoring family relationships.

Key Findings:

1. In their first month after release from incarceration, 69% of respondents did not have stable housing.

- 48% were staying rent-free with family or friends,
- 21% were either homeless or staying in short-term shelters.

2. Of those who did have stable housing, most stayed in housing they rented or owned. 11% stayed in a long-term shelter or halfway house.

3. One in three respondents had lived in at least three different places since their release from incarceration.

In My Own Words

My name is Michelle Walker I am a formerly incarcerated single mother seeking housing. My experience so far has been overwhelming since I moved back home to Richmond California over fourteen months ago. Since then my son Dominic and I have lived in family shelters and with family and friends. I have been working really hard to build a foundation so that when the time was right I would be qualified for low income housing for my son and me.

After obtaining a good paying job, working closely with reentry resource providers and establishing fair credit I began applying for affordable housing in the Richmond area. To my surprise after all of my hard work was not paying off. I had but one hope when I was contacted by Pullman Point Housing Project here in the city of Richmond, informing me that that they had looked into my application and wanted to set up an appointment with me to discuss an opportunity for affordable stable housing for my family. Of course I was filled with excitement and followed up immediately and set up an appointment for September 24th 2014. On that day ready to start the next chapter of my successful reintegration, I arrived on time and sat in the waiting area for at least thirty minutes before I was called to a back office and asked to come back next week on October 01, 2014.

I arrived on time to this follow-up appointment only to be informed that I was denied housing due to my criminal history, for a crime that I committed seven years ago. Being denied stability for my family for a mistake I committed seven years ago left me feeling devastated and hopeless, wondering what is the point of working so hard to become a productive member of society if I am going to constantly be judged for a poor choice that I have already paid for? This will not will not discourage me I will keep fighting for what is fair, for justice in my community and for those who come back to this community from incarceration to have a shot at affordable housing for themselves and their families.



Table 2: Barriers to housing during the reentry process

Phase of Reentry	Barriers to Housing
<p>Arrest and Adjudication</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individuals who are on parole/probation or have a recent criminal conviction are often barred from receiving public housing in Richmond. Typically, these consequences are not explained to individuals while they are in court. Availability of criminal records on third-party online servers gives landlords easy access to formerly incarcerated individual's criminal background. 44% of respondents believed they experienced discrimination when they applied for housing.
<p>Detention</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many incarcerated individuals do not know how to fill-out a housing application. 80% of respondents did not receive any life skills training while incarcerated.
<p>Pre-Release</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is limited pre-release counseling or planning once a release date is known. 72% of respondents did not receive any information on how to find a place to live prior to their release. As a result, many individuals do not know where they will stay upon release from incarceration. One in five respondents were not able to find a safe place to sleep during their first three days out.
<p>Post-Release</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Due to high unemployment, the majority of individuals release from incarceration or limited financially by where they can live. Nearly three in four respondents reported that they do not have enough money to pay for rent, a deposit, or a credit check. Public housing authorities and private landlords routinely discriminate against individuals with a criminal record. One in four respondents said they've tried to obtain public housing or a lease on the private market but were unsuccessful. Transitional housing capacity cannot meet demand: 25% of respondents have tried to obtain a bed in a long-term shelter or supportive housing but were unsuccessful, citing limited capacity of facilities and long waiting lists.



What Works: Community Solutions and Promising Practices

The overarching goal of effective housing programs is to ensure stable, safe and healthy shelter, addressing short to long-term needs. Solutions in reentry housing are intricately connected to all other reentry efforts, including living-wage employment, access to supportive health services, and family reunification assistance. It is important to acknowledge that each returning individual has a unique set of circumstances, and therefore may seek access to varying types of housing resources according to his or her specific situation. A recent research review concludes that housing must consider a range of “short-term and long-term housing options (appropriate for) a group of released adults... that range from fairly self-sufficient to high need”.¹⁶ Some individuals simply need help navigating the Internet to find information on available units, while others need a residential environment with supportive services. Similarly, a range of time periods must be considered, with solutions for short-term immediate need upon release, medium-term housing for the six to twelve months following release, and long-term arrangements for individuals who may have a disability or other condition inhibiting their long-term self-sufficiency. The County Reentry Strategic Plan housing section outlines several objectives focused on pre-release transition planning, and sets a goal to “increase the supply” of housing services.

Promising Reentry Housing Program Models

The Safe Return Project sees potential in several reentry housing initiatives both in the Bay Area and nationwide that could be adapted to Richmond and Contra Costa County:

- **Homeless Assistance Rental Project—Salt Lake City, UT.**¹⁷ In 2005, Salt Lake City decided to commit \$300,000 in HUD HOME funding toward the problem of recidivism by addressing the needs of homeless individuals with a history of involvement in the criminal justice system. Through the program, the Housing Authority of the County of Salt Lake (HACSL) provides placement assistance to individuals referred by the County Division of Criminal Justice Services by finding landlords who are willing to rent to this population. Additionally, HACSL subsidizes a portion of the tenants’ rent, using the HOME funds and provides insurance against potential damages or eviction costs. In the long-term, HACSL plans to transition these households to housing vouchers. As of October 2009, 90 households had been assisted through the program.
- **Maximizing Opportunities for Mothers to Succeed (MOMS)—Oakland, CA.**¹⁸ A collaborative including The Volunteers of America, the Alameda County Sheriff’s Office and the Oakland Housing Authority worked together to create the MOMS program.

Under the program, women with children who are reentering their communities from Santa Rita jail receive pre-release educational services and living space in transitional housing. After the women complete the transitional housing program they are offered public housing placement. The program has capacity to house 11 women at a time. The current director of the Richmond Housing Authority and the director of Contra Costa County Housing Authority were both involved in creating the MOMS program.

- **No Violence Alliance (NoVA)—San Francisco, CA.**¹⁹ NoVA provides wraparound reentry services and housing to individuals returning from San Francisco County jails. Due to strong collaboration between both government and nonprofit organizations, the program is able to support diverse needs including housing, health, case management, education, and employment services. Participants have the option of beginning the program prior to release from jail. While NoVA is not a housing-specific example, housing stability is one important goal of the program, and addressing a returning resident's overall needs is critical to maintain that stability.

Local Reentry Housing Capacity

- **Rubicon Programs** has been operating in Contra Costa County for over 30 years and have been successfully housing the homeless population. This program currently uses master leasing where they control a participant's rental lease for up to a year, assuring that the client is in full compliance with their rental agreement and can sustain the rental payments before turning the lease over to the client. A significant limitation to this program is that the client has to have an income before they can even be considered.
- **Shelter Plus Inc.** is a program funded through the County to support individuals with a security deposit to help them obtain housing. This program however only assists clients that are currently homeless or going to be homeless in the 72 hours of submission of application.
- There are several **homeless shelters** within Contra Costa County that are being utilized by the formerly incarcerated population. These shelters serve as a place to sleep for a night, to get a hot shower, receive important mail, and to get a hot meal. However Homeless shelters are temporary living situations and an unstable one at best.
- **Faruso House** is a drug rehabilitation housing program in Richmond. A 90 day live-in program designed to treat drug addiction is offered. This program has extended living opportunities for those who need more time to recover or have no stable housing to go to after completion of the program. These off-site living facilities are owned and managed by Neighborhood House of North Richmond, a nonprofit organization that has been in Richmond for over sixty years. This program gets a lot of funding from the Department of Corrections to house parolees coming home from prison.

- The **AB109 Community Corrections Partnership** followed recommendations from its Community Advisory Board (CAB) in 2012 and dedicated \$500,000 to varied housing support for about 150 individuals. The program included: a master leasing program through which 25 individuals would receive sub-leases, a rent support program (\$700 per month) for 50 individuals for up to 6 months, and expanded funding of homeless housing programs to accommodate 50 additional individuals.

Promising Local Policy Approaches

In addition to programming, sound policy is also vital to what works in reentry housing. Under the Obama administration, the HUD has distributed multiple letters to all local housing authorities urging them to use what discretion they have to allow reentering resident to reunite with their families in HUD-assisted housing, as long as doing so would not violate the few solid federal bans on criminal background. Following this suggestion from HUD could have a strong impact on improving access to reentry housing.

Community advocates can work with public housing authorities to develop more inclusive policies. Individuals who are still banned from public housing for some time based on their criminal background, should only be completely barred for a “reasonable” amount of time, and attempts at rehabilitation should be taken into account. Some communities have already taken steps to reform their housing authority’s policies:

- **The Portland, Oregon Housing Authority**²⁰ established policies of review that restrict housing access only through a clearly outlined number value system that is correlated with different severities of crimes. Individuals who committed less severe crimes thus have an easier time getting into housing than they would without the policy in place. The length of time since the crime(s) has occurred is also taken into account.
- **The Saint Paul, Minnesota Housing Authority**²¹ developed a similarly individual standard of review. Less-serious convictions that took place far in the past, for instance, may not be taken into account, while a more serious, recent crime could trigger a temporary ban from public housing resources.



Graduation of the Collective Impact Institute, a leadership development institute for formerly incarcerated Richmond residents (October 2014)



Pathways Forward to Improve Housing Opportunity

A policy approach to address the lack of safe, stable, affordable reentry housing options in Richmond and Contra Costa County can take advantage of multiple opportunities to implement several related strategies discussed here.

Increased AB 109 Funding for Housing

Funding from California’s Realignment budget should be better used to help eliminate some of the barriers that returning residents face and expand their housing options. The Realignment funding dedicated to housing has been inadequate, meeting a level of need equivalent to only about half of the estimated 248 people that will be released on AB109 probation and need housing assistance. The planning process for use of AB 109 funds showed a clear commitment to expanding reentry housing options in Contra Costa County, listing an emphasis on “housing-focused discharge planning prior to release”, in addition to removing affordable housing barriers for formerly-incarcerated men and women, and increasing the supply of housing dedicated specifically to formerly-incarcerated people.²²

Funding for housing is not always easy to find, given the high costs of construction, rehabilitation, and/or supportive services. However, one way to obtain more resources for reentry housing would be to dramatically increase the amount of the AB 109 Realignment budget that is dedicated to reentry housing.

Modification of Public Housing Authority Policies

Additionally, discriminatory barriers to existing affordable housing need to be removed. Local housing authorities should err on the side of inclusion to better serve as a reentry resource and help reduce costly recidivism rates. Often formerly incarcerated individuals are barred by local rules from joining a stable family living situation because they cannot be added to the lease or housing agreement. Local public housing authorities (PHAs) have been encouraged by the federal housing administration to increase access for re-entering individuals to join existing households. Local housing authorities have the power to allow residents to live in public housing as long as their past conviction did not involve the manufacturing of methamphetamines or lifetime sex-offender registration. This no-cost solution should also include advocacy to limit the criminal background screening performed by PHAs and allowing ex-offenders to reunite with their families by meaningful review of their suitability.

Implement Dedicated Programs

Though important, solutions like increasing AB 109 funding for housing will only impact 10% of returning residents, because the great majority do not have offenses that qualify as AB109. The City of Richmond and Contra Costa County could stand to benefit greatly from a dedicated reentry housing program. A program such as Oakland’s MOMS program for instance could be created in Contra Costa County and expanded to provide help and support to fathers and non-parents as well. As of now, very few housing resources dedicated to the reentry population

exist, leading returning residents to try their luck at securing either public housing, privately-developed affordable housing, or market-rate units, all of which can be difficult to obtain with a criminal history, and may be lacking in critical supportive services. While returning residents with certain conditions such as substance abuse or HIV/AIDS infection may be able to access specialized resources, others will be forced to rely on the goodwill of family and friends or the general services for homeless individuals in Contra Costa County.

Still, the approach of a master lease program and rent support connected to supportive services does reflect the best practice of meeting a range of needs with differing intensity and time periods. For clients unable to secure housing due to bad credit, a master lease held by a community-based organization provides entry into housing. Similarly, rent support for up to six months provides a housing solution during a time period that is often the most difficult and the most likely time of recidivism. Supportive housing programs in particular—those that offer subsidized rent alongside a range of social services and peer support—have been shown to significantly improve the odds of reintegration.²³



Safe Return Organizer Clarence Ford is interviewed on the KME
Street Soldiers radio program (2013)

Another strong proposal would be to connect housing resources to the First Stop center which is being developed in West County under AB 109 Realignment funding. In this scenario, the organization(s) running the First Stop Center could own housing units and offer them to AB 109-qualified returning residents. The advantage of this model would be that the units could be offered initially on a rent-free basis while the returning resident spent time trying to find a job. Later when the individual found a job, he or she could begin contributing toward rent and build up savings, with the eventual goal of transitioning into independent housing. Additionally, while in housing, the individual would be connected to all the resources of the First Stop center. The downside of this option of course is that only a small subset of the reentry population (non-violent, non-serious, non-sex offenders) would be able to access such housing. However, starting the program under AB 109 could function as a pilot project while the success of such interventions could be measured and later expanded upon.

Ban the Box on Housing Applications

Another option to consider would be to “Ban the Box” on housing applications, meaning that all landlords would be prohibited from asking at the outset whether an applicant has a criminal record. Delaying the point at which this information is obtained by the landlord means that all applicants are more likely to be given a fair chance. However, the landlord will still obtain criminal background information at a later point which will help ensure that individuals with sensitive offenses, such as a sex offense or violent offense are not placed in housing situation that may violate their terms of release or endanger other neighbors.

Integrate Reentry Housing into Large-Scale Housing Plans

A final way to demonstrate political commitment to reentry housing would be to include such considerations into official planning documents, such as the public housing authorities’ 5-Year Plans, and in plans related to obtaining federal affordable housing funding such as the Consolidated Plan, the Qualified Allocation Plan, the Continuum of Care Plan, the Olmstead Plan, and the Analysis of Impediments to Fair Housing Choice.²⁴ Each of these large-scale planning documents serves a different purpose in supporting affordable housing availability within Contra Costa County, and thus each has a different point of leverage for including provisions for returning residents.

- **Public Housing Authority 5-Year and Annual Plans.**²⁵ Public housing authorities are required by law to create 5-Year and Annual Plans that they submit to HUD. These plans include information on admissions policies, as well as overall priorities and budgetary information. The Richmond Housing Authority’s Plan includes mention of the need for housing of individuals with criminal backgrounds. The Contra Costa Housing Authority Plan does not provide such a mention. Both should talk about this need and have an approach for improving use of public housing by reentering residents.
- **Consolidated Plan.**²⁶ The Consolidated Plan is a document that every jurisdiction must have on file to apply for funding for the federal grant programs of the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG), the HOME Investments Partnership Program (HOME), Housing Opportunities for Persons with AIDS (HOPWA), and the Emergency Shelter Grants (ESG) Program. Each of the federal programs provides critical federal funds to cities, counties, and states looking to build and rehab housing units and/or provide services to homeless families and individuals in the region. The Plan for Contra Costa County has an assessment section for “special needs populations” which includes sub-populations such as the elderly and victims of domestic abuse, but does not include formerly-incarcerated individuals. Returning citizens could be included either under this section or within the section on Homelessness. Though individuals returning from institutions are mentioned within the strategies section, inadequate detail is given as to how their needs will be addressed.
- **Qualified Allocation Plan.**²⁷ The Qualified Allocation Plan (QAP) is a document developed at the state level that mandates the process for allocating tax credits through the Low Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) program. The LIHTC program is the major way through which

new affordable housing is built in the U.S. California's QAP could be modified to establish development priorities that include reentering residents.

- **Continuum of Care Plan.**²⁸ The Continuum of Care (CoC) specifically relates to the needs of homeless families and individuals within the region, setting local guidelines for funding from the Supportive Housing Program (SHP), Shelter Plus Care (S + C), and the Single Room Occupancy (SRO) program. Such funding must also be in compliance with a region's Consolidated Plan. As with the previous examples, the CoC could be amended to include provisions for fair consideration of all applicants and/or for a certain number of units being allocated to returning citizens facing homelessness, particularly in the case of transitional housing. The 2001-2006 Contra Costa CoC cites prison discharge as a source of potential homelessness, but the reference is brief.
- **Olmstead Plan.**²⁹ California has a long history of disabilities rights and prides itself in providing comprehensive services in this area. Many states, including California, have adopted an Olmstead Plan, which outlines measures that insure community integration for individuals with disabilities who historically may otherwise have been institutionalized. The conversation around the Olmstead Plan could also be directed to include individuals discharged from jails and or prisons with disabilities who may need assistance reintegrating into their communities. California's Olmstead plan includes some language on providing housing options for individuals returning from incarceration.
- **Analysis of Impediments to Fair Housing Choice.**³⁰ The Analysis of Impediments to Fair Housing Choice (AI) is a document that seeks to analyze the "general state of fair housing" within a particular region. The AI looks at this mainly through determining access to both rental- and owner-housing affordability for specially protected classes of individuals. While incarcerated individuals are not within such classes, the plan shows that Contra Costa County is mandated to have a commitment to further fair housing practices.



Safe Return Organizer Tamisha Walker joins 10 other formerly incarcerated community leaders at a meeting with White House Staff (September 2014)



Recommendations for Next Steps

The policies and programs described above will require a sustained effort to organize community members, collaborate across our differences, and take leadership to be innovative and determined. Based on our research and extensive community engagement, the Safe Return Project has prioritized the following recommendations:

Increase funding for reentry housing. The largest impact on reentry housing could be made by increasing the amount of reentry housing resources available to the community. Because of the high costs associated with housing, strong financial commitments at the state, federal, and county levels from multiple departments are crucial for success. One avenue for funding is California’s AB109 Realignment budget, however, since this funding does not serve all returning residents, other government funding sources are critical as well.

Develop specific and sustainable reentry housing programs. With or without increased funding, Richmond and Contra Costa County would benefit from more housing programs that are specific to the reentry population. There may always be at least some restrictions on accessing public housing and non-reentry specific housing programs for those with the toughest backgrounds. Dedicated reentry housing funding would increase the chances that every returning resident could find a safe place to stay.

Modify local housing authority policy. Community advocates and concerned local government members should form strong relationships with the Richmond and Contra Costa Housing Authorities to work toward policies that promote fairness and opportunity. Housing authorities should err on the side of inclusion in discretionary decisions.

Ban the Box on housing applications. Many landlords may filter out individuals with criminal backgrounds without giving them a fair chance, given the climate of housing competition in the Bay Area. “Banning the Box” that asks about criminal history on housing application in Richmond would push landlords to consider all applicants more equally until the housing offer is extended. After the offer is given, a background check could be run to allow landlords some discretion.

Include language on reentry housing need in large-scale planning documents. Several large-scale planning documents govern affordable housing policy within Richmond and Contra Costa County. Given that the region has a high percentage of reentering residents, a commitment to addressing their housing needs, and methods for doing so, should be on record in these documents.

Strengthen Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Policy

HUD should prohibit discrimination by local housing authorities against applicants with past convictions. They already encourage local housing authorities to not discriminate except in cases where the past conviction involved the manufacturing of methamphetamines on public housing property. They should require all entities receiving federal housing funding to abide by this practice, with violations leading to a risk of losing federal housing funding.

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