

OPINION

## Out of jail, desperate for a home

By JENNIFER JONES AUSTIN

NEW YORK DAILY NEWS | APR 02, 2021 AT 10:00 AM



*(Theodore Parisienne/for New York Daily News)*

In New York City, access to safe housing is a public health imperative, especially as the future of the pandemic remains uncertain. For formerly incarcerated New Yorkers, the stakes are even higher. Incarcerated people are almost 10 times more likely to be homeless than the general public, and make up [nearly a quarter](#) of all people in New York City shelters. In 2017, more than half of all individuals leaving prison and returning to the five boroughs went directly into the shelter system.

One of the key drivers of the pipeline from jails and prisons to shelters is rooted in the unjust discrimination formerly incarcerated people face during the reentry process, both from private landlords and public housing. As long as housing remains an obstacle for these New Yorkers, they risk ending up behind bars again, becoming homeless or both. Studies show that returning residents experiencing homelessness are at higher risk of re-arrest than their housed peers.

But providing access to housing can help stabilize those leaving incarceration and keep them out of jail.

The New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) is making progress to correct this injustice by changing some of its policies for formerly incarcerated New Yorkers seeking to return home, opening up opportunities for them to reunite with their families and access public housing along with needed support services. These changes mean that NYCHA will give new applicants a fairer shot at living in public housing, rather than automatically preventing them from applying because they have a criminal record.

NYCHA is rightly modifying its “permanent exclusion” policy, which previously banned formerly incarcerated New Yorkers from returning to their families and homes unless they applied for a review after a period of time during which the person in question remained crime-free. That process was confusing, burdensome, and unfair. Now NYCHA will automatically lift the ban after five years without involvement in the justice system.

While we applaud these changes, city leaders should further reform permanent exclusion by expanding NYCHA’s successful Family Reentry Program. Piloted in 2013, the program allows individuals with criminal records to return to NYCHA developments and live safely with family members, with support from reentry service providers who can help secure employment, continuing education and other services. Over five years, the program has worked with more than 160 people. Almost 70% of them reunited with family and fewer than 4% have had new convictions, showing that with the right help, formerly incarcerated people can safely live in public housing.

For Jose, one of the early participants, the program was a godsend. As he started the process of rebuilding his life after incarceration, he was able to return to NYCHA and move in with his mom, whom he cared for after she fell ill. To this day, he cherishes every last moment he was able to spend with her before she passed away. In the meantime, stable housing helped Jose get a reliable job as an electrician.

There is an urgent need to help thousands of other New Yorkers like Jose reconnect with loved ones in NYCHA and find stable housing upon release. The program could expand if it received more referrals from reentry service providers, reducing homelessness and decreasing the rate of recidivism. However, funded capacity for these organizations is limited and the recent round of city funding did not cover the full costs of operating the program.

This program represents a significant step forward on the path to ensuring those who’ve been justice-involved are not forever trapped in a vicious cycle. FPWA’s 2019 report, [“Ending the Poverty to Prison Pipeline,”](#) demonstrated through data that if you are low-income and are a person of color in New York City, you more likely to be drawn into the criminal justice system. Once there, it is harder to free oneself from poverty. It is the criminalization of racialized poverty itself that drives this cycle.

Denying people basic resources such as housing after they have paid their debt to society is unjust and perpetuates the very cycles of incarceration, homelessness and poverty that impact so many NYCHA community members. As the City Council moves legislation to ban housing discrimination from private landlords, our public housing should lead by example. The policy of permanent exclusion must be eliminated, and the Family Reentry program made available to all who want and need it to ensure that these changes are successful. This isn’t only a public safety solution but a moral imperative on the road to racial justice that recognizes the power of redemption and the humanity of our fellow New Yorkers with criminal justice histories.

*Austin is CEO of FPWA, an anti-poverty organization, and a member of the Faith Communities for Just Reentry coalition.*

###