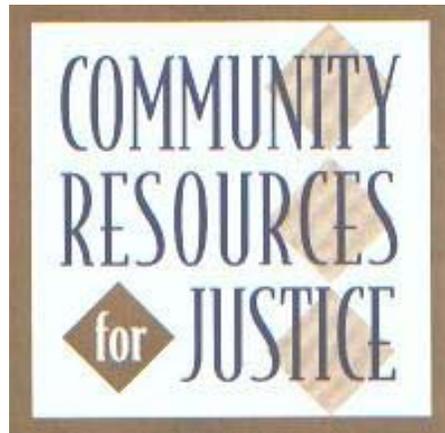


**POLICY BRIEF
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**NO PLACE LIKE HOME:
Housing and the Ex-prisoner**

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Housing. Ask anyone on the street about it and you are liable to be drawn into a lengthy conversation about the troublesome state of housing in Urban America – high prices, low availability, and, seemingly, no relief in sight. Whether you are a student or senior citizen, construction worker or downtown professional, the search for housing in an urban center is a difficult but necessary experience.

For the returning prisoner, the search for permanent, sustainable housing is more than simply a disagreeable experience. It is a daunting challenge – one that portends success or failure for the entire reintegration process.

Why should we care about the short- and long-term housing situation of the ex-prisoner population? Housing is the lynchpin that holds the reintegration process together. Without a stable residence continuity in substance abuse and mental health treatment is compromised. Employment is often contingent upon a fixed living arrangement. And, in the end, a polity that does not concern itself with the housing needs of returning prisoners finds that it has done so at the expense of its own public safety.

Today there are more women and men under some form of correctional supervision than at any other time in the history of the United States – one in 32 American adults, or 6.5 million. [1] Since 95% of the two million incarcerated individuals will eventually be released, [2] the challenge of managing their return to society promises to overwhelm the scant resources currently set aside for this critical transition.

In Massachusetts, of the approximately 20,000 prisoners who leave state and county prisons every year, the majority return to the Commonwealth's urban regions. In 2000, for example, 2,846 individuals were released from the Suffolk County House of Correction. [3] While it is not certain where all of these individuals live, it is presumed that the vast majority return to the Metro Boston area. Indeed, officials at the Suffolk County Sheriff's Department estimate that most live within a half-mile radius of the prison.

In 1999, 40% of those released from Department of Correction had a prior address in the statistical metropolitan area of Boston [4], meaning approximately 1,167 of Massachusetts' 2,919 released state prisoners returned to Boston that year. [5] All told nearly 340 state and county prisoners return to greater

Boston every month – that is, 4,080 per year.

Barriers to Reentry

Successful reentry efforts have two correlative foci – reintegration of an individual from behind bars to civil and productive life in the community, and public safety. It is fair to say that these two elements are intrinsically linked; minimizing reentry roadblocks behooves us all. Yet, even in the best of situations, an ex-prisoner is bound to face certain barriers to reintegration.

One of the most critical barriers to reentry is the issue of housing. The former prisoner can encounter any number of challenges in the search for a home. Probation and parole conditions can require an ex-prisoner to avoid specific neighborhoods and individuals, severely limiting options for habitation. Although many initially stay with family or relatives, these situations are often tentative, and can be volatile. The private housing market, which has enjoyed a robust recovery since the collapse of the early 90's, is mostly cost-prohibitive for the ex-prisoner.[6] Public housing regulations, and over-crowded shelters with long waiting lists, create additional hurdles that the newly released individual finds difficult to navigate. And while all Massachusetts correctional agencies seek to ensure that no prisoner is forced to sleep on the streets following discharge, achieving this objective remains difficult at best.

The Corrections Problem

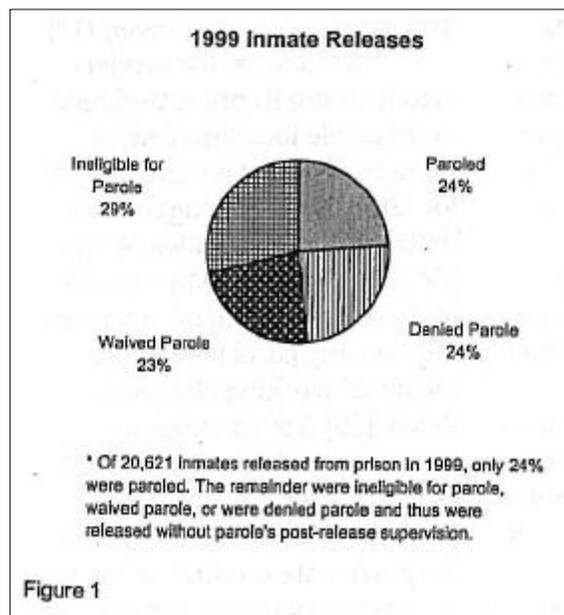
The primary goal of a correctional institution is to operate a safe prison; hence correctional agencies focus their efforts on life behind the prison walls. Charged with housing, feeding, clothing, protecting and caring for the many needs of inmates sentenced to their custody, what happens after discharge is understandably not the primary concern of prison administrators. Nonetheless, corrections officials across the Commonwealth have begun to focus their attention on the reintegration process hoping to create as smooth a transition as possible for prisoners leaving their custody. This proves to be particularly difficult with regard to housing.

Prisoners discharged from the custody of the Massachusetts Department of Correction, after serving sentences ranging from 2.5 to 25 years, or more, are returning to any one of the 351 cities and towns in the Commonwealth. Often estranged from friends and families, possessing minimal work experience and few employment opportunities, these prisoners leave the state prisons most in need of housing support. Yet, logistically, they are the hardest to serve.

State prisoners are often incarcerated in facilities quite remote from their return destination, and, therefore, have no opportunity to secure housing prior to discharge. Correctional staff, unlike their counterparts in the fields of mental health, juvenile justice, substance abuse, and the like, do not have housing search efforts built into their role, beyond emergency transitional housing. [7] Thus, for state prisoners, the scarcity of existing housing options is compounded by the difficulty for correctional caseworkers to be aware of, or make referrals to, the various local emergency housing services throughout the state.

By contrast, those exiting county correctional facilities, also in need of housing, face less of a logistical hurdle. Since most return to the nearby communities surrounding the county prison, correctional caseworkers are able to build better linkages with local housing providers than are state caseworkers. Rather, theirs is more likely a problem of capacity – a greater demand for post-release beds than the supply can accommodate. Any solutions to the current housing crisis for returning prisoners must address these short-term realities as well as the long-term housing shortages. Parole officials and their staff, unlike their prison-based colleagues, do consider it their duty to ensure that parolees leaving prison under their supervision have an 'approved' residence.

Prior to discharge, field parole officers visit a prisoner's prospective household to verify the appropriateness of the proposed living situation. When an officer encounters an inappropriate or non-existent living situation he may delay a prisoner's release date while considering other housing options (sober beds, transitional homes, treatment beds, etc.). Once an appropriate housing arrangement is identified, remaining at a specific address often becomes a stipulation of conditional release. However, the most recent data reveals that barely one quarter of the released population -- 20,621 releases in 1999 -- benefited from the oversight of a parole officer approving, monitoring, or even securing, post-release habitation.



Consider, moreover, the fact that parole officers must also supervise those individuals already on parole – the annual caseload in 1999 was 7,043 [8] -- and it is clear that the available resources are spread very thin over a growing demographic.

Parole conditions – a series of stipulations to which a prisoner agrees in exchange for discretionary release - can be a double-edged sword. While parole can supply oversight and limited housing resources to those under its supervision, conditions of release can also prevent parolees from living, or associating, with others who are criminally involved. This restriction includes family and friends who may be willing to take this person in, further limiting housing options.

Not released to parole, a prisoner might be placed under the supervision of a probation officer, if a judge ordered a term of probation to be served upon release. However, probation has no authority to delay release until appropriate housing is found. Charged with monitoring prisoners in the community, a probation officer's involvement with an ex-prisoner usually begins a few days after release, following the period of greatest risk for recidivism. Coordinated oversight notwithstanding, post-release housing is not always guaranteed.

It is difficult to know the exact numbers and housing situations of those former prisoners neither paroled nor sentenced to an additional probationary term. Not answerable to any authority following discharge, these ex-prisoners disperse into the communities whence they came. Where they go – a family home, a friend's couch, a local shelter, the street – and how they live is anybody's guess.

The Housing Crunch

Approximately 20,000 discharged prisoners will return to Massachusetts communities this year, with only one quarter of them under parole supervision. Absent access to immediate and sustainable housing, the objectives of successful reentry and public safety are threatened, while the potential of recidivism is increased.

Familial Households Often thought of as the first option available to prisoners returning to the community, this alternative is not always a welcome refuge. The individual may be perceived as a destabilizing influence in the home and not welcome by family members. If unemployed, he or she may represent one more body burdening an already strained household budget.

This situation is especially true for the prisoner returning to the family household within subsidized housing. Due to the US Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) 'One Strike and You're Out' policy, the public housing authority (PHA) may evict all members of the household for criminal activities committed by any one member or guest. [9] Some courts are upholding these evictions, e.g. Rucker v. Davis, even if the activities were remote and/or unknown to the head of the household. Obviously, the fear of being evicted for the future criminal acts of the returning family member is a legitimate concern for those relatives in public

housing.

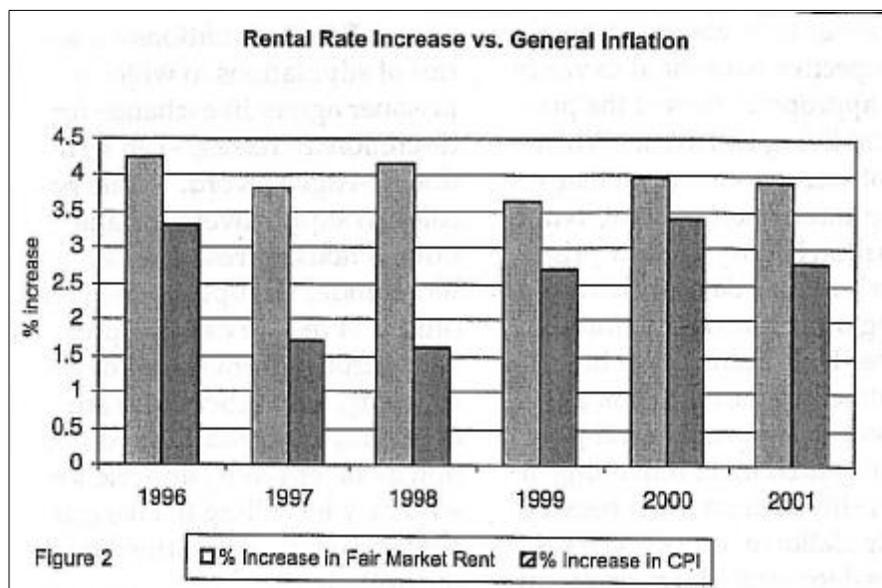
In other instances it may be the prisoner who is unwilling to return to a prior household or neighborhood. It is not uncommon that the domestic arrangement left behind was a contributing factor leading to criminal behavior. Conditions, personalities, and temptations that exist there may threaten a successful reentry. Opportunities for networking or obtaining employment referrals and leads are often limited or non-existent in the low-income neighborhoods to which most prisoners return. This lack of a support system, whether it is of the prisoners' doing or not, often precludes family lodging from being a guaranteed housing alternative.

Nationally, the private housing market represents approximately 97% of the total housing stock, Greater Boston's private stock mirrors this figure. [10] As such, the private market should provide the returning prisoner with the largest absolute number of opportunities for permanent housing, but with low employment skills and the stigma of a criminal record, the region's hyper-inflationary housing market is largely out of reach.

In high demand real estate markets such as eastern Massachusetts, where "starter homes" approach \$400,000,[11] the existence of financial assets determines whether a consumer can purchase housing, regardless of employment. [12] Given the lack of financial resources in low-income and minority households (the primary demographic groups of ex-prisoners) purchasing may never be an alternative,[13] even for the gainfully employed ex-prisoner

Opportunities in the rental market are no more abundant. A run-up in the price level of the housing stock diverts private capital from constructing less profitable, lower-income rentals units such as rooming houses, to more attractive investments, e.g. converting existing properties into market-rate condominiums. In effect, a significant increase in price level causes the low-end units to "[filter] up to higher-income households" creating, or worsening, the dearth of low-income units. [14]

This sizeable loss of multifamily stock combined with high demand precipitated rental vacancy rate decreases in half of the 75 largest metropolitan areas: Boston vacancy rates decreased to 2.7%.[15] The affect was that rental rates increased faster than general inflation for the fourth consecutive year. [16]



In Boston, inflation-adjusted rents climbed 5% during the period between 1997 and 2000.[17] This ongoing cost inflation gives Metro Boston's one- and two-bedroom Fair Market Rents of \$999 and \$1250 [18] the dubious distinction of being one of the most expensive markets in the nation. By comparison, other areas in the nation are significantly lower. [19]

Moreover, the accelerated increase in prices and rents in desirable locations causes homebuyers and renters to look for affordable housing in "less desirable" communities. A ripple effect subsequently ensues in these neighborhoods increasing housing costs beyond the means of working class residents. [20] For instance, in lower rent neighborhoods such as Dorchester, Roslindale and Roxbury – areas receiving a disproportionate

number of returning prisoners -- rent increases of 13% to 15% were experienced in 2000 alone [21], nearly four times the city-wide average.

While the lack of affordable housing in the metro Boston area is a dilemma for even educated, moderate-income individuals, unlike the returning prisoner, their potential for future opportunity is not as limited. This disparity in opportunity is due to the fact that in addition to returning to the labor market with little in the way of education, marketable skills and/or work experience, the ex-prisoner also bears the burden of a criminal record. Unlike their counterparts without a criminal history, ex-prisoners are more likely to remain in low-wage employment that offers little room for meaningful wage increases or advancement. More importantly, they are more likely to be passed over by a landlord conducting a background check or requiring a credible work history.

Consequently, it can be said that the returning prisoner is practically precluded from the largest portion of this region's permanent housing stock.

Subsidized Housing.

"Both HUD and [Dept. of Housing and Community Development] guidelines generally bar an assisted housing agency from automatically excluding an applicant based on a criminal record, past use of illegal drugs, or abuse of alcohol. "[22]

What are the alternatives to the private market? In effect, public housing represents a last resort for the returning prisoner to avoid a shelter or the streets. Therefore, it should be regarded as an important resource in reducing recidivism. Yet, unable to participate in the private market, the returning prisoner is often discouraged and precluded from the low-income options of subsidized and public housing by misconceptions about the application and appeals process and a shortage of units.

Foremost is the widespread belief that every individual with a criminal record is barred from public housing, and is rejected upon application. While the official policy of local housing authorities is not to outright reject those applicants with criminal histories, this appears to be contrary to the experiences of many. It is true that the federal law requires subsidized housing be denied to three categories of criminally involved individuals: 1) those who have been evicted from subsidized housing because of drug-related activity are ineligible for a three year period from the date of their eviction, but may have their ineligibility period shortened if they can demonstrate they have completed a PHA-approved rehabilitation program; 2) any household member who is subject to a lifetime registration requirement under a state sex offender registration program is permanently banned from receiving subsidized housing; and 3) any individual convicted of manufacturing or producing methamphetamine on the premise of federally assisted housing is likewise barred. [23] In addition, federal regulations grant the PHA the discretion to prohibit admission of all other criminally involved individuals.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that former prisoners seeking to legally live in public housing, as a leaseholder or as an addition to an existing lease, are initially denied admittance following the standard criminal background check. Since local housing authorities require every adult living in a unit be included on the lease, returning prisoners interested in living in subsidized housing must apply and be approved by the local housing authority.

Unfortunately, unaware of the appeals procedure, few take advantage of its due process rights nor do they seek the assistance of legal services to contest a rejection. Housing advocates state, however, that when adequately represented in the appeals process, "people with criminal record or drug and alcohol histories are no more likely to be denied public housing than the general population." [24] This misconception and lack of information prevents many former prisoners from obtaining what is effectively their best alternative for long-term, sustainable housing.

Another barrier to the returning prisoner acquiring public housing is a lack of available units. Despite HUD's efforts to replace deteriorating public housing stock, the inventory of this badly needed commodity continues to shrink. [25] The waiting list for available units has grown to approximately one million nationwide. [26] Additionally, the wait in some urban areas can be as long as ten years.[27]

Currently, the federal government provides subsidies to approximately 4.6 million "extremely and very low-income renters." [28] Of this amount, nearly 1.3 million live in housing projects, 1.9 million live in privately owned properties that have related subsidies, and 1.4 million receive rent vouchers to rent private-market

units. [29] However, 9.7 million low-income renters receive no assistance, with 4.8 million of this number facing housing problems (such as quality and cost) so severe that “they are deemed to warrant priority for federal assistance.” [30]

One way the affordable housing shortage has been addressed is illustrated by Massachusetts General Law 40B that mandates municipalities set aside a minimum of 10% of its housing stock for low and moderate-income units. However after nearly 30 years, the 10% goal is far from being realized. In large part, this is due to the desire of local zoning boards to maintain property values, as well as cities and towns looking for ways to circumvent the 10% requirement.

Recent changes by the Governor, and amendments suggested by the House and Senate, appear to assist municipalities to avoid and/or delay meeting that affordability target. Furthermore, within the statutory scheme are provisions that allow, in some instances, all rental units in a development to be counted toward the 10% goal, even when only a small percentage of the units are affordable. [31] By comparison, in a development of ownership units only those deemed affordable are counted. [32] This inconsistent counting can lead to a municipality’s understating its need for affordable units or overstating its compliance. This is particularly discouraging since the legislation was written to supercede local zoning measures, especially where the need for affordable housing was extreme. Given its history, it is difficult to imagine that the 10% across-the-board target will be met anytime soon.

Homelessness and Ex-Prisoners

For the returning prisoner who has no immediate access to living accommodations, a homeless shelter may very well be the first stop upon return to the community. The Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance (MHSA) reports that nearly 1,000 prisoners per year (1997-2001) reported to an emergency shelter directly upon discharge from a state or county correctional facility. [33] Annually, however, the City’s shelters serve between 4,000 – 5,000 new guests who were previously incarcerated. [34] Another recent snapshot survey of Boston’s shelter population found that 7% were newly released prisoners. [35] These numbers are dwarfed when one considers that 22% of the same shelter residents had been incarcerated within the past twelve months. [34] Clearly, as these numbers demonstrate, while some were homeless immediately upon release, the temporary living situation of many more was not sustained for any appreciable amount of time, forcing them to join the ranks of the homeless.

That nearly one quarter of the released prison population experiences homelessness within a year of release is a red flag for policy makers, corrections officials and the general populace. Moreover, these statistics represent a time when the American economy was as robust as it has been in recent history. With the possibility of a recession looming, one can safely speculate that demand for emergency housing will increase.

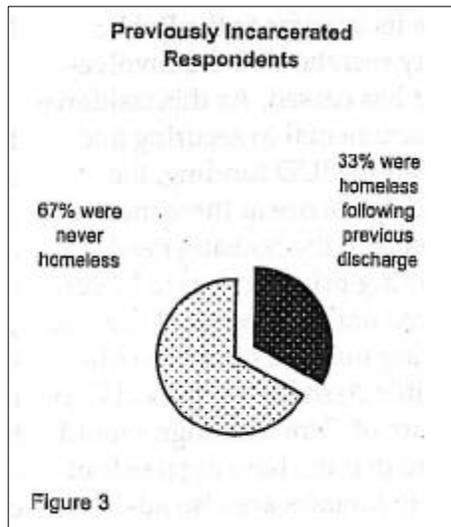
While there is a scarcity of long-term transitional housing available in the city (waiting lists range from 6 – 12 months), the shortage is particularly felt by Boston’s ex-prisoner population. Many of the transitional housing programs run by the City’s shelters prioritize homeless clients already living within the shelter system. Additionally, most of these housing programs are targeted for those with identified substance abuse and mental health needs, and while many involved with the criminal justice system do fall within these categories, this specification further diminishes the options for those not suffering from these maladies. Without housing programs accommodating men and women leaving prison, both with and without special needs, attempts to address public safety through prisoner rehabilitation are compromised.

A Snapshot

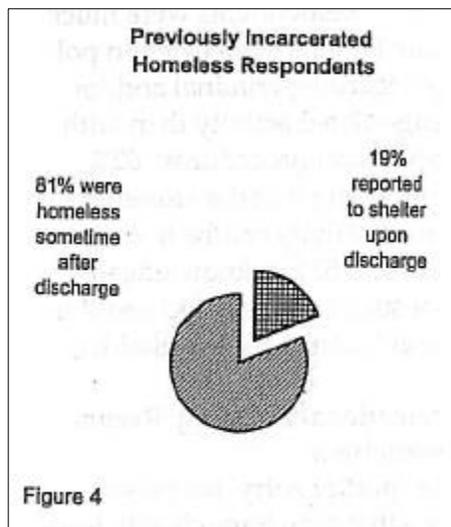
A snapshot survey was conducted of three Boston-based pre-release facilities serving 53 county and 51 federal prisoners – both male and female. Only prisoners who are deemed by corrections administrators as suitable for placement are housed at these community-based centers. As a result this sample does not represent the entire Massachusetts prisoner population. Those with violent histories, or serious mental or medical health needs are often considered inappropriate for placement at these facilities and therefore are not included in the survey. However, given the want of data collected directly from this population, regarding their housing experience and needs, this information is a useful proxy for policy makers to consider as they address the housing needs of returning prisoners.

The Results.

Of the 104 surveyed, 49 had been incarcerated prior to the current sentence. Although these prisoners are presently housed in Boston-based facilities the site of their previous incarceration remains unknown. Of these, 33%, or 16 respondents had lived on the street or stayed in a homeless shelter at some point after a previous discharge from prison.



Although this is a small sample there is a statistically significant correlation between the experience of homelessness and previous incarceration. [37] Similar to data collected by MHSA and the McCormack Institute, our research indicates that only 19% of those who experienced homelessness (3 respondents) went to a shelter immediately after their first release. The rest lived with family and friends, and some time later slept in a shelter or on the street.



When asked what would have been most helpful in securing housing at the moment of release, 69% of those who had experienced homelessness stated that their first choice was to have a prison counselor present to assist at the moment of release (only 5 of the 16, or 31%, indicated that they had ever met with a discharge planner or other kind of counselor to discuss housing prior to any of their previous releases). It is important to note that this choice was rated higher than the possibilities of receiving money for rent or deposit (60%) and free transportation to any post-release destination (51%).

Not surprisingly, the majority of the 104 prisoners indicated that they look to their family as the primary resource for both shelter (68%), and assistance (52%). Friends were a close runner-up: for shelter (44%) and assistance (36%). As for public housing, 24.1% said that they would go to the Boston Housing Authority as a resource.

When asked what their primary concerns were with regard to securing housing, county prisoners responded as follows: 62% were concerned about discrimination due to a criminal record; 56% and 54% were concerned about having money for rent and deposit, respectively; followed by “getting a job” at 45%.

Our research also supported the notion that within the prisoner population there exists considerable confusion with regard to public housing. When respondents were asked if they can legally return to public housing following incarceration, 67% either did not know or responded with the incorrect answer, “false”. However, indicative of this confusion, 45% correctly responded that they could legally apply for public housing but could be denied. With regard to the question, “I can legally return to public housing by getting on the lease,” there was, again, a fair amount of confusion: 22% said “true” (the correct answer), 20% answered incorrectly and 40% did not know; with the rest failing to respond.

Respondents were much more familiar with eviction policy regarding criminal and/or drug-related activity than with application procedures: 62% were aware that the aforementioned activity results in eviction; and 57% acknowledged that such activity could result in the eviction of the leaseholder.

Transitional Housing Recommendations

The ‘port of entry’ for prisoners – that time immediately leading up to and following discharge – is generally seen as a very vulnerable time for this population. Understanding that rates of recidivism are especially high during the first hours and days following release [38], it is critical that efforts to address public safety focus on the immediate short-term housing needs of returning prisoners. To that end CRJ makes the following recommendations:

Dedicate a housing specialist within the DOC to be included in EOHHS Interagency Taskforce on Housing & Homelessness.

Developing and formalizing existing relationships, and streamlining and expediting the referral process for exiting prisoners, this housing specialist would be a valuable asset to the DOC’s existing discharge Triage Team, ensuring a seamless continuum of care. In addition, this person should sit on the [Executive Office of Health & Human Services [EOHSS] Interagency Taskforce on Housing & Homelessness. Although the DOC participated in this taskforce while under the state’s Health and Human Service secretariat, since its transfer to the Public Safety secretariat DOC involvement has ceased. As this taskforce is instrumental in securing and allocating HUD funding, the DOC’s presence at these meetings is crucial if the housing needs of returning prisoners are to be considered and addressed. Likewise, inviting members from the MA Sheriff’s Association to local Continuum of Care meetings, would insure that the housing needs of county inmates are also addressed.

Replicate Springfield’s innovative public/private collaboration between corrections and community providers.

Hampden County Sheriff’s Department has partnered with Honor Court, a community-based provider, to help prisoners transitioning from the criminal justice system get ‘back on their feet’. Honor Court, a work therapy recovery program, contributes its unique model and necessary start-up resources (house, beds, food) to the innovation. The flexibility of the Honor Court model allows prisoners, regardless of their legal status – parolees, probationers, those in the sheriff’s custody, and those no longer under any supervision -- to reside at the Honor Court house. Adding staff and programming to the Honor Court resources, the Sheriff’s department is able to provide a structured environment for prisoners in all stages of their transition to the community. Like many transitional housing programs, participants work during the day, paying a portion of their earnings for room and board (\$350 per month), and the rest is put toward securing permanent housing in the community.

Re-introduce Parole Beds.

During a three-month period in Hampden County (June – August 2001), 11 out of 225 (5%) prisoners considered for parole were denied release due to a lack of appropriate housing. Historically, this problem has been addressed, in part, through the use of parole beds, which are specifically set aside for those who qualify for conditional release but are without an ‘approved’ residence. In the wake of the Willie Horton incident, use of these beds fell out of favor and is only now beginning to be reintroduced. Indeed, 50 parole beds are currently under construction in Boston which will be used to house prisoners transitioning from incarceration to parole,

as well as for parole violators who are sanctioned to a 'half-way back' setting. While the Parole Board and the Suffolk County Sheriff's Department should be applauded for resurrecting this concept, this innovation should extend to benefit the other communities of the Commonwealth as well.

Expand HUD's Emergency Shelter Grant awards dedicated to prisoner-specific transitional housing, e.g. SPAN, CREO.

Funded through HUD, Emergency Shelter Grants have proven successful in preventing homelessness for individuals discharged from prison, as well as stabilizing and placing homeless ex-prisoners already in the shelter system.

Two Boston-based programs, SPAN and CREO, provided residential services to 105 former prisoners in FY 2001, diverting them from the shelter system. While SPAN places homeless ex-prisoners in substance abuse treatment programs and other residential and social service programs, participants in CRJ's CREO program are housed for up to 60 days in two Boston halfway houses. Both organizations seek to provide counseling, case management, and transportation services as well as help eligible individuals with rental assistance (security deposits, first month's rent), and basic necessities. Ex-prisoners in these programs achieve stabilization by beginning to work, developing a firm footing to reduce the risk of recidivism (i.e. CREO participants during FY 2001 were able to amass on average between \$1,000 - \$1,500 during their stay). Expanding the number of Emergency Shelter Grant beds designated for this population in the Commonwealth would significantly reduce the numbers of homeless ex-prisoners.

Permanent Housing Recommendations

While the issue of transitional housing programs for ex-prisoners needs to be addressed, it is also critical to explore long-term permanent housing options for this population.

Create a joint work-release/prison industry program of rehabilitating seized and abandoned properties.

Learning from the Youth Build and Habitat for Humanity models, Massachusetts' correctional agencies should enlist the labor of work-release prisoners to rehabilitate locally seized and abandoned buildings, and brownfields. Once renovated, these buildings would become rooming houses, Single Room Occupancies, and multifamily dwellings specifically earmarked for low-income and ex-prisoner housing. The benefits of a program of this kind are many: expansion of current mixed-income and ex-prisoner housing capacity; acquisition of useful construction skills and trades leading to post-release employment; visible participation in local revitalization efforts; and, the changing of behaviors and the breakdown of stereotypes. Ideally, those motivated to learn a skill, give back to the community and create housing for which they might one day be eligible could be classified to this type of program while in custody of a correctional institution.

Provide a primer course outlining subsidized housing, its application and appeal process for prisoners approaching release, and initiate the application process when appropriate.

Prison-based discharge planners should conduct information sessions outlining the facts regarding subsidized housing. These sessions should clarify the misconceptions that exist regarding a returning prisoner's eligibility for subsidized housing and the rights of family members currently living in subsidized housing to accept the returning prisoner as a household member. Additionally, discharge planners should assist all eligible individuals with the subsidized housing application process while still incarcerated.

Equipped with this knowledge, the prisoner will be in a better position to obtain public housing, or rental assistance. For example, one can appreciate the importance of maintaining a productive lifestyle once aware that some housing developments do not conduct criminal background checks until applicants have moved to the top of long waiting lists. The understanding that mitigating circumstances, such as employment history and lack of subsequent arrests, are also considered in the public housing process further encourages applicants towards civil and productive citizenship. Similarly, education about the appeals process, such as an individual's rights regarding evidence and representation, would inform prisoners that an adverse decision is not the end of the process.

Establish prisoner-specific housing services to generate and coordinate affordable living arrangements, and extend financial incentives to landlords willing to serve this population.

Modeled after the Workforce Investment Boards (WIB) and One Stop Centers, housing services specifically geared to ex-prisoners could help them find and retain housing in the community. Services might include: housing advocacy and prison in-reach; finding and securing appropriate dwellings; pairing ex-prisoners together as roommates to defray start-up housing costs; co-signing leases to alleviate landlord uneasiness; and administering a third-party payer loan system to prevent eviction in the event of emergencies, e.g. using housing expense grants from the Department of Housing and Community Development. Just as WIB's career specialists mediate employer-employee relationships, these housing specialists, savvy to the nuances and requirements of the criminal justice system, would help broker clients' relationships with parole officers, landlords, roommates, etc.

In generating and supporting affordable living arrangements, these services would be crucial in coordinating ex-prisoner housing and promoting public safety. Like tax credits extended to employers willing to hire this population, providing financial incentives such as accelerated depreciation schedules to agencies and landlords willing to serve this population would be instrumental toward making this idea a reality.

Vigorously enforce the affordable housing requirements under M.G.L. 40B, or pass a statutory alternative ensuring an immediate increase in affordable housing.

The Commonwealth, its municipalities and legislature should either enforce the existing statute, or repeal it altogether and seek a more palatable and efficacious statutory alternative. Such an alternative needs to be more closely aligned to the housing needs and socioeconomic realities of each municipality. Rather than a state-wide 10% figure, individualized targets might consider each community's median income, median housing price, affordability index, and population. Targets based on these variables may address the disparity that exists between different municipalities. For instance, Boston, home to a substantial number of returning prisoners and with 19.4% of its housing stock classified as affordable, still faces a severe shortage. Meanwhile, Weston, the most affluent market in the region, struggles to make 10% of its housing stock affordable under the current guideline.

Initiate a collaborative effort between public, quasi-public and private institutions that fosters returning prisoners' participation in home-buying programs for low-income and homeless individuals.

State and housing finance agencies, local housing authorities, community development corporations, and private industry should collaborate to assist ex-prisoners in obtaining an equal footing with other homeless and low-income housing consumers in the private market.

Given their unique knowledge of this population and commitment to public safety, the participation of criminal justice agencies such as the Department of Correction, Parole and Probation is crucial to fostering the participation of returning prisoners in the private market and addressing the shortage of available units. In addition to an advisory role, their contribution to the initiative could include educating prisoners about the opportunity, identifying potential participants, and equipping prospective prisoners for the responsibilities of homeownership.

Once in the community, participating ex-prisoners would be encouraged to enter conventional homebuyer's programs that target homeless and low-income individuals and prepare them for homeownership through training (e.g. Mass Housing Finance Agency's Homebuyer 101, credit classes) and savings (e.g. Lynn Housing Authority's Family Self Sufficiency Program). Encouraging participation would serve to increase the inclusion of homeless and low-income returning prisoners into programs already seeking to assist these groups toward homeownership. In turn, this initiative would provide long-term housing in communities disproportionately burdened by returning prisoners.

Encourage prisoners to save in-prison and work-release wages by establishing unique interest-bearing accounts for post-release expenses, enhanced by wage sharing programs.

Unable to amass the funds required to move into an apartment (first and last month's rent, security deposit), many returning prisoners are precluded from entering the private or public housing market. Community banks, housing agencies, local unions and potential employers are in a unique position to support local public safety efforts by extending specific services to this population.

Representatives from the financial services/housing industry should conduct in-prison financial planning and management sessions. Similar to federal self-sufficiency resource models, ISSI, banks should agree to establish and manage small, interest bearing accounts, adjusting initial deposit amounts, monthly fees, and minimum balances, to encourage prisoners to save in-prison and work-release earnings.

Understanding that savings would be used to defray other potential costs, such as child support, restitution, debts, back taxes, nonetheless, a certain percentage should be set aside for post-release housing expenses. Additionally, local unions, industries and employers who hire from this population should be asked to match a prisoner's earnings prior to discharge. This would be mutually beneficial: encouraging the rehabilitation and productivity of prisoners; and, developing a prepared and loyal workforce for employers simultaneously benefiting from current tax incentives. Additionally, by encouraging the Department of Employment and Training (DET) to contribute to a sliding-scale wage program the burden of preparing this population for the workforce would not rest solely on employers. Rather, the DET's initial contribution would decrease to 0% over time, leaving the onus on the employer to eventually assume the full wage.

Incorporating this into Empowerment Zone grants, economic development packages, and workforce development initiatives may encourage local lenders and employers to target and serve this population.

Conclusion

In the end, all roads lead to the same conclusion: successful reentry equals an increase in public safety. Housing is the cornerstone of reentry: the indispensable and fundamental basis upon which ex-prisoners begin to build new lives. Housing programs that target this group or include them in existing efforts do a great service to the population-at-large in securing and enhancing public safety.

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