

Reentering the Community From Incarceration: Housing Matters

Catching Up With COSSAP, August 2020

Researchers credit stay-at-home orders for slowing the spread of COVID-19,¹ but for individuals in custody preparing for reentry into the community, “home” can be an ill-defined concept. Barriers to securing housing for ex-offenders—shortages of affordable housing, landlord policies, behavioral health issues, difficulties obtaining stable employment, and the absence of supportive family and friends—are exacerbated by a pandemic that has prompted many jurisdictions to alleviate overcrowded conditions and contagion risk by granting early release to individuals who pose minimal threat to public safety at a time when community services are limited.

In light of this new challenge, those on the front lines in the battle against substance abuse should know that stable housing has long been a recognized strategy for facilitating successful reentry and recovery, and that opportunities to provide it are increasingly becoming available.

The association between incarceration and homelessness is well documented, with reports of homelessness being ten times more likely among ex-offenders than in the general public.² The use of shelters among this population extends beyond the period immediately following release and is characterized as “prolonged and repeated.”³ A study of a reentry housing pilot program in Washington State found that it reduced new convictions and readmission to custody for new crimes, leading the authors of the study to recommend that “subsidized housing for high-risk offenders become a central part of coordinated responses to reentry.”⁴

Two-thirds of sentenced jail inmates have active substance use disorders (SUDs),⁵ which the National Health Care

for the Homeless Council notes can “cause and prolong homelessness;” moreover, the experience of homelessness “complicates one’s ability to engage in treatment.” Fatal opioid overdoses are nine times more likely among people experiencing homelessness than among those who are not.⁶ Studies indicate that the risk of opioid overdose fatality is very high during the immediate post-release period.⁷ Researchers from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill found that the likelihood of fatal opioid overdose was 40 times greater in ex-offenders’ first two weeks following release than among the general population.⁸

Traditional efforts to house those experiencing or at risk of homelessness include a mix of private, public, and supportive housing models, and the U.S. Department of



Franklin County’s (OH) Pathways participants engage in art expression during their graduation ceremony, which marks the final day of programming before their transition into the community. Transitional housing is available for participants who are at imminent risk of homelessness upon release from jail.

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Housing and Urban Development ([HUD](#)) [provides guidance](#) on the Fair Housing Act in relation to criminal records. Still, landlord discretion in the provision of both public and private housing (not all of which are fully accessible to ex-offenders) can be a factor when rental units are in high demand. Provision of permanent supportive housing is often guided by strict eligibility criteria which distinguish “chronic” from “literal” homelessness.⁹

COSSAP actively seeks to halt the revolving door of incarceration and homelessness and help individuals achieve their recovery goals by allowing up to 30 percent of grant funds to be dedicated to transitional or recovery housing as part of a comprehensive response strategy. [Transitional housing](#) provides temporary shelter, often with wraparound services, until permanent shelter is secured. [Recovery housing](#) offers a substance-free environment, often accompanied by peer support.

Franklin County, Ohio, recognizes stable housing as not only an immediate need for many upon reentry, but also a critical component for maintaining recovery. Through COSSAP funding awarded in 2018, Franklin County contracts with several housing providers in the community to meet the individual needs of program participants. Housing partners vary from highly structured transitional housing for those new in recovery to more independent housing that serves as a final step before a participant becomes self-

sufficient. Program teams work with each participant prior to release to create a transition plan detailing goals and needs, including housing. As often as possible, teams use this plan to establish a housing intake immediately after the participant’s release from custody. All participants who are provided housing through the program sign an agreement that they will regularly attend treatment for substance use or mental illness while in the residence and complete regular check-ins with program case managers and peers. Franklin County also established referral relationships with treatment providers with housing components.

Palm Beach County, Florida, an FY 2019 COSSAP grantee, is working to define and measure housing stability standards and other recovery support interventions within and outside the recovery residence environment to determine the program’s impact on outcomes. COSSAP funding is allocated to support a care coordinator/housing specialist assigned to help clients find recovery housing placement through a recovery housing voucher program. Through this program, the Southeast Florida Behavioral Health Network administers financial assistance for housing expenses. Eligible expenditures include rental assistance at selected recovery housing settings. Up to a year of assistance is provided to enable clients to become stably housed in more permanent housing. A peer recovery support specialist will also provide recovery support services, using enhancement funding through recovery support services funds.



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Other resources that COSSAP providers can leverage to fortify housing support include those made available by the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) passed in March 2020. Through this legislation, HUD allocated [\\$1 billion to its Emergency Solutions Grants Program](#) to:

- Build more emergency shelters and cover the upkeep and operation of existing emergency shelters.
- Provide hotel/motel vouchers and essential services (e.g., employment assistance, outpatient health services, legal services, mental health services, substance abuse treatment services) for families or individuals experiencing homelessness.
- Prevent individuals from becoming homeless and rapidly rehouse those who are experiencing homelessness.

The [Substance Use-Disorder Prevention that Promotes Opioid Recovery and Treatment for Patients and Communities Act](#) (SUPPORT Act), passed in 2018, is another potential avenue for addressing housing needs. Through this act, HUD established the [Pilot Program to Help Individuals In Recovery From a Substance Use Disorder Become Stably Housed](#) to help states provide temporary housing for individuals in recovery from an SUD. Section 7031 of the SUPPORT Act called for minimum standards for operating recovery housing. In response, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration posted draft national recovery housing standards and, in 2019, released [Recovery Housing: Best Practices and Suggested Guidelines](#). Furthermore, the Secretary of Health and Human Services generated an [Action Plan for Technical Assistance and Support for Innovative State Strategies to Provide Housing-Related Supports to Individuals With Substance Use Disorder Under Medicaid](#).¹⁰

For More Information

- [Assessing Housing Needs and Risks: A Screening Questionnaire](#) from the [National Reentry Resource Center](#)
- [Reentry Housing Options: The Policy Makers' Guide](#) from BJA and [The Council of State Governments Justice Center](#)
- [Housing Options for Reentry](#) from the [Reentry and Housing Coalition](#)
- [Connecting People Returning from Incarceration With Housing and Homelessness Assistance](#) from the [United States Interagency Council on Homelessness](#)
- [Building Recovery: State Policy Guide for Supporting Recovery Housing](#), from the [National Council for Behavioral Health](#) in partnership with the [National Alliance for Recovery Residences](#)
- [Homeward Bound: The Road to Affordable Housing](#) from the [National League of Cities](#)

References

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⁹Reentry and Housing Coalition. (n.d.). *Housing options for reentry* [Web page]. <http://www.reentryandhousing.org/private-housing>.

¹⁰Miller, N., Cameliën, N. M., & Ekelund, B. (2019). *RSAT training tool: Reentry strategies to reduce recidivism and sustain recovery*. http://www.rsat-tta.com/Files/Final-Re-entering-RSAT-Clients_9-27-19.

