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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/publications/step-down-programs-and-transitional-units-strategy-to-end-long-term-restrictive-housing>

Policy Issue Resources

Publication

The practice of restrictive housing where a person is held in a cell for 22 to 24 hours per day with minimal activity or human interaction has come under increased scrutiny from researchers, advocates, policymakers, the media, and corrections agencies themselves. Recognizing this, corrections departments around the country have begun exploring ways to significantly reduce and reform their use of restrictive housing. One challenge, however, is determining ways in which to successfully transition individuals who have already been living in restrictive housing for lengthy periods of time—months, years, or even decades—back into the general population and even the community. This brief examines one approach that has been adopted by a number of systems to help individuals transition, or step down from restrictive housing to less-restrictive environments. It offers an overview of these programs, key components of their success, and common pitfalls that should be avoided for agencies looking to adopt them.

If they are carefully designed and implemented, transitional units or step-down programs can be effective strategies to shorten the time people spend in restrictive housing and help them transition back to general population settings.

Although terminology and definitions may vary, the ACA refers to a step-down program as one that includes a system of review and establishes criteria to prepare an [incarcerated person] for transition to general population or the community after spending time in a restrictive setting.

Transitional units or programs can serve as a way to move people out of restrictive housing and into a less-restrictive environment as quickly as possible while still maintaining safety.

In addition, such units can provide programming and treatment to address any unmet needs (such as mental health needs) and promote positive behavioral change, and can allow meaningful socialization and group activity to help people become reaccustomed to being around others.

PUBLICATION

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