

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/providence-housing-authority-addresses-reentry>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Access to safe, affordable, and equitable housing for *all* shouldn't simply be an ideal; it is the core mission of housing agencies at the local and federal level.

Yet, historically, discriminatory policies and legislation have been used to effectively deny this fundamental right to individuals in our country.

As the largest public housing agency in the state of Rhode Island, the Providence Housing Authority (PHA) has been committed for nearly 80 years to providing safe and affordable housing to thousands of low income individuals and families. However, following the 1996 adoption of the federal [One Strike and You're Out](#) policy, public housing authorities across the country including Providence began to exclude individuals with justice system involvement from living with their families in public housing.

This policy resulted in the fragmentation of families mostly black and Latino. Children, fathers, and other family members coming home from incarceration were unable to join their families, with long-lasting implications.

In 2016, the [U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development](#) changed course and acknowledged that criminal records-based barriers to housing are likely to have a disproportionate impact on [black and Latino] home seekers. Thus, where a policy or practice that restricts access to housing on the basis of criminal history has a disparate impact on individuals of a particular race, national origin, or other protected class, such a policy or practice is unlawful and from then on would not recommend housing agencies to adopt one-strike policies.

Following this reversal, the Providence Housing Authority began to actively review its role in reentry reform and how the agency could proactively address this issue with the support of the PHA Administration, its Board of Commissioners, PHA residents, local elected officials, and community partners. For example, we were one of 14 housing authorities selected for the Juvenile Reentry Assistance Program, an initiative designed to reduce some of the collateral consequences for young people who [have had justice system involvement](#). In addition, the PHAs Board of Commissioners and the Resident Advisory Board began discussions to review and update the housing admissions policy.

At that time, the policy included an automatic denial for applicants and household members with a history of violent or drug-related criminal activity within the past 10 years. In March 2017, the PHAs Board passed a more lenient admissions policy including a process for individualized review of applicants with conviction histories which was successfully implemented in May 2017 after public review.

In late 2017, we were selected to join the Vera Institute of Justice's [Opening Doors to Public Housing](#) initiative. This initiative aims to provide technical and research assistance to housing authorities across the country as they develop and implement revised eligibility requirements for public housing applicants. This partnership allowed the PHA to learn from other housing agencies on how they addressed similar issues and barriers.

During the year-long partnership which ended in August the PHA and Vera conducted a series of meetings with staff, the Board of Commissioners, and stakeholders to share and discuss best practices and identify a course of action. Both organizations worked together to draft and evaluate standard operating procedures for applicants as well as for family reunifications in public housing. Vera's research team conducted a data analysis based upon the Rhode Island Department of Corrections data to evaluate the number of potential individuals that would be eligible for housing, should PHA change its policy. When this data was presented to staff and the Board of Commissioners, it helped demonstrate the need and importance of criminal justice policy reform and evaluation.

In Rhode Island, about 5 percent of the general population is black; however, they make up [30.6 percent of the people in the states Adult Correctional Institutions](#) and 20.2 percent of people on probation or parole. Latinos account for 23 percent of the prison population and 21 percent of people on probation or parole, while only being 12 percent of the general state population. Changing housing policies and structures that have historically discriminated against these marginalized communities is critical. The Providence Housing Authority understands the important role it can play in reentry and criminal justice reform and remains committed to evaluating and addressing these disparities.

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