

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/helping-people-with-prior-convictions-access-nyc-public-housing>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Finding housing is hard for people with conviction histories, especially in public housing.

Most housing authorities in the country have policies that temporarily or permanently bar people with conviction histories, even though [studies](#) have shown that when people released from incarceration obtain stable housing, they are significantly more likely to reconnect with family and other social support systems, find and retain employment, and avoid future justice system-involvement. That's why accurate information about housing options is critical to a person's success after incarceration. However, that information is not always available, especially when a housing authority changes its practices or updates its policies, as is the case with the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA).

For example, NYCHA recently implemented the Family Reentry Program, which provides the opportunity for people recently released from incarceration to reunite with their family in public housing. In an [evaluation](#) of the Family Reentry Program, Vera found that some residents' distrust of NYCHA contributed to misinformation about the program, impeding recruitment and enrollment efforts. The distrust stemmed from fears that applying to the program would expose families to evictions and the assumption that NYCHA completely prohibits formerly incarcerated people from living in public housing. For policies such as NYCHA's procedures for lifting permanent exclusion, confusion stems from past materials with highly technical language, the lack of clarity around the permanent exclusion policy, and the limited knowledge on the procedure to lift permanent exclusion. (Permanent exclusion occurs when a NYCHA tenant rather than a risk evictee enters into a stipulation that those associated with the resident who have engaged in non-desirable and/or criminal behavior are barred from entering the apartment.)

A new set of tools and resources released today addresses this need for better communication, providing resources to help those with conviction histories easily interpret policies and access programs that may allow them to formally visit or return to NYCHA. Accessible online at [BackToNYCHA.org](https://www.backtonycha.org), the site includes an illustrated guidebook explaining the various options available to individuals seeking to formally visit and/or live in public housing after a criminal conviction, a fact sheet for community-based organizations, and outreach posters. It also links to additional resources made available by NYCHA, legal service providers, and other agencies.

To develop these tools and resources, Vera brought together a [service designer](#), [Theatre of the Oppressed NYC](#), and [Youth Represent](#) to identify effective ways to inform residents and other members of the community about NYCHA's policies and programs for people with conviction histories. Theatre of the Oppressed NYC produced a series of theatrical performances written and performed by current and former NYCHA residents who were impacted by NYCHA's criminal justice policies to generate ideas for the content of the materials. The partners then designed a set of resources to inform the public about NYCHA's new policies and programs for people with criminal histories. In the coming weeks, the guidebooks, posters, and other print material will be distributed to reentry organizations, legal services providers, and government partners across New York in order to further broaden the dissemination of information.

As housing authorities like NYCHA revise policies and implement programs for people with conviction histories, resources like Back to NYCHA are necessary to ensure these reforms are fully accessible to the greatest amount of people. For public housing authorities across the country that are similarly revising policies and promoting successful reentry of people coming home from prisons or jails, Back to NYCHA's design can serve as a model for public outreach and bridging the trust between public housing authorities and its residents.

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