

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/returning-home-for-the-holidays>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

[More people are traveling these days for the holidays than ever before.](#)

For many, the trek home is a welcome occasion to reflect on the past year, make resolutions to live better lives, and celebrate with friends and family.

But, for the 11.6 million men and women released from U.S. jails and prison every year, returning home either for the holidays, or at any time for that matter can be particularly challenging. This is because, due to their conviction histories, many returning citizens are prohibited from accessing public housing units even where their families may live.

Currently, admissions criteria for much of the country's 3,000+ public housing authorities (PHAs) restrict people with certain felony convictions from either moving back in with their family members or from securing their own housing following release from incarceration. And while the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) explicitly bans people from public housing who have been convicted of producing methamphetamine on PHA property or who appear on lifetime registries for sex offenses, many PHAs also temporarily or permanently keep out people with other conviction histories through discretionary screening and eviction policies.

Ironically, it's these discretionary housing policies that keep out people who benefit the most from having stable housing. Today, more and more PHAs are realizing that public safety does not have to be compromised in order to give people with conviction histories access to stable housing. In 2015 HUD urged PHAs to enact policies that gave formerly incarcerated people a second chance by issuing guidance emphasizing convictions rather than arrests as the basis for denying housing admissions or for enforcing evictions.

Through our [Opening Doors to Public Housing Initiative](#), Vera has built on this momentum for housing admissions reform. Opening Doors is a growing network of PHAs that are changing their admissions policies to: 1) safely increase access to public housing for people with conviction histories, 2) improve safety of public housing and surrounding communities using reentry housing strategies, and 3) promote collaboration between PHAs, law enforcement, and other criminal justice stakeholders to improve reentry outcomes for people leaving incarceration.

As public attention grows to the difficulties people with criminal justice involvement face in securing housing, opportunities for reform emerge. We recently convened PHA representatives and local law enforcement partners from around the country in New Orleans to discuss how to move this work forward. And, Colorado's Department of Local Affairs (DOLA) recently announced an [initiative](#) to help PHAs launch reentry programs.

Going forward, it's critical that access to safe housing as part of a successful reentry process be included in discussions on criminal justice reform. At a time when people are busy celebrating the holidays and making new-year resolutions, we must remember the need for safe spaces in homes and communities for those coming home from prison and jails. And given that more than 90 percent of people who are incarcerated will eventually return home, we must further recognize that our community's success is inextricably tied to theirs.

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