

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/breaking-point/a-place-to-call-home>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Programs for [young students](#) in elementary schools and for teens in the [foster care system](#) who struggle with emerging mental health issues or trauma as described in WNYC's "Breaking Point: New York's Mental Health Crisis" series are important preventative measures that can restore health and steer young people away from the pipeline to prison. For adults returning home from a correctional facility, access to stable housing can be just as important to preventing them from falling back into behaviors that led to their incarceration. Studies have shown that people who have a safe place to live are better able to navigate the transition home from a correctional facility and, as a result, have an easier time finding employment and maintaining sobriety. On the other hand, when individuals have trouble accessing safe, affordable housing, they often wind up in recurring homelessness and criminal justice involvement.

Communities across the country have struggled to break this cycle, and New York City is no exception. In fact, a recent report by the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene on 400 New Yorkers admitted to jail more than 18 times in the last five years found that this small group accounted for 300,000 days in jail over the same time period (the reported data is cited [here](#)). This group also presented a higher prevalence of mental illness and substance use disorders than the general jail population.

There are two new approaches in New York City to change these unwanted outcomes. The recent Columbia University [evaluation](#) of one such approach, CSH's Frequent Users Services Enhancement (FUSE) pilot, suggests supportive housing effectively improves reentry and decreases this population's use of public systems. Another approach, focused on supporting successful reentry and family reunification, is examining the impact of increasing access to public housing for people with criminal convictions.

The [FUSE pilot](#) used supportive housing as an intervention for people cycling through homelessness and criminal justice involvement, targeting individuals who had at least four shelter stays and four jail stays during the five years prior to program entry. By combining affordable housing with services to improve housing stability, employment, mental and physical health, and to decrease active substance use, the pilot reduced pilot participants' usage of jails, emergency rooms, and shelters during Columbia's two-year evaluation. Each individual housed through FUSE generated \$15,000 in public savings, paying for over two thirds of the intervention costs. Mayor Bill de Blasio has recognized this successful model and has committed to expanding FUSE this year in the Mayor's Task Force on Behavioral Health and the Criminal Justice System [Action Plan](#).

Building on FUSE, CSH and Vera have partnered with the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA), New York City Department of Homeless Services, New York State and City Departments of Corrections, and 11 reentry service providers to launch the [NYCHA Family Reentry Pilot Program](#). NYCHA is one of the first public housing authorities in the country to test lifting local bans on persons with criminal justice histories. The pilot is designed to help 150 individuals recently released from prison or jail reunite with their families in NYCHA apartments. Participants receive six months of case management support from one of the participating service providers and, at the end of two years, can become permanent tenants on the family's lease. If the pilot is effective, it could be expanded in New York City and demonstrate a model for public housing authorities nationwide.

The program's evaluation, supported by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, is underway and will provide information useful to other housing authorities interested in similar programs. Programs like these will stop the revolving door of arrest, incarceration, and homelessness that trap our most vulnerable New Yorkers and, more importantly, give them a place to call home.

Vera is pleased to complement the WNYC broadcast, *Breaking Point: New York's Mental Health Crisis*, with [a blog series](#) that features the voices of experts from a range of fields as they examine how the nexus of poverty, mental health, and the criminal justice system affects nearly every aspect of New York City life.

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