

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/rss-feed-homeward-bound-an-interview-with-ron-ashford-of-the-united-states-department-of-housing-and-urban-development-hud>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

What are the most significant challenges facing individuals who seek housing after returning home from incarceration?

HUD is part of the Federal Interagency Reentry Council. The reentry council started six years ago when representatives from different federal agencies got together. We went around the table and all agencies were saying that the biggest impediment to reentering offenders is housing. Everyone was looking at us because we were HUD. We decided we needed to first clarify what HUD's position is for folks who are reentering and what the rules are. Housing authorities tend to say, "We won't let you in because HUD won't let us do it." So in 2011, [HUD Secretary] Shaun Donovan wrote a letter to all public housing authorities saying that HUD has just two permanent debarments: one for methamphetamine production on public housing premises and the other for lifetime registered sex offenders, and that everything else is left up to local housing authorities. Housing authorities are the ones that make the admissions procedures for offenses other than those two debarments so we encouraged housing authorities to be expansive where appropriate.

In the 2011 letter that you mentioned, Secretary Donovan encouraged public housing authorities to help formerly incarcerated people gain access to one of the most fundamental building blocks of a stable life: a place to live. In what ways have you observed the implementation of this recommendation in policy and practice over the course of the Obama administration?

I don't know that the needle has moved that much. It has opened up the discussion. We have identified 30 housing authorities that have actually implemented programs that allow ex-offenders access to public housing developments or Section 8 vouchers; there may be more, but we have identified 30. They range from New Haven, Connecticut to Oakland, California to other places like St. Louis, Missouri. We have developed and will be releasing profiles of these case studies so other housing authorities know what is happening in the field. I think more and more housing authorities are looking at their administrative plans and deciding that they want to move in this direction. I don't know that this movement is solely because of Secretary Donovan's letter; I think it's the pressure from the 700,000 people coming out of prison and jail every year, people who are looking for housing. Cities are forming reentry councils and these councils see that housing is missing and then bring in the housing authority to ask, "What can we do together?" A perfect example is New Haven. The New Haven Housing Authority was invited by the reentry council to participate. When the housing authority staff sat down and decided what to do, they decided to open their admissions policies and went down the road to providing housing for formerly incarcerated people.

At HUD, what we're looking at doing is giving housing authorities guidance on what is safe because I think there are two fears that housing authorities have. One fear is that residents tend to say, "We don't want ex-offenders like this guy who was a drug dealer back into the community." The other pressure comes from executive directors of [housing authority] boards who don't want to be in headlines if things go wrong and don't want to lose their jobs. We're saying to housing authorities, "Here is what the evidence says." For the first year and up to the first three years after a person leaves prison or jail, that is the danger zone. If they haven't recidivated by that time, the likelihood that they will be involved in the criminal justice system is just as high or low as anyone else. For housing authorities that have a seven-year, 10-year, or even lifetime prohibition, they need to look at the evidence and change their policies so that three years becomes the standard. They also need to make sure rehabilitation becomes a priority.

President Obama recently unveiled a new initiative called My Brothers Keeper that provides support to young men of color. How is HUD involved with the initiative and how does it relate to HUD's movement on reentry?

My Brothers Keeper is President Obama saying that we as a nation need to look at boys and young men of color and focus on their lives because they are falling by the wayside. That is a separate issue from reentry, but it is related. A lot of men of color do have criminal records so if we're going to focus on this population, we need to focus on what happens when people come out of prison with a criminal record and how we can get their lives on track. I think that will help the conversation about reentry and housing.

We know that within our public housing developments, we have a lot of boys and young men of color. For My Brothers Keeper, there are probably four or five target demographic areas and age zero to five is one of them. We know early childhood education is crucially important. Can we get them into early childhood education and use data to ensure that they've been tested for various health indicators? Can we work with school systems so we know if a child has excessive absence or tardiness at school so we can intervene? We want an extensive network of mentors so we can help keep them on track, and this includes college fraternities that are willing to mentor our kids.

We are thinking about a project that has housing authorities targeting one public housing development, and within that development having an array of organizations: early childhood education, community colleges, workforce investment boards, fraternities, etc. say, "We're going to work with every boy in this development." We want to make sure they have classes and mentors who can intervene when there's a problem. We want to try to move the needle in the targeted developments and then go from 10 to 20 to 100. We know many people would work with housing authorities if there was a target, if it was part of a national movement such as My Brothers Keeper.

What advice do you have for those in the field? What should folks be looking for? What are some next steps?

I want to congratulate Vera for their [New York Housing Authority project](#). One hundred and fifty returning citizens coming back into public housing this is like a dream. If at end of two years, all the evidence and indicators come out on the good side, we can take that to all the housing authorities in the country and say, "This is what NYCHA did and you can do it, too."

For HUD, we have to promote the 30 housing authorities we know of that are accepting ex-offenders so we can show that this is a safe avenue to go down, and find out from them what they've done, what the challenges are, and what the successes are.

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