

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/released-from-prison-with-no-place-to-live>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

When Karl Fort was released from prison in July 2019, he faced the same predicament that many of the [600,000 people](#) who return from prison every year do: he did not have a place to live.

He spent the next several months in a halfway house, then living with his niece, then at his sisters, then going back and forth between their places. Last fall, several months after he applied for public housing, he received a letter from the Winnebago Housing Authority, now known as Northern Illinois Regional Affordable Community Housing ([NI ReACH](#)), that he was eligible. But when he called, he learned there were no vacancies.

I was just eligible to be on the waiting list, Fort said.

Every week for the next few months, he called the housing authority to follow up. Finally, his exhausting search culminated in January of this year 18 months after his release when he moved into a NI ReACH apartment in Rockford, Illinois.

I felt relief, Fort said. But it should not take that long.

Forts struggle to secure housing as someone who is formerly incarcerated is not unusual, as many landlords have restrictive admissions policies. The fact that he was even able to eventually find public housing is unusual: most of the nations 3,300 public housing authorities have admissions policies that [bar formerly incarcerated people from living](#) in their communities. These restrictions can separate formerly incarcerated people [from family members and loved ones](#). They also explain, in part, why a formerly incarcerated person is nearly [10 times more likely](#) to experience homelessness than a member of the general public. And policies like these add to the burdens and stressors that formerly incarcerated people face, as a [combination of laws, rules, and biases](#) can block them from accessing services, securing jobs or professional licenses, getting loans, and exercising the right to vote.

We paid our debt to society, so why do we still pay? Fort said. It is difficult for somebody whos trying to get a place and trying to do the right thing, without the support system to help navigate it.

People of color are [disproportionately harmed](#) by the criminal legal system, so housing exclusions based on arrest or conviction history further the racial disparities inherent in this system. Meanwhile, [studies show](#) that people who have stable, affordable housing are more likely to find and keep a job and less likely to be reincarcerated.

In response, a growing number of local housing authorities are [removing restrictions](#) that prevent incarcerated people from receiving housing. [NI ReACH](#) is one of more than 26 public housing authorities across 17 states that has worked with the Vera Institute of Justice, through its work currently supported by the U.S. Department of Justice Bureau of Justice Assistance, to [remove such barriers](#). In May, the [Tacoma Housing Authority in Washington](#) announced it would stop automatically denying applicants based on conviction history. And earlier this year, Illinois became the [first state in the country](#) to pass legislation that [limits public housing authorities ability](#) to refuse housing to people based on arrest and conviction records. It also reduces the look-back period, or the amount of time public housing authorities can consider a persons conviction history, to six months from the application date.

In addition to the changes occurring at the local and state level, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development recently announced that it will [increase access to emergency housing vouchers](#) for people leaving jails and prisons who have low incomes or are at risk of homelessness.

Eliminating restrictive housing policies can go a long way toward helping people who have been incarcerated get back on their feet, and Fort says change is desperately needed. In the meantime, hes focused on helping other people recently released from prison navigate the often-complicated process.

Because I know that with a roof over their heads, they have the potential to be something greater.

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