

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/in-new-orleans-the-housing-authority-is-helping-people-with-criminal-convictions-rejoin-families>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Think about a particularly trying time in your life. Now think about not having a place to stay or family to support you during this time of hardship. Would you have made it? For people recently convicted of a crime, having a place to stay and the support of family are often the most influential factors in their success. But for decades, housing authorities across the country have not allowed recently convicted people to access public housing, even though many had loved ones who lived there. Today, the Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO) [has changed its rules](#).

New Orleans sends more people to jail and prison than almost any other place in the country per capita. Thousands of New Orleanians have criminal convictions and struggle to stay on their feet. [Eighty-five percent of people](#) in our jail are black and communities of color are most significantly impacted by the obstacles that people with convictions face, such as finding employment and housing.

Going forward HANO will use a set of criteria based on the severity of the crime and the time since conviction to determine if an applicant should be admitted to HANO-subsidized housing or evaluated further. As a result, no applicant will be denied housing because of her criminal record without consideration of individual and present circumstances. For serious and/or recent convictions, a panel will review the application and make a decision based on the persons criminal history, rehabilitation efforts, community ties, and employment history. This new process is in line with best practices recommended by the [Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law](#) and the [U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development](#). But HANO has distinguished itself by becoming the first housing authority in the country to take these steps.

It took more than three years to develop and approve this change, but the process has been as important as the end result. At the urging of local advocates, HANO developed the new rules with grassroots organizations that represent formerly incarcerated people and public housing applicants, fair housing advocacy groups, criminal justice agencies, landlords, and private property managers. This collaboration was instrumental in developing a model policy that reflects the interests of people with convictions, their families, their communities, and the broader public housing community.

However, the new policy contains a possible exemption for private managers of public housing developments with contracts that allow them to set their own rules. That means public housing applicants with criminal backgrounds may be denied if they apply to one of these sites. To truly become the model agency it aspires to be, HANO will need to find a way to apply its new policies to every site so that all New Orleanians with criminal convictions can access the same opportunities for success.

Nonetheless, this policy is an enormous step for HANO towards ensuring more fair and rational access to public housing, a critical public resource. All over the country, too many people with criminal convictions are kept from stability and the support of their loved ones. Other housing authorities should look to HANO's example for guidance as they seek to help people with convictions successfully reenter their communities and rejoin their families in public housing.

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