

CRIMINAL JUSTICE COORDINATING COUNCIL INNOVATIVE HOUSING PROGRAMS FOR RETURNING CITIZENS

The Criminal Justice Coordinating Council is hosting a live webinar on innovative housing programs for returning citizens. Research has shown that unstable housing increases the likelihood of recidivism for returning citizens, especially in jurisdictions with a limited supply of affordable housing. During this webinar, we will learn about successful reentry housing efforts for consideration in the District.

Moderator

Sean Quitzau, Senior Policy Analyst, *The Council of State Governments Justice Center*

Panelists

Sonya Harper, Director, Criminal Justice Services, *Mecklenburg County, NC*

Bernadette Butler, Director, The Homecoming Project, *Impact Justice*

Christina Green, Director of Supportive Housing, *The Osborne Association*



[Registration Link \(Zoom\)](#)

September 20, 2023

2:00 pm – 4:00 pm EST

Introduction

On September 20, 2023, the Criminal Justice Coordinating Council (CJCC) hosted a webinar titled “Innovative Housing Programs for Returning Citizens”. The webinar explored the challenges related to providing housing for returning citizens and highlighted innovative approaches being implemented in other jurisdictions. Executive Director Kristy Love provided an overview of the housing-related challenges facing the District. She noted that in 2019, the fair market price for a two-bedroom apartment was \$1,665, requiring an average salary of \$66,000. Further, the affordable housing stock in the District is insufficient to meet the needs of returning citizens.

Ms. Love pointed out that the combination of income requirements, rising rental costs, and low housing stock present impossible barriers for returning citizens, and increases the likelihood of them experiencing homelessness and recidivating.

After her introductory remarks, Ms. Love introduced the moderator, Sean Quitzau, Senior Director for Policy, the Council of State Governments (CSG).

Panel Discussion

Mr. Quitzau prefaced the panel discussion and presentations by contextualizing his work with the CSG related to housing issues and challenges faced by returning citizens and criminal justice officials. He pointed out that returning citizens are ten times more likely to experience homelessness than the general public, and individuals who are homeless are eleven times more likely to come into contact with the justice system.

Sean provided an overview of the CSG Zero Return to Homelessness Initiative that is supported by funding from the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA). The initiative has four components: collaboration across systems, assessments that capture data to drive resource allocation to clients, connecting clients to existing housing, and expanding access to housing by using cost-saving data. The primary aim of the initiative is to make post-incarceration homelessness rare, brief, and non-recurring. Mr. Quitzau indicated that the presentations from the panelists would shed light on unique initiatives in different regions that are delivering tangible and measurable results in administering reentry housing initiatives.

The panelists were as follows:

Sonya Harper, Director, Criminal Justice Services, Mecklenburg County, NC

Bernadette Butler, Director, *The Homecoming Project*, Impact Justice

Christina Green, Director of Supportive Housing, *The Osborne Association*

Sonya Harper, Director, Criminal Justice Services, Mecklenburg County, NC

The primary mission of CJS is to facilitate seamless reentry, achieving those goals by: increasing the number of beds available to individuals with criminal histories, reducing barriers to securing housing post-incarceration, providing wraparound services, and reducing recidivism among individuals in transition. CJS reentry efforts support state and federal reentrants.

Ms. Harper's department works with pre-trial, recovery court, forensics evaluation, and reentry functions to support reentry housing efforts. Her organization uses a Council Vendor Housing Network to support reentry efforts. Housing vendors do not receive incentives to participate in the program, however, state funding supports direct placement, with the help of a resource coordinator who contracts with homeowners interested in participating.

The CJS program has specific eligibility criteria for clients seeking housing assistance. To qualify, clients must be residents of Mecklenburg County, and their conviction must have occurred within the county as well. Additionally, prospective clients should have no history of conviction within the past twelve months. Referrals to the program are made through a network of sources, including faith-based organizations, state and federal agencies, community advocacy groups, and public defenders.

Prior to admission, prospective clients participate in a reentry simulation exercise that includes completing sample lease applications. Clients are further required to participate in case management services. All clients are required to seek employment as well.

Once accepted into the program, CJS provides comprehensive support. During the initial three months, CJC covers the costs of fully furnished housing units. Housing assistance is extended to cover the entire rental amount for individuals enrolled in vocational programs. In FY23 the program placed 100 residents. All housing vendor properties must comply with county regulations and each landlord is responsible for any needed repairs. Properties range in size from one-bedroom units to larger homes that can house up to seven clients. Each property provides everything required by renters, including cookware, bedding, and other household items.

Bernadette Butler, Director, *The Homecoming Project, Impact Justice*

The Homecoming Project is based in northern California, in the Oakland area, and works closely with the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. Ms. Butler explained that the philosophy and method of the Project is based on eliminating homelessness for persons previously involved in the justice system by placing clients with hosts who are willing to accept persons returning to society. The project subscribes to the philosophy of "supporting housing without building a building." Initially the project started with five hosts and blossomed to the current total of 100. A crowning achievement of the project is that many participants remain with their hosts once the program concludes

The program serves clients who were previously sentenced to 10 or more years of incarceration. All clients undergo a pre-screening process to be matched with suitable hosts. Individuals convicted of sex offenses are prohibited from participating in the program. Candidates must complete three rehabilitation programs while incarcerated to be eligible for the program. All program participants are required to participate in six months of active case management. To ensure the well-being of both hosts and clients, program hosts receive orientations and training in conflict resolution and trauma care.

The Homecoming Project operates in communities populated by minorities that are undergoing gentrification. The hosts benefit by receiving payments that enable many to remain in their properties despite rising tax rates. Approximately 98% of the clients renting from the hosts represent the Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) community.

The overriding philosophy and method of the Homecoming Project is to promote social justice and public safety. In the past five years, the Homecoming Project has placed 100 persons in long-term transitional housing. 95% of the project participants secured full-time employment. The organization prides itself on placing 100% of their clients in permanent housing with a 0% recidivism rate. Ms. Butler stated that the key to the Project's success is rooted in case management that results in "high touch" support for clients.

The Homecoming Project pays hosts approximately \$1,400 per month. Funding received to support the project is 72% derived from public sources, and 28% from private donors. Companies such as Enterprise and Wells Fargo have also provided funding for the Project. The Homecoming Project is seeking to expand to other areas and hoping to collaborate with other organizations.

Christina Green, Director of Supportive Housing, *The Osborne Association*

The Supportive Housing program is administered in the Bronx, New York, within the Marcus Garvey Housing project, which consists of 53 units. The building offers 24-hour on-site case management and program support for residents who are 50-years of age or older. Ms. Green highlighted some statistics that underscore the importance of being ready to serve the needs of the elder incarcerated population in New York state, including that by 2030, one-third of the incarcerated population will be 50 or older, one in four persons in the New York state system is 50 or older, and 80% of the incarcerated population is Black or Hispanic. A key element of the housing program is that all staff and residents were previously incarcerated and can share lived experience as they support their clients.

All clients receive fully furnished units, equipped with all the essentials needed to maintain an independent lifestyle. The current waiting list has 150 applicants. Upon taking possession of their unit, each resident receives a \$300 grocery card, a \$200 Target gift card, and a \$50 laundry

card. Residents are required to pay 30% of their housing costs, and the remainder is subsidized by Osborne.

In addition to housing, each resident is connected to primary care services as a critical part of their reentry, giving that many were incarcerated for over thirty years and may face acute health challenges. These services are provided through a federally qualified provider. Ms. Green stated that the success of their housing model is rooted in transparency and holding clients responsible for investing in their transition to reentry. She also emphasized that their model is based on care and concern for all of their clients as they pursue the goal of achieving individual success upon reentry.

Questions

The panelists described how they measure success for their programs. Success is based on avoiding rearrests and new convictions among program participants. Further, the panelists cited community buy-in as a critical measure of their success, especially given resistance from some community members who do not want to live in proximity to formerly justice-involved individuals.

Several panelists elaborated on services tailored to the needs of members of the LGBTQ community. Ms. Green indicated that the program provides some units that specifically address the needs of that demographic. Ms. Harper indicated that CJS works with advocacy organizations to perform client and housing matching. Ms. Butler explained that they ask prospective clients how they identify and attempt to match them accordingly.

Conclusion

In her closing remarks, Executive Director Love highlighted some of the strategies employed by the organizations. In particular she referenced the pre-screening processes used to identify candidates for housing, the use of wraparound services, and the willingness of community members to step up and open their homes to returning citizens. She thanked the panelists and attendees for their participation in the virtual webinar.