

Preventing Homelessness Among People Leaving Prison

Nino Rodriguez

Brenner Brown

vera

INSTITUTE

of

JUSTICE

STATE SENTENCING AND CORRECTIONS PROGRAM

Thomas was serving the end of his sentence at New York State's Queensboro Correctional Facility in New York City.¹ There were several places where he could live when he left prison, but none of them passed muster with his parole officer. His first choice was to live with his wife, but that was ruled out because she was the co-defendant in his current conviction for selling drugs. He could have stayed with his mother, but that was ruled out because his brother was staying there while serving time on parole. With a homeless shelter his only alternative, Thomas met with a community coordinator for Project Greenlight, a prison-based program that could help him find a place to live.

Because Thomas would be under parole supervision for almost a year, he wanted to find a residential program that could keep him occupied. As Thomas saw it, he would rather be in a structured program that might help him successfully complete his parole than have the temptations of total freedom and risk going back to prison. Project Greenlight's community coordinator placed Thomas with an organization that provides housing as part of a year-long employment program, and Thomas went there directly upon his release from prison.

MANY PEOPLE preparing to leave prisons and jails do not have a home. They often return to communities where persistent poverty and lack of jobs and affordable housing make finding a permanent home difficult.² Even those like Thomas who have places to live face policies or practices, including restrictions on access to subsidized housing, that either inadvertently or intentionally eliminate these options.

The active national debate on prisoner reentry has been encouraged by a number of developments, the most important of which seems to be a growing recognition by many policymakers of the axiomatic relation between success in reentry and recidivism. That awareness has been hastened by the fact that all jurisdictions—federal, state, and local—are feeling the effects of a national economic downturn. The vast sums spent by states to maintain or expand their correctional systems (in 1999, it was nearly \$35 billion) have many looking to reduce costs and improve outcomes in tough fiscal times. Enhanced reentry mechanisms, with their promise to help offenders better navigate the straits between incarceration and home, are seen by many in the field as one of the best hopes to reduce recidivism and in the process improve lives, maintain public safety, and reduce the costs of criminal justice systems.

But what if those returning offenders do not have a home? As the staff of Project Greenlight, Vera's reentry partnership with New York State, began their work in 2002, they quickly realized that lack of housing presented a major, perhaps insurmountable, obstacle to successful reentry to many inmates about to be released. Through a combination of careful research, the leveraging of strong working relationships with state corrections and parole agencies, and diligent outreach to community housing providers, Greenlight was quickly able to create a system through which offenders without homes were able to secure housing before leaving prison. While the lasting effects of the approach are still being evaluated, the story this latest installment of our *Issues in Brief* series tells, and the techniques it outlines, should be of interest to policymakers in the many jurisdictions that face the challenge of solving the housing piece of the reentry puzzle.

Greenlight is one example of Vera's innovative work in incarceration policy. Another is the Institute's State Sentencing and Corrections Program (SSC). Since 1999, working only where invited, SSC has assisted officials in more than a dozen states who are developing or implementing changes to their sentencing or incarceration policies to enhance public safety, efficiency, and fairness. SSC relies on a national, nonpartisan group of practitioner associates with reform experience in their own jurisdictions to help officials advance the reforms that they think make best sense for their state, according to that jurisdiction's policy interests, politics, and culture.

Daniel F. Wilhelm
Director, State Sentencing and Corrections Program

Although there are no national statistics on homelessness among people leaving correctional facilities, and we know little about the true scope of the problem, figures from some major jurisdictions suggest a troubling picture.³ At any given time in Los Angeles and San Francisco, 30 to 50 percent of all people under parole supervision are homeless.⁴ In New York City, up to 20 percent of people released from city jails each year are homeless or their housing arrangements are unstable.⁵ One study found that at least 11 percent of people released from New York State prisons to New York City from 1995 to 1998 entered a homeless shelter within two years—more than half of these in the first month after release.⁶ Jeremy Travis, a senior fellow at the Urban Institute who studies reentry issues, notes that a “significant percentage” of the 600,000 people leaving state prisons each year are likely to be homeless.⁷ “Even if it's 10 percent of 600,000 a year, that's 60,000 a year coming out that have some serious housing issue.”⁸

National-level policymakers are paying attention to this issue and have begun to support the idea that helping ex-offenders find housing could be a way to help reduce recidivism and thus ease the strain on corrections agencies and keep communities safe. In May, Rep. Danny K. Davis (D-Ill.) introduced The Public Safety Ex-Offender Self-Sufficiency Act of 2003 in the U.S. House of Representatives. If the legislation is passed, it would provide ex-offenders low-income housing along with services such as job training and job placement.⁹ Rep. Mark Souder (R-Ind.), one of 14 co-sponsors of the legislation, told *Corrections Journal* that helping ex-offenders return successfully to communities “helps

prevent recidivism and makes our nation safer. Providing transitional housing for offenders...is the right thing to do."¹⁰

The staff of Project Greenlight, an eight-week reentry program at Queensboro Correctional Facility, came to the same conclusion. Greenlight was implemented in 2002 as a partnership of the New York State Department of Correctional Services, the New York State Division of Parole, and the Vera Institute of Justice. From February 2002 to February 2003, the program served 348 men. Project staff realized that a significant portion of these men would be homeless upon release and decided to systematically ask the men if they wanted housing assistance, identify existing housing resources, and match the men with available openings. Without creating or subsidizing new housing, Project Greenlight found places to live for the majority of the men who, like Thomas, had no other housing options and requested assistance.

Others who are working on reentry issues around the country have recognized inmates' housing needs and are beginning to develop strategies to address them. Some are using funds available through an initiative sponsored by the Justice Department and other federal agencies to pilot prisoner reentry efforts.

This paper discusses homelessness among returning prisoners, the implications it has for government agencies, and how corrections agencies are approaching the problem. It also describes in detail Project Greenlight's housing assistance program as one example of how to rely on existing resources to address homelessness with a small population. Finally, it outlines insights from Greenlight's experience for practitioners who are facing a similar challenge.

Homelessness Among People Released From Prison

Three main factors contribute to and complicate homelessness among people leaving prison. First, ex-offenders face the same social and economic conditions that lead to homelessness among the general population. Ex-offenders returning to the community also confront barriers to housing associated with their criminal justice system involvement. Finally, there is a lack of ownership of the problem among government agencies and community organizations.

Homelessness has grown among the general population over the past 25 years for several reasons, including a widening gap between rich and poor and a growing shortage of affordable low-income housing in cities.¹¹ A scarcity of well-paying jobs and limited access to education or training also contribute to the problem. People who lack independent living skills or have physical or mental disabilities may be even more vulnerable to becoming homeless.¹² It is likely that ex-offenders face some or all of these problems as they seek housing after prison.

The barriers to housing associated with involvement in the criminal justice system are significant. Thomas's experience is an example of the effects of policies or practices that exist in many jurisdictions to restrict ex-offenders' exposure to people and situations that may place them at risk of re-offending.¹³ In addition, federally subsidized housing providers, such as local public housing and Section 8 programs, may—and sometimes must—deny housing to people with a criminal history involving drugs or violence.¹⁴

Still other circumstances make finding a home difficult for people who recently have left prison. For example, someone who has been incarcerated for one or more years

without access to employment at market wages may not have the financial resources to rent an apartment, particularly in large urban areas. Ex-offenders who live in a shelter or on the street don't have a fixed address or phone number where potential employers can contact them. They also may be unable to maintain personal hygiene and may not have clean, appropriate clothes to wear to interviews or at work.

Providing housing assistance to people leaving prison does not fall easily within the purview of criminal justice, homeless services, or housing development agencies. Corrections agencies are not necessarily responsible for inmates once they have been released. Parole agencies and other agencies charged with supervising offenders in the community, which are more directly affected by the problem than corrections agencies, typically are too small, with tight budgets and limited expertise in brokering housing or developing or managing residential facilities. Homeless services agencies may be wary of having ex-offenders funneled into their system. In a jurisdiction that does not have a homeless services agency, the responsibility of housing the homeless usually falls to a general social services agency, where it must compete with other priorities such as public assistance or child welfare.

These factors combined make it extremely difficult for ex-offenders to find a permanent home and establish stable lives in the community. They may also contribute to an offender's further involvement in the criminal justice system. Some of the men who participated in Project Greenlight, for example, had lived in shelters and reported that substance abuse, theft, and robbery commonly led to fighting and assaults.

Current research suggests that homelessness and incarceration are linked, though the nature of this relationship remains unclear. According to a study by the federal Bureau of Justice Statistics, 12 percent of state prisoners were homeless at the time of their arrest, and the Interagency Council on the Homeless has reported that 18 percent of all homeless people have spent time in a state or federal prison.¹⁵ Moreover, among parolees who have been reincarcerated, 19 percent were homeless upon their arrest.¹⁶ A recent study of more than 48,000 people released from New York State prisons to New York City found an increased risk of reincarceration among people who had used shelters (either prior to or following their incarceration), compared with those who had not.¹⁷ Stephen Metraux, the study's lead author, notes that this risk for reincarceration was highest for released prisoners with a pattern of long-term homelessness—defined as shelter use both before and after incarceration.¹⁸

If homelessness increases the risk of recidivism, the implications for criminal justice agencies and communities could be substantial. In addition to costs associated with recidivism, criminal justice agencies could face increased costs related to the time parole officers spend locating parolees who do not have a permanent home. Homelessness makes standard community supervision techniques, such as unannounced late-night visits to confirm curfew compliance, nearly impossible.

Cheri Nolan, the deputy assistant attorney general who heads the federal Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative for the U.S. Department of Justice, says criminal justice agencies have an interest in being involved in addressing inmates'

housing needs. "In the long run, it's going to reduce criminal justice system costs by reducing recidivism and lowering crime rates." Her office sees homelessness as a large contributor to crime. When people are living on the streets and aren't employed, she says, "quite often...they'll go back to what they've done in the past, which is to commit crimes."¹⁹

Local Efforts to Prevent Homelessness

Criminal justice administrators across the country are increasing their focus on homelessness among ex-offenders in their jurisdictions. Their efforts are relatively new and vary in scope and objectives. Some are pilot projects targeted to small numbers of ex-offenders while others aspire to reach all inmates who are at risk of being homeless. Whatever their scope, these efforts generally appear to focus on one of three principal objectives:

- to prohibit inmates leaving prison from being homeless;
- to provide housing as part of services to help ex-offenders stay sober or get a job, or
- to provide comprehensive transitional services, including housing.

To support these efforts, agencies usually have to identify new resources. Some recent reentry housing initiatives have benefited from the \$2 million in federal funds available to each state through the Justice Department's reentry initiative. In the current economic climate, however, few agencies can find additional funds to support housing efforts. Like Project Greenlight, they must rely on existing community resources. Examples of some of these housing assistance efforts, including

Greenlight, are described below. Because most of these efforts are relatively new, it is still difficult to assess what their effectiveness in preventing homelessness or recidivism will be.²⁰

Prohibiting Homelessness. Hawaii and Illinois are working toward the first objective. Hawaii does not release inmates to parole unless they have housing, and Illinois has a statewide goal of ensuring that everyone leaving prison has housing.²¹

- The Hawaii Paroling Authority will not release an inmate to parole supervision without an approved place to live. Homeless shelters are not considered an approved residence. Inmates who are eligible for parole are released on furlough for short periods so that they can establish ties in the community, including a place to live, a job, and renewed connections with family. Max Otani, who worked as a parole officer and an administrator responsible for parole operations statewide during his 17 years with the Paroling Authority, says that it usually takes a couple of months for an inmate to find housing. For disabled inmates or high-risk inmates such as sex offenders and arsonists, finding housing can take up to a year. Parole officers sometimes refer inmates to services to help them with housing, but in most cases inmates are on their own in finding a place to live.²²
- The Illinois Department of Corrections has pledged to not release any prisoner to homelessness. Its Placement Resource Unit attempts to find transitional housing, as well as short-term employment, for those who would

otherwise be homeless. In practice, though, the unit must focus most of its resources on the most difficult to place, many of whom are sex offenders. People leaving Illinois prisons with other criminal backgrounds may receive only very short-term housing. The unit plans to use a portion of its federal reentry funds to serve an additional 180 inmates over the next three years from the general prison population who do not have special needs. Each will receive between 70 to 90 days of either transitional housing or rental and utility assistance.²³ However, in a state that released 25,302 inmates in 2001, the number of offenders receiving such assistance is small.²⁴

Providing Housing as Part of Drug Treatment or Employment Services. California and Maryland are examples of states that are focusing on the objective of providing housing as part of substance abuse treatment or employment programs.

- In California, inmates who participate in pre-release drug treatment programs are eligible for up to six months of housing linked to post-release drug treatment. Of the approximately 160,000 inmates statewide, 7,500 are in drug treatment programs.²⁵ Vitka Eisen, associate director of criminal justice programs at Walden House, a San Francisco-based nonprofit health services organization that operates four in-prison substance abuse programs and three residential treatment facilities for parolees, estimates that 65 percent of inmates in drug treatment programs are required to participate and generally have low levels of motivation in the program. She

says that motivation increases, however, when inmates learn that post-release services, including housing, are available.²⁶ Participants must first complete a residential treatment program and later can become eligible for housing in privately run “sober living” residences while they participate in outpatient drug treatment.²⁷

- In Maryland, ex-offenders in Baltimore can enroll in job training and get help finding a job through the Re-Entry Partnership Initiative. The program provides two months of housing, which participants pay for with the stipend they receive while they’re in job training. The goal is for ex-offenders to save money so that they can eventually live on their own. The program, a joint venture of the State Division of Correction and the Enterprise Foundation, began in 1999 and serves about 130 people per year. With the federal reentry funds, the program plans to expand its services to 325. Former Program Director Tomi Hiers says, “We thought that probably about a third of the overall population would need some sort of transitional housing support...but it’s been roughly 50 percent.”²⁸

Providing Housing as Part of Comprehensive Transition Planning. Rather than focus on one particular service to help ex-offenders return to the community, some programs focus on the third objective of providing an array of transitional services, including housing assistance. Hawaii, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Tennessee have such programs.

- Hawaii’s Being Empowered and Safe Together (BEST) Reintegration

Program is a small-scale program in Maui County supported by federal reentry funds. The program is designed to serve 225 people paroled to the island of Maui over three years. BEST provides transitional services such as substance abuse treatment, family reunification services, and cognitive skills training. The program employs a full-time housing coordinator and sets aside \$200 for housing for each participant. Although the monthly rent of a studio apartment on Maui is about \$765, program planners expect that even this small stipend will help ex-offenders find housing in the first few weeks they are out of prison.²⁹

- Massachusetts’ Department of Corrections, like those in Hawaii and Illinois, has a policy of not releasing any inmate to homelessness or to a homeless shelter. According to Lisa Jackson, who heads the department’s 20-person Reentry Unit, the department’s system-wide approach to release planning addresses inmates’ housing needs as they enter prison and as they are planning to leave. In addition, in 2002, the department contracted with the South Middlesex Opportunity Council (SMOC), a private human services organization, to provide housing with integrated social services for people leaving prison who are at risk of homelessness.³⁰ From early July 2003, when it began providing services, until the end of September 2003, SMOC received referrals for 20 inmates, all of whom were placed.

The department is evaluating the effectiveness of its reentry programming. The most recent data available suggest that, despite

the state's policy to not release inmates to homelessness, some ex-offenders are falling through the cracks. In 2001, the department released 2,692 inmates.³¹ According to the Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance (MHSA), in the same year 365 people, or seven percent of those released in 2001, entered emergency shelters directly upon their discharge from a state correctional facility.³²

- Rhode Island Department of Corrections' COMPASS project (Challenging Offenders to Maintain Positive Associations and Social Stability), which began operations in February 2003, provides comprehensive transitional planning. The program will place 200 participants per year into its case-management program. Those who need housing must offset the cost of transitional housing subsidized by COMPASS with income from employment or another source, such as Supplemental Security Income disability insurance. Initial housing expenses will be treated as a loan that participants pay back as their earnings increase.³³
- In October 2002, the Tennessee Department of Corrections implemented Tennessee Bridges for up to 300 people as a transition between in-prison programming and post-release community supervision. The two-year program has three phases: six months of pre-release services including cognitive skills training, substance abuse treatment, and job readiness; six months of work-release; and a year of post-release case management. One of the program's goals is for participants to build savings for

permanent housing during the work-release phase. Those who are unable to find housing while on work-release will receive assistance from case managers for placement in transitional housing. If an inmate does not have enough money saved and if the case manager determines that placement in a transitional residence is in the inmate's best interest, that inmate can receive a loan to cover the first week's deposit.³⁴

Project Greenlight

Like the comprehensive transition planning programs discussed above, Project Greenlight in New York provided an array of transitional services, including housing assistance as one of the program's cornerstones. Greenlight systematically identified inmates needing housing, developed relationships with transitional housing resources in the community, and helped inmates develop a plan for where they would live upon release. Greenlight found housing for most of the men who asked for assistance by relying on existing resources in New York City and without subsidizing or creating new housing.³⁵

Project Greenlight's broad goal was to address a spectrum of reentry issues during the final months of incarceration, integrating the efforts of both corrections and parole staff. It required close collaboration with community-based organizations and inmates' families so the men could establish connections with people able to support them after their release.

The 348 men who participated in Project Greenlight at the Queensboro Correctional Facility—a minimum security state prison in New York City—attended mandatory workshops focusing on job readiness, practical

skills, and cognitive-behavioral tools. They also could volunteer to work more closely with an on-site job developer, a family counselor, and a community coordinator, whose responsibilities included providing housing assistance.

Project Greenlight trained two Division of Parole institutional officers and two Department of Correctional Services counselors to be reentry case managers. Thus, both the state releasing agency—corrections—and the state agency supervising people in the field—parole—had roles in preparing inmates for the transition from prison. Reentry case managers helped the men prepare individual release plans that served as guides for both the men and their parole officers.

To connect the men with organizations that could support them in the community, Project Greenlight brought to Queensboro representatives of programs that addressed employment, education, substance abuse, family issues, and constructive leisure time. Reentry case managers helped participants secure appointments with these groups and with other organizations that did not visit the facility.

The family reintegration programming was perhaps the most uncommon feature of the program. Men could invite their families to Queensboro to participate with them in regular counseling sessions, which aimed to help the men strengthen bonds with family members, reconcile their expectations with those of their families, and plan for how they would fit back into family life.

Project Greenlight's effort to provide housing assistance demonstrated that prisoners preparing for release can be prevented from going to homeless shelters or the street. The project's community coordinator worked full

time in the prison and devoted approximately half of his time to providing housing assistance. The coordinator systematically asked men if they wanted assistance and then worked intensively with them and with community organizations to make sure inmates had a place to live when they left.

The method Greenlight staff used to identify inmates' housing needs and match them to housing can be applied in any context. It is important to keep in mind, though, that Greenlight operated in a large city that provides cash benefits for housing to eligible single adults. Many Greenlight participants relied on this benefit to cover the cost of transitional housing until they could find a job or qualify for other benefits, such as Supplemental Security Income disability insurance or public housing. Most inmates released in the United States return to central cities of metropolitan areas, but cash benefits for housing may not always be available in these areas or elsewhere.³⁶ Nonetheless, because in-depth accounts of the mechanics of finding housing for inmates being released from prison are rare, Greenlight's experience may provide some helpful guidance to other jurisdictions.

Greenlight's Housing Assistance

A systematic emphasis on housing was not originally part of Project Greenlight's operational plan, though the program's designers were aware that a significant minority of participants would be homeless upon release. But in the first months of the project, reentry case managers expressed concern that several participants' parole-approved housing plan consisted of reporting to New York City's main homeless shelter. In response, Greenlight's project director assigned the community coordinator to provide housing assistance as one of his primary responsibilities.

Of the 225 Project Greenlight participants who left prison from September 10, 2002, to March 14, 2003, more than a quarter—66—requested housing assistance. During their participation in Greenlight, 15 of these men found housing on their own with family or significant others. The remaining 51, or 23 percent of the total released, received housing assistance.

To connect men with housing, Greenlight's community coordinator identified inmates most at risk of homelessness, conducted housing intake interviews, developed relationships with transitional housing organizations, and referred inmates to appropriate transitional housing. In cases where housing could not be secured, the community coordinator also worked with the city's homeless agency to expedite parolees' movement from the general-population homeless shelters to placements in specialized housing.

Queensboro and Greenlight Participants

Queensboro Correctional Facility is a minimum-security facility for men that does not house people with serious physical or mental disabilities or with a history of sex offenses. Men became eligible for release and for participation in Project Greenlight after serving two-thirds to 85 percent of their sentence and demonstrating good behavior. For evaluation purposes, they were randomly selected to participate in the mandatory program. (See Figure 1 for participants' characteristics.) Vera's ongoing evaluation of Project Greenlight, due for completion in 2004, will show whether participants have lower recidivism rates than similar ex-offenders in the year following release, make better use of community-based services, and respond more positively to parole supervision.

Figure 1: Characteristics of Greenlight Participants

Characteristic	Percentage (N=349)
Race	
Black	57.6
Hispanic	37.0
White or "other"	5.4
Age	
≤24	24.1
25-34	33.4
35-44	31.0
≥45	11.2
Unavailable	0.3
Offense type	
Robbery	29.2
Drug	22.6
Person	20.9
Property	15.2
Other	12.0
Education	
Grade school	6.0
Some high school or pre-GED	30.9
High school diploma or GED	42.4
Some college	6.9
Associate's, bachelor's, or higher degree	4.6
Unavailable	9.2
No. of felony convictions	
1	25.2
2	27.5
3	17.8
4	14.3
5-8	14.9
Unavailable	0.3

Asking Men if They Need

Assistance. New participants entered Project Greenlight every week. In their first week, they attended an orientation during which the community coordinator made a short presentation describing the housing assistance the program could provide. The coordinator then asked the men to indicate on an individual response form if they would like assistance. The coordinator encouraged men to sign up for assistance if they were certain they would be homeless or if they were unsure about the reliability of their post-release residence.

Assessing Men's Housing Needs.

To determine whether a participant was both interested in and suited for the transitional houses Greenlight worked with, the community coordinator conducted a housing intake interview covering such issues as his ability to follow curfew schedules, his need for substance abuse treatment, and his willingness to live in different types of group settings.³⁷

The coordinator developed relationships with about a dozen transitional houses, which he found by networking with other social service providers. He visited each residence to establish a relationship with the manager, meet the staff and current residents, and get a first-hand look at the facility's rooms and amenities. (See "Project Greenlight's Work with Transitional Homes.")

For residents who are unemployed or receiving public assistance, several of the houses charge a monthly rent of \$215—the amount of the benefit available to single adults in New York City for housing. Rents range from \$260 to \$300 for people who are employed or want a private room. These rents are much lower than market rates for apartments in even

Project Greenlight's Work with Transitional Homes

The transitional homes Project Greenlight worked with are independent operations that provide residents with a basic level of social services intended to help residents stay sober, find stable employment, and secure independent, permanent housing. Many of the facilities are row houses in residential areas, primarily in the Bedford-Stuyvesant and Brownsville neighborhoods of Brooklyn, that have been converted into group homes, often divided into three- or four-person rooms.

Transitional housing organizations' eligibility criteria can vary widely. For example, one of the private organizations Greenlight worked with wanted to screen out people whom the house's manager judged to be "criminal predators," and another house only accepted people willing to do volunteer work in the neighborhood. Eligibility criteria for transitional homes often were fluid and open to negotiation according to facility managers' recent experiences, both positive and negative, with people of similar profiles. Many facilities had guidelines regarding duration of residence. Most housing managers preferred six-month stays because this amount of time balanced managers' goal of motivating residents to find permanent housing with their desire to avoid frequent turnover.

the poorest neighborhoods of New York City.³⁸

Men in Project Greenlight expressed a variety of concerns beyond the cost of rent in deciding whether to seek housing at a transitional facility. For example, they wanted to be sure they could follow a house's rules while preserving their freedom and were very interested in curfew restrictions and security of personal property. A recurring theme among inmates was a desire to avoid neighborhoods that were associated with their previous criminal activity. Greenlight's community coordinator worked with them to find housing in other neighborhoods where they could make a fresh start.

Roberto is an example of a Greenlight client with very specific needs. He had a history of substance abuse and was serving time for dealing drugs, but he was not seeking substance abuse treatment. His parole officer did not

approve his plan to stay temporarily with a relative. Roberto knew that he needed housing for just a month or two until he saved enough money from his job at a barber shop to find a more permanent arrangement.

Because of his history, Roberto was eligible for a facility that was geared toward short-term stays—a "crisis" residence for people waiting to be placed into residential drug treatment programs. All new residents of the facility must be escorted during the first month of their stay, which would have limited Roberto's freedom to work and attend night school. He decided instead to go to a homeless shelter, which the parole department approves as a residence for inmates who are being released on parole.

Securing a Referral. Each Greenlight participant completed a psychosocial assessment upon entering the

program and completed a release plan several weeks later. Together, the assessment and plan illustrated a participant's progress in the program and, along with the housing intake interview, usually provided enough information about an inmate's background, strengths, and needs to help the community coordinator reserve a bed at a housing facility.

Finding the appropriate housing referral could be difficult and often occurred during the last days before release. In part this was because facility managers typically did not know more than a week in advance if a bed would be available. An inmate's willingness to follow a proposed residence's rules also was a factor. In some instances where compatibility was in question, a housing manager requested a phone interview. Phone screenings usually resulted in placing Greenlight's participants.

When the community coordinator had secured a housing referral, he gave the inmate a letter with complete directions and contact information for the residence. He also notified the Greenlight reentry case manager, who updated the inmate's release plan to reflect the new housing arrangement. Finally, the case manager sent the release plan and any referral to the inmate's field parole officer.

Creating Relationships with Other Housing Resources. In addition to forging relationships with transitional housing facilities, Project Greenlight worked closely with the New York City Department of Homeless Services (DHS) to expedite Greenlight participants' transfer from the city's general population shelters into specialized housing.

DHS was interested in better serving people on parole or probation but had difficulty obtaining informa-

tion about their needs from community supervision agencies. Greenlight offered to share information about men who were homeless, including basic biographical information, release date, and, with the inmate's permission, a strengths and needs profile. DHS used this information in its assessment process, which moves homeless people from general population shelters into specialized shelters with programming to address their needs.

Project Greenlight also had an arrangement with DHS to refer participants directly to one of DHS's more highly regarded service providers, the Doe Fund's Ready, Willing & Able program. The one-year employment and sobriety program helps participants obtain jobs and independent housing upon graduation. Ready, Willing & Able's clients usually have to stay in a DHS assessment shelter for some weeks before being referred to the program. Greenlight was able to refer its participants directly to Ready, Willing & Able.

Outcomes

Project Greenlight secured housing referrals for 32, or 63 percent, of the 51 men who requested assistance and otherwise would have been homeless upon release. The majority—19 men—were referred to independent housing facilities with which Greenlight had formed relationships. Nine of the participants were referred to Ready, Willing & Able with the assistance of DHS. Three went to housing facilities for people with HIV/AIDS, and another was diverted to a faith-based group home by his parole officer prior to release. Where these men lived in the long term is unknown. Greenlight did not secure housing for the remaining 19 of the 51 men

because they either refused help and went to the shelter system or Greenlight could not find an appropriate opening in a transitional facility.

Obstacles to Serving Homeless Inmates

Greenlight staff made several assumptions when they decided to assist inmates with housing. One was that men who would request assistance truly would be homeless—that they would not have anyone with whom they could live. Staff learned that many men had relatives who were able to provide housing but that they were restricted from living with them because of criminal-justice related policies and practices. A second assumption was that men who were homeless would ask for and accept assistance. This was not always true.

Criminal Justice-Related Policies Limit Housing Options. Some of the men who requested housing assistance did so because criminal justice-related policies had eliminated all of their housing options. Men were restricted from living with a co-defendant in their current conviction or with another parolee; their proposed residence was the site of the offense for which they were convicted; their family's federally subsidized housing would be jeopardized if they moved in; their proposed residence was the home of a correctional or law enforcement officer who possessed a firearm; or a known substance abuser lived at the residence.³⁹ Research is needed to determine whether the risk of homelessness among ex-offenders and its implications for the criminal justice system outweighs the possible public safety benefits of such policies.

Some Greenlight participants' family members had moved during the men's incarceration or already lived in other states. It is possible to transfer a parolee's community supervision to another state's jurisdiction (or even to a non-state U.S. territory) through the Interstate Compact for Adult Offender Supervision, but the process can be difficult and there is no guarantee that a request will be approved. For example, in New York, the majority of transfer requests in a given year are either declined or remain unresolved.⁴⁰ Some states, most notably New Jersey, where several inmates had family willing to take them in, are closer to New York City than other parts of New York State. Making interstate transfers easier and more efficient could help reduce homelessness among returning prisoners.

Some Homeless Inmates Do Not Ask For or Accept Help. Because Greenlight's housing assistance was voluntary, services were provided only to participants who requested them and not to all who were homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. It is possible that some participants who had housing eventually went to shelters or the streets because their arrangements were temporary or unstable. Greenlight's case managers were aware from anecdotal accounts of at least two men who became homeless after release when their own housing arrangements fell through.

After discussing housing resources with Greenlight staff, some men declined assistance and ultimately decided to go to a homeless shelter. Some wanted to avoid transitional houses that they perceived to have prison-like qualities: bunk beds, lack of privacy, or an overly restrictive

curfew. Others had already been in and out of the shelter system and either were resigned to living there or were confident that they could navigate it on their own. Some shelter-bound men reported having a housing plan that they wanted to keep confidential for fear of committing anything to paper that might be turned into a parole requirement.

Five men said they would go to a homeless shelter to get documents they needed to satisfy the parole department's administrative requirements, but not actually live there. These men said that they had family willing to provide housing and that they might live with them even though the residence had not been approved. They believed their parole officers would approve their housing choices if they could advocate for those choices in person. One man was confident that the difficulties of trying to supervise a homeless person would be an incentive for his parole officer to approve his preferred residence—even if the officer had rejected it prior to his release.

Conclusion

Project Greenlight's experience highlights several issues that policymakers and practitioners could consider when planning and implementing pre-release housing assistance. Greenlight demonstrated that inmates who would be homeless upon release could be systematically diverted to existing transitional and specialized housing. To reduce the number of people being released to shelters or the streets, program staff must first identify existing housing resources and nurture relationships with their managers and staff. In addition, program staff must identify inmates who are most at risk of homelessness

upon release and encourage them to seek housing assistance. Finally, successfully matching prisoners to available openings requires release planning staff to thoroughly assess the needs and expectations of both inmates and housing providers.

More transitional and specialized housing, as well as affordable housing in general, is critical to solving the problem of homelessness among returning prisoners. Project Greenlight staff were not always able to find housing for the small number of people who requested assistance because of a shortage of housing resources. Though Greenlight successfully referred several men to Ready, Willing & Able, it could not refer everyone who wanted to go there because of a shortage of beds. Many of the transitional houses Greenlight worked with serve only people with a history of substance abuse, but not all men had a substance abuse problem.

Research confirms that Project Greenlight may not have reached all inmates in the program who would become homeless. A study of repeat offenders in Boston who were homeless at the start of their current incarceration found that 81 percent had lived with family or friends immediately after their prior incarceration but later became homeless.⁴¹

This finding and Greenlight's experience suggest that mandatory housing assessments and assistance could improve housing and recidivism outcomes both for those who are unstably housed upon release and those who are homeless but decline assistance. Just as substance abuse treatment can help people who deny that they have a problem, a housing intervention could help inmates who have unrealistic expectations about their housing situations. Such a service could become a standard compo-

nent of pre-release services, much as substance abuse treatment has become in recent years.

Given the scope of the problem,

criminal justice, homeless services, and housing agencies need to collaborate to identify solutions. Project Greenlight's effort to use existing

resources more effectively by connecting inmates to housing resources in the community demonstrated that such collaborations can be successful.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The names of inmates discussed in this paper have been changed to protect their anonymity.
- 2 Jeremy Travis, Amy L. Solomon, and Michelle Waul, *From Prison to Home: The Dimensions and Consequences of Prisoner Reentry* (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 2001), 41. (Hereafter referred to as *From Prison to Home*.)
- 3 Joan Petersilia, *When Prisoners Come Home: Parole and Prisoner Reentry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 121.
- 4 *From Prison to Home*, 36.
- 5 Supportive Housing Network of New York, *Blueprint to End Homelessness in New York City* (New York: Supportive Housing Network of New York, 2002), 13.
- 6 Stephen Metraux and Dennis P. Culhane, "Homeless Shelter Use and Reincarceration Following Prison Release: Assessing the Risk," *Criminology & Public Policy* 3, no. 2 (2004). (In press.) (Hereafter referred to as "Homeless Shelter Use and Reincarceration.")
- 7 According to the U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 591,837 sentenced prisoners were released from state prisons during 2001. See Paige M. Harrison and Jennifer C. Karberg, *Prison and Jail Inmates at Midyear 2002* (Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003), 6.
- 8 Jeremy Travis, phone interview with authors, 27 May 2003.
- 9 *Public Safety Ex-Offender Self-Sufficiency Act of 2003*, HR 2166, 108th Cong., 1st sess., <<http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/z?c108:H.R.2166>> (10 October 2003).
- 10 "Legislation Would Subsidize Housing for Released Offenders," *Corrections Journal* (9 June 2003), 7.
- 11 Martha R. Burt, "Causes of the Growth of Homelessness During the 1980s," in *Understanding Homelessness: New Policy and Research Perspectives*, edited by the Fannie Mae Foundation (Washington, DC: Fannie Mae Foundation, 1991, 1997), 186; and Heidi Sommer, *Homelessness in Urban America: A Review of the Literature* (Berkeley: Institute of Governmental Studies Press, 2000), 30. (Hereafter referred to as *Homelessness in Urban America*.)
- 12 In a national survey from 1996, 60 percent of adults using homeless services reported substance abuse or alcohol problems and 46 percent reported mental health problems. The overlap between these two groups was 31 percent. Also, 46 percent of the homeless have chronic physical conditions. However, some researchers suggest these percentages should be viewed with caution. See Martha R. Burt, *What Will it Take to End Homelessness?* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, September 2001), 3. (Hereafter referred to as *What Will it Take to End Homelessness?*); and Marybeth Shinn and Jim Baumohl, "Rethinking the Prevention of Homelessness," in *Practical Lessons: The 1998 National Symposium on Homelessness Research*, edited by Linda B. Fosburg and Deborah L. Dennis (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, August 1999).
- 13 In many states these restrictions are created by statutes, though in some they may be administrative in nature.
- 14 Legal Action Center, "Housing Laws Affecting Individuals with Criminal Convictions" (New York: Legal Action Center, 2000). Section 8 is a rental voucher program that is the federal government's primary way of assisting very low-income families, the elderly, and the disabled to rent housing in the private market.
- 15 These data are based on the Bureau of Justice Statistics' estimate of the number of prisoners who were expected to be released in 1999 and on a national survey of homeless people in 1996 by the Interagency Council on Homelessness. See Timothy A. Hughes, Doris James Wilson, and Allen J. Beck, *Trends in State Parole, 1990-2000* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, October 2001), 8-9; and *Homelessness in Urban America*, 17. By comparison, more than one percent of everyone in the United States is homeless in a given year and up to 10 percent of people who are poor are homeless. See *What Will it Take to End Homelessness?* 1.
- 16 Fox Butterfield, "Often, Parole is One Stop on the Way Back to Prison," *The New York Times* (29 November 2000), A1.
- 17 "Homeless Shelter Use and Reincarceration."
- 18 Stephen Metraux, e-mail communication with authors, 15 October 2003. Metraux and co-author Dennis Culhane found that among people who had spent time in a shelter prior to incarceration, the risk that they would be reincarcerated after release was elevated by 23 percent (hazard ratio, 1.23). Among people who were released and went to a shelter, the risk of reincarceration was elevated by 17 percent (hazard ratio, 1.17). The risk for reincarceration associated with long-term homelessness would reflect the sum of the risks associated with shelter use before and after the previous incarceration episode, or an increased risk of 40 percent (hazard ratio, 1.40). See "Homeless Shelter Use and Reincarceration."
- 19 Cheri Nolan, phone interview with authors, 29 May 2003.
- 20 Vera contacted researchers and practitioners across the country who are working in the reentry field to learn about housing assistance efforts. The authors identified some of the programs described here by examining information about grantees of the Serious and Violent Offender Reentry Initiative available on the Justice Department's web site <<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/reentry/sar/welcome.html>>. The authors reviewed 30 grantees' information and contacted about half of these by phone to further investigate their housing efforts.
- 21 In practice, some corrections officials say, this does not always ensure that an inmate will not be homeless because initial housing placements are often very short-term.
- 22 Max Otani, phone interview with authors, 8 October 2003.

Issues in Brief

- 23 Rick Guzman, program director, Illinois Going Home Program, phone interview with authors, 5 May 2003, and e-mail correspondence with author 22 September 2003.
- 24 Robert J. Jones et al., *Statistical Presentation 2001* (Springfield, IL: Illinois Department of Corrections, November 2002), Table 6.
- 25 California Department of Corrections, "Facts and Figures: Second Quarter 2003," <http://www.corr.ca.gov/CommunicationsOffice/facts_figures.asp> (8 October 2003).
- 26 Vitka Eisen, phone interview with authors, 6 October 2003.
- 27 Bahar Safaei-Far, program manager, Walden House, e-mail correspondence with authors, 12 and 24 September 2003.
- 28 Tomi Hiers, phone interview with authors, 5 May 2003.
- 29 Verdine Kong, program director, BEST Reintegration Program, phone interview with authors, 26 September 2003; and National Low Income Housing Coalition, *Out of Reach 2003: America's Housing Wage Climbs* (Washington, DC: National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2003), <<http://www.nlihc.org/oor2003>> (10 October 2003).
- 30 Lisa Jackson, phone interview with authors, 29 September 2003.
- 31 The total number of inmates released in 2001 was 3,361. Of these, 669 were released to another custodial authority and 2,692 were released "to the street" (they were not released to another authority). See Massachusetts Department of Correction Research and Planning Division, *A Statistical Description of Releases From the Massachusetts Department of Correction During 2001* (Concord, MA: Massachusetts Department of Correction Research and Planning Division, January 2003), iv.
- 32 Massachusetts Housing and Shelter Alliance (MHSA), "Discharge Planning for Homelessness Prevention: Steps to Change" (slide presentation to the U.S. Departments of Housing and Urban Development, Health and Human Services, and Veterans Administration Policy Academy, Atlanta, GA, January 30, 2003). MHSA conducts a nightly census of people entering the shelter system in Massachusetts and collects data on the public systems from which shelter residents have entered the shelter.
- 33 Roberta Richman, assistant director of rehabilitative services, Rhode Island Department of Corrections, phone interview with authors, 5 May 2003, and e-mail correspondence with author, 22 September 2003.
- 34 Official with the Tennessee Department of Corrections, phone interview with authors, 9 September 2003.
- 35 In 2002, the Vera Institute of Justice received a grant for emergency food and shelter administered by the United Way. The funds are designated to providing these services to participants in Vera's demonstration projects. Early in Project Greenlight's operation, the program used a small amount of these funds to pay for one month of housing (approximately \$240 on average) for six participants. (The remainder of the grant funds were used by Vera's four other demonstration projects at that time.)
- 36 *From Prison to Home*, 41.
- 37 The housing intake interview expanded on the program's general psycho-social assessment that all inmates completed shortly after entering the program. This 10-page assessment covered several topics, including history of criminal justice system involvement, substance abuse background, financial resources, job experience and skills, family ties, and leisure interests.
- 38 As of 2000, the median rent of apartments in these same neighborhoods ranged from \$525 to \$675. See Denise Wallin, Michael H. Schill, and Glynis Daniels, *State of New York City's Housing and Neighborhoods 2002* (New York: Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy, School of Law, and Wagner School of Public Service, New York University, 2002), 59.
- 39 These examples are based on Project Greenlight's case notes and likely understate the number of reasons that inmates' planned residences were rejected.
- 40 Constance Clem, Barbara Krauth, and Larry Linke, *A Field Evaluation of the Interstate Compact for Probation and Parole: Findings from an NIC Survey* (Longmont, CO: National Institute of Corrections Information Center, 1998), 2, 3, and 9.
- 41 Katharine H. Bradley, et al., *No Place Like Home: Housing and the Ex-prisoner* (Boston: Community Resources for Justice, 2001), <<http://www.crjustice.org/hmbrief.htm>> (10 October 2003).

© Vera Institute of Justice 2003. All rights reserved.

This publication was supported with funds from the New York State Division of Parole. Points of view in the document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the Division of Parole.

Additional copies are available from the State Sentencing and Corrections Program at the Vera Institute of Justice, 233 Broadway, 12th Floor, New York, New York, 10279, (212) 334-1300. An electronic version is posted on Vera's web site, www.vera.org.

The Vera Institute of Justice is a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to making government policies and practices fairer, more humane, and more efficient. Working in collaboration with public officials and communities in the United States and throughout the world, Vera designs and implements innovative programs that expand the provision of justice and improve the quality of life.

The State Sentencing and Corrections Program is one of several national consulting and technical initiatives Vera operates. The program helps government officials develop balanced, fair, and affordable criminal justice policies by providing peer-to-peer assistance. To learn about how SSC can be of assistance, call (212) 376-3073, write to dwilhelm@vera.org, or visit the program's web site at www.vera.org/ssc.

To learn more about Project Greenlight, contact Marta Nelson, project director, at mnelson@vera.org, or Nino Rodriguez, senior field analyst, at nrodriguez@vera.org.