Housing Insecurity Upon Reentry for Formerly Incarcerated Women

Every year, roughly 1.9 million American women are released from prisons and jails. Despite this influx of formerly incarcerated women returning to our communities, there are few housing or supportive services. While the national focus on mass incarceration has intensified, services for women lag behind those for men. Formerly incarcerated women have distinctly different needs from men: they are more likely to have young children and the vast majority (86%) are recovering from the trauma of sexual and/or physical abuse. Gender-responsive programs and housing are vital for these women and their families. Without them, women are more likely to end up homeless than their male counterparts, and housing insecurity contributes to recidivism.

Many cities criminalize the aftereffects of homelessness, including panhandling, public urination, and even sitting or sleeping in public places. Multiple infractions lead to misdemeanors, unpaid fines lead to warrants, a failure to appear in court leads to incarceration. This cycle creates a voracious appetite for policing: for example, there was one homeless arrest for every two homeless people in Los Angeles in 2016, while San Francisco police were dispatched nearly 100,000 times for calls involving homeless people in 2017.

We must make sure justice-involved people have safe homes waiting for them. There are a handful of organizations nationwide that provide these vital services, including A New Way of Life (Los Angeles), Angela House (Houston), and WIN Recovery (Champaign, IL). Using a compassionate, gender-responsive model, these organizations provide housing, employment assistance, 12-step programs, life skills classes, family reunification services and other types of aftercare at a fraction of the cost of incarceration. Despite the life-saving work these organizations do, they’re not enough to serve the nearly 2 million women coming home each year. Greater investment is needed so fewer women fall through the cracks.

RESOURCES TO LEARN MORE:
A New Way of Life Reentry Project: Case Study | Jorja Leap et al
A New Way of Life Replication Model Study | Sisterhood Alliance for Freedom and Equality
(Re)entry from the Bottom Up: Case Study of a Critical Approach to Assisting Women Coming Home from Prison | Melissa Burch
Nowhere to Go: Homelessness Among Formerly Incarcerated People | Prison Policy Initiative

“What’s been happening for decades in our criminal justice system causes too much harm to too many people in too many ways. We have to stop doing what we’ve always done and expecting to get different results.”
— SUSAN BURTON, FOUNDER OF A NEW WAY OF LIFE REENTRY PROJECT