

**Policy  
Work  
Group**

**2011**



# Coming Home and No Place to Live: Understanding perceptions among public housing residents about the reintegration of formerly incarcerated individuals to these locations.

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**Policy Report #2**



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



It is with great sadness that we complete this project and report without our dear friend and colleague, **Sister Tahirah Abdul-Rashid** who passed away on **August 8, 2011**. **Sister Tahirah** was a founding member of the **HCAP Policy Work Group** and a passionate advocate for successful and sustainable community reintegration for formerly incarcerated individuals returning to Harlem. This report is dedicated to **Sister Tahirah Abdul-Rashid**. **May you rest in bountiful peace - Alhamdulillah!**

We want to gratefully acknowledge the East and Central Harlem NYCHA tenants who participated in this research study and their willingness to share their knowledge and insights that made this study possible.

We want to acknowledge our academic partner, the Center for Urban Epidemiologic Studies at the New York Academy of Medicine for their contribution and partnership in this study.

We also acknowledge the members of the Harlem Community & Academic Partnership for their enduring support.

Finally, we owe a great debt to the current and past members of the Policy Work Group whose thoughtful contributions and work over the past decade has nurtured our ongoing policy research and advocacy efforts.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Policy Work Group (PWG) Report #2 examines the knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs of New York City public housing residents about community reintegration of formerly incarcerated individuals. This report describes the approach and implementation of a qualitative research project by community activist leaders using the principles of Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR). A research approach was used as a way to document and generate local evidence and data to validate what we as community leaders and advocates anecdotally and experientially knew about the experiences of public housing residents and community members returning home from prison and jail in East and Central Harlem. A series of policy-oriented recommendations and strategies for effective and successful community reintegration are described here. The expectation is that the recommendations and action steps provided are considered and acted upon by a cross-section of stakeholders including community members living in communities with high recidivism rates, community-based service providers, government elected and appointed officials, the reentry advocacy community, law enforcement and correction officials, federal and city housing officials, and formerly incarcerated individuals.

## **BACKGROUND OF WHO WE ARE AND OUR WORK**

The Harlem Community & Academic Partnership (or HCAP, formerly known as the Harlem Urban Research Center) is a coalition of community residents, community-based organizations and service providers, academics, and public health institutions. HCAP seeks to improve the health of East and Central Harlem by using a CBPR framework to identify “what works” in addressing the social determinants of health in these communities. HCAP therefore supports projects that gather and utilize community knowledge to promote better health. Since 1999, HCAP has worked to build and strengthen trust, to establish credibility in the East and Central Harlem communities, to demonstrate a true commitment to improving the health of our residents, and to create a platform from which to address local urban health issues.

The Policy Work Group (PWG) is an intervention work group of the HCAP, originally charged with examining policy barriers to substance use treatment in East and Central Harlem. A survey of service providers conducted in 2000 led the PWG to focus on identifying policy barriers to effective community reintegration after incarceration, a time when many with a history of substance use are particularly vulnerable to relapse or instability. Past activities of the work group have included developing a series of issue-specific policy briefs that identify various policy barriers to reentry; sponsoring community forums; organizing an oversight hearing on discharge planning with the New York City Council; and hosting a legislative breakfast session on the local impact and cost of reentry in 2004.

In 2006, PWG and its community consultants began a process of sharing and analyzing existing information and resources related to the housing needs of individuals coming home from jail and prison to East and Central Harlem; the housing services currently

available in these neighborhoods; and the policies that serve to assist or prohibit formerly incarcerated individuals to obtain stable housing. Our work efforts during this time made evident the universally negative impact that a lack of housing options for formerly incarcerated individuals, and therefore identified access to housing as a primary focus of our future policy research, analysis, and advocacy efforts.

In 2007, we produced our first policy analysis and advocacy report entitled “Housing and Reintegration in East and Central Harlem: Coming Home and No Place To Live<sup>1</sup>” which synthesized our work since 2000. Our methods included grounding our work in the experiences of the formerly incarcerated in our community via a series of case study interviews; complementing these data with a forum for more than 50 local service providers, advocates, and policymakers; conducting a comprehensive analysis of existing federal, state and local New York City Housing Authority policies; conducting a thorough literature review; and holding regular monthly meetings with our community partners. The resulting compilation was useful in our sustained, coordinated organizing efforts to increase housing availability, facilitate the reintegration of those coming home to Harlem, and further empower our community and similar neighborhoods around the country.

## **BASIS OF RESEARCH PROJECT**

Housing instability is one of the major risk factors for recidivism (Graffam, et al., 2004).<sup>2</sup> Despite the fact that East and Central Harlem has some of the highest concentrations of New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) public housing buildings, accessing affordable housing upon release in a NYCHA building or elsewhere is a significant challenge for formerly incarcerated individuals. Based on our experience, we believe this is due to the high levels of real estate development and gentrification occurring in East and Central Harlem and the way NYCHA chooses to interpret federal housing policy.

Since we began our policy work in 2000 on community reintegration of formerly incarcerated individuals, both independently and in collaboration with other advocates, the primary recommendation had been to influence changes in NYCHA policies and regulations to permit formerly incarcerated individuals who were NYCHA residents prior to incarceration to return back to their original place of residence. However, our concern with this recommendation, based on our knowledge and research at the time, was that it had been promoted by reentry advocates without any documented understanding of the perspectives, knowledge, and beliefs or support of the NYCHA public housing residents. Thus, it our belief that if successful and sustainable community reintegration is to occur in these communities, then those most impacted such as public

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<sup>1</sup> To request an electronic version (PDF format) of PWG Report #1 (2007), please e-mail Mary Nerney at [hcap.pwg@gmail.com](mailto:hcap.pwg@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> Graffam, J., Shinkfield, A., Lavelle, B., & Mcpherson, W. (2004). Variables affecting successful reintegration as perceived by offenders and professionals. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 40, 147-171.

housing tenants should have a role in contributing to the design of local solutions, policies, and programs.

## **RESEARCH APPROACH**

The paucity of research documenting the perceptions of public housing residents living in East and Central Harlem about the reintegration of formerly incarcerated individuals to NYCHA was the primary impetus for the research project described here. The broader social context and rationale of our research efforts was based on two aspects: 1) the high recidivism rates in low-income communities of color which often have high concentrations of public housing; 2) and the notion that public housing has become the only affordable and seemingly available housing option for formerly incarcerated populations provided. In response to what we considered a significant gap in knowledge and lack of local data to support this recommendation, we conducted a research project using a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach. A community member of the PWG served as the Co-Investigator for the research project. The PWG designed a qualitative study using a focus group approach to ascertain the perceptions of current NYCHA residents living in East and Central Harlem about formerly incarcerated individuals returning to the community and to explore the possible solutions for these individuals to obtain housing, including living in NYCHA. The research study received approval from the Institutional Review Board of the New York Academy of Medicine.

Focus group participants were recruited from East and Central Harlem NYCHA locations over a six-month period of time. Adults over the age of 18, from ten NYCHA locations were targeted for recruitment. Bilingual fliers in English and Spanish were distributed at community events, barbeques and during outreach attempts. Interested individuals were required to call ahead and find out where the focus group “meetings” would be held to reduce walk-ins who might be prompted by the incentive offered to participate and not the topic at hand. All of the focus groups were conducted at two local community-based organizations, which were also wheelchair accessible.

The focus groups were conducted during the fall and early winter of 2009. The focus groups were both moderated and recorded by members of the PWG. The goals of the study were carefully explained, consents were obtained and the focus groups lasted approximately 1.5 hours. Five focus groups were held, each with 5 – 11 participants for a total of 32 participants. Among participants, 15 were female (47%), and average age was 44. Participants’ race/ethnicity included 15 African American (47%), 14 Latino/a (44%), and 3 Sub-Saharan African (9%). One of the five focus groups was conducted in Spanish only. Eligible participants did not have to be formerly incarcerated, however, it should be noted that 40% (or  $n=13$ ) of the participants reported being formerly incarcerated. Each individual was required to provide proof they were both over the age of 18 and living in NYCHA. Recruited participants received \$20, a metro card, and refreshments were provided for each focus group.

## RESEARCH FOCUS AND FINDINGS

Informed by previous research and policy work, the research project explored four specific domains of interest in the focus groups, which included:

- 1) *General Awareness and Knowledge Among NYCHA Residents About How Formerly Incarcerated Individuals Access Housing*
- 2) *Sources of Information About Formerly Incarcerated Individuals Seeking Housing*
- 3) *Perceived Barriers to Housing*
- 4) *Community Support for Formerly Incarcerated Individuals to Access Stable Housing*

For each domain, the major themes are summarized and exemplary quotes are shared to further illustrate the theme. Where appropriate, following each domain are policy recommendations based on solutions offered by the focus group participants to identified barriers faced by formally incarcerated individuals. Such solutions centered on fixing the limitations, infrastructure, and inadequacies of the housing system and to reevaluate how budget resources drive policy formulation and implementation in this system.

### **Domain I: General Awareness and Knowledge Among NYCHA Residents About How Formerly Incarcerated Individuals Access Housing**

Nearly all participants reported being aware that people returning to the Harlem community from prison or jail had significant problems finding affordable housing. Generally participants were protective of their housing community and desired that they be safe places to live. There was a need to keep their families safe while making exceptions depending on the crime. On the other hand, those returning felt stigmatized and judged, particularly about the crime committed. This makes finding housing upon return even more difficult. Participants stated that this leaves many formerly incarcerated feeling trapped in a precarious situation of stigma and a general lack of affordable housing. One participant characterized this situation by stating: “It’s hard for a regular person to get housing, so let alone someone coming home. They already stigmatize you as a criminal, so you’re automatically turned away.”

“Some change and some don’t. If you run into difficult times you may resort to doing the crime again. When NYCHA does the background check you don’t have a chance. If you have a record - forget “Housing”. You are better off with Section 8 or Gigget - get into a different program. A lot of people don’t want to do the shelters, but if you want housing then you have to work with the programs offered and follow through.”

Participants expressed that self-reliance and resourcefulness were the only ways formerly incarcerated individuals could combat this situation. Many participants shared

the importance of self-motivation, but also cited the need for guidance from outside agencies.

Domain I also aimed to explore the feelings that NYCHA residents have surrounding formerly incarcerated individuals returning to the community. Although some participants cited fear and a need to protect themselves, participants indicated feelings of sympathy and empathy just as often. For example, participants often used the terms “vulnerability” and “harassment” in their responses when referring to the experiences when formerly incarcerated individuals seek housing.

### **RECOMMENDATION: INCREASE THE USE OF TREATMENT PROGRAM SLOTS AND COMMUNITY AVAILABILITY FOR TREATMENT**

Participants appear to already be aware that a large percentage of those in jail and/or prison struggle with substance abuse. It is their view that upon release from these structured environments, formerly incarcerated individuals are particularly vulnerable to relapse or instability.

*“I was involved in drugs, so I came out and was denied.”*

#### **RECOMMENDED ACTION STEPS AND STRATEGIES INCLUDE:**

- Utilize this pre-existing awareness and knowledge in the community about the challenges to reintegration to preemptively create and maintain community-driven solutions to support effective community reintegration.
- Apply a significant portion of the projected \$184 million in savings to state taxpayers over the next two years resulting from the closing of seven New York state prisons to support Alternative To Incarceration and multi-service community-based organizations situated in communities that are most impacted by high recidivism rates.

## **Domain 2: Sources of Information About Formerly Incarcerated Individuals Seeking Housing**

Participants described learning about how NYCHA prohibits formerly incarcerated individuals from housing through formal and informal means.

Formal means often include apartment leases, the “Welcome” booklet provided to new public housing residents and other NYCHA publications. Participants stated that one would know what was permissible upon signing the lease or receiving written notices. However, according to participants NYCHA policies and regulations are not written in plain language, leading to confusion and misunderstandings. They also felt a need to

have information safeguarded in order to prevent “abuse”, as they put it, since information in the wrong hands leads to stigmatization.

Informal means often include word-of-mouth and sharing among public housing residents about the impact of perceived differential enforcement of regulations. Many participants learned the “hard” way, referring to NYCHA management enforcing formal policies with some families and not with others, how NYCHA regulations prohibit formerly incarcerated individuals from seeking housing. Most participants were knowledgeable about people coming out of prison but felt it was a “catch 22” for them.

*“My niece tried to get housing. She was unable to get it because her son committed a crime at the location she was applying for. She did not even know until she was rejected. Eventually she did get housing, but it was under the condition that she did not let her son live with her.”*

Domain 2 continued to explore formerly incarcerated individuals’ experiences in obtaining housing upon return. However, participants went on to discuss more specific and individual stories. This section also focused on NYCHA housing specifically, and the rules and regulations regarding the formerly incarcerated living in its units. There seemed to be a general lack of knowledge as to what the specific rules and regulations surrounding the formerly incarcerated are, however, the consensus was, “if you have been locked up, they will not let you into housing. I do not know the laws or restrictions, but there have been evictions.”

Throughout this portion of the focus groups, participants continued to cite situations that left formerly incarcerated individuals judged on the basis of their criminal record. The effect individuals’ criminal records can have on the entire families often came up.

Another option to this kind of condition is living “under the radar” (living in public housing without NYCHA’s knowledge). Almost all of the participants conceded to the daily occurrence of people being pushed to live in such a way. Unfortunately, hiding family members can put the entire family at risk for homelessness.

*“For people that have family in NYCHA and they are willing to let them in and they are living under the radar (unknown to NYCHA), once they are found out, the entire family will be on the streets. All for doing what family is supposed to do.”*

When asked their specific feelings on whether people who were formerly incarcerated should be allowed to live in public housing, most participants conveyed feelings of frustration citing a need to house these individuals, but also a need for public housing units to be safe. Further, participants expressed a need to be protected from certain formerly incarcerated individuals, such as sex offenders; yet also expressed frustration with NYCHA for using their discretion in interpreting federally housing policy with regard to formerly incarcerated individuals. Specifically, they shared several anecdotes about experiences they knew of or personally experienced with regard to NYCHA prohibiting formerly incarcerated individuals from living in public housing.

## **RECOMMENDATION: ADDRESS NYCHA SYSTEM ISSUES**

NYCHA regulations and policies are not considered clear or realistic to East and Central Harlem residents. Further, there is an apparent disconnect between what is factual federal housing policy and what is community perception of federal housing policies. For example, NYCHA's policy to potentially evict families that allow formerly incarcerated family members to live with them prevents families from playing an active role in the transition and successful integration of those released from prison or jail. Therefore, this policy does not encourage family reunification and eliminates many formerly incarcerated individuals' only viable and supportive housing option.

### **RECOMMENDED ACTION STEPS AND STRATEGIES INCLUDE:**

- *ENGAGE PUBLIC HOUSING RESIDENTS IN DESIGNING COMMUNITY-BASED SOLUTIONS.* Participants reiterated that residents are aware of the problem of homelessness among formerly incarcerated individuals. Public housing residents are also aware that they are the ones most likely to be affected by the return of these individuals. It is important that these informed and affected residents have a role in the solution design and decision making process.
- *RAISE AWARENESS ABOUT THE DISCRETION THAT THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT (HUD) PERMITS NYCHA IN DETERMINING THEIR ADMISSIONS AND OCCUPANCY POLICIES FOR FORMERLY INCARCERATED INDIVIDUALS.* Specifically, raise awareness to dispel the myth that individuals who have been convicted of a crime are unquestionably “banned” from public housing. While each public housing authority can choose to ban formerly incarcerated individuals from participating in public housing and Section 8 programs, it is not HUD policy to do so. In fact, in many circumstances, formerly incarcerated people should not be denied access.<sup>3</sup>
- *CONDUCT PILOT COMMUNITY TRIAL DEMONSTRATION PROJECT WITH NYCHA THAT INCLUDES OFFERING LEASES TO FORMERLY INCARCERATED INDIVIDUALS WHO ARE ENROLLED IN COMMUNITY-BASED WRAP-AROUND SERVICES.* A control group can be ascertained with an Alternative to Incarceration (ATI) or other reentry program that is not able to easily provide housing immediately after release. Allowing this community trial period may rigorously document the impact of having housing as a critical determinant of successful community reintegration.

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<sup>3</sup> National Reentry Resource Center. Federal Interagency Reentry Council: Reentry Myth Buster: Public Housing. Available at: [http://www.nationalreentryresourcecenter.org/documents/0000/1089/Reentry\\_Council\\_Mythbuster\\_Housing.pdf](http://www.nationalreentryresourcecenter.org/documents/0000/1089/Reentry_Council_Mythbuster_Housing.pdf)

### Domain 3: Perceived Barriers to Housing

The most overwhelming barrier expressed by the participants is the discharge planning/transitional services system. The system of preparing releasees is not responsive to the type of individual who wants to get on the right track and do the right thing. Many participants reported limited access to needed social services worsened by other system design flaws including limits, capacity, stopgaps, and mixed public funding sources. It is a system designed to fail because it is not client-centered, but rather a one-size-fits-all system. Thus, several participants reported feeling trapped and defeated by conflicting policies inherent in the system.

*“13 years ago before I moved here, my friend couldn’t get housing because of a felony, so he moved in with me. I thought he was lying. We went to court and he wasn’t. He paid all his fines. He had a job for the past 8 years but he still couldn’t get housing.”*

Further, high and unaffordable rents coupled with the forces of gentrification represent two other significant barriers for formerly incarcerated individuals to seek stable housing.

*“I can’t afford anything.  
\$1500 for a studio? Forget it!”*

*“If they continue to flood the surrounding areas with high income housing, then it will eventually be reflective in NYCHA housing costs.”*

This portion of the discussion evoked fear and frustration in many public housing residents. It became clear that surviving in the Harlem area is difficult for most residents, with or without a criminal record. One resident put it best: “if we can’t make it and we have jobs, how do those coming out of jail or prison expect to do it?”

*“In NYC it’s all based on location. The economy is crazy and rents are going up along with the land property. In the morning people are out measuring the blocks in Harlem, because businesses are coming and property values are going up. Harlem is changing.”*

#### RECOMMENDATION 1: INCREASE JOB TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

Although housing is the first step to a successful transition after jail and/or prison, it cannot be sustained without a reliable source of income. Across the board individuals returning from jail and/or prison do not have the education or job readiness skills

needed to contend in the current employment market. Formerly incarcerated individuals need to receive training and employment in order to afford housing.

**RECOMMENDED ACTION STEPS AND STRATEGIES INCLUDE:**

- *UTILIZE A SIGNIFICANT PROPORTION OF THE ESTIMATED \$17 MILLION IN STATE TAXPAYER MONIES FROM NEWLY MERGED THE DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS AND COMMUNITY SUPERVISION (DOCCS) TO FUND AND SUPPORT INDIVIDUALLY TAILORED AND COMMUNITY-DRIVEN JOB TRAINING PROGRAMS IN COMMUNITIES WITH THE HIGHEST RECIDIVISM RATES. ASSURE THAT COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS PROVIDE JOB TRAINING PROGRAMS THAT REALISTICALLY ADDRESSES INDIVIDUAL NEEDS OF FORMERLY INCARCERATED IN ORDER TO LEAD TO SUSTAINABLE EMPLOYMENT.* The ability to provide appropriate programs and services for this populations' unique set of issues will foster more successful transitions and less opportunities for recidivism.
- **BAN THE BOX.** On most applications for employment or education, a question is asked about whether the individual has been convicted. If the crime is **DIRECTLY** related to the desired job, such as child-related crime and child-caring job, then the question is appropriate. Otherwise, **BAN THE BOX.**

**RECOMMENDATION 2: INCREASE TRANSITIONAL AND REENTRY SUPPORT SERVICES**

Overwhelmingly, participants stated that current reentry services do not adequately address the level of stigma that formerly incarcerated people endure and are ineffective in promoting community well-being and stability. It is important to have specifically designed programs, expert counselors and case managers to deal with this population's distinct problem set.

**RECOMMENDED ACTION STEPS AND STRATEGIES INCLUDE:**

- *CLIENT-SPECIFIC DISCHARGE PLANNING.* The current discharge planning approach does not address how to overcome multiple and complex barriers. Discharge planning must be client-specific to effectively address the barriers faced by individuals after they leave prison or jail, and how to navigate and overcome those barriers.
- *SHIFT AND INCREASE FUNDING FOR REENTRY SERVICES BY MAINTAINING NEW YORK PRISON-BASED GERRYMANDERING BILL.* This is the bill passed as Part XX of the revenue budget A9710-D. It passed the Assembly on July 1, 2010 and the Senate on August 3. The Governor signed it on August 11, 2010. This bill requires the New York State Department of Correctional Services to provide incarcerated persons' home address for each census in order for the State Assembly and Senate to draw districts accordingly.<sup>4</sup> Without this legislation, incarcerated individuals are "counted" in their place of incarceration rather than their permanent home of record. As a result,

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<sup>4</sup> Prisoners of the Census. New York Prison-Based Gerrymandering Bill. Available at: [http://www.prisonersofthecensus.org/NYS\\_A9710-D.html](http://www.prisonersofthecensus.org/NYS_A9710-D.html)

regions with more correctional facilities receive a higher community census along with additional funding and representation. The maintenance of this legislation is imperative, so communities that welcome these formerly incarcerated individuals are financially equipped to receive their returning citizens.

- SUPPORT COST-EFFECTIVE COMMUNITY BASED PROGRAMS, SUCH AS ALTERNATIVES TO INCARCERATION (ATI) AND OTHER COMMUNITY-BASED REENTRY PROGRAMS.

**Domain 4: Community Support for Formerly Incarcerated Individuals to Access Stable Housing**

A form of selective tolerance emerged in the area of community support for formerly incarcerated to access stable housing. Participants reported on a continuum for which type of formerly incarcerated individual they would accept or tolerate living next to them in their community. As noted earlier, participants felt strongly about denying sex offenders reentry into public housing - a conviction type for which federal Housing and Urban Development (HUD) policy prohibit admission. This form of tolerance was very much dependent upon the type of crime committed and the individual’s reputation in the community prior to incarceration.

*“Everyone deserves a second chance, but no sex offenders.”*

*“There are some groups that can’t come back to the housing they had. If there was no respect for the neighborhood when they left, then how is the neighborhood to respect their return?”*

*“If you do bad in the neighborhood, you are not welcome to return. How you behave is how you will be received.”*

While most believe families are a natural source of support, often this is not case, since the system does not allow families to support their loved ones. One participant eloquently stated: *“Family is supposed to come first – people need their family. What is happening is that people are coming to their family, but their family has to turn them away. After that they fall back into the system.”*

As far as current support for formerly incarcerated individuals, participants overwhelmingly cited a general lack thereof. They also cited a lack of information and assistance surrounding housing for formerly incarcerated individuals and their reintegration process within the community. As one participant pointedly stated: *“we must give these individuals the tools to become self-sufficient and show others that they can fit in and not resort to recommitting a crime.”*

*“They should be allowed back depending on their crime. No felonies, just misdemeanors.”*

When asked specifically why they would *not* support formally incarcerated individuals living in public housing, most participants surprisingly cited the lack of affordable housing. That is, if a woman and her children are waiting for the same apartment as a formerly incarcerated person, most participants did not feel comfortable giving the apartment to the formerly incarcerated individual. It is important to note that participants did not cite fear or safety as their reasoning, but resource allocation.

### **RECOMMENDATION: MORE AFFORDABLE HOUSING**

A general lack of affordable housing options was the most agreed upon response throughout this entire study. Intrinsically, an increase of affordable housing stock was at the forefront of solutions for homelessness among formerly incarcerated individuals. For example in East Harlem, the median household income for District 11 was \$21,480 in 2000, which was 45.7% of the median income of Manhattan (\$47,030)<sup>5</sup> and 46.5% of the residents in this district receive income support (e.g. TANF, SSI, and or Medicaid only).<sup>6</sup> The gap in incomes between the residents of District 11 and the rest of Manhattan put these residents at risk of displacement.

### **RECOMMENDED ACTION STEPS AND STRATEGIES INCLUDE:**

- *CREATE AND MAINTAIN AFFORDABLE HOUSING PROGRAMS AND UNITS IN COMMUNITIES WITH HIGH RECIDIVISM RATES TO ALLEVIATE THE COMPETITIVE PRESSURES THAT KEEP FORMERLY INCARCERATED INDIVIDUALS FROM POSSIBLE HOUSING OPTIONS.* Participants generally viewed formerly incarcerated individuals as a threat to the number of available public housing units, rather than a threat to public safety. This is a fear based in the scarcity of resources, not surrounding formerly incarcerated individuals themselves. Increased options of non-NYCHA affordable housing mechanisms will address intensified fear brought on by gentrification, and the closing of historic affordable housing programs such as the Section 8 Voucher, Giggets, and Housing Advantage.
- *CONDUCT A SYSTEMATIC INVESTIGATION OF THE SLOW TURNOVER RATES OF EMPTY OR “WARE-HOUSED” APARTMENTS TO ADDRESS ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE HOUSING.* In order to address the “lack of affordable housing” in East and Central Harlem, an evaluation of the current housing stock must be made. Understanding why these buildings or units are being underutilized will help create further solutions.

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<sup>5</sup> Urban Technical Assistance Project (UTAP), Columbia University. Manhattan Community District 11 Planning Assessment Prepared for Manhattan Community Board 11: East Harlem. Available at: <http://www.cb11m.org/files/CommunityDistrict11Report.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> New York City Department of City Planning. Community District 11 Profile. Available at: [http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/html/neighborhood\\_info/mn11\\_info.shtml](http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcp/html/neighborhood_info/mn11_info.shtml)

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

It is important to note that communities such as East and Central Harlem are often plagued with so many different social problems that it is difficult to pull explicit and freestanding solutions. Throughout our qualitative analysis, we drew from our deep and rich experience in working and serving these communities in designing and participating in research to generate the policy-oriented solutions and recommendations produced by the focus groups.

An important insight produced by this research study is the idea that housing units may very well be available but are just not affordable. In recent years East and Central Harlem have seen an increase in new housing construction, largely luxury apartment buildings. This phenomenon coupled with NYCHA’s warehousing of public housing units in these communities support this idea. Further, the increase in available housing has not decreased the number of homeless formerly incarcerated individuals because new housing options in these communities are often unaffordable. Therefore, high recidivism rates in these communities are perpetuated by unaffordable rents which increases the number of un-rentable apartments for this population, and rules and regulations that keep formerly incarcerated individuals from renting their own place.

*“The housing system is missing the human element.”*

Results from this research study suggest that NYCHA residents living in Upper Manhattan are aware of and have experienced an inadequate subsidized housing system, where the impact and benefit of policies and programs is like being forced to wear a t-shirt that says: **“One Size Fits All.”** The truth is that it really is **“One size does not fit.”**

Treatment programs and job training courses are beneficial to formerly incarcerated individuals, but they are not population-specific. While participants in all of these programs share a host of similar problems and barriers, formerly incarcerated individuals have their own unique struggles and stigmas. There are numerous barriers to obtaining housing in East and Central Harlem for formerly incarcerated individuals.

*“They should create a new department that reviews people on a case-by-case basis – not one blanket.”*

Although not addressed specifically in this policy report, other issues such as employment, education, and healthcare access are also exacerbated by discriminatory policies that perpetuate the cycle of incarceration and disenfranchisement of this population. With punitive policies aimed directly at those with criminal records, there is no system of second chances providing an end to instability and isolation.

*“They need a special department that helps the City and supports the structure. One that helps displaced housing residents or people coming home from jail.”*

As a community of color, East and Central Harlem is persistently marginalized and affected by issues of high rates of incarceration and recidivism and poor community reintegration. Public housing policies that directly discriminate against formerly incarcerated individuals and their families reinforce racial and socioeconomic disparities and family disintegration. Without fair access to housing, employment, and education, formerly incarcerated individuals will likely recidivate.

The stigma attached to formerly incarcerated individuals was another resounding theme throughout this entire study. Fear, shame, and anxiety are daily stressors for many formerly incarcerated individuals. The stigma and isolation that they experience is overlooked and greatly intensified by punitive policies that affect them and their loved ones. In most cases, the stigma of incarceration or arrest alone can eliminate an individual from accessing housing of any kind. It is time to declare housing as a right for all Americans, including individuals returning home from jail and/or prison. These citizens have paid their debt to society and they need be treated as such.

*“They sent me to a program. The state paid them \$900 a month for me to sleep with 12 dudes in one room. They were supposed to give me \$165 in coupons, but they kept it. I did my 90 days and then went to the welfare office and applied for a room. The most they would pay was \$215 a month. They paid \$900 before, but I can’t get a room. I had to wait 5 months for Social Security to approve the case, but this is ridiculous. Why can’t they pay the \$400 for the room?”*

## **HCAP POLICY WORK GROUP MEMBERS**

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