



A
PLACE
TO CALL
MY OWN

Women and the Search for
Housing After Incarceration

COALITION FOR WOMEN PRISONERS

Table of Contents

Introduction

Housing Terms

CHAPTER 1 – Coming Home

page 2 Life during the early days, weeks, and months after release

CHAPTER 2 – Finding Shelter

page 14 The ups and downs of finding transitional housing

CHAPTER 3 – Facing Stigma & Discrimination

page 33 Facing down unfair attitudes and practices in the community

CHAPTER 4 – Living in Residential Treatment

page 49 When “housing” is a drug treatment program

CHAPTER 5 – Reuniting with Children & Family

page 60 The challenging road back into family life

CHAPTER 6 – Keeping the Focus On You

page 71 Staying sane when life gets crazy

CHAPTER 7 – Being an Advocate

page 84 Why it is important to fight back

CHAPTER 8 – Finding Home

page 95 Thoughts on the meaning of “home”

Acknowledgements

Notes

Introduction

The purpose of this book is to shine a spotlight on the experiences of formerly incarcerated women searching for housing in New York and to illustrate what is needed to make their situation better.

For women returning home from incarceration, securing a place to live is much more complex than just finding shelter. Women need housing that is safe, stable, affordable and permanent. This type of housing is central to women's ability to rebuild their lives after incarceration and reintegrate successfully back into society.

For low-income women and low-income women of color in New York, finding safe and reasonably priced housing is already a tall order. The experiences of the women featured in this book show that it is doubly so for women with criminal convictions. The significant hurdles that people with criminal convictions must overcome include legal and policy bars to housing, as well as the stigma and discrimination against formerly incarcerated people that pervade both the public and private housing markets. Overall, there are too few housing resources and options for people returning to the community from incarceration. To make matters worse, incarcerated women receive little assistance in preparing to navigate the bleak housing landscape and the many other obstacles that stand in the way of a successful reentry, such as barriers to living-wage jobs, education, family reunification and civic participation.

In New York City specifically, the dearth of transitional and permanent housing options for people home from incarceration has led to the rise of a "three-quarter" housing market. Three-quarter houses are privately-owned, unregulated and/or unlicensed houses with rooms for single adults to rent, many of which are overcrowded, unsafe and poorly managed. They are particularly dangerous environments for women who need support to address substance abuse and domestic violence issues and mental and physical health needs. Nevertheless, parole officers, prison personnel, and service providers regularly refer women to three-quarter houses because they have nowhere else to send them.

Women make up a relatively small percentage of individuals returning home from incarceration in New York State. As a result, the specific issues women often face, such as trauma, abuse and domestic violence, and shouldering a disproportionate share of caregiving responsibilities for children and family members, are easily overlooked. Most community reentry services are not specifically tailored to meet women's specific needs.

As a statewide coalition that advocates for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women, we want this book to illuminate how the dearth of housing options, along with myriad other barriers facing people coming home, subject formerly incarcerated

women to instability that keeps them vulnerable to adopting survival behaviors that hurt their physical and emotional well-being and prolong their involvement in the criminal justice system. We want women who are directly impacted by incarceration and their allies to use this book to engage policymakers and advocate for improved responses to the housing crisis in New York. We also want women to use this book as a resource for information about housing and legal assistance in New York and we have included a list of important housing terms at the beginning of the book, as well as a listing of housing resources after each chapter.

Finally, we want this book to serve as a reminder that everyone deserves a permanent, clean, safe, affordable place to live. Formerly incarcerated women are a vital part of the larger fight for justice and equality for women. Improving their condition is central to improving the rights, condition, and autonomy of all women and of all people.

The Coalition for Women Prisoners

Housing terms

Some important housing terms to know

Affordable housing – housing built with government money for low-income renters

Congregate housing – housing in which residents share common areas, like the bathroom or kitchen; some include supportive services

Cooperative living – an arrangement where several people live in a single dwelling unit, such as a large house, where each person/couple has a private area (bedroom and maybe a bathroom) and the common areas of the dwelling (kitchen, dining room, living room, maybe bathroom, recreation, and outdoor spaces) are shared by all; in New York State, a private cooperative living arrangement is prohibited for people on parole

Emergency housing – temporary housing, usually provided by the government or a social services agency, for a person in immediate need of a place to go, like a city shelter or a domestic violence shelter

Fair Housing Act – a Federal law that prohibits housing discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, disability, familial status, and national origin; the Federal law does not include protections for criminal records, source of income, or history of housing court involvement; the New York State law includes the following additional protected categories: marital status, age (over 18), military status, and sexual orientation

HASA – short for HIV/AIDS Services Administration, the part of New York City's welfare agency that helps people living with HIV/AIDS and their families access benefits and social services, including housing

Homebase – a New York City government program that helps people overcome immediate housing problems that could result in homelessness; the services are provided by Homebase and Homebase community partner organizations

Homelessness – the state of living on the street, in unsuitable housing (including couch to couch), or in a government shelter

HPD – short for the New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development, the New York City agency responsible for developing affordable housing options for low-income individuals and families

Open lottery system – a process where people eligible for subsidized housing can submit an online application and a random selection is made to assign housing units

NYCHA – short for the New York City Housing Authority

Permanent housing – housing that belongs to you as long as you pay the rent or mortgage, including market rate housing, affordable housing, public housing, rental assistance housing, service enriched housing, and permanent supportive housing

Permanent supportive housing – permanent housing with supportive medical or social services

Public housing – housing that is administered by the government, sometimes referred to as “the projects”

Scattered site housing - low cost apartments, often subsidized by a social services organization, that are scattered throughout a community instead of the apartments being in one building; some include supportive services

Section 8 – a Federal housing program administered by the New York City Housing Authority that provides “vouchers” to eligible people to subsidize their rent; presently New York City is not processing new Section 8 applications

Special needs housing - housing for people with special needs, including people with disabilities, mental illness, the elderly, the homeless, or survivors of domestic violence

SRO – short for Single Room Occupancy, which is a building, often a converted hotel, which houses one or two people in individual rooms where they typically share bathrooms and/or the kitchen

Subsidy/subsidized – government money or resources to help a person pay their rent

Tenant screening reports – reports produced by companies for landlords who want to “screen” out applicants for their apartments who they think will be bad tenants

Three-quarter house – an unregulated and/or unlicensed building with rooms for single adults to rent

Transitional housing – temporary, supervised housing for individuals after release from incarceration that includes mandatory programs and services

Transitional services – coordinated services, usually provided by one agency, that promote a person’s move from incarceration back to the community; the services typically include education and job training, housing, anger management, substance abuse treatment, family reunification, and other supportive social services

Chapter 1

Coming Home



I spent 20 years in prison—Bedford Hills and Bayview. I had never been in prison before. I didn't know anything about finding housing. I was either going to have to go into three-quarter housing or a shelter, so I made the decision to go live with my dad. This was a blessing to me. I know many people don't have the ability to go back to their families and that their families would rather they go to program housing.

When I first got home my brother and his wife came up from Virginia and my father, my daughter and friends and many other supporters of mine were around, which was really great. However, after everyone left, I was downstairs in the basement of my father's house alone for the first time in 20 years. I felt isolated and sad, although I was happy to be home. Just trying to absorb this whole concept is really hard. It is just so deep.

Get your Medicaid, ID and other documents together before you get out. This is a major plus. You will be given ID when you leave the facility, but this ID is only good for sixty days. Once you are out, you can get a non-driver's license ID from the Division of Motor Vehicles. When you are released, you'll get a check for \$40.00 and whatever money you have in your account. I opened a bank account right away and I suggest that others do this too. Open an account even

“I spent twenty years in prison—Bedford Hills
and Bayview. I had never been in prison before.
I didn’t know anything about finding housing.”

if it is only with \$1.00 because it is another form of identification. If you can, also open a little savings account, even if it is only \$5.00. All this creates identification and stability for you. Later, check your credit report to see if you owe anybody money because you don’t want people to start hunting you down. I had no credit so I had to create credit, but at least it’s clear credit. I don’t owe anybody.

I was mandated by parole to go to a program on 14th Street in New York City. They helped me apply for food stamps and to make a decision about whether to apply for welfare. I decided not to apply for welfare because I knew that once I did my program that I would find a part-time or full-time position. Getting all of this done is an all-day process, so be patient and just know that this is where you’re gonna be. Find out what time an office opens and try to be the first one there. If you can, be one of the first in line –you are more likely to be out before 12 o’clock. If you get there after the crowd has already formed, forget it, you will be there all day.

I’m learning everything anew. I have to report to parole about my living conditions and whether I’m happy there. I also have to do my mandated program for anger management, aggression and substance abuse. Now, I didn’t have substance abuse issues related to my crime, which was a violent crime. However, I took the program, a ninety-day session, and I went in kickin’ and screamin’ because I didn’t understand why I had to do all these programs I had done on the inside for the past 20 years. But I met some really great people. I understood after I did the program that structurally, it was very good for me to be able to reach out to people who were like me.

My parole experience is good and bad. Parole is an extension of your incarceration. Just accept it. You have to develop a relationship with your parole officer. Establish a rapport and trust with your parole officer so that he can say yes to things for you. Since I have been home I have been to New Jersey for a conference with my church and gone on some day trips that are out of state. My parole officer is very traditional and goes by the book. I also go see the supervisor, who is a woman. She has extended her hand to me if I need to talk, so that’s good. It’s very important to establish these relationships and to be mindful of parole’s rules and regulations. When you are told to do something, do it. Don’t mess around and ask why. Get the programs behind you so you can move on.

You must have a plan about what you want to do when you come out. Reentry is about saying to yourself, “Okay, I’m goin’ home after 10, 15, 20 years, what am I gonna do first?” You have to create this map even if you don’t follow this map

step-by-step each day. Create a list to check off. If you think you can carry it all in your head, you are going to fail. You have to write it down. It will help you stay focused and centered. It is your road map. And don't feel like you have to get everything done at once. Take one day at a time and take it slow. If you don't do it on Monday, you can do it on Thursday.

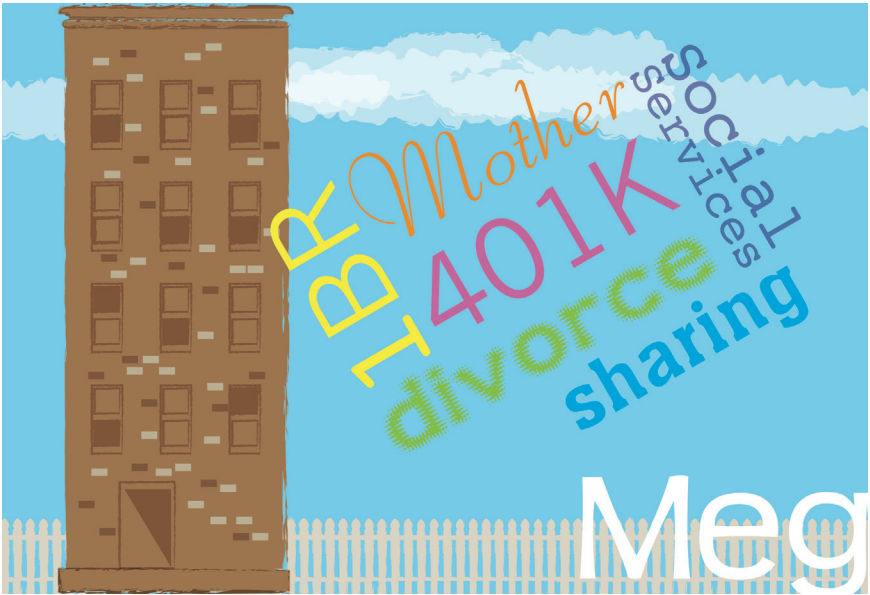
When you first come home, eat whatever you want and enjoy it. However, at some point, you are going to have to take care of yourself. Sleep is very important. I couldn't sleep when I first came home—the change of people, the excitement, the children, the families, thinking about getting a job, what I was going to wear, where I was going to get clothes. You are always thinking when you come out, and that didn't allow me to get the rest that I needed. My eyes got bags and were red and I could feel tiredness taking over my body. When that starts, you may get irritable and start snapping and not realize it! Getting sleep and taking care of self go hand-in-hand.

People try to do a lot for me and I tell them, "I got this." I have to do things on my own. If I fall, I fall. I will pick myself up, get back on track, and start all over.

"You must have a plan, an idea
in your head about what you want
to do when you come out..."

Know that you CAN DO IT. My life right now is really fantastic. I always say that my worst day out here is better than the best day inside. I am independently surviving, saving my money and making things happen. My dreams for the future are to write my book and also participate in a movie that will document who I was, who I am now, and who I am becoming. I definitely want to be a part of helping people who are released and help change the domestic violence laws. I want to be an inspirational, motivational speaker, and talk with sisters and brothers who need to hear certain things. I want to be a voice for those who have lost their voice.

I consider home a place where you can rest your head, close your eyes, feel safe, and know that the peace and the love of God's hand is upon you. I can remember what it felt like to want to be home and think that this could never happen for me. So for those of you still doing time, just hold on, keep praying, and have faith knowing that God is good.



I've been home since April 2011 after doing 8 months in Monroe Correctional Facility jail for a probation violation. I was in the middle of a divorce and living with my mother right before I was incarcerated. I'm 41 and had never been incarcerated before. I was released to Brighton, which is a suburb of Rochester, and that's where I live now.

Even though I had a release date, I wasn't sure that I was actually going to get out because I was in the box. When my release date came, they pretty much told me, "Why are you still here? You're outta here!" and gave me 10 minutes to get out. There was no release planning and I wasn't given any money. I went back to live with my mother. I'm not on probation any more, so I didn't have to get any approval about where I was going. I was really excited to go home, although I felt sorry for the other women I met inside who were not doing as well.

I live in the suburbs with no car and no driver's license because of my DUI offense. I ride my bike and take the bus everywhere or have a relative drive me if something is far away. Right now I'm supporting myself using 401K money from a job

"My mother and my friends are my emotional support and I attend women's groups at a local organization. I find it inspirational to be in a room with so many women going through similar things."

I had working at a newspaper. I've gone to the Department of Social Services to get help, but it's a bit crazy there. I'm lucky that I even got a good social worker.

My mother and my friends are my emotional support and I attend women's groups at a local organization. I find it inspirational to be in a room with so many women going through similar things.

Right now my life is in limbo. I'm not sure about anything right now and I just have to see how things are going to work out. It's hard to meet people and have to not tell them that I've been in jail, especially when I run into people that I know and they ask, "Where have you been for the past year?"

As far as dreams for the future, I would like to get my own place—a one-bedroom apartment—and a job teaching art at the college level. Also, my divorce is not final and my husband is being difficult about the money surrounding the divorce, so I hope to get that resolved soon.



Before I left prison, I knew I wanted to get my own place, but I couldn't afford it. I knew there was a waiting period before I could get social services. And I didn't want to go to a shelter where I didn't feel safe. So I went home to live with my family, which I did not want to do. As a matter of fact, that's where the crime took place, in front of my mother's house. It was awkward, and I had been away from them for so long, I felt like I didn't even know them anymore.

My biggest obstacle was finances. I mean I couldn't get a job that pays enough money to pay my rent and other bills. Because of the discrimination of just coming out of prison, especially having a murder or manslaughter conviction, the discrimination is harsh. My partner, when she used to come visit me inside, told me, "It's way different out here. It's a dog-eat-dog world out here and the economy sucks so bad." I was like, "I'm so employable. I have 2 college degrees. I don't have a drug or alcohol history." And I get out and can't get a job anywhere except for a rinky-dink coffee shop working the night shift.

"I didn't realize how devastated and fragile I was, so that all compounded the anxiety of first coming home."

“I went to an upstate program and they said that I didn’t qualify for any of their services because I had a place to live—I had to be in a shelter in order to qualify for their services.”

Parole will give you a bus ticket if you need it and \$40. What is \$40? They do have a program called Pre-Release where they give you general information and tell you about a couple of emergency shelters. There is no sense of security in going to a place like a shelter where you know no one. It’s worse than prison because these are people who are active in drug use and crime. You’re just coming out of a place that’s very insecure and you want some security and stability in your life that’s conducive to your rehabilitation and your reentry into society. It’s just not there.

I had Post Traumatic Stress Disorder from years of abuse. I had to go see a counselor as part of my parole and he diagnosed me with it. I said, “Don’t tell me I have that. I’m a survivor. I healed from that. I’ve grown from the abuse.” He said, “I’m not talking about the abuse. I’m talking about the seventeen years in prison.” I didn’t realize how devastated and fragile I was, so that all compounded the anxiety of first coming home. You have all these plans and ideas because every single day of your incarceration you think about what you’re going to do when you come home, because that’s all you have.

I got a job and I was living at my mom’s and things were falling apart there, as so many people will see when they come home. Your families have changed. You have changed. It was a very uncomfortable situation, so I left and I moved in with my partner. I still wanted to have my own apartment, but it’s so hard to do it on your own financially, it really is, and social services gives you a hard time. They’re not supportive. I hate to say it, but my worker spent more time trying to look down my shirt than really paying attention to what I was saying.

I didn’t want to get on social services because I felt like it would hinder me from progressing on my own, that it would be like a crutch that I really didn’t need. But my parole officer said that I had to get on social services to have some sort of income or people would think I’m going to go commit more crimes. Social services gave me a minimal amount of money for rent because I was living in my mother’s house, and receiving food stamps. When I started working, they dropped me even though I wasn’t making that much money.

It just seems like if you don’t have HIV and you don’t have a drug history or a severe alcohol history, there’s nothing social services can do for you. I went to an upstate services program and they said that I didn’t qualify for any of their ser-

vices because I had a place to live—I had to be in a shelter in order to qualify for their services. I said, "I just did seventeen years in prison. I think I qualify for any services available to get on my feet." It's like the system is designed for you to fail. With the frustration of finding housing, a secure environment, and employment, it's very, very hard.

I would tell women returning to their communities not to give up. Stay focused. Don't get frustrated or discouraged. Once you get discouraged, it leaves room for all these other negative feelings to come into play—hopelessness, defeat—and you don't want that. You've got to make it, because a bad day out here in society beats a good day in prison anytime. When my car acts up or I'm having a bad day at work or me and my honey get into a disagreement or me and my mother get into an argument, it's okay because it's better than where I've been. You're gonna have so many days where you feel like exploding in frustration, but don't give up.

Getting Started...

Write to obtain a general resource guide for people returning home from incarceration. Read it to understand the types of services available to you, and then begin to contact community agencies for information about their services.

Bronx Reentry & Resource Directory

Bronx Reentry Working Group

To obtain a copy download online or contact:

Tel: (718) 920-5682

info@BronxReentry.org

www.bronx.reentry.org

Coming Home, A Resource Guide for Re-entrants and Their Families

Upper Manhattan Reentry Task Force

Harlem Justice Center

DROP-IN HOURS: 1PM-3PM TUESDAY

170 East 121st Street

New York, New York 10035

Tel: (212) 360-4131

Fax: (212) 828-7416

Electronic version can be downloaded from www.courtinnovation.org and www.rethinkingreentry.blogspot.com

Connections: a resource guide for formerly incarcerated people in New York

Available in English and Spanish. To obtain a copy, contact:

Institutional Library Services

The New York Public Library

455 Fifth Avenue

New York, New York 10016

Tel: (212) 340-0971

Electronic versions can be downloaded from: www.nypl.org/branch/services/connections (English version) www.nypl.org/branch/services/conexiones (Spanish version)

Crown Heights Community Mediation Center Reentry Resource Directory 2010-2011

256 Kingston Avenue

Brooklyn, New York 11213

Tel: (718) 773-6886

Fax: (718) 774-5349

www.crownheights.org

You can write to them for a copy or stop in and pick one up.

Transition Guide: How to get a good start on the outside.

Produced by the New York State Department of Health

To obtain a copy, contact:

New York State Department of Health

Corning Tower

Empire State Plaza

Albany, New York 12237

Online: www.health.ny.gov/diseases/aids/corrections/docs/transition_guide.pdf

ALBANY COUNTY

On Your Own, Information and Resources for Persons Formerly Incarcerated, the Convicted and Their Families in the [New York State] Capital District.

Produced by the Center for Law and Justice in Albany

To obtain a copy, contact:

Center for Law and Justice

Pine West Plaza No. 7

Washington Avenue Extension

Albany, New York 12207

Online: www.cflj.org/resources-and-publications/on-your-own-2

ERIE COUNTY

Connections: A Guide to Transitional Services in Erie County

To obtain a copy, ask in person at any branch or contact:

Buffalo & Erie County Public Library

Extension Services

1 Lafayette Square

Buffalo, New York 14203

Online: www.buffalolib.org/content/institutional-services

HUDSON VALLEY (COLUMBIA, DUTCHESS, GREENE, PUTNAM OR ULSTER COUNTIES)

Hudson Valley Connections: A resource guide for ex-offenders returning to Columbia, Dutchess, Greene, Putnam or Ulster counties

Available in English and Spanish

To obtain a copy, contact:

Mid-Hudson Library System

Outreach Services Department

103 Market Street

Poughkeepsie, New York 12601

Online: www.midhudson.org/hvconnections/booklet.pdf

LIVINGSTON/WYOMING COUNTIES

Community Connections - Livingston/Wyoming Counties

To obtain a copy, contact:

Outreach Department

Pioneer Library System

2557 State Route 21

Canandaigua, New York 14424

Tel: (585) 394-8260

Online: www.owwl.org/outreach/community

ONTARIO/WAYNE COUNTIES:

Community Connections - Ontario/Wayne Counties

To obtain a copy, contact:

Outreach Department

Pioneer Library System

2557 State Route 21

Canandaigua, New York 14424

Tel: (585) 394-8260

Online: www.owwl.org/outreach/community

ROCHESTER & MONROE COUNTIES

Making Moves: Handbook for Ex-Offenders Returning to the Rochester and Monroe County Area

To obtain a copy, contact:

Extension Outreach Department

Monroe County Library System

115 South Avenue, Rochester, New York 14604

Tel: (585) 428-8312

Online: www3.libraryweb.org/central.aspx?id=78

ULSTER COUNTY

Coming Back to Ulster County

To obtain a copy, contact:

Restorative Justice Group

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Catskills

320 Sawkill Road, Kingston, New York 12401

Tel: (845) 331-2884

Electronic version can be downloaded from: www.uucckington.org/resourcealist.pdf

WESTCHESTER COUNTY

Westchester Connections: A guide for persons incarcerated, persons formerly incarcerated, and others similarly in need, to assist their reentry back into society, including helpful resources throughout Westchester County. November 2004.

Produced by the Westchester Council on Crime and Delinquency.

To obtain a copy, contact:

Westchester Council on Crime & Delinquency

P.O. Box 3300

Mount Vernon, New York 10553

Electronic version can be downloaded from: <http://www.wccdinc.net/>

WOMEN'S REENTRY EXPERIENCES

My Sister's Keeper, A Book for Women Returning Home from Prison or Jail

To obtain a copy, contact:

Coalition for Women Prisoners

Women in Prison Project

Correctional Association of New York

2090 Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard, Suite 200

New York, New York 10027

Tel: (212) 254-5700

Fax: (212) 473-2807

www.correctionalassociation.org

HELPLINE

311

New York City's information line for information and access to all New York City government services and information; all calls to 311 are answered by a live operator, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week; immediate access to translation services in over 170 languages is available; call 311 from any borough of New York City

Outside of New York City, call (212) NEW-YORK (212-639-9675); the TTY number is (212) 504-4115

Chapter 2

Finding shelter



I have been home for 4 years after doing time at Taconic Correctional Facility. They gave me a train ticket, \$40, and just kicked me off.

I was supposed to go to my daughter's in Long Island, but parole claimed that since they couldn't verify my address, they couldn't approve it. They instead sent me to a social services shelter that turned out to be someone's car garage converted into a shelter. It housed up to 7 people—men and women, all in one room. It was horrible. The person who ran the shelter was a full-fledged alcoholic and the place smelled like a bar. The whole environment was what we call "radioactive." It was crazy. People were outside doing transactions right in front of the house. I didn't stay one night there. I stayed with my sister and the next day I went back to my parole officer who said, "Oh my God. Don't you have somewhere else to stay?" He gave me a week to find an address. I stayed a week with my sister and then 6 months with my god-sister before I found my own apartment.

I came home and did not find an apartment until a year later. So for a year and change, I went from one family member to the next trying to maintain housing because I didn't want to go into the shelter system. It was while working at an organization that helped women recently released from prison that I learned about resources and how to navigate. As people say, it's not what you know, it's who you know.

I faced discrimination every place I looked for an apartment. They ask you for a credit report and as soon as they learn you've been recently released from prison they say the apartment's been taken or your credit is not up to standard. I was on public assistance and looking for a job, so it was hard to find somebody who would accept \$215 from public assistance for monthly rent. While staying at my god-sister's, an aunt with an apartment in Harlem bought a condo. So she let me rent the apartment for the \$215 until I started working. I knew it was only temporary so I started applying for low-income housing. I waited almost a year, but finally I got a call for a couple of interviews. By this time I had a job and was making decent money.

I spent so much time sending in applications for low-income housing. It took a lot of stamps and envelopes because I had to send them a self-addressed, stamped envelope to get the applications back and hope that they called me. I only got 2 interviews. One of them said my credit was bad and to pay off all of my old debts. The other said my credit was good enough, however, when I originally applied I was on public assistance, so that was the income I sent in. I was honest

"I faced discrimination every place I looked for an apartment."

with them and said, "This is my income now. Do I still qualify?" I still qualified but I made \$100 over the guidelines for a single person and my husband was still locked up. The woman at the housing program was really a godsend. She worked it out so that I could qualify. Unfortunately, I lost the apartment when I went back to Rikers for 8 months. I didn't have to lose it though. I left my stepson and his girlfriend with money to pay the bills. They just didn't do it, so I lost the apartment. It was like starting all over again.

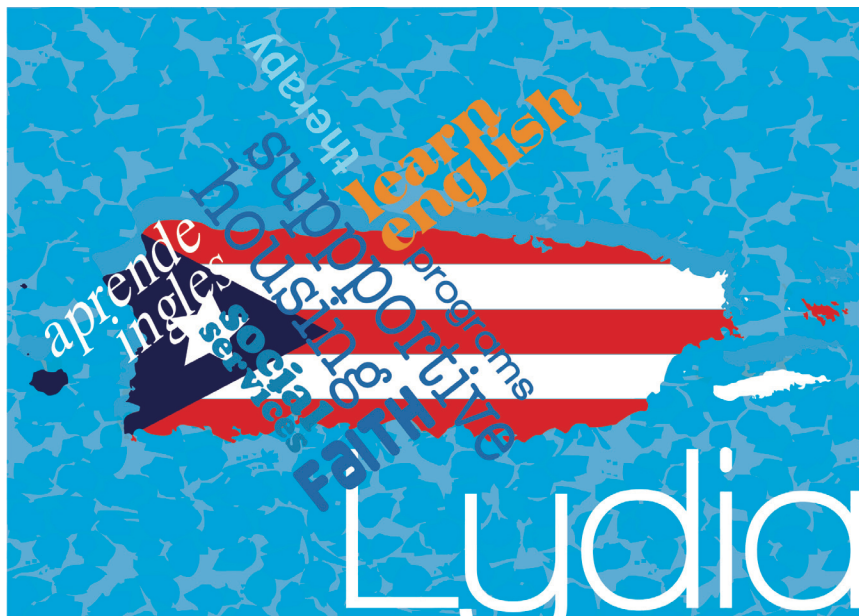
After I got out of Rikers, I went to stay with a friend. It wasn't working out. I stayed 30 days and then went to another friend who was actually my case manager at an outpatient program. I told her what was going on and that I was feeling like I'm either gonna go back to using drugs or committing crimes, and it is not really what I want to do. I've got a different mindset and I really wanted to work on doing things different. So she sent me to a transitional services organization where I stayed for a year. It was an excellent place with structure, community meetings, treatment, and therapy. I have referred people myself. They are one of the places that focus on your reentry and your family reunification. They give you weekends out with your family and tell you, "If you feel unsafe or uncomfortable, you can always come back here. Just because we give you a weekend pass doesn't mean you have to stay out. Do what's right for you." I found that to be real helpful for me because sometimes I didn't want to be around my family.

Finding housing is not easy, but if you've got the right support, somebody working with you, somebody who's been through it, then you can see the roads they've taken and get over the obstacles. That's my goal, to show another woman how

I got to where I am. My mother always said if you see somebody is down, don't step on them, give them a hand and help them up. Sisters have it a whole lot harder than the brothers. I got into my transitional housing program and I saw the support it offered and the other women who've come through the program who are successful and responsible. The moment you hit the streets and somebody tells you about a resource, go and investigate. Or if you meet up with somebody who you knew from inside doing their thing, ask them, "Where are you going? What are you doing?" Pick their brain.

I became Muslim in 1999, not long after I got married. What I found out this last bid is that I wasn't practicing my religion. I would dress the part, but the other stuff I was doing was un-Islamic, really. When I came home, I really got connected with people in my masjid who have been where I've been and who are living productive lives. Some of the brothers and sisters in my masjid have been locked up, but they've been out 20, 30 years and have never looked back because they stayed focused through Islam. That kinda inspired me. I go to my masjid and talk to my brothers and sisters. I tell them what's going on with me and if I need help, I tell them. When I first got to my transitional program I had absolutely nothing. The people at my masjid bought me a coat and winter boots and gave me money to eat and travel to class. If I would miss a class, they would call and ask, "Are you okay sister? Do you need something? Can you get around? Do you need us to come get you?" It was like that. One lady had never been in prison or jail. She was pregnant when I started coming to the masjid and then she had her baby. We just became a little family. When she had to go back to work, she asked me to watch the baby. I said, "But I live in a program." She said, "If they give you work hours, I will work around your hours until my daughter gets in from school and my son gets home from work." They gave me the keys to their apartment and I would go there every morning to watch the baby. They trusted me like this. Do you how that felt? She knew that I came from prison. We talked about it in the masjid. She said, "I don't care about your past. I see something different in you."

Be open to whatever is available. There are a lot of people who've walked in our shoes. We just don't realize it because they are responsible and productive, but they have been in prison, and have been addicts, and they are there to help.



Vení a los Estados Unidos desde Puerto Rico en 1958, cuando tenía 18 años. Ahora tengo 63. Por razones de salud, he estado viviendo en viviendas de apoyo por los últimos 5 años tras cumplir 5 años en Bedford Hills. Esta es mi segunda vez sirviendo tiempo en las cárceles. He pasado tiempo en las cárceles de Clinton County, Bedford Hills y Albion.

Antes de ir a la cárcel, yo vivía en Brooklyn en un programa residencial de tratamiento de drogas. No me gusto, pero aprendí mucho. Mientras estuve allí, yo estaba lista para entrar a viviendas de apoyo, pero a causa de un nuevo delito, la perdí.

Nunca olvidaré mis experiencias en la cárcel. Estuve enferma, y no entendía el idioma. Quiero decirles a todas las mujeres que hablan español en la cárcel que aprendan inglés. Presten atención en los programas y en la escuela. Escuchen y aprendan. Eso es lo que yo hice. Yo no sabía inglés cuando fui allí. Tienen que aprender. En Clinton no habían muchas personas que hablaban español. No podrán entender nada a menos que decidan aprender inglés.

Es triste, muy triste, al no saber hablar inglés en un lugar desconocido. Tuve que hacer seis meses en Clinton y ningunos de mis familiares pudieron venir a visitarme. Me sentí como que hubiera hecho 5 años de prisión, esos 6 meses en Clinton fueron muy duros. Me llevaron al hospital casi todos los días debido a mi asma.

Me enteré de mi vivienda de apoyo a través de la única psicóloga que hablaba español en Bedford. Yo iba a llorar mucho a ella porque estaba muy deprimida. Ella me ayudó mucho. El probatorio de libertad condicional era hispano, pero yo casi nunca le pedía ayuda. Yo quería escuchar acerca de los programas, por eso

oía lo que decían la gente alrededor de mí. Así es como describí el programa y de mi psicóloga.

Hablar solo español hizo muy difícil para obtener servicios y el tratamiento adecuado y me impidió poder participar en lo que se ofrecía. Tuve la suerte de tener el psicólogo y oír acerca del programa de viviendas de apoyo. Me fui a vivir sin problemas. El momento fue perfecto. Todavía estaban haciendo el proceso de admisión y tenían habitaciones libres. La psicóloga me habló sobre el programa y me explicó todo. Si no la tuviera, probablemente nunca hubiera oído hablar de esta vivienda de apoyo. Ella me dijo, "Tienes que saber hablar inglés o puede que no te acepten al programa. Cuando vengán a hacerte la entrevista, y nada más puedes hablar un poco de inglés, usted no será aceptada."

Mi vivienda de apoyo es un lugar muy inusual. Tenemos un probatorio de libertad condicional con nosotros aquí. Ella es parte del grupo, así que no haiga antagonismo. La mayoría de las mujeres aquí pagan renta, hasta un 30% de sus ingresos. No puedo trabajar porque estoy enferma. Mi vida aquí es buena. Puedo participar en eventos y salir a un montón de citas al médico, a ver a mi pareja y mi familia. Vemos la televisión y todos se divierten. Tengo un montón de apoyo de mi familia y de la gente de aquí. Cuando vine por primera vez hace 5 años, me sentía contenta, tranquila, feliz y en paz, mucho mejor que en la cárcel. Estoy muy agradecida de que me pueda quedar aquí permanentemente. No tengo problemas cuando salgo a las calles-no hay problemas con las drogas o de la delincuencia. Mi hija fue encarcelada y mi nieto también, pero ahora están limpios. Ellos van a un programa. Me hace muy feliz.



Before I was incarcerated I lived in Manhattan. It was pillow to pole, pole to pillow—wherever I could lay my head at that time. I was running the streets, doing drugs—crack cocaine. I got caught up. At one point, the judge said, “If you come before my court again, your minimum will be 25 before you go to the parole board.” If that don’t make you change, I don’t know what will. I was incarcerated because of drug-related crimes, transporting and using. I was a user, but they made me seem like I was a dealer and I was sentenced under the Rockefeller Law. I got a time cut. I had to do 13 years.

I’ve done 3 state bids. When I first came home, I wasn’t ready. I wanted to make up for the time I was in prison. I went away when I was 17 and had no responsibilities. I knew I could always go to my mother’s house or my grandmother’s house. They would allow me to come, change clothes, take a bath, and they would feed me, but I could not spend the night. It was tough love.

When I was released it was stressful. I came out with \$40, a bus ticket and a MetroCard. There was no discharge planning. If you didn’t have nowhere to go, you went to a shelter. That’s it. I went to a program after my last bid because I didn’t want to do this anymore. I got home, spent the night at my mom’s house, had a good dinner, and I then I went and signed myself into a residential drug treatment program for women. After 2 years, I graduated from there. I also was employed there as coverage staff.

“In prison they give you a booklet with a whole bunch of different programs and shelters and stuff like that, but who wants to read that book when you’re ready to come home?”

Before I was released I thought to myself, “What am I gonna do different this time? With me having a criminal background am I going to be able to succeed?” I was determined this last time not to remain a statistic because I knew that I could do better. I just needed the opportunity. It was a vicious cycle, but when I made the decision to stop, I’d had enough. And things started happening. When I got out, I got a job because I had skills. I was one of the fortunate ones. When I went into prison I had my GED. I’m the type person if there’s something to learn I’m gonna try to learn it. I may not want to at the time, but eventually I will get around to it. I did work release at Bayview, so when I came out of Bayview I was doing cooking and working for a car service as a receptionist.

In prison they give you a booklet with a whole bunch of different programs and shelters and stuff like that, but who wants to read that book when you’re ready to come home? You got a whole lot of anxiety. You’re overwhelmed. It’s not the same as a person meeting with you and asking, “What do you want to do? What do you want to pursue? Do you have anywhere to live? Do you want to go to a shelter? Do you want me to make arrangements for you to go to a program? Do you think you still need a program?”

When it was time for me to leave my drug treatment program, my parole officer allowed me to go into an SRO (Single Room Occupancy). This was a risk because I was gonna be on my own—my own room with my own key. I could come and go as I please. It felt great. It was the first time that I could actually say, “This is mine.” I didn’t have to worry about somebody saying, “All right, no more money, you got to go.”

I was at the SRO about 2 years, maybe 3 and had to leave because I was pregnant and you can’t have a baby at an SRO. Fortunately, I was already approved for Section 8. I stayed at the SRO until I had the baby. I was going to school and looking for apartments, and found one in the Bronx. So, by the time I had my daughter, I had an apartment. I didn’t actually live there until my daughter was 3 months old because I was a first-time mom and scared. I had to make a living so I stayed with my moms for the first 3 months of my daughter’s life, and then she was like, “Okay, it’s time to go home and be a mother.” My mom has always been tough love with me.

"If I hadn't found housing I would probably
still be using, not dealing with reality,
not paying bills, and not being responsible."

If I hadn't found housing I would probably still be using, not dealing with reality, not paying bills, and not being responsible. I can't think like that today because I have another individual that I'm responsible for. I still struggle every day with child care, with relationships, with living life. I know that in a split second I can lose everything that I worked so hard to get. That's the reality of it. I still have a hard time managing my bills, but I pay my rent to keep a roof over my head and pay my Con Ed to keep the lights on.

I didn't like my parole officer when I was on parole, but I'm grateful that I had her because she didn't allow me to manipulate parole. She didn't allow me to slip and slide with anything and it opened up a lot of doors. I went to school. I got my chef license. She made me tow the line. I know how to let the system work for me, but she didn't allow that. It was like she saw right through the bull crap. I'm very grateful to come across her.

When I was getting out, I would have liked to know that there were places out there that would support me, that would understand my situation. I've made mistakes, but a person does change. A lot of people don't give a person a second opportunity, like right now with the laws and Section 8 housing saying that I can't live on this property because I committed a felony. You're not affording me the opportunity to get good housing, to provide a roof over my head. And it's not only with housing, it's with employment too. You know there's still some form of discrimination out there, but like I tell anybody I know who's been through the same, don't let that stop you. You set your goals and you go for it. It can happen. It may take a little longer and you're going to get frustrated, but it will happen eventually.

I've been working at a program with supportive housing for people with mental illness. Before I actually started working here I was going to school for nursing and because of my criminal background I was told that I could not do nursing. This hurt, but it's the reality. My case manager and my supervisor gave me the encouragement to go back to school and pursue a career in human services. So, that's what I'm doing now. My goals for the future are to obtain my college degree, to move up in my job, to make a little bit more money, to continue to advocate and help people that are less fortunate, and to let them know, "You can make a change. You can make a difference. Let your voice be heard."

Getting Started...

The resources below are to help you get started locating housing and housing services. It also includes resources for finding emergency shelter and homelessness services.

TRANSITIONAL HOUSING

Bowery Residents Committee

80 Centre Street, 200B

New York, New York 10013

Tel: (212) 732-7906 **24-HOUR HOMELESS HELPLINE: (212) 533-5151**

www.brc.org

A community-based organization with transitional housing beds and permanent housing

Center for Community Alternatives

39 West 19th Street

10th Floor

New York, New York 10011

Tel: (212) 691-1911

A transitional housing program for formerly incarcerated women and men; has a women's program; **MUST HAVE** substance abuse history for housing

Center for Community Alternatives Upstate

115 East Jefferson Street, Suite 300

Syracuse, New York 13202

Tel: (315) 422-5638

WALK-IN: 9AM-12PM, MONDAY-FRIDAY

Fax: (315) 471-4924

www.communityalternatives.org

Transitional services, advocacy and policy development; has offices in Syracuse, Manhattan, and Brooklyn, as well as a recovery program in Rochester and a defense-based advocacy program in Buffalo; case managers help with housing

Fortune Society

29-76 Northern Boulevard

Long Island City, Queens, New York 11101

Tel: (212) 691-7554

Fax: (212) 255-4948

Transitional housing for formerly incarcerated women and men

Hour Children

13-07 37th Avenue
Long Island City, New York 11101
Tel: (718) 433-4724

A transitional housing program and supportive services for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women with children

Osborne Association

Dutchess ReEntry Program
25 Market Street
6th Floor
Poughkeepsie, New York 12601
Tel: (845) 345-9845

Comprehensive services for women and men returning to Dutchess County from state prison

Providence House

703 Lexington Avenue
(Between Malcolm X Blvd and Stuyvesant Ave)
Brooklyn, New York 11221
Email: info@providencehouse.org
Tel: (718) 455-0197
Fax: (718) 455-0692

Transitional housing for women on parole

Women's Prison Association (WPA)

Hopper House
110 Second Avenue
New York, New York 10003
Tel: (646) 292-7740
Fax: (646) 292-7763

Assists women in transition from prison or jail by providing residential housing to them and their children; the Community Linkage Unit is the point of intake for access to their various housing and support programs

HOUSING ASSISTANCE AND REFERRALS

You may have to be a client of the agency in order to access these services.

Center for Community Alternatives

115 East Jefferson Street, Suite 300

Syracuse, New York 13202

Tel: (315) 442-5638

Fax: (315) 471-4924

www.communityalternatives.org

A community-based organization that provides services, advocacy and policy development for the formerly incarcerated; has offices in Syracuse, Manhattan, and Brooklyn, as well as a recovery program in Rochester and a defense-based advocacy program in Buffalo

Center for Urban Community Services

Housing Resource Center

196 East 121st Street, 6th Floor

New York, New York 10035

Tel: (212) 801-3300

Toll free: 1-800-533-4449

Fax: (212) 635-2191

<http://www.cucs.org/referral-center/housing-placement-assistance>

An organization that works to end homelessness for the low income; their Housing Resource Center provides various types of information for people engaged in housing and housing placement efforts, including comprehensive online information about the NY/NY Referral Assistance Program and the Single Point of Access (SPOA) Housing Program, which helps connect specially identified applicants to the most appropriate residences and services

ComALERT, Kings County District Attorney's Office

210 Joralemon Street, 3rd Floor

Brooklyn, New York 11201

www.brooklynda.org

A program of the Kings County District Attorney's Office that provides services for formerly incarcerated people returning to Brooklyn; refers ex-offenders to community based organizations for job training and placement, education, substance abuse treatment, and housing assistance

Exodus Transitional Community

2271 Third Avenue

New York, New York 10035

Tel: (917) 492 0990

www.etcny.org

exodustranscom@aol.com

A community-based organization that provides support services to men and women who are in transition from incarceration to full reintegration into their communities

Fifth Avenue Committee

Developing Justice in South Brooklyn Project

621 DeGraw Street

Brooklyn, New York 11217

Tel: (718) 237-2017

Email: fac@fifthave.org

www.fifthave.org

A community-based organization that helps formerly incarcerated people with employment, education, housing, substance abuse treatment, health and mental health services, and family relationships

Housing + Solutions

4 West 39th Street, Suite 316

New York, New York 10036

Tel: (212) 213-0221

Fax: (212) 213-0225

Housing program that provides both permanent and transitional supportive housing for homeless single women and homeless women with children ages 18 and below; must be referred from a homeless shelter

Services for the Underserved

305 7th Avenue, 16th Floor

New York, New York 10001

Tel: (917) 408-5318

www.susinc.org

An agency that provides supportive housing to low income, formerly homeless and disabled individuals; services for adults 18 and older; must be able to afford rent

STEPS To End Family Violence

Reentry Project

151 Lawrence Street, 5th Floor

Brooklyn, New York 11201

Tel: (212) 437-3500

Helpline: 1-877-STEPS-94

An alternative to incarceration program for women who are domestic violence survivors; has a reentry project

HOUSING/HOUSING ASSISTANCE FOR FORMERLY INCARCERATED INDIVIDUALS WITH HIV OR AIDS

Bailey House

Project FIRST

The Rand Harlan Center for Housing, Wellness and Community

1751 Park Avenue

New York, New York 10035

Tel: (212) 633-2500

Fax: (212) 633-2932

An AIDS services organization that provides rental support for the formerly incarcerated living with HIV or AIDS

FACES NY

HIRE Project (Health Improvement for Reentry)

317 Lenox Avenue, 10th Floor

New York, New York 10027

Tel: (212) 283-9180 x 102, 110, or 113

Offers transitional housing and supportive services

Hispanic AIDS Forum

213 West 35th Street, 12th Floor

New York, New York 10001

Tel: (212) 868-6230

Fax: (212) 868-6237

www.hafny.org

Rental assistance program for HIV+ individuals who are NOT HASA eligible

Housing Works

Women's Transitional Housing

454 Lexington Avenue **MUST BE:**

Brooklyn, New York 11221 - HASA eligible

Tel: (347) 274-3961 - Recently incarcerated (within 6 months)

Transgender Transitional Housing Program

2611 Pitkin Ave

Brooklyn, New York 11208

Tel: (718) 827-8700

VOCAL-NY (formerly New York City AIDS Housing Network)

80A Fourth Avenue

Brooklyn, New York 11217

Tel: 718-802-9540

An AIDS advocacy organization that provides housing referral assistance for HASA housing only

SUPPORTIVE HOUSING/HOUSING ASSISTANCE FOR PEOPLE WITH PSYCHIATRIC DISABILITIES AND OTHER SPECIAL NEEDS

The Bridge

248 West 108th Street
New York, New York 10025
Tel: (212) 663-3000 x372
Fax: (212) 663-3181
www.thebridgeny.org

A community-based agency that provides housing for individuals with a serious mental illness diagnosis; permanent housing to chronically homeless individuals who are actively abusing alcohol or drugs; for individuals living with HIV or AIDS

Center for Urban Community Services

Housing Resource Center
196 East 121st Street, 6th Floor
New York, New York 10035
Toll free: 1-800-533-4449
Tel: (212) 801-3300
Fax: (212) 635-2191

<http://www.cucs.org/referral-center/housing-placement-assistance>

An organization that works to end homelessness for the low income; their Housing Resource Center provides various types of information for people engaged in housing and housing placement efforts, including comprehensive online information about the NY/NY Referral Assistance Program and the Single Point of Access (SPOA) Housing Program, which helps connect specially identified applicants to the most appropriate residences and services

Community Access

2 Washington Street
New York, New York 10004
Tel: (212) 780-1400 x7708

Offers low-income affordable housing to people with an Axis 1 mental health diagnosis

Upper Manhattan Mental Health Center

1727 Amsterdam Avenue
New York, New York 10031
Tel: (212) 694-9200
www.ummhinc.org

A mental health program that offers housing referrals

EMERGENCY SHELTERS FOR WOMEN

For Single Adult Women without Children

New York City

In New York City there are 3 intake centers run by the New York City Department of Homeless Services that are for single adult women in need of emergency housing. There are no women's intake centers in Manhattan, so you will have to travel to the Brooklyn, Queens or the Bronx for intake.

Brooklyn Women's Intake/Assessment Center

116 Williams Avenue
Brooklyn, New York 11217
Tel: (718) 483-7700

Franklin Women's Intake/Assessment Center

1122 Franklin Avenue
Bronx, New York 10456
Tel: (347) 417-8240

Jamaica Armory Women's Intake/Assessment Center

93-03 168 Street
Queens, NJ 11434
Tel: (718) 262-1780

NEW YORK CITY FAMILY SHELTERS

For Families and Adult Couples without Minor Children under 21

Adult Family Intake Center (AFIC)

400-430 East 30th Street and 1st Avenue
New York, New York New York 10016

If you are part of a family with adult children no younger than 21, you must go to the Adult Family Intake Center (AFIC) located in Manhattan. AFIC is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

For Families with Children under 21

Prevention Assistance and Temporary Housing (PATH)

151 East 151st Street
Bronx, New York 10451

The Prevention Assistance and Temporary Housing office, or PATH office, is the intake center for families in need of emergency housing. PATH is open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week

For Women who live outside of New York City

Nassau County Coalition Against Domestic Violence

15 Grumman Road
Bethpage, New York 11714
Tel: (516) 542-0404

For Women who live in the upstate New York region

Equinox Domestic Violence Services

95 Central Avenue
Albany, New York 12206
Tel: (518) 434-6135
Hotline: (518) 432-7865

Cornerstone Manor

45 Carlton Street
Buffalo, New York 14203
Tel: (716) 852-0761

Haven House

P.O. Box 451, Ellicott Station
Buffalo, New York 14205
Tel: (716) 884-6000

Shelters of Saratoga

14 Walworth Street
Saratoga Springs, New York 12866
Tel: (518) 581-1097

Salvation Army of Syracuse Area

677 South Salina Street
Syracuse, New York 13202
Tel: (315) 475-1688

Vera House

P.O. Box 365
Syracuse, New York 14309
Tel: (315) 468-3260 – 24 hour crisis and support line
TTY: (315) 484-7263 (during business hours)

HOMELESS/HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION SERVICES

Coalition for the Homeless

129 Fulton Street (between Broadway and Nassau Streets)

New York, New York 10038

Tel: (212) 776-2000

Fax: (212) 964-1303

info@cfthomeless.org

They see the first 60 walk-in clients Monday to Friday 9a.m. until 2p.m.; conducts intake/assessments, assist with shelter problems, provides food pantry and soup kitchen information, clothing, help with police harassment, benefits assistance, housing assistance, referral letters, establishment of mailing address, help with domestic partnership applications and youth services

Homebase Sites

Homebase is a New York City-wide program to help families and individuals overcome immediate housing problems that could result in becoming homeless. The list below is the current Homebase community sites. Please note that Homebase is not a transitional services program. Therefore, be sure to ask upfront if the Homebase helps parolees and/or people returning home from incarceration, because not all of them do.

BronxWorks

1130 Grand Concourse

Bronx, New York 10456

Tel: (718) 508-3100

Bushwick 1 (RBSCC 1)

90 Beaver Street

Brooklyn, New York 11206

Tel: (718) 366-4300

Brownsville (RBSCC 2)

145 East 98th Street

Brooklyn, New York 11212

Tel: (917) 819-3200

Bushwick 3 (RBSCC 3)

1475 Myrtle Avenue

Brooklyn, New York 11237

Tel: (347) 295-3738

CAMBA I

1117 Eastern Parkway
Brooklyn, New York 11231
Tel: (718) 622-7323

CAMBA II

2211 Church Avenue
Brooklyn, New York 11226
Tel: (718) 940-6311

CAMBA III

1195 Bedford Avenue
Brooklyn, New York 11216
Tel: (718) 622-7323

CAMBA IV

648 Bay Street
Staten Island, New York 10304
Tel: (718) 282-6473

Catholic Charities Bronx

2155 Blackrock Avenue
Bronx, New York 10472
Tel: (718) 414-1050

Catholic Charities Bronx 2

4377 Bronx Boulevard
Bronx, New York 10466
Tel: (347) 947-3920

Catholic Charities Queens

87-80 Merrick Boulevard
Jamaica, New York 11432
Tel: (718) 674-1000

HELP I

775 Crotona Park North
Bronx, New York 10460
Tel: (718)299-8473

HELP II

1780 Grand Concourse, Level 1
Bronx, New York 10457
Tel: (347) 226-4540

Palladia

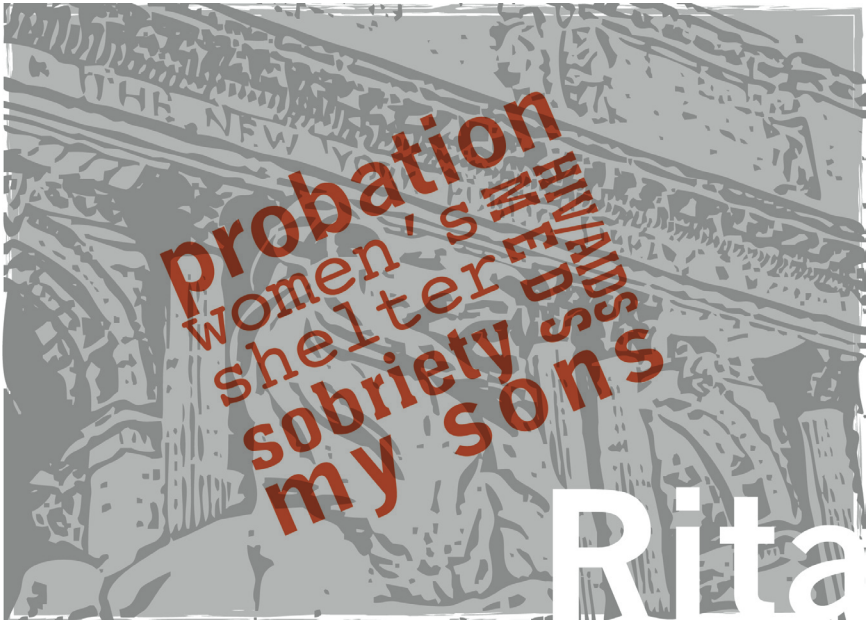
2276 3rd Avenue

New York, New York 10035

Tel: (917) 492-1019

Chapter 3

Facing Stigma and Discrimination



I've been home for 8 years. A few days before I got released, I was sharing with my bunkie the fact that I didn't have nowhere to go. She said, "Oh you got a man, girl." I didn't want to live with him. I wanted to get to know me first because I spent years letting someone else control what my existence was like.

My worst time was right after I made the board. They let me know my release date and said they would contact the place I was going. Then 9-11 happened and I ended up having to stay in the facility. The state facilities in the city were locked down until further notice.

At first I was released to a woman's shelter in Brooklyn. Someone suggested I take a look at the building before moving in because I was concerned about my recovery. I had to get permission from my parole officer at Bayview and she allowed me to go. It was totally atrocious in every sense of the word. Things were happening there that would have totally been a threat to my recovery. The

shelter's a trap for anybody on parole but I think they send people there because there's no other place. My only other choice was to go to HASA (HIV/AIDS Services Administration) and HASA placed me in an SRO (Single Room Occupancy), which was another den of iniquity, if you will, because stuff was also going on in there. Also, I was on HIV medication that needed to be refrigerated. Not all of the rooms had a little refrigerator. I didn't have a refrigerator to put my medication, so I couldn't take it right away. I was really upset that I had to disclose my HIV status to somebody in order to use their refrigerator.

Coming home, my fear was being homeless. I had no family to go to. My brother was living in a senior citizen complex and all my sisters lived out of town, except for one who was active. I was crazy with trying to find something. My P.O. said, "Can you get a one bedroom?" But ACS said no because if I got a one bedroom I couldn't have my children for the weekends. There's a lot of stuff to do to be in compliance with the family reunification process. The only thing that I was told in

"I was on HIV medication that needed to be refrigerated. Not all of the rooms had a little refrigerator."

terms of discharge planning was to connect with a particular transitional services organization that could meet my HIV care needs. This program helped with referrals to doctors and subway fare so that I could go back and forth for appointments and stuff like that. My children were in the system so I was constantly going to court, visiting my children and moving around. Eventually, a friend said to me, "They keep shifting you around like luggage. Why not see if you can get a letter and what they'll give you to stay with me?" I was in agreement because I was tired of the running around and parole was on me to find some place stationary.

The whole time I was on parole I had 3 parole officers and all of them were very, very kind. I used to invite them in for breakfast. They used to come at 5 in the morning and I was like, "Come on in. I got eggs on the stove! You want some coffee?" With my first parole officer, it got so that I would open the door and automatically she'd say, "No, Miss, no coffee." One time my children were home and I had changed parole officers and the new P.O. came with his partner. They had their shields showing and their guns were visible, not out, just visible. My son opened the door and he said "Mom, the cops!" When I went to door, I saw that it was just Mr. Bergen. This was the part that I had forgotten. This was my son's last memory of me -I was arrested and spent 24 hours in the bullpen and when I got back home, ACS had taken my children away- so I asked my parole officer to introduce himself to my children. He said, "I'm not taking your mom nowhere. Your mom's a nice lady. I've just come to see how she's doing."

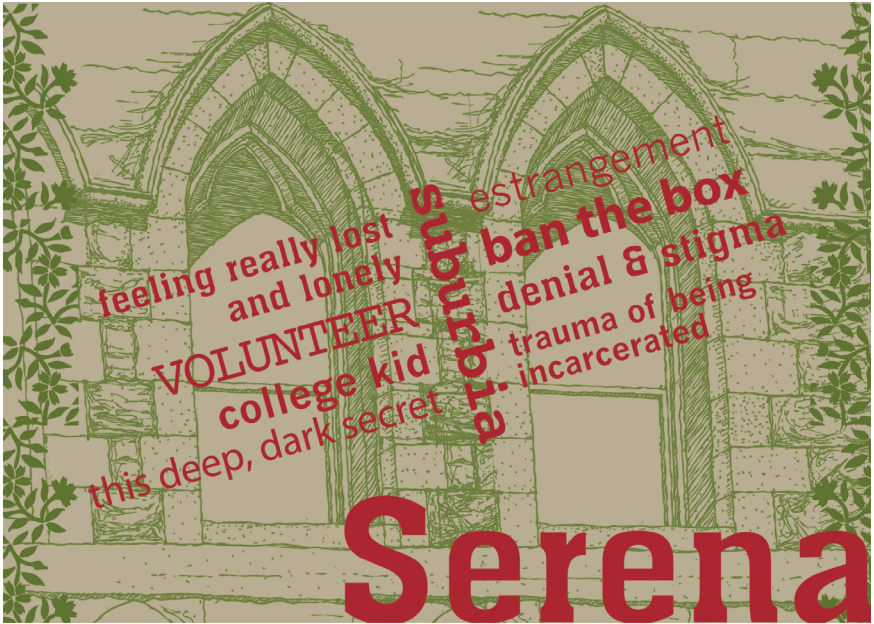
I never really wanted to get into a relationship just to have housing because I had so much stuff going on. I really needed a safe haven, a place I could call my own.

At a point in time, I finally moved in with my old man. My parole officer asked me, "How's that going for you?" I said I don't particularly like it because I don't want to get into a relationship. This man had a one-bedroom apartment. Where am I sleeping? In the bed with him! I didn't want that. She said, "Well then I think you need to make some other arrangements." I knew I did but where am I going? Anything that I find doesn't qualify because HASA's not paying that kind of rent. It's like standing in the middle of 125th Street with a bag in your hand not knowing which way to go. Everybody's going somewhere and doing something except you. The end of the day comes and you're so without, and you have a headache, and you didn't do anything to get a headache. You're so depressed that it just moves you to tears. That's how I was for weeks. The motivating factor that kept me going in all of this was my children. If it had been just me, I would have slept on the park bench and not cared. I would have taken a chance getting violated.

"I never really wanted to get into a relationship just to have housing because I had so much stuff going on. I really needed a safe haven, a place I could call my own."

Right now I'm in Brooklyn in East New York and I want to go back to the Bronx. That's home for me. My children are adults now. I'm still with my gentleman friend but I choose not to live with anybody. I needed to get back with my kids. I needed to find out who they were. They needed to find out who I was. It looks great now because I have safeguarded my future. I'm still working towards going where I would like to be though. In the last 2 years I put in 20 applications for housing and got 5 responses. I've been on 4 of those lottery interviews. I'm waiting for 3 of them to respond.

I know this is going to sound corny, but have faith. You gotta do the next right thing. You can't let somebody say you can't do something because of their experience. You have to have that drive. You have to know that if you want it bad enough your energy and determination is going to see you through. Put your faith first and know that your higher power is going to see you through it no matter what.



I'm from a small suburban town in Suffolk County. I was 19 when I went upstate for about 3 years. Actually, I did 6 months in the county jail, then out on bail, then back and forth to court for about a year, until I was finally sentenced. So, I'd served 6 months and I had another 2 and a half years to go, which I did at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility. It was my first and only time in trouble.

When I was released from Bedford, I could go wherever I wanted. I just had to find an address. The facility had a pre-release program but it covered stuff like how to write a resume and how to answer a question on a job application about a felony conviction, not information about housing. I was 21 or 22 when I came home and I really didn't know to ask for help. My case involved family-related domestic violence. I had never been in a shelter, I didn't do drugs, and I didn't have a history of going in and out of prison, so I wasn't eligible for programs.

My mom was in a mental hospital. I was estranged from my dad, and my younger sister lived in another state and was trying to take care of herself. I got visits from other family and friends, including a woman from the county jail I became friends with who worked in the clergy office as a volunteer. She stayed in touch with me while I was at Bedford, visiting, writing, sending money and clothes. She said if you don't have anywhere to go when you get home, I'm from an area that you're comfortable with, you can come stay with me.

“I had nowhere to go, so why not go to college?
I’ll have a place to live. But it was actually not good
for me at all...I had this deep, dark secret.”

I really thought that if I moved in with this woman and her family I could just find my way. I was in denial about the fact that my life had changed. I saw myself as this college kid who grew up in a pretty decent home, and I thought that I would return to my suburban neighborhood and put it all behind me, just fit back in, go to college, and become a psychiatrist. Anyway, I stayed with this woman, even though I wasn’t really ready. I was dealing with depression and major anxiety—feeling really lost and lonely in the world. Also, the woman’s husband was being really inappropriate with me. I loved her, she was wonderful, but he started making sexual advances towards me, and I couldn’t tell her because she was giving me the world. Since the husband was increasingly making me uncomfortable, I decided to move up the time to go to college, so I only stayed with them a few months.

It almost makes me want to cry when I think about how hard I struggled all by myself. I had a terrible parole officer—she was really mean and punitive. She picked on me, showed up in the middle of the night to harass me for no reason. She never found anything wrong, never suggested any resources for me for housing, support services, or therapy. She felt like she had to treat everybody rough. I really think that she couldn’t understand how I ended up in prison. I was in prison with 2 to 3 hundred people who are mostly from urban areas—I only met a handful of people who were from my area. A lot of the women were lucky in a sense because they had people that they knew from their neighborhood who also happened to be in prison. Even the folks who do advocacy work on Long Island said I should go into New York City where there are meetings and resources.

In college I lived in the residential dorms. This was new to me too. That dorm was my home since I had no “home” to go to on breaks. Everyone else had families to go to, some kind of grounded support. I had an uncle who helped me some—he bought me sheets, sneakers, took me shopping for school, stuff like that, but he didn’t have an extra bedroom for me. It was really lonely, so I got involved in everything at school—the history group, outreach to Bedford, doing extra credit in class. I made friends too. But I had underlying emotional issues from being traumatized and incarcerated that I hadn’t fully dealt with and they kept surfacing. I disclosed my incarceration to the teacher who was in charge of the Bedford project and she actually wasn’t very nice to me! It was weird. There was one other girl at school who I knew from the inside, so I would try to talk to her. We’d whisper about being in Bedford like it was a secret. She didn’t tell people either. It was weird, awkward, and really, really hard.

I actually think that going to college and living there was the worst choice I could have ever made at the time. Everyone thought it would be a good thing because I had nowhere to go, so why not go to college? I'll have a place to live. But it was actually not good for me at all. My roommates were sweet and would include me in stuff, but I had this deep, dark secret. I felt this stigma and this terrible sense of shame and guilt. I felt like I had fallen so far from this straight-A college kid with all of these dreams for my life. So when I met this guy and he became my boyfriend, I moved in with him. It was like a breath of relief. We dated for 6 months and then got married. He was also looking for his place in the world—he was on his own, no family support, a crazy mother, looking for somebody to have a life with, because he'd had nothing too. So I got a job and withdrew from school.

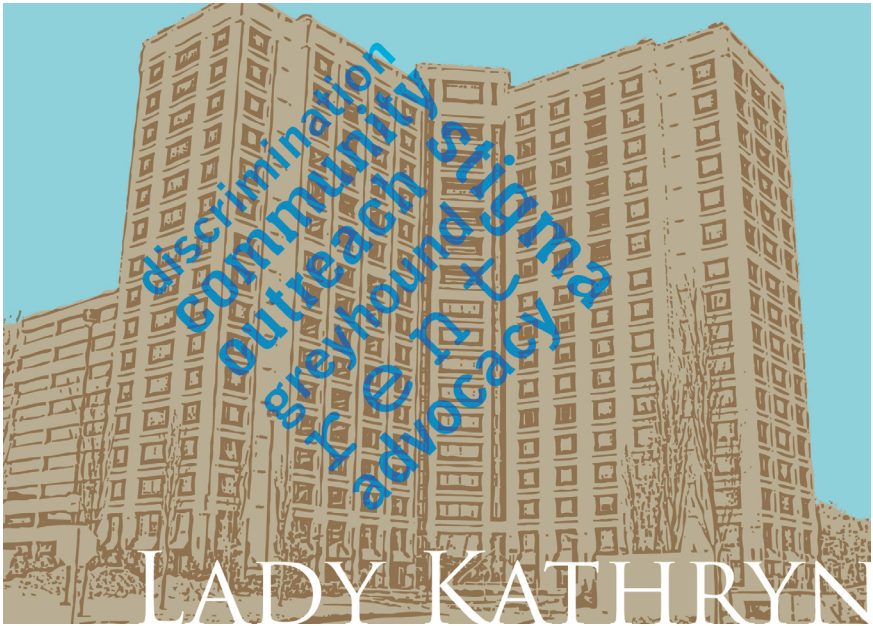
This is the thing about not having housing. I don't think I would have gotten married or ended up living in the lady's house and being victimized by her creepy husband if I had a place of my own. I would have been better off going into a shelter and applying for housing, accessing other resources, and really growing as a person, you know? People from New York City and returning to New York City are lucky in my view because there are more resources and they are returning to a place where there's a subway to get places. In a suburban neighborhood, you know people, you know their ways, you understand how to exist there—yet there're no resources and you have to pretend that your prison time never existed. You're living this double life where you can't actually be truthful about what your life has been like.

“There is this trauma of being incarcerated, and the identity shift, going from incarcerated where your whole identity is based on how people treat you, and then coming home.”

There is this trauma of being incarcerated, and the identity shift, going from incarceration where your whole identity is based on how people treat you, and then coming home. I had a lot of post-traumatic stress disorder. I would be standing in line somewhere waiting for somebody to start yelling at me, “Get back over here.” I felt like I was constantly on edge waiting for the next thing to go wrong. I have a lot of skills and I've actually had a couple jobs where I left the question about the felony conviction box blank. I didn't say yes or no. And I was eventually let go, even though I was doing great, because I never filled in the box. They said that was lying, which I didn't know. I was like how do I find a job that is a skilled job? As soon as they ask about the felony and I say yes I'm done. Eventually my dad's friend, who knew my background, gave me a job working at an insurance company doing claims, so I could put that on my resume. I'm a huge advocate of the “ban the box” campaign, because the felony question is discrimination. Even

when jobs say they don't discriminate, you can't prove that they don't. I don't feel guilty or ashamed anymore. I've made peace with myself and my life. Nobody's going to make me feel bad because I went to prison. My values, my sense of self, my identity, and my self-image has changed, and it took a long time—10 years. For women going home to suburban areas near New York City, I think it takes an added effort. You have to be willing to travel to the city. You have to be willing to go to groups, meetings, do volunteer work, and schlep in, take the train. Maybe it takes you 2 hours to get into the city, but so what? Do it once a week. If I could give advice to my 22-year-old self, I would have said, "Go and volunteer 1 day a week. Don't be afraid of it." On Long Island you've got a conservative, Republican base where it's just a big awful shame to be formerly incarcerated. If you're really religious, maybe you'll tell your church. They take pity on you. There is more support for drug offenders—like drug court. In Nassau County there is a reentry task force, which was a life saver for someone I know. They found her a place to live, got her caseworker who helped her, and held her hand in finding a place to live.

Before you come home, the more knowledge you have, the better. I didn't realize this at the time—that I could have asked for information or could have looked in the prison library, or asked other people who'd been in and out of prison. They know the deal. They know every resource. I also say volunteer, even if it's at a local shelter. Maybe the shelter doesn't really help formerly incarcerated people, but because they're a service provider, they'll somehow end up helping you, because every person's an individual. But I don't think you can go back to life as usual after being through the trauma of prison.



I was a homemaker before I was incarcerated and my husband took care of the housing situation. In prison, no one really had discussions with me about my aftercare except for someone from an outside program that provides family violence services, and it wasn't the main topic we discussed. She gave me a list of options and services I could engage once I was released. As far as sitting down and structuring a plan for housing, no. In all honesty, I wanted to just let the world be. I made several attempts at suicide.

The process of being released was terrifying. The bus was actually supposed to get to New York City at 11 p.m. but it broke down and by the time the other bus came to get us and we got to the city, it was 3:14 a.m. in the morning and no one was there. I was hoping that anyone would have been there. I had a token and some money—I think it was \$20, \$22—something in a little yellow envelope. I took that and got a beer. I drank it real fast so I got a buzz. Then I went and got another one. By my fourth beer, I was a little inebriated. This one guy was following me all around the train station and he made me scared, so I threw a bottle at him. When the cops came, I started wrestling and acting stupid, so they took me to the psych ward.

When I was released from the psych ward, I went to a "three-quarter" house in Brooklyn. It was kind of shabby. Then I went to a home owned by a nurse I met who was letting homeless people rent out rooms. After that, I pretty much just bounced around and around. If relatives would let me stay with them, I'd stay a

"I heard 'first come, first served basis' several times after filing out housing applications, providing personal documentation, getting letters signed by my P.O., and going through proper procedures. Nobody's gonna blatantly say, "You're a felon."

few days. But as far as my own housing, I did not have housing. The first year home was the hardest, because I was just so disconnected. I couldn't really comprehend what I had done. Drugs kept me in a state of fog all the time. I was just clueless and spinning my wheels.

A landlord once asked me what I was arrested for. I told him domestic violence and he said, "You were beating somebody up?" I said, "No, I was victimized by my husband." At first, the person was very warm and receptive until I told him I killed my husband in a domestic violence dispute. Then he said to call him in a couple of days. I called and he told me that he rented the apartment to someone who came with the money right then and there, first come, first served basis. I heard "first come, first served basis" several times after filling out housing applications, providing personal documentation, getting letters signed by my parole officer, and going through proper procedures. Nobody's gonna blatantly say, "You're a felon. You killed someone. We're not gonna rent to you. We don't want to rent to you." At one point I was staying with a cousin in the projects on Brooklyn Avenue in Flatbush. One day she said, "Listen, I got this very mysterious letter. It isn't signed by anyone, but the letterhead on it is from the building management. It says, 'You have an unwanted guest in your apartment. Must be removed immediately.'" I don't blame her. She had 3, 4 kids. I would throw me out too if my housing was in jeopardy. So, that was another way I felt discriminated against because of what I'd done.

My children were 13, 19, and 20. Before I was arrested, I was their primary caretaker and I planned to get them back. But my sister made it crystal clear that as long as she had breath in her body, I would never be around my children again, and she almost made that happen. I chased her over half of the world. Every time I got a location, she would move someplace else. I spent 4 or 5 years just trying to get a look at my children to see how they were doing.

I don't think my parole officer really thought very much of me. She always had this look of disdain when I came around, like she was always agitated by me. That's how she treated all of us. She always gave off the vibe that we got a second chance and didn't deserve it. I wasn't made aware of my parole mandates until I made a few mistakes and I was almost violated, but when the district attor-

ney did a bit of investigation on my behalf, which was unusual, they said, "Well, if she honestly didn't know...." They were supposed to give me a list of my stipulations and curfew. I never received all that. I was just told, "You gotta do this, this, this, and this." One time I left the city to go to a family funeral in New Jersey. I wasn't aware that you had to ask somebody to go to a funeral. After that, the parole officer started coming to everything, including the program I was in at the time. No call, she would just show up and say, "Oh, I have to take your urine right now." It was like she was pushing me to fail so she could violate me. I probably wouldn't have spent that first year sleeping here and there and running the streets if she had said, "Well, you need to go to a shelter." or "Go here." I wish I had known about the stigma against people who have violent felonies. We all make mistakes and fall short. Everyone should be held accountable for their actions, but don't take one isolated incident and drag a person down that same path for the rest of their life.

"Everyone should be held accountable for their actions, but don't take one isolated incident and drag a person down that same path for the rest of their life."

About the third year, I started to get some clarity because I went to get clean. I went to a program and lived there for 18 months. I was the only female with 46 other dudes. When I completed that program, they found me an apartment. I was the first female there that actually did everything I needed to do to complete the program. A lot of other females went there, but they had behavior problems, and then you got all those guys running around. I was like, "Look, we can be friends. We can be like sister and brother, but I'm not here looking for a man, a boyfriend, or a partner." I was the first real success story.

I'm in a family shelter now. It's a fairly new community-based program through HASA. I am HIV-positive and co-infected with hep C. When I first moved in the neighbors were like, "Oh, she got the monster." So I made it my business to go around and introduce myself to everyone in the building. If you're unaware and uninformed, then you're scared of it. I had to make some people aware, yes, I do have the virus, but as long as we don't exchange for transmission, you'll be fine. Then people started asking me about getting tested and things like that. I saw this as a positive thing—that I was able to take my pain, share it, and help other people.

You can have all the programs in your life, all the good people, and all the support, but at the end of the day, if you have nothing with your name on it and no key to it, you're still homeless. Once you're homeless, anything is bound to happen, and 9 times out of 10, recidivism comes into play. When you can't find decent housing, going back to prison starts to look kinda good. At least that way,

you've got 3 hots and a cot.

When I think about home, I get a smile on my face and warm hug inside. I know I'm gonna be happy when I reach that destination 'cause I know the people on the other side of that door love me, I need them in my life, and I love them. It's that space where I can go, take that sigh of relief—I'm home, I'm safe, and it's mine. I want to advocate for women. Women have not only been victimized by their partners, but re-victimized by the system because the system won't let us forget. You have to be diligent in your housing search. Don't let nothing deter you. And keep your head up. Know that everyone, even you, deserves affordable, safe, decent housing.

Getting Started...

People with criminal convictions face obvious and not-so-obvious forms of discrimination in looking for housing and other services. The resources below are to help you understand your rights as a person with a criminal conviction and get legal assistance if you need it.

“KNOW YOUR RIGHTS” INFORMATION

Client Rights and Responsibilities Desk Guide (74 page guide)

This guide helps families with children who are living in a New York City shelter to understand the standards and expectations within the family shelter system. To obtain a copy, write to:

New York Department of Homeless Services

Division of Family Services

33 Beaver Street, 16th Floor

New York, New York 10004

Tel: (212) 361-0636

Fax: (917) 637-7340

www.nyc.gov/dhs

Coalition for the Homeless (online resource)

The Coalition for the Homeless offers a comprehensive online “document library” of court documents, state regulations, city policies, program guidelines, and additional information for homeless and other low-income New Yorkers, as well as for advocates and service providers. They include: *Know Your Rights – Single Adult and Family Shelter Rights and Illegal Boarding Houses – Know Your Rights*. They also have an online listing for where to find a hot meal, and an online resource guide for finding community resources. To obtain these documents, you must access a computer and go to their website at <http://www.coalitionforthehomeless.org/pages/advocacy-document-library>

Denied Housing by a Prospective Landlord? Tenant Screening Reports (fact sheet)

This fact sheet explains what a tenant screening report is, how landlords use them, and what you can do if you are denied an apartment based on one. To obtain a copy, write to:

Neighborhood Economic Advocacy Development Project (NEDAP)/

New Economy Project

176 Grand Street, Suite 300

New York, New York 10013

Tel: (212) 680-5100

Fax: (212) 680-5104
www.nedap.org

Fair Housing, It's The Law (guide)

This guide explains the provisions under the New York City Human Rights Law that prohibit discrimination in housing, employment and public accommodation in New York City. The guide contains a list of its offices in each of the 5 boroughs, as well as a list of helpful numbers for addressing issues such as heat and hot water complaints, building violations, complaints in city-owned housing, and questions about rent-regulated apartments. To obtain a copy, download at www.nyc.gov/cchr or write to:

New York City Commission on Human Rights
40 Rector Street
New York, New York 10006
Tel: (212) 306-7450
En Español: 1-877-662-4886
TDD: (212) 306-7686
Fax: (212) 306-7589
www.nyc.gov/cchr

How to Get Section 8 or Public Housing Even with a Criminal Record: A Guide for New York City Housing Authority Applicants and Advocates (booklet)

This booklet explains whether your convictions or illegal drug use might make you ineligible for public housing and how you can make the best case to get the New York City Housing Authority to admit you anyway. To obtain a copy, write to:

Legal Action Center
225 Varick Street, 4th Floor
New York, New York 10014
Tel: (212) 243-1313
Toll free: 1-800-223-4044
Fax: (212) 675-0286
www.lac.org

Know Your Rights: Homelessness (fact sheet)

This brochure explains your legal rights if you are homeless. To obtain a copy, write to:

The Legal Aid Society
199 Water Street
New York, New York 10039
Tel: (212) 577-3300
Fax: (212) 509-8761
www.legal-aid.org

NYC Financial Justice Hotline

Tel: (212) 925-4929

A free information, legal advice and referrals for low-income New York City residents run by NEDAP/New Economy Project; if you live outside of New York City, do NOT call the hotline —instead see www.lawhelp.org or www.naca.net for information and referrals

Out of Sight NOT Out of Mind: Important Information For Incarcerated Parents Whose Children Are In Foster Care (booklet)

This booklet provides incarcerated parents with important information about the child welfare system and about your rights and your responsibilities towards your child in foster care. To obtain a copy, in English or Spanish, write to:

Children of Incarcerated Parents Program (CHIPP)

NYC Administration for Children's Services (ACS)

150 William Street, 4th Floor

New York, New York 10038

Tel: (212) 487-8631

Fax: (212) 487-8574

Picture the Homeless (various publications)

This is an organization that has several "know your rights" publications for the homeless, including *ACDS (Adjournments In Contemplation of Dismissal)*, *Arrest Without A Warrant*, *Civil Rights*, *Fingerprinting 101*, *What To Do If You Are Stopped By The Police*, *Voting Rights of the Homeless*, and *Loitering 101*. To obtain a copy, write to:

2427 Morris Avenue

Bronx, New York 10468

Tel: (646) 314-6423

PictureTheHomeless@att.net

New York State Parole Handbook: Questions and Answers Concerning Parole Release and Supervision

New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision
This handbook contains answers to questions about being under parole supervision in New York State. To obtain a copy go to: <https://www.parole.state.ny.us/pdf/handbook-nov2010.pdf>

New York State Office of Probation and Correctional Alternatives: Frequently Asked Questions

New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services

<http://www.criminaljustice.ny.gov/opca/faq.htm>

This link will connect you to a list of frequently asked questions and answers concerning probation or correctional alternatives

SRO Tenants: Know Your Rights (fact sheet)

This fact sheet explains your rights as a resident in Single Resident Occupancy (SRO) housing. To obtain a copy, write to:

MFY Legal Services, Inc.
299 Broadway, 4th Floor
New York, New York 10007
Tel: (212) 417-3705
Fax: (212) 417-3891
www.mfy.org

Three-Quarter House Residents: Know Your Rights (fact sheet)

This fact sheet explains your rights as resident in a three-quarter residence. To obtain a copy, write to:

MFY Legal Services, Inc.
299 Broadway, 4th Floor
New York, New York 10007
Tel: (212) 417-3705
Fax: (212) 417-3891
www.mfy.org

LEGAL ASSISTANCE

Bronx Defenders

860 Courtlandt Avenue
Bronx, New York 10451
Tel: (718) 838-7878
www.bronxdefenders.org

Provides legal and supportive services to help individual and families dealing with challenges due to involvement the criminal justice system

Legal Action Center

225 Varick Street, 4th Floor
New York, New York 10014
Tel: (212) 243-1313
Toll free: 1-800-223-4044
Fax: (212) 675-0286

Provide legal help to people with histories of addiction, HIV/AIDS, or criminal records

MFY Legal Services, Inc.

299 Broadway, 4th Floor
New York, New York 10007
Tel: (212) 417-3700

Provides civil legal help to the low-income; they do not provide direct representation in criminal cases

**Neighborhood Economic Advocacy Development Project/
New Economy Project**

176 Grand Street, Suite 300

New York, New York 10013

Tel: (212) 680-5100

Fax: (212) 680-5104

Hotline: (212) 925-4929

www.nedap.org

Provides help on financial issues affecting the low-income, especially in communities of color; has a helpline, community legal clinic, and self-help/know your rights material

Sylvia Rivera Law Project

147 West 24th Street, 5th Floor

New York, New York 10011

Tel: (212) 337-8550

WALK-IN: 1PM-5PM, THURSDAY

Toll Free: 1-866-930-3283

Fax: (212) 337-1972

info@srlp.org

www.srlp.org

Legal services and advocacy for gender-non conforming individuals

Urban Justice Center-Mental Health Project

123 William Street, 16th Floor

New York, New York 10038

Tel: (646) 602-5644

Fax: (212) 533-4598

www.urbanjustice.org

Legal advocacy for people with mental health diagnoses and their families

Chapter 4

Living in Residential Treatment



Currently, I am living at an alternative-to-incarceration drug treatment program. I was in jail at Rikers Island for 6 months after being convicted of selling a controlled substance. I had never been incarcerated before. At Rikers, I was not given resources or information about housing and no one came to talk to me about where I was going to live or the issues I would face when returning to my community. I was apprehensive about leaving jail because I was going to a drug program and I did not know what to expect.

I was offered a drug program in place of a 4½ to 9 sentence. This was due to changes in New York's drug laws. Choosing a 6-month drug program instead of going to prison upstate was an option for me as a first-time drug offender. One day I went to the law library where I was given an article. It said that if it is my first drug offense and I had a substance abuse problem that I could request a substance abuse program. When I read that, I reached out to a program and did a telephone interview. Later, they sent me an acceptance letter which I copied and sent to the court. In my letter to the judge, I explained that I sold drugs to support a drug habit. When I appeared before the court, the judge stated that he was very impressed by my wording. I explained to the judge that I met with my lawyer and the district attorney, but the district attorney was adamant that I not

get a drug program because my sale was to undercover police at two different times, so they felt this was like a business. But selling wasn't my business, my addiction was my business. I was the middleman. The drug program came and got me from court and I went right to the program.

My wake up call was the cuffs. I had been in drug programs before but I had never been arrested. When I was arrested I said, "I can never do this again." In Rikers I got to see people that were way older than me—old timers doing this for 15, 20 years. I don't want that to be my story. If I am going to do something for 20 years I want it to be something I can put on my resume. The thought of being in jail was crazy for me. I would wake up sometimes and say, "Is this what you have decided to do with your life?"

The one thing that has come out of this whole situation is coming back into the family fold. This was not was not my first program, so they had heard this all before. I have been taking little steps and my family has been right there. My son is 5 years old and has lived with my aunt before my incarceration. Due to my addiction, my parental rights were terminated and my aunt adopted him. She is super, super hard on me—harder than the system could be. My parental rights were terminated through an open adoption, so I have the option of trying to come back into my son's life on a continuous basis. When ACS (Administration for Children's Services) first placed him with her and I wasn't too far-gone, she would let my son come and spend the weekends with me. She always tells me, "Sharmaine, that's your son and no one can take him from you, but I need you to be more stable...." At first I was angry, but I wasn't thinking about my son when I was doing what I was doing. I must say my aunt is doing a damn good job with my son. He's in Catholic school, goes to karate, on his little play dates, and it's good for him. Recently, my aunt let me see my son. The biggest part of this was that he knew that I was his mother. He knows who I am. I send him a card every week. I call him maybe once every other week. I'm not rushing because I have to make sure I can deal with the little emotional things that he may go through when it is time for me to leave or the questions he has. It's okay for me to work on me now because I know he's going to come along eventually.

Before I was incarcerated I had my own apartment in the projects, but due to my addiction, eventually I was evicted. I just didn't go to the housing hearings—played it out as long as I could knowing that eventually they were going to kick me out. I'm actually supposed to leave the program next month and I have no clue where

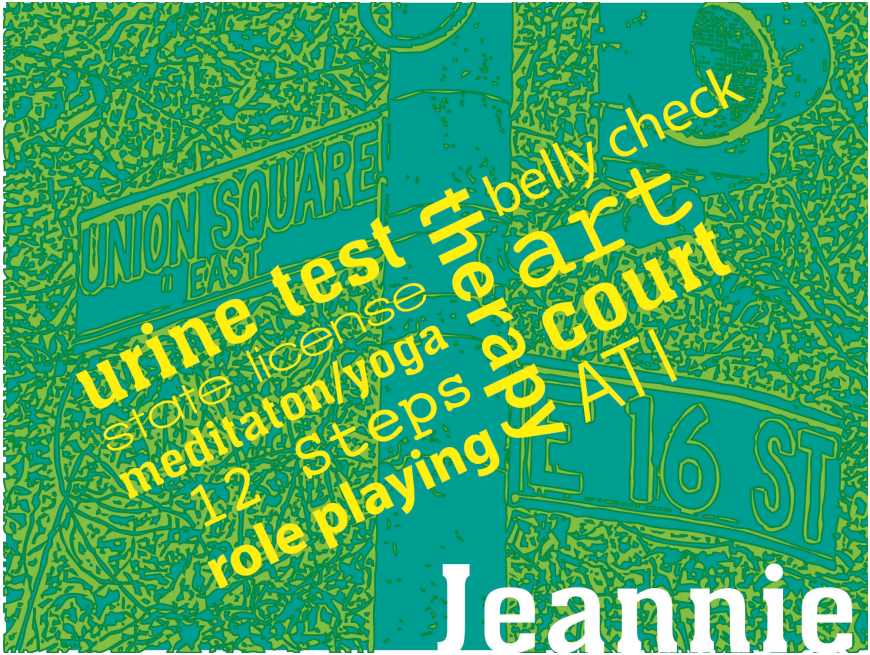
"I was apprehensive about leaving jail because I was going to a drug treatment program and I did not know what to expect."

“I have to take gradual steps into independent living. I can’t just jump into it because that may be overwhelming for me.”

I’m going. Someone was supposed to be helping me find housing but she was terminated. They send everyone to this one housing place in the Bronx and I’m hearing from other residents that it is like another treatment program—rules, regulations, groups—but I’m not trying to be in treatment forever. When I say I’m not trying to be in treatment all the time, I mean I’m not trying to sleep in a bunk bed in a room with another person and sign in and sign out for the rest of my life. In a perfect world, I would be going into an apartment. I could even deal with three-quarter living. I have to take gradual steps into independent living. I can’t just jump into it because that may be overwhelming for me. I know it’s one day at a time and that’s how I’m taking it. Some days it’s not one day a time, its 5-minute blocks at a time. Fortunately, my program will not put me out if I do not have a place to go. They give us \$150.00 and we have to take half of that and put it into a client savings account. We are expected to budget on \$75.00 a month, which includes MetroCards and personal stuff. Once you get your first public assistance check you’re expected to be totally independent. When I go out into the community I can go on my own. Sometimes I buy 10 subway rides on my MetroCard because I may not go out every day. Even still, it gets hard.

I report to the court once a month. I just got transferred to a drug treatment court and I have mixed feelings about that because I am 6 months into my treatment program with one judge and I’ve kinda built a rapport with the judge. This is the judge that my letters of support went to, who knows what I’m doing, and what I’m trying to accomplish. This new judge doesn’t know anything about me and I doubt the judge is going to take the time to read my whole case file.

What keeps me at my program is this—where am I gonna go with \$40.00 and a bus ticket? I have a pending felony. If I leave the program or if I decide I want to go back to jail as opposed to staying in the program, the felony will hit the books. So I have to complete my basic program, find employment, and complete after-care, then my case will be dismissed. Get as much information as you can. If you know when you are coming home, contact as many agencies as you can so you can have a plan once you step from behind those walls. Utilize whatever opportunity in whatever areas that you can. Even if you get the same information from different places at least you got the information.



I was in jail because I relapsed and the judge sent me to Rikers. I was released on my own recognizance but relapsed again and the judge put me into residential treatment. ATIs are exactly what the letters stand for—Alternative To Incarceration.

Being in an ATI is definitely not as restrictive as being in jail or in prison but you still have to follow all the rules and your whereabouts need to be accounted for at all times. If I was an hour late returning to the program, they had the option of not allowing me into the building and then calling the treatment court where a warrant would be placed for my arrest. So, they're providing an opportunity for getting your life in order, going to school, going to training, working and stuff like that, which is definitely more liberal than being locked up in prison or jail.

I've been in residential treatment for 10 months now. The structure is helpful. I think that when you're in prison and someone's always telling you what to do and where to go, to then just be thrown into society could be completely chaotic and crazy for an individual. It makes some people want to go back to prison because they can't handle all the pressures. With treatment facilities, they really do want to empower women. I say all the time, "It sucks and I hate living here." But in reality, they really want to help. The program I'm in is like a self-help program. The more you put into bettering yourself and trying to accomplish things, and the more you follow the rules, the more leeway they will give you. They start you off with passes that are 4 hours each on Saturday and Sunday. You do that for a

“I was released on my own recognizance but relapsed again and the judge put me into residential treatment. ATIs are exactly what the letters stand for—Alternative To Incarceration.”

couple of weekends. Then you get 6 hours for a couple of weekends—then it's 8...then 10. Now that I'm being discharged, I get 12 hours and overnight passes. Sometimes I would go to the movies or go see a play or go have lunch with a friend or go to yoga—things that I can't do during the week—to try to become more acclimated to being normal. They also have resume specialists come in to do mock interviews with us, teach us how to do cover letters, and how to fill out an application when it asks you if you have a felony or misdemeanor charge. It's a small group of women in the class working together. You stay in that group until you find a job. They let you do your own job searching. When I did my job search, I hardly went to any of the places that they told me to because I knew I wouldn't mind working as a barista. But they wouldn't let me go do my original business as a massage therapist because it's run on a cash basis and they weren't sure how to let me make appointments because you're not allowed to have cell phones. The program is responsible for you, so they have to be able to track your movements. It's easier for them if you have a job where you show up and then you return to the program.

For the most part a program will try to empower you, but then there's always that twist that they put on things to say, “Well, that's how life is.” For example, my therapy is downtown and I go to meditation in Union Square, so I used to go from therapy and just walk up to Union Square and to meditation. My counselor let me do that for a few weeks and then she said no. She wouldn't sign off on my itinerary. It's called a “belly check” to see how you're going to react when you are being told no. When you get towards the end of treatment, they start pushing, trying to push your buttons to see how you react, because in the real world you don't always get told “yes.” Now, I can take a step back and be like, “Oh, okay, I understand what they're doing. That makes sense.” But some people don't get it. Everybody has different levels of understanding and awareness. Some folks leave treatment. They can't take it.

I have my own apartment in Brooklyn that I have been maintaining for the past 10 months. I had to fight to keep it because the court told me that after 9 months of being at my program they didn't think they were going to let me move back there since I did drugs in my apartment. I had a conversation about this with my case manager and the director of the treatment court. I had to explain to them that the apartment was in my name but that my ex-boyfriend has been maintain-

ing the apartment and get a notarized letter saying this. My ex is going to move out of the apartment and he agreed to continue helping me with the bills until I get on my feet in the next 2 to 3 months. I came up with alternative plans in case they wouldn't let me keep my apartment. A friend of mine who has a 3 bedroom apartment that he lives in by himself said I could rent a room from him. So that was plan B. Then the other plan was another friend of mine who has a place where he rents a room up in the Bronx and had 3 other rooms for rent.

You don't have to necessarily go through the program's housing specialist to find housing. They'll let you find your own housing. If you go through the housing specialist typically they put you in a "three-quarter" house because I think that's the easiest thing to do. For example, one of the women from the program is living in a house with a husband and a wife who own the house and they have 4 bedrooms. They rent those 4 bedrooms out to women coming out of programs. The renters have to be out of the house from 9a.m. – 5p.m.—that seems to be the common thread with "three-quarter" houses and "halfway" houses. You usually have to be out between 9 or 10a.m. and you cannot come back to your room until 2 or 5p.m. Some of the houses are for men also. They'll have the men on a certain floor and women on another floor. They also test you with a urine test or the breathalyzer every time you come back, no matter what time it is. This is supposed to be a stepping-stone to help you to be able to work.

I don't think going into a three-quarter house is the best thing to do. Most of the women who were in residential treatment that have completed now come back for aftercare and I've been asking a lot of them, "How is it? How many people are living there? How many people are in your room?" There are some that have good situations, but there are some that are in really unhealthy situations where they're on the top bunk and their roommate is always getting high and drunk and is peeing on the floor in the middle of the night, so when she climbs down from the bed she has to be looking for the pee and the person smells all the time. When you're trying to get your life together that's really not what you need.

I got clean before. I never went into treatment or did AA or NA or worked any of the Steps or did any therapy or anything like that. I don't feel very nervous about it because I've actually worked on things. The biggest trigger I have is my family. Every time I got clean before, I'd be clean for like 2 or 3 years and I would think, "Okay, now I can handle talking to mom and dad again." I would talk to them and within like a month or 2 I would be using heroin again and it would just be complete craziness. I was emotionally and physically abused in my house and I started running away when I was 8. I have worked with my therapist doing this intensive role-playing. It pains me to not speak to certain family members. It's like breaking up with a bad boyfriend or girlfriend. But when it becomes detrimental, you just can't keep going on with it. I'm glad about the way things worked out in my life to a certain extent because I have been taking care of myself pretty much since I was 13 and moved out of my parent's house when I was 16. I've always had

“I say all the time, ‘It sucks and I hate living here.’
But in reality, they really want to help.”

jobs. I always found my own apartments. I’d love to have a big gigantic loft again. But it’s more like I want a place where I just feel comfortable, safe, and sane, a place where I can just go and be with my cats and my artwork.

I don’t have parole or probation ‘cause I’m in treatment court. I will have to do 3 months of outpatient treatment and then my mandate will be lifted. That’s also why I decided to go into treatment instead of trying to take my case to the Grand Jury or just taking the time. I didn’t want to have a felony on my record. This could have affected my business because I’m in the medical field—for massage therapy you still have to have a state license to practice. I have been very fortunate because I haven’t had any discrimination problems.

Getting Started...

The resources below are to help you access residential substance abuse treatment programs, as well as substance abuse treatment programs that provide help with housing referrals.

The Bridge

168 E. 107th Street

New York, New York 10029

Tel: (212) 663-3000 General Office

Tel: (212) 665-2531 Residential Services

Fax: (212) 663-3181

Residential drug treatment for women with co-occurring mental health disorders and an alcohol or other drug abuse diagnosis

La Casita

United Bronx Parents

834 E. 156th Street

Bronx, New York 10455

Tel: (718) 292-9808

Fax: (718) 665-5778

Comprehensive residential drug-free treatment program for homeless women with children; offers substance abuse services, meals, on-site childcare, educational/vocational services, medical and mental health management, and a broad range of family-based intervention and support

Daytop Village (Manhattan)

500 Eighth Avenue, 3rd Floor

New York, New York 10018

Tel: (212) 904-1500 x208

www.daytop.org

Residential drug treatment program for adults age 18 and over; serves all of NYC; must have substance abuse diagnosis or be on parole

Daytop Village (Bronx)

2614 Halperin Avenue

Bronx, New York 10461

Tel: (718) 518-9007

www.daytop.org

Residential drug treatment program for adults age 18 and over; serves all of NYC; must have substance abuse diagnosis or be on parole

The Educational Alliance

25 Avenue D

New York, New York 10009

Intake Contacts: (212) 780-5475, ext. 4416 or ext. 4409

Residential substance abuse services for women and men over 18; also specialized services and groups for women

820 River Street

Peter Young Housing Industries Treatment

1140 Pacific Street

Brooklyn, New York 11216

Tel: (718) 230-7780

Residential treatment program for women and men

El Regreso Foundation

Women's Residential Treatment Services

141 South 3rd Street

Brooklyn, New York 11211

Tel: (718) 384-6400

Fax: (718) 384-0540

Email: elregreso@aol.com

Residential substance abuse treatment for women; (outpatient) ambulatory treatment for women; bi-lingual substance abuse program serving communities in Williamsburg, Bushwick and Greenpoint of Brooklyn

Greenhope Services for Women

435 East 119th Street

New York, New York 10035

Tel: (212) 996-8633

Fax: (212) 996-8638

Women-only residential drug treatment

Kings County Hospital Chemical Dependency Services

648 Albany Avenue, K-5 Building

Brooklyn, New York 11203

Tel: (718) 245-2635 Administration

Tel: (718) 245-2630 Methodone clinic

A chemical dependency program that offers methadone treatment, comprehensive medical care (including pre-natal, GYN, family planning, psychiatric care), counseling and case management, comprehensive vocational/career/educational services (including computer training, employment readiness, job retention, GED preparation classes), acupuncture, and detoxification; accepts Medicaid, self pay or fee scale payments

Narco Freedom

Intake Department – ask for the *Regenerations* program

401 East 147th Street

Bronx, New York 10455

Tel: (718) 402-5250 (intake)

Fax: (718) 401-9175

Regenerations program is residential treatment for women with children under the age of 9

Odyssey House Family Center

219 East 121st Street

New York, New York 10035

Tel: (212) 987-5100

Offers transitional, residential, temporary, and permanent housing to qualified individuals; insurance is required; must be referred by court, detox or an organization

Queens Village Committee for Mental Health for J-CAP, Inc. (J-CAP)

Admissions Office:

116-30 Sutphin Boulevard

Jamaica, New York 11434

For intake to Reentry Program, call directly at:

Tel: (718) 322-2500

Fax: (718) 322-1883

Admissions hotline: 1-800-216-5227

Residential treatment program; has a reentry program; uses the therapeutic community method

Samaritan Village

Van Wyck (admissions/assessment for all residences)

Residential Treatment Program

88-83 Van Wyck Expressway

Jamaica, New York 11435

Tel: (718) 657-6195

Toll free: 1-800 532-HELP

Residential treatment program for women and men; multiple sites; also has outpatient services

Serendipity II

944 Bedford Avenue

Brooklyn, New York 11205

Tel: (718) 802-0572

Fax: (718) 802-9885

Residential program for women who have been in the criminal justice

system and have a substance abuse problem; uses the therapeutic community method

Women’s Center for Substance Abuse & Wellness at Casa Rita and Midtown

Women In Need, Inc.

391 East 149th Street

Bronx, New York 10455

Tel: (718) 402-0066 (Bronx Casa Rita)

Fax: (718) 402-0260

Detox programs that accepts pregnant women, housing, and outpatient temporary services

SUBSTANCE ABUSE TREATMENT PROGRAMS THAT PROVIDE HOUSING REFERRALS OR ASSISTANCE

Bowery Residents Committee (BRC) Substance Center

131 West 25th Street, 12th Floor

New York, New York 10001

Tel: (212) 533-3281

Substance abuse crisis center; can connect you to housing as well

New York Center for Addiction Treatment Services (NYCATS)

598 Broadway, 2nd Floor

New York, New York 10012

Tel: (212) 966-9537

www.nycats.net

An addiction treatment agency that makes housing referrals as part of their services

Palladia

2006 Madison Avenue

New York, New York 10035

Tel: (212) 979-8800

www.palladiainc.org

A drug treatment program that offers assistance in obtaining housing as part of their services

Chapter 5

Reuniting with Children & Family



I work as a case manager for an organization that provides health care for the homeless, including people from prison. It is a difficult job. Clients spend 90 days in this program and then they have other linkages with substance abuse treatment programs. We also have people who come in from Ward's Island, off the street, or from the different welfare hotels in the city. I want to be able to give them hope like hope was given to me when I didn't think there was any.

You know what I find funny? I assist other people, but it's been difficult for me to be able to get the system to provide services for people like me, the formerly incarcerated. I've found that across the board, when you look at the systems in place, it's a lot harder to find services if you have children. If you're by yourself, there's a bit more breathing room. Look at the shelters for families, for women with children or residential treatment programs for women with substance abuse problems. They are limited.

I was about 20, 22-years-old when I first got arrested. The crimes I committed were felonies, like armed robbery and weapons possession, so I didn't qualify for an alternative to incarceration. When I was paroled, the only place I could go was my parents' house. Anytime it appeared that I wasn't following the rules in my parents' house, they

“Look at the shelters for families, for women with children or residential treatment programs for women with substance abuse problems. They are limited.”

were like, “I’m gonna call the parole officer. You’re gonna get the hell up out of here.” The last time I was arrested, in 2003, it was for assault. My son’s father was choking me and I grabbed a plastic shovel. It was the only way I could get him off me. I went to jail for 45 days. We were legally married and lived in a house that we owned in Brooklyn, but I didn’t sign the papers for the house. So when I was in jail, he packed up all my stuff and put it in storage. He also went to family court and said that I was abusive to him. When I came out of jail, I went to his mother’s house to get my son and he shows me papers saying that he has full custody of the baby, that I was verbally abusive to him and all this stuff because I was using. I wound up sleeping on my sister’s couch.

I remember calling up different agencies because I had the report of the domestic violence, but it said I was the abuser. At family court I told the judge, “Look, I went to jail. He took everything out of the house. He took my jewelry and he pawned it. I need my jewelry. I need whatever money was in the house.” And the judge told him, “Help her find an apartment.” He said he would, but he didn’t.

The only way I found a place to live was to go into a substance abuse program. I wasn’t mandated by the court. They gave me a 90-day period by myself to get acclimated and then I had to go back to court. The judge was like, “Well, I’m not telling you that you have to go to this program. This is of your choice.” And I’m like, “You’re not helping my kid’s father to help me get an apartment. Nobody’s helping me. Where do you want me to take the kid?” After the 90 days, my baby was brought to stay with me in the program. They had a program where they got apartments for their clients, the ones they consider successful, and they paid the rent for 3 years. This was pretty good because I could go to school, find some type of training, do something. The only thing I had to pay was my utilities.

Where these programs put people with substance abuse issues can revert you right back to using. I lived in the Bronx. The area wasn’t great, but I chose it because it was take it or leave it, and I could get into school and look for a job. In the vestibule of my new building, there were wrappers from the cigars and on the first floor they sold crack. The odds were stacked against you. I found that what was more resourceful to me was seeking out women who had been through what I had been through, other women that were formerly incarcerated, former substance abusers, and asking them. If it was left up to the services, it really wasn’t happening.

My son's father was supposed to come get my son on weekends, but he didn't. In the end, I wound up going back to my parents' house. But it got crazy over there and I fell back to using. My son's father reported me to ACS (Administration for Children's Services) and they came. So I had to look for my own housing and rely on the job I had. I was thinking ACS was gonna help me out, but it didn't happen like that. I went to another residential program, but it wasn't one for children. I completed their 18-month program and the 6-month outpatient and here I am. I am still in this process. I got approved for a Section 8 voucher and then I got a letter saying there was no money. Eventually I found a place in Queens, a nice, 3-bedroom apartment. I found the apartment on my own by calling other women who were formerly incarcerated and asking them what to do. My rent is \$1300. I don't get rent subsidies. I don't get food stamps. I'm looking for health insurance because I'm working, but I haven't even applied for the health insurance that my job gives because I can't afford the \$20 or \$30 that they're gonna take out of my paycheck. I also had pre-cancerous cells. I was on Medicaid when I was in the program, but got cut off when I came out. These are the things that women like me have to face.

"My rent is \$1300. I don't get rent subsidies. I don't get food stamps...I haven't even applied for the health insurance that my job gives because I can't afford the \$20 or \$30 that they're gonna take out of my paycheck."

I truly believe from my own experience that the systems in place are not there to help us succeed. The barriers that we have to overcome and the hurdles put us in a state of desperation and hopelessness. We're treated in a demeaning way because we're a mother that lost a child due to substance abuse. We're formerly incarcerated and that file is put in front of whatever worker who's gonna take our case. They look at it and have their preconception of who we are. It's not, "Let me see who the woman is now." I'm grateful to the women that came before me to know that there is a way. It's not an easy way—don't get me wrong. I don't know how many of us are going to be able to make it and get to the other side when the system is not designed to really help us make the transition from jail to residential treatment and back into society.

One thing that I do value about myself is being able to get through things. As women, we never know the resiliency we have until we're put to the test. And it really takes a hunger to wanna get whatever it is we're trying to get. Yes, I've done a lot of things. I'm sure a lot of us have. What matters is right here, right now is that I'm a different person. I know what I want. I want to live a life. I want

to be happy. I want to go to work. I want to come home because there's nothing better than coming home to see my child and the way my child smiles at me. To my son, I am Wonder Woman, Batman, A-Rod. I'm everything. I'm worth something. I didn't believe it for a long time because of all the outside entities, including some of my relatives. I now know that I'm worth something and that I was placed on this earth for a purpose.



I'm from an industrial military town in Virginia and New York looked like the golden beacon of opportunity. I have 2 boys from a relationship when I was 19 with a seriously heroin-addicted older man that liked younger girls. He took care of me because my parents were addicted to crack cocaine and they had 7 other children. Through his addiction, we became co-dependent and began to destroy each other. He ended up being incarcerated for 8 years after the birth of our second child.

I was incarcerated in March 2008. I made the tough decision to allow my children to go to a family member. I only served 7 days—they gave me bail for 2 years straight. When I was released on bail, I got into it with my next-door neighbor and I knew that it was going to be an ongoing thing. I wasn't going to put my kids through that and I wasn't going to deal with that. So I went to my mother's house with my 2 kids. They slept in her house and I slept outside in the car because I couldn't deal with what goes on in her house. Finally a neighbor came over and

"They told me to go apply for social services and asked if I had kids. I said yes but that I didn't have custody. They said, "That will make things really hard. They're not going to give you much."

said, "I know that you're sleeping in a car. Come and clean houses with me in Colonial Williamsburg. You can make some money and then go to the rental office manager. He knows you. You grew up here. He'll give you a place." I did that for a month. Then I got a little telemarketing job and actually ended up being good at it. I made a couple thousand dollars, saved money and went to the rental office. The guy said, "I'll give you a place, but your credit stinks." I wasn't convicted yet, so no criminal record was appearing in the computer systems and I could apply for stuff. He said, "Okay, I'll let you get the apartment on some conditions." First, he recommended that I go to a life coaching education forum. The second was that I go to consumer credit counseling so that I could get some debt assistance. My trial was in April and at my final sentencing hearing, the judge decided to suspend 8 years of the 10-year sentence because he realized I'd never done anything like this before. I had a crappy attorney, so I got a new one. He said that he could do a motion for reconsideration and promised to get me out based on my history and what I'd been doing. And I was able to get home in 90 days.

"While doing Internet searches to find housing I stumbled on a report about reentry. I called the organization and talked to the director who wrote the report and we had this amazing conversation. She e-mailed me the names of all these people."

So, I'm coming out, but I'm homeless. All I had was the car that I bought before my trial. I couldn't keep my townhouse because the conviction was now appearing in the computer records. The rental manager who was so nice to me said, "There's no way the co-op board is going to vote for you to stay." So, I left thinking that there's gonna be a shelter that can take me, but when I called they said there was a waiting list. They told me to go apply for social services and asked if I had kids. I said yes but that I didn't have custody. They said, "That will make things really hard. They're not going to give you much."

After my release, I stayed in Virginia 1 year. I lived in my car for 9 months, including through a blizzard. Finally, I came up on the shelter list. I also applied for college. I called the shelter and told them my start date and I was able to move in. In the meantime, my current boyfriend was doing odd jobs for money to get to New York. He said if anything happens, come to New York. I went from the shelter straight to New York City to my boyfriend's mother's house. She warned us, "Things aren't so stable here. I ain't been working in a long time. You may end up in a shelter here." She also had the crack cocaine addiction and lost custody of all of her children.

My boyfriend and I had a very good relationship until we came to New York. When we got to New York, things got abusive and all the issues between him and his mother and his other family members started to come to a boil. He started acting out with his mother. Then he started being abusive and controlling towards me. I decided to move out of the house. While doing Internet searches to find housing I stumbled on a report about reentry. I called the organization and talked to the director who wrote the report and we had this amazing conversation. She e-mailed me the names of all these people. I had also connected with an organization of formerly incarcerated women and when I told the director about the abuse, she said, you gotta get outta there and that I should call them if I needed help to get away. One day, it got really bad and I called, and she came. She also called a couple of other people. I pressed charges against my boyfriend and they locked him up. I stayed at one of the members' homes for the weekend and then met with the head of a transitional services program for women. Eventually, I connected with a lawyer at a legal program for incarcerated mothers who helped me with the process of getting my kids back.

I've had so many definitions of home in the last years. It doesn't have anything to do with where you go or where you are. It's a state of mind, a state of being. Try to find out whatever information you need. Don't just go off the word, the gossip, the he said/she said. Find out what you need to do, what you can apply for, what you're eligible for, and what you're not eligible for. And don't move where you don't have a true support system. Try to build that or somehow create that, because if you don't, you're gonna be running into a glass wall. Also, have a little faith in yourself, trust yourself, and trust your instincts.

Getting Started...

The resources below will help you find assistance if you are an incarcerated parent, a formerly incarcerated parent, a parent with children in foster care, a parent involved in the family reunification process, or a parent at risk of losing your parental rights.

Brooklyn Family Legal Defense Project

177 Livingston Street, Suite 700

Brooklyn, New York 11201

Tel: (347) 592-2500

Fax: (718) 596-4704

www.bfdp.org

Provides help to low income families with children in the foster care system

Center for Family Representation

40 Worth Street, Suite 605

New York, New York 10013

Tel: (212) 691-0950

Fax: (212) 691-0951

Provides families in crisis with free legal assistance and social work services to help children to stay with their parents safely. Serves only Manhattan and Queens cases

Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP)

East Harlem Neighborhood Center

80 East 110th Street, #1E

New York, New York 10029

Tel: (212) 348-3000

Provides advocacy training and support to parents with children in the foster care system

NYC Administration for Children's Services (ACS) Children of Incarcerated Parents Program (CHIPP)

150 William Street

New York, New York 10038

Tel: (212) 341-4883 or (212) 442-5134

Fax: (212) 341-3398

CHIPP Collect Call Hotline (for incarcerated parents only):

(212) 341-3322 - MON, WED, THU, and FRI, 8:30AM-5:00PM

CHIPP helps facilitate parent-child visits for children in the child welfare system (foster care, preventive and court ordered supervision) whose

parents are incarcerated, and offers resources, training, and technical assistance to service providers in both the child welfare and criminal justice system

NYC Administration for Children’s Services (ACS)

Office of Advocacy

150 William Street, 1st Floor

New York, New York 10038

Tel: (212) 676-9421

Hours of Operation: 9:00a.m. - 5:00p.m., Monday – Friday

Parents’ Rights and Children’s Rights Hotline: (212) 619-1309

The Office of Advocacy assists parents, including incarcerated parents, with children in foster care who are not receiving regular visits with their children, who are dissatisfied with their visits, or feel that the child welfare agency or agency caseworker is not working with them or may be misrepresenting them

Legal Information for Families Today (LIFT)

350 Broadway, Suite 501

New York, New York 10013

Tel: (646) 613-9633

Hotline: (212) 343-1122 (Monday – Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.)

Se habla Español

www.liftonline.org

Provides free legal information about the New York family law issues

**Osborne Association Family Ties/
Family Resource Center and Hotline**

Hotline: 1-800-344-3314

An organization that offers families and friends of people in prison a hotline staffed by formerly incarcerated individuals and family members, providing information, referrals, peer support and counseling, and support groups during incarceration and following release

Osborne Association locations

Brooklyn

175 Remsen Street, 8th Floor

Brooklyn, New York 11201

Tel: (718) 637-6560

Fax: (718) 237-0686

The Family Resource Center is run out of the Brooklyn office only

Bronx

809 Westchester Avenue
Bronx, New York 10455
Tel: (718) 707-2600
Fax: (718) 707-3102

Beacon

380 Main Street, Suite 201
Beacon, New York 12508
Tel: (845) 440-7924
Fax: (845) 440-7435

Poughkeepsie

25 Market Street, 6th Floor
Poughkeepsie, New York 12601
Tel: (845) 345-9845
Fax: (845) 849-0621

Prison Families of New York

40 North Main Avenue, #4
Albany, New York 12203
Tel: (518) 453-6659

A support program for upstate prison families; partners with the Osborne Association

Single Parent Resource Center

228 E. 45th Street, 5th Floor
New York, New York 10017
Tel: (212) 951-7030
Parent line: (212) 951-7030 x231
Fax: (212) 951-7037

www.singleparentusa.com

Provides programs and services for New York City's single parents and their families, including family reunification preparation workshops, single parents in recovery workshops, and single mothers/single fathers support groups; write to them for a brochure

VOLS Incarcerated Mothers Law Project

Volunteers of Legal Services
281 Park Avenue South
New York, New York 10010
Tel: (212) 966-4400
Fax: (212) 219-8943

No general referrals by phone (only inside prison). Provides lawyers for one-on-one legal counseling to mothers with child custody and/or visit

ing issues; they work on site at the city's jail on Rikers Island and at Taconic Correctional Facility and Bayview Correctional Facility; write to them or find them on site

Women's Prison Association (WPA)

Hopper House
110 Second Avenue
New York, New York, 10003
Tel: (646) 292-7740
Fax: (646) 292-7763

Has a Family Preservation Program that provides intensive case management assistance to families at risk for removal of children to foster care due to a mother's drug use; also has a Law Project that provides help to mothers in the criminal justice system who are involved in family court and the child welfare system; WPA's Community Linkage Unit is the single point of intake for access to their various housing and family support programs

Legal Project @ WPA

Works in conjunction with VOLS Incarcerated Mothers Law Project
Contact Ellen Rosenberg
Tel: (646) 292-7729
Email: erosenberg@wpaonline.org

Chapter 6

Keeping the Focus on You



When I was released from Beacon, they gave me a train ticket and \$40. I took the Metro North and had to report to my drug treatment program. The person from the program who came and interviewed me in Beacon, I had done time with her in the 1980s. Now, she was a counselor in charge of outpatient. When I graduated from the program, I ran into my ex as I was about to go into a single occupancy house. We got back together in June. I completed my program in September. On September 1st she rented an apartment and I moved in with her. I took the focus off of me and put the focus on us. My counselor was saying that in the first year of recovery it's best not to get into any relationships but I was like, "I got this. I got this."

It didn't blow up in my face right away. It took 6 years. In those 6 years, I lost my oldest brother, my mother died, and my son's father died. My ex's name was on the lease and she paid the rent. I paid the other bills—Con Ed and the cable—and I bought all of our personals and stuff to wash clothes. Her niece and 2 kids moved in temporarily, but that turned into 6 years. After 6 years she had 3 kids and she didn't pay any rent. I felt like I was renting a f----g room. It started to be very stressful for me and my wife. I'm working in a local college and they have all

“My counselor was saying that in the first year of recovery it’s best not to get into any relationships, but I was like, ‘I got this. I got this.’”

those little set up tables for credit cards. I had like 6 credit cards. Oh my God, we were in debt! The rent was going up and we didn’t have stabilized rent. That was getting stressful.

My ex and I didn’t last long after that. She had to file for bankruptcy, give up the apartment and move into a room. I moved in with my son. If I hadn’t of run into her, I would’ve got into a single occupancy and probably would have winded up with my own apartment. I took it really hard. I went and got me a bag of dope. Then I put all my energy into my son and my grandkids. I hung in there for the next year with my job, but then I just couldn’t take it no more. I had worked for the college facilities for 7 years. I would take messages, do the mail, and enter data into the computer. But due to my addiction I got tired of copping before going to work and I just didn’t go to work.

When I moved in with my son, it was a crazy situation. My son and his wife were fighting. She didn’t take care of the kids, so I took over my grandkids, made sure they took baths every night, made sure their clothes was clean. She was smoking crack and we didn’t know it. Finally, she caught a case and went to jail. My son got stabbed and almost died, so I sent him to Florida. That’s how I was living.

I always went home to my mother, but this time I was determined to stand on my own and be independent. Right now I’m in a program on the lower east side. I volunteered to go into this program. It’s a 6-to-9 month program and I’ve been there for almost a year. I’m loving it. I’m finally back on track, conditioning my mind, focusing on me, and looking for a job. I have to set up some type of outpatient because I have to be busy and stay focused. I’ve already changed people, places, and things. I’m not interested in a relationship no time soon. I’m interested in getting me together. When they tell you not to get into a relationship your first year in recovery, don’t get into a relationship, because that takes the focus off of you. Do not put anyone before yourself. I recommend going to a program because it will plug you into the right things instead of going back home to somebody. You cannot help anyone unless you help yourself first.

I got approved for a scattered site, single occupancy and it made me eligible for Section 8. I had to let people know from the time I walked in the door that I was not going into a three-quarter house. It’s more convenient for them to just send you to a three-quarter house, but I’m not doing that. A three-quarter house is like a shelter. You have to leave from 9 to 3. Suppose I don’t have nowhere to go

“I had to let people know from the time I walked in the door that I was not going into a three-quarter house. It’s more convenient for them to just send you to a three-quarter house, but I’m not doing that.”

that day? And it’s cold. What am I gonna do? That’s not a home. I’m older now. I have aches and pains. And I have hep C. I wanna retire, but I want to be able to stand up on my own 2 feet and be able to pay my own bills. I’m not trying to be rich. I’m just trying to be comfortable and to focus on my grandkids.

It’s very hard, and being that we have been incarcerated, a lot of places don’t even want to deal with us. We really have to fight for what we want and the only way we’re going to get anything is to put the work in. Nothing is gonna get handed to you, nothing. I didn’t have any connections to put me places. I had to fight for what I got and where I am today.



I'm originally from North Carolina, but I was born and raised here in New York. I was convicted of a felony last year. My biggest issues right now are funding to go back to school and housing. I'm living in a non-air conditioned house—I call it the trap house—always busy, busy, all times of the night. And it's too hot to sleep. I sleep outside on the back deck in a chair with the dog. I've worked all my life as a flight attendant. After 9/11, I got displaced, then had a couple of jobs, then relocated to Raleigh, North Carolina.

I had to find a way to provide for me and my daughter. I needed to keep a roof over my head. I've been homeless before—lived in a car—and I didn't want that experience again, so cashing checks was my way out. In New York, I met someone who turned me on to printing travelers checks off the computer in \$100 increments with the seal and everything. To make a long story short, I was out in the Hamptons writing checks, happy-go-lucky, and got caught. My charge was possession of a fraudulent instrument. I had a co-conspirator who had outstanding federal warrants, so I got hit with her charges, even though this was my first offense.

My charge was initially a misdemeanor for \$850. After the fifth day in jail I was offered a deal of 5 years probation if I pled to a felony. So I took a plea. I have 5 years probation which requires me to stay in New York, even though I showed them that I'm a resident of North Carolina. I have a lease, driver's license, ties, everything in North Carolina. They didn't care. I pretty much I got thrown under the

"I'm gonna go see a psychiatrist tomorrow because I'm just beside myself with losing 3 jobs in one week. I just want somebody to talk to because I'm having a lot of issues. I need to vent to somebody."

bus and rolled over. I don't know if they would have prosecuted me to the fullest extent, being that my co-defendant was already a felon and had a rap sheet. I didn't know what they were going to do. I didn't even ask. They were like you can go home if you take this and I took it. I called my niece in Queens and said, "I'm walking home." There was an officer who gave me train fare because I was all the way in the Hamptons and I didn't have any way home. As a matter of fact, they still have my property –my money, my glasses, my hand bag, and my \$300 in cash. I was like, they can keep it. I don't even want to cross the border to go to Nassau County.

Right now, I am looking for appropriate housing. I'm on public assistance and I get \$150. You can't live anywhere on \$150. I also get \$200 in food stamps and Medicaid. Out where I was incarcerated, it's the suburbs. They didn't tell me anywhere to go or anything like that. I'm not familiar with the laws or programs here. I found out everything on the Internet. My probation officer is in Jamaica, Queens. He's pretty fair and he never gives me any problems. I've had one drug test. He can see that I'm very articulate and educated. I'm not going anywhere. I just need help to get over this hurdle. He doesn't have a quarter to get a clue though as far as housing, Section 8, or public housing. I went to a women's advocacy group and an employment organization in Jamaica, Queens. I gave *them* literature to pass along.

Looking back on it, I don't know if staying in jail rather than taking a plea would have helped me. I was out in the Hamptons. It wasn't a cute look. The majority of the girls incarcerated out there are 16 to 20 year-old heroin addicts. I mean they're young, non-Afro-Americans, showing me their tracks. And they knew how to work the system. I don't want no parts of it. All I want is to work, go to school, and put a roof over my head. In my future, I see myself flying as a pilot, as a second officer for a major airline. The training costs though—it's like \$50,000 - \$72,000. I got accepted into flight school, now I just have to get the money up. I had a loan that went into default. I don't know what to do at this point because now I owe \$10,000.

I'm gonna go see a psychiatrist tomorrow because I'm just beside myself with losing 3 jobs in 1 week. I just want someone to talk to because I'm having a lot of issues. I need to vent to somebody. And I need the state to really help me with this. Yes, I understand that what I did is wrong, but how many years am I

"I have my freedom. I have my health. It's not as good as it should be, but I really can't complain. I do have a roof. It's not mine. I don't put my key in the door, but I'm working on it. As long as I can stay motivated and stay in a positive mind frame, which I'm really trying to do."

going to live this one mistake over and over and over and over? Right now, I'm stuck. I haven't done anything for 2 weeks. I haven't looked for a job. I haven't really been out there networking. I attend advocacy meetings so I can have a network. We've all been pushed through the system. I don't care if it's been for 5 days. I have a number. The last time I was in trouble was 11 years ago and it was a misdemeanor. I've had 3 work offers, but being that I have a criminal record, they said, "You can't work here." Even though there are laws that say no one can discriminate due to the fact that you have a criminal record.

My life right now? I have my freedom. I have my health. It's not as good as it should be, but I really can't complain. I do have a roof. It's not mine. I don't put my key in the door, but I'm working on it. As long as I can stay motivated and stay in a positive mind frame, which I'm really trying to do. My daughter is 23 and a law student at North Carolina Central. I still have my apartment in North Carolina. That's for her, so she can keep a roof over her head. There is no dad. It's just me and her. Everybody's story's different and we can only change ourselves.

My notion of a perfect home is putting the key in the door, having central air, and a slice of watermelon from Paisley, South Carolina, because that's where the watermelon patches are.

Make contacts

"I found that what was more resourceful to me was seeking out women who had been through what I had been through."

"Before you get out, the more knowledge you have the better. I didn't realize at the time that I could have asked... or could have looked in the library in the prisons, or asked other people who'd been in and out of prison. Actually, people who've been in and out of prison a couple times, they know the deal. They know every resource."

"I didn't know anything about finding housing. What I did know was that I had to pay close attention to those women who were leaving. Watch what it was that they did."

Ask questions

"Use your discharge planner, use the discharge parole officer because they have the information—but if you don't ask for it, you're not going to get it."

Leave the past in the past

"What I would share with women, your past is your past. You can make a difference."

"Now I can go on with my life and know that I've been traumatized and I don't need to stay stuck in that trauma. It's a way to move past it. Part of that is letting people know you, so they can help you."

"Basically, what you have to do is begin where you are and move forward. Don't try to recapture your lost years. You have to move forward."

Be persistent

"It is difficult to find work. That cannot stop you. Fill out every application you can. Be 100% honest. Get what you need to get to get help."

"It's good to get in with organizations that work with people that's coming out of the system. It's very hard, and being that we have been incarcerated, a lot of places don't even want to deal with us. You really have to fight for it, and the only way you're going to get anything is to put the work in."

Be honest

"And it's okay to say you f_____d up. They expect you to f__k up, but don't try to hide it from them or run from them or they're gonna get ya... It's like breathing to them, you know? And you just gotta be honest. Be honest and open and communicate with them, and build that trust."

Be prepared

"Get as much information as you can. If you know when you are coming home, contact as many agencies as you can so you can have a plan once you step from behind those walls."

"You must have a plan. You have to create this map—even if you don't follow this map step-by-step each day. So you create a list... it will help you stay focused, it will help you stay centered, it will help you day by day. It is your road map to reentry."

Getting Started...

For most people, the community reintegration process and the search for housing is pretty stressful. The resources below are to help you find resources to take care of yourself during this time.

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)

Alcoholics Anonymous offers access to information about the Fellowship and meetings through local Intergroup/Central Offices, answering services and other local service committees. These offices can arrange to have an AA member contact you to share their experiences with AA and help you find and get to your first AA meeting.

For a regional list of New York AA meetings, see www.aa.org, click onto "How to Find Meetings," then click "New York"

Intergroup Association of AA of New York

Tel: (212) 647-1680, (914) 949-1200, TDD (212) 647-1649

Serving Manhattan, Staten Island, Westchester County, with some tri-state regional information

Brooklyn Intergroup of AA

Tel: (718) 851-3039

Central Services Intergroup of Orange County

Tel: (845) 534-8525

Nassau Intergroup of AA

Tel: (518) 292-3040 (24-HOUR)

Queens Intergroup of AA

Tel: (718) 520-5012

Rockland County Intergroup

Tel: (845) 352-1112

Suffolk Intergroup Association

Tel: (631) 669-1124 (24-HOUR)

Sullivan Intergroup Association

Tel: (866) 490-5686

EN ESPAÑOL

Oficina Central Hispana de AA

Tel: (212) 348-2644 – serving primarily NYC

Intergrupo del Area de Brooklyn

Tel: (718) 348-0387

Intergrupo Hispana de Nassau

Intergrupo Hispana de Queens

Intergrupo de Suffolk

Llame la Oficina Central para información en estas locaciones

Bronx Community Recovery Center (affiliated with Phoenix House)

509 Willis Avenue, 6th Floor

Bronx, New York 10455

Tel: (718) 292-5788

Peer support groups, recovery telephone check-ins, community service projects, social events and outings

Casa Atabex Ache

The House of Womyn's Power/La Casa del Poder de la Mujer

471 East 140th Street

Garden Level

Bronx, New York 10454

Tel: (718) 585-5540

Fax: (718) 585-5980

Email: casaatabexache@aol.com

Healing circle for women of color

Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP)

East Harlem Neighborhood Center

80 E. 110th Street, #1E

New York, New York 10029

Tel: (212) 348-3000

Support groups for parents with children in the foster care system

Citizens Against Recidivism

137-58 Thurston Street

Springfield Gardens, New York 11413

Tel: (347) 626-7233

info@citizensinc.org or mdeveaux@citizensinc.org

Offers a 13 week adult anger management program in Queens with a focus on stress management, emotional intelligence and communication skills

Coming Home Program

The Center for Comprehensive Care
St. Luke's Roosevelt Hospital
Morningside Clinic
390 West 114th Street, 3rd Floor
New York, New York 10025
Tel: (212) 523-6500 (appointments)

Provides primary health/medical care services, OB-GYN and women's health, mental health treatment, dental care, case management and social services, legal services, support groups, yoga/massage/acupuncture and more

Howie the Harp Advocacy Resource Center

2090 Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard, 12th Floor
New York, New York 10027
Tel: (212) 780-1400

Peer-led initiative run by Community Access that provides employment resources, advocacy training and peer wellness and coaching to mental health consumers; write to them for more information

Our Journey

P.O. Box 134
New York, New York 11695
Monthly retreats for formerly incarcerated women

Narcotics Anonymous (NA)

Regional hotline: (212) 929-NANA (6262)
For an electronic copy of meeting booklet, go to: www.newyorkna.org

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)

NAMI New York State – Tel: 1-800-950-3228 or (518) 462-2000
NAMI New York City – Tel: (212) 684-3264 **HELPLINE**
Helpline for referrals to services for people with a mental health diagnosis

New York State Hotline for Sexual Assault and Domestic Violence

Tel: 1-800-942-6906
Español: 1-800-942-6908
TTY: 1-800-818-0656
Helpline for victims of sexual assault or domestic violence

Reentry Roundtable

Community Service Society
105 East 22nd Street (at Park Avenue South)
New York, New York 10010
Tel: (212) 614-5306

Monthly meeting for formerly incarcerated persons; includes a speaker on a topic concerning returning home, a free lunch, a resource table, and networking; write to obtain a meeting schedule

Sistas Healing Old Wounds (SHOW)

760 New Scotland Avenue
Albany, New York 12208
Tel: (518) 512-1336 or (518) 915-1351
Email: sistas@showny.org

Albany-based support organization for formerly incarcerated women that assists formerly incarcerated women statewide; has a Facebook page which can be accessed by emailing sistas@showny.org

Second Chance Life Skills Program

106 West 145th Street
New York, New York 10039
Tel: (877) 626-4651 or (212) 690-3070
Email: vp1secondchancecommittee@gmail.com

Program at the National Action Network that teach life skills to formerly incarcerated people to help them with the community reintegration process

STEPS To End Family Violence

Reentry Project
151 Lawrence Street, 5th Floor
Brooklyn, New York 11201
Tel: (212) 437-3500
Helpline: 1-877-STEPS-94
Has a women's reentry support group

**Vera House Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Hotline
(upstate)**

Tel: (315) 468-3260

TTY: (315) 484-7263 (business hours)

24-hour crisis and support line for victims of domestic violence and sexual assault in the Syracuse area

Women's Prison Association (WPA)

Hopper House

110 Second Avenue

New York, New York 10003

Tel: (646) 292-7740

Fax: (646) 292-7763

Point of intake for access to WPA's housing and support programs; support groups include wellness and recovery, anger management and a writer's group

WORTH Support Groups

Women on the Rise Telling HerStory

171 East 122nd Street, Suite 2R

New York, New York 10035-2945

Tel: (646) 918-6858

www.womenontherise-worth.org

Advocacy and mutual support organization for currently and formerly incarcerated women; write to them for a general meeting schedule and support group schedule

Chapter 7

Being an Advocate



Formerly incarcerated women experience consequences that stretch way beyond the prison sentence. These experiences further dehumanize, oppress and demoralize women, especially if they are mothers. If women received preventative services, such as outpatient treatment, higher education opportunities, parenting classes, money management and emotional support, these interventions will prepare women and lead to improved personal success and sustainability.

The first policy priority for me is the public housing ban against formerly incarcerated persons.* The second is the parole regulations that prohibit 2 formerly incarcerated people from living in the same apartment but allowing formerly incarcerated people to live in shelters, half-way houses or "three-quarter" housing. And the third is what happens when both public housing policies and criminal justice policies work together to put women in a bind.

Politicians should know that women are most often the primary caregivers in their families and desire to reunify with their children after they are released. Yet, parole and other mandates often have women spinning their wheels because these mandates are usually unrealistic. Women need supportive, safe housing right away

“Formerly incarcerated women experience consequences that stretch way beyond the prison sentence. These experiences further dehumanize, oppress and demoralize women, especially if they are mothers.”

upon release. They need to have access to their families without fear of negative repercussions. We need more alternatives to incarceration as opposed to more women in prison. We also need to address the challenges of single women with no children who need housing, and create safe alternatives to shelters for these women. Women process their challenges differently than men. Women with children want to come home and be with their children and families. Single women want to have a safe start, whether it is with their family or not. I believe that women in particular should be able to share housing if they are on parole. The cost-sharing and mutual support would help them make a successful transition.

I believe that women need to be as proactive and prepared for release as possible. I suggest that they use the law library and ask informed questions about the resources in their community when talking to pre-release counselors and field parole officers. I encourage women to get as much information about available resources in the communities they will be returning to before they are released. Don't just send a request to an organization for a letter of reasonable assurance. Inquire if there are other organizations that they need to reach out. Most importantly, get involved in policy and advocacy efforts after release from prison. No one can speak to the issues more than a person who has been impacted by prison and the transition home. The voices of women must be included in bringing about policy change. Finally, get connected with women who have been successful after prison. They can offer you information, support you through your transition, and be there for you to ask questions.

*Under federal law, only two groups of individuals are banned from public housing: people on the lifetime sex offender registry and people convicted for the manufacture of methamphetamine on public housing premises. However, public housing authorities are given substantial discretion in creating their own criminal record restrictions to protect the “health, safety or welfare” of other tenants in public housing. In New York, the public housing authorities regularly use this discretion to deny individuals with felony and misdemeanor convictions eligibility for public housing. For more information, see the Legal Action Center's *How to Get Section 8 or Public Housing Even with a Criminal Record: A Guide for New York City Housing Authority Applicants and their Advocates*. Go to page 45 of this book for information on where to write and obtain a copy.



I want elected officials and other policy makers to understand that housing is a key component to a woman's stability when she returns home. When women are able to secure housing upon release, one of the major barriers is removed. A lack of housing can cause a woman to act on old survival skills that will ultimately lead her back to prison.

If I could immediately change a policy to help women returning home it would be to lift the felony ban to public housing. There is also the issue of women unable to find suitable housing for themselves and their children. This may be due to child welfare involvement or extended family members who do not want to relinquish their roles as the primary caregivers of the children once the mothers return home.

In terms of advice for women returning home, what advice is there to give? Seriously. What can you say? There is nothing that eases the pain of the lack of affordable housing options. Any formerly incarcerated woman knows that.

"There is nothing that eases the pain of the lack of affordable housing options."



The purpose of discharge planning is to help women prepare for release. However, many formerly incarcerated women report that discharge planning is inadequate and that they need more help and support. We want better discharge planning for women while we are still inside. Written material should be up-to-date and readily available. Programs that visit the facilities should be resourceful, ready, and able to help women with transitional services. Discharge counselors should be knowledgeable with solid ties to community programs. We also want parole mandates and supports that meet our needs. Parole officers should be better resourced and knowledgeable about community resources and better able to help women create and maintain a plan of action as they transition home. And we need more alternative to incarceration programs and transitional services programs for women. There are not enough such programs for women, especially residential programs where mothers can have their children with them. Finally, we need safe, resourced women's and family shelters. Too many women are being released to dangerous shelters with little to no services to help them find more secure housing. And more affordable housing options for all low-income persons and people with special-needs.

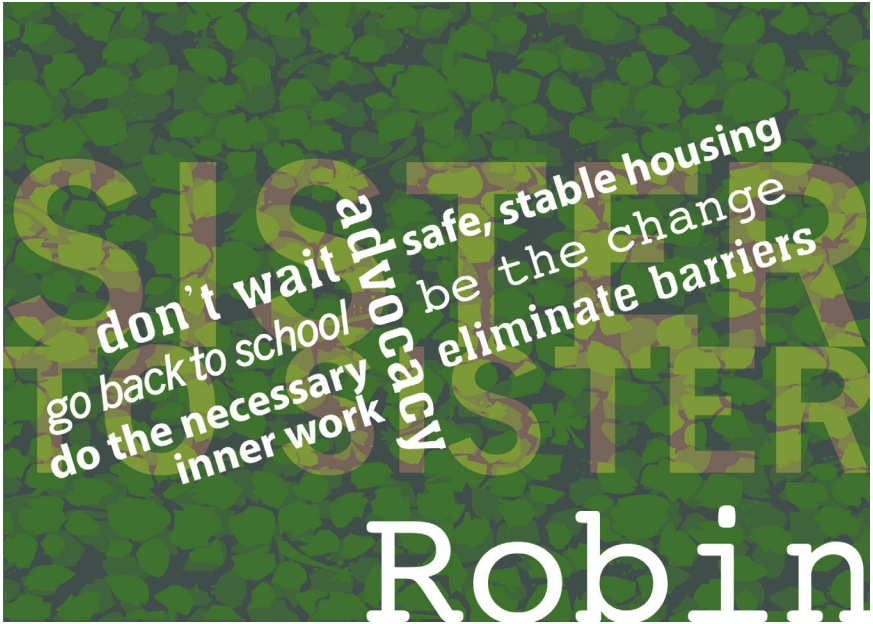
One priority policy issue is the fact that drug convictions do not permit someone returning home to live in the housing projects. Another is the background checks and credit checks that are routinely performed by landlords. There are so many barriers that we face due to our criminal record. I was homeless and living on the street. We need a place to get mail, have an alarm clock, shower and get proper

“We need a place to get mail, have an alarm clock, shower and get proper rest. These are basic needs. Once we have a safe, clean and affordable place to live, we can show up and perform.”

rest. These are basic needs. Once we have a safe, clean and affordable place to live, we can show up and perform. We have served our time and completed our mandates. Therefore, housing discrimination should not be tolerated. The boards of community task forces that monitor policy should include a person who is formerly incarcerated. And transitional housing programs should be FUNDED, FUNDED, FUNDED!

Also, it should be required that after a woman does her time that she be given quality pre-release preparation and housing automatically, either a single room or enough room to be able to reunite with her children. Also, a counselor or therapist should be available to her 24 hours a day. In addition, cooperative living would be the best situation so that women can barter with other women when it comes to babysitting, food exchange, etc., and every “household” can help take care of the other. This builds community and society and instills this quality in our children, who are the future. Finally, upon successful completion of this transitional living experience, women and their families should be able to move into permanent housing without any criminal background barriers.

To women returning home I say, do not be discouraged. Practice patience. Love yourself. People who love themselves do not hurt themselves. Get connected to organizations and tap into the resources. Don't be afraid to reach out for support and help to build the sistahood of all women. Be a positive example for others who come behind you. And finally, GIVE BACK.



Remembering my own experience many years ago at Taconic, a woman there told me, “Baby girl, you only have to do this one time. It is not a requirement that you come back here.” Some 16 plus years later I still keep in mind what that sister told me. It’s my story, but it’s also our shared story.

Accessing and securing safe and stable housing, and family reunification, must be public policy priorities. Too many policy makers and service providers view formerly incarcerated women as the problem rather than identifying and addressing the ongoing systemic and structural flaws that are barriers for women. We need to think in a more comprehensive manner and address the continuum of issues that affect women, including trauma and stigma, and adopt a restorative approach rather than a punishment-driven approach.

If I could immediately change policy, it would be to reinstate and expand the work advantage programs, and eliminate all housing barriers, including the discriminatory New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) administrative practice of barring those with felonies from public housing. I would also advocate for comprehensive discharge assessment and planning that starts when a woman enters the system rather than when she’s coming home.

“Don’t wait. Be the change.”

I say to women returning home, dig deep and do the necessary inner work. Value your life and embrace your experience. If you've been in and out of the penal system, don't get too comfortable. Take advantage of opportunities and ask for help. Be an active participant in your life—go back to school, begin to dream again. The poet Audre Lorde wrote, "Some women wait for something to change....and nothing does change.....so they change themselves." Don't wait. Be the change.

Getting Started...

Joining others in the fight to change the laws, systems, practices and attitudes that negatively affect incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people is empowering and will help you stay the course as you engage in the housing search process. The resources below are advocacy organizations and initiatives where you will meet other community members who are on the same journey as you.

Brooklyn Self-Help and Advocacy Center

250 Baltic Street, 3rd Floor

Brooklyn, New York 11201

Tel: (718) 875-7744

Fax: (718) 243-0763

Peer-run organization in Brooklyn for people with mental illness

Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP)

East Harlem Neighborhood Center

80 E. 110th Street, #1E

New York, New York 10029

Tel. (212) 348-3000

Community-based organization for parents with children involved in the child welfare system

Citizens Against Recidivism, Inc.

Manhattan: (347) 626-7233, ext. 4

Queens: (347) 626-7233, ext. 1

Email: mri@citizensinc.org

<http://www.citizensinc.org/Queens>

Faith-based community organization for currently incarcerated and formerly incarcerated on the community integration process; has a Muslim Reentry Initiative

Coalition for Women Prisoners

Women in Prison Project/Correctional Association of New York

2090 Adam Clayton Powell, 2nd Floor

New York, New York 10027

Tel: (212) 254-5700

A statewide alliance of individuals and organizations that work on issues concerning women impacted by the criminal justice system

College Initiative

Mailing address: P.O. Box 966, New York, New York 10116

Office address: 29-76 Northern Boulevard, LIC, New York 11101

Tel: (347) 669-2864

Fax: (718) 679-9394

www.collegeinitiative.org

Assists women and men with a criminal history and a high school diploma or a General Equivalency Diploma (G.E.D.) with access to college

College and Community Fellowship

475 Riverside Drive, Suite 1626

New York, New York 10115

Tel: (646) 380-7777

Fax: (646) 745-2539

Assists women with criminal convictions with access to college; offers educational programs, mentoring, tuition support and academic support

Families Rally for Emancipation and Empowerment (FREE!)

Email: freefamiliesinc@gmail.com

<http://www.freefamilies.us>

Advocacy group for families with incarcerated loved ones; has a resource guide for families

Howie the Harp Advocacy Resource Center

2090 Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard, 12th Floor

New York, New York 10027

Tel: (212) 780-1400

Peer-led initiative run by Community Access that provides employment resources and advocacy training to mental health consumers

Nassau Inmate Advocacy Group

Staying Healthy Inside and Out

P.O. Box 2202

Hempstead, New York 11550

Tel: (516) 587-0527

www.nassau-inmate-advocacy-group.org

Advocacy group for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people from Nassau County

Prison Families of New York

40 North Main Avenue

Albany, New York 12203

Tel: (518) 453-6659

Albany-based support organization for prison families and individuals returning home from incarceration

ReConnect Program

Women in Prison Project

Correctional Association of New York

2090 Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard, 2nd Floor

New York, New York 10027

Tel: (212) 254-5700

New York City-based advocacy and leadership training program for women transitioning home from prison, jail, or an alternative to incarceration program

Reentry Roundtable

Community Service Society

105 East 22nd Street (at Park Avenue South)

New York, New York 10010

Tel: (212) 614-5306

Monthly meeting for formerly incarcerated persons; includes a guest speaker, free lunch, a resource table, and networking

Our Journey

P.O. Box 134

New York, New York 11695

Monthly retreats for formerly incarcerated women; write to them for a brochure and information about meetings

Sistas Healing Old Wounds (SHOW)

760 New Scotland Avenue

Albany, New York 12208

Tel: (518) 512-1336 or (518) 915-1351

Email: sistas@showny.org

Albany-based support organization for formerly incarcerated women that assists formerly incarcerated women statewide; has a Facebook page which can be accessed by emailing sistas@showny.org

Voices of Women Organizing Project (VOW), Battered Women's Resource Center

P.O. Box 20181

Greeley Square Station

New York, New York 10001

Tel: (212) 696-1481

Fax: (212) 696-1482

www.vowbwrc.org

Leadership and organizing initiative for survivors of domestic violence

Women's Advocacy Project

Women's Prison Association

110 Second Avenue

New York, New York 10003

Tel: (646) 292-7750

www.wpaonline.org

Women's advocacy training program for formerly incarcerated women

Women on the Rise Telling HerStory (WORTH)

171 East 122nd Street, Suite 2R

New York, New York 10035-2945

Tel: (646) 918-6858

www.womenontherise-worth.org

Advocacy and mutual support organization for currently and formerly incarcerated women

Chapter 8

Finding Home



I worked in transitional services at Bayview Correctional Facility. I taught Phase I, and helped with Phases II and III. I was in transitional services the whole time I was there. I was released back to Nassau County and nobody is taking care of the needs of those of us going back home outside of the 5 boroughs.

I was planning to return to my home in Levittown. I had lived there prior to my prison sentence. My dad had passed away and my mom was living downstairs and my partner and I were living upstairs. I lived with them for 15 years before I was incarcerated. While I was in prison my mom fell, dislocated her shoulder, and had to go into a rehab center. From there she went to a nursing home. She is 88 years old. I have one child and the burden was on my daughter to take care of the house and my parents. When I was away, she was making the decisions that I should have been making. When I was ready to be released, I found out that my home had just been sold because my family couldn't keep up with it. I was devastated. I built that home.

I told my parole officer that I would only live with my daughter as a last resort. Her home is very small and they had been so stressed taking care of my parents while I was in prison. I didn't need to be a burden to them. But my parole officer

“When I walked in the door I said, ‘This is going to be okay. This is where I am staying.’”

told me I had no choice, that I had to go to my daughter’s house. When I told my daughter, she became very upset. She took it upon herself to find alternatives. My daughter is a wonderful researcher. She called Albany and talked to the head of reentry, who was spectacular. Nassau County has nothing in place so he got in touch with the coordinator of the Reentry Task Force in Nassau County. I gave her all the information about myself and she sent me an application from the Department of Social Services.

I was supposed to go to a shelter in Roosevelt but when I went to the Department of Social Services, they didn’t have my paperwork. We had to make all these calls. Finally the coordinator of the Task Force found my paperwork. But I couldn’t go to the shelter because there wasn’t an empty bed, so they sent me to Glory House. When I walked in the door I said, “This is going to be okay. This is where I am staying.” It’s a wonderful house and I feel blessed to be here. I can walk to the Department of Social Services. I can walk to my parole. I walk to where I do my anger management. I also went home every weekend to empty my previous home that was sold. It took 2 days to clean out. We hired someone to help and some wonderful women at Glory House also came to help take everything out of the house.

I’ve been looking for jobs since I’ve been home. My parole officer gives me print-outs. I’ve gone to Home Depot, Petco, Target. I have gone to every place and filled out every application you can think of. And of course when they ask, “Have you been incarcerated?” I put “Yes, will discuss at interview,” but I never get called back. I just went to a big work fair at East Meadow High School. There were 80 vendors and no one would take me. It’s a joke. I called the Winston Agency and said, “I’ve been incarcerated.” She said, “Unfortunately, our clients do not accept formerly incarcerated. They just don’t.”

I want the ladies to know it is difficult to find work, but that cannot stop you. Fill out every application you can and be 100% honest. Use social services, the shelters, advocacy organizations. In Nassau County, the Reentry Task Force is very, very important. You must contact them if you are coming to Nassau/Suffolk County. Every 2 weeks I have to go to social services to reapply to stay at Glory House. I bring them a list of apartments that I have called. If social services runs out, they have to re-house me some place else. A lot of girls go to hotels or motels where social services pays \$80 per day. That could pay for a mortgage.

“Home has to be a very safe place—a place where people can come and not have any problems.... Home is a place where you feel safe talking about your problems and finding help.”

I am fortunate because my daughter is going to help me get a car. I need to get a job so that I can support myself and get an apartment. Being a practicing Buddhist, I believe in the universe, so I believe in putting things out there. I know I will have a house. If I could be anywhere now, I would be in my home. I would have my pond and my sanctuary. We have a saying in Tai Chi philosophy, “You can’t put your toe in the same river twice.” It’s constantly flowing.

Home has to be a very safe space—a place where people can come and not have any problems. If you do have a problem, it is nothing big enough that can’t be handled. Home is a place where you feel safe talking about your problems and finding help. I want to have a garden, some place to just sit and be calm. You can’t heal just with talk therapy. The body has memory and you have to address that too.



I am 44 years old. I was living in Brooklyn before I went to prison. I did my first bid in prison when I was 15. I was caught riding in a stolen car. My last bid was 5 years ago. All of my other arrests have been due to my addiction.

I have had substance abuse problems all my life. I first tried alcohol at age 10 and it grew from there. My involvement with the criminal justice system is because of addiction issues. When I was a kid, I lived with my grandparents. My grandfather started becoming abusive towards me in a sexual way. He sexually abused me more than once when I was about 7 or 8. My grandmother pretty much knew what was happening in the house. She was afraid of him and didn't have no means of any type of help. He was the man of the house, the only income in the household, and whatever he said or did was fine. There were a lot of secrets in the house.

When I was 12 or 13, I was hanging out in the hallway in the projects with my cousin, my sister, and one of my friends. We had just come back from the pizza shop and my grandfather took off his belt. I snatched it because I knew what he was going to do—he was going to whip us. He went to hit me and I ended up hitting him in the face with my hot pizza. Then I ran inside the house, packed a duffel bag, and ran back out. I ran a block and a half to my sister's house. I had had enough.

“I had a place of my own, a Section 8 apartment, and I lost it due to my incarceration. So when I got close to my release date I was just crazy, stressed and very overwhelmed about what was going to happen.”

I lived with my sister and her lover and whoever else was in their household. In the building there was drug trafficking going on. I had just started smoking pot and I really liked it. I liked smoking pot and drinking alcohol. I liked mixing it. It gave me the giggles. One time I didn't have any money to buy marijuana and the drug trafficker offered to get me high. I said fine. The guy ended up raping me in one of the empty apartments. That made me crazy in a sense. I just wanted to be clean. I didn't feel like I was clean enough after what he did to me. I moved from my sister's to my aunt's. I stayed there until my mother came into the picture and took me to live with her. I lived there with my mom, my 2 younger brothers and my stepdad for 2 or 3 years.

I was clean for 7½ years when I got into a relationship. I was doing housekeeping and I took something that didn't belong to me and I didn't return it because my boyfriend sold it. I did it because I wanted to spend the night with my boyfriend and I didn't want him to go anywhere. I would have done anything to be with him. I screwed up big time because I had a good job there and I f_____d up a good relationship that I had with a friend. This person who I took the laptop from was my friend's roommate. They knew it was me because I was the only one in the house.

When I went away on my last bid, I had a place of my own, a Section 8 apartment, and I lost it due to my incarceration. So when I got close to my release date, I was just crazy, stressed and very overwhelmed about what was going to happen. I contacted a residential program for mothers and children. They pretty much said they were going to have a bed for me, but I didn't know when. So I had no clue about what I was going to do when I came home. I was released from Bayview to a drug rehab program where I was able to continue my work release. At the program I started doing parenting classes, which is like 6 weeks. After I was at the program for 2 months, I paroled out to the place for mothers and children. That's where everything began. My drug program was a year-long outpatient program. I had a part-time job and I lived at my new placement for about 2 years. I did not have my son with me at first. That was in the process. I eventually started visiting with my son every other week, then every other month until the court restored my rights. Then finally he moved in and within 6 months he was in my custody again. I have 5 children, but he's the only one that lives with me.

My parole officer was not helpful at all. She was very negative, like a big bully. She basically just threatened to take me back to jail if I didn't do the right thing. If I didn't make my curfew, get a job, do my program, and stay clean and sober, I was never going to see my son again, and I was going to go back to jail for a long time. Basically, I learned from the streets. The streets taught me to be a fighter and survivor. But there was nobody within the criminal justice system, be it corrections or parole, or even the housing department, there was no one at all who helped me come up with a plan. No one helped me. No one guided me. The only people that guided me was the mothers program. I pretty much advocated for myself.

I am now living with my son in a 2-bedroom apartment in Queens. We've been here for 3 years and I work at the mothers program as head housekeeper. I have a year-to-year lease. It's a beautiful apartment. I love it. This is my home. This is where I share my family life with my kids. My kids come over, not often, but they do come over. We laugh, watch movies, and sometimes we just have serious talks. The building? It's okay for right now. We need a steady super. If I could do anything for my children, I would like to hit the Lotto and buy a nice house! But mostly I want to be there for them spiritually and mentally.

"I've had a roof over my head when I was growing up, but not a feeling of home. Home is supposed to be loving and somewhere where you're safe, meals with your family, laughter, and pride."

I've had a roof over my head when I was growing up, but not a feeling of home. Home is supposed to be loving and somewhere where you're safe, meals with your family, laughter, and pride. Where you can share all of your intimate thoughts and what happens with you, with your family members. Home is where your heart is, basically. My first year here I had a big Thanksgiving. I invited one of my cousins who I had a big fight with years before. I invited her over and we made up for everything. It was a nice Thanksgiving. Having a home is a blessing. Having a family is another blessing.

I say to other women stay focused. Get your roots into the dirt and know what you want. Be hungry for your recovery. Search for the positive people who are out there. If you want change in your life, if you want something different in your life, you have to try something different, you know? If you want to stay clean, you have to hang out with the clean and sober folks. If you want to go to school, you have to be focused on going to school. Your wants and your needs are 2 different things. Just stay focused and do the right thing for you and your kids. Stick with the right people. If you stay with the old people, doing the old things, you're gonna end up back in prison. Get a new circle, a group of sisters that are doing

the right thing and that are doing things for themselves. My immediate goal is to get my G.E.D. I am so determined. I really want to start doing it this year. I know that I need help and I'm gonna seek the help that I need. I don't have a problem asking for help when I need it. That's one of my strengths.

Be demanding. We need more options for housing. That's a big problem. Women coming home basically having no where to go. We need more affordable housing, more subsidized housing. Women need something that's gonna be permanent for them and their families—something that's gonna be a foundation.

Getting Started...

Affordable housing is an issue that affects most New Yorkers, not just the formerly incarcerated. The listings below are general resources to help direct you to affordable housing options.

Hearts & Minds, Information for Change

<http://www.heartsandminds.org/housing.htm>

Website to help people access all kinds of resources, including New York City housing; their page entitled *You Can Find Housing in NYC* has resources for temporary and long-term housing, low-income housing, housing for the elderly, and help with landlord problems; they also have a Housing Search Checklist to help you organize your search

NYC Affordable Housing Resource Center

www.nyc.gov/html/housinginfo

New York City government online resource for information on all aspects of New York City housing, including renting an apartment, buying a home, and apartment maintenance issues; also includes the New York City affordable housing lottery listings

Reentry Resource Center: NY

www.reentrynet.net/ny

New York State-based online support network and information clearinghouse on prison, reentry, and the consequences of criminal proceedings with an information section entitled Housing and Reentry that provides information and resources on how arrest and/or a criminal history can affect a person's ability to obtain and/or stay in public and private housing

Acknowledgements

Our deep and heartfelt appreciation to the 21 women who shared their lived experiences for this book: Anisah, Bernice, Betty, Brunilda, Cheryl, Janet, Jeannie, Kim, Lady Kathryn, Linda, Lydia, Meg, Marion, Mia, Rita, Robin, Roni, Serena, Sharmaine, Sharon, and Tina.

Kudos to the following members of the Coalition for Women Prisoners Reentry Committee for their steadfast work on and dedication to this project through its various stages (in alphabetical order): Valerie Amsterdam, Professor Kristin Bumiller, Rachel Brumfield, Gina Cascino, Marlene Cedeno, Lili Chargin, Carmen deJesus (co-chair), Lindsay Donnell, Danielle Ingridanis, Maxine King, Tamar Kraft-Stolar, Serena Liguori, Linda Malloy, Robin McGinty, Russelle Miller-Hill (co-chair), Lorraine Patterson, Jessica Ross (co-chair), Liz Schoen Swavola, Anisah Thompson (co-chair), Denise Thompson, Stacey Thompson, Rachel Younger, Roberta Todd, Jaya Vasandani, Jeannie Vink, Andrea B. Williams, and Grace Womble.

Special thanks to Serena Liguori, Jessica Ross, and Gina Cascino for organizing and facilitating the interviews, transcripts, and project meetings in the initial phases of the project; Gina Cascino, Jessica Ross, Allison Schwartz and Jeannie Vink for transcribing the recorded interviews; Professor Kristin Bumiller and Marlene Cedeno of Amherst College for providing narrative interview training and project support to the book project committee and key research and book draft work respectively; Troy Lambert (AfroBlu Designs) for designing the book; Melissa Ells for fact-checking the resources sections; Emerson Soto for translating Lydia's narrative into Spanish; Tamar Kraft-Stolar for editing various book sections; Sam Streed for proofreading the final drafts; and Andrea B. Williams for assuming coordination of the project and directing the editorial and design process to completion.

A Place To Call Your Own, Women and the Search for Housing After Incarceration was created by the Coalition for Women Prisoners Reentry Committee. The Coalition for Women Prisoners is a New York statewide coalition dedicated to making the criminal justice system more responsive to the needs and rights of women, their families and their communities. The Coalition was created in 1994 and is coordinated by the Women in Prison Project at the Correctional Association of New York.

For more information about the Correctional Association of New York, visit us at www.correctionalassociation.org, on Facebook: www.facebook.com/CorrectionalAssociation and follow us on Twitter @CANY_1844 or www.twitter.com/CANY_1844

Notes

Copyright © 2013
Correctional Association of New York
All Rights Reserved