

In The Cold: Sleeping In The Street

It is hard to build a successful life without a place to call home, but this basic necessity is often out of reach for formerly incarcerated people. Barriers to employment, combined with explicit discrimination, have created a little-discussed housing crisis. I was recently released from federal prison after serving 25 years, for a non-violent drug offense. Upon release, I was blessed to have safe, stable, and affordable housing thanks to my family/support system and the fact that I came out with a plan, and basically hit the ground running. A friend of mine who also was recently released from prison was living with his sister. He thought that he had safe, stable, and affordable housing, but apparently he and his sister could not get along and he found himself homeless, living out of his car, taking showers at a gym where he works out at, all while still going to a construction job and looking for somewhere to call home. He apparently lived like this for a good month and a half before being able to find a place to rent. The pressing need to have a place to call home forced my friend to jump on the first thing available, in a not so good neighborhood.

Stories such as that of my friend are usually the norm for many formerly incarcerated people. Stable housing is a difficult proposition to navigate for various reasons. Here in Montgomery County, homelessness is measured by a one-day snapshot of residents experiencing homelessness. The Point in Time count and report does very little to help us better understand the needs of our residents, by leaving out whole segments of the population. For instance, the PIT only counts families, children, and seniors. Homelessness among formerly incarcerated people is in urgent need of solutions.

Maryland has an incarceration rate of 585 per 100,000 people meaning that it locks up a higher percentage of its people than many wealthy democracies do. As a community what are we to do? What are we to do when the most vulnerable are in need of solutions? I feel that what is needed and necessary is a redirection of funds, to support locally-driven services, supports, and opportunities that meet the unique needs of formerly incarcerated people as it relates to safe, stable, and affordable housing. Numerous studies show that up to 15% of currently incarcerated people experience homelessness in the year leading up to their incarceration, and formerly incarcerated people are most likely to be homeless in the period shortly after their release.

This fact reflects the reality of homelessness among formerly incarcerated people here in Montgomery County that the PIT one-day snapshot does not consider. With more than 20,000 people in prison and at a cost of almost one billion dollars a year, Maryland's corrections system consumes significant public resources. Knowing more about the impact incarceration has on communities would help policymakers and residents make more informed choices on better ways to invest taxpayer resources in more effective public safety strategies and opportunities to help formerly incarcerated people succeed.

Let me be clear, the PIT model is truly commendable however, I ask that it include formerly incarcerated people, and a redirection of funds is necessary to support locally-driven services, supports, and opportunities that meet the unique needs of formerly incarcerated people and the communities they serve, as it relates to safe, stable, and affordable housing.

Excluding formerly incarcerated people from safe, stable and affordable housing has devastating side effects. It can reduce access to health care services, make it harder to secure a job, and prevent accessing educational programs. Excluding formerly incarcerated people from safe, stable, and affordable housing harms not only individuals but public safety and the economy at large. State-and-City policymakers have the power to solve this housing crisis by **Expanding social services for the homeless focusing on "Housing First"**. States and local reentry organizations must make housing a priority, and provide additional services thereafter- a strategy known as "Housing First". States have made permanent housing for the homeless a budget priority. Housing First reforms, along with expanded social services, would help to disrupt the revolving door of release and re-incarceration.

Homelessness among formerly incarcerated people is a fixable problem. States can and should develop more efficient interagency systems to help formerly incarcerated people find safe, stable, and affordable homes and a redirection of funds is necessary to support locally-driven services, supports, and opportunities that meet the unique needs of the formerly incarcerated here in Montgomery County. If formerly incarcerated people are legally and financially excluded from safe, stable, and affordable housing, they cannot be expected to successfully reintegrate into their communities. It is critical that policymakers develop comprehensive responses to this problem for all people-and particularly those carrying the stigma of criminalization- need these solutions.