

MOVING TOWARD EVIDENCE-BASED HOUSING PROGRAMS FOR PERSONS WITH MENTAL ILLNESS IN CONTACT WITH THE JUSTICE SYSTEM

The National GAINS Center for Systemic Change for Justice-Involved People with Mental Illness

Research shows that a one-size-fits-all approach to housing for persons with mental illness who are justice involved will not work. What works in housing for most persons with mental illness may be different from what works for those who are justice involved — particularly those individuals released from jail and prison to the community and placed under correctional supervision.

The reentry population may have differing needs than individuals with mental illness who have had contact with the justice system. The nature of criminal justice contact can play an important role in determining the best housing options for consumers as well. Persons returning from prisons and jails may have high-level needs given the requirements of supervision (e.g., remain drug free, obtain employment). Housing options should provide a balance between the often competing needs of criminal justice supervision and flexible social service provision.

Taking into consideration the reentry point of individuals can provide the basis for understanding how their mental health needs can be integrated with criminal justice system needs. When a person is under criminal justice supervision, housing and the services that come with housing must simultaneously satisfy the service needs of the individual and the demands of the criminal justice system. Furthermore, those returning to the community after being in the custody of the criminal justice system for long periods of time often lack awareness of the range of housing options, as well as the skills to make appropriate housing-related decisions.

With regard to returning prisoners, research suggests that residential instability and incarceration are compounding factors

influencing both later residential instability and re-incarceration. A large study examining persons released from New York State prisons found that having both histories of shelter use and incarceration increased the risk of subsequent re-incarceration and shelter use (Metraux & Culhane, 2004). Individuals with links to the mental health system had considerably higher proportions of shelter stays and re-incarcerations post release than those without links to the mental health system. Other studies have found that persons with mental illness who experience housing instability are more likely to come in contact with the police and/or to be charged with a criminal offense (Brekke et al., 2001; Clark, Ricketts, & McHugo, 1999).

Housing for persons with mental illness who have had contact with the justice system can be viewed along a continuum of options from full self-sufficiency to full dependent care (see Figure 1). The most available or appropriate housing option for individuals may differ depending on which reentry point (i.e., diversion, jail, or prison) an individual enters the community. Supportive housing and special needs housing, and transitional facilities (highlighted in Figure 1) are the main options for consumers of housing in need of services to treat mental health conditions, outside of the provision of institutional care. Supportive housing and special needs housing are permanent housing options coupled with support services. These types of housing are most often partially or wholly supported by HUD and specifically designed to support disadvantaged populations. Transitional housing is an umbrella term to capture any housing that is not permanent but is designed to provide at least some type of service that assists clients with establishing community reintegration or residential stability.

To navigate the intricate landscape of housing for persons with mental illness who have had contact with the justice system, it is important to understand that the service-enriched options for housing can utilize a range of approaches from [redacted] to [redacted]. These approaches are underlying principles that guide the provision of housing and services to individuals who are homeless or have been deemed “hard to house.”

The [redacted] approach offers the direct placement from the street (or an institution) to housing with support services available, but not required. Often, the only requirements are that individuals not use substances on the premises and abide by the traditional lease obligations of paying rent and refraining from violence and destruction of property. In contrast,

[redacted] starts with treatment and progresses through a series of increasingly less service-intensive options with the goal of permanent supportive housing as people are “ready.” Housing is transitional in [redacted] models and generally features services that are “high demand,” as described below.

Although requirements and configurations of services vary tremendously across service-enriched housing options, service-