



Left to right: Tim Jones, Richmond Housing Authority; Deborah Thrope, National Housing Law Project; Tamisha Walker, Safe Return Project; Kimberly Gamboa, Safe Return Project; Larnel Wolfe, former Safe Return Project Team Member.

FINDING A HOME AFTER INCARCERATION: RICHMOND'S FAIR CHANCE HOUSING ORDINANCE

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Every year, over 600,000 people exit state and federal prisons, and more than 11 million return from local jails. Despite the search for safe and stable housing, many of these men and women will become homeless, putting them at a greater risk of recidivism. In fact, parolees are seven times more likely to reoffend if they are homeless than if they're housed. Affordable housing developers and managers can thus play a key role in reducing homelessness and improving public safety by expanding housing opportunities for formerly incarcerated people.

The Safe Return Project

Due to significantly higher rates of arrest and conviction of people of color, Richmond is disproportionately impacted by mass

incarceration. The Safe Return Project, dedicated to successful reintegration in Richmond, set out to identify and alleviate the major barriers to reentry, known as "collateral consequences." Its research affirmed studies showing that abundant affordable housing helped returning citizens reintegrate into the community. Overly broad tenant screening policies, on the other hand, undermine efforts to gain employment, interfere with family reunification, and negatively impact health.

Contrary to popular belief, most incarcerated people were convicted for petty or nonviolent crimes. In addition, research shows that a crime that occurred many years ago or an arrest without a conviction is not necessarily a predictor of future behavior. The Safe Return Project

asked the National Housing Law Project to draft a policy that addresses these issues—reducing barriers to housing while providing clear screening guidelines for affordable housing that focus on the health and safety of tenants rather than a criminal record alone.

Fair Chance Affordable Housing Ordinance

That policy, the Fair Chance Access to Affordable Housing Ordinance, was recently passed by the Richmond City Council. The ordinance applies to all federal, state, and locally-assisted affordable housing properties in Richmond, including Richmond Housing Authority and Low Income Housing Tax Credit developments. Under the ordinance, a landlord must first determine if an individual is otherwise qualified to live in the unit before reviewing his or her criminal record. Upon review of the record, the provider is barred from considering criminal history that does not relate to health and safety concerns. In addition, the ordinance requires an individualized assessment of each applicant's criminal history, including mitigating circumstances such as disability or domestic violence. The screening process outlined in the ordinance will strengthen managers' and owners' compliance with fair housing laws.

The Richmond Fair Chance Access to Affordable Housing Ordinance helps developers, landlords, and the city itself promote successful reintegration, reduce recidivism, and ease the collateral consequences of mass incarceration.

By Deborah Thrope, National Housing Law Project