

OPENING DOORS TO PUBLIC HOUSING

Request for Proposals (RFP) for Technical Assistance

Applications will be accepted until 11:59 pm PST, February 28, 2020

Applications should be submitted in PDF format via email to ecrew@vera.org.

Questions about this solicitation should be directed to Erica Crew via email: ecrew@vera.org.

The Vera Institute of Justice (Vera)—with funding from the U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA)¹—is soliciting applications from public housing authorities (PHA) that, in collaboration with their justice system partners, are seeking technical assistance to plan and implement reentry programs and/or change their admissions policies regarding people with conviction histories. PHAs that manage their own units as well as those administering housing choice voucher programs are eligible to apply. The goals of this initiative are to:

1. Safely increase access to housing for people with conviction histories;
2. Improve the safety of public housing and surrounding communities through the use of reentry housing strategies; and
3. Promote collaboration between public housing authorities, law enforcement agencies, and other criminal justice stakeholders to effectively reduce crime and improve reentry outcomes for people leaving prisons and jails.

I. Background

For more than 600,000 people leaving prison and the 10.6 million cycling through jails annually, research shows that safe, affordable housing is essential for them to succeed after they are released.² At present, admissions criteria across much of the country's public housing restricts people with conviction histories from either moving back in with their family members or obtaining their own housing. Following federal guidelines, all public housing authorities must place lifetime exclusions on people who are lifetime-registered sex offenders or who have been convicted of producing methamphetamine on public housing property. For all other types of criminal histories, housing authorities exercise their discretion in screening and eviction actions.

¹ This project is supported by Grant No. 2017-IG-BK003 awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. Assistance is subject to the availability of grant funds. The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the Office for Victims of Crime, and the SMART Office. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

² Jennifer Bronson, E. Ann Carson, *Prisoners in 2017* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2019); Zhen Zeng, *Jail Inmates in 2017*, (Washington DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2019); Lucius Couloute, *Nowhere to Go: Homelessness Among Formerly Incarcerated People* (Prison Policy Initiative, August 2018) <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/housing.html>.

In recent years, a shift in thinking has occurred to address the collateral consequences around housing for formerly incarcerated individuals. In 2015, HUD released guidance to PHAs on the use of arrests for determinations on who can live in HUD-assisted housing, also emphasizing HUD does not require PHAs to adopt “One Strike” policies. A number of PHAs across the country have begun to adopt policies, in addition to discrete reentry programs, that provide formerly incarcerated people with the opportunity to live in federally subsidized housing more quickly than their policies permitted in the past. Some of the reentry programs, including Burlington, Vermont; King County, Washington; and New York City, were featured in a 2016 HUD [toolkit](#) for PHAs.

In 2016, Vera, in collaboration with HUD and Trinity Church Wall Street, hosted [a national convening](#) at Trinity Church. The convening brought together public housing authorities from across the United States, government officials, community-based organizations, legal service providers, and other interested members of the general public.

The day before the convening, Vera brought together 16 public housing authorities to learn about their respective reentry programs and any policy changes that impact people with conviction histories. The contents of this meeting informed [Opening Doors: How to develop reentry programs using examples from public housing authorities](#), a guide for public housing authorities that are looking to increase access to people who are leaving the justice system.

Vera’s interest in hosting the convening and producing this guide stemmed from its work with two housing authorities. In 2013, Vera partnered with the Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO) to address barriers to affordable housing and employment faced by those with criminal records. In partnership with housing police, parole, residents, and other stakeholders, Vera helped HANO develop policies and screening guidelines to inform HANO’s admissions and hiring practices.

Around the same time, in partnership with the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA), the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision, the New York City Department of Homeless Services, the Corporation for Supportive Housing, and a dozen reentry service providers Vera assisted NYCHA in implementing a new pilot program to help formerly incarcerated people reunite with their families who live in public housing. By making better use of existing housing units and connecting participants to case management provided by experienced reentry service providers, this program is working for families in New York and is being replicated by other housing authorities. Vera also completed [an evaluation](#) of the NYCHA pilot program. Vera found that NYCHA’s program helped participants succeed by providing them with stable housing and ensuring that their other reentry needs were met by partnering service providers. Program participants reported that family support was also essential to their efforts to secure employment and get back on their feet. Significantly, at the time of the evaluation, only one out of the 85 participants in the program was convicted of a new offense over a three-year period. That trend has continued as more people have enrolled in the program.

Over the past three years, this initiative—Opening Doors: Safely Increasing Access to Public Housing for People with Conviction Histories—has expanded these efforts, working with a wide range of public housing authorities, law enforcement agencies, county and state corrections, homeless service providers, Continuum of Care organizations, and other community stakeholders to remove those barriers to housing for people with conviction histories.

II. Opening Doors to Public Housing Initiative

Vera will draw on its prior work with the following PHAs, through this initiative:

2017 Sites

- Colorado: Department of Local Affairs, Division of Housing
- Massachusetts: Springfield Housing Authority
- Nebraska: Kearney Housing Agency
- North Carolina: Asheville Housing Authority
- Rhode Island: Providence Housing Authority
- Washington: Tacoma Housing Authority

2019 Sites

- California: Housing Authority of the County of San Diego in collaboration with six housing authorities operating within the county
- Delaware: State consortium of five agencies led by the Delaware State Housing Authority
- Louisiana: Lafayette Housing Authority
- Oklahoma: Oklahoma City Housing Authority

The goals of this BJA-funded Opening Doors initiative are to:

1. Safely increase access to housing for people with conviction histories;
2. Improve the safety of public housing and surrounding communities through the use of reentry housing strategies; and
3. Promote collaboration between public housing authorities, law enforcement agencies, and other criminal justice stakeholders to effectively reduce crime and improve reentry outcomes for people leaving prisons and jails.

Where applicable, Vera will partner with the PHAs to develop effective strategies in the following areas:

1. Family reunification and updated admissions policies for people with convictions; and
2. Practices to incorporate people with conviction histories in strategy development and implementation.

III. Technical Assistance to Public Housing Authorities

A. Eligibility

Through this RFP, Vera will select up to four housing authorities who are interested in receiving and would benefit from 17 months (through September 30, 2021) of technical assistance as they plan and implement their own reentry-focused housing programs and/or change their admissions policies to safely increase access for people with conviction histories. Housing authorities of all sizes are encouraged to apply, including those administering housing choice vouchers. In addition, multiple housing authorities in the same geographic area may decide to apply together in a single application, in the event that they have common goals and believe that coordinating their efforts will increase the local impact of their work.

B. Overview of Technical Assistance

Vera will work with each selected site or group of sites to develop a technical assistance plan. That plan may include some of the following activities. The actual work to be performed for each selected site will be specified in a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to be entered into between Vera and the site:

1. Meetings with the Housing Authority: Vera staff will meet with the housing authority to understand its goals for the project as well as its concerns and anticipated challenges.
2. Meetings with Stakeholders: Vera staff will also meet with the key stakeholders (such as community service providers, tenant associations, property managers, reentry courts, housing authority police, probation/parole officers, and corrections leaders) to understand their desired outcomes, concerns, and their goals for the project.
3. Policy Assistance: Vera staff will review the housing authority's existing policies governing housing eligibility for people with criminal records, and assist with the process of developing new screening guidelines and policies.
4. Reentry Program Development: Vera staff will help develop a reentry program, in collaboration with other local stakeholders in addition to the housing authority, to serve people with conviction histories looking to reunite with their family members who are already living in public housing—including policy change, partnerships with corrections agencies, and referral processes to supportive services, as desired by the PHA.
5. Implementation Assistance: Vera will provide ongoing assistance during the term of the project with planning and implementation of recommended policy changes.
6. Opportunities for Cross-Site Exchange: Vera will help foster cross-site learning through various activities, including webinars to share promising practices and strategize about implementing programs and effecting policy changes.

C. Expectations for Participating Housing Authorities

Selected housing authorities will liaise regularly with the Vera team and develop, maintain and support partners and stakeholders. In addition, the following components are essential to the initiative:

1. Site lead: This person will be the primary liaison between the housing authority and the Vera team and will participate in regular project management calls with Vera staff, coordinate logistics for Vera site visits and workgroup meetings (e.g. securing meeting space, helping to plan agenda, etc.), and educate key stakeholders about the project.
2. Development of stakeholder group: Vera staff will work with the site lead to identify and develop a group of stakeholders who are interested in assisting with the creation of programs or reshaping policy in order to better serve the reentry community.
3. Data/Facility Access: Providing or assisting Vera in procuring data in support of its technical assistance, including PHA policy documents, administrative data, and access to PHA facilities.
4. Publication Rights: Granting Vera permission to publish reports, data analysis and other publications related to the Opening Doors Initiative and its technical assistance (opportunity for review and commentary will be provided prior to any publication).

There is no financial commitment required from housing authorities.

IV. Application Requirements

Through the Opening Doors Initiative, sites will be selected to receive up to 17 months of technical assistance of the type outlined in Section III.B, above to expand housing access for people with conviction histories. The actual length of each project will be agreed in an MOU executed between Vera and each site. Applications will be accepted from individual housing authorities or groups of housing authorities.

Applicants must submit application packages via email, in PDF format, to ecrew@vera.org. Applications should include: (1) a letter of intent and commitment, (2) an application narrative, and (3) letters of support (required).

1. Letter of Intent and Commitment: The Opening Doors Initiative is a collaborative effort, and its success depends on the commitment and engagement of the housing authority along with the support of local law enforcement and criminal justice agencies. The letter of intent should be signed by the PHA's executive director and indicate the housing authority's commitment to:

- a. Planning and implementing a reentry program to allow people with conviction histories to return home or otherwise obtain housing; and/or Changing existing policies to enable people with conviction histories to obtain housing;

- b. Engaging and collaborating with Vera as well as the relevant stakeholder group throughout the project;
- c. Providing a suitable site lead throughout the project;
- d. Making the site lead available for one in-person meeting (travel costs will be covered by Vera);
- e. Identifying, developing, and facilitating the involvement of supportive stakeholders throughout the project;
- f. Providing or assisting Vera in procuring data in support of this technical assistance;
- g. Granting Vera permission to publish reports, data analysis and other publications related to the Opening Doors initiative (opportunity for review and commentary will be provided prior to any publication); and
- h. Entering into an MOU with Vera formalizing these commitments and other details regarding the project.

2. Application Narrative: The items listed below should be submitted as a narrative (copies of relevant documents or sections of documents may be included as attachments). The narrative, excluding attachments, should not exceed 10 pages in length.

- A. Statement of the Problem: The statement of the problem should provide a brief overview of the housing authority's reasons for applying and its goals for this reform effort. This section should also detail the housing authority's current policy as regards people with criminal histories and/or juvenile records. An overview of the application and review process which should include how, and at what point in the review process, criminal background checks are run. This section should also include any available data, up to two years in the past, on the estimated number of people with criminal histories and/or juvenile records that have applied for housing, but were denied housing admission due to their criminal histories and/or juvenile record. Application reviewers are looking for applications with: 1) a clear explanation of why the jurisdiction wants to revise its policies or design a re-entry program; 2) an informed sense of how many prospective applicants/tenants have been denied housing in recent years as a consequence of the housing authority's official policies and/or informal practices; 3) a demonstrated understanding of the current reentry housing landscape in the area, including any preexisting resources and programs, or lack thereof; and importantly, 4) why the timing is right to engage in this work now. Reviewers are also interested in the scope and scale of the project impact (e.g., ways a PHA can take what it learns and share with a county- or state-wide group of stakeholders; number of families that may be impacted by the policy change or reentry program).
- B. Policy Changes Process: This section should describe who needs to sign off on policy changes (e.g., board members or commissioners, local elected officials, etc.) Please also provide examples of other recent policy or programmatic changes the housing authority has implemented, and highlight key lessons learned from these past efforts.

- C. Staffing: Please identify the proposed site lead for this project and describe why that person has been selected. Describe how the site lead will be supported by the PHA's leadership and staff, and in addition please provide a description of the site lead's other responsibilities and availability to commit to this project over the 17-month period.

3. Letters of Support (required): Applicants are required to provide letters of support from relevant criminal justice stakeholders and partners, specifically (1) the board chair of the housing authority, (2) community human services or reentry service providers, (3) housing authority police or other local law enforcement, and (4) probation, parole, and or corrections officials. As an option, applicants may also include letters from other partners such as property management companies, tenant associations, the county criminal justice coordinator, legal service providers, and local business leaders. These letters will not count towards the page limit of the proposal.

V. Selection Decisions: Timeline and Process for the Selection of TA Sites

Applications will be accepted until 11:59 pm PST on February 28, 2020. A team of BJA and Vera staff will review and score all of the proposals, and will conduct telephone conversations with short-listed applicants to discuss the initiative, ascertain strength of commitment and resolve any unanswered questions or concerns. Applications will be scored on the basis of each site's articulated commitment to the goals described in this RFP; the site's need, as well as openness and readiness, for technical assistance to accomplish its housing reentry goals; demonstrated ability to carry out policy change; and clear indication and evidence of support from local partners.

Selected sites will be notified, and a public announcement of the selection will occur in April 2020.

Terms of RFP

Vera has the right to amend or cancel this RFP at any time. Any changes to this RFP will be made in writing. Vera reserves the right, at the time of evaluation of any response, to request any additional information that it deems necessary. Vera will be the sole judge of responses received. Any response which does not comply with the terms of this RFP, including deadlines, may not be considered. Vera will not return any materials it receives, and will not reimburse applicants for any costs incurred in developing a response.