

# Innovations and Resources

Improving Housing Access for People Impacted by the Criminal Justice System

## Summary and Goals for the Convening

The Criminal Legal System Initiative held our inaugural convening on March 30, 2021. Attendees with lived and professional experience with housing, homeless, and criminal legal systems joined virtually across more than 20 counties nationwide. The convening sought to:

1. Highlight emerging cross-sector strategies to improve housing access and prevent homelessness for people impacted by the criminal legal system;
2. Explore approaches to leveraging resources and funding to support these strategies; and
3. Provide opportunities for peer learning, networking, and action planning to identify actionable next steps for attendees' communities.

A recording of the convening is available [here](#) and convening slides are available [here](#).

## Keynote Speaker

Vonya Quarles, Esq., BS, BM, JD, Co-Founder & Executive Director of [Starting Over, Inc.](#) provided powerful framing and a call to action for the convening. Speaking from her personal and professional experience, Vonya discussed how criminal convictions, evictions, and misconceptions about who “deserves” safety and housing impede access to both.

Through transitional housing and reentry services including post-conviction relief (e.g., expungement), Path to Staffing Employment and Economic Development, tutoring, peer support, and civic and community engagement, [Starting Over, Inc.](#) has helped over 900 individuals and families move from homelessness to stable housing.

## Panel One: Innovations

The first convening panel featured three programs that address the intersection of the homeless and criminal legal systems in particularly innovative ways.

### Impact Justice: The Homecoming Project

Aishatu Yusuf, Director of Innovation Programs at [Impact Justice](#) presented on [The Homecoming Project](#). The Homecoming Project, inspired by the sharing economy, screens and matches hosts who have an available room to rent with someone returning home from prison. The six-month program includes coaching to both returnees and hosts, a community navigator, case management, and COVID-19 PPE supplies and testing. In its first three years, The Homecoming Project has housed 57 people.

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### San José State University: Record Clearance Project

Victoria Kirshner, Lead Mentor at San José State University's [Record Clearance Project](#) shared innovations in the [Path to Expungement Mentoring Program](#). Mentors who have gone through the expungement process themselves staff the program. The program helps to connect clients to a wide range of housing programs, including: Blackbird House Respite, Sober Living Environments (for which the program pays client rent using a step-down model), emergency shelters, residential treatment programs, and permanent housing. Mentors assist clients to navigate and access resources in the Adult Reentry Network and facilitate record expungement, reentry to the community, and attainment of self-sufficiency.

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### San Diego County Sheriff's Department: Stepping Up Initiative

Kathy Myers, Reentry Program Coordinator at the [San Diego County Sheriff's Department](#) addressed the Stepping Up Initiative's Coordinated Program Release program, which connects reentry services, inmate processing, medical services, providers, and clients to ensure participants have the medication they need prior to release. Also, the Supporting Individual Transitions (SIT) project focuses on the 100 people with the most bookings per year and builds relationships to connect individuals to supportive services, including case management and housing-first services through PATH. This has been especially helpful for clients whose interactions with the criminal legal system are related to behavioral health needs, and resulted in 48 people leaving the Top 100 list in the first year.

## Panel Two: Resources

The second convening panel featured three programs that are applying for and utilizing various funding sources to address the intersection of housing and the criminal legal system in particularly resourceful ways.

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### San Francisco District Attorney's Office: Safety + Justice Challenge

Josie Halpern-Finnerty, Project Director for the San Francisco [Safety + Justice Challenge](#) (SJC), spoke from the perspective of the criminal legal system about building bridges to housing for people leaving jail. SJC leverages multiple funding sources including foundation funding to launch housing pilots, and uses a mix of funding sources from housing and the criminal legal systems to sustain efforts. Building strong relationships and effective communication across these systems – including training and technical assistance to criminal legal system partners to “speak housing” – has led to creative problem-solving.

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## LifeMoves: Reentry Program

Jacqueline C. Ramirez, Director of Housing & Employment at [LifeMoves](#) explained the process for a traditional shelter provider to provide targeted reentry services. LifeMoves identifies funding sources through the [California grants portal](#), numerous listservs, and a strong Development team that brings opportunities to weekly leadership meetings. Lessons learned include ramping up grant administration, preparing to be flexible depending on awarded funding and conditions, and planning time to ramp up. The Program has already housed 16 people and employed 5 people in less than one year.

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## Los Angeles County: Office of Diversion and Reentry

Ryan Izell, Director of Housing, [Office of Diversion & Reentry](#) discussed interim housing, homeless services, and probation-funded rapid rehousing programs for people exiting custody. The Office utilizes a variety of federal, state, and local funding (i.e., AB109, SB678, MHSA, HUD, LA County) that is administered through a flexible housing subsidy pool. This flexible braided funding pool is centered around each client. The funding effectively “follows” clients, enabling them to move seamlessly from interim to permanent housing.

## Start, Stop, Continue Activity

The third portion of Homebase’s convening was a breakout group activity led by Homebase facilitators. Attendees and presenters were randomly assigned to small groups comprised of cross-sector participants from a range of geographies.

During the session, facilitators asked participants to reflect on immediate steps each of them could take in their home community, agency, or organization to help improve access to housing for people involved with the criminal legal system. The activity specifically directed participants to reflect on information shared by convening presenters, and identify **actions to start, actions to stop, and actions to continue** to increase housing opportunities and/or remove barriers to housing.

Participants engaged in a combination of quiet reflection and idea generation, share out (by way of Jamboard, an interactive platform that simulates a white board), and conversation and collaboration around the information generated. Below is a bulleted summary of themes that were identified across the nine groups of attendee participants:

## Start

- Taking action to reach out to unlikely/new partners
- Hiring peers/people with lived experience across all programs, particularly (but not only) housing programs for people impacted by criminal legal system
- Prioritizing looking for funding to serve this population; diversify and leverage current resources to better serve people impacted by criminal legal system in the long-term
- Building deeper connections with clients to better understand their needs and the barriers they encounter
- Making sure housing and post-custody needs are part of all of client conversations
- Exploring resource pooling between organizations providing similar/adjacent services
- Being proactive: in-reach to people in custody; case coordination meetings for jail population; family reunification services and support when possible as part of housing plan
- Helping to educate other systems-partners; learn the “language” and tools of partners
- Building programs around clients, not clients around programs
- Exploring housing models identified in Innovations and Resources convening
- Collaborating and advocating: to increase “gate money” for people exiting prison; to change HUD’s definition of chronic homelessness so it does not exclude many/most people exiting prison/jail
- Expanding our thinking on who is impacted by incarceration:
  - Factor families impacted by incarceration into reentry budgets and programs
- Addressing bias and assumptions about criminal legal system exposure with and educating themselves about who is system-impacted and why

## Stop

- Working in silos
- Duplicating efforts across systems
- Being complacent with housing policies that are not inclusive of all people, specifically criminal legal system-involved people
- Having decision-making conversations without people with lived experience at the table (for the whole conversation)
- Assuming all landlords are resistant to housing people impacted by the criminal legal system

- Waiting for clients to ask us to help them to do more to support them around their/their family's barriers related to criminal legal system exposure
- Ignoring the "housing elephant in the room" because we think some people can't be housed
- Forcing treatment services on clients who are not interested and/or do not need them
- Expecting people to navigate complex systems without support
- Letting politics and rhetoric around how overwhelmed the system is prevent us from doing better for this population
- Discriminating against/ignoring the housing needs of people on the 290 registry
- Thinking someone else should be finding housing for people on probation
- Letting politics get in the way of helping people reach stability and self-sufficiency
- Local criminal prohibitions for housing and discretionary discriminatory screening practices; ensure Fair Housing and ADA laws are enforced

### Continue to

- Put energy into maintaining and increasing community partnerships
- Make sure our resources and referrals are up to date and meet the needs of our clients
- Advocate for structural changes to provide housing security
- Partner with criminal legal system partners like the Sheriff, Public Defender, District Attorney, Probation, Superior Court
- Use data to support funding and engage new partners and identify systemic inequities
- See clients as humans, regardless of their background
- Engage in discharge planning and in-reach to make sure warm handoffs are happening

**THANK YOU** to everyone who attended this inaugural convening. For additional information on the Criminal Legal System Initiative, please email us at [clsi@homebaseccc.org](mailto:clsi@homebaseccc.org).