

NCSHA 2008 Awards Entry Description

Entry Name: *Re-Entry Partnership Housing Program*

Category Name: *Special Needs Housing – Combating Homelessness*

HFA: *Georgia Department of Community Affairs/Georgia Housing and Finance Authority*

SUMMARY:

An emerging subgroup of the homeless includes convicted felons released from prison. Released felons often fail because of poor or no discharge planning. Many of those who fail, but do not return to prison, are sleeping under bridges and in tents because no available housing options exist.

At the same time, a growing number of convicted felons remain in prison solely because they have no place to live. Georgia is one of only a few states that require convicted felons to secure stable housing prior to release. Currently, 831 felons remain in Georgia's prisons beyond their parole date. They have been there, on average, 305 days beyond the date of their eligibility for release, simply for a lack of housing. Unfortunately, housing placement at release is a difficult challenge that all felons (not just those who are paroled) face. Returning felons rarely have the financial resources or credit history necessary to secure housing. Further, federal laws bar many convicted felons from public housing and federally assisted housing programs. Private tenant selection policies also often screen out individuals with a criminal history, making returning home to family and friends difficult.

The Re-Entry Partnership Housing Program was initiated by a collaborative of state agencies to (1) provide a reasonable best chance for felons released on parole and (2) make available a sound fiscal solution to the cost of housing felons beyond their parole date, simply for lack of housing.

PROGRAM INNOVATION:

The Re-Entry Partnership Housing Program (RPH) is an innovative program that provides housing to convicted felons. This program targets a special population, those convicted felons who remain in prison after the Parole Board has authorized their release solely because they have no place to live. In Georgia, convicted felons can only be released when there is a documented place to live. RPH provides released felons with stable housing and food, even the hard to place felons with special needs, including mental health and substance abuse challenges. The goal of the program is to provide short term financial assistance to help stabilize the re-entry process. Participating housing providers are compensated \$600 per month for up to three months for the room and board of each participating paroled felon. The total assistance per resident is not to exceed \$1,800. The providers connect the parolee with vital services to foster his/her community transition. RPH participants are supervised by a parole officer who works in cooperation with housing providers to provide a stable and supportive environment to ensure a successful re-entry process. Program success (a favorable outcome for each parolee) is very simply measured in terms of whether or not the parolee is meeting his/her terms of parole. In fact, this simplicity is one of the keys to the program's success. Successful providers are rewarded with new placements based on their success level, their capacity, and the special needs of each parolee (including geography). Unsuccessful providers are simply terminated from the program.

EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIPS:

The success of this program is based on the unique partnership between state agencies and community-based housing providers; all meeting a critical need in the successful re-entry of

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convicted felons. Funding for this program was initially made available to the Georgia State Board of Pardons and Paroles through a grant from the Federal Criminal Justice Coordinating Council and the Georgia Criminal Justice Coordinating Council (CJCC). The Board of Pardons and Paroles is responsible for identifying parolees to participate in the program, to secure housing for parolees, and to report back to CJCC. The Georgia Department of Corrections is a critical lead partner responsible for establishing housing criteria and conducting housing site visits. The State Housing Trust Fund for the Homeless (HTF), through its contract with the Department of Community Affairs (DCA), is the administrative agent charged with compensating housing providers and ensuring that the housing provider meets basic contracting and organizational requirements for entering into a contractual relationship with the state. These agencies meet on a regular basis to ensure the program's effectiveness. Currently, a total of thirty-three (33) approved housing providers throughout Georgia are participating, offering housing, employment search assistance, anger management support, substance abuse counseling, mental health and HIV/AIDS services, health services, and other critical services to participating felons.

RESPONSE TO IMPORTANT STATE HOUSING NEED:

The number of convicted felons who fail upon release continues to be a major cause of homelessness. Other convicted felons remain in prison solely because they have no place to live. This number continues to increase; placing an increased burden on the state's correctional system. A total of 831 felons currently remain in prison for an average of 305 days beyond their eligibility date for parole because they have no place to go.

The RPH was developed to assist released felons and to address this stress placed on the state's correctional system. The State Interagency Homeless Coordination Council is currently studying the success of this initiative and may apply lessons learned across all state correctional facilities for all populations discharged.

REPLICABILITY:

The Re-Entry Partnership Housing Program is easily duplicated by states interested in offering housing options to hard to house returning convicted felons. The key to the program's success is the collaborative partnership between various state agencies and community based housing providers. The RPH pilot program was initially funded through a grant from the Federal Criminal Justice Coordinating Council. Recently, that grant has expired and funding has been replaced with state funds from the Department of Corrections as a result of the significant success of parolees and the cost avoidance realized – currently estimated at \$18.8 million dollars to date.

The program also has been met with support at the community level as housing providers must obtain a letter from a local government jurisdiction where properties will be located indicating that the local government is knowledgeable of the housing providers request to participate in the program and that the use of the proposed property is consistent with all local zoning requirements. Further, felons convicted of sex offenses or those with mental illness that require placement within a licensed

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facility are not eligible to participate in the program. Both restrictions limit opposition to the program and, to date, no complaints regarding the parolees have been raised to the partnership.

MEASURABLE BENEFITS/ACHIEVE STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES:

Since 2002, the RPH has placed 516 parolees in the community through July 31, 2008, including 30% who are classified as special needs. This program serves returning convicted felons with substance abuse and mental health challenges. Over 58% of participants have secured employment and almost 16% have completed parole. Program participation provides returning felons with the opportunity to focus on securing employment without the stresses of securing a place to live. As a result, only 5% have had their parole revoked and less than 3% have absconded. Nationally, 30% of those released from state prisons will be re-arrested within 6 months of release. In Georgia, 28% of returning offenders are re-convicted within 3 years of release.

BENEFITS VS COSTS/EFFECTIVE USE OF RESOURCES:

The benefits witnessed by this program clearly outweigh the costs. The Re-Entry Partnership Housing Program cost \$686,000 since the inception of the program in 2002. The amount spent to incarcerate the 516 felons served by this program past their tentative parole month to max out date would have been nearly \$25 million. The cost to house convicted felons past their tentative parole month until entry into the RPH was nearly \$6 million dollars. Thus, the RPH program has saved Georgia taxpayers more than \$18 million. As the program continues to expand, it is believed that cost savings can be sustained by effective parole supervision and intervention.

Beyond the fiscal benefit, the intangible benefits are numerous as individuals are given the chance to develop productive lives, families are re-united, and bonds between parent and child are strengthened. The story of Mr. Cordell Rollins demonstrates the power of this program.

Cordell Rollins entered the Light Community Outreach Center in Winder, Georgia under the Re-Entry Partnership Housing Program on April 6, 2006. He was released from a transitional center in Augusta, Georgia where he was employed at Macaroni Grill. Cordell entered the program because he had no place to live and his immediate family lived in public housing. Cordell participated in the substance abuse groups where he learned how to overcome his drug addiction. He also took anger management classes that were offered at the facility. Cordell obtained a job at Kentucky Fried Chicken in Winder and was later offered a full time job at a construction company in Buford, Georgia. He has been employed with the construction company for 2 years. Cordell remained at the center for more than 3 months, paying his rent and taking on a leadership role. He helped other guests during their stay and helped his mother and brother move to Georgia to address their drug and alcohol abuse challenges. They were also guests at Light Community Outreach Center. His mother also participated in the substance abuse program, found full time employment, and moved out into her own apartment. Cordell left the center on November 13, 2006. He is still employed with the construction company and is engaged to be married. He attends church services regularly at The Light Community Outreach Center.