

Opening Doors: Re-Entry Housing Special Needs Housing: Housing for Persons with Special Needs

Introduction:

The saying “when one door closes, another opens” couldn’t be more appropriate to the efforts underway in Rhode Island to help ‘open doors’ for the formerly incarcerated. Ensuring that when a ‘door’ opens – and these individuals are poised to re-enter society – they are equipped with the tools and resources to succeed and rebuild their lives is critical to the success of re-entry programs for this special population. Recognizing the many challenges that this population faces, this HFA has worked to establish meaningful partnerships with service providers and community partners in our efforts to create homes that are safe, affordable and offer the necessary supports to fully integrate and support these individuals and their families.

The Challenge:

The challenges associated with the development of re-entry housing are many. We all work in challenging environments to create safe, affordable homes, but when these homes are targeted toward this special population, numerous resources and services are required. The obstacles to securing housing for reentering individuals are significant. Supportive services need to be identified and tailored to their needs; transportation and access to services, employment and educational opportunities are necessary; ties to family members and the community at-large must be considered and positively reinforced; and partners must work with community members, municipal officials and others to ensure that formerly incarcerated individuals are embraced and welcomed by their neighbors and the community.

Generally speaking, appropriate homes need to incorporate:

- support services and resources to successfully reintegrate formerly incarcerated individuals;
- reduce recidivism by creating opportunities for ex-offenders to become integral members of the community and society;
- stabilize families of ex-offenders; and
- provide connections and linkages within the community to both fully integrate and support these individuals and their families.

Collaboration:

Success can only be achieved through strong and diverse partnerships. One recent development for formerly incarcerated individuals that illustrates the many challenges, partnerships, and blending of resources and services required is OpenDoors in the state’s capitol city.

Located at 485 Plainfield Street in Providence, OpenDoors Housing is a ***first-of-its-kind development in Rhode Island***. The OpenDoors reentry program uses a holistic approach to support offenders as they prepare to leave prison, return home, and stabilize in the community. The state HFA worked closely with the developer, OpenDoors, a 501(c)3 non-profit organization whose mission is to strengthen communities by supporting the formerly incarcerated, as well as the state’s Housing Resources Commission, RI LISC, Corporation for Supportive Housing, RI Department of Environmental Management (site remediation), the City of Providence, and was able to utilize federal programs and funding such as TCEP and NSP.

Responding to Needs:

Studies have shown that providing permanent, service-enriched homes for those returning to the community after a period of incarceration plays a critical role in helping them successfully integrate back into society and dramatically reduces recidivism. A similar model in Chicago, known as St. Leonard’s Ministries, reported that clients who completed their program had a recidivism rate of 26 percent, as compared to the 59 percent statewide recidivism rate (Urban Institute).

Residents will benefit from the wide variety of support and services provided by our non-profit partner, OpenDoors. Their walk-in resource center is easily accessible and accepts drop-in visits from any formerly incarcerated person. The organization maintains an up-to-date and comprehensive file of resources in major life areas such as housing, employment, education, medical, mental health, substance abuse and transportation. Clients have access to telephones and computers to facilitate communication with employers, family members, and probation or parole officers. Their resource center has a full schedule of programming, ranging from job readiness to financial literacy to support groups. OpenDoors also serves as a temporary address when needed.

A Reentry Case Management program works with participants up to six months prior to release from prison. OpenDoors is contracted through the Rhode Island Department of Corrections (DOC) to provide discharge plans to inmates in the Men's Minimum Security Facility at the DOC. This is done in both individual and group formats in an attempt to reach as many as possible of the over 1,200 discharges per year from that facility. Individual 14-point plans addressing different life-areas are established for clients with longer sentences, while comprehensive written information on available services is provided to group participants who typically have shorter sentences.

The combination of resources, specifically: Employment, Housing, Recovery Services, Financial and Computer Literacy, Civic Participation, Mentoring, Voter Registration and Transportation has proven effective in serving this population in a comprehensive and meaningful way.

Results:

OpenDoors is the state's first large-scale development specifically created to support Rhode Islanders who are returning to the community after incarceration. Besides providing homes and services to help these Rhode Islanders become contributing members of society, this development is breathing new life into the neighborhood by restoring a vacant and abandoned factory into a beautiful building, enhancing the surrounding community and preserving green space.

Utilizing nearly \$1.8 million in federal Tax Credit Exchange Program (TCEP) funds provided under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, as well as other funding sources, OpenDoors Housing consists of 19 service-enriched homes, as well as office space for OpenDoors. Residents will have access to services provided by OpenDoors, including discharge planning for existing inmates at minimum security prisons, one-on-one or group counseling for those already released from prison, employment workshops and training, and tax-preparation assistance.

By repurposing an abandoned and blighted factory building, new homes will be created for Rhode Islanders working to turn their lives around. It's important to create homes that are affordable to low-income Rhode Islanders, but it is equally important to ensure that the residents of OpenDoors have the services needed to improve their quality of life. OpenDoors has become a vital link in the difficult transition from prison to the community. Faith and stable housing are critical to the success of ex-offenders following their release. This exciting new development is a big win for public safety.

The homes at OpenDoors are a prime example of the type of innovative thinking and doing that Rhode Island needs in order to build a brighter future for the families who live and work here. We are not only providing a safe, healthy home environment and access to important services for long-term personal success, but also making smart decisions for sustainable communities by re-using abandoned property and constructing homes where access to jobs and services are within walking distance. This new space creates a stable home environment and promotes economic self-sufficiency by addressing barriers to employment.

How does it respond to the judging criteria:

Innovative: As a first-of-its-kind development in Rhode Island, OpenDoors is truly innovative in its approach to providing safe, healthy homes to the formerly incarcerated.

Replicable: This successful model is easily replicable and meets a growing need that most states face. Nationally, this population has grown dramatically in recent decades while we all are experiencing a shortage of affordable homes.

Responds to an important state housing need: Formerly incarcerated individuals are encountering the same difficult housing and economic conditions as others but with additional challenges based on their special needs. The partnerships created and the development highlighted above provide a meaningful response to a pressing state need for safe, healthy homes tailored to the formerly incarcerated.

Demonstrates measurable benefits to HFA targeted customers: Stated simply, housing for people with special needs works best when combined with services. The emphasis of the program is on ensuring that there is an adequate supply of apartments, addressing the first and most pressing of needs: shelter. By addressing this need, the program frees service providers to concentrate on what they do best: assisting those with special needs or other challenging circumstances. The intent of the program is to provide housing while helping residents become secure and settled participants in their communities.

Has a proven track record of success in the marketplace: Similar efforts in other states have proven effective in supporting this special population, utilizing funding sources and programs in a meaningful way that achieves results.

Provides benefits that outweigh costs: The benefits of having someone have a place to call home cannot be measured in dollars. The benefits to this population and their families are also beneficial to society at large, decreasing recidivism rates, re-connecting individuals with their families and communities and helping this population fully integrate back into society.

Demonstrates effective use of resources: The funding sources included stimulus funding, which also helped to spur the local economy and create construction jobs. Additionally, a vacant and blighted building will now be restored, adding great value to the surrounding community.

Effectively employs partnerships: Our partnership with the OpenDoors LLC, Housing Resources Commission, Corporation for Supportive Housing, DEM, and the City has enabled the program to benefit from shared resources, funding and expertise.

Achieves strategic objectives: Serving all Rhode Islanders who are in need of a home is at the heart of this HFA's mission, and removing barriers for special needs populations is an integral part of our mission.