



HFA: Alaska Housing Finance Corporation (AHFC)
Entry Name: Beyond the Bars
Category: Special Needs Housing
Sub-Category: Housing for Persons with Special Needs

According to Alaska Department of Corrections (DOC), on any given day 44% of their incarcerated population are living with a diagnosed mental illness and 80% are living with a substance use disorder.

The Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority (Trust), an agency [established by Congress](#) to serve Alaskans experiencing mental illness or developmental disabilities ([Trust Beneficiaries](#)), funds several housing programs through Alaska Housing Finance Corporation (AHFC), including \$100,000 for the Discharge Incentive Grant (DIG). Department of Health (DOH) makes up the rest with \$94,865. DIG provides immediate housing support for Beneficiaries exiting DOC facilities in Anchorage but not the rest of the state.

“Prior to statehood in 1959, there were few mental health services available in the territory of Alaska for individuals who experienced mental illness or developmental disabilities. At the time, mental illness was considered a crime.”
– Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority

Our Most Vulnerable People are Behind Bars

Alaska is the largest state by a significant margin but has one of the smallest populations. Many of its communities are not on a road system. That geographic isolation, especially in the severe winters, leads to an acute lack of resources for some of the most vulnerable Alaskans; Trust Beneficiaries.

When Beneficiaries are in crisis, as is true in much of the U.S., law enforcement is often the first, if not only, to respond. In the life-threatening cold, jail may be the safest place in the moment, but is an expensive and unproductive outcome for all involved. The frigid winters might partially explain Alaska’s high recidivism rate (reincarceration after release), often ranked near the top in the nation. Better to be warm in prison than dead on the street from the cold.

Among Beneficiaries, who face significantly longer lengths of incarceration, the recidivism rate is even higher. Without intervention, specifically housing, the most at-risk people will continue the cycle of incarceration, release, instability, and recidivism.

Addressing an Important State Housing Need

Recognizing this cycle and the lack of resources in other parts of the state, DOC approached AHFC in late 2023 with \$250,000 in reentry funds to address housing in six disparate communities. With a very tight turnaround (under six months to spend funds), AHFC identified reentry coalition partners in each community, completed the grant award process, created a new client intake and tracking system, and successfully launched the pilot of the new Reentry Housing Program.

Alaskans exiting DOC should be a positive, but for those who are departing one of the only places they have received the behavioral health services they need, release is frequently temporary. With

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this in mind, AHFC didn't just give money to agencies and walk away, we partnered with them. The reentry coalitions told us what they needed, their capacity, and how AHFC could best support them. AHFC developed and deployed a custom intake system that allowed agencies to enter their clients, track budgets and expenses, and always see how many more people they could help with remaining funds. This also gave AHFC the ability to report to DOC the number of Beneficiaries served, where they were served, and what services were utilized in real time.

Seeing the data-supported impact of the program inspired DOC to continue funding the Reentry Housing program year over year at \$250,000. In addition, the Trust doubled their investment in DIG to \$200,000 and the State of Alaska provided a further \$200,000. Including DOH, funding for reentry housing services went from \$194,865 in 2023 to \$744,865 in 2025.

"I saw the inmates set this whole thing up for all the reentry community partners. They set up all the tables, chairs, and stereo system. You could see in their faces that they were excited to be given this opportunity. Everyone sat patiently and attentively listening. You could tell that this day was extremely important to them."

– Brenda Vu, Grant Administrator for the Reentry Program

Innovative: More Than Just Statistics

While it is crucial to track the outcomes of interventions, it is also important not to overlook the individuals involved. The services these programs provide are not just numbers in a spreadsheet; each is a life, often at a precarious crossroads. AHFC's program lead and grant administrator, who manage the Reentry and DIG program, attend resource fairs held at various correctional facilities.

These events are set up similar to a job fair. The purpose is to bring together community partners and inmates prior to release to discuss their needs, the resources available, and how to access them. The benefits go both ways as this provides valuable feedback for the providers on barriers, such as online-only applications or phone systems that auto-reject correction facility calls. This step is also essential in building trust with the population, especially Beneficiaries, and getting a full understanding their specific needs as they near release.

As our program lead Jennifer Smerud put it, "Providing this connection to the outside world is important to the individuals who were homeless or isolated at the time of sentencing; they weren't doing ok on the outside, and without these connections they would be set up to fail before having a chance to start."

AHFC's senior staff toured the Palmer Correctional Center in 2024 and discussed further partnerships with DOC for housing interventions. This tour included the minimum-security side of the prison, the various workshops and classrooms, but also went behind the fencing and barricades of the medium-security facilities.

Seeing behind the bars underscored what it means to house Trust Beneficiaries with non-Trust incarcerated individuals. People with developmental disabilities room with and spend significant

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time around active gang members, drug dealers, or worse.

A 2014 study of Trust Beneficiaries incarcerated in Alaska¹, found that Trust Beneficiaries constituted 65 percent of the over 60,000 individuals incarcerated at the time. These were individuals who entered, exited, or resided in an Alaska DOC facility between 2008 and 2012. Trust Beneficiaries were discovered to be significantly more likely to be convicted of a felony, and had a longer median stay than other offenders; nearly twice as long in felony cases. While this study is dated now and steps have been taken toward a solution, the fact remains that Alaska's prison system is acting as the largest provider of mental health services in the state. In order to address this systemic failure, the DIG and Reentry Housing program act as a bridge between DOC mental health services, and stable housing, services, and providers on the outside.

Program Impact

The Discharge Incentive Grant (DIG) has been quietly addressing the needs of Trust Beneficiaries exiting corrections for years and has averaged a little over 100 clients served per year over the last five. The DIG recidivism rate hovers around 30% compared against 65% for DOC's overall rate of reincarceration.

The Reentry Program, while only in its third year, has already had an outsized effect on addressing the plight of Beneficiaries exiting corrections. Over its first two years, 165 households consisting of 261 individuals, 30 of which were children, have been assisted across ten communities.

Housing interventions work. An analysis AHFC did in 2012 found that the recidivism rate flipped from two-thirds being reincarcerated, to only a third when reentry services were accessed. Utilizing technology to bridge the capacity gap for our more isolated partners, we are able to get these services into the communities that have needed them for a long time.

Alaska is vast, and our communities are divided by more than just distance. The climates are different, the access to basic resources vary wildly, and what works for urban hubs is doubtful to work for rural Alaska. Allowing partners input in how to develop these programs, not only to meet the needs of the Beneficiaries, but to do so in a way that aligns with their communities' resources and capacity has been highly effective. Directly engaging with partners and Beneficiaries has created an environment that not only fosters success, but does so efficiently and at a lower cost. Our partners tell us what they can reasonably spend, their capacity, and how AHFC can best support them. Then we do it.

Reducing recidivism starts with stable housing and preventing reincarceration benefits all Alaskans. It reduces costs to tax payers, improves the lives of those who experienced incarceration, and returns citizens to their families and community. It doesn't punish Trust Beneficiaries for needing just a little more help.

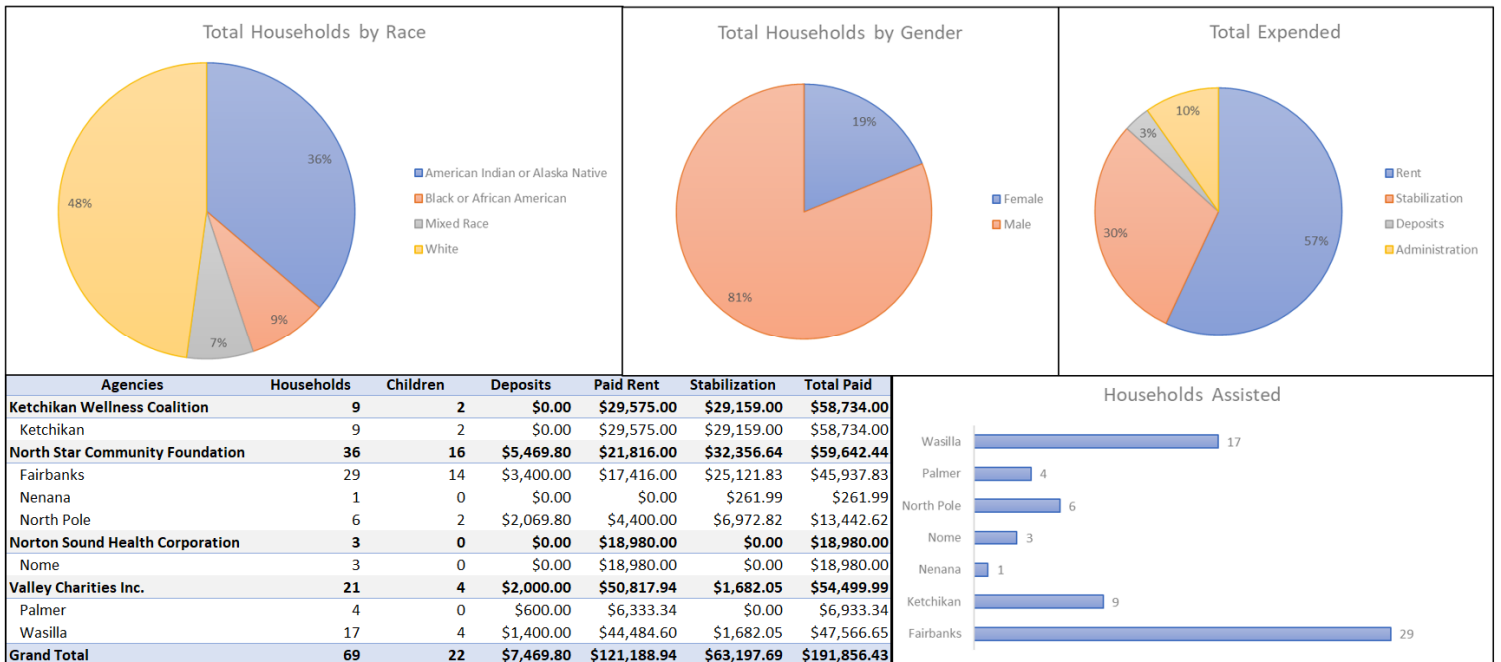
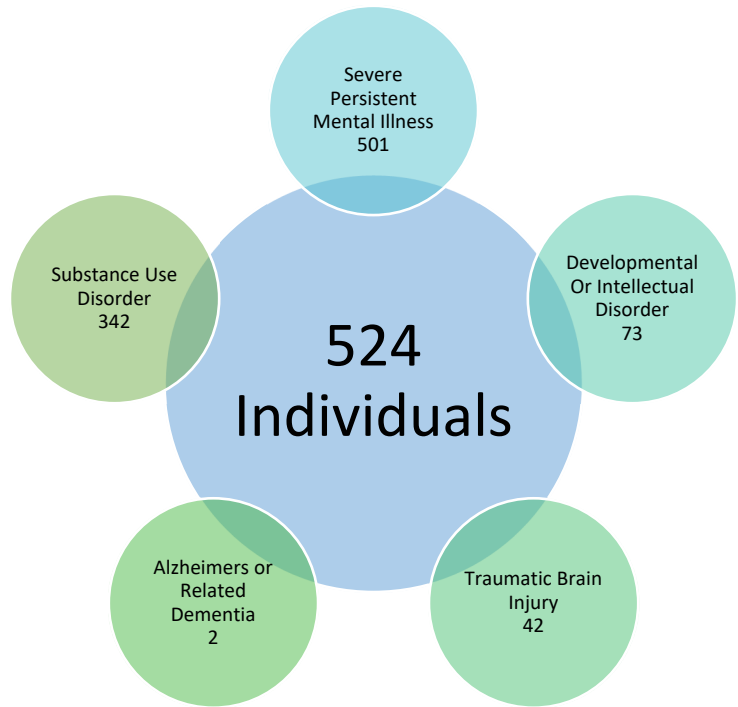
¹ Hornby, H., Rubin, M., & Zeller, D. (2014). (rep.). *TRUST BENEFICIARIES IN ALASKA'S DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS* (pp. 1–200). South Portland, ME: Hornby Zeller Associates, Inc.

Visual Aids:

From 2021-2025 Individuals who met the following criteria were enrolled in Discharge Incentive Grant:

1. *Discharging from Anchorage Correctional Complex;*
2. *Homeless at the time of exit;*
3. *Diagnosed with one or more brain disorders; and*
4. *Lacking community connections or resources to self-resolve their housing.*

These individuals were significantly more likely to stay housed and out of corrections than the general population of offenders.



A simple dashboard snapshot sent to Department of Corrections from the FY24 Reentry Pilot Program



Alaska Housing Finance Corporation sends staff to Department of Corrections (DOC) facilities to discuss potential housing solutions or attend resource fairs to connect directly with Trust Beneficiaries. Three commissioners were included in the below tour.



Marsha Oss

From: Marsha Oss
Sent: Friday, December 6, 2024 7:28 AM
To: [REDACTED]
Subject: [REDACTED]

Hey this is a thank you note going to the Alaska trust authority I want to thank you for all your help that you've done getting me clothing and hygiene stuff it's greatly appreciated without you guys I would have gotten out with nothing again thank you for all the warm clothes and thank you for helping me with hygiene materials also shampoo body soaps. This program has been a great help for me to getting me back started on my feet Sent from my iPhone

Marsha Oss

From: Marsha Oss
Sent: Friday, December 6, 2024 10:36 PM
To: [REDACTED]
Subject: [REDACTED]

I [REDACTED] want to thank Alaska trust authority and ms marsha for all the help and assistance that you have provided and given to the people who are in need and the direction of better living and help with rental assistance and I first hand want to say thank you and god bless both parties and helping me get back on track and down the right path and also happy holidays from yours truly [REDACTED] Sent from my iPhone

To whom it may concern.

I wanted to express my appreciation to Alaska Trust Authority. The help the trust has given me with move-in cost deposit and 3 months rent.

Their generosity has gotten me on my way to self-sustained lifestyles, upon re-entering into society and left with nothing.

Within those few months of help, I was able to find work and get myself through school. Now being well on my way to completing school, with a permanent position in local 375 Union.

Thank you. Sincerely, [REDACTED]

I would like to thank the Alaska Trust Authority from the bottom of my heart for allowing Marsha Oss to help me and my 2 son's, one 14 year old and one 7 month old, get back on our feet. I've been struggling for about 6 years with addiction and just recently turned my life around for good. I just graduated a yearlong treatment with Wellness Court and now have a full time job at the Fairbanks Rescue Mission. Your program has helped me with my deposit for my first apartment that I've had in a very long time. I also got help with so much more; my electric deposit, and everything to make my apartment a home for me and my 2 kids. We were able to get a beautiful couch, a queen bed frame, mattress, bedding for all of us, kitchen dishware, bathroom necessities, a bed for my baby, pots and pans, a T.V for our living room, a vacuum, microwave, and so much more. We now have everything we need to get by and I couldn't be more excited and grateful to be able to provide my kids with the necessities that they need and deserve and now I am able to give them a life they deserve thanks to your program for giving us the means to do so.

Sincerely,
[REDACTED]
Subject: Marsha Oss
Trust authority thanks

CAUTION: This email originated from outside of the organization. Do not click links or open attachments unless you recognize the sender and know the content is safe.

Hello, my name [REDACTED] I was recently released from incarceration this past year and through great people like Marsha Oss and the trust committee I have been able to reintegrate myself back into society, without help from this committee and Marsha I honestly don't know where I would be since my recent conviction I have always live life on the wrong side of society only up until my release this time I've never had any real support from anyone who truly wants to see me succeed, so the keys to success have always felt outside of my grasp, but this time around has been different with the support of this committee and Marsha I feel as though I can finally be a functioning member of society, so thank you for all the support and help in my path to success

Thank you letters sent to one of the Reentry Program partners from clients they assisted.

Dear Mr. Governor,

My name is [REDACTED] I am currently at the Northstar Center in Ester where I have been given the opportunity to get a job while finishing up my incarceration. I am lucky enough to have gotten a Trailer Mechanics position at Black Gold Express, a local Trucking Company. If it was not for your support with the Re-entry program and the understanding, patience, and kind heartedness of Marsha Oss this great career opportunity would be out of my reach. But through your "Hand-up not Hand-out" Program yourself, Marsha, and her team, have supplied me with the vital essentials needed for me to be able to carry out my tasks at work, with everything from new boots, fire resistant clothing, tool box and every tool that I need to succeed at my new career has shown me for the first time in my 41 years in this beautiful state of ours that I'm not just another cog in a ever turning wheel but that with people like you and Marsha who actually take the time to truly help their community and the people in it even the incarcerated ones like myself gives me hope for our great state of Alaska so from the bottom of my heart Thank You Sir for all your support we need more people like You and Marsha looking out for the greater good of our community.

Letters thanking Governor Dunleavy directly, sent to our Reentry partner

To the Governor Dunleavy of Alaska,

I [REDACTED] want to thank you personally for everything you have done for me since January as I was released from the North Star residential center. Working with Marsha has been an amazing experience and i'm Very Blessed To have her on my side.

Which in return I got to meet the Mayor of Fairbanks At my graduation from the laborers training school. That was definitely an honor!! A day I will cherish forever!

The hard work and dedication to the City of Fairbanks definitely shows in my favor and i'm Proud and Honored to represent your hard work And doing well for myself and my community!! If I can be of any service to you Or the city of Fairbanks I would be Honor to serve you, thank you again!

Respectfully yours,



Governor Dunleavy,

I hope this message finds you well. I am currently obtaining services through the Re-Entry Coalition, as a Fairbanks resident who was released from incarceration in March of 2024. Since my release, I have enrolled in UAF as a pre-law student, to finish my BA in Political Science, with the intent to pursue a graduate degree in law, upon completion of my undergraduate degree.

Although I have limited resources, as a consequence of my previous choices, I have been greatly supported by the Re-Entry Coalition in my decision to continue my pursuit of higher education. Thank you very much, for the grant which funded the purchase of my laptop and printer as school supplies. These are costly items which I otherwise would not have access to, if not for your assistance. They will be very useful in the next steps on my journey to recover my purpose, and contribute to my community.

I'm incredibly grateful that organizations like the Re-Entry Coalition, and grants like these, are available to Alaska residents seeking to successfully rehabilitate their lives.

Thank you for your time.

Best,



My name is [REDACTED] and I would like to take the time to thank you for allocating funds to reentry coalition. Because of this I am able to not only work for a great company, but also advance to a better paying position as a diesel mechanic. With out the tools you helped me receive I would not be able to even apply for the position. I was an addict for 20 years. I've been clean for almost 4 years now. Having gainful employment is vital to my recovery. It makes it so I can pay my bills and have money to live. So in closing I would like to tank you again.