

Many Inmates Move from Prison to Shelters, Despite Efforts to Get Them Homes

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Xena Grandichelli did four months in Rikers for assault and has spent two years in a shelter since her release.

When Fred Henderson left prison in 2009, he wheeled himself out of his life behind bars and into the web of shelters, three-quarter houses and city bureaucracy that confronts people discharged from the correctional system. Today, Henderson is still living in squalor, abandoned by his former three-quarter house operator and unable to find a home to call his own.

For Henderson and many formerly incarcerated people like him, the hardship does not end when they're done doing time.

"It's like living in a maze," Henderson, 58, says. "The shelter system is worse than prison. At least in prison you know how long you're gonna be in there and then you get released. In the shelter system, you're allegedly free, but you're not. It's like doing another sentence."

After serving 10 years for a host of bank robberies throughout the tri-state area, Henderson was released from New York State's Franklin Correctional Facility in September of 2009. Henderson spent three years living at the Wards Island Shelter, a stepping-stone for the recently released that is notorious for lawlessness and violence—the NYPD documented 27 felony assaults at the

facility in 2013. After parole officers rebuffed his repeated requests to be relocated, Henderson decided to take matters into his own hands, willfully violating his parole to get in front of a judge and seek reassignment.

Since then, Henderson has lived in the mess of the three-quarter house system, an unregulated network of privately operated, for-profit residences that often bill themselves as inclusive drug-treatment programs but provide few services, if any.

Henderson, who is largely bound to a wheelchair after suffering a botched hip surgery in prison, was admitted to three-quarter house shelters at 413 E. 152nd St. and 2640 Third Avenue operated by the drug-rehabilitation conglomerate Narco Freedom. Just over a year later, Narco Freedom was indicted for stealing \$27 million from Medicaid, among other charges of kickbacks and insurance fraud.

In September of 2015, the Human Resources Administration (HRA) appointed Samaritan DayTop Village to take over Narco Freedom's facilities and secure permanent housing for its tenants. Only 258 of Narco Freedom's 1,100 victims have found new places to live.

Henderson is not one of them. He remains in a building nominally overseen by a court-appointed landlord.

“You start to wonder if you’re ever going to be able to live like a normal person,” says Henderson, who must struggle up two flights of stairs while the building’s elevator remains broken and endure the nightly company of squatters. He was forced to sleep in his wheelchair for three weeks because his old room was infested with bed bugs. He’s changed rooms but the building’s infestation persists. “I’ve been doing this for almost eight years. You start to lose hope.”

For transgender rights activist Xena Grandichelli, the journey has been equally difficult.

In October of 2014, Grandichelli, 56, was arrested on an assault charge, and spent four months on Rikers Island before the case ended without a conviction. Upon her release from jail, she was given \$40 and offered no guidance for how to secure housing. She spent her first night outside of jail at a drop-in center in Manhattan, unable to find a bed and unable to sleep sitting up in a chair because of a lingering knee injury. After a few nights in between the drop-in center and other emergency shelters, Grandichelli was placed at the CAMBA Broadway House Women’s Shelter in Bushwick, Brooklyn, where she’s lived for nearly two years.

The shelter environment is hostile for transgender women, says Grandichelli, who says other residents have called her slurs and threatened her with violence—one even threatened to stab Grandichelli in her sleep. When she filed a complaint, the staff ignored her, she said. “There’s times when I’m ready to walk out and actually live on the street, because I’ve had it with so much of the garbage,” Grandichelli says.

What meets you at the gates of freedom?

Upon leaving the criminal justice system, formerly incarcerated men and women have few options to keep them out of the cold. Those without family to take them in must often wait months if not years in the shelter or three-quarter house system before they secure stable, affordable housing. There is little room in New York’s housing market—which currently leaves at least 60,000 people homeless each night—and inadequate public assistance to accommodate people reentering society after a life in prison.

“You’ve got this kind of perfect storm,” says Ann Jacobs, the director of the Prison Reentry Institute at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. “We have a really expensive, tight housing market and people who come out of heavily institutionalized backgrounds who have been out of circulation for a long enough time. They may never have had a lease or utility bill in their name before they went in and now they come out and have to construct every aspect of their life with all of the collateral consequences of conviction.”

Last year, 25,000 people were discharged from the New York State prison system, according to data from the Department of Corrections and Community Supervision. An additional 68,000 were released from city correctional facilities, according to the New York City Mayor’s Management Report. Although most people who are discharged return to families, there are three

options for those who cannot: “They can go to the shelter system, three-quarter houses or to the street,” Jacobs says.

The number of formerly incarcerated people diverted to shelters and the three-quarter house system is unclear. (City Limits in August filed a request under the Freedom of Information Law to the city’s Human Resources Administration for data on the number of people entering shelters who reported a recent prison or jail stint; the agency in January told us they did not have reliable data.)

A 2002 study by University of Pennsylvania researchers examined the incidence of shelter use and reincarceration among 48,424 people released from New York state prisons between 1995 and 1998, finding that 11.4 percent of respondents reported a stay in the shelter system, and 32.8 percent returned to prison two years after release. The study also suggests that there is a revolving door between prison and shelters: 45 percent of those who reported shelter use prior to incarceration—6.5 percent of all respondents—experienced subsequent stays in shelters after release.

“If you put somebody who’s not going to have any support system in an environment like a shelter, the risk is going to be much higher that they go back to what they know, which are the same kind of activities that got them locked up,” says Stephen Metraux, the lead author of the study.

The Department of Corrections Parole Handbook acknowledges that “Placement in emergency housing or a shelter is not a preferred residence program, and so, your Parole Officer will help you identify possible residences with family or friends if you have nowhere to live.”

But Erin Burns, senior program manager at the Corporation for Supportive Housing (CSH), a national non-profit that helps people living in homelessness and extreme poverty by creating supportive housing, says there is often nowhere else for people to be released.

“No amount of discharge planning is going to get folks housing if there’s no housing on the back end,” she says.

From what Henderson has observed—and as many of the people our reporters spoke with have corroborated, including one case manager who estimated the number may be as high as 60 percent to 70 percent—correctional facilities are still actively discharging people to shelters.

“They’re using the shelters as a dumping ground,” Henderson says.

The way out, on paper

The most promising means for residents to escape the shelter system may be the city’s voucher programs. These include the Special Exit and Prevention Supplement (SEPS), designed for homeless single adults and couples, and Living in Communities (LINC), which targets families with children, elderly individuals and victims of domestic abuse who are homeless. Unfortunately for Henderson, Grandichelli and thousands of other homeless residents with idle papers, the city’s voucher programs have fallen short of expectations.

“The whole concept of vouchers is to enable people to get out of the shelter system, which is expensive and not an appropriate

place for long term living,” says Eric Tars, a senior attorney at the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty. “Instead we are seeing that people are looking, certainly doing their due diligence to try and find housing, but the landlords are shutting it down,” he says.

Henderson and the other residents of 2640 Third Ave., now controlled by Chapter 7 bankruptcy trustee Alan Nisselson, were given priority SEPS vouchers in April 2015.

In March of 2016, HRA connected Henderson with a housing specialist from Rapid Re-Housing, a program that provides services to homeless or at-risk individuals. Henderson had limited contact with his housing specialist when first assigned. Since June, he has placed several calls and sent two emails to the agency, he says. He is still waiting for a callback.

Without the assistance of Rapid Re-Housing, Henderson and other residents of 2640 Third Ave. began dialing landlords but heard a familiar response.

“When we tried to use the voucher or tried to go to certain places, the landlords knew nothing about it,” he says about the SEPS program. “Like, ‘What’s that? We know about LINC, but we don’t know about that.’” He pointed blame squarely at the mayor’s office, DHS and HRA. “Nobody promoted this voucher,” he says. “Nobody who went to the landlord association said ‘We have this new voucher, it’s the same as the LINC.’”

Xena Grandichelli’s efforts to use her LINC voucher have also been fruitless. She blames the CAMBA administration, which she called unresponsive, disorganized and prejudiced against transgender people. Grandichelli says she has seen other residents come and go, arriving at the shelter and receiving housing placements before her, regardless of her long stay and medical needs. Her first assigned caseworker told her she wasn’t a priority, and her second caseworker has also been unhelpful.

“She’s just blatantly telling me, ‘I don’t know,’ or ‘You got to take that up with the director,’” Grandichelli says.

After receiving her voucher, Grandichelli was provided with what she believes is an outdated list of landlords and realtors—when Grandichelli called several of the rental agencies she was told those shelter providers had listed the same realtors for the last 20 years and that they were no longer housing voucher recipients. She has been given little assistance from her housing specialist, she says, and has no option but to find and contact landlords on her own.

CAMBA declined to comment. A spokesperson for the Department of Homeless Services told City Limits: “The Department of Homeless Services is currently working with this individual to address the concerns that she has raised with her shelter provider.”

Most landlords have refused to take her LINC voucher, which is worth \$1268 a month. (Grandichelli receives an additional \$215 in HRA shelter allowance.) Landlords’ refusals are straightforward. “They just say, we don’t accept that voucher, or we don’t deal with that program,” she says.

Grandichelli’s inability to apply her voucher, despite having all of her paperwork and a letter from her doctor recommending her for

immediate placement, has soured her optimism. “We were told that we would be housed in nine months,” Grandichelli says. “That turned out to be a fable, because I’m still there.”

But not everyone is as discouraged. Steven Johnson, 49, who was incarcerated for manslaughter when he was 22 and spent over 20 years in prison, has a criminal record and minimal income but remains optimistic he will soon have a home to call his own. “It would mean everything,” Johnson said. “My own place to live, take off my shoes, take a shower. I never have my own privacy. As a grown man, I need that.”

Johnson has been homeless since he completed his prison sentence in October of 2015, shuffling between month-long stints at family members’ houses before spending three months at the DHS-operated Skyway Men’s Shelter in South Ozone Park. He is currently living at the Holiday Inn Express in Maspeth, Queens.

“The conditions here are pretty good,” Johnson says. “It’s a top-of-the-line hotel. You have wall-to-wall carpeting and maids to come in and clean.”

Johnson earns about \$270 a week working maintenance for the World Trade Center and stocking shelves at Claudia Discount, a grocery store in the Bronx. His wage is not enough to afford an apartment in New York City, but with the assistance of a SEPS voucher, Johnson hopes his time as a nomad will soon come to an end.

“I finally got my voucher so I feel like I’m going to move over that hump,” he says. “I just feel like my hard work paid off because you know since I’ve been out I’ve just been working. Work, work work, work everyday and finally I found something.”

Johnson realizes that even with the maximum \$1,213 housing voucher for a single household, finding a place to live in New York City will be a challenge.

“It might be a problem because the rent is kind of high, but everywhere you go is the same thing,” he says. “I’m gonna keep on trying. I might have to settle for a room for now.”

“No vouchers”

Source of income discrimination is illegal in New York City. If landlords own buildings with more than six units, the New York City Human Rights Law forbids them from discriminating against tenants who intend to pay their rent with lawful income, whether the income is from salaried work or government vouchers.

It’s not clear why or how often vouchers are applied and not accepted. What is clear is that, although the practice is illegal, the consequences of source of income discrimination have yet to strike fear in landlord’s hearts.

“Enforcement is extremely lacking,” says Tars. “Landlords feel free—even if they aren’t saying ‘no vouchers’ right on their advertisements—they are still doing it in practice when they find out what the source of income is.”

The city did announce last week that it was charging five landlords who control a combined 20,000 apartments with repeatedly refusing to accept vouchers. But advocates say the problem is larger than that.

Some landlords may be hesitant to accept LINC vouchers because of the abrupt ending of Mayor Bloomberg's Advantage Program, which began in 2007. After funding for the program dried up in 2011, many families were unable to sustain rent payments without the city's assistance, leaving thousands suddenly homeless and many landlords disinclined to accept future voucher-holding tenants.

As of November of 2015, when data was last available, 80 percent of LINC vouchers remained unused, according to data from the Department of Homeless Services. But HRA's outlook is optimistic: "Since October of 2014 the LINC, SEPS and other city rental assistance programs have helped 48,000 New Yorkers to avoid or exit shelter and transition to permanent housing," said HRA spokesperson Lourdes Centeno in a statement sent to City Limits. "We are joining forces with the City Commission on Human Rights to ensure that every New Yorker has equal housing opportunities regardless of their source of income."

The New York Attorney General's Office and the New York City Commission on Human Rights (CCHR), in coordination with housing and criminal justice activists, have begun to address source of income discrimination. The CCHR has investigated more than 114 cases of source of income discrimination this year, up from a total of 90 in 2015 and 22 in 2014. The AG's office has also brought investigations against real-estate companies throughout the state, and reached settlements requiring those companies to accept applicants with vouchers and enact new policies going forward.

"We believe our aggressive enforcement efforts have sent a clear message to real estate companies that discriminating against people based on their source of income will not be tolerated," says Assistant Attorney General Sandra Pullman in an emailed statement.

But it can be hard to assess the impact of these actions without comprehensive data. No government agency or nonprofit organization has collected data on the number of New York landlords who have refused housing vouchers or the number of complaints filed by housing applicants for discrimination.

Even when enforcement action is taken, punishment is light. Although the Human Rights Commission can impose civil fines of up to \$125,000 per violation and \$250,000 for a "willful, wanton or malicious act," a Daily News investigation conducted in December of 2015 found that the penalties levied by CCHR in cases of source of income discrimination averaged \$5,441. The CCHR resolved 157 cases resolved since 2008: 62 percent resulted in zero financial penalty against the landlord or brokers.

High hopes for housing alternatives

The financial and social barriers that confront formerly incarcerated people looking for housing and the high incidence of substance abuse and mental health disorders among the discharged population require solutions beyond affordable and market rate housing options. To break the cycle of homelessness and reincarceration many experience, housing and criminal justice advocates are calling upon New York City and New York State to expand the number of supportive housing units available to ex-offenders.

"Without the support that goes with your supportive housing, someone with a criminal justice background will not be able to succeed in the community," says Kristin Miller, a director at the Corporation for Supportive Housing. "In addition to having special needs, like mental health disorders, substance abuse in their history and medical issues, they also face a challenging time finding affordable housing and employment."

Pilot programs that have provided formerly incarcerated people supportive housing—permanent, affordable housing that provides on-site medical, rehabilitation and counseling services—present encouraging evidence.

In 2008, Frequent User Services Enhancement (FUSE), a CSH initiative that identifies individuals with long histories of involvement in the health, shelter or jail systems, launched a New York City pilot that placed 200 individuals with four or more jail and shelter stays in supportive housing units across the city. A year later, 91 percent of participants remained in housing. Participants also spent about 147 fewer days in shelter and 19 fewer days incarcerated than a comparison group over a two-year period.

The reduced burden on jails and health services has saved substantial money, driving annual costs for inpatient crisis medical and behavioral services down by \$7,308 per person per year.

Jeff Nemetsky, the Executive Director of Brooklyn Community Housing and Services (BCHS), a supportive-housing provider in Bedford-Stuyvesant that was part of the FUSE pilot, observed that participation in a community allowed residents to develop social skills and relearn to trust others after years spent walled off from society and wary of their neighbors.

"To be isolated in that way, you're almost in a state of perpetual crisis," he says. "Almost by definition you're not creating a support network for yourself and you're going to live in the world in a precarious state where you don't have comfort or confidence in yourself and the future."

Until he was admitted to BCHS in December of 2009, William Sostre had spent most of his adult life addicted to drugs and unable to break the cycle of homelessness, living in prison, jail, shelters, shooting galleries or the streets.

"I was raised in jail," said Sostre, 63, who started using drugs when he was 13 and was incarcerated for the first time four years later. "Once I get on drugs and I'm on the streets, I don't care what I do. I sleep anywhere."

Sostre, who was often released to Wards Island, Bellevue Hospital or dropped off at the Port Authority where drug dealers could be found waiting in the wings, says that supportive housing has allowed him to let go of fear and social hostility.

"You come in here ready to tear someone up if they violate you because that's the mentality you have from jail," he said. "I learned how to open up to people and put that guard down."

Six years since he entered BCHS, Sostre is sober, has become a mentor to his fellow residents and has reconnected with his family.

“Being here has given me time to think,” he says. “I have my own room. I read. I write. I can actually plan things out and try to set up things to do with my daughters and granddaughters. I learned to be at peace with myself.”

BCHS is one of a handful of supportive housing services in New York City that together provide between 500 to 750 units to the criminal-justice involved population, according to Burns. While supportive housing has proven to be a successful and cost effective way to end the cycle of homelessness and incarceration, there is a tremendous lack of available units.

A CSH assessment found that four out of every five people eligible for supportive housing must remain in shelters or on the street because of the shortage. The mayor and governor made recent commitments to create tens of thousands of supportive housing units over the next 15 years, but long-term funding for development is currently in a legislative stalemate.

Advocates caution that, though promising, supportive housing is not a one-size-fits-all solution and must be combined with reforms to NYCHA policies excluding ex-offenders, better enforcement of laws against source-of-income discrimination, the expansion of the city’s voucher program and increased oversight and services in the city’s shelter and three-quarter house systems.

“Supportive housing is a large component of the strategy, but it’s just a piece of the puzzle,” says Jacobs. “We have to come up with new approaches that are inclusive and responsive to different people’s circumstances.”

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A home to call one’s own

The retribution and rehabilitation that inmates endure behind bars is supposed to reform and ready prisoners for a second shot. For many, having a home is the key they need to unlock a secure and productive life.

“You come out of jail and you can go into a home, that means everything,” Henderson says. “Most people come out and they don’t have structure. It gives you a sense of responsibility. A house or an apartment is a responsibility.”

The challenge of housing formerly incarcerated people is complex; a messy intersection between the criminal justice system, housing market and public assistance. But to Henderson, the cycle of homelessness has a clear explanation.

“They say a person without a plan plans to fail,” he says. “I say a person without a home goes back to the only home he knows: a cardboard box or a jail cell.”