Promising Practices Brief

HARVARD Kennedy School
Government Performance Lab

How Colorado is Creating Housing Pathways After Prison

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Formerly incarcerated Coloradans face substantial barriers to securing safe and stable housing, leaving many without a place to live upon release.[1] And when formerly incarcerated people experience homelessness, they are more likely to be arrested and incarcerated again.[2]

In 2023, the Harvard Kennedy School's Government Performance Lab (GPL) began working with the Colorado Department of Corrections (CDOC) to identify people in their system most at risk of being released without a stable place to live and to target housing resources to prevent them from exiting into homelessness. Through this work, the GPL and CDOC sought to answer the following core questions:

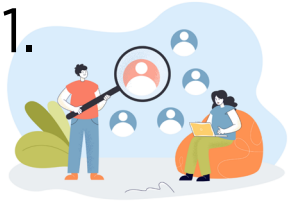
1. Is the Department of Corrections able to effectively **identify people who are incarcerated and at high risk** of experiencing homelessness upon release? What tools are used to identify high-risk clients, and how is this data tracked?
2. What **housing resources are currently available** to people exiting the state's prison system? Are those with the greatest needs being effectively prioritized and connected to these resources?
3. What **new or reallocated housing resources** could be leveraged to better address unmet housing and service needs among reentry clients with the greatest needs?

By the end of a 12-month implementation period, 16 CDOC facilities had adopted a new Housing Stability Assessment developed with the GPL. During this period, **staff assessed 635 people exiting prison, 182 of whom were determined to be at high risk of exiting into homelessness.**

The GPL also worked with CDOC to develop a new referral pathway that connects people with a high risk of experiencing homelessness to the state's limited supportive housing units. Through the initial pilot, 33 people have been placed in supportive housing. CDOC plans to place people in additional units as they become available. This publication outlines Colorado's three-step approach to supporting people exiting prison at risk of homelessness, offering a model that other jurisdictions can adapt to their systems.

Strengthening Reentry Planning to Prevent Homelessness: Three Key Steps

1.



Identify People at Risk of Homelessness

2.



Map Available Resources

3.



Unlock Additional Housing Opportunities

Background: Colorado's Reentry Initiatives

In 2022, Colorado Governor Jared Polis made reducing homelessness among people returning from prison a key priority of the state's Cabinet Working Group on Reducing Homelessness. Through this interagency initiative, CDOC has worked directly with the state's Division of Housing, which funds subsidized housing, including long-term permanent supportive housing (PSH) programs across Colorado.

In 2023, the GPL began working with CDOC to analyze existing data sources to identify the people exiting the prison system into homelessness. In Colorado, nearly one in five people exiting prison experience homelessness in their first year on parole.* In fiscal year 2024, 1,040 people exiting Colorado prisons experienced homelessness in their first year post-release. Of those, 616 people experienced homelessness immediately after being released, while 424 people experienced homelessness after an initial placement into transitional or stable housing.

The GPL also conducted a comprehensive review of CDOC's existing transition planning program to identify areas where pre-release planning could better identify and support people at risk of experiencing homelessness upon release. The GPL reviewed program documentation^ and conducted 53 in-depth interviews with program staff and CDOC leadership.

RESTORE: CDOC's Pre-Release Transition Program

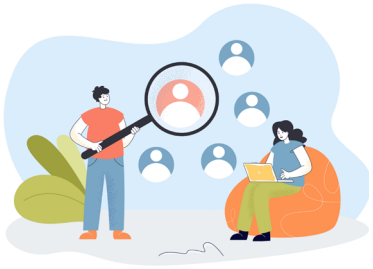
Through Colorado's transition planning program, Reformative, Engaging System of Transitional Opportunities for Reentry (RESTORE), currently incarcerated people receive case management from release case managers and access to resources such as workforce development courses and resume-writing workshops.

To be eligible for RESTORE, a person currently incarcerated in CDOC facilities must either be: 1) within six months of their release or 2) tabled for release pending parole board approval, which could require an approved parole plan. Through RESTORE, clients complete a transitional release plan and then receive individualized case management and referrals to community services based on their unique needs.

At the start of the GPL's technical assistance, RESTORE was not consistently assessing clients' risk of homelessness upon release. Release case managers often had conversations with clients about risk factors and past episodes of homelessness, but this information was not used to systematically identify or target resources for those at risk of exiting into homelessness. This publication outlines the three steps that CDOC, with GPL support, took to create a system that identifies and supports people at a high risk of experiencing homelessness post-release.

* GPL analysis of CDOC data on housing outcomes for people released from incarceration.

^ Documents reviewed included: CDOC's transitional release plan template and handbook, quarterly transitional release program reports, community reentry services quarterly reports, risk of recidivism assessment tool, and administrative regulations and relevant legislation.



Step 1: Identify People at Risk of Homelessness

In the United States, formerly incarcerated people are nearly 10 times more likely to experience homelessness than the general population — and the risk of homelessness is greatest in the period just after release.[3] Upon reentry, individuals face systemic barriers to securing housing in both private and publicly subsidized markets *(see sidebar)*. Individuals who exit prison into homelessness, or become homeless after release, have difficulty accessing federal housing resources and benefits, and face the criminalization of homelessness, making them more likely to be rearrested.[4]

To understand the pathways of currently incarcerated people into homelessness upon release, corrections agencies should look to **historical data on homelessness among former clients.** Because state corrections agencies tend to address housing on an individual, case-by-case basis, they often do not have insight into statewide trends. And because individuals on parole may not always report their housing situations accurately, it is difficult to understand the full picture of who exits prison into homelessness — this data requires better cleaning, review, and analysis.

Without analyzing data on who is experiencing homelessness following release, agencies like CDOC are limited in their ability to proactively identify people at risk of experiencing homelessness upon release. While agencies may not have complete data on the housing outcomes of former clients, many do collect some level of information on where clients go post-release, providing a useful starting point.

The GPL worked with CDOC to use existing data fields to identify common factors across people who experienced homelessness after release. Using this data, the GPL developed and implemented an evaluation tool — the Housing Stability Assessment — to help release case managers identify people who would benefit from additional support prior to their release.

Barriers to Stable Housing Post-Release

- **Private market barriers:** Background checks, stigma, and property owner preferences often lead to rejected rental applications for people with criminal records.[5] Even when people with criminal histories overcome these application hurdles, barriers to employment frequently make it difficult for them to afford market-rate rents.[6]

- **Public resource barriers:** Formerly incarcerated people face restrictions on accessing many subsidized housing programs, with certain programs disqualifying people with specific criminal convictions, such as sex or drug offenses.[7] Subsidized supportive housing programs, the most intensive interventions for people with behavioral or physical health needs, often are only available to individuals who are currently experiencing chronic homelessness or use it as criteria when prioritizing access to resources. As a result, people leaving institutional settings, including prison, often do not qualify for or are not prioritized for these resources.



Identifying Risk Factors for Homelessness

The first step in being able to identify someone at risk of exiting prison into homelessness involves understanding what factors make them more likely to experience homelessness.

The GPL worked with CDOC's data team to analyze data that was already being collected to gain a deeper understanding of which clients historically exited prison into homelessness. While CDOC staff already tracked the number of people on parole experiencing homelessness at a given time, the new analysis used data from every post-release parole check-in to capture clients' full housing histories — including when clients became homeless, how long they remained so, and whether homelessness occurred after an initial housing placement. The GPL then worked with CDOC staff to filter this data by client demographics (e.g., race, gender), conviction type, and risk assessment scores to better understand who experiences homelessness after release.

This data analysis identified two factors that were associated with a higher likelihood of experiencing homelessness immediately after release or after an initial housing placement:

- A high score on CDOC's Colorado Transitional Accountability Plan, which largely uses behavioral health factors to assess risk
- An incarceration period of a year or less

The GPL's diagnostic analysis used existing CDOC data to better understand their population and the specific factors that put someone at risk of experiencing homelessness. Governments interested in better understanding the factors that put someone at risk of exiting prison into homelessness can similarly analyze their existing data in new ways or in new combinations to reveal insights.

Building a Housing Stability Assessment

After identifying the factors that put someone at high risk of exiting into homelessness, CDOC and the GPL developed a Housing Stability Assessment. This spreadsheet tool is designed for release case managers to fill out with a client and includes questions about factors that are known to increase the risk of homelessness, such as:[8]

- A client's housing history, including previous shelter stays and eviction records
- Not having family or friends living in the area
- Length of time served
- Type of charges, such as those that can make finding housing more difficult (e.g., production of methamphetamines or sex offenses)

Clients with higher scores on the tool may face a greater risk of experiencing homelessness post-release, allowing case managers to target resources and support to prevent this outcome.

Download an Excel template of a Housing Stability Assessment here.



Applying an Assessment

To facilitate adoption of the new Housing Stability Assessment, the GPL and CDOC implemented a phased rollout, beginning with program-wide training on its purpose and alignment with CDOC's public safety objectives. Subsequent small group sessions led by RESTORE managers proved critical to achieving staff engagement and consistent implementation across regional teams.

As of June 2025, 16 out of Colorado's 19 state prisons had adopted the Housing Stability Assessment, and it had been used to assess 635 clients. Of clients assessed using the tool, 29% (182 individuals) scored "high need." All clients enrolling in RESTORE who qualify for community housing are assessed by a release case manager 90 to 120 days prior to release, and clients who score as "high need" are flagged to receive additional support in developing a housing plan, which for the clients identified as having the highest levels of need could include longer-term resources like permanent supportive housing.*

*Excluding discharge clients, interstate clients, clients refusing RESTORE, and clients enrolled in RESTORE for fewer than 10 days.

> "Using the new Housing Stability Assessment, we have secured housing for people who have been tabled for release for a while. One success story was a client with a complex set of needs — he was convicted of a sex offense, is unable to read or write, and needs ADA accommodations. We discovered a housing option he was eligible for that we hadn't been aware of previously. He's now set to be released to that housing resource later this month."
>
> *— RESTORE Release Case Manager*

Tracking Systemwide Risk of Homelessness and Outcomes

CDOC also developed an automated dashboard that will track usage of the Housing Stability Assessment and housing outcomes for RESTORE clients. This will help the state better understand the needs of people experiencing homelessness, both pre- and post-release. This knowledge will help inform future referral strategies and investments in housing resources that are aligned with those needs.



Step 2: Map Community Housing Resources

Successfully referring reentry clients to appropriate programs and resources can be a challenge in preventing post-release homelessness. Often, the landscape of housing providers available for clients leaving prison is fragmented and unregulated. Corrections agencies fund a wide range of programs — some developed using established evidence-based models, but many not — including religious housing, sober living facilities, and housing with work requirements. Identifying effective and appropriate models for clients often requires significant investment from case managers who must rely on their own knowledge of resources and programs. As a result, case managers, who often do not have the capacity to do intensive research on existing and new resources, can end up overlooking valuable options. The GPL worked with CDOC to create a simple, centralized database to reduce this burden on case managers wanting to connect clients to appropriate housing.

Creating an Inventory of Available Housing Resources

By identifying people at high risk of exiting into homelessness and documenting their specific needs, the Housing Stability Assessment provides one half of the data needed to make an appropriate match to housing. The CDOC Housing Resource Inventory provides the other half.

The CDOC Housing Resource Inventory is a spreadsheet that aggregates information on housing resources available to people leaving prisons, including eligibility criteria, application information, and services offered. To build the CDOC Housing Resource Inventory, the GPL surveyed local housing providers and compiled information on requirements for clients and application processes.

Release case managers can filter the workbook by a client's needs or specific eligibility criteria, such as gender, location, conviction type, or mental health needs, to identify the most appropriate resources for each client.

> "If there were one place staff could look, it would be easier to reach out to providers and would make a quicker move-in period. You wouldn't be trying to search for contacts and all these unnecessary little steps. In a perfect world, we'd have a system where you could plug in the client profile and it would pre-populate a list of options where they could go."
>
> *— RESTORE Release Case Manager*



The GPL trained RESTORE staff across Colorado's prison system on how to use the Housing Stability Assessment and the CDOC Housing Resource Inventory in tandem to match a client with the housing resource where they were most likely to be successful. Release case managers were given the opportunity to practice pairing fictional "clients" with appropriate resources using both tools during these trainings. Case managers who have used the tool expressed that it has helped them more effectively support clients and learn about available resources in the community.

> "I have already been able to use the Housing Resource Inventory. A client came in looking for housing and I didn't know where to send him. I used the inventory and filtered it down by his needs and restrictions and found some good options for him that I didn't even know existed. This is a really helpful tool."
>
> *— RESTORE Release Case Manager*

Building a Housing Resource Inventory



Step 1: Make a list of all known housing providers in your community.

Tip: Talk with case workers about where they have referred people in the past.



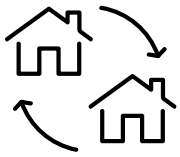
Step 2: Determine the data you need to have in your inventory.

Tip: Focus on gathering data that directly impacts referral decisions.



Step 3: Survey providers to collect information about their resources.

Tip: Follow up with reminders or offer support in filling out the survey.



Step 4: Develop a strategy to keep data current, and assign someone to maintain the inventory.

Tip: Assign staff to reach out to providers annually to verify information.

Download an Excel template of a Housing Resource Inventory here.



Step 3: Unlock Additional Housing Resources

While many reentry clients can be served with short-term or light-touch housing subsidies or transitional programs, there is a subset of this population with high rates of serious mental illness, substance use, or disabilities that require longer-term and more intensive support. In Colorado, those who score the highest on the Housing Stability Assessment are often those who would benefit from longer, more intensive support. Permanent supportive housing (PSH) — a housing resource that combines long-term subsidized housing with wraparound services — is one of the most effective federally subsidized resources available to prevent people with high needs from experiencing homelessness.[9] However, as in communities across the country, Colorado's supply falls far short of the demand for this resource, leaving individuals exiting prison with even greater barriers to access.[10]

Barriers to Accessing Supportive Housing for Formerly Incarcerated People

Across the country, local Continuums of Care (CoCs) are responsible for coordinating homelessness response systems and establishing processes to prioritize people for available housing resources.[11] Some resources managed by CoCs, including federally funded PSH units, are only available to people who meet HUD's definition of chronic homelessness, which requires an individual to have experienced homelessness for at least 12 consecutive months or for at least four episodes within three years that total 12 months or more.[12] By definition, this requirement excludes individuals who have been incarcerated for extended periods.

While many CoCs have programs that specifically serve justice-involved clients — a broad category ranging from minor offenses to long-term incarceration — program requirements often mean that people about to be released or just released from prison are deprioritized for resources. For example, many CoCs require individuals to complete an intake assessment before they can even be added to a waitlist for services, but this assessment often cannot be completed until a person has been released from prison and is already literally experiencing homelessness. Reducing barriers to accessing CoC-managed resources like PSH can help corrections agencies improve long-term housing outcomes for clients at the highest risk of experiencing homelessness.



Investing State Resources for People with Justice Involvement

Recognizing the barriers that people with conviction histories face in securing housing, Colorado has invested its own resources into creating more flexible, low-barrier resources specifically targeted at justice-involved people experiencing homelessness, employing evidence-based models like PSH. In 2024, Colorado allocated 380 tenant and project-based PSH vouchers, and $660,000 in supportive services funding for programs serving justice-involved individuals. However, accessing these limited resources is highly competitive and requires proactive support from release case managers.

In 2024, the GPL inventoried state-funded housing resources and identified two key challenges that make it difficult for formerly incarcerated people to access these resources:

Challenge 1: Many PSH resources funded by the Colorado Division of Housing to support justice-involved clients continue to receive referrals through local Continuums of Care, with eligibility limited to individuals who have a documented history of justice involvement. This means that only clients on CoC lists can access these programs, and being added to those lists typically requires that a person be actively experiencing homelessness rather than still in prison awaiting release.

Challenge 2: These resources are targeted to "justice-involved" clients, but there is no requirement to prioritize clients with complex needs or lengthier incarceration histories. "Justice involvement" is a loose term and can include people with minor offenses or misdemeanors, which may have less of an impact on likelihood to experience homelessness than crimes that resulted in longer incarceration periods.

> "Successful reintegration requires effective transitional release planning that addresses the specific needs of individuals preparing for release. Accurately assessing these needs is pivotal for establishing strong connections to community resources and housing. The Colorado Department of Corrections enhanced its staff's ability to identify needs and overcome potential barriers through our work with the GPL."
>
> *— Jessica Bertolas, Assistant Director, Transitional Services, CDOC*



Piloting a Pipeline from Incarceration to Supportive Housing

The Housing Stability Assessment can help release case managers identify individuals with complex needs who may require long-term housing resources such as PSH. However, CoC prioritization criteria for PSH have historically prevented CDOC from making direct referrals to PSH spots intended for justice-involved individuals.

In early 2025, the GPL worked with the Colorado Division of Housing to pilot a referral pipeline for 33 units of state-funded PSH for clients directly referred by CDOC. The GPL collaborated with the Division of Housing and PSH providers to update tenant selection plans — documents that specify eligibility criteria for housing projects — to prioritize individuals preparing for release from prison or experiencing homelessness while on parole. To make it easier to identify clients for these PSH units, the GPL developed a digital list using CDOC data that identifies eligible, high-priority clients based on current homelessness and high scores on the Housing Stability Assessment.

To ensure the sustainability of this new referral pathway, the GPL and CDOC established clear processes and responsibilities to define who is accountable for verifying a client's disability status, collecting vital documents, and communicating housing opportunities to clients. This effort included training case managers on the supportive housing model to help them effectively identify eligible participants.

The GPL also developed language for tenant selection plans that will be used to prioritize referrals from CDOC in future housing projects currently in the state's development pipeline. Colorado continues to expand this direct referral model, allocating more units to receive referrals from CDOC and creating additional opportunities for clients exiting the state's behavioral health system to be referred directly.

While long-term outcomes for these clients will take time to assess, the units participating in the initial pilot have been filled and early feedback from housing providers and case managers highlights the value of a transparent, straightforward referral process. States can consider leveraging their funding to create streamlined, flexible referral systems that address gaps left by eligibility criteria and prioritization processes.



Lessons for Policymakers

This brief highlights early actions Colorado leaders took to identify and support the population of people at risk of exiting state prison systems into homelessness. Leaders interested in similarly addressing this issue can consider the key lessons below and how they might be applied to their jurisdictions:

- **Stable housing supports public safety.** Research demonstrates that when people leaving prison experience homelessness, they are more likely to be arrested, recidivate, or to be a victim of a crime themselves.[13] As part of their broader mission to promote public safety and reduce recidivism, corrections agencies should work to facilitate stable housing for people exiting their systems.
- **Start by learning who is at risk.** With support from the GPL, Colorado conducted an analysis to identify the drivers of homelessness among their reentry population. This data was used to create an assessment tool that identifies high-risk clients as early as possible and places them on a path to quality housing resources through case management.
- **Know your resource landscape.** While many housing resources remain inaccessible to people exiting prison, it is important for stakeholders to understand what options are available and to strengthen connections between individuals leaving incarceration and the providers who can serve them. By centralizing information about these resources, case managers can provide more appropriate and effective referrals.
- **Make referral opportunities to the highest-intensity resources simple and streamlined.** Through this project, Colorado stakeholders began to work directly with housing providers to create direct referral pathways from corrections to supportive housing, having recognized that normal homelessness system referral pathways were not accessible to recently incarcerated people. These pathways are tailored to the specific needs and barriers of reentry clients, increasing the likelihood that resources will be a good fit.

Downloadable Templates

To access the resources shared in this publication, please click below:

- **Housing Stability Assessment**
- **Housing Resource Inventory**

Notes

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The Government Performance Lab, housed at the Taubman Center for State and Local Government at the Harvard Kennedy School, conducts research on how governments can improve the results they achieve for their citizens. An important part of this research model involves providing hands-on technical assistance to state and local governments. Through this involvement, we gain insights into the barriers that governments face and the solutions that can overcome these barriers. By engaging current students and recent graduates in this effort, we are also able to provide experiential learning.

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