

NYS Joint Legislative Budget Hearing
FY 23 Executive Budget Proposal for Housing

January 31, 2022

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My name is Wendell Walters and I am a Senior Policy Associate at the Osborne Association's Center for Justice Across Generations. Osborne is one of the largest and oldest criminal justice organizations in the state. We serve 12,000 people each year in the full spectrum of the criminal legal justice system from arrest to reentry. We have offices in Brooklyn, Harlem, Newburgh, Buffalo with our headquarters located in the Bronx. We have programming in 30+ correctional facilities, including New York State prisons and NYC's Rikers Island.

For thousands of people returning to their community, housing is by far the most prevalent and pressing reentry issue. This steady stream of men and women re-entering our communities face enormous challenges when they come home, ranging from health and mental health concerns, unemployment and a lack of relevant skills, and the overwhelming stigma of having a criminal record. Upon release, these immediate challenges can be all-consuming and many individuals need support and the necessary resources to reach just a minimum level of stability. However, the fastest road to stability is to return home to family, or if that option is not available, to find a safe place to live and -- in either case -- they need the support of the government to get them there. Unfortunately, they are being released with no place to call home and inevitably end up in a homeless shelter. According to the Coalition for the Homeless State of the Homeless 2021 report, a full 52 percent of the almost 7000 people released from New York State prisons to New York City in 2019 were released directly to shelters.

We all know that the shelter system in NYC is overburdened even without the increasing number of returnees. The influx of those released from prison and jail each year, especially after the spread of COVID-19 in the spring of 2020, has led to emergency use of local hotels to provide relief. This temporary fix is not a viable solution as the funding for its long-term use is still not determined. The administrations at both the city and state levels will be faced with this critical homeless policy decision as thousands continue to be released from prison each year.

The obvious answer is to create more housing opportunities for the previously incarcerated. While the community of housing organizations has long focused on permanent housing, people leaving prison and jail often benefit from transitional housing support as a stepping stone to supportive or affordable permanent housing. Osborne is trying to do its part with the redevelopment of a once state-owned work release facility in the Bronx for transitional reentry housing. Opening next spring, the Fulton Community Reentry Center will provide 135 beds to those leaving a correctional facility, with an emphasis on older returnees who have been away for many years - too often decades - and have particular re-integration challenges. The building will include space to share meals, foster community, and hold classes, training sessions, support groups, events and private counseling. Most importantly, we will work to reunify people with loved ones because - let's face it - we can't just build our way out of the homelessness crisis. At the same time, we have also partnered with affordable housing developers and other advocates to dedicate permanent supportive reentry housing units as part of larger projects.

Osborne has also recognized that there are many families who have loved ones recently released from prison for whom they are willing to provide a place to temporarily reside but have limited financial means to afford it. The additional expenses for their loved one - food, phone, clothing and more - are just too much to shoulder since it may take some time for a person to find work after release. In response and born from the direct experience of Osborne participants and staff,

we created the Kinship Reentry program that would provide funding to eligible families who are willing to take in these individuals. At a fraction of the cost of a shelter, the program provides financial and peer support, counseling and case management. The program is currently privately funded and still in a pilot stage, but we are confident of its success and with public support, it can be easily replicated as an effective alternative to shelters.

While we work to increase housing availability, we also advocate to eliminate the discrimination that formerly incarcerated people often face when searching for housing. Osborne is a member of the Fair Chance for Housing campaign which aims to pass anti-discrimination legislation protecting the previously incarcerated when they apply for housing. There are almost 7 million people in the state with an arrest or conviction record; 750,000 New York City residents have a conviction record. Most of them are people of color and they are being denied housing at an alarming rate. Individuals who have been released from prison many years ago, transformed their lives and are otherwise eligible for housing, still carry that burden along with their families. We were glad to see the Governor's support for Fair Chance for Housing in her budget although it does not call for a complete ban on the practice of criminal background checks. Hopefully, we are given the opportunity to engage in the development of this policy with her office and the Legislature.

While efforts like these are important, they represent only a small portion of the need that is so evident and we need the state to do more. HCR funding for the previously incarcerated has traditionally focused on permanent supportive housing in the form of operating expenses for program service providers under the Empire State Supportive Housing Initiative (ESSHI). Some projects, thankfully, specifically serve formerly incarcerated people; other multifamily development programs exclude housing for the previously incarcerated. Osborne will receive ESSHI funding as a service provider for supportive housing units for which we are grateful. However, this set level of funding is shared with the many supportive housing developers and providers who do worthy projects serving a diverse set of vulnerable populations but it cannot be used to provide transitional reentry housing. Given the circumstances and the growing importance of this issue, we believe that the transitional reentry housing community should have a dedicated allocation of capital and operating funding. We support S2804B and the creation of the Housing Voucher Access Program sponsored by the Senate Housing Chair, Senator Kavanagh's bill to create a state rental assistance program for the homeless and homeless prevention that could be a source of operating income for these projects.

To be clear, we are not requesting a reduction to ESSHI funding to accommodate reentry housing. We ask for a larger allocation to fund housing that is paired with supportive services that will be applied to the development of both transitional and permanent supportive housing for the previously incarcerated. The Governor's budget proposal for 10,000 units of supportive housing specifically calls for housing this population of New Yorkers. Of course, it will still be important to continue to construct permanent supportive and affordable housing for people exiting transitional housing, but it is critical that there be a new emphasis on transitional housing for those previously incarcerated.

In the absence of a substantial work release program that was significantly curtailed, transitional housing is more important than ever. The Governor's budget proposes a pilot program for

reentry transitional housing but a pilot program that relies on treatment centers to serve as a transitional stop after release is insufficient. We recently met with the Senate Housing Chair and the HCR Commissioner to outline the funding need and we were encouraged by their response. As New Yorkers, we cannot afford to ignore this glaring and growing issue. Housing provides stability and stability promotes public safety.

Thank you