

Narrator:

Formerly incarcerated people are 10 times more likely than the general public to be unhoused, and people who are unhoused are 11 times more likely to be arrested.

Dolfinette:

My experience with trying to obtain housing when I was first released was basically I couldn't find anywhere to rent, one, because I had no income. But two, those places in the private sector that I did fill out applications, I never heard back from those places. My biggest challenge was just trying to find affordable housing. My background did play a role. I literally hid in my mother's senior living facility. I also applied to the Housing Authority of New Orleans, and that took over a year.

Kedar:

So my record's bad, but that still didn't define who I am. This defines who I am, a model citizen. I feed the poor, I give fashion shows, give money to different cancers and things. But because they couldn't see that, nowhere to wash, nowhere to take care of your personal hygiene, nowhere to sleep, nowhere to make you feel like you're human because you did something 20-some years ago. And it's a slap in the face. And it was always a stonewall, was like you pay the \$50 application fee just to be denied because of your criminal background check, I mean, after you spend three or \$400. And it was always about your record because of something you had did, like in my case, 20, 30 years ago. We can't have affordable housing in order to clean our body, take care of our hygiene, rest our head. [inaudible 00:01:39] productive parts of society because of the false delusions that society has on ex-offenders coming out.

Narrator:

Prior to COVID, over 50,000 people were entering emergency shelters from jails or prisons each year. Homelessness was already on the rise. After COVID, when social safety nets were already being stressed by the pandemic response, we can only imagine how many people leaving incarceration were returning to the community without a place to sleep at night.

Marlene:

In all honesty, I had [inaudible 00:02:10]. And so in my past life, I was involved with offender success, and we were involved with individuals and the institutions. And until I learned the population, I truly didn't realize that individuals left prison without any family. I honestly never knew that. I just assumed that individuals had still their family kin, and that was not the case. And so when we started this process years ago, it was identified individuals were just being sent to shelters.

John:

So we have millions of people transitioning into the community from jails and prisons each year, and they face significant barriers when trying to find safe and affordable housing. They only add to the cycle of homelessness and future justice system involvement.

Marlene:

I don't hear a lot of myths currently about justice-involved individuals and housing, but my past myths that I've heard and would've ingested based on what was issued to me in society was honestly that individuals coming back from any institutions, that being jail or prisons, were never going to succeed and that nobody should be ever given a chance. I know in truth, in reality, that that's just not the case. And

let me say that's not the case for all individuals that are involved with the justice system, and maybe it is for the one or two. And unfortunately the myths have swayed those justice scales unequally, if you will, making the one or two, the majority.

Will:

The myths that I've heard initially were that individuals returning from prisons were not reliable. They did not want to work. They did not want to live a better life. They just wanted somewhere to just screw off at pretty much, and that was a hundred percent wrong. All the individuals that I've encountered and the ones who I'm housing, they work harder than some of the citizens who's never been incarcerated at all. They come to work on time, before time. They work after. They work all the hours they can get. They pay their rent on time. Honestly, they're the best clients I have.

Dolfinette:

I'll start with people first. So the people, as I mentioned, were formally incarcerated people that had already navigated these systems, right, and began to educate me on what was going to be needed in order for me to apply and once, if approved, what I would need to do in order to be able to get into that unit.

I do not think that the housing options match what people want or need. Currently in my role at the organization that I now work with, I am the housing director. And so each day, I am tasked with connecting women who were formally incarcerated or directly impacted to the type of housing that I so desperately needed, right, safe, affordable housing. Present day in the city of New Orleans, there's limited if any available housing options, right? And that's for just everyday people. So then when you add in the fact that we are coming into this pot with conviction or convictions, we're definitely the last, if we even make the cut, to be screened for these properties, right?

And so if you have those units and people get those units, they tend to stay in those units, right? And so what happens to the thousands of others that's vying for those units? They don't get them. It affects recidivism. It's a toll on your physical, mental, and emotional health to be unhoused. The options out there does not match what's wanted and what's needed because people just want to be safe. People want to live in homes and houses that aren't roach-infested, that's not rat-infested, but also affordable.

Kedar:

Again, by telling me no and allowing me to run my business... See they had a curfew [inaudible 00:06:39] I think it was 10:00 maybe. Frankie introduced me to a lot of powerful people. [inaudible 00:06:43] gave me my chance. I met a lot of good people.

Dolfinette:

Those of us who are directly impacted or who have convictions, we are human beings first. But secondly, when we check these boxes, there's this information that they gain about us which merely says that we were accused of something and we got convicted for what we were accused of. Doesn't mean we were guilty, but does that mean we don't have the right to be safely housed? Because safe housing is a right. It's not a gift. And it's the beginning of the foundation for this second chance that everybody says we deserve. Not employment, not education, not even money.

Kedar:

Here we are. We're sitting in the United States of America that says once you have finished your sentence, you have paid your debt to society. And more or less, on paper, all is forgiven. But the reality of it is you have a stigma. There's like a stench to you when you are an ex-offender, and I must say this, especially you are an ex-offender of color. In my world, there's already basically two strikes against you. You did time. You're a person of color. You've turned your life around. But because you did something, like me when I was 27 years old, now you won't give me a house when I'm 53 and I make three or four times your rent.

Marlene:

My level has changed on being more unconditional to individuals. And when I say that, I say unconditional with just love in general. My beginning year of my career, again, those myths, they stood hard within me. In all actuality, by the grace of God [inaudible 00:08:24] right? That could have been me. That could have been my [inaudible 00:08:27]. Well, today I look at an individual a little differently than I did in the past. And so I want to give the individual unconditional love in the beginning and guide them. Now, if a human messes up with that process or has a housing provider obviously say, "This is not working out with the DOC" and they, again, work very well with us, to just assist with getting that individual to the proper housing unit that is going to be a better fit for that human.

Dolfinette:

Me being able to obtain housing at the time that I did literally saved my life. Someone with 10 felony convictions, five misdemeanor convictions, just being able to get that housing in that moment saved my life. But also, we tend to be some of the best tenants because what we do understand, they're waiting to say, "I told you so." But also, we find gratitude in a lot of things that others just take for granted.

Kedar:

Give us a chance. You never know. We'll probably become some of the best tenants that you ever had because we know we're being under a microscope. We know we're being watched. So give us a chance. Will everybody make it? No, of course not. You're going to have people that are going to fail, but that's life. That's human. That's going to happen. But in the long run, the majority, you'll be proud to rent them housing.

Will:

And I served eight and a half years myself, and here I am now. I've helped numerous of people save their homes, save their jobs, get therapy, mental and physical, get transportation. I've done a lot, and I've stayed out of the system. I've stayed out of jail. I've never been in any trouble. And I've helped the community flourish in multiple ways.

John:

To address the housing problems facing system-impacted people, we're going to need a multi-pronged approach. We need additional investments in supportive housing and additional housing subsidies. We need to address the policies of housing providers that bar people with conviction histories from accessing their housing. People impacted by the criminal legal system are not a monolith. Some may need more supports, while others, in terms of housing, may just want to return home to their children.

Kedar:

I want society to really look in the mirror. We did our wrong, and we atone for it. We go to prison. But look in the mirror, and the fault for public housing and the lack of meaningful, affordable housing starts with that person in that mirror. If you have the opportunity to invite change for the better and you don't do it, you are wasting your time. This could have been you. This could be your son. This could be your daughter. This could be someone in your family, which most people have somebody that has been in trouble with the law. You have to invite change. And if you're going to say you forgive us, forgive us. And in return, you will be blessed.

Dolfinette:

And if you just humanize us, see us through humane eyes, then all of us will be housed, right? Nobody that does not know my story, meet me and know I have 10 convictions, know I have been to prison four times. No, they don't know that because that's not what they see. They meet Dolfinette, a mother, a grandmother, a servant. It isn't until I tell them. And like clockwork, they say, "Oh, well, you're not like those other people." And then I say, "I'm just like them."