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NLIHC Hosts Congressional Briefing on Why Housing Matters in Criminal Justice Reform

NLIHC and nine other organizations hosted a congressional briefing on June 24 titled "Why Housing Matters in Criminal Justice Reform." Speakers discussed why we must ensure the reentry population has access to decent, affordable homes, the barriers to housing those individuals continue to face, and current efforts to revisit and reform policies that have worked to exclude people with criminal records from federally subsidized housing.

In her opening remarks, NLIHC Senior Policy Analyst Elayne Weiss applauded recent bipartisan support to reform the criminal justice system, but noted that work needs to be done to ensure housing resources are ready for the increasing reentry population that will result from those reforms. The briefing's moderator, Kristen Clarke of the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights under Law, added that policy barriers too often prevent justice-involved persons from accessing decent, affordable housing. She spoke of the role that housing plays not only in placing reentering individuals on a path to success, but in lifting up whole communities.

During the panel discussion, Cashauna Hill of the Greater New Orleans Fair Housing Action Center discussed the work her organization has done to bring attention to the impact screening policies have on people of color. She explained that the use of blanket bans on justice-involved persons overwhelmingly placed people of color in the New Orleans area at risk of being rejected from housing, as these persons were overrepresented in the city's incarcerated population. Hill praised the Housing Authority of New Orleans for implementing a policy that guarantees a more individualized review of an applicant's criminal background.

JoAnne Page of the Fortune Society emphasized the importance of criminal background screening policies that support the reunification of reentering individuals with their families already living in federally assisted housing. She pointed to the collaboration around this issue already underway between the New York City Housing Authority, the Vera Institute, and other

organizations like the Fortune Society. She also spoke of the Fortune Society's housing program that helps formerly incarcerated persons return to their communities.

Department of Justice (DOJ) Second Chance Fellow Daryl Atkinson provided moving testimony of his own experience transitioning from incarceration to working at DOJ. While he emphasized that there may not exist a "silver bullet" solution to ensuring reentering persons transition successfully to life after incarceration, he explained that stable housing was crucial in his own reintegration process.

He said, "Imagine if we approached the successful reintegration of the 650,000 people that are released every year, the ten to eleven million that cycle in and out of jails, the 70 million - the one-in-three Americans - who have an arrest or conviction history, imagine if we approach them [as though] they are someone's person, they're someone's son, that they're someone's loved one. That they are part of our American family and we welcome you home because everyone needs to be able to go home. Imagine if we had a policy framework that approached them that way. Imagine if our resources at the federal level supported them and their families that way to welcome them home. I would surmise our outcomes when it comes to reentry would look really, really different."

Organizations that sponsored the briefing include: NLIHC, National Fair Housing Alliance, National Alliance to End Homelessness, Coalition for Juvenile Justice, Greater New Orleans Fair Housing Action Center, National LGBTQ Task Force Action Fund, Fortune Society, Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities Housing Task Force, National Disability Rights Network, and Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law.