

**Burlington Housing Authority**  
**Offender Re-Entry Housing Program**  
**Final Report, FY '07-'08 (July 1, 2007-June 30, 2008)**

**Intakes\*** 98

**Intakes w/ SA history\*** 82 (83.7%)

**Housed (see attached chart, p. 6):**

- Total: 38 (24 m, 14 w)
- From facility w/o subsidy 9 (9 m, 0 f)
- From community w/o subsidy 3 (3 m, 0f)
- From facility w/ subsidy 14 (10 m, 4 f)
  - 13 of 14 were added to a partner or family member's Section 8 voucher or subsidized housing household; the remaining individual's name came to the top of the Section 8 waitlist
- From community w/ subsidy 12 (2 m, 10 f)
  - 2 of these were individuals added to a partner or family member's voucher
  - 2 of these were women graduating from Northern Lights program
  - 2 were individuals whose names came to the top of various subsidized housing/Section 8 waitlists
  - 6 were Family Unification Vouchers issued within first 3 months of fiscal year, before voucher availability disappeared

**Retention:**

- Average % of caseload receiving housing retention services: 76.25% (# retention cases / # search cases per quarter)

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\* Data for these statistics were available for quarters 2-4 only due to a change in internal data collection methods for the purposes of reporting out to BHA's Board of Directors. However, tracking of this data resumed for the rest of the year as ORHP staff recognizes it as significant.

\* Id.

### Housing lost:

- 18 total
  - 6 of these were housed during FY '07-'08 (15.8% housing lost of 38 total housed)
    - 3 of these 6 lost their housing specifically due to return to the facility, 3 for other reasons
  - 12 of these were housed by ORHP in previous years
  - Of total, 10 individuals lost their housing due to return to facility (violation or new charges)
  - Of total, 8 individuals lost their housing due to other reasons (mainly financial)

### Transition money:

- According to our figures, 0 of the 38 individuals housed by our program during FY '07-'08 received transition money from DOC.

### Narrative:

#### Obstacles

Overall, it has been an extremely challenging year for housing offenders. There are a number of contributing factors to this:

- A lack of available subsidies, such as Section 8
  - Due to an unpredicted overlarge response to a pull from the Section 8 waiting list, there was a shortage in available vouchers set aside for "fast-track" Section 8 programs, allowing families who meet specific criteria to "jump" the waitlist. Thus, Family Unification Vouchers (FUV), previously available for homeless parents whose children are outside their care due to lack of housing, have not been available since the beginning of the last fiscal year. As noted above, the few individuals who were able to access these vouchers did so within the first three months of the year, before availability dried up completely. There will be no available FUV until January 2009.
  - Anecdotally, ORHP staff understands that public housing authorities nationwide often bar individuals with felony criminal records access to subsidized households. That our program participants can be added to the subsidized households of partners or family members is a blessing we count often; rent is affordable (30% of income) while they live there and statistically, they are more successful because of both the support and accountability from loved ones. However, if the relationship between the offender and the voucher-holder breaks down in any way, and the offender is asked to leave the household, they cannot take the subsidy with them, and thus are in no better circumstances than (and subject to the same market forces as) an individual without a subsidy. This was the case for 3 of the 6 program participants housed this year who ended up losing their housing.
  - On the other hand, 100% of the individuals housed this year with their own subsidy, whether through BHA or another subsidy source were still housed at the end of the year.

- A lack of DOC transition money.
  - \$1000+ of “gate money” was previously available for incarcerated offenders returning to their communities of origin and was often granted to pay most of an individual’s security deposit and first month’s rent. This year, we heard from facility caseworkers on a number of occasions who did not believe that transition money was available. Whether this was because the money ran out so long before the end of the previous fiscal year, or because of the significant changes that were made to the program’s eligibility criteria, we are unsure. Regardless, DOC transition money simply was not available for any of our housed clients this year.
  - This significantly affected our ability to house people coming from jail; we were able to house less than half of the individuals we conducted intakes with this year, in large part due to lack of housing readiness. Having security deposit and first month’s rent is a critical factor in our assessment of whether we can effectively work with a program applicant, as it is crucial for clinching local landlords who are already hesitant about taking on individuals with criminal histories.
  - We understand that eligibility criteria for the program were revamped because in past years transition money was spent on individuals who returned to jail, even if for a short time. For us, this begs the question as to whether statistics are available for how many of those who received that transition money and went back to jail both returned to the facility *and* remained there for a significant length of time for lack of residence.
  - We also wonder how many of the intakes we conducted this year were denied entrance to our program based specifically on lack of first month’s rent and security deposit, but who could have been housed had transition money been available to them. We don’t currently track this information, but we know anecdotally that there are individuals for whom this was the case. How much would continued incarceration for those individuals have cost the State as a result?
  
- Lack of affordable housing
  - According to “Between a Rock and a Hard Place”, published by the Vermont Housing Council and the Vermont Housing Awareness Campaign, rental costs for a modest 2BR unit in Vermont is \$836—a 15% increase since 2005. In Chittenden County, however, because the cost of living is so much higher, the average fair market rental (FMR) price is \$983 for a 2BR, and \$783 for a 1BR. While the publication does indicate the FMR costs do include the cost of utilities, we often see landlords charging that much (or more) for 1-2 BR units, *plus* the cost of utilities.
  - Again according to “Between a Rock and a Hard Place”, the hourly wage needed to support the average Vermont (not Chittenden County) FMR is \$16.07. We have found that the majority of our clients are able to find jobs only in low-wage employment sectors, such as food service, factory work, cleaning, retail, and day labor. The disparity between the FMRs listed above and our clients’ median wages (\$8.25-10.37/hour, depending on the category) is glaring. Add to this the fact that Vermont’s unemployment increased from 3.8% in July 2007 to 4.7% this past June (<http://www.vtlmi.info/>), and that because few of our program participants are able to access their own rental subsidy they must pay full market rate rent and utilities out of pocket—it is clear that the local economy is a strike against them.

- Lack of participating landlords
  - Because of the nature of the Burlington-area economy (college town, low vacancy rate), landlords in the area can afford to be choosy. Because of our population's significant housing barriers, which more often than not, include not just criminal history, but also bad credit, poor rental history or lack of housing history altogether, limited opportunities for livable-wage employment, and substance abuse, although landlords will listen when we advocate on behalf of our clients, it is often too large a calculated risk for them to undertake housing them. We consistently work to bring new landlords into the program by growing the parts of the program that meet the landlord's needs (adding housing retention, shoring up the lease addendum, teaching Ready to Rent), and cold-calling, but we continue to struggle with not just the lack of available units, but finding landlords willing to give someone a second chance.

### Surmounting Obstacles

However, the past year in the life of the ORHP has not been all doom and gloom. We are quite proud of some of our programmatic accomplishments:

- We taught a number of Ready to Rent classes. These include classes for men at St. Albans, Newport, and Chittenden Regional Correctional Facilities, as well as classes for women at Dale and in the community (taught at BHA). While the numbers of individuals who graduated the program were not high (less than 20 overall), we feel confident that the hours of housing readiness education class participants received were of high quality, and in some cases, we are already seeing the difference the class has made in some participants' ability to secure housing. It is also of note that we collaborated with the Community High School of Vermont to get adult diploma credits awarded to CHSVT students who successfully completed the class.
- We put together a breakfast for local property owners about Ready to Rent and ORHP. The event revealed that local landlords have need for their voice to be heard about tenant issues (including, but not limited to, housing offenders). This prompted some conversations with the Vermont Fair Housing Project about hosting a series of focus groups for landlords about attitudes towards re-entering offenders. In anticipation of this, we developed a 6-question survey for local property owners about their attitudes towards renting to individuals with criminal histories. 70% of respondents do not currently accept applications from individuals with criminal histories. However, 60% (of total respondents) indicated that if an offender could show "proof of rehabilitation" (such as letters of recommendation, certificates of completion from programming, etc.), they would re-consider the individual's application. This validates one of Ready to Rent's basic premises, and also gives us some tangible numbers to work with when explaining basic "housing-readiness" steps with returning offenders.
- We continue to have good working collaborations with both Dismas House and Northern Lights transitional housing programs. These programs are invaluable as they give returning offenders some time to get out into the community and build stability. That individuals have an opportunity to find employment, get established in treatment programs, and work towards making significant changes in their lives, without the burden of sustaining market-

rate housing, helps us when we are approached to assist them transition into independent living in the community. On that note, ORHP staff testified at the Vermont House of Representatives' Institutions and Corrections Committee about offender re-entry housing, and the need for more transitional housing programs for returning offenders. We also developed our own proposal for offender re-entry transitional housing based on an efficiency apartments model rather than communal living. This would allow those individuals who neither need nor want to live communally to have another affordable housing option upon re-entry.

- We continue to refine our housing retention process, creating tools to help us engage longer, and more productively, with housed clients. This is the first year we tracked our housing retention caseload, and are pleased to report we have a 76% overall carrying rate. When comparing “housing lost” statistics of last year, we feel that by offering housing retention services, we have helped significantly lower the recidivism rates for actively engaged participants.
- We began keeping regular office hours at Burlington P&P, which has been favorably received by PO's there. It has allowed ORHP staff to immediately engage with clients referred by their PO's, and also gives us access to busy PO's who we might not otherwise have such constant contact with. This has made our jobs easier, and overall, seems to be an effective tool for more successful collaboration.
- We created a website for our program, which can be accessed at <http://www.burlingtonhousing.org/article/view/21053/1/3713/>. It contains links to view or download our program's policy manual, to access our program application, and to contact ORHP staff. We received a number of applications from Vermont offenders housed out-of-state that we speculate we might not have gotten otherwise.
- Finally, we lost and gained staff, both of whose passion for offender re-entry well exceeds their affiliation with the program. Miriam Popper left to begin a graduate program in Pennsylvania, while founding staff member Michael Ohler was re-hired to take her place. Despite efforts at filling an existing gap in funding, and knowledge that there is more work to be done than 2 f/t staff members can reasonably take on, we were unable to obtain the full amount needed to maintain 2 f/t ORHS positions. Nevertheless, we continue to do our best to help offenders secure and maintain permanent housing, and think big-picture about ways we can help the program grow and evolve to meet the increasingly-complex needs of this population, while taking into account the existing resource scarcity and NIMBY-rich political climate.

ORHP Housed, FY '07-'08

