

RELEASE

News related to Connecticut's formerly incarcerated citizens and the organizations that serve them



FOCUS ON *housing*



Brought to you by students at Central Connecticut State University,
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welcome to **RELEASE**

Welcome to the first edition of Release, a publication devoted to collecting stories about citizens with criminal histories and the organizations that serve them. Produced by the Institute for Municipal and Regional Policy (IMRP) and created by students from Central Connecticut State University, the newsletter provides profiles, general features, interviews, videos, informative graphs and more. Our goal: to empower ex-offenders and to educate the larger Connecticut community on what it can do to stem recidivism. Release covers employment, housing, education, children of incarcerated parents and other subject areas that relate to building a productive life with a criminal history. For your free subscription to Release, which will be distributed online on a monthly basis and also published in print on a quarterly basis, please register at www.releasenews.org.

Half Way HOME

*A Place for Offenders to
Recollect Their Lives*

By Casey Coughlin

6:30 a.m. – Janette is dropped at the front steps of the court house where she received her sentence. The same stairs she climbed the day she lost her freedom she now sits upon unsure of what to do next. She's been released and is no longer the responsibility of the DOC. With no money in her pocket or family support, her choices are limited at best. In her hand she grasps onto her only option, a letter from Community Partners in Action, informing her of her acceptance into the Resettlement Program. The slow moving prison system has prevented her from receiving her first meeting with her case manager; however, she's heard from the other women inmates that all the gals in Resettlement go to the Women's Y. It takes her all day by foot but she finds her way across Hartford and into the shelter.



***Both of these women
have criminal
histories. Both of them
are in alternative
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them have options.***



6:30 a.m. – Wake up call for Michelle. She now has thirty minutes to get

herself ready and her bed made before breakfast. She hears house staff as they continue down the hall banging on hollow wooden doors, stirring the rest of the halfway house's inmates. She sits up in her bunk bed and looks out the window; although there are no bars there is little difference between her stay here at the Hartford House and her previous at York Correctional Institute.

Both of these women have criminal histories. Both of them are in alternative housing. Neither of them have options.

Janette successfully navigated her way to safety, armed only with her letter of acceptance. She convinces the shelter staff that she is a member of the Resettlement Program. She soon finds herself at the Mart House, a voluntary transitional house that works with ex-offenders dealing with mental illness and/or substance abuse. The average stay is about sixteen months but there is no move-out deadline. Janette will be welcome to stay as long as it takes for her to gain psychological and financial stability.

Community Partners in Action was established in 1875. Originally named Friends of the Prisoners Society, it was



MART'S HOUSE, OPERATED BY COMMUNITY PARTNERS
IN ACTION, HARTFORD, CT.

the first organization in Connecticut to address reentry issues. Mark Twain held a spot on the first Board of Advisors.

The Mart's House is old and large, with lots of space, allowing the women to feel comfortable and secure. The walls in the common areas are coated in cheerful colors and covered with framed art. Maximum capacity is eight women. Here they have their own rooms, cabinets in the kitchen and racks in the refrigerator. They voluntarily enroll themselves in the



MINIMALISTIC WOODEN PIECES FURNISH THE BEDROOMS IN THE HARTFORD HOUSE

program and the support services that accompany it.

There are a few rules: no cars (only public transportation), no visitors, plenty of required meetings, and, of course, a curfew. The house manager is the only full-time staff member at the house, so self regulation is crucial to the success of the house.

The most significant difference between the Resettlement Program and others like it around the state is that the case workers enter the prison and build a relationship with their clients six months prior to release.

“When you sit across from a person [who is incarcerated] who is really naked, transparent, you can really see them. You see them without the makeup and the earrings and the clothes, sometimes that stuff defines who a person is. You get a real good look at this person,” says the house manager.

12:00 p.m. – Janette prepares herself lunch and joins a few ladies at the dining room table. She has just returned from a group session and will be leaving in two hours for the weekly resettlement meeting held at CPA’s headquarters.

12:00 p.m. – Michelle files into the small dining room. She eats alongside her fellow housemates all of whom were required to come back and check in after being out on morning passes.

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“It’s a very humbling experience. You live and you learn. When you’re in jail, you do a lot of reflecting upon yourself...”
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Michelle herself was out job hunting and will remain in the house until her afternoon passing time starts. Right now her two priorities are to find a job and gain financial stability before her release date comes.

The Hartford House is the oldest halfway house in Connecticut. It has helped a multitude of women make the move from incarceration to freedom successfully. Although different from the transitional houses, because it requires an inmate to complete a set amount of time, the basic philosophy is the same: support and supervise an incarcerated citizen’s move from prison to the community. The Hartford Houses exterior matches the Mart’s House: average. It conforms to the neighborhood and draws no attention to itself. Not even an outside sign exists to set itself apart. Its front yard is meticulously landscaped; flower plants produce bursts of color against the aging yellow siding.

When asked about what a client gains from living in the halfway house Michelle says, “You learn what you have to do to get back out into the world. I’ve learned a lot of patience being incarcerated and being now in this situation.” Her fellow housemate Elba speaks candidly about her experience at Hartford House.

“Sometimes it’s hard, because it’s like ‘oh my god, I’m grown,’ but it’s all about the rules. That’s the whole part of us getting out of jail and coming back here. We try and do good out here.”

She continues, “It’s hard though, you can’t even go shopping on your own time, you can’t buy what you want to

their rooms by eleven, and in twelve hours they will begin it all again.



THE HARTFORD HOUSE: AN AVERAGE EXTERIOR GIVES WAY TO A POWERFUL INTERNAL NETWORK OF SUPPORT

buy. You can’t go where you want to go. There are rules and regulations and I’m grown and have somebody telling me what to do.”

6:30 p.m. – Janette has just finished dinner. Her other housemates are home now from their assorted activities and meetings. They wash their dishes and complete their evening chores. It’s almost time for their house manager to leave. In the evening the ladies are left to their own entertainment. Some retire to their rooms to channel surf, some hang around the library waiting for a chance to use the computer, others linger chatting in the kitchen. The mood is relaxed as another day comes to a close. They must all be in

6:30 p.m. – Michelle has finished dinner and her evening chores. She is one of the more solitary housemates, and prefers to spend her evenings watching a movie or reading a book. There are only a few things on her mind, finding a job and counting the days until her release.

Lights out at eleven.

Michelle points out: “It’s a very humbling experience. You live and you learn. When you are in jail, you do a lot of reflecting upon yourself—to see what you need to do better and how to cut down your negative circle.”

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Breaking Down BARRIERS

Q & A with Urban Institute's
Dr. Jocelyn Fontaine

By Jesse Duthrie



The Urban Institute, a national nonprofit agency, has played a role in gathering information, conducting research, evaluating programs, and educating Americans on social and economic issues for over four decades in the United States. Dr. Jocelyn Fontaine is a research associate in the justice policy center, and has covered housing issues for over 10 years.

DUTHRIE: In terms of recidivism rates, how critical is it for an ex-offender to have stable housing? Is it one of the largest issues for returning offenders?

FONTAINE: For those of us who work in this field, we like to think that housing is a place to call home. It is the very foundation, quite literally,

which successful reintegration can be launched. If you don't have a place to call home then it's very difficult to maintain a job, connect with your social support, reconnect with your family members, and live a stable life.

DUTHRIE: There are several barriers that ex-offenders face in finding housing. If you could name the three most difficult barriers men and women returning home from prison are facing, what would they be?

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“If you don't have a place to call home then it's very difficult to maintain a job, connect with your social support, reconnect with your family members, and live a stable life”
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FONTAINE: The first is limited access to public housing. One of the things many people toss around is that formerly incarcerated persons aren't allowed to live in public housing facilities. That's not entirely true. Recently there was a letter that was signed by Housing and Urban Development (HUD) that was written to local federal housing authorities from the federal government about restrictions on who can live in public housing, but certainly not all formerly

incarcerated persons are barred from living in public housing facilities.

Another barrier is lack of affordable housing. Most people coming out don't have income and it can be difficult for them to find housing that they can afford. They're faced with having to rely heavily on their family and friends who may not be the best source of social support at that moment. Sometimes people come from very criminogenic housing

environments. They go back to living in the same neighborhoods where they were just arrested.

Third, there is insufficient housing assistance. That is people coming home from prison having to rely on people they know and what they know on how to find housing instead of a schematic that links them up with community based providers, who may be non-profit community based, faith based, or other organizations that are

in the community who can help link people to housing support.

DUTHRIE: Do you have a specific example of how your work has been used by communities?

service organization called the Safer Foundation (based in Chicago, IL), decided to launch a prisoner reentry demonstration project, called Safer Return, in East Garfield Park. The demonstration, which is ongoing, was

least one person who has been touched by the criminal justice system: be that a family member, a friend, somebody they went to school with. The very real financial consideration is that we are paying for this. The cycling nature for the kind of people who just bounce in and out of systems including the corrections system and coming back and forth; we have to pay for that.

DUTHRIE: If there is one thing we haven't covered today you feel should really be expressed to the readers of **RELEASE**, what would it be?

FONTAINE: The Urban Institute's analysis of individuals returning from prison to the community in the state of Illinois helped inform implementation of the Safer Return Demonstration Project.

Through the Urban Institute's Returning Home Project we found that a large percentage of prisoners were returning to only a small number of communities in the city of Chicago. Our analyses showed that releases from Illinois state prisons were highly concentrated in Chicago, but even more concentrated within a few Chicago neighborhoods—Austin, Humboldt Park, North Lawndale, Englewood, West Englewood, and East Garfield Park. Those six neighborhoods, less than 10 percent of all the Chicago neighborhoods, account for more than one-third of the prisoners returning to Chicago.

As a result of this analysis and the number of reentry roundtables (early 2000s), the Urban Institute, in partnership with the nonprofit, social

designed to build, implement and test a prisoner reentry demonstration project that is comprehensive and community based. It was developed based on UI's research and interest in Chicago around doing something about this issue. It is funded by the MacArthur Foundation and jointly developed by the Urban Institute and the Safer Foundation.

DUTHRIE: A lot of citizens are unaware or unconcerned with the issues ex-offenders face. Yet the majority of people in prison will be released back into society. In your opinion how can we reduce social stigmas and help the men and women coming home?

FONTAINE: I think we've done a lot with the passage of the Second Chance Act, which received bi-partisan support. There is a growing knowledge that most people in prison will be coming back at some point. I think for the public it's just increased awareness of this issue. I can't put a number on it, but I'll just say a lot of people know at

FONTAINE: What people need to think about is housing is just one of the challenges ex-offenders face. It's a big one but the other issues that the returning population faces compound it. It's definitely something worth highlighting and focusing on but it needs to be understood in the context of just how difficult it is for people to successfully reintegrate.

Second Chance Act

Created in 2008 under the President George W. Bush administration, the Second Chance Act (SCA) authorizes federal funding for state and federal reentry programs, which include job training, substance abuse treatment, and housing as well as reentry research.

HOUSING COSTS:

Where does the money go?



CT Department of Corrections
General Fund Expenditures
(2009-2010)

\$660,028,372

How would you like your tax dollars spent?

Statistics are rounded whole-dollar estimations from CBIA, CT Department of Corrections, and SAMHSA.

Foundation of TRANSITION

A Portrait of a Half Way House Director

By Casey Coughlin



KACY AUSTIN, PROGRAM DIRECTOR

The entrance is locked; a buzz hits my ears, a dead bolt retracts and I am allowed in. Men loiter in the lobby and upon my entrance are shooed like children by the case workers and security guards. They slowly start moving away, sneaking in a comment about my pretty toe nails before the looks of the house employees move them up a hunter green staircase. I am amazed both at the effectiveness of the case managers silent message and the

ineffectiveness of my clothing choice. Apparently sandals are too risqué.

I wander behind Kacy Austin, Program Director of Connecticut Renaissance's Waterbury Community Release Programs, as she tours me through their halfway house. Doors line the halls like a college dormitory. Behind them are large rooms with sealed windows, bunk beds and nondescript dressers. In the common room there's sagging couches, battered ping pong tables and shelves stuffed with board games that are probably older than most of the men who play them.

Overall the building lacks spaciousness; it struggles against its neighbors for its rightful elbow room. What it lacks in width it makes up in height: flight after flight of the same painted stairs. I faithfully bob behind my guide.

We circle the last hall and descend the flight of stairs. "So that's basically it, any questions?" Kacy asks over her shoulder.

In her office the air conditioning is a welcomed change from the stuffy halls. We discuss her job as program manager, which boils down to "mother of the house." She must file paper work, be an administrator, support her staff members, the clients, and occasionally

their families. When called upon she jumps in wherever the house is short, any job from maintenance to food service. Whatever is happening in this halfway house, she knows about.

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Around sixty-five percent of the men that leave this program stay in the Waterbury area, mostly due to the housing options.
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Around sixty-five percent of the men that leave this program stay in the Waterbury area, mostly due to the housing options. For men with substance abuse problems, sober houses are available. For those with mental health issues, other support systems are in place. And for those who do not fall into either of these categories rent is low compared to surrounding areas. The only setback her men are facing is the failing job market. "Many guys are only getting part-time hours, which isn't enough to pay their sober house rent," Kacy remarks.

When I ask about the hardest part of her job, Kacy pauses. I am surprised

when she answers, “Talking to a mother, or a wife, who comes here crying because her son made a choice that got him back to jail even though he was out here. Hearing the struggles they went through throughout that person’s incarceration and the hopes that they had having them so close to home and now they’re back [in prison].”

Kacy’s motivation to enter this field of work stems from her own family background. She jokes she certainly doesn’t do it for the money. She says the majority of her fellow co-workers share her compassion for the guys because of personal connections to their struggles.



“I would change the process of meeting the client’s substance abuse and mental health needs first before they have to deal with the pressures of employment.”



When asked about what she would change about the correctional system the house is currently operating under, Kacy explains, “I would change the process of meeting the client’s substance abuse and mental health needs first before they have to deal with the pressures of employment.”



THE SITE OF CT RENAISSANCE’S WORK RELEASE PROGRAM

She continues, “What I do feel sometimes is there might be people who I would like to see stay a little bit longer. They may be looking at the fact that they are past their parole date, and it’s true that they are past that date, but sometimes some people could use about another month or so before they are actually ready to go out.”

She also believes that making the transition mandatory for all inmates would be beneficial.

“I think everyone should [be released to a halfway house] because it’s such a different lifestyle and there is always that adjustment period. You can tell the difference between a guy who has been incarcerated for a year versus a guy who has been incarcerated for 10 years.”

What is Kacy most proud of when it comes to her work?

“I am happy to say no one has left here homeless.”

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Outside the SYSTEM

A Man Who Helps on His Own Time

By Jesse Duthrie



AVNER GREGORY OUTSIDE OF ONE OF HIS RENTAL PROPERTIES

Avner Gregory isn't a corrections officer. He doesn't create legislation. Nor does he run reentry programs, guard prisons, or drive a police car. He's a businessman; a property owner and landlord for several apartment buildings. Although he's not funded by the state or part of the legislation process, he is still a vital link in the reentry continuum. How, in a state diligently working on reentry policy, could Avner matter?

He rents to ex-offenders.

Avner's home is something of a remarkable circumstance. The state had closed down a section of houses in New London to build highways. The house, bought by Avner for a dollar, was moved to downtown New London. It serves as his temple with plenty of open space and Hindu iconography. Six months out of the year he lives in India, while the other six are spent overseeing his business in Connecticut. Like a clergyman, his words are calculated and resonate with a serious tone.

In real estate for more than thirty years, he has rented to many ex-offenders. When asked why, he responds with something many businessmen lack: compassion. "A lot of [ex-offenders] burned bridges before they went to jail. They don't have friendship when they get out, and certainly the people in prison weren't their friends. The prison guards aren't going to help them. Who's really going to help them?"



"A lot of [ex-offenders] burned bridges before they went to jail. They don't have friendship when they get out, and certainly the people in prison weren't their friends. The prison guards aren't going to help them. Who's really going to help them?"



He can relate to the tribulations of ex-offenders. During the Vietnam War, Gregory did not comply with draft laws. A criminal of the state, he left to Israel for five years, then Canada, then

found his way back to Connecticut in his mid-twenties. Shortly after he was arrested and sentenced to three months in prison.

“I met many people in jail and I knew that they were there because they may have not been guilty. They may have been in the wrong place at the wrong time. And I saw many people who weren’t deserving of the jail. I don’t think I was deserving of the jail either. When I was in jail, I said to myself that someday, when I get a chance, I’m going to volunteer and help out with prisoners. It gives me a great satisfaction at this point in my life that I can do that.”

One such person Gregory has helped, who chose to remain anonymous, remembers the process of leaving prison only to find himself locked up again within a matter of months. “It was tough for me. I would be in jail but in there I could do drugs. So when I came out, nothing had changed. I went right back into my ways and next thing I know, I’m locked up again.”

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“They usually go back to their neighborhood and live with people in the same areas they were arrested. No wonder these guys are going back to jail.”

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After years of recidivism, this man came back from prison and declared to himself that he would not return. While staying at a family member’s house, he earned enough money to

afford his own place. Along with his wife and three kids, he rented an apartment from Avner.

“Avner is great. He was there to talk to me. If he had work, I could sometimes work for him. I kept my place right and we had no problems.”

This man eventually began a landscaping business, and within a few years he bought a house, several cars and paid for his children’s educations. Amidst his success, he’s more adamant on discussing the challenges of men coming home from prison than his own life.

“It’s hard for these guys coming home. They need somewhere to lay their heads. There are halfway houses, but those are limited. Nobody really wants to live in a shelter. They usually go back to their neighborhood and live with people in the same areas they were arrested. No wonder these guys are going back to jail.”

Both Gregory and his former tenant agree that finding housing is one of the



A QUAIN BEDROOM IN ONE OF GREGORY’S UNITS

a person adamant about helping ex-offenders, is cautious when accepting a person because, “the landlord has some responsibilities to protect the tenants in the building.”

His unorthodox approach to selecting tenants with criminal background: getting a feel for the person. In his calm, Hindu-esque state of mind, he chooses those he feels will make a good fit. Yet if he cannot accept the person, for whatever the reason may be, he takes it upon himself to find other landlords who can.

Avner knows that if the state of Connecticut wants to progress and reduce rates of recidivism, it must start by learning compassion towards others.

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