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MANOHLA DARGIS The New York Times

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# Ban on Former Inmates in Public Housing Is Eased

By MIREYA NAVARRO

The New York City Housing Authority will ease its ban on recently released prisoners and allow some of them to live in public housing as part of a pilot program set to start next month.

Public housing nationwide has been off-limits to many people with criminal records and, in New York, residents can be barred for up to six years depending on the nature of their offenses. But two years ago the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development began urging public housing agencies to relax admission policies in an effort to help people released from prison reunite with their families.

The New York City Housing Authority, landlord to more than 400,000 residents, will be one of the first public housing agencies in the nation to test lifting the restrictions. The program will, over the two-year pilot period, place 150 former inmates in public housing and provide social services to help them find jobs and meet other requirements.

"We're hoping we'll see fathers and mothers reunited with their children, or parents who are reunited with their children and grandchildren and need their support because they're aging parents," said Nora Reissig, the director of family services for the Housing Authority.

Research shows that housing and family support, especially during the critical first months after prisoners are released, increase their chances of success in re-entering society and not returning to crime. But they face hurdles when trying to rent apartments, advocacy groups say, and for many the preferred or only option is to return to their former homes or to live with family members.

Only those released within the previous 18 months, or those about to be released, will be eligible. Some of the participants are expected to be former public housing residents who are returning home. Others will be people who did not live in public housing but have a relative currently living in a Housing Authority building.

The change in policy is also meant to help the city tackle homelessness. Officials with the city's Department of Homeless Services, which will defray the program's cost of about \$700,000, says its shelters house 484 adults who were released from prison in the last 18 months. The department's deputy commissioner for adult services, Douglas C. James, said 100 of the program's 150 participants are expected to come from the shelters.

Opening up options would also help residents who are already housing recent ex-convicts and who face eviction if the violations are uncovered. New York housing officials said they did not keep figures on how many unauthorized tenants came from prisons but said that the New York State Division of Parole lists about 1,500 parolees with a public-housing project in the city as their address.

John B. Rhea, chairman of the Housing Authority, said a change in policy would allow some of these residents to get "out of the shadows."

"As the largest provider of housing in New York, we feel it's important to be part of the solution," Mr. Rhea said.

Only a few cities, like New Orleans, are changing admission rules to accommodate former prisoners in public housing or the Section 8 rental assistance program, said Margaret diZerega, director of the family justice program with the [Vera Institute of Justice](#), a policy and research organization. The Vera Institute helped design the demonstration project in New York.

But Ms. diZerega said New York's approach may hold the best potential for replication because of the social services included.

"The service component is one that will give housing authorities more confidence to maybe take a chance on people they previously excluded," she said.

Housing officials in New York and elsewhere must still comply with HUD's lifetime bans on some registered sex offenders and on people convicted of methamphetamine production on federally subsidized property. To be eligible in New York, candidates would have to be related to the apartment's leaseholder, including by domestic partnership. They must agree to work with case managers to find employment, blend into the household and undergo drug treatment or attend addiction support groups if necessary before the placement becomes permanent.

The program, in the works since 2010, counts on the support of the New York Police Department and the New York State Department of Corrections and Community

Supervision, as well as tenant leaders. About 19 percent of offenders released from New York State prisons last year listed shelters as their first known address, state corrections officials said.

Reginald H. Bowman, who is the president of a citywide council of public housing residents, said he expected mixed reactions to the program in housing projects. But he supported it, he said, because “in reality, whether these people return to public housing or not, they’re still going to return to their neighborhoods and it would be better for them to have monitoring and support systems than to have them released with no safety net.”