

Statement by  
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At a hearing on  
Halfway Home to the District: The Role of Halfway Houses in Reducing Crime and  
Recidivism in the Nation's Capital

by the  
House of Representatives Oversight and Government Reform Subcommittee on  
Federal Workforce, Postal Service, and the District of Columbia

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today about the role of halfway houses in transitioning people from prison to the community. I am director of the Justice Policy Center at the Urban Institute. While we engage in research across a wide array of crime and justice topics, the largest share of our research is on prisoner reentry, and for good reason. The successful transition of people returning home from prison is critical not only for them, but also for the safety and well-being of their families and communities (La Vigne, Brooks, and Shollenberger 2007; Shollenberger 2009).

Yet, the path to successful reentry is rarely smooth. People exiting prison face tremendous challenges to leading sober and law-abiding lives on the outside. Few have housing or a job lined up, and many struggle with substance abuse, physical health problems, and mental illness (La Vigne, Shollenberger, and Debus 2009; La Vigne, Visher, and Castro 2004; Mallik-Kane and Visher 2008; Visher and Courtney 2007;

Visher et al. 2005). While they may have received treatment, training, or assistance behind bars, far too often prisoners are released without the support and services critical to their successful reintegration (La Vigne et al. 2009; La Vigne, et al. 2004; Mallik-Kane and Visher 2008; Visher et al. 2005).

Prisoners returning home to the District face the additional challenge of having been incarcerated hundreds of miles away from their families and potential employers (Roman and Kane 2006). They return home in need of health care, drug treatment, jobs, and importantly, safe and affordable shelter (Hall et al. 2009; Roman and Kane 2006). That's where halfway houses come in. When designed and operated well, halfway houses can serve as a secure and supportive way station, easing what would otherwise be a stark transition from the prison environment to the free world.

I wish I could tell you that halfway houses are a definitive success in reducing recidivism, but it's not that clear cut. For every study that finds halfway houses effective, another finds they have no effect at all. Why? Because not all halfway houses are created equal. Some house only low-risk inmates, while others welcome inmates of all risk levels. Some offer a full complement of programs and services, while others function strictly as work-release centers. These variations in populations and services may explain the mixed findings on their effectiveness.

In fact, the most definitive evaluation of halfway houses suggests that medium- and high-risk residents are most likely to benefit from living in these homes, demonstrating a significantly lower likelihood of reoffending than matched comparison groups that do not transition through halfway houses (Lowenkamp and Latessa 2002). The same study found that low-risk residents using halfway houses actually have *higher*

rates of recidivism than comparison groups. What that means is that housing low-risk prisoners in transitional facilities takes them out of the environment that makes them low risk to begin with.

Research has also found that the type and quality of programs halfway houses offer make a big difference in preventing reoffending. Effective halfway house programs have qualified staff who use such evidence-based practices as needs assessments and tailored, wraparound services (Lowenkamp, Latessa, and Smith 2006).

So what does this mean for the District? About half the prisoners returning to D.C. transition through “residential reentry centers,” the District’s term for halfway houses. Some questions for this committee include: Are the right prisoners housed there? Are risk assessment tools employed to ensure that medium- and high-risk prisoners—the ones most likely to benefit—end up filling those beds? Do the centers assess the needs of their residents? Target services to those needs? Hire and retain well-trained, experienced staff? Engage in self-evaluation of the quality and effectiveness of their programs? These measures will enable the District to yield the best possible public safety impact from its halfway houses.

D.C.’s halfway houses are a scarce but potentially valuable resource in improving prisoner reentry, reducing recidivism, and increasing public safety in the nation’s capital. I urge the committee to ensure that these facilities are used effectively to make the most of their potential for successful prisoner reentry and improved public safety.

Thank you for your time. I welcome any questions you may have.

## Note

The views expressed are those of the author and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders.

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