

Public housing initiative offers second chance to some with arrest records



Juanita Patton, photographed May 19, 2015, moved into a public housing apartment in Ford Heights in March despite having a criminal record. "Having a (criminal) background cuts you off," she said. "It's harder to get a job. It's harder to get housing. You can't put it behind you." Patton is the first Cook County resident to benefit from a policy change that gives second chances to some ex-offenders. (Nancy Stone, Chicago Tribune)

By [Lolly Bowean](#) Chicago Tribune [contact the reporter](#)

Juanita Patton got public housing despite her criminal record, thanks to a policy change in Cook County.

For more than seven years, Juanita Patton spiraled in and out of homelessness, staying at relatives' houses, living in shelters and, at times, sleeping at covered bus stops on the streets.

When she finally landed at the top of the list for public housing in Cook County after waiting more than six years, she was initially turned away because she had recently been arrested for domestic battery, though she also had done a stint in jail for possession of crack cocaine.

But in March, with the help of attorneys and advocates, Patton became the first resident in Cook County to benefit from a recent policy change meant to

help applicants with criminal records obtain public housing, and she moved into a tiny, one-bedroom apartment in Ford Heights.

"I love my apartment because it's mine and, when I come in the door, I don't have to answer to nobody," said Patton, 49. "I can unlock the door with my own key, go in my own kitchen and fix myself something to eat. I don't have to ask nobody and there is nobody telling me to hurry up."

For years, public housing agencies have operated under a one-strike policy that denied apartments and housing vouchers to applicants with criminal backgrounds. The policy was a product of the 1990s and 2000s, when many public housing complexes were plagued by violent crime, gangs and open-air drug markets; housing officials responded by evicting residents who let family members with arrests live with them, and even evicted some tenants who were acquitted or had their arrests thrown out.

Now, with the country engaged in a national conversation about how to help ex-offenders, a growing number of public housing agencies across the country are looking closer at applicants with criminal backgrounds to see if they merit a second chance.

"We are trying to address this vulnerable population that has not historically had access to our housing programs because we realize we can't just shut the door on people," said Richard Monocchio, executive director of the Housing Authority of Cook County. "That just makes a vicious cycle worse. The government has to be a leader in reform. We have opened our eyes in realizing that those we incarcerate need some help when they get out. Otherwise, the sky-high recidivism rate will continue to grow."

The Housing Authority of Cook County appears to be the first housing agency in the state to consider applicants with a criminal past, officials said. Instead of automatically denying applicants, the agency screens them to see if they are working with social service agencies to reform their lives. It also considers the

type of conviction that sent the applicant to jail and how long ago the crime was committed on a case-by-case basis.

The Chicago Housing Authority is testing a pilot program that will allow 50 convicted felons to obtain apartments or vouchers. CHA has also begun to allow current public housing residents and voucher holders to add relatives with criminal records to their leases, officials said.

Similar initiatives have been adopted in New York and Los Angeles.

If former inmates are going to live more productive lives, the first thing they need is a place to live, said Anthony Lowery, director of policy and advocacy at the Safer Foundation, a group that helps former prisoners regain their footing. When offenders return to their communities and can't find jobs or decent housing, they are more likely to reoffend, Lowery said.

"Most (inmates) are released into poverty," he said. "We know if a person can get stable housing, they can get a job and then their chances of recidivism reduces by 60 percent."

The new policies only affect a small number of people, advocates say. Residents still have to make it to the top of long waiting lists, and many of those waiting lists are not accepting new applicants. And not all criminal records are excused. People convicted of violent crimes such as murder, rape, fraud, manslaughter or arson are disqualified.

"We're telling these agencies that if they have a blanket policy, they are excluding people who can be their best tenants. It doesn't make sense to not allow people to rebuild their lives," said Julie Dworkin, with the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, who has helped write policies for both Cook County and Chicago. "We're not advocating for special set-asides or asking that they jump the waiting list or having special programs. We're saying if they are in line, you can bring them in with support."

Patton was living in Chicago Heights in 2007 when she quit her job and began to take care of her sick brother full time. As his paid caretaker, Patton brought home a good salary that helped cover the bills, she said. But any time her brother was hospitalized, her income was cut off since she wasn't being paid to take care of him. Eventually she fell behind on her rent and could never catch up. She tried to downsize to a smaller apartment for her and her brother, but got evicted.

In 2009, Patton signed up for public housing for the both of them. After her brother died in 2012, she bounced between relatives' homes and stayed in shelters — sometimes getting banned for not following rules or having confrontations with other guests.

In January, as she was staying with a cousin, she made it to the top of the list for public housing. Patton got her case worker at Respond Now, a social service agency, to help her bolster her application for public housing. She had already worked with an attorney to get her criminal record sealed. She was also volunteering to show her desire to rebuild her life. Although she was homeless, she stayed accountable to her case worker, checking in frequently and making it to her appointments.

Patton doesn't like to talk about her criminal record. She was arrested in January for domestic violence, but the charge was dropped, records show.

"When you are homeless, it feels like all the odds are against you and it makes you feel like you want to die," she said. "Having a (criminal) background cuts you off. It's harder to get a job. It's harder to get housing. You can't put it behind you."

Patton signed a lease and moved into her apartment in late March. She has furnished it with a secondhand couch and bedroom set. She has a new toaster that was donated to her and a kitchen table that she kept at a relatives' house

when she was evicted. She's figured out how to get to the grocery store and knows where the closest food pantries and thrift shops are located.

The first few months are a probationary period where she will be monitored to ensure she is settling in comfortably.

"I'm learning my neighbors," she said. "My case manager wants me to have a housewarming. We are setting a date."

[*lbowean@tribpub.com*](mailto:lbowean@tribpub.com)