

Offender Success Program Focus Group

On Wednesday, August 9, 2017, participants of the Offender Success Program, a program that connects formerly incarcerated individuals with resources and assists in community reintegration, met at the Catholic Social Services of Washtenaw County. Discussions about housing availability, affordability, and neighborhood experiences from this focus group informed the Assessment for Fair Housing Plan.

Facilitators: Ashley Timmerman (Catholic Social Services of Washtenaw County) and Tara Cohen (OCED)
Participants: 5

Resources

Focus group participants have learned about things like schools, programs, child care, bus routes, et cetera, through trial and error, word of mouth, Catholic Social Services, and online.

Background

Before participants' recent arrests and convictions, participants lived in West Willow (Ypsilanti Township), Westland, Saline, Toledo OH and Brandon FL. At the time, two participants lived with their girlfriends, another two participants lived with family/their parents, and one participant lived with their child's mother.

Housing

At the time of the focus group, all five participants were living in rental housing provided by the Offender Success Program- four in apartments and one in a motel- all with roommates. One of the five participants had just secured a room in a nearby halfway house called Next Step Living. Moving forward, all five participants agreed that getting their own apartment is their ideal housing situation.

Most participants (four out of five) felt safe in their current housing situation. Of those who felt safe, they shared that their housing situation is quiet and feels safe compared to previous experiences. For the one participant who said they didn't feel safe, he spoke to the presence of drugs and crime in their neighborhood.

Ideal Housing Qualities

When asked, "If you could live anywhere and money was no object, what would you look for in a neighborhood?" participants described housing near work and grocery stores as key qualities. When asked what's preventing them from getting to this ideal situation, participants shared that being on parole (and waiting to transfer parole back to Toledo) and the lack of money and a job is keeping them from their ideal.

Barriers to Housing

When asked about other barriers or struggles they anticipate as they look for housing, lack of money was mentioned as a main concern. Participants also worried about the availability of a room or apartment. Other concerns when thinking of their success include sobriety, securing a cell phone, and obtaining their social security card for housing and job applications.

Two of the five participants said they wouldn't have anywhere to go if they left their current housing situation today.

When asked if participants would rent where they are housed now, if they were able to rent long-term, three participants said "yes, definitely". One participant said "no". There was discussion around how landlords could work better with people and be more understanding - by allowing a payment plan for the rental deposit, for example. Participants spoke about their experience with HAWC (Housing Access of Washtenaw County), and how HAWC told them they were unable to assist them with a deposit for a halfway house, and because they are not technically homeless. This is a recurring barrier for people looking for housing assistance as HUD's definition of homelessness is specific to people who are chronically homeless.