A Fresh Take on Ending the Jail-to-Street-to-Jail Cycle

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For troubled repeat offenders, a chance at a supportive place to live.

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George Washington (not the famous one) first ended up in a New York homeless shelter in the mid-1980s, after he came home from prison for robbery and crack cocaine hit the streets. Since then, he’s passed between girlfriends’ houses, hotels, shelters all over the city, rooming houses, family members’ couches, rehab facilities, and a cell on Rikers Island.

This story was published in partnership with [The Takeaway](https://www.wnyc.org/story/housing-program-curbs-jail-homelessness-cycle/).

Washington, 54, is considered a “frequent flier”: someone who has cycled in and out of jail on mostly low-level charges. These repeat offenders tend to be older, single men who are chronically homeless and deal with significant mental health or addiction issues. Their arrests are usually the result of not getting the treatment they need or not having a steady place to live. And they’re expensive: between jail, shelters, and the emergency room, they end up costing a lot more in taxpayer dollars than your average resident.

From 2012 to 2015, Washington went to jail 13 times for a total of 348 days. His charges included selling marijuana, “criminal trespass” and “theft of services” for sneaking onto a train without paying, and “fraudulent accosting” for low-level scams (like offering to sell someone drugs and giving them an empty paper bag instead). In that same span, he checked into a homeless shelter 40 times.

Now, New York City hopes it has found a cheaper, more stable way to keep men like Washington out of jail: give them an apartment. A program rolled out last month, which expands on an earlier initiative, identified the jail’s most frequent visitors and offered them permanent housing and support services. And while that sounds expensive, it costs the city $16,000 *less* per person per year than letting them cycle from the jail to the shelter and back again.

While staying at a shelter in 2015, Washington was approached by a social worker about moving into his own place. With it came addiction treatment, counseling, and other social services — if he wanted them. There were no requirements he had to fulfill to keep the new home. “I’m surprised I was picked for this program,” he said in a recent interview. “I’m grateful. But I’m pretty sure there were other qualified people. Why me?”

George Washington

Washington was picked through a special metric to identify the city’s most vulnerable residents. Researchers with the Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice matched data from the city’s homeless shelters with data from the jail, to identify those who had been through both systems over five times in four years. That gave them a list of about 1,500 people. They narrowed it further to select the 120 people (mostly men) at the top of that list. So far, 102 have moved in.

“Those folks end up in jail every six weeks or so for relatively short stays, and in the interim they’re hitting the health systems, ER rooms, or the shelter. This is a complete waste of jail and of just, human beings,” said Elizabeth Glazer, director of the Mayor’s Office of Criminal Justice. “How do we stop that cycle and stabilize these folks’ lives?”

George Washington

Cities across the country — like [Santa Clara, Calif.](http://www.thirdsectorcap.org/santa-clara-homelessness/), [Salt Lake City](https://www.thenation.com/article/city-came-simple-solution-homelessness-housing/), and [Dallas](https://www.dallasnews.com/news/dallas/2016/09/08/dallas-giving-tiny-houses-away-homeless) — have realized that stable housing can be a way to combat crowding in the local jail. It’s part of a spreading approach to homelessness called “[housing first](https://www.usich.gov/solutions/housing/housing-first),” which means putting fewer requirements on people that need a place to live. They don’t need to stay sober, complete classes, or even avoid arrest to keep their apartment.

In 2016, Dallas opened a [community of 50 tiny houses](http://www.centraldallascdc.org/the-cottages-at-hickory-crossing.html) for the city’s chronically homeless, many of whom were referred from the county department of justice diversion program. The only rule: “be a good neighbor,” said former executive director Keith Ackerman. On-site social workers and medical and mental health providers are available to help people transition into their new home after spending years on the streets. “They may deal with claustrophobia and have to sleep on the front porch; there are individuals dealing with regret and depression that their buddies are out on the street, and there’s the feeling of not being worthy,” Ackerman said.

People with frequent arrests are often the most in need of stable housing but have the hardest time getting it. Some programs and public housing authorities bar people with criminal records. And the federal definition of “chronically homeless” leaves out some people who continually go in and out of jail. When individuals are jailed for 90 days or longer, the clock restarts on how long they’ve been homeless. That can make them a lower priority to receive help.

In 2008, New York City [piloted a similar program](http://www.csh.org/csh-solutions/serving-vulnerable-populations/re-entry-populations/local-criminal-justice-work/nyc-fuse-program-key-findings/). Seventy-two people who had frequented the city’s jails and shelters were given permanent housing with support services in apartments scattered throughout the city. After two years, there was a 40 percent decrease in the days participants spent in jail. When Mayor Bill de Blasio [announced a series of initiatives](https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/02/nyregion/new-york-city-to-expand-health-services-for-mentally-ill-inmates.html) in 2014 to keep those with a mental illness out of the criminal justice system, it included a revamped version of the program. (Glazer estimates that 40 percent of the participants have a serious mental health issue.)

De Blasio has also [committed roughly $3 billion](https://www.wsj.com/articles/new-york-city-plans-3-billion-homelessness-effort-1447804658?alg=y) to build supportive housing for homeless New Yorkers. But the $9 million for this program comes instead from Manhattan District Attorney Cyrus Vance’s office, out of money garnered from penalties against three major banks. The asset forfeiture fund from his office, totalling $808 million, [has paid for multiple criminal justice programs](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/08/nyregion/cyrus-vance-has-dollar-808-million-to-give-away.html) in the city. Three years of funding have been allocated.

One challenge for the housing initiative is whether it could grow to serve everyone that needs it, especially in an expensive retail market like New York. “Housing is an issue for everybody in this city,” Glazer said. “One of the great challenges is figuring out how to institutionalize [these programs] and make them not a pilot, not an initiative, but simply the way you do business.” The program works with local housing nonprofits, who in turn work with landlords to encourage them to lease their apartments to the program’s clientele.

In the Bronx, Washington meets weekly with a mental health therapist, a drug treatment counselor, and his case manager, Louis Trejo of Camba, a local housing nonprofit. Trejo helped him move in, came to the rescue when Washington lost his keys, and got him into a 28-day rehab program after Washington relapsed last summer. There’s an understanding in the program that relapse is part of recovery; it doesn’t mean getting kicked out. Washington has now reconnected with his family in the borough and is hoping to work towards his GED.

George Washington

“Once you address the shelter issue, the participant goes from survival mode to stability,” said Trejo, who works with 20 other program participants as well.

Washington has a palm-sized kitten named Crystal to keep him company in his new apartment. Everything has a place: his baseball caps, headphones, umbrella, and even the kitty litter scoop hang from from pushpins on the wall. It has ample closet space, natural light, and is relatively quiet. But his favorite part, Washington said, “is just having a roof over my head. I have space to think and pray. I’m just trying to keep it.”