

San Antonio Criminal Justice Action Coalition

To educate and engage the public on the issue of mass incarceration in an effort to bring about fundamental reform of our justice system

NO PLACE TO GO: The Lack of Transitional Homes in San Antonio

With approximately 7000 men and women returning annually to San Antonio from state and federal prisons, it is baffling that there are so few residential reentry beds available for these returning citizens. Those reviewing reentry data for San Antonio may be perplexed at the incredible gap between service need and service capacity when it comes to residential reentry centers or transitional homes (previously referred to as halfway houses). It is especially problematic when looking at those being released from state prisons as there are virtually no community-based beds for this population. The absence of this resource poses a real threat to public safety when it is clear that a certain percentage of this group needs the structure and treatment that is best administered in a professionally-staffed residential setting.

So why does this problem exist? One need only look at the staffing expectations found in state contract solicitations for such facilities as compared to San Antonio city code requirements for transitional homes (UDC Sec. 35-390). The most recent state contract solicitation states that between the hours of 10:00pm and 6:00am, the total monitoring staff-to-offender ratio shall be at least one to one hundred (1:100). During all other times, the total monitoring staff-to-offender ratio shall be at least one to sixty (1:60). Contrast this to the city code that calls for not less than one attendant to thirty residents on any given shift (1:30). The city code goes a step further in that it requires an overall program staff to client ratio of not less than one to eight (1:8). The city code while much more stringent ensures safety for staff, clients and the general public.

While the state solicitation staffing requirements offer only minimum staff to client ratios, it is clear that any potential vendor would have to far exceed state staffing cost estimates to come into compliance with city code. This disconnect of expectations ensures that service providers would not be able to offer an acceptable bid on a state contract performed within city limits. This conundrum is the most likely reason that San Antonio has no community-based residential reentry options for citizens returning home from state prisons. One significant outcome of this situation is that formerly incarcerated citizens from our community are sent to transitional homes in other cities, only to return here upon completion of supervision without employment or connection to other needed resources.

An unrelated but important clause in city code states that no tenant or resident may occupy a transitional home in any capacity if previously convicted of a sex oriented crime, child molestation, and/or murder in any degree. While on its face this clause may appear to protect the public by excluding dangerous individuals from residing in transitional homes, it actually removes this structured environment from being an option for individuals who may most need it. Sex offenders will be returning to San Antonio regardless of this exclusionary language. This option has simply been excluded as a means of enhanced accountability.

While the public tends to express greater fear of murderers and sex offenders, it should be noted that these two types are much less likely to be convicted of the similar offenses when released than other types of offenders (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2007). Perhaps a more sensible approach to transitional housing for these offenders is the development of specialized facilities with more stringent accountability requirements located outside of residential neighborhoods.

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