

FIXES

# Would You Open Your Home to an Ex-Prisoner?

A new effort in Oakland, Calif., matches hosts with people who were recently incarcerated to help them reintegrate after they're released.

**By Michaela Haas**

Dr. Haas, a journalist and author, regularly writes about social justice, resilience, and environmental innovations.

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In the beginning, Sabina Crocette struggled with the best way to introduce London DeLora Croudy to her family and friends. “Should I introduce her as my roommate? My renter? A new family member?” Ms. Crocette was also questioning how much to get involved in her guest’s life: “I wanted to embrace her but not smother her.”

That is because their relationship has no precedent.

Ms. Crocette, 52, took in Ms. Croudy, 32, just before Christmas last year through the Homecoming Project, an effort by the nonprofit Impact Justice in Alameda County, Calif. According to the Prison Policy Initiative, a public policy think tank, people who have been released from prison are 10 times more likely than the general public to become homeless. Few can afford astronomical rents in California’s Bay Area, and the stigma against the formerly incarcerated is persistent. But when ex-prisoners end up homeless, the recidivism rates increase.

“We looked at the success of Airbnb and the sharing economy, and saw a model that could be adapted to meet this need,” Terah Lawyer, the program manager, said. “Some are offering shared housing for college students or refugees. We are the first to offer it for the re-entry population.”

“This is a very sensitive ask,” she continued, “but we found it appeals to people who have strong social values and are called to helping that population.”

Since it began in August 2018, the Homecoming Project has matched 15 newly released prisoners with hosts. “We prioritize people who are homeless and who have been in jail for more than 10 years,” Ms. Lawyer said. Perhaps surprisingly, these prisoners are unlikely to reoffend. So far, all the participants and alumni have steady jobs or are pursuing degrees, Ms. Lawyer said. None is on the streets or jobless. Nobody has gotten in any trouble with the law. The Homecoming Project would be prepared to hold a conflict resolution session “to break through communication barriers if there are any,” Ms. Lawyer said, but so far there haven’t been.

One reason for that success is that the program looks for people with good records — Ms. Croudy, for instance, said she has had no violations in prison. She emphasizes how invested she is now in a spiritual and healthy lifestyle.

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In 2010, she was sentenced to 13 years for conspiracy to distribute heroin; she served more than eight years, getting out in 2018. “I was into that fast lifestyle; I lost myself,” Ms. Croudy says about her life before incarceration. But getting out was frightening. “I was lost, estranged from my family, I had no money and was afraid to ride public transport. I was extremely insecure how to find my place.”



Ms. Croudy is setting up a side business as a sales consultant for health products. Wesaam Al-Badry for The New York Times

She met Ms. Crocette at an information event for ex-prisoners. “Sabina drove me to my halfway house because I didn’t have a car; she invited me to lunch because I didn’t have money; and when I asked if she maybe knew someone who had a spare room, she looked at me funny and said, ‘Have you heard of the Homecoming Project? I just happen to have an extra room.’”

Ms. Crocette had invited former prisoners to stay with her for short periods before. She bought the quaint blue townhouse in Oakland in 2005 from her salary as a well-paid tax lawyer. An oversized “Welcome” sign graces the poppy red door. Ten years ago she changed careers and started working as a probation lawyer. “This is not financially lucrative,” she said, “but it enriches my soul.”

However, one client not only had a key to her home, but also an addiction problem Ms. Crocette wasn’t aware of. “When nobody was home, he stole cash from my daughter.”

So when Ms. Crocette floated the idea of Ms. Croudy moving in, her daughter, then 21, had a swift response: “No way! Haven’t you learned anything?” Ms. Crocette laughed. “I said to her, ‘Why don’t you meet London before you say no? I believe you’ll be buddies in no time!’ And this is exactly what happened.”

The three women regularly cooked together, shared meals and got to know one another. “You don’t have to ask my permission to go out,” Ms. Crocette had to remind Ms. Croudy in the beginning.

The Homecoming Project screens hosts and their potential house guests extensively and pays \$775 per month in rent for six months. The program is about much more than just a place to sleep. “Many participants have to learn to navigate the community,” Ms. Lawyer said. “How do you use an iPhone? How do you cook for yourself?” Some have more serious issues. “People who have committed crimes often have trauma,” Ms. Lawyer said. “It is important for them to be part of a healthy family.”

So that the hosts are not left on their own to deal with such complex issues, each client is connected to an innovative LifeLong Medical Care clinic in Berkeley, where they get health care and can request counseling. Hosts and guests regularly take workshops on topics ranging from practical help to self-care. “They need to be educated about the challenges,” Ms. Lawyer said. “For instance, one host didn’t ✕

understand why privacy was such a big issue for his participant. Once he understood the setting in institutions where you even use the bathroom in front of other people, it resolved the confusion.” The Homecoming Project’s community navigators stop by as often as needed to help.

“It’s safer than if I took in a renter from Craigslist,” Ms. Crocette said.

Ms. Lawyer said that careful matching is crucial for success. She paired one host and client because of their common background in technology. “The host worked at a tech company where they were looking for a coder. They are now commuting together. This was the fastest a participant ever found a job: four days.”

Like many hosts, Ms. Crocette is an activist who wants to improve what she sees as a racially biased justice system. She continues to rent the room privately to Ms. Croudy since the six months’ support by the Homecoming Project ended. “People need security for two years to plan and build a new life,” Ms. Crocette said.

The Homecoming Project has a waiting list of more than 100 ex-prisoners, but only 20 hosts. Ms. Lawyer said they are ready to expand — but a lack of money stands in the way.



After her Homecoming Project stipend ended, Ms. Crocette began renting her room to Ms. Croudy privately. Wesaam Al-Badry for The New York Times

Initial funding came from a private donor, but the group also received grants, including one from Stanford University, and a contract with the state of California. Ms. Lawyer hopes to train other organizations around the country to bring the model to their own communities. To give some perspective on the need, 600,000 people are released from prison every year in the United States

Ms. Lawyer knows the issues firsthand. She spent 15 years in prison for aiding and abetting a murder. Behind bars, she got degrees in business management and drug counseling. “When I got out two years ago, I ended up in a transitional home that was run almost like a prison,” she said. “I was grateful I had a place to sleep, but I was not allowed to work for the first three months though I had a job lined up,”



and I had to take a drug rehabilitation program though I had never touched drugs and am an addiction counselor. I could have run these courses!”

Ms. Croudy said that she, too, hated her halfway house, which was run by a for-profit company that also manages prisons and immigrant detention centers. “I was only allowed to leave one day a week. They simply don’t treat you as an individual who is preparing to stand on her own feet.”

The Tipping Point, an anti-poverty group, is piloting a home-sharing program for foster youth, another stigmatized group. Many of its hosts, too, are motivated by their desire to give people a second chance. But there’s another reason, said Mitch Findley, a senior planner with the group’s Chronic Homelessness Initiative: the region’s astronomical housing prices affect hosts as well as guests. “Things are so expensive that people are willing to open their homes to help solve our community’s housing challenges,” he said.

Ms. Crocette wants to persuade friends and neighbors to take in Homecoming Project clients.

Ms. Croudy now has a car and a paid fellowship with a nonprofit that advises former prisoners. In her video series, “Starting Over With London,” she shares her experience: “Starting over is a struggle, a physical and emotional battle.”

She is setting up a side business as a sales consultant for health products and regularly shares nutrition tips with her host, including which vitamins to take. “I’ve lost eight pounds!” Ms. Crocette said, and patted her thighs in brand-new jeans. She said the two have settled on a term they’re both comfortable with to describe their relationship. “We’re friends.”

Michaela Haas, Ph.D., is the author, most recently, of “Bouncing Forward,” and a Solutions Journalism Network contributor.

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