

Myth Busters of Prisoner Re-Entry- May 3, 2011

[Crime Report. Federal Agency Reentry Council]

(See: <http://www.nationalreentryresourcecenter.org/reentry-council>) – highlights added

NEWS FROM WASHINGTON



Despite popular belief, there is no federal law barring most former inmates from public housing.

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The challenge of steering the 700,000 inmates leaving U.S. prisons every year to the services they need never has been more daunting in a poor economy. Now, the federal government is stepping up its work to help the cause.

In a rare show of collaboration, 18 federal agencies that deal with re-entry issues are working together to clarify their practices, and in some cases change their policies, so that states and localities where the ex-prisoners live can better help them find necessities like housing, health care, jobs, and various government benefits.

Yesterday, what is known as the Federal Interagency Reentry Council posted a set of “Reentry MythBusters” as a guide. The material is available on a website, <http://www.nationalreentryresourcecenter.org/reentry-council>, that the Justice Department has funded to provide a wide range of information.

To take one major myth as an example, it’s widely believed that people who have been convicted of a crime are banned from living in public housing. Actually, locally operated public housing agencies can determine their own policies. They are prohibited by federal law from admitting only those with a lifetime registration requirement as a sex offender or people who manufactured meth in public housing.

Housing and Urban Development Secretary Shaun Donovan is urging housing authorities to help “ex-offenders gain access to one of the most fundamental building blocks of a stable life – a place to live.”

Among other myths debunked on the new web site: that parents with felony convictions cannot receive welfare help under the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program (TANF), that former prisoners can't regain Social Security eligibility, and that ex-inmates are barred from getting federal jobs or federal student financial aid.

It's true that many government benefits are denied to the 2.3 million people who are behind bars at any given moment. So many terms are so short -- often a matter of a few months -- that convicts need help navigating the government benefit maze so that they can maximize the benefits to which they're entitled.

The federal council is providing states information on how those now incarcerated can apply in advance to reinstate benefits as soon as they are released.

Most inmates are in state institutions, so it's states that must decide how their practices can be streamlined. One example of a policy change on a federal level: the Veterans Administration now allows the many ex-convicts in community corrections programs like halfway houses to use federal veterans health programs.

One unusual aspect of the federal re-entry council is that it's being managed by current federal employees with existing federal dollars. The federal Second Chance Act is providing about \$83 million this year to help state and local reentry programs, but the federal coordinating work is an Obama administration initiative that wasn't required by the federal law.

Attorney General Eric Holder has taken a personal role by convening the council, which aims at reducing the big problem of repeat criminality by helping those returning from prisons and jails to become productive citizens.

As reported in The Crime Report, Holder last month asked state governors and attorneys general to review provisions of their laws that hamper ex-prisoners from getting work, education, or other benefits but do not increase public safety. Holder vowed a review of federal laws on the subject.