Austin/Travis County Reentry Roundtable

Final Report on the Justice Reinvestment Initiative Supportive Housing Pilot Evaluation
Urban Institute
June 2015

1. **Keep an updated/current list of eligible participants:**
   Having a fixed list of participants hindered the identification and enrollment of participants. By the time the pilot was implemented, the list of eligible participants was outdated. Having an updated list is particularly important since the definition of frequent users includes individuals who cycle into the jail system (or other systems) repeatedly. In Travis County, there were presumably additional individuals who would have met the eligibility criteria by virtue of having an additional jail booking. Maintaining a live list, which should be updated regularly (e.g., weekly or monthly), would facilitate much more efficient identification and enrollment over time.

2. **Use integrated data systems to identify eligible participants:**
   The pilot used outreach workers from diverse organizations to identify eligible participants; yet, the mechanism for identifying them was not electronic or integrated. Ideally, the jail, mental health system, and HMIS data systems (or others) in Travis County would have been integrated in such a way that those on the master list would have been "flagged" the moment they showed up in a system (by being admitted to the jail, by staying in a shelter, or being served by the mental health system, for example). An integrated, electronic data system would facilitate a more efficient identification and enrollment process where eligible participants are identified the moment they use a government system. Related, an integrated data system could identify individuals with even higher societal costs by determining the frequent users of various systems.

   > **Urban Institute Key Recommendations for Travis County JRI Initiative:**
   >
   > - Keep updated/current list of eligible participants
   > - Use integrated data systems to identify eligible participants
   > - Have dedicated social workers or staff in jail and/or community to locate eligible participants
   > - Have clear, consistent eligibility criteria
   > - Reduce barriers to housing
   > - Streamline identification-enrollment-housing process

3. **Have dedicated social workers or staff in the jail and/or the community locate eligible participants:**
   The use of outreach workers across several agencies facilitated locating eligible participants, but these workers were trying to locate eligible participants in addition to their regular work schedules and commitments. It would have been more efficient if there were dedicated staff in the jail and/or in the community whose sole job was to identify potential participants. Dedicated staff are associated with additional costs, but finding the target population—individuals with high rates of residential instability and system cycling—would have been more efficient if there were staff who could focus all of their efforts on this task. Consistent with recommendation #3, a dedicated staff person in the jail could have been in charge with monitoring the system that flagged when an individual came into the jail.

4. **Have clear and consistent eligibility criteria:**
   The application process that Foundation Communities used to assign housing created additional eligibility criteria for the pilot. There was confusion early on which individuals on the master list were actually eligible for housing. The housing provider application and appeal process also changed over time, causing additional confusion, as it became clearer that property management viewed many on the master list as having disqualifying criminal histories. More individuals would have been housed if the housing provider vetted the master list and ineligibles were screened out based on their criminal history. The outreach workers spent valuable time and resources locating individuals who would be eventually denied housing. Many individuals spent time and resources completing the housing application process and were disappointed when it was denied. To avoid wasted energy on the part of staff and frustration among potential participants, a program should have clear and consistent eligibility criteria established at program start-up.

5. **Reduce barriers to housing**:
   As demonstrated by the small percentage of individuals housed relative to those assigned to the treatment group (23 of 74), barriers built into the housing process weeds people out. This is to be expected of course. Yet, some of these barriers, such as interviewing with property management and needing forms of identification, should be eliminated or modified, particularly for the frequent user population that has high rates of residential instability and mental illnesses. That is, frequent users are the very individuals who would have difficulties with the application process. And arguably, individuals with high rates of residential instability and mental illnesses are the individuals who need low-barrier housing the most.

6. **Streamline the identification-enrollment-housing process:**
   Several individuals were involved in the identification, enrollment, and housing process in the pilot, including TCJP, the outreach workers, and staff at Foundation Communities. A more efficient process, which likely would have resulted in more individuals being housed and served, would have reduced the number of people involved in this process. A potential recommendation stemming from this issue would be to dedicate one or two staff persons from one organization to be involved in both the identification and housing process.