



Freedom Commons includes 54 affordable apartments, 11 of which are permanent supportive housing for people who have been incarcerated. Alternatives



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Syracuse, New York: From Prison to Stability on the Outside

People exiting prison face enormous challenges in creating stable lives for themselves. Housing, employment, and even services can be difficult to access; as a result, people recently released from incarceration find themselves at heightened risk for homelessness. In Syracuse, New York, the Center for Community Alternatives (CCA) partnered with the Syracuse Housing Authority to create Freedom Commons in 2019. Located in the city's historically underinvested Southside neighborhood, the development combines traditional affordable housing with some units designated as permanent supportive housing targeting formerly incarcerated individuals. The development also includes Freedom Commons Academy, a facility that helps recently released individuals reacclimate to life outside

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of prison. Freedom Commons earned a 2020 LEED Homes Award in the Outstanding Affordable Project category based on its high level of design, energy efficiency, commitment to social equity, and neighborhood improvement.

Building a Single Community

Freedom Commons is a mix of one-, two-, and three-bedroom units plus congregate housing for the academy within a multifamily building and attached townhouses. Freedom Commons contains 54 apartments, 43 of which rent to individuals or families with incomes not exceeding 50 percent of the area median income (AMI); these units are not reserved for people who have been incarcerated. The remaining 11 apartments are permanent supportive housing for households earning incomes at or below 30 percent of AMI, have experienced or were at risk of homelessness, and have been involved with the criminal justice system. The academy's housing is a transitional shelter with 3 rooms for up to 15 participants; this shelter provides additional services to help residents develop a foundation for success in employment, housing, and other areas in which recently incarcerated people often experience significant challenges. Building amenities include a community room, training room, computer lab, kitchen, dining room, laundry facilities, and bike storage.

Freedom Commons cost more than \$14 million to develop (table 1). The largest source of permanent financing was federal low-income housing tax credits. Approximately \$5 million came from various state programs including the Energy Research & Development Authority, which helped fund features that earned Freedom Commons LEED Gold certification. Operating subsidies for the permanent supportive housing are provided through a combination of project-based vouchers and funds from the Empire State Supportive Housing Initiative. Operating costs for the academy are supported by funding from the Onondaga Department of Social Services. Freedom Commons helps Syracuse achieve its goal of building and preserving more than 100,000 units of affordable housing and 6,000 units of supportive housing under a 2017 housing plan. Administered by the state's affordable housing agency, New York State Homes and Community Renewal, the plan calls for \$20 billion to be spent over 5 years.

Table 1: Financing for Freedom Commons

Low-income housing tax credit equity	\$9,480,000
New York State Homeless Housing and Assistance Corporation	2,700,000
New York State Homes & Community Renewal Housing Trust Fund	2,200,000
New York State Energy Research & Development Authority	60,000
Total	\$14,440,000

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Green Features and the Neighborhood

Freedom Commons includes several environmental features. To reduce energy costs, the building has a tight envelope and energy-efficient windows. Durable materials such as brick, metal, and fiber cement help ensure the building's longevity and potentially reduce maintenance costs over time. Because Freedom Commons was constructed near several bus routes, residents have easy, car-free access to community amenities and services, allowing for reduced onsite parking and limited paved areas. Minimizing impervious surfaces and installing a rain garden are elements of the site's stormwater management system. Freedom Commons also enhances the general livability of the surrounding neighborhood and, because it was built on a vacant lot, eliminates a neighborhood eyesore. Project designers placed the parking at the interior of the site and varied the massing of the building to better activate the street at a pedestrian scale.

Serving Formerly Incarcerated Individuals

Providing services to residents is central to the mission of Freedom Commons. Caseworkers help residents in the permanent supportive housing units connect with the services they need. Services for these residents include education, addiction recovery, employment services, housing support, and general case management. One important service that CCA offers Freedom Commons residents and other clients is civic restoration, a legal service that corrects mistakes in criminal records. Those mistakes, found in 60 percent of criminal records, can be barriers to housing and employment. Some mistakes can make a person more vulnerable to future criminal justice involvement — for example, when an officer stops a person for a minor infraction and the apparent warrant requires detention.

A design decision is also helping some Freedom Commons residents address a typical challenge for formerly incarcerated people. Kelly Gonzalez, CCA's deputy director, describes the decision to include two-bedroom apartments among the permanent supportive units to facilitate formerly incarcerated people recovering custody of their children. Judges can be reluctant to reunite families without proof of adequate housing, which would include a separate bedroom for children. CCA, however, cannot underutilize a two-bedroom unit by renting it to single people or childless couples or by keeping it unoccupied. CCA caseworkers have been able to present a promise to rent a two-bedroom apartment to a family, giving the judge a basis for reuniting the family.

The academy's services were designed for people released directly from prison and needing to develop behavior patterns to negotiate life outside of the highly controlled prison environment. So it is critical to select people who might benefit from the academy while they are still in prison. Many participants are referred by the Onondaga County Re-Entry Task Force, which identifies inmates with a moderate-to-high risk of reoffending. Some people are referred by CCA staff who run programs inside prisons and determine inmates' anticipated housing challenges as they near release. Others have learned about the academy through word of mouth while still incarcerated. As a residency requirement, academy participants must complete 35 hours of productive activity weekly. This activity may be a job, volunteer work, or other specialized programming. CCA staff also help clients learn how to talk about a

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past conviction with potential employers and landlords in ways that demonstrate how they have changed, because, Gonzalez says, how a person addresses the past is crucial for generating positive housing and employment outcomes. Residents of the academy build community and accountability by cooking for themselves and one another in the common kitchen and cleaning the academy portion of Freedom Commons. In addition, to help structure their day, residents must be onsite by 8:00 pm and observe a 10:00 pm curfew.

Policy Challenges

Gonzalez notes that policies in homelessness services can work against formerly incarcerated individuals' successful reintegration into mainstream society. For example, the referral policies of the regional Continuum of Care's coordinated entry system consider persons in prison as being housed; so people exiting incarceration are placed at the back of the queue for services such as rapid rehousing. Operational funding policies for emergency shelters are another challenge for the academy. Those policies do not accommodate the longer stays and specific services that some people exiting incarceration require. Although the academy has resolved its challenges through individualized solutions, Gonzalez sees the need for new program policies that address the unique needs of formerly incarcerated people at scale. Such work is underway at the federal level, with proposed changes that allow Continuums of Care to provide increased housing options and remove barriers to housing access for people exiting prison.

In spite of these challenges, Gonzalez reports early success at Freedom Commons. Factors contributing to that success include support from the local public housing agency and Freedom Commons' dedicated and empathetic staff. Freedom Commons also relies heavily on resident "ambassadors" who have been through incarceration and have shared perspective on helping residents find their footing, readjust to life outside of prison, and ultimately, break an all-too-common connection between incarceration and homelessness.

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