

Housing helps out prisoners

By Victor Merced and Ron Chase

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Put a candle in the window,

'Cause I feel I've got to move.

Though I'm going, going

I'll be coming home soon,

Long as I can see the light.

— John Fogerty

You're coming home soon. Determined to stay out of trouble, you're sure you can remain clean and sober. You must find work: The search will be tough, the first job likely menial.

Just where is home? You're among the lucky. You have a place to go — a halfway house. Not the streets. But you've been "inside" so long, you discover a tough reality when you taste freedom. The unstructured life hits you hard.

Old acquaintances come out of nowhere. You fight off the ghosts. Easy money beckons. It looks better than the nine bucks an hour at the car wash. But you hang tough with the low-paying job.

Your family wants to help but is strapped. Support — from close kin and civic coffers — is minimal.

There's precious little comfort in your situation, even as glad as you are to be out of prison and as hard as you are trying to "get it right" this time. Still, you're determined not to be among the 31.4 percent of Oregon prisoners who are convicted of a felony within three years of release.

No drugs. No booze. No scams. You're doing all right, largely because you have a home. It may be temporary, but it's clean and safe. And it's a start.

But many offenders re-entering everyday life from prison or county jail in Oregon don't have housing at all. Nobody to "put a candle in the window" for them. And the result is often bad.

Good housing, on the other hand, reduces repeat offenses dramatically. Fifty percent of released offenders who were not given long-term housing reoffended, compared to just 20 percent in groups who received housing, reported an Illinois study.

What that means, according to the research commissioned by the Fannie Mae Foundation, is that housing was associated with a 30 percentage point decrease in repeat offenses.

The Justice Policy Institute last year reported that 26 percent of people in jail across the nation and 19.5 percent in state prisons were homeless in the year before they were incarcerated.

What's more, this study found that greater violence occurred among prisoners who lived in older, substandard housing where lead exposure from peeling paint was present. The same study found that states spending the highest amounts on housing experience the lowest rates of incarceration.

Oregon's prison price is \$77.78 per inmate per day: pretty costly. And repeat offenses keep the costs high. The turnstile rotates for released offenders, as noted above, at a rate greater than 31 percent in our state.

Accordingly, the 4,000-plus men and women who are paroled or released each year in Oregon translates to 1,250 who reoffend within three years. Besides the immeasurable impact to the victims of crime, the daily cost is about \$100,000 to accommodate those who are sent back.

How do we reduce this? How do we decrease the number of ex-offenders who return to prison so that we may cut the cost of their incarceration? One way is with more post-release housing.

It's the old pay-now or pay-later argument. The studies are clear: It's cheaper to pay up front.

Released offender housing works. It significantly reduces repeat offenses and thereby cuts the cost of operating prisons and jails in the long run.

We're not advocating the release of violent criminals. Not at all. We're calling for greater support for released offender housing in Oregon, for engaging communities so that local decision-makers understand the benefits of better, more stable places for parolees to live. We're asking for more operating expenses to run transitional housing and more help with rent.

The payoff will be enormous, as the song says, when we can see the light.

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