



# TRANSITIONING

## incarcerated individuals out of extended restrictive housing

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**I**n recent decades, correctional systems increasingly have relied on restrictive housing, which can include various forms of segregation as well as solitary confinement.<sup>1</sup> The housing may be used for discipline, protection or administrative purposes and may be short or long in duration.<sup>2</sup> Individuals in restrictive housing may remain in a cell, alone or with another cellmate, for up to 24 hours a day. They are typically only allowed out — shackled and escorted by guards — to attend recreation and medical appointments. Restrictive housing appears to be widely used. One study found over 18% of U.S. incarcerated individuals spent time in restrictive housing.<sup>3</sup>

Reliance on restrictive housing has generated significant debate. Advocates view it as essential to the operations and safety of prisons and jails, while critics view it as inhumane, harmful and unnecessary. Those who work in corrections, as well as policymakers and the public, vary in their views.<sup>4</sup> Empirical research has not examined a wide range of relevant dimensions, but studies to date paint a complicated picture.<sup>5</sup> For example, some studies suggest restrictive housing may harm the mental health of incarcerated individuals or it may increase in-prison misconduct among those who experience restrictive housing or across entire prison systems.<sup>6,7,8</sup> It also might increase recidivism.<sup>9</sup> Yet, some studies do not find significant differences to support these arguments.<sup>10</sup>

A pressing need exists to help incarcerated individuals transition out of restrictive housing, particularly among those placed in extended solitary confinement. These individuals may be released

from segregation with little preparation for reintegration and, as a result, face difficulties adjusting to life in open population prison settings or upon return to society.<sup>11</sup> Little remains known, though, about efforts to facilitate improved transitions out of this housing.

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### **Lessons learned about efforts to transition individuals out of restrictive housing**

To gain insight into what might be done to improve the transition of individuals out of long-term restrictive housing that entails solitary confinement, this essay draws on insights from a study in Florida that involved interviews and focus groups with 144 prison personnel across ten prisons. Five facilities managed extended restrictive housing units, four were general population facilities that send and receive individuals from these units and one provided

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transition services for those released from them. From the interviews and focus groups, we identified seven critical considerations in how correctional systems might improve the transition experience and outcomes of individuals released from restrictive housing.

### 1 Goals of a restrictive housing transition program

The notion of a transition program may seem like common sense, but there can be variation in the goals that different groups believe are important. For that reason, the goals of a transition program should be made clear at the onset. Otherwise, there will be little alignment of staffing efforts and ability to achieve program goals.

One goal might be to decrease the overall use of restrictive housing. Across almost all interviews and focus groups, respondents emphasized the importance of programming that reduces the likelihood individuals released from the housing return to it. Many emphasized while such programming may be offered in a restrictive housing setting, the challenges in doing so point to the need for transition housing and programming.

A second and related goal might be to encourage some individuals to want to leave the housing. Why? They may become accustomed to the safety and seclusion of a single-bed cell. As one respondent stated, “Some inmates get comfortable behind the door. That’s why a program is so important. It’s hard for them to go from behind the door

to the general population. They’re scared. [A transition] program [could help] them.” Transition programming that gradually prepares these individuals for social interactions may be critical.

Still another goal might be to prepare individuals for transition to society, not just to other prison units. In some states, individuals may be released directly from restrictive housing to the community. A transition program would be especially important for helping these individuals secure housing, employment and services, as well as to reintegrate with their families.

### 2 How to design a restrictive housing transition program

Personnel mentioned different program design considerations, and many varied in what they thought a program should offer. Most, though, highlighted the need for a multi-faceted yet realistic approach.

The timing of program delivery was viewed as critical. Individuals in restrictive housing ideally might begin receiving some services while there to facilitate “buy-in” before they arrive at a transition program. Respondents who worked in restrictive housing highlighted the importance of incarcerated individuals having a reentry plan for return to general population facilities and society. Such planning might improve behavior in the short term and, in the longer term, successful participation in a transition program.

Another critical design consideration centers on the types of programming offered. Consistent with what research suggests would be helpful, many respondents highlighted the need for cognitive-behavioral treatment approaches — delivered by skilled professionals and coordinated with experienced officers — to help incarcerated individuals both in restrictive housing and in transition programming better manage social and life challenges. These services likely need to be adapted for working with a population with unique conditions, such as a greater likelihood of engaging in violence or having a mental illness or disability.

Still another design consideration should be care in the approach to placing incarcerated individuals into transition housing and releasing them from it. These individuals typically have been in isolation for extended periods. That presents problems for managing group dynamics in a program and for assisting individuals as they move into general population facilities. Thus, consideration of how many individuals can be in the transition programming, the length of treatment, and the process for acclimating them to general population units is important.

3

### Criteria for admission and release from a restrictive housing transition program

A diversity of opinions exists about who should be in restrictive housing.<sup>12</sup> Regardless, in an environment of scarce resources, correctional systems must carefully consider eligibility for participation in a transition program. Most individuals in long-term solitary confinement would seem to require such assistance, both because of their risk profiles and their time spent in isolation. But correctional systems may not be able to serve all these individuals, and some of them may not require an intensive transition program.

One clear criterion is the risk individuals pose to themselves and others. Those who are more likely to engage in violence or who lack coping skills may warrant greater priority. Another criterion many respondents highlighted is the motivation to participate. Those most motivated to enter a transition program were viewed as more likely to benefit from it. At the same time, they also may be more likely than others to fare better upon return to general population units or to society. Coercing less motivated individuals to participate therefore might be the

better option. However, coercion may be ineffective and counterproductive. A focus, therefore, on how to improve motivation of any participants before, during and after restrictive housing is essential.

4

### The importance of preparing individuals for release from restrictive housing

The last several decades have been witness to a burgeoning literature that documents the challenges and importance of successful reentry into society. Correctional systems increasingly recognize this insight extends, in particular, to those in solitary confinement or other forms of restrictive housing. Extended periods of time alone or with significant restrictions on privileges, visitation and programming may add additional complications to reentry. The individuals may be more likely to have mental health symptoms, to have difficulty interacting with others, or to be unprepared for life with others and in society. That, in essence, constitutes the central argument for transition programming. It provides such individuals with the opportunity to slowly integrate — with targeted help from counselors and other trained personnel — into the prison community and the world at large.

5

### Challenges that specific groups present for transition program efforts

For a transition program to be successful, it will need to adapt to and address the challenges that certain groups of incarcerated individuals in restrictive housing present. In nearly all discussions with personnel, this emphasis arose. Individuals with a mental illness constitute one such group. For example, respondents reported individuals with severe anxiety problems have difficulty responding to directions and may seek to isolate themselves by remaining in solitary confinement or by avoiding participation in programming. Some individuals with mental illness also may act in ways other incarcerated groups view as odd or a nuisance, contributing to the potential for stigma or victimization. Incarcerated individuals with a learning disability may be more frustrated by the experience of living in restrictive housing and by efforts to assist them in a transition program. Strategies are needed for working with such individuals when they reside in restrictive housing or when they enter a transition program to help them navigate the

many hurdles that come with life in prison and reentry to society. (There is, in addition, the importance of taking steps to reduce placement of individuals with mental health conditions in restrictive housing in the first place.)

### **6 The critical role of staffing to restrictive housing transition efforts**

Adequate staffing constitutes another critical component of successful restrictive housing transition efforts. As in other areas of correctional system operations, having too few staff can result in failure and potential harms given that individuals in long-term solitary confinement may be especially dangerous or unpredictable. With insufficient number of personnel, and with insufficiently experienced personnel, transition programming is likely to be ineffective. The same observation holds for other types of restrictive housing. When staffing falls short, so, too, does the ability to monitor incarcerated individuals carefully, to respond to their needs in a timely manner, or to provide services and treatment.

### **7 Evaluation as an essential part of developing and assessing transition efforts**

As with restrictive housing transition program efforts around the country, rigorous evaluations are needed that identify what works and the conditions necessary for programs to be effective. Assessing impacts on outcomes such as prison safety and order, the behavior of incarcerated individuals, recommitment to restrictive housing, and recidivism will be important. But assessment of factors that contribute to high-quality implementation will be important as well. In particular, process evaluations are needed that collect information from personnel and incarcerated individuals to understand how to improve program delivery.

## **Conclusion**

The insights here complement and extend observations other researchers and studies have made.<sup>13</sup> Specifically, we identified seven dimensions correctional systems should consider when creating transition programming for individuals coming out of long-term restrictive housing. These include program goals, design, admission and release criteria, preparation for release from restrictive

housing, challenges with specific groups of incarcerated individuals, staffing and evaluation. Such dimensions are likely to be critical for guiding the development of transition programs out of all types of restrictive housing.<sup>14</sup>

The need for effective transition programming is clear — individuals who remain in isolation for extended periods, as well as anyone who has spent time in other types of restrictive housing, may have difficulty adjusting to life in open population prisons or society. And they can constitute a threat to themselves or others. Many approaches can be taken. For example, in their evaluation of extended restrictive housing, Digard and colleagues recommended treatment while in segregation and instructor-led programming in classroom settings.<sup>15</sup> They also encouraged prisons to develop “step-down” programs that gradually increase out-of-cell time and privileges to prepare individuals for transition.

Whether such efforts will be effective remains to be determined, but it is clear correctional systems need interventions like them. It is clear, too, many prison and jail systems in fact want programs that can reduce potential harms of restrictive housing and increase the likelihood of incarcerated persons’ success in securing housing, employment and becoming prosocial members of society. Several states, including the one examined in this study, are taking steps to improve outcomes among those released from restrictive housing, yet their operations and impacts have yet to be evaluated.<sup>16</sup> In addition, some programs exist that show potential promise for improving the mental health of those in restrictive housing.<sup>16</sup> In taking steps forward, states will want to clarify the goals of their transition programs and the specific activities and staffing that comprise them. They will want to tackle implementation hurdles, such as how to individualize programming in a context of limited funding and how to ensure personnel buy-in. Not least, they — along with state and federal agencies — will want to invest in research that can provide feedback to guide their efforts and to increase evidence about what works.

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