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INDEPENDENT NONPROFIT NONPARTISAN NEWS

OAR, OTHER ORGS PLAN "SUNFLOWER HOUSES„ TO HELP THE FORMERLY INCARCERATED BUILD NEW BEGINNINGS

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ITHACA, NY – Everyone needs a safe, stable roof over their heads. For some individuals, that's harder to come by. Those with lower incomes, those with special needs, and individuals with unique but limiting circumstances, like men and women who are out on parole.

No one's expecting sympathy for previous actions. But it is hard to make a new start, especially in a city where the housing costs are high and options are limited; many end up in the homeless shelter. The formerly incarcerated often struggle to find stable work and manage to stay afloat with Tompkins County's regionally high cost of living. Services in physical or mental times of need can be difficult to obtain, especially if the service is in Ithaca



and the individual is living in a rural area without easy access to transportation. Issues many lower-income renters often face in Ithaca, such as making a sudden move to a different place, may trigger a parole violation if a parole officer isn't notified first, and can land the individual back behind bars, an unfortunate result called recidivism.

Not only is recidivism a setback for the person trying to re-enter the community, it's a financial burden for the county as well. On the low end, the cost of incarcerating someone in Tompkins County is about $325/day. The average of the past several years shows about 47 people are re-incarcerated every year, they typically wait about sixty days to see a judge and likely be turned over to the Department of Corrections. The cost of keeping them in the Tompkins County Jail comes out to over $900,000 per year.

There's also a racial equity component that arises with recidivism. The incarcerated population is disproportionately people of color. In 2019, 45% of people sent to prison from Tompkins County were Black, despite Black residents only being 4.4% of the county's population.

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Sunflower Houses



Reducing recidivism reduces the scale of racial disparities. Clearly, whether understood on compassionate grounds, social equity or financial pragmatism, there's significant value in reducing recidivism in Tompkins County.

This is where the Sunflower Houses may have value to the Tompkins County community. Similar to the Endeavor House, the Sunflower Houses is a planned the Sunflower Houses is a planned transitional housing program designed to provide comprehensive wraparound services to people in reentry in order to facilitate their successful reintegration into the community. It is a collaborative effort between Opportunities, Alternatives, And Resources of Tompkins County, an organization that helps formerly incarcerated people integrate back into the community, non-profit housing provider Ithaca Neighborhood Housing Services (INHS), and Ultimate Re-Entry Opportunity for Tompkins County (URO), an organization partners with Cornell Cooperative Extension that seeks to reduce barriers to re-entry by providing programming and resources.

The Sunflower Houses program serves multiple needs. For one, it will provide for safe, affordable housing for people in reentry, in easy access of services. For two, it will provide structure through house programming and oversight coordinated by a paid full-time house manager. For three, the programming will include components like computer training, assistance finding and sustaining employment, and related services provided by OAR. The overall goal of the program is to promote independence for individuals working to rejoin the community by reducing the stressors associated with regaining their footing as independent, stable members of society.

There would be twelve participants in two INHS duplexes (four three-bedroom units) in Ithaca's Southside neighborhood, near the intersection of South Cayu-

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-ga and Titus Streets, close to government and social services in Downtown Ithaca, and in easy access to employers and bus lines to other employers. Participating individuals would have their own bedroom and share common areas with two others. Entrants would be vetted and assessed by URO and OAR, and need to demonstrate a motivation to succeed and rejoin the community. Residents would be expected to demonstrate good behavior and fulfill house duties (attending programming scheduled by the house manager, cleaning/ maintenance duties) as requirements of their stay. Sex offenders would not be included in the Sunflower Houses. The estimate is that each entrant would stay in the houses for 6-9 months, so there would be 20-22 residents in a given year.

As planned, the Sunflower Houses will run on a three-year pilot program. While the Department of Social Services will pay some of the costs for rent, the program requires supplemental funding from Tompkins County, about $111,320 annually. These funds would go towards the salary of the house manager, rent supplements, utilities/ maintenance of the properties, costs of supplying and running the house programming as well as record-keeping for reviewing the effectiveness of the Sunflower Houses. Now remember that $900k figure from earlier, the annual cost of re-incarceration. If the Sunflower Houses program cuts down recidivism by 30%, it more than pays for itself.

According to the funding application to Tompkins County, the expected savings to the county would be $390,000-$440,000, as well as a $190,000 savings to the Department of Social Services (which given the county's contribution potentially means another $55,000 reduction in county expenses).

"The Data Development Working Group of URO, composed of professors and student researchers at Cornell and Ithaca College, have been researching the key barriers to successful reentry in Tompkins County for the past three years. The findings of their study, which interviewed 54 formerly incarcerated people in the Tompkins County, show that the lack of affordable housing in Ithaca is central reason why many individuals cannot break a cycle of incarceration," says a press release from the URO.

"(T)his program will help save human lives. As the research teams at Cornell, Ithaca College, and URO have corroborated, finding a safe and affordable place to live is the single most essential element in reentry, as it impacts several other variables: access to employment, health care, court-mandated appointments, and access to regular transportation. The Sunflower

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Housing Project will give many of our community members a second chance at life that they, in practice, are deprived of, given the current lack of housing."

Ostensibly, there are going to be potentially thorny issues to sort out, namely, some residents in Ithaca's rapidly-gentrifying Southside neighborhood will not kindly to this type of housing in their part of the city. These are people seeking to restart and reorient their lives, and some will struggle. The concerns of local residents will need to be considered alongside the county's financial commitment and perceived community value of a program like the Sunflower Houses.

The program will be presented to the Tompkins County Legislature's Housing and Economic Development Committee Thursday morning. URO representatives state a student-led demonstration will be held in support of the program at the County's Legislative Chambers next Tuesday at 4:30 PM. If supported, the program could go to the legislature for a vote to fund the Sunflower Houses in October.