

Statement of Dolfinette Martin, Housing Director of Operation Restoration
Submitted to the U.S. House Financial Services Committee Subcommittee on Diversity and
Inclusion Hearing on
“Access Denied: Eliminating Barriers and Increasing Economic Opportunity for Justice-Involved
Individuals”
Tuesday, September 28, 2021

Chairwoman Beatty, Ranking Member Wagner, and members of the U.S. House Financial Services Subcommittee on Diversity and Inclusion, thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee today and for holding this hearing.

My name is Dolfinette Martin, Housing Director of Operation Restoration, a nonprofit created to help remove barriers for women formerly and currently incarcerated to help them reach their fullest potential and discover new possibilities. I myself am a formerly incarcerated woman who served a combined 12 years in prison. After my release on April 12, 2012, after serving 7 years 4 months and 28 days of incarceration my first night home I had no soap, deodorant or personal items that would help me keep my dignity.

My living situation was me hiding in my elderly mother’s senior living apartment because her lease required that no one live in her apartment other than her. This went on for a year after my release. At that time, I began to organize with grassroot organizations to change the current policies around public housing and criminal backgrounds at the Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO). We were able to successfully get those policies changed but implementation would take another 2 years. Once implemented, I was nominated to sit on the panel as a tenant of public housing. This was important because what was needed was someone who faced and is still facing the stigmas, bias and challenges around being safely housed in affordable houses due to a conviction. This panel is only for people who have not been released from incarceration within the last year or their conviction isn’t overis less than 3 years old. The reason this panel is so important is that it gives people the opportunity to receive public housing regardless of their past. In the four years of panel reviews there has only been 1 denial. However, oversight is greatly needed as this is an agency that is part of a larger problem.

Despite some progressive work we have been able to get HANO to do; 3rd party management corporations and private landlords are still using discriminatory practices although they receive HUD funding. These corporations and private sector landlords are using arrests as well as convictions to deny access to people. For instance, the panel could vote to allow access but if the tenant is applying for Section 8 housing, then the landlord does yet another background review and deny. In my work with Operation Restoration and Vera Institute of Justice we have attempted to help many women who have been denied housing solely because of a conviction and a few only had arrests with no adjudication of the charge. This type of discrimination not only affects the safety of these people but also the financial hardships that paying \$50 application and \$25 background check fees create is astronomical.

Recently, we had a natural disaster hit our state and evacuation efforts created yet another barrier to safe, affordable housing. Initially, those seeking hotels would have to pay out of pocket and if FEMA approved lodging there still was this barrier called "credit card on file for incidentals" . If I have no money, job or credit then presenting this life saving piece of plastic is nonexistent. So now I am faced with yet another barrier to housing. My personal experience with this is still present to this day. Though I am fortunate to be gainfully employed, have a savings and a checking account, several credit cards and cash on hand I AM HOMELESS due to the Hurricane damaging my roof and HANO negligence to ensure that tarp was properly placed on my unit. I am currently paying to live in an Airbnb, have received \$0 dollars from FEMA, and am not sure when my unit will be repaired. This I bring up solely because I have beaten the odds. As someone with ten felony convictions in my past my present is a college degree since my release, I sit on HANO panel review, I sit on the Board of Commissioner of Audubon Zoo, I sit on the Advisory Board of Formerly Incarcerated Transitional Clinic, I am Housing Director at Operation Restoration, manage a transitional home for women, am an entrepreneur, have a working relationship with city government, was on our Mayor's transition team, and have received numerous awards for the work I do in my community and state yet today I am homeless because there is no urgency around rehousing someone from the projects. With all the access that I have to the people in positions of power I can not find housing after a natural disaster of this magnitude. Imagine what those communities without this kind of access are facing!