



Second Chance: Make It More Than Just Words

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Imagine making the worst choice or series of choices in your life. Imagine causing enormous grief and harm to those around you as well as yourself. Imagine losing everything, believing there is no future, that you are a lost cause. Imagine you find yourself sitting in a prison cell, having hit rock bottom and believing your life is over. Then, something changes, and you very slowly start to believe that maybe, just maybe, you have a place in this world still. Perhaps there is good left for you to do in this life, things to accomplish, a new perspective to be had. And so the struggle begins to hold on to that small seed of hope, to keep that flame of possibility and hope and that magical word “future” burning. The people around you support your hard-won optimism and applaud your strength and courage to live life differently, to rebuild what was broken. You begin to believe you can do it and by the time your release from prison arrives, you are full of confidence and optimism that you can create a new life for yourself; that you can have a second chance. Then you step out into the world again and immediately realize that the fight is not over and the reality and panic crash around you; a felony conviction is making it impossible to find a place to live. You feel the second chance, the hope and that magical “future” begin to disappear.

This is the reality that millions of felons face when they are released from prison. Men and women who, while paying the price required of them by society, work hard and fight to create a new life are finding it almost impossible to achieve that life once they leave prison. Housing for felons is difficult to find. Section 8 housing, while willing to accept applicants with a felony, has very strict guidelines that prohibit many felons from getting housing. If a felon has been placed on the sex offender registry or has been convicted of selling meth near public housing facilities, they cannot even apply for Section 8. Those who have a felony within 5 years of applying often are denied, with some states and cities having a requirement of 10 years before they will accept

an application with a felony. In some locations having a conviction for a violent crime, drug dealing, or fraud is grounds for denying an application.

Though there are federal housing grants available for felons, often the demand outweighs the availability and response time can be very slow, leaving a large amount of time where there is no housing option. Organizations such as Catholic Charities, as well as other churches also aid with those with a felony conviction, but as with federal aid, response time can be slow due to the enormous demand.

So, what are the options available for those with a felony conviction when it comes to housing? Most cities have halfway houses available, and even though some of them have restrictions for certain felonies, they offer one of the better chances for a person with a felony conviction to have a place to live while getting their new life started. These programs often rely on charitable donations, grants and other forms of public funding in order to run, offering services dependent upon the funding they receive. If there is little funding, there are fewer services available,

If we are going to encourage people to create a new life and tell them they deserve a second chance, then the tools need to be available in order to make that second chance more than just lip service. This isn't just an issue for legislators and the housing authority. All of us can help create that second chance by donating to programs that provide housing opportunities for felons and for becoming active in advocating for services for these individuals who don't choose to live on the street but are denied the opportunity, so many times, to make it off of the streets.

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