

SUCCESS STORY

Returning home

From Rikers to restored hope

Luz didn't know she was pregnant. It had been 21 years since she had her last child. After finding out, the first thing she felt was shock. The second thing she felt was fear, because not only was she carrying a child, but she was being sent to Rikers Island. Rikers Island is a jail complex located to the East of Manhattan; it is notorious for poor conditions for those detained there, the majority of whom have not been convicted of a crime, but are awaiting trial.

Luz was arrested after being, she describes, in the "wrong place at the wrong time." Eventually, Luz's case was dismissed, and charges were dropped. But while she waited for justice, she waited on Rikers Island. Her family members petitioned the court for compassionate release. "Everybody was scared that the baby would be born in jail," she says.

It was eight months before Luz was granted release so she could give birth outside prison walls. It was right on time. "When I was released, I got on the train, and a couple of stops later, I got out, and I called the ambulance," says Luz.

She gave birth that day. What should have been a joyful moment, she describes as horrible. "I had no place to take my baby. I didn't have any clothes to put on my back," she says.

Her sister, already in touch with the court system and Children's Services, was able to care for the baby. For two nights, Luz slept in a hotel. Then she went to Hour Children, a transitional shelter for those who have been in jail or prison. She felt a sense of hopelessness. "I had lost the place where I lived," she describes, "All of my belongings, I didn't even have my birth certificate....I really hit rock bottom, and I didn't know how I was going to make it through."



"It was up to me to try to make the best of this," Luz says. She secured a housing voucher and began her search. Months passed, "I had such little luck," says Luz.

After "every dead end," Luz says that Hour Children—part of the consortium of organizations working to move women out of Rikers and into transitional housing alongside HousingPlus—told her about a new building opening in East New York.

Luz knew that if she got the apartment, it would be like coming home again. "I went to school on Linwood Street, it was right across the street from where I lived," Luz says, "It was a beautiful neighborhood to grow up in."

While she waited to see if she would be accepted at our newest building on Shepherd Avenue, which is located just a few blocks from her childhood home, Luz says, "I kept on praying every day....I was just so happy when I was told to come pick up my keys. I was like 'Thank God, there's hope.'"

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Since moving into her apartment, Luz has been able to go to court and explain that she has a permanent place to bring her baby son, who is now 15 months old. “That was my main stress before,” she says.

While she waits to regain custody, her baby visits regularly. “He likes to look out the window, and he can see the cars. He just loves cars,” she shares.

She says her goal now is to get her baby back into her care and be supportive of her two other adult children: her son, who is in college, and her daughter, who recently left the Air Force.

In her new apartment, Luz enjoys preparing meals, and her favorite place is her kitchen table. “I know everyone loves my collard greens and potato salad,” says Luz. Her older son, who attends college at SUNY Dutchess, is planning a visit, and she has an

entire menu planned of foods she wants to send him back with.

Today, she says she feels safe. “I am so thankful for everybody who made this possible for me, to have a roof over my head.” She describes that on hard days, her HousingPlus case manager takes the time to have a supportive conversation, “When you’re working so hard to get your life in order, coming from where we came from, in prison and losing everything, it feels good to have someone to talk to and someone to encourage you and give you that extra push.”

“I kept on praying every day...I was just so happy when I was told to come pick up my keys.”

Starting the school year right, thanks to Marble Church

Marble Collegiate Church made the beginning of the new school year so bright by providing dozens of backpacks for young HousingPlus tenants. These colorful bags were not only welcome, they were brimming full of age-appropriate literature and school supplies, thoughtfully grouped according to the different needs of grade levels from K-12.



A message for you, from the CEO's desk

Dear Friends,

It's wonderful to be sitting down and writing this to you. Encapsulated in this newsletter are so many things that I am proud of: Stories of how we have restored tenants' hope, updates about the importance of moving forward and onward to keep building affordable supportive housing, and reflections on all that we've had to celebrate.

I have been at HousingPlus now for about five months. Looking at all that has occurred in this short time, it can feel closer to five years. In that time, we have opened the doors of 365 Shepherd Avenue in partnership with Spatial Equity, renewed our City contract with the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice for an additional three years, and built upon strong leadership among our staff by elevating trusted personnel and hiring proven achievers for new positions.

In the meantime, I have been taking the time to reach out to all of you. You are the reason HousingPlus is here for tenants like Luz, who spent the majority of her pregnancy awaiting sentencing on Rikers Island, and today has a permanent home at HousingPlus. Thank you for continuing to support our work, our tenants and their children, and the entire community. While 2025 has brought challenges and changes, especially with government funding, HousingPlus remains financially strong and propelled by our mission.

Finally, I want to leave you with what I'm looking forward to. Our friends at Spatial Equity are scheduled to break ground on a new building on Van Sinderen Avenue in early 2026. In November, we will celebrate Veterans Day with tenants who have bravely served their country. And we continue day by day to build upon the promise of HousingPlus, as set forth by Rita Zimmer in 2002—to empower each of the women and families in our program to find stability and dignity in their own homes.

Sincerely,

Karen Ford, CEO, HousingPlus



Learning from our thought leaders

HousingPlus has been both learning and leading in conversation with other housing providers this year. In September, we joined Housing Solutions of New York for the second annual SEEN conference, which featured panel discussions about supporting frontline staff and building bridges to the community to gain support for new housing efforts. Rebecca Chatteram, COO of HousingPlus, was a panelist for the latter conversation.

On October 3, HousingPlus joined the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice (MOCJ) for a special event called Justice in Motion. At the event, we got to hear firsthand from people working with formerly incarcerated New Yorkers and identify ways that housing is a vital need for community members reentering their neighborhoods after jail or prison.



Deanna Logan, Director of MOCJ

Turning her life around

Cathy has experienced more than her share of adversity.

As a young person, Cathy felt like her father was a different person when he drank. She felt terrified for her mother, who was the victim of her father's abuse.

An additional adversity was her sexual and gender identity. At a young age, she confided in her mother, "When I was 11, I told my mother I was different, and she said 'Baby, I knew that all along.'"

"There was no such word as trans then," says Cathy, referring to the silence around transgender identity common in the 1960s and 70s.

Both physical and sexual violence led Cathy to leave her family home. Like many trans people, Cathy struggled to live her life as her true self and also make ends meet. She worked several low-wage jobs, at fast food restaurants and grocery stores.

After leaving an abusive relationship, Cathy felt isolated. Her friends introduced her to the club scene. It was not long after that that Cathy turned to prostitution, shoplifting, and selling marijuana to make enough money to pay her bills. She always gave extra money to her mother. She was arrested several times for both shoplifting and prostitution, and she felt like she was trapped in a cycle, "I would try to catch up. It would never work."

In 2023, Cathy was in an upstate New York prison serving three years for theft. When she appeared before the parole board, one of the officers said, "I read your file on a Thursday. I took it home over the weekend and read it two more times. It's a hard read. You've been through a lot."

Hearing those words broke something open in Cathy. "I burst into tears," she says. She knew this was the last time she would be in prison or jail.

When she got out on parole, she began residing at Providence House, one of three nonprofits who operate the Justice Works program, along with HousingPlus. This program provides transitional housing to women post-incarceration, especially those at risk of becoming homeless.

She felt she was changing her life. "Earlier in life, I wasn't very happy with myself. Everything I did was for the wrong reasons," Cathy says.

So when she got out, she got to work. "I got an internship at HousingWorks Thrift Shop," Cathy says. "I was making \$475 dollars a week and I banked every dime. I knew that if I got an apartment, I wanted to fix it up."

She got that chance to decorate her own apartment when HousingPlus accepted her to live in a brand new studio apartment in East New York. "When I got here, I brought all my boxes and all my suitcases up here, I sat on the floor and just cried. [HousingPlus] had given me dishes, forks, spoons, knives, and a Tupperware set."

In the apartment today, Cathy has set up a spot near the television where she sits and relaxes before taking her blood pressure. She has suffered two strokes and has several chronic health conditions, including diabetes. However, her home provides her with the opportunity to cook her own food, take short walks with her rescue dog, Bobble, and rebuild her health.

"I hope that since I've turned my life around, and it's late in life that I turned it around, I hope to live into my 80s," she says.



Did you miss it? Read the 365 Shepherd Grand Opening recap

This July, 365 Shepherd Avenue formally opened its doors to 123 units of housing, including 74 apartments set aside for families in permanent supportive housing facilitated by HousingPlus.

This journey has had multiple steps, with the pandemic's disruption in the midst of it, so it was incredibly gratifying to see the efforts of so many people bear fruit. It is one thing to see the floor plans and renderings of a new building, but it is another kind of magic to see a building full of tenants getting their second chance.

For our ribbon-cutting, we welcomed tenants and community leaders alike to join us in celebrating the culmination of years of work to build more affordable and supportive housing in East New York. Alongside our partner and co-developer, Spatial Equity, HousingPlus was thankful to celebrate the opening with tenants, as well as New York State Homes and Community Renewal, the New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development, Council Member Sandy Nurse, and representatives from the office of House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries.



How YOU can help

The “Plus” starts with you

By giving to HousingPlus you help to provide safe, secure, supportive, and permanent housing for women, children, and families while they build stable lives and realize their goals.

Our housing-first model provides tenants with a stable place to live while overcoming everything from poverty, homelessness, addiction, trauma, and the effects of incarceration.

Can we count on you to add the “plus” New York City women, children, and families need today? Donations like yours can help an apartment become a home for tenants like Cathy, who was incredibly touched when she saw that her new kitchen was fully outfitted on move-in day. You can make a donation on our website <https://housingplusnyc.org/donate/> or use the QR code shown here!



Scan Code to Donate

Work hard, play hard

Case managers are often in the field, meeting with clients at their apartments. Property managers and Residential Aides are helping to ensure the building spaces and common areas are safe, clean, and serving our tenants well.

HousingPlus staff across the organization are often heads down, hard at work. So it was truly magical on August 27 when we had a Staff Outing at Prospect Park in Brooklyn, NY. This beautiful day was filled with much needed relaxation, fun, and coming together, including over games of volleyball, delicious food, boats on the lake, and games of all kinds.

And as a surprise, we even had a visit from our incredible founder, Rita Zimmer, who made the day extra special with her presence.

It was a great opportunity to see all the people that make HousingPlus work each day.



HOUSING PLUS NEWSLETTER

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