

Naomi's House, for women leaving prison, to open in Richmond

Carolyn Jones

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Michele Bonge is well familiar with the drill: Get out of jail, have nowhere to go, fall back in with old crowd, go back to jail. Repeat.

But this time, she has hope that things will be different. The 34-year-old Antioch mother of three plans to move to a new facility in North Richmond that is among the only homes in the Bay Area for formerly incarcerated women.

She'll not only have a safe place to live, she'll get counseling, job training, and classes in finance, civics, nutrition and parenting.

"Trying to find a job when you don't have a place to live, it's scary. You just end up doing what you did before," she said Thursday at a groundbreaking for the new facility, called Naomi's House. "But to have a place to live will give me a foundation to move forward. It's going to be awesome."

Naomi's House, a joint project between Contra Costa County and a nonprofit called Reach Fellowship, will provide housing for eight women and their children.

The women will stay for about a year, paying rent from their general assistance checks and volunteering in the neighborhood, until they're ready to live independently.

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Not just anyone can live at Naomi's House. Reach staff will screen inmates in local jails before accepting them into the program. Only those who are motivated, drug-free and need minimal supervision will be admitted, said Reach co-founder [Edwina Perez-Santiago](#).

Reach already works with hundreds of inmates in Contra Costa County, providing job skills and counseling, and plans for Naomi's House to be a seamless transition for those women who are accepted.

'Much different needs'

"Women inmates have much different needs than men, and that's what we're trying to focus on," Perez-Santiago said. Many suffer post-traumatic stress from rape, sexual abuse, domestic violence and prostitution, plus maladies common to most inmates: drugs, lack of education, anger-management problems and long histories of bad choices.

Perez-Santiago should know - she spent seven months in federal prison in Dublin for bank robbery. She had friends and family willing to help her when she was released, but she knew many of her fellow inmates had nothing, and would soon return to their old habits. She's worked to help formerly incarcerated men and women since then.

"The main thing with women is that they need to know they have a voice," she said. "They don't need to sit silently and let things happen to them. They need to know that people care about them, that people will listen, and they need to speak up."

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Naomi's House - named for the woman in the Bible who found joy after years of hardship - will be in a former duplex owned by the county [Housing Authority](#). The building has been shuttered for at least five years and needs about \$240,000 in upgrades before the first residents can start moving in, possibly as early as September.

Low-interest loan

The county arranged a low-interest loan for the remodeling, and the ongoing program costs will be funded through the county's inmate realignment funds from the state.

Supervisor [John Gioia](#), who represents North Richmond, said Naomi's House has been seven years in the works.

"This will be good for the individuals and good for the community because these women will have more productive lives," he said. "It's great to see tangible results like this after years of planning. It's taken a long time, but it's been worth it."

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