25 years of SARAH POWELL HUNTINGTON HOUSE
On October 25, 1993, the Women’s Prison Association (WPA) opened Sarah Powell Huntington House (SPHH), New York State’s first family reunification program for homeless, formerly incarcerated mothers. This innovative program provided housing (the most pressing need for women upon release) while also addressing conflicting requirements that existed at the time: a mother coming home from prison was ineligible for family housing without custody of her children and ineligible for custody without proof of family housing.

25 years later, the 28-unit apartment building in Manhattan’s East Village continues to provide shelter and support to homeless women and families with, or at risk of, involvement with the criminal legal system. This unique residence grants families access to services that promote long-term health, stability, and self-sufficiency. Staff work with families to secure permanent housing, enroll in school, seek employment, find healthcare, and manage the full range of day-to-day household and family challenges.
A Sensible Solution

WPA has 173 years of experience providing housing and other specialized services for women and families affected by the criminal legal system. Women with justice histories experience added challenges when they return to their communities. Friends or family on parole or with criminal records are prohibited from housing them. Family in publicly subsidized housing could risk tenancy by offering them a place to stay. Depending on her conviction, a woman may be ineligible for public or Section 8 housing. The tightening market of affordable housing in the private rental market gives landlords significant advantage in selecting tenants, and, unfortunately, many landlords are reluctant to rent to people with records. Many women have poor credit status related to debt incurred during incarceration or past criminal activity which makes landlords more reluctant.

For most women, reuniting with their children after incarceration is their first priority, but this process is complicated, emotional, and impossible without adequate housing. In reunification, both mothers and children must adapt to new roles, and mothers must learn to be active parents again. Children frequently express an unwillingness to accept their mother as an authority figure due to her absence from their lives. Mothers often deal with feelings of guilt associated with their absence and with feelings of inadequacy as they restore relationships with their children and resume their role as parents and primary caretakers. SPHH provides a safe, supportive environment that promotes healing and the rebuilding of trust between children and mothers while fostering children's independent development and mothers’ long-term stability and self-sufficiency.

WPA’s approach to the design and facilitation of SPHH reflects a thorough understanding of the life experiences of our clients—most importantly how the intersecting issues of trauma survival, mental illness, substance abuse, and economic marginality underlie both women’s criminal behavior and housing instability. A safe and stable home provides a base from which women can look for jobs, go to school or work, learn new parenting techniques, find doctors, and attend court or treatment. It is an essential element in the effort to stabilize families, strengthen communities, and increase public safety.
25 Years of Impact

Since its opening in 1993, Sarah Powell Huntington House has been home to 879 mothers and 937 children.

The average length of stay for a family is 18 months.

With WPA’s expert guidance, 654 families have found safety and stability in permanent housing.
My name is Irene and I used to live at SPHH. I lived there with my son, CJ, for a long time and, honestly, I couldn’t wait to leave. I hated saying that I lived in a shelter, I hated the structure of life there, and sometimes I hated the staff for pushing me to do what I needed to do for myself – or for CJ – because sometimes that stuff was really hard - like addressing the trauma and depression that made it hard for me to be the best mom I could be.

I moved out about a year ago and CJ and I are doing pretty well. Now I realize that we really needed SPHH to get to this place. While living there, I completed my alternative to incarceration program (that means I was home with CJ instead of in jail and a few amazing community organizations worked together to help me get back on track). I took part in programs at WPA like the Women’s Advocacy Project, which taught me how to advocate for myself in normal ways, like at the bank or doctor’s office, and on a larger scale for other women with justice histories like me. CJ really benefited from the afterschool care SPHH offered - and so did I! Looking back, SPHH was exactly what our family needed to find stability and move forward.

At SPHH, CJ and I met another mother and son who are our best friends now. Last year, we had Christmas dinner together with them – our WPA family. Even though we don’t live at SPHH anymore, WPA stocked us up with fresh vegetables and snacks for CJ that got us through a few weeks of school lunches. I know we can always call on the team at SPHH if we need something – and they will be there to help. I think that’s the best thing about WPA – they understand that success is in the details, there are no quick fixes, and that we’re all capable of changing our own lives, with the right support.
Vision

At SPHH and beyond, WPA strives to create an environment where women feel supported to make positive changes for themselves and their families.

Our vision for the future of SPHH is optimistic. By 2023, we plan to return to SPHH’s original reunification model, housing 10 mothers as they work to reunify with their children. Additionally, we plan to implement adult literacy and arts education programming to adapt to the evolving needs of our clients and practice the most effective strategies toward family stabilization.

WPA envisions a community where our reliance on incarceration as the default response to crime has been replaced by constructive, community-driven responses. 173 years of experience have proven that access to safe and stable housing is essential to reducing crime amongst women, keeping families together, and strengthening communities.