

**MARCH 2025**

# **PROGRAM EVALUATION**

*Rental Assistance Grant*



  
Starting **Over**, Inc.

*Report prepared by:*

 **HARC**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **Introduction**

Starting Over Inc. (SOi) is a nonprofit based in Riverside, California, which supports people as they navigate the re-entry process after release from prison. SOi received funds from the California Board of State and Community Corrections (BSCC) to implement a Housing First Program as part of the Adult Re-Entry Rental Assistance Grant Program. The goals outlined in the RA grant are 1) to increase housing options for formerly incarcerated people in Riverside County, 2), to reduce recidivism and homelessness among SOi Housing First guests, and 3) to increase income for all SOi Housing First guests. SOi requested HARC's services to conduct an evaluation of their program.

This report summarizes findings from guest interviews (current and past guests) and explores how guests were helped, the strengths of the program, and opportunities for improving the program.

### **Methods**

Current and past guests of SOi were invited to take part in a short phone interview to share how the SOi program helped them and what could be improved. All guests who participated in interviews were informed that they would be given a \$25 Visa gift card in exchange for their participation. The data was qualitatively analyzed question-by-question by coding the text and identifying themes in the data. All participant names used in this report are pseudonyms, selected by HARC, in an effort to protect the confidentiality and privacy of individuals who were interviewed.

### **Results**

A total of eight guests participated in the phone interviews: four current guests and four past guests.

#### **Past Guest Interviews**

Four past guests shared their experiences with the SOi program.

##### *Personal Journeys*

Participants recounted significant personal challenges, including housing instability, employment struggles, and ongoing legal barriers following their release from incarceration.

### *Most Helpful Classes Services*

Guests also valued employment support offered through the Path to Seed job readiness program, which provided critical skills, resume assistance, stipends, and technology resources.

### *Employment Support*

Past guests describe that employment was a focus for them while they were in the SOi program. On the downside, many of them wished they would have spent more time focusing on their education and some intend to pursue their education more in the near future.

### *Housing Support*

Many past guests described the profound impact of SOi's support services in helping them to transition to stable living. Housing assistance was identified by participants as the most essential component of the program, particularly the financial matching program of up to \$5,000.

### *Personal Victories*

Guests celebrated significant personal victories since leaving the program, primarily centered on achieving and sustaining stable housing. Other successes included reconnecting with family, personal growth, and improved patience and emotional stability.

### *Suggestions for Improvement*

Suggestions for improvement, while limited due to overall high satisfaction, included requests for expanded recovery resources, sobriety incentives, and increased outreach to youth in the community.

## **Current Guest Interviews**

Four current guests shared their experiences with the SOi program.

### *Personal Journeys*

Four current guests described their journeys, and many of them have faced challenges, including incarceration, homelessness, addiction, financial hardships, and legal issues. The participants Luis, Thomas, Rachel, and Sarah credit the SOi program with providing housing stability, employment opportunities, educational support, and assistance with recovery efforts, enabling them to successfully begin rebuilding their lives.

### *Most Helpful Classes/Services*

Current guests describe the most helpful services include the job readiness program, the free housing, legal assistance mental health/emotional support, and practical assistance to help them get by and get on track.

### *Employment and Barriers to Employment*

The most commonly mentioned barriers to employment include difficulty finding a job, technological struggles with using job search tools, and barriers with employers because of the required background checks. Despite all this, SOi has been helpful to guests along their employment journey.

### *Future Housing Support*

Similar to current guests, past guests recognize the profound impact of SOi's support services such as the financial matching program, and the assistance with the home search process.

### *Personal Victories*

Current guests have already experienced victories with regard to personal empowerment and general personal growth.

### *Suggestions for Improvement*

Guests provided several key recommendations, such as enforcing clear safety rules, extending the program, and expanding the on-site supportive services available. Clear communication with guests about the rules of the program would also be beneficial.

## **Conclusion**

Guests of the Starting Over (SOi) program provided valuable feedback on their experiences, highlighting housing assistance—especially the financial matching initiative—and employment support through the Path to Seed job readiness program as crucial for achieving housing stability. Stable employment emerged as a significant factor in maintaining consistent housing, underscoring the importance of reliable income. Participants celebrated personal successes, including improved housing stability, strengthened family relationships, and enhanced personal growth. Nonetheless, guests also identified areas needing improvement, such as clearer safety protocols, expanded recovery support, extended program timelines, and better communication about guidelines and available resources. These insights offer clear direction for enhancing the effectiveness and sustainability of the SOi program moving forward.

## INTRODUCTION

Starting Over Inc. (SOi) is a nonprofit based in Riverside, California, which supports people as they navigate the re-entry process after release from prison. SOi received funds from the California Board of State and Community Corrections (BSCC) to implement a Housing First Program as part of the Adult Re-Entry Rental Assistance Grant Program. With these funds, SOi is able to provide housing (one for women and one for men, capacity is ten adults per home) under the Housing First Model that will accept previously incarcerated individuals who meet the criteria for chronic homelessness. The goals outlined in the Rental Assistance sub-grant are 1) to increase housing options for formerly incarcerated people in Riverside County, 2), to reduce recidivism and homelessness among SOi Housing First guests, and 3) to increase income for all SOi Housing First guests. SOi

SOi requested HARC's services to conduct an evaluation of their program. HARC, Inc. (Health Assessment and Research for Communities) is a nonprofit evaluation firm located in Riverside County, California. Founded in 2006, HARC has provided evaluation services for dozens of health and human services agencies across the Inland Empire.

This report summarizes the overall findings from all of these evaluation activities and illustrates how guests were helped, the strengths of the program, and explores opportunities for improving the program.

## **METHODS**

HARC and SOi collaboratively developed interview questions to be administered to both current and past guests of SOi. Questions specifically for guests asked about their path to employment and housing, as well as the strengths of the program, and areas to improve the Housing First program.

All guests who participated in interviews were provided with a \$25 Visa gift card in exchange for their participation in a 30 minute to one-hour phone interview. Interviews with guests were held over the phone.

A total of eight guests participated in the phone interviews: four current guests and four past guests. Not all questions were asked of all guests – interviewers adapted the questions that were asked and not asked, depending on the life experience of the guest.

Once all interviews were completed, they were transcribed into written text. The data was analyzed question-by-question by coding the text and identifying themes in the data.

All participant names used in this report are pseudonyms, selected by HARC, in an effort to protect the confidentiality and privacy of individuals who were interviewed.

# PAST GUEST

*Interview Results*





## Personal Journeys

Past guests were asked to describe their journey and how they were connected to SOi. Note that all participant names used in this report are pseudonyms, selected to protect the confidentiality and privacy of individuals involved.

The four past guests shared about their journeys through incarceration, release, and reentry into society. Participants highlighted the critical role of support programs in their transitions.

- James spent seven years in federal prison and, after release, transitioned through a halfway house before joining the SOi program. This allowed him to stay in Palm Springs, maintain employment, and build a stable life in a familiar environment.
- David faced legal challenges with an unresolved case and experienced homelessness while living in a Jeep with his wife. He found support through the organization, which helped him with housing and legal guidance. However, he has faced difficulty with housing, due to the difficulty in getting a job.
- Raymond built a family and business after prison but lost stability during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to homelessness and separation from his children. With program support, he regained self-worth, secured housing, and is in the process of getting a new job.
- Danny benefited from mentorship and reentry services upon release, which connected him to the SOi program. He secured temporary housing through the program, worked, saved money, and eventually transitioned into independent living in Los Angeles.

Their stories highlight the challenges of reentry, including housing instability, employment struggles, and legal barriers, while also demonstrating the positive impact of reentry programs in fostering stability and helping people rebuild their lives.

## Most Helpful Classes/Services

The most common response from past guests is that the most helpful service or support to them was the housing support.

Past guests described that the Path to Seed, **job readiness** program, was helpful to them. Participants learned job readiness, resume building, other employment support. Another participant described that they were provided with a computer and stipend for attending the program – which was helpful.

Past guests also mentioned that the **drug and alcohol classes** were helpful on their journey.

One guest expressed gratitude for how SOi provided a **referral to another program** that could provide wraparound services.

Housing Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• "Just a place to stay, that's what I needed."</li><li>• "I just needed a place to stay where I could keep my job."</li></ul>
Job Readiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• "Path to Seed was helpful. They provided me with good resources. I was already in kind of a good situation, but it was good."</li></ul>
Drug and alcohol classes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• "Drug and alcohol classes - they were super helpful, all if it was."</li></ul>
Referrals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• "They connected me with a sister program, and they've been a big help."</li></ul>

## Employment Support

Pasts guests were asked about their current employment, what employment support was offered by SOi, and what additional support would be helpful.

Most past guests obtained employment early on their journeys. Guests worked in construction, roofing, and forklift operations/driving. Another guest described that he was waiting to be hired by a union and is a mechanic/carpenter.

These past guests described how essential work was and that they had “tunnel vision” **focused on their jobs** and didn’t fully take advantage of other opportunities. Along those lines, past guests expressed an interest in **pursuing more education** to create more opportunities for them.

### Focused on employment

- "I had tunnel vision with this job, working five-twelve hour shifts a week - and I didn't take advantage of other opportunities."

### Desire for additional education

- "I was worried about maintaining my job. I wanted stability. I really want to pursue my education - associate's degree would be the first step, but I want a bachelor's degree or technical program."

Taken together, these findings suggest that participants often desire more education and more time in the program but simply need financial support or incentives to provide them with the stability to pursue these interests.

## Support in Obtaining Housing and Ease of Maintaining Housing

Pasts guests were asked whether Staring Over helped them get housing and whether it has been easy for them to maintain housing since leaving SOi.

The majority of past guests (three of the four people) described that **SOi helped them tremendously with getting housing** and have been able to maintain housing quite easily.

A couple of past guests acknowledge that the **housing assistance programs have been immensely helpful** in gaining housing stability. Past guests describe that either the \$5,000 money match for first/last month's rent or financial support for gaps in employment have helped past guests immensely with maintaining housing.

Past guests describe that their **housing stability is linked to stable employment**, and employment struggles equate to housing struggles. For example, one guest mentioned that the struggle to find stable employment has been a barrier to stable housing and in fact, he is currently unhoused.

The one guest that remains unhoused explained that the one thing that would help him secure housing is for someone to "offer me a job right now – that would be great."

### Housing Assistance Programs are immensely helpful

- "The stipend helped a lot. Actually, I don't have to pay rent for the first time until January... so it went pretty far."
- "I'm in between jobs, but my landlord is working with SOi - SOi is helping me get a grant to pay for two more months of rent."

### Housing stability linked to stable employment

- "Yeah, It's been good. I have a job and I have my own place."
- "I can't seem to secure housing. I can't secure a job that's going to consistently bringing in a paycheck every week."

## Biggest Victories

Past guests were asked about their biggest victories since leaving SOi housing. The most common response from past guests is that they have achieved and maintained **housing/stability**.

Other participants mentioned the victory of being **connected with family**, and one guest is even able to be there for his daughter and help her find stability.

Additionally, one past guest mentioned **personal growth** in that he has become a much more patient person after leaving prison – which has been an immense victory to him.

### Housing Stability

- "I had tunnel vision with this job, working five-twelve hour shifts a week - and I didn't take advantage of other opportunities."

### Connected with Family

- "Getting back of contact with my kids, steady stream of visiting and doing what I gotta do, paid support."

### Personal Growth

- "When I got out of County even my wife saw this - she's like, damn, you're a little bit more patient than you normally are."

## Suggestions for Improvement

Past Guests were asked to offer SOi with suggestions for improving the program. Past guests most often expressed **satisfaction with the program** and said that no changes were needed. Guests also expressed immense **gratitude** and positive sentiment around the program, with one guest describing “The whole thing was such a blessing to me.”

However, past guests did offer a few pieces of advice for improving the program. Some mentioned a need for more **resources and support for recovery**. Incentives were also mentioned as a way to encourage sobriety.

Lastly, one guest reiterated his point from earlier, that more **outreach and engagement with youth** would be filling an important need in the community.

### Satisfaction and No Changes Needed

- "From everything i've seen is that they do everything the right way."

### Sobriety and Recovery Support

- "Maybe incorporating some sobriety help - some incentives to go to meetings. One of the guys fell off the wagon because it wasn't presented to him at the house."

### Youth Outreach/Engagement

- "What about the younger people? My generation that still has all of these years left."

# CURRENT GUEST

*Interview Results*



## **Personal Journeys**

Current guests were asked to describe their journey and how they were connected to SOi. All participant names used in this report are pseudonyms, selected to protect the confidentiality and privacy of individuals involved.

The four current guests have faced significant challenges, including long-term incarceration, homelessness, addiction, financial struggles, and legal issues. Guests described that through the SOi program and their and other support systems that they have been able to start to rebuild their lives with housing, employment, education, and recovery efforts.

- Luis spent 19 years incarcerated and was released in the summer. He quickly joined and completed the SOi program and has secured a job. He is grateful to SOi for providing help with housing stability which is helping him rebuild his life.
- Thomas struggled after being released from prison, living on the streets while waiting for an opening in the SOi house. He has been housed by SOi for the past three months; he is working and appreciates the feeling of housing stability.
- Rachel had a successful career as a mail carrier and real estate agent before falling for financial scams, and legal troubles led to incarceration. After serving time, she became homeless and was then connected to the SOi program through a shelter. She has been at SOi for about a year and is now working and rebuilding her life.
- Sarah, a 52-year-old mother of two, struggled with addiction, legal issues, and homelessness. After jail, she went through rehab, sober living, and an outpatient program before entering SOi. She has been in the program for nearly a year. Sarah has had some setbacks, but she remains committed to recovery, getting an education, and reconnecting with her family.



## Goals While at SOi

Current guests at SOi were asked to describe the goals they have while at SOi.

The goals described were diverse, but related and included employment, financial stability, housing, personal growth, helping others, family reunification, and improving legal situations.

Guests described their **employment goals**, including starting a handyman business, restarting a real estate career, pursuing a law degree, and returning to work after surgery. Guests also described that they are **seeking financial security** by saving money and planning for future expenses.

Aspirations for **independent housing** was also mentioned by guests, in that they want to get their own place or rent a room after completing the program.

Another goal is guests is **personal growth and recovery**. Guests described a desire for emotional healing, personal development, and self-improvement.

Other goals of the guests include **family reunification, reintegration** and **giving back**.

Employment	•"My main goal is to start a business. Handyman."
Financial Security	•"I'm saving money for a car."
Independent Housing	•"I want to get my own apartment or house. I want to be independent again."
Personal Growth and Recovery	•"Just adapting to everyday things. I want to learn to cook for myself and be able to stand on my own."
Family Reunification	•"My younger daughter has two kids, so I want to be a grandma to those babies."
Reintegration and Giving Back	•"SOi offers house manager positions, and I kind of want to give back."

## Mental Health Ratings

Current guests were asked to rate their mental health on a scale of 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent). Mental health ratings ranged from 3 to 6, with most falling between 3 and 4.5. In follow-up comments, guests described their rating with a few key themes.

First, guests described how they **experience adjustment challenges and emotional struggles**, such as difficulty with the many roommates, social isolation, and difficulty adapting to change.

Some guests described that they have developed **coping strategies and experience resilience**. Guests describe actions they take like reaching out to others or staying organized as ways to manage their emotions and stress.

Lastly, guests describe they are **motivated for self-improvement** and would like to grow and change. Guests describe that they make efforts to improve their well-being, appreciate encouragement, and yet they try to remain humble in this process and keep working diligently to do better.

### Adjustment Challenges and Emotional Struggles

- "Being away from my family, away from my friends, going through this transition by myself, it's a lot."

### Coping Strategies and Resilience

- "If my anxiety is high, I reach out and call somebody, it's a little homesickness basically."

### Motivated for Self-Improvement

- "I write notes to myself everyday so I don't forget. I'm really, really, trying hard."

## Most Helpful Classes/Services

Many current guests mentioned the Path to Seed, a **job readiness** program, was helpful to them on their journey and provided them with opportunities.

A couple of current guests mentioned that the **free housing** was invaluable and helped them be able to save money for themselves and other expenses.

**Legal assistance** and help with expunging arrest records was helpful to guests in overcoming employment barriers. Guests were also provided with help obtaining important documents such as identification.

Current guests valued the **mental health and emotional support** – such as referrals for therapy and peer support services (though one guests had a concern about the inconsistency of peer support).

**Practical assistance** was also highly valued by guests, such as gas cards, clothes, dental care, connection for a credit union.

Job Readiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The job readiness program got me on my feet. When I applied, I got hired, I was prepared. They prepared me basically."</li></ul>
Housing Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• "To be honest, the housing saved my butt. I was able to save a lot of money - I bought a car."</li></ul>
Legal and ID support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• I'm working with a lawyer to get my arrest records expunged - they're helping me with that."</li></ul>
Mental Health and Emotional Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• "They referred me to mental health if I need it - and I'm trying to enroll in therapy for my anxiety."</li></ul>
Practical Assistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• "Gift cards because I had no clothes, gas cards. I got with a credit union because a guy from Altura showed up at Path to Seed - my credit score has gone up 70 points, it's phenomenal."</li></ul>

## Employment and Barriers to Employment

Some guests acknowledge the help SOi provides for employment, including jobs, connections with staffing agencies, and internship opportunities.

Some current guests expressed **difficulty with finding a job**, including difficulties with finding the right job, and difficulties in connecting with employers, particularly those who are okay with crime records on the guest's backgrounds.

One guest expressed that there are **technological barriers**, particularly due to lack of exposure to computers, and it's often difficult to navigate online job applications due to a lack of experience with these tools.

### Difficulty Finding a Job

- "I've applied for a couple of positions. I haven't heard anything back, so I don't know what's going on with that."
- "There's a handful of jobs out there, but no bites. I had to settle for temp agencies."

### Technological Barriers

- "I'm a little show on technology, I hadn't been around it for awhile. So, even turning on a computer was difficult for me at first. And you know, logging in and scanning that - I don't know how to scan."

### Background Checks

- "I got a conditional offer from Sprouts, but then they didn't hire me because of my background check."

Current guests provide some insights into ways to improve employment opportunities for guests. For one, **technology training or assistance** could help make jobs more easily accessible to guests. Another guest had the idea that maybe SOi can **form partnerships with employers**, so that SOi can simply send over resumes, or send them to someone who is hiring.

- ***"There's no greater feeling for someone getting out of prison and going back through a program like this and the bring in a legit paycheck. These guys go through Path to Seed and graduate and get discouraged and can't find a job, they don't know where to go from there."***

## Future Housing Support

Current guests described the support that SOi has provided related to housing searches, as well as what would help them to get into housing.

Foremost, guests described that the **matching savings program (up to \$5,000) is an enabler** and has motivated guests to save. Current guests also describe that they expect the matching funds will be exceedingly helpful in transitioning to independent housing (which we know is true from interviews with past guests).

Current guests also describe that **SOi's team helps them with housing searches**, including their case managers and peer support specialists.

Lastly, current guests often take the initiative in **information-seeking about housing**. Current guests look online, reach out to case managers, or others outside of the home to find independent housing.

### Matching Program as an Enabler

- "They match whatever I have up to \$5,000 to help me get into housing. That's a part of their program that I'm looking forward to utilizing. As we speak I'm waiting for a call about apartments for rent - there's nothing like having your own place."

### Case Management and Housing Support

- "I ask my peer support specialist about once a month for housing and she'll send me something. She sends me stuff every now and then."
- "[SOi] will help with my apartment searching."

### Information- Seeking about Housing

- "I always look for affordable housing. I look for it online."
- "I signed up with HUD Housing or something else."

Some potential recommendations for bolstering what we've learned here are to expand education on available housing (possibly creating housing navigation toolkit), and bolster case management support for guests.

## Recidivism

Current guests were asked if they've had any legal difficulties or any challenges with staying "out of trouble." All guests reported that they had no difficulty in staying out of trouble.

One guest described that **work has been their central focus**, and they only have time to work and recover.

Another guest described their pride in how they become a person who is **law-abiding**.

- ***"I definitely haven't had any issues with the law. I have nothing to hide. My conscience is clean. You know, I don't have a problem walking into the police station. Whereas before, I'd see a police officer's car and I'd dodge the other way."***

## Biggest Victories

Current guests discussed their biggest victories since beginning with SOi. Guests described that their victories include both personal empowerment and personal growth.

All three current guests who responded to this question alluded to feeling victorious in **personal empowerment** and that they felt growth in autonomy.

Current guests also feel **personal growth** in very positive ways, such as emotional, spiritual, and physical health – that is, the victory happened within themselves.

### Personal Empowerment

- "I have improved at standing up for myself."
- "I've learned I don't have to rely on somebody's approval for anything."

### Personal Growth

- "I'm in a good place emotionally, physically, and mentally - that's the biggest victory."

## Suggestions for Improvement

Current guests were asked if they have any suggestions for how to improve SOi's rental assistance and housing program.

Some guests emphasized the need for clear **rules to enforce safety**. One noted that rule-breaking compromised the program's integrity and suggested removing those involved in fighting or drug use. Another recommended better screening to prevent disruptions.

Another theme is a discussion of the **program structure and duration**. One participant expressed a need for more time in the program to work on personal development. Another guest suggested a pre-housing program to develop essential skills prior to the housing program.

Similar to past guests, current guests expressed the need for **supportive services**, such as on-site anger management, substance abuse treatment, and structured routines.

Lastly, one guest emphasized the importance of **clear communication**- communicating expectations, rules, requirements, and resources would benefit everyone.

### Rules to enforce safety

- "There need to be consequences. A leader in the house that says 'we're not going to tolerate that.'"
- "Dig a little deeper on intakes. Find out medical records, find references, some people have mental health issues and [hide it]."

### Program structure and duration

- "I would have liked the program to be a little longer, a little more time to do things."

### Supportive services

- "Offer drug class and counseling after Path to Seed. I think they should [also] offer anger management. [One guy in here] goes all the way to Moreno Valley for anger management."

### Clarity and communication

- "We're not permanent residents, we're guests. Maybe the expectations need to be more clear at the beginning, every person understands something differently."



## Advice to New People

A few past and current guests provided some insights on advice they would give to new people starting the program.

James shared that he would explain how the program works and how to adapt to the house and the shared living arrangements:

***“I’ll tell them how I work, how it goes around here... how to maintain and, you know, make it work. The program helps you a lot.”***

Danny also described the importance of adjusting to the environment, and the importance of committing to the process:

***“I was uncomfortable there. I’m going to be honest... I was 22 in there, and a lot of the people in there were older... still doing drugs, still messed up. So, it was uncomfortable to be there. Just stick it through because it’s definitely okay. Stay there and do whatever the program consists of.”***

Matthew’s advice was about the importance of supporting each other and fostering a sense of community. He describes an experience of helping a new roommate adjust to the house:

***“When he first got here, I helped him get a job and took him to the bank so he could open a bank account. Just to show them what they’ve learned and pass it along to the next guy to help. That goes a long way.”***

This advice from James, Danny, and Matthew provides us with a roadmap for people entering SOi. Specifically, learning how the system works, being okay with discomfort, and supporting one another can all make a significant difference in the experience.

## CONCLUSION

Guests of the Starting Over (SOi) program, both past and current, have shared valuable insights into their experiences and recommendations for SOi program improvements. Overall, participants highlighted the value of the housing assistance, particularly the financial matching program, as critically important for achieving stability. Employment support services, including the Path to Seed job readiness program, are described by past and previous guests as exceedingly helpful.

Employment remains a key factor for housing stability – that is, stable income that comes with a reliable job is what makes housing stable. Those without a stable income and/or a job, tend to struggle with housing stability.

Guests expressed significant personal victories—notably in housing stability, family reconnection, and personal development—highlighting the transformative potential of the SOi program.

However, some guests identified areas for further enhancement. Guests suggested a need for clearer safety rules, expanded recovery resources, longer program durations, and increased communication regarding program guidelines and available support.

Addressing employment barriers, including technological and background check challenges, was also emphasized as essential for future program improvements. These recommendations provide actionable guidance to ensure the continued success and effectiveness of the SOi program.