

Coming Home

A Guide to Re-entry Planning for Prisoners Living with Mental Illnesses

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National Alliance on Mental Illness

Find Help. Find Hope.

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NAMI, the National Alliance on Mental Illness, is the nation’s largest grassroots mental health organization dedicated to building better lives for the millions of Americans affected by mental illness. NAMI advocates for access to services, treatment, supports and research and is steadfast in its commitment to raising awareness and building a community of hope for all of those in need.

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Introduction

In 2011, 20 percent of parolees returned to prison due to a new arrest or another reason¹. If leaving prison soon, it is important to plan for your release ahead of time to help with a successful transition. This will mean finding a place to stay, restarting any benefits you may have had and ensuring treatment to manage your mental illness. You must plan before your release because it takes time to complete these tasks and you will need them right after your release. If you have personal identification, access to housing, benefits and treatment from the start, it will make your return to the community smoother.

Getting Started

There are several important things to do before—and immediately after—your release. You should find out if you need to reapply to any public benefits, public housing or Medicaid that you received prior to incarceration. When applying for public benefits, it is important to check with the program agency about eligibility rules because a conviction may impact your ability to receive them. Some states will let you start your application for Medicaid or public housing before you are released. If you can, you should do so. If needed, you should also apply for Social Security before your release. Ask jail or prison authorities whether you can get any help with starting your applications prior to release. If not, a family member or friend may be able to work with the county Department of Social Services to begin applications. Below is information about specific benefits that may be helpful to you. For more general information, please visit www.benefits.gov.

Acquiring Identification

Identification (ID) is needed to apply for public benefits or a job. If possible, ask family members to help compile these documents. General help on vital documentation can be found at www.usa.gov/Citizen/Topics/Family-Issues/Vital-Docs.shtml.

State Identification Card or Driver License

While many state Department of Corrections facilities issue a photo ID upon release from prison, not all Departments of Motor Vehicles (DMV) will let you use your corrections ID to prove you are who you say you are. Contact your state DMV for more information about the types of ID they issue and what documentation is needed to acquire them (such as a birth certificate or social security card). A list of DMV locations can be found at www.usa.gov/Topics/Motor-Vehicles.shtml.

Social Security Card

If you have lost your Social Security card or need to apply for one, you will need original documents proving your U.S. citizenship, age and identity. You will then need to fill out Form SS-5, and send it to the U.S. Social Security Administration. For more information, check out www.ssa.gov/ssnumber.

Birth Certificate

Typically, you will need a copy of your birth certificate to apply for other forms of ID. To get a copy of your birth certificate, you will need to contact the agency that deals with vital records in the state where you were born. A list of agencies is available at www.cdc.gov/nchs/w2w.htm.

Asking for Help to Buy Necessities

If possible, ask a family member or friend to buy a few basic necessities and bring these to you on the day of your release. You should ask for a set of basic clothing, toiletries and a cell phone. Pay-as-you-go cell phones offer inexpensive service options. You may want to ask your family member or friend to program numbers in for emergency services and your doctor if you have one. Numbers of family and friends who can help you in an emergency should also be programmed in to the phone.

Finding a Place to Stay

About one in five people leaving prison will soon be homelessⁱⁱ. Re-entrants without stable housing are more likely to return to prison. Be aware that many of these programs will have waiting lists.

Public Housing and Section 8

Housing agencies usually have two kinds of programs: traditional public housing and the Housing Choice Voucher program (Section 8 housing). In traditional public housing, individuals and families pay a low rent to a housing agency. Section 8 provides vouchers for families and individuals to rent apartments on their own. In the case of vouchers, the housing agency pays part of the rent.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has rules about who can live in public housing. HUD does not allow people convicted of certain crimes, including sex offenses and methamphetamine production, in public housing. HUD also does not allow people whose current drug or alcohol use affects the health or safety of other residents.

Public Housing Authorities (PHAs) have wide discretion about admissions policies for both Section 8 and public housing. Contact your local PHA for more information about who is eligible. You can also call (800) 955-2232 to get more information about public housing or get contact information on your local PHA at <http://portal.hud.gov> and searching for “public authority”.

Note: Be sure to ask if your criminal record affects your placement on any waiting lists for public housing programs.

Some states have public housing available in addition to the local PHA. Contact your state housing agency to find out if they have any programs for low-income individuals or released prisoners returning to the community. A list of state housing agencies can be found at www.ncsha.org/housing-help.

Supportive Housing

Supportive housing is a special kind of public housing that includes other services needed by the individual renting the apartment, such as case management or an on-site health center. To find out more, contact your local Department of Social Services at www.aphsa.org/Links/links-state.asp or call 211. You can also contact your state housing agency (see link above) or your state mental health agency to find out more about supportive housing. A list of state mental health agencies is online at <http://findtreatment.samhsa.gov>.

Transitional Housing

Some states have transitional housing programs for people leaving incarceration. Transitional housing provides greater structure, stability and services than some other living arrangements. Programs vary widely across the states and parolees may need to be referred to the program by corrections staff to be eligible. You may also be required to live in a transitional housing situation immediately following release. For more information, contact your state's Department of Corrections. A list of state departments of corrections is available online at <http://1.usa.gov/HK9OYx>.

Staying with Family

Staying with family members is a good option for many people. However, it is important to be aware that staying with family can be difficult. Your family members might feel anxious, have trouble paying additional bills or have difficulty in relationships with other family members or friends. It is best to talk through these issues openly with your family members. The NAMI Family-to-Family class can help your family cope. To find out more, contact your NAMI Affiliate at www.nami.org/local.

Homeless Shelters

If you have nowhere else to go following your release, you can go to a homeless shelter in your area. The websites below have different resources for people who are homeless, including contact information for shelters. You should call the shelter first to ensure that they have room. You may also be able to get more information by calling 211.

Homelessness Resource Center at SAMHSA

<http://homeless.samhsa.gov/Resource/LocalResources.aspx>

HUD Office of Community Planning and Development for Homeless Assistance and Resources

www.hudhre.info/index.cfm?do=viewHomelessResources

Homeless Shelter Directory

www.homelessshelterdirectory.org

Getting Health Care

Going to the doctor regularly is an important part of staying healthy. To do that, you will need some form of health insurance. Starting in 2014, all Americans will be required to have health insurance or pay extra taxes. At www.healthfinder.gov/FindServices, you can find out information about what kind of health care program is right for you. You can also learn more about getting insurance at www.nami.org/healthcoverage.

Mental Health Care

You can find a mental health treatment center at findtreatment.samhsa.gov or call (800) 662-HELP or (800) 662-4357 for a referral. To find low-cost or free services, be sure to select "sliding fee scale" or "payment assistance" when searching facilities. Call the facility to find out what you would have to pay.

Medicaid

Medicaid is a government program that provides health insurance to low-income families and people receiving certain government benefits, like Supplemental Security Income (SSI). Some states provide

insurance to single, childless adults. If you had Medicaid before you were incarcerated because you received SSI, then you must re-apply for SSI before you can be eligible for Medicaid.

Many states are expanding their Medicaid programs as part of the new health care law. They will cover single adults up to 133 percent of the federal poverty line. Check with your local Department of Social Services (in some communities, dial 211) to learn more about your state's Medicaid eligibility rules. You can also check www.healthcare.gov/do-i-qualify-for-medicaid/#howmed to find out whether you qualify for Medicaid.

Private Health Insurance

The new health care law creates marketplaces for individuals to buy health insurance, starting January 2014. This will allow many people with low incomes to pay for private insurance. For more information, visit www.healthcare.gov.

Medicare

Medicare is government health insurance for people over 65 or people who have been on Social Security Disability for more than 2 years. If you have become eligible for Medicare while incarcerated, contact the Social Security Administration to learn more about Medicare enrollment. Visit www.ssa.gov or call (800) 772-1213.

Medicare Part A covers in-patient hospital care, and Medicare Part B covers most outpatient treatment. The information below is only for people who were on Medicare before entering jail or prison:

Medicare Part A will be suspended during incarceration, but will resume when you are released.

Medicare Part B may be affected by incarceration. If you use your Social Security to pay for your Medicare premiums, you will have to start paying for them yourself when you become incarcerated. If you don't, you will have to reapply for Medicare Part B. Before your benefits can start, you have to pay back all of the premiums you missed while incarcerated. Be aware that due to enrollment rules, you may have to wait many months before your insurance restarts. Contact the Social Security Administration to learn more about Medicare enrollment at www.ssa.gov or (800) 772-1213.

Community Health Services

There are facilities in your community that offer low or no-cost health care. You can find a community health care center by calling (888) ASK-HRSA or (888) 275-4772 or visiting http://findahealthcenter.hrsa.gov/Search_HCC.aspx.

Medication

Some states provide exiting prisoners a supply of medication upon release. Check with your state's Department of Corrections or the facility regarding its policies. There are programs to help you pay for your medication, called pharmaceutical assistance programs, and are offered by some states and most drug companies. Check out www.rxassist.org/ for more information. Each company has its own eligibility rules and application procedures.

Below is information for the prescription assistance programs of some of the major drug companies.

Astra Zeneca

(800) AZa-ndMe or (800) 292-6363, Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. Eastern Time
www.astrazeneca-us.com/patients

Bristol-Myers Squibb

www.bms.com/products/Pages/programs.aspx

Eli Lilly

(855) LLY-TRUE or (855) 559-8783
www.lillytruassist.com

Pfizer

(866) 706-2400
www.phahelps.com

Getting Help with Money until You Are Employed

Social Security

The Social Security Administration has several different programs that provide monthly benefits. Traditional Social Security benefits (retirement benefits) are paid based on a lifetime of work. Social Security Disability Insurance (SSD/SSDI) is available to people with a health condition that makes them unable to work. Supplemental Security Income (SSI) provides benefits to eligible people with low income. More information is available at www.ssa.gov/disability on eligibility for SSI and SSDI. You can find more information on SSI at www.ssa.gov/ssi.

Note: Social Security will not pay benefits to any person currently living in a facility that is under the supervision of a state agency, such as a prison or jail, for more than 30 continuous days. This includes persons confined to an institution, paid for by the state, because of a court order. For prisoner-specific information, check out <http://ssa.gov/pubs/EN-05-10133.pdf>

It is important to make sure that Social Security did not pay any benefits while you were incarcerated. If payments were made in error, then you will have to pay them back to the Social Security Administration.

How to Get Back on Social Security

Many correctional facilities have a pre-release agreement with the Social Security Administration to help people restart or reapply for benefits. If the facility does not have a pre-release agreement, contact Social Security at (800) 772-1213 and give them your Social Security number and your expected release date. A Social Security representative can provide further instructions and make an appointment for you at the local Social Security office. You can find information on the closest Social Security office at <https://secure.ssa.gov/ICON/main.jsp>.

Temporary Assistance to Needy Families

Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) is commonly known as welfare. TANF provides financial assistance to families with children in need. Some states may also use TANF funds for job training or counseling. Find out more at www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ofa/programs/tanf/about. For further details, contact your local department of social services or the appropriate state agency, which can be found at www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ofa/help.

Note: Federal law does not allow people convicted of certain crimes (including drug crimes) to receive TANF. However, some states still provide benefits to people in such circumstances. There are also limits on how long you can receive TANF. You will have to check with your local department of social services to find out what your state's rules are.

Access to Food

Getting enough nutritious food can be difficult. There are programs and places that can help.

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), commonly called food stamps, is food assistance provided to low-income individuals. Contact your local department of social services, or call your state's SNAP hotline, if you need to participate in this program. Hotline numbers are available at www.fns.usda.gov/snap/contact_info/hotlines.htm.

Note: Federal law does not allow people convicted of certain crimes (including drug crimes) to receive SNAP. However, some states still provide benefits to people in such circumstances. You will have to check with your local department of social services to find out what your state's rules are.

Food Pantries

Food pantries may give you food when you do not have enough money for the grocery store. You can use the following websites to find a food bank or food pantry near you:

Feeding America

<http://feedingamerica.org/foodbank-results.aspx>

Emergency Food Programs

www.homelessshelterdirectory.org/foodbanks/index.html

Your Voting Rights

Voting laws vary by state. Few states allow citizens to vote while incarcerated. Many more allow people on parole or probation to vote. Some states will never allow a person convicted of a felony to vote again. For state specific details, contact your state's Board of Elections (which can be found at www.eac.gov/voter_resources/contact_your_state.aspx) or visit the American Civil Liberties Union's website at www.aclu.org/maps/map-state-felony-disfranchisement-laws.

Pursuing an Education

Education is important to getting a job. Having a high school diploma or improving your reading skills can make it easier for you to get a job.

High School Diploma

If needed, there are programs to help you finish high school or get your General Educational Development (GED) certification. The GED is a way to earn a degree similar to a high school diploma. These programs vary by state, and you can find more information on your state's adult education programs by visiting the state department of education. Many states also offer programs to improve adult literacy. A list of these sites can be found online at <http://wdcrobcolpo1.ed.gov/Programs/EROD>.

College

If you have a high school diploma or equivalent degree, you can apply to college to get additional education and there are programs to help pay for continued education. Find out more at <http://studentaid.ed.gov/types>. Please note that certain types of financial aid (such as Pell grants) are not available to you while you are incarcerated. You will become eligible again when you are released. Some convictions (such as convictions for certain drug crimes while on federal student aid) will delay your assistance or keep you from getting assistance even on parole. For details on student aid eligibility go to <http://studentaid.ed.gov/eligibility/criminal-convictions>.

Finding a Job

Finding a job can be an important part of restarting your life. Information about career centers and job training programs in your area is available at www.servicelocator.org/ or by calling (877) US2-JOBS or (877) 872-5627. Employers get a tax break (the Work Opportunity Tax Credit) when they employ former prisoners.

Listing an Arrest on Job Applications

You should tell the truth if your employer asks about any arrests or convictions, even on an application form. However, in some states employers cannot ask about certain kinds of criminal records, such as arrests that are no longer pending. You can find out more about your state's labor laws by contacting your state department of labor, which is listed at www.dol.gov/whd/contacts/state_of.htm.

Taxes

Filing your taxes is a way to establish your income, which is important when you apply for an apartment or a loan. Even if you don't make enough money to have to pay taxes, you may be eligible for a refund. You can claim a refund up to three years later.

Note: This information only refers to federal taxes (taxes paid to the IRS). You may have to pay additional state or local taxes or be eligible for additional refunds.

Information About Your IRS Account

If you have questions about your account or what you may owe, call (800) 829-1040. If you need copies of old income forms such as a W-2 or 1099, or you need copies of your old filed tax returns, you can call (800) 829-1040 or visit www.irs.gov. If you believe that you may have an outstanding debt, such as child support or a federal student loan, you should contact the Treasury Offset Program Call Center at (800) 304-3107 to find out about your account.

Help Filing Your Taxes

If you need help filing your taxes, there is free assistance available to you. Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) is a program in which IRS-certified volunteers help people file basic tax returns. To locate a VITA site near you, go to www.irs.gov and search for “VITA,” or call (800) 906-9887. The American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) also provides taxpayer assistance to low- and middle-income people over 60. To locate the nearest AARP Tax-Aide site, call (888) 227-7669 or use the Tax-Aide Locator at www.aarp.org. Certain software companies offer their tax preparation software for free to people who file their taxes electronically (e-file). These software programs are available through the IRS website. To find out more, visit www.irs.gov/freefile.

If You Owe

You should still file your taxes, even if you cannot pay what you owe. To find out about payment options or set a payment plan visit www.irs.gov/Individuals/Payment-Plans,-Installment-Agreements or call (800) 829-1040.

If There is a Problem

If you have a dispute with the IRS, help is available. Low-Income Taxpayer Clinics (LITCs) help low-income or limited-English-speaking taxpayers with IRS issues, including audits and appeals. To find an LTC near you, please visit www.irs.gov/uac/Low-Income-Taxpayer-Clinics. The Taxpayer Assistance service is your advocate at the IRS and is there to help you resolve your IRS problems. Call toll-free at (877) 777-4778 or go to www.taxpayeradvocate.irs.gov.

Fees Related to Incarceration

In addition to restitution (money you pay to make up for your crime), many states impose additional fees relating to a person’s time in the criminal justice system. This can include fees from your arrest or to pay for your community supervision (parole). If you do not pay them, you may be in violation of your parole.

Child Support

Even if your income changes because you were incarcerated, you still have to pay child support. You may even have to pay as much as before. You will need to contact your state’s child support enforcement agency to find out what you owe and what action will be taken against you in case of non-payment. Those agencies can be found online at www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/css.

Moving to a Different State

You may be released into a state where you don't want to live. If that is the case, you can apply to transfer your supervision (parole) to another state. If you intend to be out of your home state for more than 45 days, you will have to transfer your supervision to the state where you will be. The rules about when and how people on parole can move from state to state are governed by an agreement called the Interstate Compact, which is negotiated by the Interstate Commission for Adult Offender Supervision. For more information, visit www.interstatecompact.org/About/NavigatingtheCompact.aspx.

Service Members and Veteran Support

People who have served even one day in the military or National Guard may be eligible for additional help from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). The VA can help veterans with compensation, health care, education, housing and other needs. You can find more information about the services they offer at the VA website, <http://benefits.va.gov/benefits>.

The VA provides specific assistance for veterans leaving incarceration, which you can find out more about here: www.va.gov/homeless/reentry.asp. There are state-by-state resource guides for veterans leaving incarceration, which can be found at www.va.gov/homeless/reentry_guides.asp.

You Should Know

While you are incarcerated, your VA benefits could be limited or even suspended. When you have 30 days or less until your release day, you can apply to restart your benefits. To do so, you should inform the VA of your anticipated release date, scheduled by your parole board or similar agency. The VA must be notified within one year of your actual release. If there was an overpayment in your benefits (full benefits were paid to you more than 60 days after you were incarcerated) you will have to repay the VA the full amount before you can begin receiving benefits again. For more information, contact the Veterans Administration or check out this fact sheet on the VA website, www.benefits.va.gov/BENEFITS/factsheets/misc/incarcerated.pdf.

VA Phone Numbers

- If you have questions about your benefits, call (800) 827-1000.
- If you have questions about your health care benefits, call (877) 222-VETS (8387).
- If you need to talk to someone because you are having problems adjusting to civilian life, you can call the Veterans Crisis Line, (800) 273-8255 and Press 1.
- If you or your family member is a combat veteran, and you need to talk to someone about your military service or difficulties in adjusting to civilian life, you can call the Vet Center Combat Call Center: (877) WAR-VETS or (877) 927-8387.

Interstate Compact

Military families have additional opportunities to help re-entrants move from state to state (supervised transfer from one state to another). More information can be found here at www.interstatecompact.org/Legal/RulesStepbyStep/Chapter3/Rule31011.aspx.

Getting Support for Mental Illness

There are organizations that provide support groups and education programs to individuals living with mental illness. They may also be able to help you get services in your area.

NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness)

NAMI helps with access to mental health services, treatment and support. NAMI also offers support groups and education programs for people living with mental illness and their families. To learn more about NAMI programs, visit www.nami.org/local.

Depression-Bipolar Support Alliance (DBSA)

DBSA seeks to provide hope, help, support, and education to improve the lives of people living with mood disorders. DBSA offers peer support groups and helps individuals and families connect to needed resources. You can find your DBSA chapter/support group at www.dbsalliance.org/site/PageServer?pagename=peer_support_group_locator.

Mental Health America (MHA)

The goal of MHA is to inform, advocate and enable access to behavioral health services for every American. To find an MHA affiliate, visit www.mentalhealthamerica.net/go/searchMHA.

Getting Support for a Substance Abuse Condition

If you have a problem with drugs or alcohol, you are not alone. Seventy percent of all incarcerated individuals living with a mental illness also have a problem with substance abuseⁱⁱⁱ. If you are in a similar situation, you need to get help. Doing so is one of the best things you can do for your health and to keep yourself out of jail.

Narcotics Anonymous (NA)

NA helps people with drug problems (including alcohol) live drug-free lives. This free program provides help and support from other people who are drug dependent. To find a meeting, visit www.na.org.

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)

AA helps people with drinking problems move into recovery. This free program provides help and support from other people who abuse alcohol. To find information on a meeting, visit www.aa.org.

Your corrections agency may have additional programs for drug or alcohol treatment. Your parole officer may be able to help you get into one of these programs, if they are available.

Other Resources for Re-entry

- The Re-entry Policy Council of the Council of State Governments has compiled a resource list for people re-entering society after incarceration. It contains information about various federal programs and the general rules of each, as well as how to contact the federal agencies that operate those programs. It is located at http://tools.reentrypolicy.org/benefits_chart. There is also

a re-entry service directory for each state available at <http://csgjusticecenter.org/reentry/reentry-service-directories/>.

- The Federal Interagency Re-entry Council published a Myth Buster fact sheet series that explains, in greater detail programs to help people re-entering. They can be found at http://oldrm-nrrc.csgjusticecenter.org/documents/0000/1090/REENTRY_MYTHBUSTERS.pdf.
- The U.S. Department of Education put out a guide to services and educational opportunities entitled, Take Charge of Your Future, available at www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/AdultEd/take-charge-your-future.pdf.

¹Maruschak, L.M., & Parks, E. (2012). Probation and Parole in the United States, 2011. *Bureau of Justice Statistics*. Retrieved from <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/ppus11.pdf>.

²National Alliance to End Homelessness. (2013) Re-Entry. Retrieved from <http://www.endhomelessness.org/pages/re-entry>

³Abram, K.M., & Teplin, L.A. (1991) "Co-Occurring Disorders Among Mentally Ill Jail Detainees: Implications for Public Policy," *American Psychologist* 46(10), pp. 1036–1045; the CMHS National GAINS Center, *The Prevalence of Co-Occurring Mental Illness and Substance Use Disorders in Jails* (2002), www.gainscenter.samhsa.gov/html/resources/publications.asp.