

IMPORTANT POST RELEASE INFORMATION

Omar Shabazz
Coordinator, Prisoners Resource Center, AFSC

Bonnie Kerness
Coordinator, Prison Watch, AFSC

Clients/Friends:

The American Friends Service Committee Prisoners Resource Center receives many requests for information about post-release assistance. The following is born of the experience of AFSC/PRC staff, which includes both first hand experience with reentry and years of experience in assisting ex-prisoners in their post release adjustment

Over the years, we have also received many requests for something called "The Ex-Offenders Blueprint." While there are still many copies of this floating around in the prisons, the paper is essentially filled with inaccuracies and false hopes - the most notable being that ex-prisoners qualify for Social Security. This is untrue. Whatever entitlements ex-prisoners qualify for, it is via their presumed poverty (from not having worked in the prior year/s), entitling them to welfare, food stamps, etc. - and not the fact that they are ex-prisoners.

Ex-prisoners do qualify for Municipal Welfare, and often this is the way many people choose to re-establish themselves. However, the application process itself is demeaning and difficult, and often filled with bad treatment and frustration. People report similar experiences with the food stamp office. Please note, these services can only be applied for upon release and take time to process. Legal Services can assist in determining whether or not you are being handled properly. For example, one ex-prisoner was told that he HAD to go to a homeless shelter, as opposed to staying in the streets, in order to qualify. This is not true.

Many people come out on "placement" and are forced to stay in shelters. Most often space in the shelters cannot be reserved ahead of time. Bed space is commonly reserved by standing on a line from 3 p.m. until 5 or 6 p.m. when the shelter opens. Once in the shelter, you must stay there until early morning when everyone is put out onto the streets together. Thefts are frequent. Ex-prisoners who have been forced to stay in shelters report raw experiences and treatment. While it is not impossible to reconstruct your life from a shelter, it is the most difficult "row to hoe."

On a more positive note, many ex-prisoners qualify for financial aid should they decide to go to college, vocational, or technical school. Because many of the jobs around are dead-end, hard labor factory jobs and in spite of the pressing economic needs faced by newly released prisoners, it has been our experience that some form of college or training provide more stability in the long run. Some community colleges offer two year medical technology programs, for instance, which you can attend via financial aid. GED courses can be taken free of charge in most communities. We encourage you, your friends and/or family to call local

colleges, vocational and technical schools and have brochures and financial aid information sent to you.

When pursuing employment and job skills training, consider the following options: Temporary Placement Agencies (located in most urban centers, some pay same day); placement agencies operating out of the county or municipal department (in Newark there is the Mayor's Office of Employment and Training- MOET); the Private Industry Council and the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation which offers information on jobs and training; the local United Way Information and Referral Department which provides information on local placement agencies; City Hall which maintains lists of local educational and training programs.

A final note on job searching involves the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act. According to this law, no employer can hire anyone without formal identification establishing their citizenship. Be prepared to obtain a photo ID, a copy of your birth certificate and social security card as soon as possible. Be sure to get your release papers as well.

Perhaps the most neglected area of caution in re-entry is the emotional one. Long term prisoners in particular should be alert to potential symptoms of post traumatic stress. Symptoms include difficulties in sleeping, eating, and relating to people who don't understand the prison experience; anger and irritability; interpersonal distancing; feelings of mistrust, etc. Many interpersonal relationships are understandably strained. We have observed many relationships that have endured years of coping with imprisonment fall apart within the first year of release. We have also observed that the most difficult time for recovering addicts is 4-6 months post release. Strained finances are often at the bottom of both failures. Since there is little protracted pre-release preparation while in prison, this first year is especially difficult for New Jersey ex-prisoners. We strongly encourage forming or seeking some kind of support system. It is also good to begin psychological preparation prior to release. This can be done by preparing for the worst possible difficulties in your effort to re-create your lives. Each person should plan with a special emphasis on self reliance. You need to be saving as much of your state pay as possible. Whether inside or outside, budgeting is an important skill. None of the systems you may have to rely on are designed to ensure your success. There are enormous obstacles, including the fact that discrimination against ex-prisoners is legal in New Jersey with the exception of state civil service and the issuing of occupational and professional licenses on the state or municipal level. It is our unfortunate experience that very many of you will return to either using or selling drugs, which insures your future place in the prison system.

We hope that the above is helpful in answering some of your questions. We realize that this is a somewhat shallow and incomplete effort at answering just a few of the many questions our clients bring to us. In addition, there are different resources in each county and each municipality. For more specific information you can feel free to write to the office and we will try to help provide more complete information. It is also a good idea to have family and/or friends on the street begin to make the necessary inquiries for you prior to your release.

Best wishes from the AFSC/PRC staff and volunteers.

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CRIMINAL JUSTICE PROGRAM

AFSC New York Metropolitan Region (NYMRO)

972 Broad St., 6th Floor

Newark, NJ 07102

Phone: 973-643-3079

FAX: 973-643-8924