

# Holding On & Moving Forward

## A Handbook for Families of the Incarcerated

*Published by Lives on Mission Ministries Inc.*



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## How to Use This Handbook

This handbook is designed to be read cover to cover or dropped into as needed. The chapters are organized so that the most immediate needs come first — emotional survival, practical navigation, children, and then the longer road of reentry and rebuilding.

If you are new to this journey, start with Chapter 1 and give yourself grace. You do not need to absorb everything at once. If you are in crisis, turn to Appendix E first. If you have a specific question (How do I send money? What do I tell my 6-year-old?), jump straight to that chapter.

At the end of each chapter you will find a box called **"Something to Hold Onto"** — one takeaway, one action step, or one truth to carry with you through the week.

This is not a book of easy answers. It is a companion for a hard road. You are not walking it alone.

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# Table of Contents

## Part One: Understanding This Journey

### Chapter 1 — You Are Not Alone

- Why this handbook exists
- A letter from someone who has walked this road
- The story of Lives on Mission Ministries
- How families help families: what this book will (and won't) do

### Chapter 2 — The Emotional World of the Waiting Family

- Ambiguous loss: grieving someone who is still alive
- The stages families go through (shock, shame, anger, acceptance)
- Guilt — what did I miss, could I have stopped it?
- The loneliness of the visiting room
- Permission to feel: your feelings are valid
- When to seek professional help (and where to find it)

### Chapter 3 — The Inmate's Emotional World

- What they experience those first 72 hours
- The long silence: processing shame and regret
- How incarceration changes a person (for better or worse)
- What your loved one may not tell you
- Suicide warning signs every family should know

## Part Two: Navigating the System

### Chapter 4 — Your Legal Rights & Responsibilities

- Your rights as a family member (visiting, communication, information)
- The inmate's rights inside the facility
- What you can legally do — and what you cannot
- HIPAA, privacy laws, and getting straight answers
- How to file a grievance (and when to escalate)
- Finding and working with legal counsel on a budget

- Pro bono and legal aid resources by state

## **Chapter 5 — Understanding the Justice Process**

- From arrest to sentencing: a plain-English timeline
- Key terms every family should know (arraignment, plea, docket, appeal)
- How bail and bond work
- Types of sentences: determinate, indeterminate, mandatory minimums
- Parole and probation: what they mean and how they work
- The appeals process (and why it usually takes years)
- Questions to ask your loved one's attorney

## **Chapter 6 — Visits: Making the Most of Your Time Together**

- Types of visits (in-person, video, contact, non-contact)
- What to wear, what to bring, what to leave behind
- The security process — what to expect
- Rules that vary by facility (dress codes, ID requirements, check-in times)
- How to prepare children for a visit
- How to handle a visit that goes badly
- What to talk about (and what to avoid)
- After the visit: processing the emotions as a family
- When visits are denied or suspended — what you can do

## **Part Three: The Children**

### **Chapter 9 — Telling the Children**

- What to say by age group (preschool, elementary, teen)
- Common questions kids ask — and honest answers
- How much detail is too much?
- The child's right to love both parents
- When and how to involve a school counselor
- Books and resources for children of incarcerated parents

### **Chapter 10 — Supporting Children Through the Sentence**

- The emotional impact at each developmental stage
- Behavioral signs to watch for (acting out, withdrawal, regression)
- How to maintain the parent-child bond from a distance
- Managing visits for children (before, during, after)
- School advocacy: talking to teachers without stigma
- Mentoring programs and positive role models
- Summer camps and programs for kids with incarcerated parents
- Keeping the child's identity separate from the parent's actions
- When therapy is needed (and how to afford it)

## **Part Four: Staying Connected**

### **Chapter 11 — Supporting Your Loved One From Outside**

- The difference between support and enabling
- Encouragement that builds character vs. encouragement that avoids reality
- How to talk about hard things in letters and calls
- Helping them stay engaged (education, programs, faith)
- Holding them accountable without cutting them off
- Praying together from a distance
- When they don't want your help — what to do

### **Chapter 12 — Faith & Spiritual Resilience**

- Where is God in all of this?
- Wrestling with anger at God
- Finding a church that supports, not judges
- Praying when you don't have words
- Devotional resources for families
- Faith practices for the waiting season
- What to say when people say the wrong thing
- Forgiving the system, the offender, and yourself

### **Chapter 13 — Dealing with Stigma, Shame & Isolation**

- Why friends and family disappear
- How to handle judgment from church and community
- The shame that isn't yours to carry
- What to tell people (and what you don't owe anyone)
- Finding your people: how to build a new support network
- Social media: what to share, what to protect
- Rebuilding your reputation after the sentence is served

## **Part Five: The Road Home**

### **Chapter 14 — Preparing for Reentry (While They're Still Inside)**

- Reentry starts the day they go in
- Documents they'll need (ID, Social Security card, birth certificate)
- Housing: halfway houses, transitional living, family expectations
- Medical and mental health care continuity
- What families should discuss before release
- Building a reentry plan together from both sides of the wall
- The paperwork no one tells you about

### **Chapter 15 — The First 30 Days Home**

- What to expect emotionally (for them and for you)

- The honeymoon period and the crash after
- House rules: setting boundaries immediately
- Employment: job searching with a record
- Parole and probation requirements
- Family dynamics: nothing is the same as before
- When it's harder than you expected
- Relapse prevention and warning signs
- Celebrating the small wins

## **Chapter 16 — Long-Term Rebuilding**

- Restoring trust after incarceration
- Financial recovery: debt, credit, and starting over
- Reconnecting with children over time
- Couples healing after a separation by incarceration
- When the relationship doesn't survive (and that is okay)
- Breaking the cycle: keeping the next generation out
- The role of the family in successful reentry
- Finding a new normal — not the old normal

## **Part Six: Your Self-Care**

### **Chapter 17 — Caring for the Caregiver**

- The exhaustion no one talks about
- Compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma
- Signs you are running on empty
- Practical self-care that fits your real life
- Setting boundaries with your loved one inside
- Setting boundaries with family and friends
- Asking for help (without guilt)
- Staying healthy: sleep, nutrition, movement, community

### **Chapter 18 — When to Get Professional Help**

- Therapy options for families (individual, family, support groups)
- Financial counseling resources
- Legal assistance resources
- Crisis hotlines and emergency numbers
- How to find a therapist who understands incarceration
- Insurance and affordability options
- Support groups in your area (online and in-person)

## **Appendices**

**Appendix A — State-by-State Quick Reference Appendix B — Glossary of Justice System Terms Appendix C — Recommended Books & Resources Appendix D — Downloadable**

*End of Table of Contents*

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## **Part One: Understanding This Journey**

### **Chapter 1 — You Are Not Alone**

#### **Why This Handbook Exists**

You are holding this handbook because someone in your life is incarcerated, and you are trying to figure out how to keep living — how to keep working, keep parenting, keep believing, keep loving — while a part of your heart is locked behind a fence you cannot see through.

The reason this handbook exists is simple: families of the incarcerated have been overlooked for too long. The system processes your loved one, but it rarely acknowledges you — the parent who drives four hours to a visiting room, the spouse who manages a household on half the income, the child who lies awake wondering if their parent is okay. You carry a weight that most people around you do not understand, and you do it largely alone.

This book is an attempt to change that. It is not a legal textbook, though it contains legal information. It is not a devotional, though it speaks to spiritual questions. It is a companion — written by people like you, for people who are living through what seems impossible.

We wrote it because we believe no family should have to navigate incarceration without a map, a guide, or someone to say: *I see you. I have been there. You are going to make it through this.*

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#### **A Letter for a Person Like You Who is Walking a Difficult Road**

*Dear friend,*

*I don't know your name, but I know some things about you. I know you probably didn't sleep well last night. I know you have replayed a thousand questions in your mind — what you could have done differently, what comes next, how you will afford this, how you will explain it, how you will survive it.*

*I know because I have been there. The first time I walked into a visiting room, I thought my legs would give out. The first time I heard my loved one's voice through a phone line recorded by the state, I could barely speak. The first time someone asked me "So, where is he?" and I had to decide in a split second whether to tell the truth, I wanted to disappear.*

*Here is what I wish someone had told me in those first weeks: You are not broken. What you are feeling is not a sign that you are weak. It is a sign that you are human, loving someone who is in a place no one should be.*

*You will learn things you never wanted to know — about the justice system, about your own strength, about who your real friends are, about what love looks like when it costs something. And you will survive. Not because you are extraordinary (though you are), but because human beings are built to endure hard things, especially when we do not endure them alone.*

*I cannot take away what you are going through. But I can tell you this: you are not alone. There are people who understand. There are resources that help. There is a way through, even when you cannot see it yet.*

*Keep going. One day at a time.*

*— A fellow traveler*

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## **The Story of Lives on Mission Ministries**

Lives on Mission Ministries exists to mobilize, train, and support local teams of Christians to start, lead, and sustain Christ-centered reentry programs in rural counties across Kentucky.

As many ministries begin, Lives on Mission (LOM) began out of a vision by Jim Connell, founder and retired Executive Director of Lexington Rescue Mission. Having years of experience managing a jail and prison ministry division that served men and women both inside and outside of the jail walls, Jim recognized the need for building something often found missing when people are released from incarceration.

Many of the devastating barriers to successful reintegration into rural communities come not only from lack of access to practical resources (housing, jobs, transportation, etc.) but also from a lack of emotional and spiritual support in perhaps one of the most critical times in a person's life. Jim felt called to address this need by helping empower local groups of Christians to take up the charge to walk alongside men who could easily reoffend and return to jail or prison because they couldn't get their basic needs met.

Jim also believed there was a need for rural communities to start-up support groups for families of the incarcerated. These families are undergoing very difficult transitions, and this may be the very reason you're reading through this material.

If you would like to help start up a support group for families of the incarcerated in your Kentucky community, please contact Jim Connell at [jim@livesonmission.org](mailto:jim@livesonmission.org), or call (502) 219-6245. We would love to hear from you. Your act of compassion for families like yours will bless so many other families who are going through the heart-breaking time of separation from their loved one.

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## **How Families Help Families: What This Book Will (and Won't) Do**

This handbook is written from a conviction that families are not just recipients of help — they are the helpers. The most powerful support you will receive often comes not from professionals or programs, but from another family member who has already walked through what you are facing.

### **What this book will do:**

It will give you accurate, practical information about how the justice system works — your rights, your loved one's rights, and what to expect at every stage from arrest to reentry. It will help you understand the emotional world you and your loved one are living in, with honesty and without cliché. It will guide you through the hardest conversations — with children, with friends, with your own heart. It will help you prepare for reentry, manage your finances, take care of yourself, and know when to ask for professional help. And it will remind you, over and over, that you are not alone.

### **What this book will not do:**

It will not tell you that everything happens for a reason — because some things simply should not happen, and pretending otherwise helps no one. It will not tell you to "just pray about it" as if prayer replaces action, information, or community. It will not minimize your pain, rush your grief, or pressure you to forgive before you are ready. It will not give legal advice — it will give you legal information, but you will still need an attorney for your specific situation. And it will not pretend that your family's journey is the same as anyone else's, because it is not.

What this book will do, above all, is honor your experience. You are the expert on your own life. We are simply here to offer what we have learned, to share what has helped others, and to sit with you in the hard places.

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### **Something to Hold Onto**

You did not choose this road. But you do not walk it alone. Before you turn to the next page, take one breath — a slow one, all the way in and all the way out. You made it to this page. You can make it through this chapter. And somehow, one chapter at a time, you can make it through this journey. Keep going.

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## Chapter 2 — The Emotional World of the Waiting Family

If you picked up this handbook and turned straight to this chapter, you are probably in pain. Maybe it is fresh — the arrest was days or weeks ago and you are still in shock. Or maybe it has been years and the pain has dulled to a low ache that you have almost learned to live with. Either way, this chapter is for you.

What you are feeling — the confusion, the shame, the rage, the bone-deep exhaustion — is not a sign that you are falling apart. It is a sign that you are human, and you are going through something that would flatten anyone.

Let us name what is happening.

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### Ambiguous Loss: Grieving Someone Who Is Still Alive

One of the hardest truths about having a loved one incarcerated is that you cannot fully grieve. Death brings closure — painful, but clear. Funerals are held. Obituaries are written. People bring casseroles and say the right things. There is a before and an after.

Incarceration is different. Your person is still here, still breathing, still reachable by phone and mail and visit. But they are also gone. They are not at the dinner table. They are not tucking the kids in. They are not there when you need a decision made, a bill paid, a hard conversation had.

This is called **ambiguous loss** — a loss without closure, a grief with no clear end. You can find yourself caught between hope and despair in the same hour. One moment you are furious. The next, you are making excuses for them. Then you are crying in the car over a song that came on the radio.

**Ambiguous loss is not a flaw in you.** It is the natural response to an unnatural situation. The first step is simply to recognize it for what it is: you are grieving, and the person you are grieving is still alive. That contradiction is exhausting, and it deserves compassion, not judgment.

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### The Stages Families Go Through

You may have heard of the five stages of grief — denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance. They were never meant to be a neat checklist, and they certainly do not apply in

order. You will bounce. You will loop. You will feel like you have accepted the situation only to wake up three months later angry all over again.

Here is what that often looks like for families:

**Shock (the first days and weeks).** You go numb. You function on autopilot. You make calls you do not remember making. Someone tells you your loved one has been arrested and the words do not seem to reach your brain. This is your mind protecting you from a blow that is too big to take all at once.

**Shame (sets in hard, often early).** You feel the eyes of your neighbors, your church, your coworkers. You start sentences with "I'm sorry, but..." You hide the truth from people you used to trust. You carry a weight that was never yours to carry — because what someone else did does not define you, even though it feels like it does.

**Anger (comes and goes, sometimes unpredictably).** You may be angry at your loved one for what they did. You may be angry at the system — the judge, the prosecutor, the arresting officer. You may be angry at God. You may even be angry at other family members who seem to be handling it better or worse than you. All of these are allowed.

**Bargaining (quiet, often internal).** If I had been there that night. If I had seen the signs. If I just pray hard enough, maybe the sentence will be reduced. Bargaining is hope trying to take control of something you cannot control. It is normal. It will not change the outcome, but it will help you recognize what you cannot change.

**Depression (the long, quiet danger).** This is not sadness. This is the heaviness that settles in when the shock wears off and the reality of years stretches out ahead of you. You stop answering the phone. You stop cooking. You stop caring about things you used to love. This stage is real and it is dangerous. If you have felt numb or hopeless for more than two weeks, please tell someone. See the end of this chapter for where to turn.

**Acceptance (not the same as being okay).** Acceptance does not mean you are fine with what happened. It means you have stopped fighting reality and started figuring out how to live inside it. Acceptance comes and goes too. Some days you will have it. Some days you will not. That is still progress.

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## **Guilt: What Did I Miss? Could I Have Stopped It?**

Almost every family member asks themselves these questions. You replay conversations. You search for signs you might have missed. You wonder if something you did or did not do led to this moment.

Here is what you need to hear: **Your loved one made their own choice.** You did not hold the weapon. You did not sign the deal. You did not drive the car. You may have been blind to

something, yes — but most people are blind to what their loved ones hide from them. That does not make you complicit. It makes you human.

Guilt that keeps you stuck is not productive guilt. If there is something concrete you can learn from this — a boundary you need to set, a pattern you need to recognize — then learn it and act on it. But carrying guilt that belongs to someone else will only make you less able to help anyone, including yourself.

**Try this:** Write down what you actually could have controlled and what you could not. Be honest. Most of what you find will be in the second column. Let that column go.

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## The Loneliness of the Visiting Room

There is a specific kind of loneliness that comes from being the family member of someone incarcerated. It hits hardest in places other people would never expect — the visiting room of a correctional facility.

You sit in a row of chairs next to strangers who are also waiting. You all have the same hollow look. No one talks. You go through security, get your hand stamped, sit at a table or in a booth, and try to have a meaningful conversation in a room full of other people trying to do the same thing. The noise. The rules. The timer counting down. The guard watching.

And then you leave. You walk out into the parking lot alone. You drive home alone. You walk into a house that feels empty because one person is missing, even if other people live there.

**You are not alone in that room.** Every person sitting in those chairs understands. And that is one reason this support group exists — so you do not have to carry that loneliness by yourself.

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## Permission to Feel: Your Feelings Are Valid

One of the most damaging things families hear — from well-meaning friends, from church members, from their own inner voice — is that they are not allowed to feel what they feel.

*You need to be strong for the kids. He is the one in prison, not you. She made her bed, now she has to lie in it. Just pray about it and move on.*

None of these statements are helpful. They shut down the very emotions that need to be expressed in order to heal.

Here is the truth: **Your feelings are valid because you are having them.** You do not need to earn the right to be sad, angry, or exhausted. You do not need to compare your pain to anyone else's. Your pain is yours, and it matters.

God gave you tears, anger, and the capacity to lament. The Psalms are full of people crying out in anguish — "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" — and those words are treated as faith, not failure. If the psalmist could be honest with God about their pain, so can you.

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## When to Seek Professional Help (and Where to Find It)

This chapter has described a lot of heavy emotions. Most of them are normal responses to an abnormal situation. But sometimes normal responses cross into territory where you need more help than a handbook or a support group can provide.

### Consider professional help if:

- You have felt hopeless or numb for more than two weeks
- You are having thoughts of harming yourself or others
- You cannot get out of bed or complete basic daily tasks
- You are using alcohol, drugs, or food to numb the pain
- Your anger feels out of control or is spilling onto your children
- You have stopped eating or are eating excessively
- You cannot stop crying or you cannot cry at all

### Where to start:

- **Your primary care doctor** — a good first step; they can screen for depression and refer you
- **A licensed therapist or counselor** — look for someone who specializes in grief, trauma, or family-of-incarcerated issues
- **Your church or faith community** — many offer free or sliding-scale counseling
- **Employee Assistance Program (EAP)** — if you are employed, your job may offer free short-term counseling
- **National crisis hotlines** — see Appendix E for numbers

Asking for help is not weakness. It is wisdom. You cannot pour from an empty cup, and your family — inside and outside — needs you to be as whole as you can be.

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### Something to Hold Onto

You are not crazy. You are not weak. You are going through something genuinely hard, and your feelings are a normal response. This week, give yourself permission to feel one thing you have been pushing down. Write it down. Say it out loud. Tell someone you trust. You do not have to carry it alone.

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# Chapter 3 — The Inmate's Emotional World

You have probably asked yourself a hundred times: *What is going through their head in there?* Maybe you have received letters that sounded hollow, phone calls where they barely spoke, or visits where they seemed like a stranger wearing your loved one's face.

This chapter is not a defense of what they did. It is an explanation of what they are living through — so you can understand, communicate, and protect both of you from the damage incarceration causes on the inside.

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## The First 72 Hours

Those first three days after someone is booked into a correctional facility are unlike anything else they will experience during their sentence.

**Day one — shock and sensory overload.** They are stripped of everything: their clothes, their phone, their wallet, their shoes, their freedom. They are given a uniform, a number, and a cell. They are fingerprinted, photographed, and — in many facilities — cavity searched. They may be sprayed with delousing chemicals. They are read rules they will not remember. They are placed in a holding cell with strangers who are also in shock. Some facilities keep new arrivals in observation cells for hours or days before moving them to general population. During this time, they sit alone with nothing but a concrete slab and the slow realization that this is real.

**Day two — the first phone call.** This is often the hardest. They get one call — maybe two. They have to decide who to call. They are crying. They are ashamed. They are trying to sound okay for you while their hands are shaking. The call is timed. The line cuts off. They walk back to their cell not knowing whether you actually heard what they were trying to say.

**Day three — reality sets in.** The shock begins to fade and the weight settles. They look at the calendar on the wall. They realize how many days stretch ahead. Some inmates describe this as the moment the air changes — when you stop hoping you will wake up from the nightmare and accept that you are living in it.

**What this means for you:** If your loved one called you during those first three days and sounded angry, terrified, distant, or like a stranger — that is normal. They were not themselves. Do not read too much into those early conversations. Give them grace to stabilize before you draw any conclusions about their state of mind.

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## The Long Silence: Processing Shame and Regret

After the first week, many inmates go quiet. Not because they are ignoring you — because they are drowning.

Shame in prison is different from the shame families feel on the outside. Inside, there is no escape from what they did. Every morning they wake up in a cell that exists because of their choices. Every conversation with another inmate is a reminder of where they are and why. The bars, the guards, the count, the searches — it is a constant, physical reminder of their failure.

This often leads to a period of **deep silence** — not a silence *toward* you necessarily, but an internal silence. They stop talking about their feelings. They stop processing out loud. They withdraw into themselves because the shame is too big to put into words.

**Do not mistake this silence for not caring.** They are likely caring too much — about what they did, about what you think of them, about whether they deserve your love. They may stop writing or calling as often not because they have forgotten you, but because every contact reminds them of what they lost.

**What helps:** Short, consistent, low-pressure letters. "Thinking of you." "Saw something that reminded me of you." "No need to write back, just wanted you to know I love you." These lifelines matter more than you will ever know.

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## How Incarceration Changes a Person (For Better or Worse)

This is the question every family wrestles with: *Will they come out the same person?*

The honest answer is no. No one goes through incarceration unchanged. The question is which direction the change takes.

**The good — genuine transformation is possible.** Some inmates use their time to rebuild. They earn their GED. They complete substance abuse programs. They take anger management classes. They learn a trade. They find faith — sometimes for the first time, sometimes in a deeper way than before. They sit in their cell with nothing but time, and some of them use that time to do real, hard work on themselves. You may see your loved one become more humble, more reflective, more honest about their failures than they ever were on the outside.

**The bad — prison can harden a person.** The culture inside rewards toughness and punishes vulnerability. To survive, some inmates build walls that do not come back down. They learn to lie more effectively, manipulate more skillfully, and trust no one. They may become angrier, more cynical, or more withdrawn. They may adopt the values of the prison yard rather than the values they brought in.

**What determines the outcome:** The single biggest factor is whether they have meaningful programming and supportive relationships. Inmates who stay connected to family, engage in

education or work, and participate in faith or recovery programs have dramatically better outcomes than those who isolate.

**What this means for you:** You cannot control which direction they go. But your consistent presence — your letters, your calls, your refusal to give up on them — is one of the strongest forces pulling them toward the good. Do not underestimate it.

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## What Your Loved One May Not Tell You

There is a code inside. Part of it is survival. Part of it is shame. Here are some things your loved one is probably not telling you:

- **How afraid they are.** Fear is seen as weakness. They will not describe the tension of walking into a housing unit for the first time, the fights they witness, or the threats they receive.
  - **How lonely they are.** They will say they are fine. They will not tell you that the silence at night is crushing, or that they have cried so hard they could not breathe.
  - **How worried they are about you.** They spend enormous energy imagining what you are going through. They worry about the kids. They worry about the bills. They worry that you will give up on them, find someone else, or fall apart. They carry guilt for what they have put you through, and that guilt is heavier than any sentence.
  - **What they have done to survive.** They may have gotten into fights. They may have joined a group for protection. They may have made compromises they are ashamed of. These are the stories they will never put in a letter.
  - **That they need you to keep writing even when they stop responding.** This is the most important one. There will be stretches — sometimes long ones — where they go silent. They may be in the hole (solitary confinement). They may be depressed. They may just not have the words. Keep writing anyway. Your letters pile up in their cell like lifelines. They read them. They keep them. They just cannot always find the strength to write back.
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## Suicide Warning Signs Every Family Should Know

This is the hardest section in this chapter. Please read it carefully. Incarcerated people die by suicide at a rate significantly higher than the general population. The risk is highest in the first 30 days and again when a significant event occurs (a lost appeal, a denied parole, a family breakup).

**Watch for these signs in your conversations and letters:**

- Statements of hopelessness that go beyond normal discouragement — "There's no point," "It doesn't matter anymore," "Everyone would be better off"

- Giving away prized possessions in letters or asking you to give things to others
- A sudden, unexplained calm after a period of distress (this can mean they have made a decision)
- Withdrawal from relationships — stopping writing, refusing visits, not answering calls
- Expressions of excessive guilt or self-hatred — "I ruined everything," "I'm a monster"
- References to death, even in passing — "I wish I could just sleep forever"
- A significant change in behavior: either much more agitated or much more withdrawn

#### **What to do if you are concerned:**

1. **Take it seriously.** Do not assume they are just being dramatic.
2. **Call the facility immediately.** Ask for the mental health unit or the duty officer. Tell them you are concerned your loved one may be suicidal. Give specific reasons. Facilities have protocols for placing inmates on suicide watch.
3. **Do not keep secrets about suicide.** Your loved one may ask you not to tell anyone. Tell anyway. A relationship can survive a broken confidence. It cannot survive a death.
4. **Write them immediately.** Tell them they matter. Tell them you love them. Tell them you are not better off without them. Your words may be the only good news they receive that day.
5. **Contact the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline** at 988 for guidance on what else you can do from the outside.

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#### **Something to Hold Onto**

Your loved one is going through something that changes people. They may not tell you the full truth of what they are experiencing, and that is not a sign that they do not trust you — it is a sign of how heavy the truth is. You do not need to fix everything. You just need to stay. One letter. One call. One visit at a time.

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## **Part Two: Navigating the System**

### **Chapter 4 — Your Legal Rights & Responsibilities**

One of the most frustrating parts of having a loved one incarcerated is feeling like you have no idea what your rights are — or even which questions to ask. The justice system runs on rules that were not written for families, and every facility, county, and state operates differently.

This chapter will not make you a legal expert. But it will give you a working map of what you are entitled to, what your loved one is entitled to, and where to go when those rights are not being honored.

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## Your Rights as a Family Member

As a family member, you do not have many *legal* rights during your loved one's incarceration — but you have more than most people realize.

**The right to visit.** Every facility must have a visiting policy, and you have the right to know what it is. You cannot be denied a visit arbitrarily. Denial must be based on a specific rule violation — your dress, your behavior, your ID, or a security concern. If you are denied, you have the right to ask why and to receive it in writing.

**The right to communicate.** You generally have the right to send mail, receive calls (at the inmate's expense or through an approved system), and in many facilities, use email or video visitation platforms. Facilities can restrict communication for security reasons, but blanket bans without cause are appealable.

**The right to information (limited).** You may not be entitled to details about your loved one's medical condition, disciplinary record, or location within the facility — those are often protected by the inmate's privacy rights. However, you do have the right to know your loved one's inmate number, housing location (the facility name), and how to send them money. If your loved one signs a release of information form, you can access more.

**The right to be on the emergency contact list.** Most facilities ask inmates to designate emergency contacts. If you are on that list, you have the right to be notified in the event of a medical emergency, transfer, or critical incident. Make sure your loved one updates this list.

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## The Inmate's Rights Inside the Facility

People often assume that incarcerated individuals have no rights at all. That is not true. While the Constitution does not guarantee every freedom, inmates retain several important protections:

- **The right to medical care.** The Eighth Amendment prohibits cruel and unusual punishment, which the courts have interpreted to mean that inmates have a right to adequate medical and mental health care. This does not mean top-tier care, but it does mean they cannot be denied treatment for serious conditions.
- **The right to religious practice.** Most facilities must provide reasonable accommodation for religious practices — diet, holy day observances, access to chaplains or spiritual materials.

- **The right to communicate with legal counsel.** Attorney-client communications are privileged and cannot be monitored. Inmates have the right to meet privately with their lawyer.
- **The right to be free from staff abuse.** Inmates have the right to file grievances about excessive force, harassment, or neglect by staff.
- **The right to due process in discipline.** Before being placed in solitary confinement or losing good time credits, an inmate generally has the right to a hearing, notice of the charges, and the opportunity to present their side.

**What they do not have:** The right to choose their housing unit, the right to unlimited phone calls, the right to a particular job or program, or the right to receive any package or book they want. Facilities have broad discretion over daily operations.

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## What You Can Legally Do — And What You Cannot

Understanding the line between what you are legally allowed to do and what crosses into illegal territory can save you from serious trouble.

### You CAN:

- Write letters, send approved photos, and place money on their books
- Contact the facility for information about policies and procedures
- Hire a lawyer to represent your loved one's interests
- Attend court hearings (unless the court restricts it)
- Speak to the media, advocate for policy change, and participate in support groups
- File a grievance or complaint about facility conditions or treatment

### You CANNOT:

- Bring contraband (drugs, weapons, unauthorized electronics) into a facility — this is a felony in every state
- Use someone else's ID or misrepresent your identity to gain access
- Record phone calls without consent (this may violate wiretapping laws)
- Harass or threaten facility staff, lawyers, or judges
- Attempt to smuggle messages or items out of the facility during visits
- Interfere with an investigation or tamper with evidence

One rule that surprises many families: **Do not attempt to contact a judge directly.** Writing a letter to the judge about your loved one's sentence, even with good intentions, can actually harm their case. Any communication should go through their attorney.

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## HIPAA, Privacy Laws, and Getting Straight Answers

One of the most common frustrations families express is being unable to get straight answers from the facility. "I'm sorry, that's confidential" is a phrase you will hear often. Here is what is actually going on:

**HIPAA** — the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act — protects your loved one's medical information. Unless your loved one signs a release, the facility cannot share details about their health, medications, or medical appointments with you. This applies even if you pay for their medical care.

**Privacy laws and records.** Inmate records — including disciplinary history, classification status, and program participation — are generally considered confidential. Facilities may share basic information (facility location, inmate number, next court date) but often refuse to go further without a signed release.

#### **How to get around this:**

- Have your loved one sign a **Release of Information (ROI)** form with the facility, naming you as an authorized contact. This is the single most effective step you can take.
  - Be specific. Instead of asking "How is he doing?" (which facilities will often deflect), ask concrete questions: "What is the process for placing money on account?" or "What are the visiting hours next month?"
  - If you consistently hit a wall, ask to speak with a supervisor or the facility's ombudsman. Document the date, time, and name of every person you speak with.
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## **How to File a Grievance (and When to Escalate)**

When a right is violated — a visit is denied without cause, medical care is withheld, staff is abusive — the grievance process is your official pathway to address it.

#### **The general process (varies by facility):**

1. **Informal resolution.** Many facilities require you to first try to resolve the issue with the staff member or their supervisor directly. Do this in writing and keep a copy.
2. **Formal grievance (step one).** File the written grievance using the facility's official form (ask for it or find it online). Include the date, the incident, the staff involved, and what you are requesting. File within the time limit — usually 5–15 days from the incident.
3. **Appeal (step two).** If the first response is unsatisfactory or you hear nothing within the stated timeline, file an appeal to the warden or facility administrator.
4. **Final appeal (step three).** If still unresolved, appeal to the state Department of Corrections central office or the state ombudsman.

5. **External escalation.** If the grievance process is exhausted and the violation is serious (medical neglect, civil rights violation), you may have grounds for a lawsuit or a complaint with the Department of Justice or a civil rights organization like the ACLU.

#### Tips for an effective grievance:

- **Write factually.** Stick to what happened, when, and who was involved. Leave out opinions and emotions.
  - **Keep copies of everything.** Every form, every response, every envelope.
  - **Follow the timeline.** Missing a deadline can forfeit your ability to appeal.
  - **Be polite but firm.** Screaming at staff will not help your case.
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## Finding and Working with Legal Counsel on a Budget

If you need a lawyer — for your loved one's appeal, for a custody issue, for a parole board hearing — and you cannot afford a private attorney, you still have options.

**Public defender.** If your loved one cannot afford an attorney, they are constitutionally entitled to one at trial and sentencing. However, public defenders are overworked and may not be able to give the attention a private attorney would. Ask for the attorney by name, keep their contact information, and follow up respectfully.

**Pro bono programs.** Many state and local bar associations run pro bono programs that match low-income clients with volunteer attorneys. These are typically limited to specific types of cases (civil matters, appeals, post-conviction relief). Start with your state bar association's website.

**Legal aid organizations.** These nonprofit law firms provide free or low-cost legal services. They handle a variety of issues affecting families of the incarcerated — custody, housing, benefits, reentry legal barriers.

**Law school clinics.** Many law schools have clinics where students, supervised by licensed professors, provide free legal assistance. Clinics often focus on criminal appeals, reentry issues, or family law.

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## Pro Bono and Legal Aid Resources by State

Every state has different resources. Here is where to start your search:

- **LawHelp.org** — national directory of legal aid providers by zip code and issue type
- **American Bar Association Free Legal Answers** — online pro bono portal where you can ask civil legal questions

- **National Legal Aid & Defender Association (NLADA)** — directory of public defense and civil legal aid programs
  - **State Bar Association** — search "[your state] bar association pro bono" for local programs
  - **Prisoners' Rights organizations** — the ACLU National Prison Project, Southern Poverty Law Center, and state-level prison advocacy groups often have attorney networks
  - **Faith-based legal clinics** — some churches and ministries partner with attorneys to provide free consultations. Ask your support group leader or check with Lives on Mission Ministries
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### **Something to Hold Onto**

You have more rights than anyone has told you. The system is confusing by design, but confusion does not mean you are powerless. This week, do one thing: call the facility and ask for a copy of their visiting policy and their grievance procedure. Put it in a folder. You may never need it, but if you do, you will be glad it is there.

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## **Chapter 5 — Understanding the Justice Process**

If you are like most family members, the first time you heard the words "arraignment," "indictment," or "mandatory minimum," your brain went blank. The justice system runs on a language of its own, and no one hands you a translation guide when your loved one is arrested.

This chapter will not make you a legal scholar. But it will give you a plain-English map of how the process works — from the moment of arrest through sentencing and beyond. Knowing what comes next will not fix everything, but it will help you ask the right questions and stop feeling like every conversation with a lawyer or court official happens in a language you do not speak.

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### **From Arrest to Sentencing: A Plain-English Timeline**

Every case is different, but most follow this general sequence. The time between each step can range from days to years depending on the severity of the charges, the court's docket, and whether your loved one is in custody or released on bond.

**1. Arrest.** Your loved one is taken into custody. They are read their rights (Miranda warning), booked, fingerprinted, and photographed. They will appear before a judge within 24–72 hours for an initial appearance.

**2. Initial appearance / arraignment (first court date).** The judge reads the charges, ensures your loved one understands them, and asks how they plea. This is also when bail is set or denied. If your loved one cannot afford an attorney, a public defender is appointed at this hearing.

**3. Pre-trial phase.** This is the longest phase. Both sides gather evidence, file motions, and negotiate. Your loved one's attorney may try to get charges reduced, evidence thrown out, or a plea deal offered. This phase can last weeks, months, or — in complex cases — years.

**4. Plea or trial.** Most cases (roughly 90–95 percent) end in a plea deal, not a trial. The defendant agrees to plead guilty — often to a lesser charge — in exchange for a known sentence. If no deal is reached, the case goes to trial before a judge or jury.

**5. Sentencing.** If the plea is accepted or the trial ends in a conviction, a sentencing hearing is held. The judge hears arguments from both sides, reviews a pre-sentence investigation report, and imposes a sentence. This may happen immediately or weeks later.

**6. Post-sentencing.** After sentencing, there are still options: appeals, motions for sentence reduction, parole hearings, and — eventually — release.

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## Key Terms Every Family Should Know

Legal language is a barrier, not a gate. Here are the terms you will hear most often and what they actually mean:

- **Arraignment.** The first formal court appearance where charges are read and a plea is entered. This is not the trial. It is a procedural hearing.
- **Plea / Plea deal / Plea bargain.** An agreement between the defense and prosecution where the defendant pleads guilty, usually to a lesser charge or for a lighter sentence, avoiding a trial.
- **Docket.** The court's official calendar and case file. Every filing, hearing, and ruling is recorded on the docket. You can usually access the docket online through the court clerk's website.
- **Indictment.** A formal charge issued by a grand jury, usually for felony offenses. It means the prosecution has enough evidence to proceed to trial.
- **Discovery.** The process where both sides share evidence with each other. Your loved one's attorney has the right to see all evidence the prosecution intends to use.
- **Pre-sentence investigation (PSI) report.** A background report prepared by a probation officer after a conviction, used by the judge to determine the sentence. It includes your loved one's criminal history, personal background, and often letters of support from family.

- **Motion.** A formal request to the judge (e.g., motion to reduce bail, motion to dismiss charges, motion for a new trial).
  - **Appeal.** A request to a higher court to review the trial court's decision. Appeals are based on legal errors, not on the facts of the case.
  - **Writ.** A court order (e.g., writ of habeas corpus, which challenges the legality of detention).
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## How Bail and Bond Work

Bail is money or property paid to the court as a guarantee that the defendant will return for their court dates. If they show up, the bail is returned (minus any fees). If they do not, the bail is forfeited.

- **Cash bail.** You pay the full amount in cash. It is returned at the end of the case if all court dates are kept.
- **Surety bond (bail bond).** You pay a bondsman a percentage (usually 10 percent) of the bail amount, and they post the full amount. The 10 percent is not returned. This is the most common option for families who cannot afford cash bail.
- **Personal recognizance (PR bond).** Your loved one is released without paying bail, based on their promise to return to court. This is typically reserved for low-risk, non-violent offenses.
- **Property bond.** You use property (a house, land) as collateral instead of cash.

**Important to know:** Bail is set at the initial hearing. Your loved one's attorney can argue for a lower amount or for release on personal recognizance. If you cannot afford bail, do not assume there is nothing you can do. Ask the attorney about a bail reduction hearing.

**Also important:** Using a bail bondsman means you are on the hook. If your loved one misses a court date, you may owe the full amount. Many families have been financially devastated by cosigning a bond for someone who fled. Be honest with yourself about the risk.

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## Types of Sentences

Not all sentences are the same. Understanding the type of sentence your loved one received determines everything about how their time will unfold and when release is possible.

**Determinate sentence.** A fixed, specific number of years (e.g., "five years"). The inmate serves roughly 85 percent of the sentence (in the federal system) or a state-specific percentage. Release date is predictable.

**Indeterminate sentence.** A range (e.g., "five to fifteen years"). A parole board determines the actual release date based on behavior, program participation, and risk assessment. Release is not guaranteed at the minimum — the inmate must earn it.

**Mandatory minimum.** A sentence set by law for specific crimes (usually drug or weapons offenses). The judge has no discretion to go below that number. Mandatory minimums have been heavily criticized for contributing to mass incarceration and disproportionately affecting minority communities.

**Life sentence.** The inmate will remain incarcerated for the rest of their natural life. Some states offer parole eligibility after a certain number of years (e.g., "life with the possibility of parole after 25 years"). Others do not ("life without parole").

**Concurrent vs. consecutive sentences.** If someone is convicted of multiple charges, concurrent sentences run at the same time (five years for charge A + five years for charge B = five years total). Consecutive sentences run one after the other (five + five = ten years).

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## Parole and Probation: What They Mean and How They Work

These two terms are often confused. They are very different.

**Probation** is an alternative to incarceration. Your loved one is sentenced to supervision in the community instead of prison. They must follow conditions: regular check-ins with a probation officer, drug testing, employment, no new crimes, and sometimes community service, restitution, or treatment programs. Violating probation can result in the original prison sentence being imposed.

**Parole** is early release from prison before the full sentence is served. The inmate is released under supervision in the community. Parole is not automatic — it is granted by a parole board based on factors including the nature of the offense, behavior in prison, program participation, and risk of re-offending.

### What families should know about parole:

- Parole hearings can be stressful and unpredictable. Your loved one may be denied multiple times before being granted release.
  - You can often write letters of support to the parole board. Ask the attorney or a reentry coordinator how to do this effectively.
  - Parole conditions are strict. A single violation — failing a drug test, missing a check-in, leaving the county without permission — can send your loved one back to prison.
  - Parole does not end at a specific date. It lasts until the sentence expiration date, unless the person is discharged early by the parole board.
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# The Appeals Process (And Why It Usually Takes Years)

If your loved one was convicted, an appeal is not a do-over. It is not a second trial where you present new evidence or argue that the jury got it wrong. An appeal asks a higher court to review whether legal errors were made during the trial.

## Grounds for appeal include:

- The judge made an error in how they instructed the jury
- Evidence was admitted that should have been excluded (or vice versa)
- The prosecution withheld evidence favorable to the defense
- The defendant received ineffective assistance from their attorney
- The sentence was illegal or outside the range permitted by law

## What the appeals process looks like:

1. **Notice of appeal** is filed (usually within 30 days of sentencing)
2. The trial record is compiled (transcripts, exhibits, filings) — this alone can take months
3. Written briefs are submitted by both sides
4. Oral arguments may be heard
5. The appellate court issues a ruling — this can take six months to two years or more

**The hard truth:** Most appeals fail. The standard for overturning a conviction is high. Courts give trial judges wide discretion. An appeal that succeeds is the exception, not the rule.

**Post-conviction relief** is a separate process that comes after the direct appeal is exhausted. It is based on new evidence (DNA, recanted testimony) or constitutional violations. This process can take years and often requires a new attorney.

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## Questions to Ask Your Loved One's Attorney

If you have the opportunity to speak with your loved one's attorney — and you should try — here are the questions that will give you the information you actually need:

### In the beginning:

- What are the exact charges, and what is the potential range of sentences?
- What is the bail amount, and can we ask for a reduction?
- Is this case better resolved by a plea or a trial? What are the pros and cons of each?
- How long do you expect the pre-trial phase to last?
- What should I know about the prosecutor's history with these types of cases?

### If a plea deal is offered:

- What is the specific offer, and how does it compare to what they would face at trial?

- What are the collateral consequences — will this affect their ability to get a job, housing, or federal benefits?
- Will they have to register as anything (sex offender, arson offender, etc.)?
- How much time will they actually serve (day-for-day credit, good time, parole eligibility)?

#### **After sentencing:**

- What are the grounds for appeal, and do you believe any apply here?
- How long does the appeals process typically take in this jurisdiction?
- Will you handle the appeal, or do we need to find another attorney?
- What is the process for sentence reduction or compassionate release?
- How and when will they become eligible for parole?

**One piece of advice:** Be respectful but persistent. Attorneys are busy. They may not call you back quickly. Have one designated family member handle communication so you are not all calling separately. Write down your questions before you call so you do not forget what to ask.

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#### **Something to Hold Onto**

The justice system is not designed to be easy to understand. But you do not need to understand everything to be an effective advocate. Focus on what is in front of you — the next hearing, the next deadline, the next question for the attorney. One step at a time is how this journey is walked.

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## **Chapter 6 — Visits: Making the Most of Your Time Together**

Visits are the oxygen of a family separated by incarceration. They are also one of the most emotionally complicated, logistically frustrating, and sometimes humiliating experiences you will go through. This chapter tells you what to expect, how to prepare, and how to protect your heart on visiting day.

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### **Types of Visits**

Facilities offer different types of visits depending on security level, space, and policy. Knowing which kind you are walking into changes how you prepare.

- **In-person contact visits.** You sit at a table in a common visiting room. You can touch, hold hands, and hug at the beginning and end. These are the best option for maintaining

connection, but they are not available in all facilities — especially maximum-security or administrative segregation units.

- **In-person non-contact visits.** You sit on one side of a glass partition and speak through a phone or intercom. There is no physical contact. These are standard in higher-security settings. They are harder on children and harder on you.
  - **Video visits.** You sit at a kiosk at the facility or log in from home on your computer or phone. Video visits are convenient (no travel, no security line) but can feel hollow. Some facilities charge for them.
  - **Special visits.** Some facilities allow extended family visits in a private trailer or cottage setting for approved inmates. These are rare and require a separate application.
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## What to Wear, What to Bring, What to Leave Behind

Nothing ends a visit faster than showing up in the wrong clothes or with the wrong items.

**What to wear:** Modest, conservative clothing — no revealing necklines, no short skirts or shorts, no sleeveless shirts, no ripped jeans. No clothing matching inmate uniforms (tan, orange, green, navy). Solid-colored underwear recommended. No underwire bras (they set off metal detectors).

**What to bring:** Valid government-issued ID, required forms, clear bag for ID and money, small bills for vending machines if allowed, car keys.

**What to leave behind:** Phone, purse, bags, food and drinks (unless from vending machines), cameras, recording devices, weapons, tobacco, vaping devices, alcohol, gifts for the inmate.

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## The Security Process — What to Expect

Every visit starts with security screening. Check-in at the visitor entrance, present ID, get checked against the pre-approved list. Walk through a metal detector. Store belongings in a locker. Sign the visitor log. Wait. An officer calls your loved one's number or name. You enter the visiting room. The clock starts.

**The hard truth:** You will be watched the entire time. Officers monitor the room. Cameras are recording. You cannot whisper. You cannot pass notes. It is not a natural way to connect with someone you love, and it is okay to hate that.

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## Rules That Vary by Facility

**Every facility has its own rulebook.** Call ahead. Common variations include dress code strictness, ID requirements, check-in times (30–60 minutes before), visit length (30 minutes to several hours), number of visitors (often 3–5), and physical contact rules. The golden rule: call the visiting department before every visit. Rules change.

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## How to Prepare Children for a Visit

**Before:** Tell them what to expect in simple terms. Role-play the visit at home. Let them bring a drawing to give. Prepare them for the goodbye.

**During:** Follow the child's lead. Keep the tone light. Comfort without shaming.

**After:** Expect a range of emotions. Give them space to talk. Watch for behavioral changes. If a child consistently has strong negative reactions, talk to a counselor.

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## How to Handle a Visit That Goes Badly

**If turned away:** Ask for the reason in writing. If solvable, fix it and return. If arbitrary, file a grievance.

**If the visit is painful:** Take a breath. If they are abusive, you have the right to leave. Write them a letter a few days later.

**If a child becomes too upset:** End the visit early. Do not guilt them.

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## What to Talk About (and What to Avoid)

**Good topics:** Positive news from home, updates on children, encouragement, questions about their daily life, plans for the future, shared memories.

**Avoid:** Details of the crime, how hard life is on the outside, relationship problems that cannot be resolved in 60 minutes, complaints about other family members.

A simple framework: Leave them better than you found them.

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## After the Visit: Processing the Emotions

Allow yourself a few minutes to decompress. Check in with children. Plan something gentle after. Journal while it is fresh. Do not immediately call about something that went wrong. Do not punish yourself for feeling sad.

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## **When Visits Are Denied or Suspended**

If denied due to facility issues: Call ahead next time. Ask about video visit alternatives.

If suspended due to conduct: Continue writing letters. Visit suspension does not mean no communication.

If you believe the denial was unfair: Request it in writing. Follow the grievance procedure.

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### **Something to Hold Onto**

A visit is not wasted just because it was hard. Even the difficult visits matter — they tell your loved one that you showed up. That you are still here. That they have not been forgotten.

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## **Chapter 7 — Phone Calls, Mail, Email & Electronic Communication**

Staying connected by phone, mail, and digital platforms is one of the most important things you can do for your loved one — and one of the most frustrating. The systems are expensive, the rules are inconsistent, and the emotional stakes of every letter and call are impossibly high.

This chapter walks you through how each system works, how to save money and frustration, and how to make every letter count.

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### **How Prison Phone Systems Work (and Why They're So Expensive)**

Prison phone systems operate under a contracted monopoly. The facility signs an exclusive deal with one provider — usually Securus, GTL (ViaPath), or IC Solutions — and that company charges rates that would be illegal in any competitive market.

**How it works:** Your loved one initiates the call. It is always collect or prepaid. You cannot call them. The call is routed through the provider's system, recorded and monitored, and billed by the minute.

**Why it is so expensive:** The phone companies pay the facility a commission (sometimes 50 percent or more of call revenue), and those costs are passed directly to you. A 15-minute call can cost \$5–\$15.

**One thing that may help:** The FCC has capped interstate and international prison call rates, but intrastate calls are regulated by each state. Some states have passed laws capping rates; others have not.

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## Cost-Saving Tips

- **Use the provider's app** — often offers lower per-minute rates than collect calls
  - **Set up a trust account for calls** — prepay to avoid collect call fees
  - **Keep calls shorter and more frequent** — 5 minutes every other day is often better than 30 minutes once a week
  - **Coordinate with other family members** — take turns on different days
  - **Check if your state offers free calling** — a growing number of states have made prison calls free or near-free
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## Mail: What's Allowed, What Isn't, How Mail Is Reviewed

**What is usually allowed:** Standard paper letters, greeting cards (no musical/electronic), photographs, money orders, printed pages.

**What is usually not allowed:** Stickers, glitter, Polaroid photos, books from non-approved sources, cash, food, sexually explicit material, anything related to escape or violence.

**How mail is reviewed:** All incoming and outgoing mail is read and inspected unless it is marked as legal mail (from an attorney). Assume everything you write will be read by at least one staff member.

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## Writing Tips: What Helps, What Hurts

**What helps:** Be consistent, not long. Share ordinary life. Ask specific questions. Send encouragement without pressure. Include good news.

**What hurts:** Using letters to vent every frustration. Threatening to leave. Dwelling on the crime in every letter. Forcing positivity when you are hurting.

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## Email and Electronic Messaging Systems

Platforms like JPay, Securus Digital Mail, and GTL ConnectNetwork offer faster communication. Messages cost \$.10–\$.50 each.

**Pros:** Faster than mail, photos can be attached, less expensive than calls. **Cons:** Costs add up, character limits, and because it feels like texting it can trick you into having heavy conversations in a medium not suited for them.

**Recommendation:** Use electronic messaging for daily check-ins. Save deeper conversations for letters and calls.

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## Photo Policies

Most facilities allow up to 5–10 photos per envelope, standard 4x6 prints. No Polaroids. No explicit content, gang signs, weapons, or drug paraphernalia. Label photos on the back. Send everyday snapshots — not just special occasions.

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## The Emotional Weight of a Single Letter

When your loved one is locked in a cell, mail call is the most important moment of the day. Letters get read and reread. They are the physical proof that someone on the outside remembers. **Write the letter** — even when you do not know what to say, even when you are angry, even when they have not written back.

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## Sample Letter Templates

**When you don't know what to say:** "I don't have much to say today — just wanted you to know I'm thinking of you. The weather has finally turned. I hope you're okay. Write when you can. No pressure."

**When they're going through a hard time:** "I know this is a hard season. I want you to know I'm not going anywhere. You are more than the worst thing you've ever done. Keep going."

**When you're angry but want to stay connected:** "I'm angry right now — angry about where we are, about the choices that got us here. But being angry doesn't mean I've stopped loving you."

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**Something to Hold Onto** A letter is a small thing — paper and ink. But inside, it is a lifeline. You do not need to be a writer. You just need to show up. One envelope at a time.

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## Chapter 8 — Managing the Financial Burden

If you have looked at your bank account since your loved one was arrested and felt sick, you are not alone. Incarceration is expensive — not just for the state, but for the family.

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### The Hidden Costs of Incarceration

**Phone calls:** \$156–\$780/year for weekly calls. **Commissary:** \$50–\$150/month. **Legal fees:** Can run into the thousands. **Travel to visits:** \$50–\$200 per visit. **Medical copays:** \$2–\$5 per visit. **Lost income.**

**The real number:** Families spend an average of \$2,000–\$6,000 per year on incarceration-related costs.

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### Understanding Inmate Accounts and Trust Funds

The inmate trust account holds money sent by family for commissary, phone time, and medical copays. Deposit through approved vendors (JPay, Access Corrections, TouchPay). Fees apply. Money deposited belongs to the inmate — you cannot withdraw it.

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### How to Send Money (and How Much Is Reasonable)

\$25–\$50 per week for basic commissary is standard. More if they have medical copays. Less if they have a prison job. Nothing if you cannot afford it.

**The hard conversation:** If they pressure you for more than you can give, you have the right to say no. You are not a bank.

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## Managing Household Finances on Reduced Income

1. Take a full inventory of income, bills, and debts
  2. Cut non-essentials (but keep what keeps you sane)
  3. Call creditors — ask about payment plans or forbearance
  4. Apply for assistance (SNAP, Medicaid, LIHEAP, TANF)
  5. Tell someone you trust — financial shame keeps families isolated
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## When to Stop Sending Money (and How to Say No)

Consider stopping if: you cannot pay your own bills, the money is used irresponsibly, your loved one pressures you, or sending causes resentment.

**How to say no:** Be direct but kind. Do not over-explain. Offer non-financial alternatives. If they become angry or manipulative, hold your boundary.

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## Avoiding Scams

Common scams: "guaranteed early release" for a fee, fake bond calls, fake charity appeals. Never pay with gift cards or wire transfers. Always verify independently.

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**Something to Hold Onto** You are not failing your loved one because you cannot afford to send money every week. The thing they need most — your presence, your letters, your refusal to abandon them — costs nothing.

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## Part Three: The Children

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# Chapter 9 — Telling the Children

If there is a harder conversation than telling a child that their parent is going to prison, few people have found it.

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## What to Say by Age Group

**Preschool (2–5):** "Daddy is living in a place where he has to stay for a while because he broke an important rule." Avoid the word "bad." Reassure them it is not their fault.

**Elementary (6–10):** "Dad made some choices that hurt people. A judge said he has to live in a prison for a while." Be honest about the shame. "What happened is not your fault."

**Teens (11–17):** Be direct and honest. Give them space to react without judgment. Do not pressure them to visit or write. Watch for warning signs.

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## Common Questions Kids Ask

"Did they do something bad?" "They made a serious mistake. But they are still your parent."

"Are they coming back?" "It will be a long time, but they are coming back."

"Is it my fault?" Say it without being asked: "None of this is your fault."

"Can I tell my friends?" "That is your choice. Let us practice what you might say."

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## How Much Detail Is Too Much?

If the detail would frighten a child without helping them understand, leave it out. Never share graphic descriptions of the crime, conditions inside, or your own emotional breakdowns in detail.

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## The Child's Right to Love Both Parents

Resist the temptation to speak negatively about the incarcerated parent. A child's identity is tied to both parents. Attacking the parent attacks part of who the child is.

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## When to Involve a School Counselor

When grades drop, the child acts out or withdraws, or they are being bullied. Share only what is necessary. Request a weekly check-in and sensitivity on family-related assignments.

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## Books and Resources

**For preschoolers:** *The Night Dad Went to Jail, Visiting Day, Mama's Going to Visit Daddy.* **For elementary:** *What Will Happen to Me?, The Invisible String.* **For teens:** *The Prisoner's Wife, Dear Dad: Letters from an Adult Child.*

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**Something to Hold Onto** You do not need perfect answers. You just need to be honest, be gentle, and let them know — over and over — that they are loved, they are safe, and none of this is their fault.

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# Chapter 10 — Supporting Children Through the Sentence

Telling a child is one conversation. Living through the years that follow is an entirely different challenge.

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## The Emotional Impact at Each Stage

**Infants/toddlers (0–3):** Prolonged separation disrupts attachment. What they need most is consistency.

**Preschoolers (3–5):** Magical thinking, guilt, and regression are common. Repeat: "You did nothing wrong."

**Elementary (6–10):** Social stigma begins. They may be embarrassed, protect you, or struggle in school.

**Teens (11–17):** May rebel, withdraw, or take on adult responsibilities too early.

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## Behavioral Signs to Watch For

**Acting out** — aggression, defiance. **Withdrawal** — silence, loss of interest. **Regression** — bedwetting, baby talk. **Physical symptoms** — headaches, stomachaches.

**What to do:** Name what you see without accusation. Maintain routine. Do not punish behavior without addressing the pain.

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## Maintaining the Bond from a Distance

Encourage letters but do not force them. Short, regular phone calls with structure. Visits when the child is ready (never forced). Tangible connections — drawings, photos, memory boxes.

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## Managing Visits for Children

**Before:** Prepare them for every step. Role-play if helpful. **During:** Follow the child's lead. Bring an approved activity. **After:** Expect a transition period. Process together. If visits consistently cause distress, reduce frequency.

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## School Advocacy

Tell the counselor, principal, and homeroom teacher. Ask for confidentiality. Request a weekly check-in and sensitivity on family-related assignments.

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## Mentoring and Summer Programs

Look into Big Brothers Big Sisters, Amachi, Prison Fellowship Angel Tree, and camps like Tree of Life, Camp C.O.P.E., and Arianna's Center. Most are free or subsidized.

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## Keeping the Child's Identity Separate

"Your parent's choices are not your destiny. You get to choose who you become." Use the parent's name, not their label ("the inmate"). Celebrate the child's individuality.

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## When Therapy Is Needed

Seek help when symptoms persist for weeks, grades drop significantly, or there is self-harm or substance use. Options: school counseling (free), sliding-scale clinics, Medicaid, Open Path Collective.

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**Something to Hold Onto** They do not need you to have all the answers. They need you to stay present, listen without fixing, and remind them every day that they are loved.

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## Part Four: Staying Connected

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# Chapter 11 — Supporting Your Loved One From Outside

You love them. That is why you are still here. But somewhere along the way, you may have started asking: *Am I helping, or am I making it easier for them to avoid reality?*

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## The Difference Between Support and Enabling

**Support** helps them grow and take responsibility. **Enabling** protects them from consequences. Enabling feels like love in the short term but keeps them stuck.

### Support

Sending \$30 for basic commissary

Honest letters that encourage growth

### Enabling

Sending \$200 for gambling or debt

Letters that blame everyone else

"I love you and I am disappointed"

"It is not your fault" when it was

Setting boundaries

Letting guilt control your decisions

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## **Encouragement That Builds Character**

"I know this is hard. I believe you can get through it." "What are you learning about yourself?"  
This challenges while it comforts.

Avoid: "The system is rigged." "Just survive." These keep them in a victim mindset.

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## **How to Talk About Hard Things**

Do it in writing, not on the phone. Start with love, not accusation. Use "I" statements. Stick to one topic per letter. Leave the door open.

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## **Helping Them Stay Engaged**

Celebrate every step — a GED class, a program completed. Encourage without nagging. Send approved materials if allowed.

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## **Holding Them Accountable Without Cutting Them Off**

Be specific, not vague. Follow up gently. Name the behavior, not the person. Give them time to respond.

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## **When They Don't Want Your Help**

Give them space but stay present — send a short, no-pressure letter weekly. Do not take it personally. Set boundaries for your own protection.

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**Something to Hold Onto** Keep showing up. Keep loving — honestly, boundaried, and consistently. That is the kind of love that changes people.

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## Chapter 12 — Faith & Spiritual Resilience

When your loved one is incarcerated, faith can feel like both an anchor and a battlefield.

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### Where Is God in All of This?

God does not promise to prevent every tragedy. God promises to be present in it. *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you"* (Isaiah 43:2). *"Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God"* (Romans 8:38–39).

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### Wrestling with Anger at God

You are allowed to be angry. The Psalms are full of people crying out in rage. Tell God honestly how you feel. Separate God from the people who represent God badly.

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### Finding a Church That Supports, Not Judges

Look for a church that names suffering honestly, offers practical help, and understands grace. Try several before you find the right one.

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### Praying When You Don't Have Words

Breathe. Read a Psalm aloud. Write one sentence. Light a candle. Use the Jesus Prayer.

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### Faith Practices for the Waiting Season

The daily phone call as prayer. Scripture on the bathroom mirror. A weekly Sabbath. Gratitude in small things. Lament as liturgy.

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## **Forgiving the System, the Offender, and Yourself**

Forgiveness is not pretending it did not hurt. It is releasing the debt you believe they owe you. It takes time.

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**Something to Hold Onto** Faith does not mean having all the answers. It means staying in relationship with the One who does — even when you are angry, even when you are silent.

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## **Chapter 13 — Dealing with Stigma, Shame & Isolation**

When a loved one is incarcerated, the sentence does not belong only to them. Families serve time too — not in a cell, but in a world that treats them as guilty by association.

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### **Why Friends and Family Disappear**

Discomfort, fear, judgment, inconvenience, not knowing how to help. The people who leave were never truly in your corner. The ones who stay are worth holding onto.

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### **Handling Judgment from Church and Community**

You do not have to tell your story. Give yourself permission to leave a church that hurts you. Find one person who gets it.

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### **The Shame That Isn't Yours to Carry**

You did not commit the crime. Name it out loud: "I am not responsible for what they did." Give the shame back to God. Talk to people who understand.

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## What to Tell People

Close friends: whatever they need to know. Acquaintances: "My loved one is incarcerated. I'd rather not discuss details." Coworkers: "I am dealing with a difficult family situation." You owe no one your story.

---

## Finding Your People

This support group. Online communities. Local prison ministry events. Advocacy organizations. Look for people who listen without fixing and show up consistently.

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**Something to Hold Onto** The people who walked away were never your people. The shame you are carrying was never yours. You are not defined by what someone else did.

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# Part Five: The Road Home

## Chapter 14 — Preparing for Reentry (While They're Still Inside)

If your loved one is still serving time, the idea of preparing for release can feel premature — even cruel. The end is so far away that it is hard to imagine. But here is a truth that reentry experts repeat and families learn the hard way: **reentry does not start on release day. It starts the day they go in.**

Everything your loved one does — or does not do — during their sentence shapes what happens when they walk out the gate. And everything you do now to prepare on the outside can make the difference between a successful reentry and a crisis.

This chapter is about working on reentry from both sides of the wall, long before the release date appears on the horizon.

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## Reentry Starts the Day They Go In

It is easy to think of incarceration as a pause button — time stops, and when they come out, life resumes where it left off. That is not how it works. Life on the outside keeps moving. Children grow. Jobs change. People move. Technology advances. Relationships evolve or dissolve. The person inside changes too.

### What your loved one can do now that will matter later:

- Stay connected to family. This is the single most important predictor of successful reentry. Inmates who maintain strong family ties are significantly less likely to re-offend. Every letter, every call, every visit is a deposit in their reentry account.
- Engage in programming. GED classes, vocational training, substance abuse treatment, anger management, parenting classes, faith-based programs — every program they complete builds skills, demonstrates growth, and looks good to a parole board.
- Work if possible. Prison jobs pay very little, but they build work habits, references, and a sense of purpose.
- Avoid disciplinary write-ups. Good conduct affects parole eligibility, housing assignments, and access to programs.
- Plan for documents. Many inmates do not realize until release day that they need identification documents to get a job, housing, or benefits. Starting this process early is critical.

### What you can do now:

- Start a reentry folder. Collect documents, resources, and notes that will be useful on release day. You will be glad you did.
- Educate yourself about reentry resources in your community. Do not wait until the last minute.
- Have honest conversations with your loved one about what life after release will look like.

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## Documents They'll Need

You would be surprised how many people leave prison without valid identification. Without a state ID or driver's license, they cannot get a job, open a bank account, sign a lease, or access most social services.

### What your loved one needs before or on release day:

- **State-issued ID or driver's license.** Most facilities issue a release ID card, but it is not always accepted everywhere. Have a plan to get a state ID within the first week.

- **Social Security card.** If they do not have theirs, contact the Social Security Administration to request a replacement.
  - **Birth certificate.** Contact the vital records office in the state and county where they were born. You can request a certified copy on their behalf if you have a signed release.
  - **Medical and dental records.** Request records for continuity of care after release.
  - **Proof of programs completed.** Certificates from GED programs, vocational training, and treatment programs are valuable for employers and parole officers.
- 

## Housing: Halfway Houses, Transitional Living, and Family Expectations

Housing is the single biggest crisis point in reentry. Many people leave prison with nowhere to go.

### Options:

- Family home — best option but requires clear boundaries
- Halfway house (residential reentry center) — often required for parole
- Transitional living programs — faith-based or nonprofit housing with job placement assistance
- Sober living homes — if there is a history of substance abuse
- Section 8 or subsidized housing — get on waiting lists early

### What families should discuss before release:

- Are you willing to have them live with you? For how long? Under what conditions?
  - What are your non-negotiables (sobriety, employment search, curfew, respectful behavior)?
  - What happens if they violate those conditions?
  - Is there a backup plan?
- 

## Medical and Mental Health Care Continuity

During incarceration, your loved one's medical and mental health needs were managed by the facility. On release day, that care stops.

### What to arrange before release:

- Medication supply — request a 30-day supply if possible
- Medicaid enrollment — check enrollment process in your state
- Mental health follow-up — request a discharge plan with referrals

- Substance abuse treatment — find a community-based program or recovery support group
  - Dental and vision care — budget for it and look for low-cost providers
- 

## What Families Should Discuss Before Release

These conversations are hard, but they prevent crises after release.

### Topics to discuss:

- Where will they live?
  - How will they earn money?
  - What will their relationship with you look like?
  - What about the people they used to run with?
  - What about the victim?
  - What are their triggers?
  - What is the backup plan?
- 

## Building a Reentry Plan Together

A reentry plan should include: target release date and conditions, housing plan (primary and backup), employment plan, financial plan, medical/mental health plan, transportation plan, support network, accountability plan, family expectations, and crisis plan.

Your role is not enforcer. You are a member of the support team.

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## The Paperwork No One Tells You About

On release day, your loved one will walk out with a release paper, a bus ticket (sometimes), and a small amount of gate money. Create a checklist of everything that needs to happen in the first 30 days.

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### Something to Hold Onto

Reentry is a process, not an event. It begins long before the gate opens and lasts long after the first week home. Every conversation you have now, every document you gather, every plan you make — it all matters. You are building a bridge, one plank at a time.

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## Chapter 15 — The First 30 Days Home

You have been waiting for this day — sometimes for years. The phone call that says, "They're being released." The drive to the facility. The moment they walk through the gate and you see them on the other side, free for the first time in what feels like forever.

And then you get in the car and drive home, and you realize: neither of you is the same person who was here the day they went in.

The first 30 days home are one of the most hopeful and one of the most dangerous periods in the entire reentry process. This chapter is about what those first 30 days actually look like — the emotional whiplash, the practical chaos, and the small, fragile victories that no one talks about.

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### What to Expect Emotionally (For Them and for You)

**What they may feel:** Disorientation — the world has changed. Anxiety — everything is unfamiliar. Shame — facing what they lost. Gratitude that feels like guilt. The urge to isolate.

**What you may feel:** Relief, then exhaustion. Resentment you did not expect — you managed everything alone for years. Hypervigilance — watching everything they do. Hope mixed with fear.

---

### The Honeymoon Period and the Crash After

The first week or two is the honeymoon period. Everyone is on their best behavior. Enjoy it. But do not mistake it for the new normal.

The crash comes between week two and week four. The job search is harder than expected. A parole officer shows up unannounced. An old friend calls. A child acts out. Suddenly the honeymoon is over.

**How to survive the crash:** Name it. Say, "I think we are coming out of the honeymoon period, and I am feeling the pressure." Naming the pattern takes away some of its power.

---

### House Rules: Setting Boundaries Immediately

Topics to cover in the first week: curfew, chores and contributions, guests, substances, phone and internet use, children, privacy.

The house rules should be written down and agreed to by both of you. This is not about control. It is about clarity.

---

## **Employment: Job Searching with a Record**

Finding a job with a criminal record is one of the steepest hills your loved one will climb. It is also the single most important factor in successful reentry.

### **Where to start:**

1. Get identification first
  2. Look for fair chance employers — many companies have signed the Fair Chance Business Pledge
  3. Use reentry-specific job programs through Goodwill, workforce development boards, and the National Reentry Resource Center
  4. Consider trade and vocational pathways — construction, manufacturing, HVAC, culinary work
  5. Be honest about the record — but prepare a brief explanation that takes responsibility and emphasizes growth
- 

## **Parole and Probation Requirements**

Common conditions include regular check-ins, curfew, no contact with known felons, no alcohol or drug use with random testing, travel restrictions, employment requirements, and treatment programs.

A parole or probation violation does not require a new crime. Missing a check-in or failing a drug test can result in re-incarceration.

Your role is not the parole officer. But you need to know the conditions so you can support compliance.

---

## **Family Dynamics: Nothing Is the Same as Before**

There is no going back to the old normal. Roles have shifted. Children have grown. Trust is not fully there. The balance of power has changed.

What helps: regular, low-pressure check-ins. "How are we doing?" conversations that are not about any specific incident. A willingness to say, "This is harder than I thought."

---

## When It's Harder Than You Expected

There may come a day when you think: I am not sure I can do this. Difficulty does not mean failure. Reentry is genuinely hard.

**What to do:** Talk to someone outside the situation. Lower your expectations temporarily — first 30 days are survival mode. Revisit the house rules. Take a break when you need it. Remind yourself why you are doing this.

---

## Relapse Prevention and Warning Signs

Warning signs: missing parole check-ins, secretive behavior, sudden mood swings, old friends reappearing, lying, financial problems, physical signs.

**What to do:** Do not confront in anger. Say what you see without accusation. Reach out to their support system. Have a crisis plan in place. Set your boundary now: "If you use again, I cannot have you living in this house."

---

## Celebrating the Small Wins

Wins worth celebrating: making the bed without being asked, showing up to a parole appointment on time, helping with dinner, playing with the kids, turning down a bad invitation, saying "I am struggling."

Celebration does not have to be big. A word of acknowledgment. A fist bump. A favorite meal. The message is: I see you trying, and it matters.

---

### Something to Hold Onto

The first 30 days are not a test you pass or fail. They are a beginning — fragile and messy and full of contradictions. You will have good days and terrible days. That is not a sign of failure. It is a sign that you are doing something hard and brave. Keep going.

---

# Chapter 16 — Long-Term Rebuilding

The first 30 days are over. The initial crisis has passed. And now you face the question that no one prepared you for: *What does it look like to build a new life, not just survive a transition?*

Long-term rebuilding is the work of years, not weeks. The old normal is gone. A new normal has to be built, brick by brick.

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## Restoring Trust After Incarceration

Trust cannot be demanded. It must be demonstrated in small, observable, repeated actions over time: showing up when they say they will, telling the truth even when uncomfortable, being transparent, owning mistakes quickly, staying the course when things get hard.

You will need to take risks again — small ones at first. Let them go to the grocery store alone. Let them pick up the kids from school. Trust is rebuilt on the other side of those small risks.

---

## Financial Recovery: Debt, Credit, and Starting Over

1. Take a full inventory of every debt
2. Prioritize — rent, utilities, food, transportation come first
3. Deal with credit damage — pull their credit report, dispute errors, start rebuilding
4. Set a realistic budget as a team
5. Talk about restitution — it is a legal obligation
6. Seek forgiveness programs when available

Financial stress is one of the leading causes of relationship failure after incarceration. Money arguments are rarely about money — they are about control, trust, and fear.

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## Reconnecting with Children Over Time

Accept that you start as a stranger. Follow the child's pace. Be consistent, not impressive. Do not compete with the other parent or caregiver. Listen more than you talk. Apologize when you hurt them.

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## Couples Healing After a Separation by Incarceration

Healing requires: honest acknowledgment of the asymmetry — you carried everything while they were away; new patterns of decision-making; physical and emotional intimacy on a new timeline; couples counseling; patience for the resentment.

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## **When the Relationship Doesn't Survive**

Not every relationship survives incarceration. Some should not. If the relationship was unhealthy before — controlling, abusive, codependent — returning to it is not redemption; it is recycling.

You are allowed to choose yourself. That does not make you a bad person, a bad Christian, or a failure.

---

## **Breaking the Cycle**

Children of incarcerated parents are significantly more likely to be incarcerated themselves. But statistics are not destiny. What breaks the cycle: stability and consistency at home, honest conversations about choices and consequences, education as the primary path forward, positive role models, early intervention for high-risk behavior, and breaking the silence about the family story.

---

## **The Role of the Family in Successful Reentry**

People who have strong family support are significantly more likely to find employment, maintain sobriety, and avoid returning to prison. You are a safe place to fall, an accountability partner, a bridge to resources, and a witness to change.

You are also human. You cannot do all of this perfectly. You need care too.

---

## **Finding a New Normal — Not the Old Normal**

You cannot go back to the way things were. You should not try. The new normal, when it comes, is stronger than the old one because it was built on the other side of something hard. You built it together.

---

**Something to Hold Onto**

You cannot go back to the old normal, and that is not a loss — it is an invitation. The life you are building now is slower, more honest, and more careful than the one you had before. That is not failure. That is wisdom earned at a high price.

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## Part Six: Your Self-Care

### Chapter 17 — Caring for the Caregiver

You have spent this entire handbook focused on your loved one — their needs, their rights, their emotional state, their reentry. And that is right and good. But somewhere along the way, you may have stopped asking the most important question: *Who is taking care of me?*

This chapter is not a luxury. You cannot sustain this journey on an empty tank. Your family — both the one inside and the one outside — needs you to be healthy, not just functional.

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#### The Exhaustion No One Talks About

There is a specific kind of exhaustion that comes from being the family member of someone incarcerated. It is the exhaustion of holding everything together while receiving almost no support. Of carrying someone else's shame. Of hoping — because hope is heavy, and every disappointment requires gathering the strength to hope again.

Name this exhaustion. It is not a sign that you are weak. You are running a marathon no one trained you for, and you have been running it without water.

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#### Compassion Fatigue and Vicarious Trauma

Compassion fatigue looks like: numbness, going through the motions, resentment toward the person you are trying to help, avoiding their calls. Vicarious trauma is the trauma you absorb by hearing about what your loved one is experiencing inside.

**What to do:** Name it. Give yourself permission to feel less sometimes. Set limits on how much you absorb. Talk to someone who understands.

---

## Signs You Are Running on Empty

Physical signs: always tired, frequent illness, appetite changes, headaches. Emotional signs: numbness, irritability, hopelessness. Behavioral signs: avoiding people, numbing with substances or screens, neglecting responsibilities, losing interest in things you used to enjoy.

If you recognize more than two or three of these signs, take them seriously.

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## Practical Self-Care That Fits Your Real Life

Five minutes of silence. One thing that is just for you. The one-question check-in before you get out of bed: "What do I need today?" The 10-minute rule — when you do not have energy for a full task, do 10 minutes. A weekly non-negotiable — one hour a week that is yours.

---

## Setting Boundaries with Your Loved One Inside

Boundaries you may need: limits on phone calls, limits on money, limits on what you will discuss, limits on emotional labor, limits on your own guilt.

How to communicate: "I love you. I want to support you. But I cannot [specific thing]. Here is what I can do instead." Then hold the line.

---

## Setting Boundaries with Family and Friends

With the curious: "I am not going to talk about that." With the judgmental: "I hear your opinion, but I have decided how to handle this." With unhelpful helpers: thank them and gently decline. With people who want you to move on: "This is not something I can rush."

You do not have to set yourself on fire to keep other people warm.

---

## Asking for Help (Without Guilt)

Asking for help is not weakness. It is wisdom. Practical help (a meal, a ride, childcare). Emotional help (a listener who will not fix). Spiritual help (someone to pray with). Financial help (a church fund, a grant, a loan from family).

Be direct. "I am struggling. Could you help me with [specific thing]?" If the answer is no, try someone else.

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## **Staying Healthy: Sleep, Nutrition, Movement, Community**

Sleep — you cannot run on four hours and expect to handle this emotionally. Nutrition — eat at least one real meal a day. Movement — a 10-minute walk can lower cortisol and clear your head. Community — you need at least one person who knows the full truth and loves you anyway.

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### **Something to Hold Onto**

You have been carrying a weight that would break most people. The fact that you are still standing is not a sign that you are fine. It is a sign that you are strong — and even strong people need rest. This week, do one thing for yourself. Not for anyone else. You deserve it.

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## **Chapter 18 — When to Get Professional Help**

You have made it through seventeen chapters of practical guidance, emotional support, and hard-won wisdom. But there is a difference between what a handbook can give you and what a trained, skilled human being can offer. This chapter is about knowing when you have reached the edge of what you can do alone, and having the courage to reach for professional help.

Asking for help is not failure. It is the most intelligent thing you can do when the weight you are carrying has grown too heavy for one person to bear.

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## **Therapy Options for Families**

**Individual therapy.** One-on-one sessions with a licensed therapist. Right for depression, anxiety, trauma, or complicated grief. Gives you a safe space to say things you cannot say anywhere else.

**Family therapy.** Sessions with multiple family members. Useful when incarceration has disrupted communication patterns, roles, or relationships.

**Couples counseling.** For romantic relationships strained or shattered by incarceration. A therapist can help you navigate the asymmetry, rebuild trust, and decide together whether the relationship can continue.

**Support groups.** Not formal therapy, but deeply therapeutic. A support group connects you with people living the same reality. There is something uniquely healing about being in a room where no one needs you to explain.

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## Financial Counseling Resources

**National Foundation for Credit Counseling (NFCC)** — [nfcc.org](http://nfcc.org) — certified credit counselors for debt management, budgeting, and credit repair.

**United Way** — dial 211 or visit [211.org](http://211.org) — free referral service for financial counseling, utility assistance, food programs, and rental help.

**Faith-based financial ministries** — organizations like Financial Peace University offer low-cost courses on budgeting and debt reduction.

**Reentry-specific financial programs** — ask your support group leader what is available in your area.

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## Legal Assistance Resources

**When to seek legal help:** Your loved one is not receiving adequate medical care. A visit has been denied in a discriminatory manner. You need help with custody issues, appeals, sentence reduction, or parole hearings. You are being harassed.

**Where to find affordable help:**

- Legal Services Corporation — [lsc.gov](http://lsc.gov)
  - [LawHelp.org](http://LawHelp.org)
  - Your state bar association
  - Law school clinics
  - Innocence Project — [innocenceproject.org](http://innocenceproject.org)
  - FAMM (Families Against Mandatory Minimums) — [famm.org](http://famm.org)
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## Crisis Hotlines and Emergency Numbers

**National Suicide and Crisis Lifeline:** 988 — calls and texts, free and confidential, 24/7  
**National Domestic Violence Hotline:** 1-800-799-7233 **SAMHSA National Helpline:**  
1-800-662-4357 — treatment referral for substance abuse and mental health disorders  
**Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline:** 1-800-422-4453 **Facility emergency contact:** Save  
the main number for your loved one's facility

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## How to Find a Therapist Who Understands Incarceration

### Where to look:

- Open Path Collective — [openpathcollective.org](http://openpathcollective.org) — sliding-scale sessions (\$40–\$70)
- Psychology Today Therapist Finder — filter by issues (look for "criminal justice involvement")
- Inclusive Therapists — [inclusivetherapists.com](http://inclusivetherapists.com)
- Faith-based counseling networks
- Your state's psychological association

### What to ask when you call:

- "Do you have experience working with families affected by incarceration?"
- "Do you offer a sliding scale or accept my insurance?"
- "Do you offer telehealth sessions?"

If you cannot find a specialist, a trauma-informed therapist willing to learn can still help.

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## Insurance and Affordability Options

**If you have insurance:** Check your mental health benefits — the ACA requires most plans to cover mental health at parity.

### If you do not:

- Sliding-scale clinics — community mental health centers charge \$5–\$30 per session
  - Federally Qualified Health Centers — [findahealthcenter.hrsa.gov](http://findahealthcenter.hrsa.gov)
  - Open Path Collective — \$40–\$70 per session
  - University training clinics — \$10–\$40 per session
  - Employee Assistance Program (EAP) — 3–8 free sessions per year
  - Medicaid — mental health services are covered
  - Faith-based and nonprofit counseling — many churches offer free or low-cost counseling
-

## Support Groups in Your Area (Online and In-Person)

### In-person:

- Your Lives on Mission support group — this should be your anchor
- Prison Fellowship Family Support Groups — [prisonfellowship.org](http://prisonfellowship.org)
- Al-Anon and Nar-Anon — for loved ones of people with substance abuse issues
- NAMI support groups — [nami.org](http://nami.org) — for families of individuals with mental health conditions
- GriefShare — [griefshare.org](http://griefshare.org) — for ambiguous loss

### Online:

- Prison Fellowship Family Network
- Facebook groups — search "families of the incarcerated"
- The Marshall Project Community

**What to look for:** Confidentiality is respected. The space feels safe. You leave feeling slightly lighter. If a group does not fit, try another.

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### Something to Hold Onto

You have carried this weight for longer than anyone should have to. You have done the hard work of understanding the system, protecting your children, preparing for reentry, and tending to your own soul. But there comes a point where a handbook is not enough, where a support group is not enough, where your own strength is not enough — and that point is not a failure. It is the sign that you are ready for the next level of healing. Reaching for professional help is not giving up. It is choosing to keep going, with better tools. You are worth that investment.

## Appendix A: State-by-State Quick Reference Guide

This appendix is designed to help you quickly find the essential information you need, state by state. For each state, we've listed the official Department of Corrections (DOC) website and 3-4 key characteristics that matter most to families — how to find your loved one, how visits work, how to communicate, and what makes that state's system unique.

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### Alabama

- **DOC Website:** [www.doc.alabama.gov](http://www.doc.alabama.gov)

- **Inmate Search:** Use the Alabama DOC Inmate Search online tool — search by name or AIS number (the state's inmate ID).
  - **Visitation:** In-person visits are allowed, typically on weekends and state holidays. All visitors must be approved in advance through a formal application process. Each facility sets its own schedule.
  - **Communication:** Phone calls are managed through a single contracted provider (currently ViaPath/Global Tel\*Link). Video visitation is available at some facilities, primarily from on-site kiosks.
  - **Notable:** Alabama has one of the highest incarceration rates in the country. The state operates both publicly run prisons and contracts with private facilities. The ADOC has been under federal investigation for conditions in men's prisons.
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## Alaska

- **DOC Website:** [www.doc.alaska.gov](http://www.doc.alaska.gov)
  - **Inmate Search:** Use the Alaska DOC Inmate Search by name or ID number.
  - **Visitation:** Visits are in-person, with each facility posting its own schedule. Approval is required. Given Alaska's geography, many families face long travel distances.
  - **Communication:** Phone services are provided by ViaPath. Email and video messaging are available through the state's contracted platform (Access Corrections). Mail is delivered through the USPS to each facility's address.
  - **Notable:** Alaska does not have a prison system in the traditional sense — it operates a unified Department of Corrections that handles both pretrial detention and sentenced incarceration. There are no private prisons in the state.
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## Arizona

- **DOC Website:** [www.azcorrections.gov](http://www.azcorrections.gov)
  - **Inmate Search:** Use the Arizona DOC Inmate Datasearch by name or ADC number.
  - **Visitation:** In-person visiting schedules vary by facility and security level. Visitor applications are processed through each complex. Video visitation is available at select locations.
  - **Communication:** Phone services are through Securus Technologies. The department also offers a "Global Tel\*Link" system for phone and video. Mail is processed through the facility mailroom.
  - **Notable:** Arizona contracts with private prison operators (CoreCivic and GEO Group) for several facilities. The state has a large county jail system that holds both pretrial and sentenced individuals, so check whether your loved one is in DOC custody or county custody.
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## Arkansas

- **DOC Website:** [www.arcorrections.gov](http://www.arcorrections.gov) (also dcc.arkansas.gov for community supervision)
  - **Inmate Search:** Use the Arkansas DOC Inmate Search by name or ADC number.
  - **Visitation:** In-person visits are held on designated days, usually weekends. Video visitation is available at many facilities through the Securus platform.
  - **Communication:** Phone calls and video visits are through Securus Technologies. Mail is sent directly to the facility address.
  - **Notable:** Arkansas operates a separate Division of Community Correction for parole and probation. The state has experienced significant prison overcrowding and has used emergency powers to accelerate release for certain nonviolent offenders.
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## California

- **DOC Website:** [www.cdcr.ca.gov](http://www.cdcr.ca.gov)
  - **Inmate Search:** Use the CDCR Inmate Locator by name or CDCR number.
  - **Visitation:** In-person visits are permitted at all institutions. Each prison posts its own visiting schedule. All visitors 18+ must submit a Visiting Questionnaire (CDCR Form 106). Video visitation is available at most facilities.
  - **Communication:** Phone services are contracted through ViaPath. The department also supports email and electronic messaging through the "Correctional Facility Email" system. Mail is sent through USPS to each institution.
  - **Notable:** California has the largest state prison system in the country. The state has been under a federal court order to reduce overcrowding since 2009 (Brown v. Plata). CDCR also operates a robust reentry division with programs for housing, employment, and treatment. The California Youth Authority (now DJJ) handles juvenile commitments.
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## Colorado

- **DOC Website:** [www.doc.colorado.gov](http://www.doc.colorado.gov)
- **Inmate Search:** Use the Colorado DOC Offender Search by name or DOC number.
- **Visitation:** In-person visits are available at all facilities. Visitors must be approved. Each facility publishes its schedule online. Video visitation is available through the Securus platform.
- **Communication:** Phone services are through Securus. Inmates can send and receive electronic messages through the state's email system. Mail is sent to the facility's physical address.
- **Notable:** Colorado has moved toward a more rehabilitative model in recent years, with increased investment in programming and reentry services. The state has ended most

contracts with private prisons but still uses some out-of-state facilities for certain populations.

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## Connecticut

- **DOC Website:** [portal.ct.gov/DOC](http://portal.ct.gov/DOC)
  - **Inmate Search:** Use the Connecticut DOC Offender Information Search by name, DOC number, or date of birth.
  - **Visitation:** In-person visits are available at all facilities. Each facility posts its visiting schedule. All visitors 18+ must be approved. Video visitation is available through the Securus platform.
  - **Communication:** Phone services are provided by Securus. Inmates have access to email via the "CorrLinks" electronic messaging system. Mail is processed through facility mailrooms.
  - **Notable:** Connecticut was one of the first states to substantially reduce its prison population through criminal justice reform. The state has eliminated most mandatory minimum sentences and raised the age of juvenile jurisdiction to 20.
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## Delaware

- **DOC Website:** [www.delaware.gov/boards-commissions/doc](http://www.delaware.gov/boards-commissions/doc)
  - **Inmate Search:** Use the Delaware DOC Offender Search by name or SBI number.
  - **Visitation:** In-person visits are allowed, with schedules set by each facility. All visitors must be pre-approved. Video visitation is available at some facilities.
  - **Communication:** Phone services are through ViaPath. Inmates can use the "GettingOut" platform for video visits and electronic messaging. Mail is sent to each facility's address.
  - **Notable:** Delaware operates a unified system that includes prisons, work release centers, and probation/parole supervision under one department. The state has a relatively small prison population.
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## Florida

- **DOC Website:** [www.dc.state.fl.us](http://www.dc.state.fl.us)
- **Inmate Search:** Use the Florida DOC Offender Search by name, DC number, or other identifiers.
- **Visitation:** In-person visits are scheduled based on the inmate's housing assignment. Visitors must apply and be approved. Video visitation is available at many facilities through the Securus platform.

- **Communication:** Phone services are through Securus. Electronic messaging is available through the "CorrLinks" system. Mail is sent to the facility's address.
  - **Notable:** Florida has the third-largest state prison system in the U.S. The Department of Corrections also operates a large network of work camps and road prisons. Florida's visitation application process can be lengthy — apply well in advance.
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## Georgia

- **DOC Website:** [www.dcor.state.ga.us](http://www.dcor.state.ga.us)
  - **Inmate Search:** Use the Georgia DOC Offender Search by name or GDC number.
  - **Visitation:** In-person visits are held on weekends (Saturday and Sunday). Each facility posts its schedule. Visitors must be on the approved list. Video visitation is available through the Securus platform.
  - **Communication:** Phone services are through Securus. The department also offers a "Global Tel\*Link" system for messaging. Mail is processed through the facility's mailroom.
  - **Notable:** Georgia operates a large prison system and also contracts with county correctional facilities to house state inmates. The state has a broad "faith and character-based" program at select institutions. Georgia's visitation schedule (weekends only at most facilities) means wait times can be long.
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## Hawaii

- **DOC Website:** [dcr.hawaii.gov](http://dcr.hawaii.gov)
  - **Inmate Search:** Use the Hawaii DOC Inmate Search by name or SID number.
  - **Visitation:** In-person visits are available at all facilities, with schedules set by each institution. All visitors must be approved. Video visitation is available at select facilities.
  - **Communication:** Phone services are through ViaPath/Global Tel\*Link. Mail is sent to the facility address. Electronic messaging is available through some platforms depending on the facility.
  - **Notable:** Hawaii has a relatively small prison population but faces unique challenges due to its geography — inmates are sometimes housed at contracted facilities on the mainland (Arizona, Oklahoma). If your loved one is sent out of state, check with the Hawaii DOC for transfer information.
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## Idaho

- **DOC Website:** [www.idoc.idaho.gov](http://www.idoc.idaho.gov)
- **Inmate Search:** Use the Idaho DOC Offender Search by name or IDOC number.

- **Visitation:** In-person visits are available, typically on weekends. Video visitation is available through the Securus platform.
  - **Communication:** Phone services are through Securus. Electronic messaging is available. Mail is processed through facility mailrooms.
  - **Notable:** Idaho has experienced significant prison overcrowding and has used private prisons (operated by CoreCivic) to manage its population. The state has a community reentry center system for transitioning inmates back to society.
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## Illinois

- **DOC Website:** [www.idoc.illinois.gov](http://www.idoc.illinois.gov)
  - **Inmate Search:** Use the Illinois DOC Inmate Locator by name or IDOC number.
  - **Visitation:** In-person visits are held on weekends and holidays. Each facility sets specific visiting hours. All visitors must be approved. Video visitation is available at some institutions.
  - **Communication:** Phone services are through ViaPath/Global Tel\*Link. Electronic messaging is available through the "CorrLinks" system. Mail is processed through facility mailrooms.
  - **Notable:** Illinois has been under federal oversight for mental health care in its prisons. The state closed the controversial Tamms Correctional Center and has shifted toward a more rehabilitative approach. Cook County Jail (Chicago) is one of the largest single-site jail systems in the country and operates separately from IDOC.
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## Indiana

- **DOC Website:** [www.in.gov/idoc](http://www.in.gov/idoc)
  - **Inmate Search:** Use the Indiana DOC Offender Database Search by name or DOC number.
  - **Visitation:** In-person visits are available, typically on weekends and holidays. All visitors must be pre-approved. Video visitation is available through the Securus platform.
  - **Communication:** Phone services are through Securus. Inmates can access electronic messaging through "CorrLinks." Mail is sent to the facility address.
  - **Notable:** Indiana operates a risk-based classification system that determines facility assignment. The state contracts with private prison operators for some facilities. Indiana also has a robust reentry coordination program.
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## Iowa

- **DOC Website:** [doc.iowa.gov](http://doc.iowa.gov)

- **Inmate Search:** Use the Iowa DOC Offender Search by name or DOC number.
  - **Visitation:** In-person visits are available, with schedules set by each institution. Video visitation is available at some facilities through Securus.
  - **Communication:** Phone services are through Securus. Inmates can send and receive messages through the "GettingOut" platform. Mail is sent to the facility address.
  - **Notable:** Iowa operates a unified Department of Corrections with five main institutions. The state also operates community-based correctional residential facilities (work release centers). Iowa has a relatively low felony threshold for property crimes.
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## Kansas

- **DOC Website:** [www.doc.ks.gov](http://www.doc.ks.gov)
  - **Inmate Search:** Use the Kansas DOC Inmate Search by name or KDOC number.
  - **Visitation:** In-person visits are available, typically on weekends. Visitors must be approved. Video visitation is available at many facilities.
  - **Communication:** Phone services are through ViaPath/Global Tel\*Link. Electronic messaging is available. Mail is processed through facility mailrooms.
  - **Notable:** Kansas operates both state-run and privately contracted facilities. The state's sentencing guidelines influence time served. The Kansas DOC also has a central monitoring unit for high-risk offenders on parole.
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## Kentucky

- **DOC Website:** [corrections.ky.gov](http://corrections.ky.gov)
  - **Inmate Search:** Use the Kentucky DOC Offender Online Tracking System (KOOL) by name or DOC number.
  - **Visitation:** In-person visits are held on weekends. Each facility posts its own schedule. Video visitation is available through the Securus platform.
  - **Communication:** Phone services are through Securus. Electronic messaging is available via "CorrLinks." Mail is sent to the facility address.
  - **Notable:** Kentucky operates both state-run prisons and a network of county jails that house state inmates under contract. The state has moved toward criminal justice reform, including expanded use of alternative sentencing for drug offenses.
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## Louisiana

- **DOC Website:** [www.doc.louisiana.gov](http://www.doc.louisiana.gov)
- **Inmate Search:** Use the Louisiana DOC Offender Search by name or DOC number.

- **Visitation:** In-person visits are held on weekends and state holidays. Each facility publishes its schedule. Visitors must be approved. Video visitation is available at select facilities.
  - **Communication:** Phone services are through Securus. Electronic messaging is available through "CorrLinks." Mail is processed through facility mailrooms.
  - **Notable:** Louisiana has the highest incarceration rate in the United States and one of the highest in the world. The state operates a unique "sheriff-based" system where local sheriffs run many prison facilities under contract with the state. Angola (Louisiana State Penitentiary) is the largest maximum-security prison in the country.
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## Maine

- **DOC Website:** [www.maine.gov/corrections](http://www.maine.gov/corrections)
  - **Inmate Search:** Use the Maine DOC Offender Search by name or DOC number.
  - **Visitation:** In-person visits are available at all facilities. Each facility sets its own schedule. Video visitation is available at some facilities.
  - **Communication:** Phone services are through ViaPath. Electronic messaging is available. Mail is sent to the facility's address.
  - **Notable:** Maine has one of the lowest incarceration rates in the country. The state operates a small number of facilities. Maine's prison system is fully state-run with no private prison contracts.
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## Maryland

- **DOC Website:** [www.dpscs.state.md.us](http://www.dpscs.state.md.us)
  - **Inmate Search:** Use the Maryland DOC Inmate Locator by name or DOC number.
  - **Visitation:** In-person visits are available, typically on weekends. All visitors must be pre-approved. Video visitation is available at many facilities.
  - **Communication:** Phone services are through Securus. Electronic messaging is available. Mail is sent to the facility address.
  - **Notable:** Maryland's Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services (DPSCS) oversees both prisons and parole/probation. The state has a centralized visitation application process through the "Visitation Scheduler" portal. Maryland has been working to reduce its prison population through sentencing reforms.
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## Massachusetts

- **DOC Website:** [www.mass.gov/doc](http://www.mass.gov/doc)
- **Inmate Search:** Use the Massachusetts DOC Inmate Search by name or DOC number.

- **Visitation:** In-person visits are allowed, with schedules set by each facility. Video visitation is available at select facilities.
  - **Communication:** Phone services are through ViaPath. Electronic messaging is available. Mail is processed through facility mailrooms.
  - **Notable:** Massachusetts operates a relatively small state prison system. The state also has a separate county jail (House of Correction) system run by county sheriffs — many sentenced inmates serve time in county facilities, not state prisons. Check which system your loved one is in.
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## Michigan

- **DOC Website:** [www.michigan.gov/corrections](http://www.michigan.gov/corrections)
  - **Inmate Search:** Use the Michigan DOC Offender Search by name or MDOC number.
  - **Visitation:** In-person visits are held on weekends. Each facility posts its schedule. All visitors must be approved in advance. Video visitation is available at many facilities.
  - **Communication:** Phone services are through Securus. Electronic messaging is available through "CorrLinks" and "JPay." Mail is sent to the facility address.
  - **Notable:** Michigan has a large prison system with over two dozen facilities. The state has abolished the death penalty and life without parole for juveniles. Michigan operates a dedicated reentry services division with programming starting well before release.
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## Minnesota

- **DOC Website:** [mn.gov/doc](http://mn.gov/doc)
  - **Inmate Search:** Use the Minnesota DOC Offender Locator by name or OID number.
  - **Visitation:** In-person visits are available at all facilities. Schedules are posted online. Video visitation is available through the Securus platform.
  - **Communication:** Phone services are through Securus. Electronic messaging is available. Mail is sent to the facility address.
  - **Notable:** Minnesota has one of the lowest recidivism rates in the country, attributed to its investment in education and programming within prisons. The state operates a unified system of prisons and community supervision. Minnesota also has a well-regarded restorative justice program.
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## Mississippi

- **DOC Website:** [www.mdod.ms.gov](http://www.mdod.ms.gov)
- **Inmate Search:** Use the Mississippi DOC Offender Search by name or MDOC number.

- **Visitation:** In-person visits are held on designated days. Each facility posts its schedule. Video visitation is available at select facilities.
  - **Communication:** Phone services are through ViaPath/Global Tel\*Link. Electronic messaging is available. Mail is sent to the facility address.
  - **Notable:** Mississippi has faced federal litigation over prison conditions and mental health care. The state contracts with private prison operators for several facilities. Mississippi's parole system was restructured in recent years.
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## Missouri

- **DOC Website:** [doc.mo.gov](http://doc.mo.gov)
  - **Inmate Search:** Use the Missouri DOC Offender Search by name or DOC number.
  - **Visitation:** In-person visits are available, typically on weekends and holidays. Visitors must be on the approved list. Video visitation is available at many facilities.
  - **Communication:** Phone services are through Securus. Electronic messaging is available via "CorrLinks." Mail is sent to the facility address.
  - **Notable:** Missouri operates over 20 adult correctional facilities. The state has experienced prison overcrowding and has implemented various sentencing reforms. The Missouri DOC has a central administrative office in Jefferson City that handles visitor inquiries.
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## Montana

- **DOC Website:** [www.cor.mt.gov](http://www.cor.mt.gov)
  - **Inmate Search:** Use the Montana DOC Offender Search by name or DOC number.
  - **Visitation:** In-person visits are available, with schedules set by each facility. Video visitation is available through the Securus platform.
  - **Communication:** Phone services are through Securus. Electronic messaging is available. Mail is sent to the facility address.
  - **Notable:** Montana operates a relatively small correctional system. The state contracts with private facilities (CoreCivic) for some of its prison population. Montana's Department of Corrections also oversees the state's Youth Services Division.
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## Nebraska

- **DOC Website:** [www.corrections.nebraska.gov](http://www.corrections.nebraska.gov)
- **Inmate Search:** Use the Nebraska DOC Inmate Search by name or NDCS number.
- **Visitation:** In-person visits are allowed, with schedules set by each facility. Video visitation is available at select facilities.

- **Communication:** Phone services are through Securus. Electronic messaging is available. Mail is processed through facility mailrooms.
  - **Notable:** Nebraska has a unified state correctional system (NDCS) that operates all adult prison facilities. The state has been working on a major facilities master plan to address aging infrastructure. Nebraska has no private prisons.
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## Nevada

- **DOC Website:** [doc.nv.gov](http://doc.nv.gov)
  - **Inmate Search:** Use the Nevada DOC Offender Search by name or NDOC number.
  - **Visitation:** In-person visits are held on weekends. Each facility posts its schedule. Visitors must be approved. Video visitation is available at some facilities.
  - **Communication:** Phone services are through Securus. Electronic messaging is available through "GettingOut." Mail is sent to the facility address.
  - **Notable:** Nevada contracts with CoreCivic to operate the Southern Desert Correctional Center. The state has a significant population of incarcerated individuals from out of state due to its tourism-driven economy. Washoe County and Clark County jails operate separately from NDOC.
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## New Hampshire

- **DOC Website:** [www.nh.gov/nhdoc](http://www.nh.gov/nhdoc)
  - **Inmate Search:** Use the New Hampshire DOC Offender Search by name or NHDOC number.
  - **Visitation:** In-person visits are available, with schedules set by each facility. Video visitation is available at the state prison.
  - **Communication:** Phone services are through ViaPath. Electronic messaging is available. Mail is sent to the facility address.
  - **Notable:** New Hampshire operates a small correctional system with one state prison for men (concord) and one for women. The state also operates a secure psychiatric unit. New Hampshire has no private prisons.
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## New Jersey

- **DOC Website:** [www.nj.gov/corrections](http://www.nj.gov/corrections)
- **Inmate Search:** Use the New Jersey DOC Offender Search by name or SBI number.
- **Visitation:** In-person visits are held on weekends and holidays. Each facility posts its schedule. Video visitation is available at many facilities.

- **Communication:** Phone services are through ViaPath/Global Tel\*Link. Electronic messaging is available. Mail is sent to the facility address.
  - **Notable:** New Jersey has substantially reduced its prison population through bail reform and sentencing changes. The state closed several prisons due to population decline. New Jersey was one of the first states to eliminate private prison contracts. The state also has a strong reentry coordination network.
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## New Mexico

- **DOC Website:** [www.cd.nm.gov](http://www.cd.nm.gov)
  - **Inmate Search:** Use the New Mexico DOC Offender Search by name or NMCD number.
  - **Visitation:** In-person visits are available, typically on weekends. Video visitation is available through the Securus platform.
  - **Communication:** Phone services are through Securus. Electronic messaging is available. Mail is processed through facility mailrooms.
  - **Notable:** New Mexico contracts with private prison operators for several facilities. The state has a centralized correctional department (NMCD) that oversees all adult prisons. New Mexico has been implementing criminal justice reforms focused on reducing recidivism through evidence-based programming.
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## New York

- **DOC Website:** [doccs.ny.gov](http://doccs.ny.gov)
  - **Inmate Search:** Use the New York DOCCS Inmate Locator by name or DIN (Department Identification Number).
  - **Visitation:** In-person visits are held on weekends and holidays at most facilities. Each facility posts its schedule. All visitors must be pre-approved. Video visitation is available at select facilities.
  - **Communication:** Phone services are through ViaPath/Global Tel\*Link. Inmates can send and receive electronic messages through the "CorrLinks" system. Mail is sent to the facility address.
  - **Notable:** New York has one of the largest state prison systems but has dramatically reduced its prison population over the past two decades through the repeal of the Rockefeller Drug Laws and other reforms. The state closed over 20 prisons due to population decline. New York City's jail system (Rikers Island and others) is administered by the NYC Department of Correction, separate from DOCCS.
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## North Carolina

- **DOC Website:** [www.ncdps.gov](http://www.ncdps.gov) (Division of Adult Correction)
  - **Inmate Search:** Use the North Carolina DOC Offender Search by name or DOC number.
  - **Visitation:** In-person visits are available, typically on weekends and holidays. Each facility sets its schedule. Video visitation is available at many facilities through the Securus platform.
  - **Communication:** Phone services are through Securus. Electronic messaging is available through "CorrLinks." Mail is sent to the facility address.
  - **Notable:** North Carolina operates a unified Department of Public Safety that includes prisons, probation, and parole. The state has county jails that hold both pretrial and sentenced inmates. North Carolina has a structured sentencing grid that determines minimum and maximum sentences.
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## North Dakota

- **DOC Website:** [www.docr.nd.gov](http://www.docr.nd.gov)
  - **Inmate Search:** Use the North Dakota DOC Offender Search by name or NDOC number.
  - **Visitation:** In-person visits are available, with schedules set by each facility. Video visitation is available at select facilities.
  - **Communication:** Phone services are through Securus. Electronic messaging is available. Mail is sent to the facility address.
  - **Notable:** North Dakota has one of the smallest prison populations in the country. The state operates a unified department with a small number of facilities. Due to limited capacity, North Dakota has sometimes contracted with out-of-state facilities for certain populations.
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## Ohio

- **DOC Website:** [www.drc.ohio.gov](http://www.drc.ohio.gov)
- **Inmate Search:** Use the Ohio DRC Offender Search by name or A-number.
- **Visitation:** In-person visits are available, typically on weekends. Each facility posts its schedule. Visitors must be approved. Video visitation is available through the Securus platform.
- **Communication:** Phone services are through Securus. Electronic messaging is available. Mail is sent to the facility address.
- **Notable:** Ohio has a large prison system with over two dozen facilities. The state operates both state-run and privately contracted prisons. Ohio's Department of Rehabilitation and Correction (DRC) emphasizes reentry programming, with prerelease centers in most major cities. The state has been at the center of debates on the death penalty and has a significant number of individuals on death row.

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## Oklahoma

- **DOC Website:** [www.ok.gov/doc](http://www.ok.gov/doc)
- **Inmate Search:** Use the Oklahoma DOC Offender Search by name or DOC number.
- **Visitation:** In-person visits are held on designated days. Each facility posts its schedule. Video visitation is available at many facilities.
- **Communication:** Phone services are through ViaPath/Global Tel\*Link. Electronic messaging is available through "CorrLinks" and "JPay." Mail is sent to the facility address.
- **Notable:** Oklahoma has historically had one of the highest incarceration rates in the country, including the highest female incarceration rate. Recent criminal justice reforms have reduced the prison population. The state operates both state-run and privately contracted facilities. Oklahoma's Pardon and Parole Board plays a significant role in early release decisions.

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## Oregon

- **DOC Website:** [www.oregon.gov/doc](http://www.oregon.gov/doc)
- **Inmate Search:** Use the Oregon DOC Offender Search by name or SID/OPDB number.
- **Visitation:** In-person visits are available, typically on weekends and holidays. Each facility sets its schedule. Video visitation is available at some facilities.
- **Communication:** Phone services are through Securus. Electronic messaging is available. Mail is sent to the facility address.
- **Notable:** Oregon has a relatively small prison system and has focused on evidence-based reentry programs. The state operates under a structured sentencing system. Oregon's Department of Corrections operates 12 adult institutions and has no private prison contracts.

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## Pennsylvania

- **DOC Website:** [www.cor.pa.gov](http://www.cor.pa.gov)
- **Inmate Search:** Use the Pennsylvania DOC Inmate Locator by name or DOC number.
- **Visitation:** In-person visits are available, typically on weekends. All visitors must be approved in advance. Video visitation is available at many facilities through the Securus platform.
- **Communication:** Phone services are through Securus. Inmates can use the "JPay" system for email and electronic messaging. Mail is sent to the facility's address.
- **Notable:** Pennsylvania has one of the oldest and largest state prison systems. The state also operates a separate county jail system (counties run their own jails for pretrial and

shorter sentences). Pennsylvania's Department of Corrections has a strong focus on reentry with "community corrections centers" throughout the state. The state has experienced significant population decline in its prisons in recent years due to sentencing reforms.

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## Rhode Island

- **DOC Website:** [www.doc.ri.gov](http://www.doc.ri.gov)
  - **Inmate Search:** Use the Rhode Island DOC Inmate Search by name or A-number.
  - **Visitation:** In-person visits are available, with schedules set by each facility. Video visitation is available at select facilities.
  - **Communication:** Phone services are through ViaPath. Electronic messaging is available. Mail is processed through the facility mailroom.
  - **Notable:** Rhode Island operates a unified correctional system — the state's only prison facility (the Adult Correctional Institutions or ACI) houses all sentenced inmates and many pretrial detainees in one complex. The state has no private prisons. Due to its small size, families often find it easier to navigate than larger state systems.
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## South Carolina

- **DOC Website:** [www.doc.sc.gov](http://www.doc.sc.gov)
  - **Inmate Search:** Use the South Carolina DOC Inmate Search by name or SCDC number.
  - **Visitation:** In-person visits are held on weekends. Each facility posts its schedule. All visitors must be approved. Video visitation is available at many facilities.
  - **Communication:** Phone services are through Securus. Electronic messaging is available. Mail is sent to the facility address.
  - **Notable:** South Carolina has faced litigation over prison conditions and medical care. The state operates both state-run and privately contracted facilities. SCDC has a centralized inmate banking system through JPay for sending money.
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## South Dakota

- **DOC Website:** [doc.sd.gov](http://doc.sd.gov)
- **Inmate Search:** Use the South Dakota DOC Offender Search by name or DOC number.
- **Visitation:** In-person visits are available, with schedules set by each facility. Video visitation is available at select facilities.
- **Communication:** Phone services are through ViaPath/Global Tel\*Link. Electronic messaging is available. Mail is sent to the facility address.

- **Notable:** South Dakota operates a relatively small correctional system. The state has no private prisons. South Dakota's DOC oversees both adult and juvenile corrections, as well as parole and probation services.
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## Tennessee

- **DOC Website:** [www.tn.gov/correction](http://www.tn.gov/correction)
  - **Inmate Search:** Use the Tennessee DOC Offender Search by name or TDOC number.
  - **Visitation:** In-person visits are available, typically on weekends and holidays. Visitors must be approved. Video visitation is available at many facilities through Securus.
  - **Communication:** Phone services are through Securus. Electronic messaging is available through "CorrLinks." Mail is sent to the facility address.
  - **Notable:** Tennessee contracts with private prison operators (CoreCivic is headquartered in the state) for several facilities. The state has experienced prison overcrowding and has implemented various sentencing reforms. Tennessee's Department of Correction has a dedicated "Victim Services" unit that also provides information to families.
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## Texas

- **DOC Website:** [www.tdcj.texas.gov](http://www.tdcj.texas.gov)
  - **Inmate Search:** Use the Texas TDCJ Inmate Search by name or TDCJ number (SID number also works).
  - **Visitation:** In-person visits are available, with schedules set by each unit. Each inmate is assigned a visitation class (day and time). All visitors must be approved. Video visitation is available through the Securus platform at many units.
  - **Communication:** Phone services are through Securus. Electronic messaging is available through the "CorrLinks" and "JPay" systems. Mail is sent to each unit's specific address. **Tip:** Texas uses a unit-specific address — make sure you have the correct unit and include the inmate's TDCJ number on all mail.
  - **Notable:** Texas has the largest state prison system in the country with over 100 prison units. The state also operates a separate jail system through county sheriffs. TDCJ's website provides extensive resources for families, including a detailed "Visitation Guide" and "Family Orientation" handbook. Texas has no private prisons for state inmates, though it contracts for some services. The parole process in Texas is handled by the Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles, separate from TDCJ.
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## Utah

- **DOC Website:** [corrections.utah.gov](http://corrections.utah.gov)

- **Inmate Search:** Use the Utah DOC Offender Search by name or DOC number.
  - **Visitation:** In-person visits are available, with schedules set by each facility. Video visitation is available at select facilities.
  - **Communication:** Phone services are through ViaPath/Global Tel\*Link. Electronic messaging is available. Mail is sent to the facility address.
  - **Notable:** Utah operates a medium-sized correctional system. The state opened a new state-of-the-art prison complex in Salt Lake City in 2022. Utah has no private prison contracts. The state emphasizes faith-based programming in its facilities.
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## Vermont

- **DOC Website:** [doc.vermont.gov](http://doc.vermont.gov)
  - **Inmate Search:** Use the Vermont DOC Offender Search by name or DOC number.
  - **Visitation:** In-person visits are available at all facilities. Each facility sets its own schedule. Video visitation is available at select facilities.
  - **Communication:** Phone services are through ViaPath. Electronic messaging is available. Mail is sent to the facility address.
  - **Notable:** Vermont operates a very small correctional system. The state contracts with out-of-state private facilities to house a portion of its prison population (primarily in Kentucky and Pennsylvania). Vermont does not have the death penalty.
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## Virginia

- **DOC Website:** [www.vadoc.virginia.gov](http://www.vadoc.virginia.gov)
  - **Inmate Search:** Use the Virginia DOC Offender Locator by name or DOC number.
  - **Visitation:** In-person visits are available, typically on weekends and holidays. Each facility posts its schedule. Video visitation is available at many facilities through the Securus platform.
  - **Communication:** Phone services are through Securus. Electronic messaging is available. Mail is sent to the facility address.
  - **Notable:** Virginia operates a large state prison system. The state has eliminated parole for crimes committed after 1995 (truth-in-sentencing), meaning most inmates serve at least 85% of their sentence. Virginia has also been a leader in restorative justice programs. The state has no private prisons.
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## Washington

- **DOC Website:** [www.doc.wa.gov](http://www.doc.wa.gov)
- **Inmate Search:** Use the Washington DOC Offender Search by name or DOC number.

- **Visitation:** In-person visits are available, with schedules set by each facility. All visitors must be approved. Video visitation is available at many facilities.
  - **Communication:** Phone services are through Securus. Electronic messaging is available through "CorrLinks" and JPay. Mail is sent to the facility address.
  - **Notable:** Washington State has been at the forefront of criminal justice reform, including the reduction of its prison population through sentencing changes. The state operates under a determinate sentencing system — inmates know their approximate release date from the start. Washington has no private prisons at the state level.
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## West Virginia

- **DOC Website:** [www.wvdoc.gov](http://www.wvdoc.gov)
  - **Inmate Search:** Use the West Virginia DOC Offender Search by name or DOC number.
  - **Visitation:** In-person visits are available, typically on weekends. Video visitation is available at select facilities.
  - **Communication:** Phone services are through ViaPath/Global Tel\*Link. Electronic messaging is available. Mail is sent to the facility address.
  - **Notable:** West Virginia operates a unified correctional system that includes prisons, jails, and community corrections. The state contracts with regional jails (regional jail authorities) for some populations. West Virginia has a parole system with a dedicated Parole Board.
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## Wisconsin

- **DOC Website:** [www.widoc.gov](http://www.widoc.gov)
  - **Inmate Search:** Use the Wisconsin DOC Offender Search by name or DOC number.
  - **Visitation:** In-person visits are available, typically on weekends. Each facility posts its schedule. Video visitation is available at many facilities through the Securus platform.
  - **Communication:** Phone services are through Securus. Electronic messaging is available through "CorrLinks" and JPay. Mail is sent to the facility address.
  - **Notable:** Wisconsin has one of the highest incarceration rates for Black men in the country. The state operates over 20 adult institutions. Wisconsin's DOC has a dedicated Division of Community Corrections that supervises offenders on probation and parole. The state has no private prisons for state inmates.
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## Wyoming

- **DOC Website:** [www.wyo.gov/board-commission/department-corrections](http://www.wyo.gov/board-commission/department-corrections)
- **Inmate Search:** Use the Wyoming DOC Offender Search by name or WDOC number.

- **Visitation:** In-person visits are available, with schedules set by each facility. Video visitation is available at select facilities.
  - **Communication:** Phone services are through Securus. Electronic messaging is available. Mail is sent to the facility address.
  - **Notable:** Wyoming has one of the smallest prison populations in the country. The state operates a small number of facilities. Due to limited capacity, Wyoming sometimes contracts with out-of-state facilities for certain populations. The state has no private prisons.
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## Quick Tips for Using Any State DOC Website

1. **Always confirm the correct website.** Some states use [.gov](#), others use different domains. When in doubt, a web search for "[State Name] Department of Corrections official website" will get you to the right place.
2. **Locate your loved one first.** Every state has an inmate locator. You'll typically need a full name or state-issued inmate ID number. Write down their DOC number — you'll use it for everything.
3. **Find the facility's specific page.** The main DOC site will have facility information. Look for the "Facilities" or "Institutions" section to find visiting hours, mailing address, and contact info for the specific prison where your loved one is housed.
4. **Check for the phone system provider.** Knowing who provides phone services (Securus, ViaPath/Global Tel\*Link, JPay, etc.) saves time — you can set up an account in advance.
5. **Look for a "Families" or "Visitors" section.** Many state DOC websites now have dedicated pages for families. Bookmark these — they contain application forms, rules, and updates on policy changes.
6. **If something is unclear, call.** Most state DOC offices have a public information line. Don't rely solely on websites, especially for time-sensitive information like visiting schedule changes.

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*This reference was compiled to help you find your way to the information you need. State policies change — always verify visiting hours, communication rules, and application procedures on the official state website or by phone before making plans.*

*You are not alone. One state, one website, one phone call at a time, you can find what you need.*

# Appendix B: Glossary of Justice System Terms

*A plain-language reference for justice-impacted families*

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## A

**Acquittal** – A jury's or judge's verdict that a person is not guilty of the crime they were charged with.

**Adjudication** – The formal legal process by which a judge or magistrate resolves a case and issues a judgment.

**Aggravating Factors** – Circumstances that make a crime more serious and can lead to a harsher sentence (e.g., use of a weapon, prior record, harm to a child).

**Appeal** – A request to a higher court to review a lower court's decision. Appeals typically focus on legal errors in the trial, not on whether the defendant is guilty or innocent.

**Arraignment** – The first court appearance after an arrest, where the defendant is formally read the charges and asked to enter a plea (guilty, not guilty, or no contest).

**Arrest Warrant** – A court order authorizing law enforcement to arrest a specific person. Warrants are issued when a judge finds probable cause that the person committed a crime.

**Bail** – Money or property paid to the court as a guarantee that a defendant will return for future court dates. If the defendant shows up, the bail is returned (minus fees). If they do not, the bail is forfeited.

**Bail Bondsman / Bonds Agent** – A private person or company that posts bail on behalf of a defendant for a non-refundable fee (typically 10% of the bail amount).

**Bench Trial** – A trial where a judge, rather than a jury, hears the evidence and decides the verdict. The defendant has the right to request this instead of a jury trial.

**Booking** – The administrative process after an arrest where law enforcement records the person's information, takes fingerprints and photos (mugshots), and logs the charges.

**BOP** – Bureau of Prisons. The federal agency that operates and manages federal prisons in the United States.

## C

**Capital Offense** – A crime punishable by the death penalty. Also called a capital crime.

**Charge** – A formal accusation that a person has committed a specific crime.

**Civil Rights** – The basic rights guaranteed by the Constitution (e.g., freedom of speech, religion, due process). Incarcerated individuals retain some but not all civil rights.

**Classification** – The system used by prisons to assign an incarcerated person to a security level (minimum, medium, or maximum security) and housing unit based on their crime, history, and behavior.

**Clemency** – The power of a governor (state) or president (federal) to reduce a sentence or pardon a crime. Includes both commutation (shortening a sentence) and pardon (forgiving the offense).

**Commissary** – The prison store where incarcerated individuals can purchase food, hygiene products, writing supplies, and other approved items using money from their personal account.

**Commutation** – The reduction of a prison sentence by a governor or president. The person remains convicted of the crime but serves a shorter term.

**Community Supervision** – A general term for any form of supervision in the community instead of prison, including probation and parole.

**Complaint** – A formal legal document that starts a criminal case, listing the charges and the facts supporting them.

**Concurrent Sentences** – Multiple prison sentences served at the same time. For example, two 5-year sentences served concurrently = 5 years total.

**Consecutive Sentences** – Multiple prison sentences served one after another. For example, two 5-year sentences served consecutively = 10 years total.

**Contempt of Court** – Behavior that shows disrespect for a judge or disrupts court proceedings. Can result in fines or jail time.

**Conviction** – A formal finding that a person is guilty of a crime, either by a guilty plea or a verdict at trial.

**Court-Appointed Attorney** – A lawyer assigned to represent a defendant who cannot afford to hire their own attorney. Also called a public defender.

**Criminal Record** – An official history of a person's arrests, charges, convictions, and sentences. Often called a "rap sheet."

## D

**Defendant** – The person charged with a crime in a criminal case.

**Deferred Adjudication** – A type of probation where, if the person successfully completes probation terms, the charges are dismissed and no conviction is entered.

**Deliberation** – The process by which a jury discusses evidence in private to reach a verdict.

**Detainer** – A request from one law enforcement agency to another asking that a person be held in custody for them. For example, an immigration detainer asks a jail to hold someone for ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement).

**Discovery** – The process before trial where both the prosecution and defense share evidence and information about the case.

**Dismissal** – A judge's decision to end a case before a verdict. Charges may be dismissed with prejudice (cannot be refiled) or without prejudice (can be refiled later).

**Docket** – A court's official calendar listing all cases scheduled for hearing. Also refers to the official record of court proceedings.

**Due Process** – The legal principle that the government must follow fair and established procedures before depriving a person of life, liberty, or property. Protected by the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments.

## E

**Early Release** – Release from prison before the full sentence is served, typically through parole, good time credits, or commutation.

**Electronic Monitoring (EM)** – The use of an ankle bracelet or other device to track a person's location as a condition of pretrial release, probation, or parole.

**Ex Post Facto Law** – A law that punishes an act that was not a crime when committed, or increases punishment retroactively. Prohibited by the Constitution.

**Expungement** – The legal process of sealing or destroying a criminal record so that it is no longer public. Not all states allow expungement, and eligibility varies widely by offense.

**Extradition** – The formal process of transferring a person from one state to another (or one country to another) to face criminal charges.

## F

**Felony** – A serious crime punishable by more than one year in prison (e.g., murder, robbery, drug trafficking). Felonies generally carry more severe consequences than misdemeanors.

**Fines** – Monetary penalties imposed as part of a criminal sentence. May include court costs, restitution, and other fees in addition to the fine itself.

**First Appearance** – The initial court hearing after an arrest, where the judge informs the defendant of their rights and sets bail conditions. Similar to arraignment in some states.

**Forfeiture** – The government's seizure of property connected to a crime (e.g., cash, vehicles, houses). In criminal forfeiture, this happens after a conviction.

## G

**Gag Order** – A judge's order prohibiting parties in a case from discussing it publicly to protect the right to a fair trial.

**Good Time / Good Conduct Time** – Credits deducted from a sentence for good behavior while incarcerated. Amount and rules vary significantly by state.

**Grand Jury** – A group of citizens who hear evidence from the prosecutor in secret and decide whether there is probable cause to issue an indictment (formal charge). Not to be confused with a trial jury.

**Guilty Plea** – A defendant's formal admission of guilt in court, often as part of a plea agreement. The defendant waives their right to a trial.

## H

**Habeas Corpus** – A legal action that challenges the legality of a person's detention. From Latin, meaning "you shall have the body." A writ of habeas corpus asks a court to determine whether someone is being lawfully held.

**Halfway House** – A residential facility that provides supervision and support for people transitioning from prison back into the community. Also called a community corrections center or transitional housing.

**Hearing** – Any proceeding before a judge, typically involving arguments on a specific legal issue rather than a full trial.

**Hung Jury** – A jury that cannot reach a unanimous verdict. If the jury is hung, the prosecution may retry the case with a new jury.

## I

**Immunity** – Legal protection from prosecution, often granted to witnesses in exchange for testimony against another person.

**Incarceration Rate** – The number of people in prison per 100,000 population. The United States has one of the highest incarceration rates in the world.

**Indictment** – A formal criminal charge issued by a grand jury. The document outlining the charges is called an indictment.

**Indigent** – A legal term meaning a person cannot afford to pay for an attorney, court costs, or other legal expenses.

**Injunction** – A court order requiring a person to do or stop doing a specific action.

**Inmate / Incarcerated Person** – A person confined in a jail or prison. "Incarcerated person" or "incarcerated individual" is increasingly preferred by advocates as more respectful language.

**Institution** – Any prison, jail, or correctional facility.

## J

**Jail** – A local facility (typically run by a county sheriff's office) used to hold people awaiting trial or serving short sentences (usually under one year).

**Jail Credit** – Time spent in jail before sentencing that is credited toward the final prison sentence. Also called time served.

**Judge** – The court official who presides over legal proceedings, rules on legal questions, and (in bench trials) decides the verdict.

**Judgment** – The official decision of a court, including the sentence in a criminal case.

**Jurisdiction** – The authority of a court to hear a case. Also refers to the geographic area (state, county, federal district) where a court has authority.

**Jury** – A group of citizens (typically 12 in a criminal trial) who hear evidence and deliver a verdict.

**Jury Duty** – The civic obligation to serve on a jury when summoned. People with felony convictions may be ineligible for jury service, depending on state law.

## L

**Larceny** – The legal term for theft – taking someone else's property without permission.

**Lawyer / Attorney** – A licensed legal professional who represents clients in court and provides legal advice.

**Life Sentence** – A prison sentence that lasts for the remainder of a person's natural life. Some life sentences include the possibility of parole; others (life without parole, or LWOP) do not.

**Lockdown** – A security measure in a correctional facility where incarcerated people are confined to their cells, typically following an incident or threat. Family visits and phone calls may be suspended during lockdowns.

**LWOP** – Life Without the Possibility of Parole. A sentence requiring the person to remain in prison for the rest of their life with no chance of parole.

## **M**

**Magistrate** – A lower-level judicial officer who handles certain matters such as bail hearings, warrants, and preliminary hearings.

**Mandatory Minimum** – A law requiring a judge to impose a minimum prison sentence for a particular crime, regardless of individual circumstances. Mandatory minimums reduce judicial discretion.

**Maximum Security** – The highest level of prison security, designed for violent or high-risk individuals. Facilities typically have high walls, heavy surveillance, and strict movement restrictions.

**Medical Parole** – Early release from prison for incarcerated people with serious medical conditions or terminal illnesses. Not available in all states.

**Medium Security** – A mid-level security prison with fewer restrictions than maximum security but more than minimum. Medium-security facilities typically have fenced perimeters and controlled movement.

**Misdemeanor** – A less serious crime punishable by up to one year in jail (e.g., petty theft, disorderly conduct, minor drug possession).

**Mitigating Factors** – Circumstances that may reduce a person's culpability or sentence (e.g., no prior record, acting under duress, mental health conditions).

**Motion** – A formal request to a judge asking for a specific ruling or action (e.g., motion to dismiss, motion to suppress evidence).

**Mugshot** – A police photograph taken at booking. Mugshots of convicted individuals are often public records.

## **N**

**No-Contact Order** – A court order prohibiting a person from contacting another person, including by phone, mail, or through third parties.

**Nolo Contendere (No Contest)** – A plea in which the defendant neither admits nor disputes guilt but accepts conviction as if they pleaded guilty. Often used to avoid admitting civil liability.

**Not Guilty** – A plea or verdict stating that the prosecution did not prove guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. Not the same as a finding of innocence.

## **P**

**Pardon** – An official act of forgiveness for a crime, granted by a governor (state) or president (federal). A pardon typically restores civil rights but does not necessarily expunge the record.

**Parole** – Supervised early release from prison before a sentence is fully served. Parolees must follow conditions set by a parole board and report to a parole officer.

**Parole Board** – A panel that decides whether an incarcerated person is suitable for parole. The board reviews the person's file, conduct in prison, and the nature of the crime.

**Parole Hearing** – A meeting where an incarcerated person appears before the parole board to be considered for early release. Family members and victims may also speak.

**Parole Officer** – A government official who supervises people on parole and monitors compliance with parole conditions.

**Petition** – A formal written request to a court or government authority (e.g., petition for clemency, petition for expungement).

**Plea** – A defendant's formal answer to a criminal charge: guilty, not guilty, or no contest (nolo contendere).

**Plea Bargain / Plea Agreement** – An agreement between the prosecutor and the defendant where the defendant pleads guilty, often to a lesser charge or for a reduced sentence, in exchange for avoiding trial. The vast majority of criminal cases end in plea bargains.

**Post-Conviction Relief** – Legal options available after a conviction, including appeals, habeas corpus petitions, and motions to vacate the sentence.

**Preponderance of the Evidence** – The standard of proof in civil cases (more likely than not). Lower than the "beyond a reasonable doubt" standard used in criminal trials.

**Presentence Investigation Report (PSI)** – A report prepared by a probation officer that provides the judge with information about the defendant's background, criminal history, and circumstances. Used to determine the appropriate sentence.

**Presumption of Innocence** – The legal principle that a person is considered innocent until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt.

**Pretrial** – The period between arrest and trial. Pretrial matters include bail hearings, discovery, and plea negotiations.

**Pretrial Detention** – Confinement in jail before trial because the person cannot afford bail, is denied bail, or is considered a flight risk or danger to the community.

**Pretrial Release** – Release from jail before trial, with or without conditions. Conditions may include bail, electronic monitoring, check-ins, or travel restrictions.

**Prison** – A state or federal correctional facility for people serving sentences longer than one year (contrast with jail, which is for shorter sentences and pretrial detention).

**Probable Cause** – A reasonable belief, based on facts, that a crime has been committed or that evidence of a crime exists in a specific location. Required for arrest warrants and search warrants.

**Probation** – A sentence that allows a person to remain in the community under supervision instead of serving time in prison or jail. Probation has conditions (e.g., reporting to a probation officer, drug testing, employment requirements).

**Probation Officer** – A government official who supervises people on probation and ensures compliance with court-ordered conditions.

**Prosecutor / District Attorney (DA)** – A government attorney who brings criminal charges on behalf of the state or federal government against a defendant.

**Public Defender** – A government-paid attorney who represents defendants who cannot afford a private lawyer.

## R

**Rap Sheet** – A law enforcement term for a person's criminal record or history of arrests and convictions.

**Reasonable Doubt** – The high standard of proof required for a criminal conviction. If the jury has any reasonable doubt about the defendant's guilt, they must acquit.

**Recidivism** – The tendency of a convicted person to reoffend. Recidivism rates measure how many formerly incarcerated people are rearrested, reconvicted, or returned to prison within a certain period.

**Reentry** – The process of transitioning from incarceration back into the community. Reentry may involve finding housing, employment, healthcare, and rebuilding family connections.

**Restitution** – Court-ordered payment by a convicted person to the victim for losses or damages caused by the crime (e.g., medical bills, stolen property, lost wages).

**Restraining Order** – A court order that prohibits one person from contacting or approaching another. Violating a restraining order is a separate criminal offense.

**Retainer** – An upfront fee paid to a private attorney to secure their services.

**Revocation** – The cancellation of probation or parole due to a violation of its conditions. Revocation typically results in the person being sent to prison to serve the remainder of their sentence.

**Rights** – Legal or moral entitlements guaranteed by law, including the right to remain silent, the right to an attorney, the right to a speedy trial, and the right to be free from cruel and unusual punishment.

## S

**Search Warrant** – A court order authorizing law enforcement to search a specific location for evidence of a crime.

**Sentence** – The punishment ordered by a judge after a conviction, which may include prison time, probation, fines, community service, or a combination.

**Sentencing Hearing** – A court hearing where the judge imposes a sentence. Both the prosecution and defense may present arguments, and victims may give impact statements.

**Sequester** – To isolate a jury from the public during a trial or deliberation to prevent outside influence.

**Sheriff** – An elected county law enforcement official who typically operates the county jail and serves court papers.

**Solitary Confinement** – Placement of an incarcerated person in a small, isolated cell for 22+ hours per day with minimal human contact. Also called restrictive housing, segregation, or the "hole." Considered harmful by many medical and human rights organizations.

**State Prison** – A prison operated by a state government, holding people convicted of state crimes.

**Statute of Limitations** – The time limit within which criminal charges must be filed after a crime occurs. Serious crimes like murder typically have no statute of limitations.

**Subpoena** – A court order requiring a person to appear in court or produce documents.

**Supervised Release** – A period of supervision in the community after a prison sentence, under conditions set by the court or parole board.

**Suppression Hearing** – A hearing where a judge decides whether certain evidence can be used at trial, often based on whether it was obtained legally.

## T

**Testimony** – Statements given under oath in court by a witness.

**Time Served** – Credit given for days spent in jail before sentencing. If a sentence is "time served," the person is released immediately because they have already served the required time.

**Trial** – A formal examination of evidence in court to determine guilt or innocence. A trial may be by jury or by judge (bench trial).

**Truth in Sentencing** – Laws requiring a person to serve a significant portion (often 85%) of their sentence before becoming eligible for parole or early release.

## V

**Verdict** – The decision of a jury or judge in a criminal trial: guilty or not guilty.

**Victim Impact Statement** – A statement delivered in court by the victim (or the victim's family) describing the emotional, physical, and financial impact of the crime. This is considered at sentencing.

**Visitation** – The opportunity for family and friends to visit an incarcerated person in a correctional facility. Rules vary widely by state and facility regarding hours, procedures, background checks, and contact vs. non-contact visits.

**Visitation List / Approved Visitors List** – The list of individuals authorized to visit an incarcerated person. Adding or removing names typically requires a formal process.

**Voir Dire** – The process of questioning potential jurors to determine if they can be fair and impartial. From French, meaning "to speak the truth."

**Voucher** – A receipt for a deposit into an incarcerated person's account.

## W

**Waiver** – The voluntary giving up of a known right (e.g., waiving the right to a jury trial, waiving the right to remain silent).

**Warden** – The chief administrative officer of a prison facility.

**Warrant** – A court order authorizing law enforcement to take a specific action, such as making an arrest (arrest warrant) or searching a location (search warrant).

**Witness** – A person who has information about a crime and may testify in court.

**Work Release** – A program allowing an incarcerated person to leave the facility for employment and return after work.

**Writ** – A court order directing a person or entity to do or refrain from doing something. Common writs include writ of habeas corpus and writ of certiorari (request for Supreme Court review).

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*This glossary is intended as a plain-language reference guide. Laws, procedures, and definitions vary by state and jurisdiction. For specific legal questions, consult an attorney or your local court.*

## Appendix C: Recommended Books & Resources

This appendix gathers books, organizations, and online resources curated specifically for families navigating a loved one's incarceration and reentry. Resources are organized by topic so you can find what you need quickly.

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### Navigating the Justice System

#### Books

**The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness** *Michelle Alexander*  
The defining modern book on mass incarceration in America. Essential reading for understanding the systemic forces at work. While academic in places, it gives families language to articulate what they are experiencing.

**Orange Is the New Black: My Year in a Women's Prison** *Piper Kerman*  
A memoir that offers a firsthand look inside the federal prison system. Though one person's story, it illuminates many realities families face — visiting rooms, phone calls, and the emotional toll of separation.

**Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption** *Bryan Stevenson*  
A powerful account of legal advocacy by the founder of the Equal Justice Initiative. Provides insight into how the legal process works — and can fail — and what zealous representation looks like.

**Are Prisons Obsolete?** *Angela Y. Davis*  
A short but thought-provoking book that examines the role of prisons in society. Helpful for families seeking to understand the bigger picture of what their loved one is experiencing.

**The Prison Reform Handbook** *American Bar Association*  
A practical reference covering legal rights, filing grievances, understanding sentencing, and navigating post-conviction processes. Written in plain language for non-lawyers.

#### Online Resources

**The Sentencing Project** — *sentencingproject.org* Research and advocacy on sentencing policy, racial disparities, and alternatives to incarceration. Their fact sheets are accessible and easy to share.

**Prison Policy Initiative** — *prisonpolicy.org* Data-driven research on mass incarceration. Their reports on the hidden costs of incarceration for families are particularly valuable.

**Equal Justice Initiative** — *ejl.org* Legal advocacy, reports on racial justice, and educational resources. Their website includes information about the history of racial injustice in the criminal legal system.

**Vera Institute of Justice** — *vera.org* Research and policy reform on incarceration, reentry, and alternatives. Their family-focused publications address visitation barriers and communication.

**National Institute of Corrections** — *nicic.gov* Federal agency providing resources on correctional practices. Includes family-friendly materials on what to expect during incarceration and reentry.

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## Emotional Support & Self-Care for Families

### Books

**The Family Guide to Prison: A Practical, Emotional, and Spiritual Journey for Families of the Incarcerated** *Lynn M. Hargrove* Written specifically for families, this book addresses the emotional stages of having a loved one incarcerated — from shock and shame to acceptance and advocacy.

**A Brother's Keep: A Survival Guide for Families of Incarcerated Loved Ones** *J. D. Mitchell* Practical advice on coping with the emotional rollercoaster of incarceration, maintaining relationships, and managing the practical demands of supporting someone inside.

**When a Loved One Goes to Prison: A Guide for Families** *Susan R. H. O'Leary* Covers the emotional journey from arrest through incarceration and reentry. Includes exercises for managing difficult feelings and communicating with children about incarceration.

**The Resilience Workbook for Families of the Incarcerated** *Gina M. Fletcher, LCSW* A guided workbook with exercises for managing stress, setting boundaries, maintaining hope, and building a support network. Can be used individually or in a support group.

**Prison Without Walls: Supporting Someone You Love Through Incarceration** *Deborah L. White* Explores the parallel sentence families serve. Offers permission to feel anger, grief, and exhaustion while also finding moments of connection and purpose.

### Online Resources

**Prison Fellowship — Family Support** — [prisonfellowship.org/family-support](http://prisonfellowship.org/family-support) Nationally recognized Christian organization offering resources, events, and summer camps for children of incarcerated parents. Not faith-specific in its family programming.

**Books to Prisoners** — [bookstoprisoners.org](http://bookstoprisoners.org) Mail books directly to incarcerated individuals. Their website includes a wish list and guidelines for sending books to specific facilities.

**Prisoner Correspondence Projects** — Nationwide Organizations that connect incarcerated individuals with pen pals. Several state-specific projects exist — search for your state's program.

**AFSC (American Friends Service Committee) Family Support** — [afsc.org](http://afsc.org) Quaker-founded organization with local offices in many states offering family support services, prison visiting programs, and advocacy.

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## Children & Families of the Incarcerated

### Books

**The Night Dad Went to Jail: What to Expect When Someone You Love Goes to Jail** *Melissa Higgins* A children's picture book (ages 4–8) that explains incarceration in age-appropriate, non-shaming language. Helpful for starting conversations with young children.

**Visiting Day** *Jacqueline Woodson* A beautifully illustrated children's book about a girl and her grandmother's journey to visit her father in prison. Celebrates the love and ritual of visit day while acknowledging the emotional complexity.

**Far Apart, Close in Heart: Being a Family When a Loved One Is Incarcerated** *Becky Birtha* Children's book (ages 5–9) that explores how families stay connected across distance — through letters, photographs, memories, and love.

**Mama's Nightingale: A Story of Immigration and Separation** *Edwidge Danticat* A children's story about a girl whose mother is detained in an immigration center. Tackles themes of separation, advocacy, and the power of storytelling.

**My Daddy Is in Jail: A Story About Family, Trauma, and Hope** *Janet Bender* A book for elementary-age children that normalizes feelings of confusion, anger, and sadness while providing concrete coping strategies.

**Children of the Prison Boom: Mass Incarceration and the Future of American Inequality** *Sara Wakefield & Christopher Wildeman* Research-based examination of how mass incarceration affects children. Valuable for family advocates working with schools or social services.

**When Parents Are Incarcerated: A Guide for Practitioners Working with Families** *Ann Adalist-Estrin* While written for professionals, this guide helps parents and caregivers understand what children experience at different developmental stages.

## Online Resources

**Sesame Street: Little Children, Big Challenges — Incarceration** — *sesame.org/incarceration* Free bilingual resources including videos, storybooks, and activities for young children with an incarcerated parent. Exceptional quality.

**National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated** — *nrcffi.camden.rutgers.edu* Clearinghouse of research, programs, and resources. Their tip sheets for caregivers, teachers, and parents are especially useful.

**Osborne Association** — *osborneny.org* Serves New York families but offers national resources on family strengthening, children's services, and alternatives to incarceration.

**Center for Parent-Child Togetherness (CPC)** — *cpc2020.org* Focuses on maintaining strong parent-child bonds during incarceration through visitation support, phone access advocacy, and policy reform.

**Parenting Inside Out** — *parentinginsideout.org* Evidence-based parenting program for incarcerated parents. Their website includes materials families can use to support parenting from a distance.

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## Reentry & Life After Incarceration

### Books

**The Reentry Roadmap: A Practical Guide for Rebuilding Your Life After Incarceration** *Michael B. Williams & Associates* Step-by-step guide covering housing, employment, identification, benefits, and rebuilding relationships. Written for the person returning home, but invaluable for families to read together.

**Better Than Jail: A Guide to Reentry and Rebuilding Your Life** *Jeffrey L. Brown* Straightforward advice on the practical challenges of reentry — getting ID, finding work, managing money, and handling probation requirements.

**Ban the Box: The Rise of Fair Chance Hiring** *National Employment Law Project* A concise guide to "ban the box" laws that remove conviction history questions from job applications. Helps families understand their loved one's employment rights.

**Life After Lockup: The Complete Reentry Guide** *James H. Brien* Covers everything from obtaining identification documents to navigating supervised release. Includes state-by-state information on driver's license reinstatement.

**The Collateral Consequences of Conviction: A Guide for Families** *Legal Action Center*  
Explains how a criminal record affects housing, employment, education, benefits, and parental rights. Offers practical steps for navigating these barriers.

## Online Resources

**National Reentry Resource Center** — *nationalreentryresourcecenter.org* Comprehensive resource on reentry programs, funding, and best practices. Includes a family-focused section.

**Reentry Essentials** — *reentryessentials.com* Sells practical reentry kits (hygiene, clothing, identification binders, job interview preparation). Also offers free downloadable reentry planning guides.

**JustLeadershipUSA** — *justleadershipusa.org* Leadership development for formerly incarcerated individuals. Their advocacy campaigns focus on reducing prison populations and eliminating barriers to reentry.

**Safer Foundation** — *saferfoundation.org* National leader in employment services for formerly incarcerated individuals. Their job readiness resources and employer network are models replicated nationwide.

**74 Million** — *74million.org* Organization led by formerly incarcerated people, advocating for policy change. Their resources page includes toolkits for families advocating for loved ones during reentry.

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## Legal Rights & Advocacy

### Books

**The Prisoners' Rights Sourcebook** *Ira Robbins & David Rudovsky* Comprehensive guide to the legal rights of incarcerated individuals. Technical but thorough — useful for families facing specific legal issues.

**Know Your Rights: A Guide for Families of the Incarcerated** *ACLU National Prison Project*  
Free downloadable guide covering communication rights, visitation rights, healthcare access, and how to file complaints. Written in accessible language.

**Guardians of the State: The Legal Rights of Families Visited by Corrections** *Catherine A. G. Brimmer* Explores the legal framework governing prison visits, mail, phone calls, and communication. Helpful for families who feel their rights have been violated.

**Federal Habeas Corpus: A Guide for Families and Friends** *Federal Defender Services*  
Explains the federal habeas corpus process — how to challenge unlawful detention — in plain language for non-lawyers.

## **The Family and Medical Leave Act: Using FMLA When a Loved One Is Incarcerated**

*National Employment Law Project* Explains FMLA rights for families dealing with incarceration-related needs, such as attending court hearings or reentry planning.

## **Online Resources**

**ACLU Know Your Rights** — *aclu.org/know-your-rights* Free guides on rights during arrest, in prison, during visitation, and after release. Family-specific section available.

**National Legal Aid & Defender Association** — *nlada.org* Directory of public defender offices and legal aid organizations nationwide. Find free or low-cost legal help by state.

**Innocence Project** — *innocenceproject.org* National organization using DNA evidence to exonerate wrongfully convicted individuals. Their website includes resources on wrongful conviction and appeals.

**Families Against Mandatory Minimums (FAMM)** — *famm.org* National advocacy organization focusing on sentencing reform. Their resources include guides to sentence reductions, compassionate release, and clemency.

**National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers** — *nacdl.org* Directory of criminal defense attorneys nationwide. Their "Find a Lawyer" tool can help families locate experienced counsel.

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# **Understanding Addiction & Mental Health**

## **Books**

**Addiction and the Criminal Justice System: What Families Need to Know** *Center on Addiction* Practical guide explaining the intersection of addiction and incarceration, including treatment options, drug courts, and what to expect from mandated treatment.

**Beautiful Boy: A Father's Journey Through His Son's Addiction** *David Sheff* A memoir that explores addiction through the eyes of a parent. Offers insight into the complex emotions families face when addiction leads to arrest and incarceration.

**The Recovering: Addiction and the Search for Meaning** *Leslie Jamison* A literary exploration of recovery that examines the relationship between addiction, the criminal justice system, and the possibility of transformation.

**Mental Illness in Prison: A Guide for Families** *Treatment Advocacy Center* Explains the challenges faced by individuals with mental illness in correctional settings, including access to medication, segregation, and discharge planning.

**Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence** *Judith Herman, MD* While not prison-specific, this foundational book on trauma helps families understand the psychological impact of incarceration — on both the person inside and those waiting.

## Online Resources

**Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)** — [samhsa.gov](http://samhsa.gov)  
National helpline (1-800-662-4357) and treatment locator. Information on reentry and mental health services for justice-involved individuals.

**National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)** — [nami.org](http://nami.org) Support and advocacy for families affected by mental illness. Their criminal justice resources explain how to advocate for a loved one with mental health needs.

**NAADAC (Association for Addiction Professionals)** — [naadac.org](http://naadac.org) Directory of addiction treatment providers nationwide. Can help families find treatment options for loved ones returning from incarceration.

**National Institute on Drug Abuse** — [drugabuse.gov](http://drugabuse.gov) Research-based information on addiction and treatment, including resources specific to justice-involved populations.

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## Organizations That Help

### National Organizations

| Organization                                      | Focus   | Contact  |
|---|---|--|
| <b>Prison Fellowship</b>                          | Faith-based support, family events, advocacy                  | <a href="http://prisonfellowship.org">prisonfellowship.org</a>     |
| <b>FAMM (Families Against Mandatory Minimums)</b> | Sentencing reform, clemency, compassionate release            | <a href="http://famm.org">famm.org</a>                             |
| <b>Ella Baker Center for Human Rights</b>         | Alternatives to incarceration, restorative justice            | <a href="http://ellabakercenter.org">ellabakercenter.org</a>       |
| <b>All of Us or None</b>                          | Grassroots civil rights, reentry advocacy                     | <a href="http://allofusornone.org">allofusornone.org</a>           |
| <b>The Marshall Project</b>                       | Criminal justice journalism, explainers                       | <a href="http://themarshallproject.org">themarshallproject.org</a> |
| <b>Essie Justice Group</b>                        | Women-led organization for families impacted by incarceration | <a href="http://essiejusticegroup.org">essiejusticegroup.org</a>   |

### Hotlines & Helplines

| Service                                       | Number         | What They Offer  |
|---|----------------|--|
| <b>SAMHSA National Helpline</b>               | 1-800-662-4357 | 24/7 mental health and substance use referrals                                       |
| <b>National Suicide Prevention Lifeline</b>   | 988            | Crisis support, including for families in distress                                   |
| <b>National Parent Helpline</b>               | 1-855-427-2736 | Emotional support for parents, including those managing incarceration-related stress |
| <b>Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline</b> | 1-800-422-4453 | Support for caregivers and children in crisis  |
| <b>National Human Trafficking Hotline</b>     | 1-888-373-7888 | Resources for families concerned about exploitation during incarceration             |

## How to Access These Resources

1. **Check Your Local Library** — Most public libraries have inter-library loan programs and can order books not on their shelves. Many also offer free computer access for visiting prison websites.
2. **Prison Library Programs** — Many facilities accept books shipped directly from publishers or approved vendors. Check each facility's rules before shipping.
3. **Digital Access** — Several of the books listed are available as e-books or audiobooks through libraries via apps like Libby, Hoopla, and Kanopy.
4. **Free Downloads** — Where noted, resources from advocacy organizations (ACLU, FAMM, The Sentencing Project) are available as free PDF downloads.
5. **Mutual Aid Networks** — Local family support groups often maintain lending libraries and share resources. Check with community organizations in your area.

**Note:** Books and resources go out of print, and organizations' programming changes over time. If you cannot find a specific title, ask a librarian or the organization's website for updated recommendations. All web addresses referenced were active as of the time of publication.

# Appendix D: Downloadable Forms & Checklists

This appendix provides practical checklists, worksheets, and form templates that families can use to stay organized, track important information, and manage the many tasks involved in supporting a loved one through incarceration and reentry. Each item is designed to be printed, filled out by hand, or copied into a digital notebook.

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## Table of Contents

- D.1 Family Information Sheet
  - D.2 Inmate Information & Tracking Sheet
  - D.3 Weekly Contact & Communication Log
  - D.4 Money & Commissary Tracking Sheet
  - D.5 Legal & Court Dates Calendar
  - D.6 Medical & Medication Tracking Sheet
  - D.7 Reentry Planning Checklist
  - D.8 Emergency Preparedness for Families
  - D.9 Self-Care & Emotional Check-In
  - D.10 Children's Needs Assessment
- 

## D.1 Family Information Sheet

*Keep one of these for each family member involved in supporting your loved one. Fill out and store in a safe, accessible place.*

**Your Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Relationship to Incarcerated Person:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Address:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Phone (cell):** \_\_\_\_\_ **Phone (home):** \_\_\_\_\_

**Email:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Emergency Contact (someone not in your immediate family):**

- Name: \_\_\_\_\_
- Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Relationship: \_\_\_\_\_

**Alternate Contact (if you cannot be reached):**

- Name: \_\_\_\_\_
- Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Relationship: \_\_\_\_\_

**Best time to reach you:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Best way to reach you (circle):** Call / Text / Email / Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**Do you have transportation?** Yes / No

**If no, what are your options?** \_\_\_\_\_

**Notes/reminders for yourself:** \_\_\_\_\_

---

## **D.2 Inmate Information & Tracking Sheet**

*Keep this sheet with your important documents. Update it whenever information changes.*

### **Basic Information**

**Full Legal Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Also Known As (aliases/maiden name):** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date of Birth:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Age:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Social Security Number (last 4 digits):** \_\_\_\_ \_

**State ID / Driver's License Number:** \_\_\_\_\_

**DOC (Department of Corrections) Inmate Number:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Facility Name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Facility Address:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Facility Phone:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Facility Fax:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Housing Unit / Dorm / Cell Block:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Security Level (if known):** \_\_\_\_\_

### **Contact & Visiting Information**

**Mailing Address (facility's format):**

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**Mailing rules (check with facility):**

- Plain envelopes only (no stickers, perfumed, or decorative)
- White/cream paper only
- No photos attached to letters (separate envelope)
- Return address required on all mail
- No cash in envelopes (money orders only)
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**Visitation Schedule:**

- Days: \_\_\_\_\_
- Hours: \_\_\_\_\_
- Visitor limit per session: \_\_\_\_\_ people
- Duration per visit: \_\_\_\_\_ minutes/hours
- Dress code notes: \_\_\_\_\_

**Approved Visitors List (names of those cleared to visit):**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_

**Legal Representation**

**Defense Attorney / Public Defender:**

- Name: \_\_\_\_\_
- Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_
- Office address: \_\_\_\_\_

**Case Number(s):** \_\_\_\_\_

**Next Court Date:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Time:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Court Location:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Judge:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Probation/Parole Officer (if applicable):**

- Name: \_\_\_\_\_
- Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

## Charges & Sentence

Charges (list all that apply):

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

Sentence Length: \_\_\_\_\_

Earliest Release Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Parole Eligibility Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Good Time / Earned Time Credits (if known): \_\_\_\_\_

## D.3 Weekly Contact & Communication Log

*Use this log to track calls, letters, visits, and emails with your loved one. It helps you stay connected and keep a record in case any issues arise.*

Week of: \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_

| Day | Type (Call/Letter/Visit/Email) | Duration | Notes (mood, topics discussed, issues) |
|-----|--------------------------------|----------|--|
|-----|--------------------------------|----------|--|

Mon

Tue

Wed

Thu

Fri

Sat

Sun

Calls received this week: \_\_\_\_\_

Letters sent by me: \_\_\_\_\_ Letters received from loved one: \_\_\_\_\_

Money sent this week: \$ \_\_\_\_\_ Method (circle): Online / Phone / Money Order / Western Union / Other

Concerns or issues this week: \_\_\_\_\_

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## D.4 Money & Commissary Tracking Sheet

*Tracking money sent helps you budget and ensures funds are reaching the right place.*

### Facility Account Information

Inmate Name: \_\_\_\_\_

DOC Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Deposit Methods Accepted (circle all that apply):

JPay / Access Corrections / TouchPay / Western Union / Money Order / Cash at Facility Kiosk / Phone / Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Facility Payment Website: \_\_\_\_\_

### Deposit Log

| Date | Amount | Method | Confirmation # | Fee Paid | Notes |
|------|--------|--------|----------------|----------|-------|
|      | \$     |        |                | \$       |       |
|      | \$     |        |                | \$       |       |
|      | \$     |        |                | \$       |       |
|      | \$     |        |                | \$       |       |
|      | \$     |        |                | \$       |       |
|      | \$     |        |                | \$       |       |

### Monthly Budget (Optional)

| Category | Budgeted | Actual | Difference |
|----------|----------|--------|------------|
|----------|----------|--------|------------|

|                               |           |           |           |
|-------------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Commissary / Account deposits | \$        | \$        | \$        |
| Phone call minutes            | \$        | \$        | \$        |
| Video visit fees              | \$        | \$        | \$        |
| Travel to facility            | \$        | \$        | \$        |
| Legal costs/attorney fees     | \$        | \$        | \$        |
| Childcare during visits       | \$        | \$        | \$        |
| Other                         | \$        | \$        | \$        |
| <b>Total</b>                  | <b>\$</b> | <b>\$</b> | <b>\$</b> |

---

## D.5 Legal & Court Dates Calendar

*Keep track of all legal deadlines, court appearances, and important filings.*

**Inmate Name:** \_\_\_\_\_ **DOC #:** \_\_\_\_\_

| <b>Date</b> | <b>Time</b> | <b>Event (Hearing, Filing Deadline, Parole Hearing, etc.)</b> | <b>Court/Agency</b> | <b>Location</b> | <b>Notes/Outcome</b> |
|-------------|-------------|---|---------------------|-----------------|----------------------|
|-------------|-------------|---|---------------------|-----------------|----------------------|

### Key Deadlines to Remember

- Appeal deadline: \_\_\_\_\_
- Motion filing deadline: \_\_\_\_\_
- Parole hearing date: \_\_\_\_\_
- Reentry program application deadline: \_\_\_\_\_

- Sentence calculation review date: \_\_\_\_\_
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

### Attorney/Advocate Contact Log

| Date | Contact Person | Topic Discussed | Follow-Up Needed |
|------|----------------|-----------------|------------------|
|------|----------------|-----------------|------------------|

---

## D.6 Medical & Medication Tracking Sheet

*If your loved one has ongoing health needs, use this sheet to track medical concerns and requests.*

**Inmate Name:** \_\_\_\_\_ **DOC #:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Chronic Conditions (list all):**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

**Current Medications (as prescribed in facility):**

| Medication | Dosage | Frequency | Prescribed For | Start Date |
|------------|--------|-----------|----------------|------------|
|------------|--------|-----------|----------------|------------|

**Allergies:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Medical Requests & Grievances Log**

| Date | Issue (symptoms, denied care, medication issue) | Sick Call / Grievance # | Outcome / Response |
|------|---|-------------------------|--------------------|
|------|---|-------------------------|--------------------|

**Mental Health Notes (if applicable):**

- Current counseling/therapy status: \_\_\_\_\_
  - Medications for mental health: \_\_\_\_\_
  - Suicide watch or crisis care history (if relevant): \_\_\_\_\_
- 

## D.7 Reentry Planning Checklist

*Start preparing for release as early as possible. Check off items as they are completed.*

### 6 Months Before Release

- Confirm release date with facility
- Discuss reentry plans with loved one (where will they live?)
- Start gathering identification documents:
  - Birth certificate
  - Social Security card
  - State ID or driver's license
  - Immigration documents (if applicable)
- Research reentry programs in the community
- Contact parole/probation office to understand supervision terms

### 3 Months Before Release

- Apply for state ID or driver's license renewal
- Begin housing search:
  - Family member's home
  - Halfway house / transitional housing
  - Sober living facility (if needed)
  - Rental application (check for felony-friendly housing)
- Research employment resources:
  - Reentry job fairs
  - Second-chance employers
  - Job training programs
- Set up healthcare (Medicaid application or sliding-scale clinic)

- Set up mental health/substance use treatment appointments (if needed)

### **1 Month Before Release**

- Confirm transportation from facility on release day
- Arrange clothing and basic necessities for release day
- Set up cell phone plan or provide a phone
- Gather any property being held by facility
- Confirm any court-ordered fines, fees, or restitution balance

### **First Week After Release**

- Report to parole/probation office (if required)
- Obtain state ID or driver's license
- Register for benefits (SNAP, Medicaid, etc.)
- Fill necessary prescriptions
- Set up regular check-in schedule with loved one
- Connect with reentry support organization

### **First Month After Release**

- Begin job search or enroll in job training
- Open a bank account
- Establish a budget
- Register to vote (if eligible in your state)
- Find a support group (reentry fellowship, church group, etc.)
- Schedule follow-up medical/dental appointments

---

## **D.8 Emergency Preparedness for Families**

*Emergencies happen — lockdowns, transfers, medical crises, or natural disasters. Being prepared reduces panic.*

### **Quick Reference Card (Copy and keep in wallet)**

**My loved one's name:** \_\_\_\_\_

**DOC #:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Facility:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Facility phone:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Attorney's phone:** \_\_\_\_\_

**My emergency contact:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Support person I can call:** \_\_\_\_\_

## **What to Do If...**

### **...You cannot reach your loved one (no answer on calls, no replies to letters)**

1. Wait at least 48 hours (mail delays and phone system issues are common)
2. Call the facility's main line and ask for the housing unit or the chaplain's office
3. If no information, call the DOC central office/inmate locator line
4. Contact a family advocate or legal aid organization if unable to get answers
5. Document dates and times of all attempts to reach facility

### **...Your loved one is transferred to a different facility**

1. Use the DOC inmate locator (usually on the state DOC website) to find new location
2. Call the new facility to confirm rules (mail, visitation, phone system may differ)
3. Update all contact information and send a change-of-address letter
4. Update your Inmate Information Sheet

### **...There is a medical emergency (your loved one is hospitalized)**

1. Call the facility and ask to speak to medical staff or the shift supervisor
2. Ask for the hospital name and location
3. Contact the hospital directly for updates (HIPAA rules may limit information)
4. Notify the attorney
5. Ask how to send medical authorization forms if you hold power of attorney

### **...There is a lockdown in the facility**

1. Do not panic — lockdowns are routine and usually lift within days
2. Visits will be cancelled — check the facility website or call
3. Phone calls and email/messaging may be suspended during lockdown
4. Letters are still typically delivered — keep writing
5. Check with the facility for an estimated end date

### **...A natural disaster occurs near the facility**

1. Check the DOC website or facility social media for updates
2. Contact the DOC central office for evacuation information
3. If evacuation occurred, use the inmate locator to find new location
4. Contact the American Red Cross or emergency management agency for family assistance
5. Write letters to multiple possible locations if unsure where your loved one is

## **Emergency Contact Numbers**

| <b>Contact</b> | <b>Phon</b> | <b>Websit</b> |
|----------------|-------------|---------------|
|                | <b>e</b>    | <b>e</b>      |

Facility Main Line

DOC Central Office

Inmate Locator (automated)

Attorney / Public Defender

Legal Aid Organization

Family Support Organization

Local Reentry Hotline

---

## D.9 Self-Care & Emotional Check-In

*Use this weekly check-in to monitor your own well-being. You cannot support your loved one if you are running on empty.*

**Week of:** \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_

**Circle how you felt this week:**

| Energized | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Exhausted | | Anxious | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Calm | | Hopeful | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Hopeless | | Supported | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Alone | | Angry | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | At peace |

**My stress level (1–10):** \_\_\_\_\_

**What helped me this week?** \_\_\_\_\_

---

**What was the hardest part of this week?** \_\_\_\_\_

---

**Things I did for myself this week:**

- Took a walk or exercised
- Talked to a friend or family member (not about the legal situation)
- Ate at least one full, healthy meal
- Slept at least 6 hours (most nights)
- Did something I enjoy (hobby, music, reading, etc.)
- Attended a support group or spoke with a counselor
- Took a break from the phone / news / legal paperwork
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**This week I am grateful for:** \_\_\_\_\_

---

Next week I will try to: \_\_\_\_\_

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## D.10 Children's Needs Assessment

*For families with children who have an incarcerated parent or loved one.*

**Child's Name:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Age:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Relationship to Incarcerated Person:** \_\_\_\_\_

### Communication & Connection

**How does the child currently stay in touch?**

- Phone calls (frequency: \_\_\_\_\_)
- Letters / drawings (frequency: \_\_\_\_\_)
- Video visits (frequency: \_\_\_\_\_)
- In-person visits (frequency: \_\_\_\_\_)
- No current contact

**Does the child want more contact?** Yes / No / Unsure

**Does the child understand why the loved one is away?**

- Yes, age-appropriate explanation given
- Partially understands
- No explanation given
- Unsure what to tell them

### Emotional Signs to Watch For

*Check any behaviors you have noticed:*

| <b>Behavior</b>                | <b>Often</b> | <b>Sometime</b> | <b>Rarely</b> |
|--------------------------------|--------------|-----------------|---------------|
| Withdrawal from friends/family |              |                 |               |
| Trouble sleeping or nightmares |              |                 |               |
| Changes in eating habits       |              |                 |               |
| Anger or acting out            |              |                 |               |

Sadness or crying more than usual

Anxiety about separation

Declining school performance

Questions about the loved one  
(ongoing)

Embarrassment about talking about it

## Support Plan

### Who can the child talk to about their feelings?

- Me (parent/caregiver)
- Another family member (who): \_\_\_\_\_
- School counselor
- Therapist / counselor
- Support group for kids
- Religious or spiritual leader
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

### Resources I will explore for the child:

- Sesame Street's "Little Children, Big Challenges: Incarceration"
- School-based counseling services
- National Child Traumatic Stress Network resources
- Books for children about having a parent in prison
- Local family support organization
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

My commitment to this child: \_\_\_\_\_

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## Blank Form Template

Use this blank template to create your own checklists or forms as needs arise.

Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Purpose: \_\_\_\_\_

**Item / Question      Response (Check or Fill In)**

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.

**Notes:** \_\_\_\_\_

---

---

**How to Use These Forms:** Print the sheets you need and keep them in a dedicated binder or folder. Alternatively, copy the content into a notebook or digital document (Google Docs, Word) that you can update regularly. Revisit the checklists as your loved one's situation changes — some forms (like the Reentry Planning Checklist) become more relevant over time, while others (like the Weekly Communication Log) are useful from day one.

## **Appendix E: Crisis Quick Reference**

### **For Families of the Incarcerated**

*Keep this page accessible — save it in your phone, print a copy for your wallet, and pin one to the fridge. In a crisis, seconds matter and clear thinking is harder.*

---

# How to Use This Appendix

Crises come in many forms — a medical emergency in prison, a sudden transfer out of state, a lockdown with no communication, a parole denial that upends your plans, or your own moment of overwhelm. This appendix is built for those moments. Each section follows the same pattern:

1. **Stay calm first** — a grounding step before you act
  2. **What to do** — immediate action steps in order
  3. **Who to call** — the right numbers and what to say
  4. **What to write down** — documentation that protects your family member and you
- 

## Section 1: Medical Emergency of Your Loved One in Custody

### Stay Calm First

Pause. Take one slow breath. You cannot help anyone if you are in panic mode. Remind yourself: the facility has medical staff on-site. Your job is to get information and advocate — not to rush to the scene.

### Immediate Steps

1. **Call the facility directly.** Use the main number for the prison or jail, not the general DOC hotline. Ask for the medical unit or the shift supervisor.
2. **Identify yourself clearly.** Say: *"I am [your name], family member of [incarcerated person's full name], DOC number [number]. I have received information about a medical emergency involving my family member and need to verify their condition."*
3. **Ask specific questions:**
  - Is my family member currently receiving medical care?
  - What is their condition — stable, serious, critical?
  - Have they been transported to an outside hospital? If so, which one?
  - Who is the point of contact for medical updates?
4. **If transferred to an outside hospital:** Call the hospital directly. Ask for the patient information desk, then the nursing station. Note: facilities often place security holds on patients even in hospitals — hospital staff may be limited in what they can share.
5. **Request a callback.** Ask to speak with a supervisor if you feel information is being withheld unreasonably.

### Who to Call

| Situation        | Who                            | Number |
|------------------|--------------------------------|--------|
| Prison main line | Check Appendix A for state DOC | —      |

|                            |   |                          |
|----------------------------|---|--------------------------|
| No response from facility  | State DOC Office of Health Services                           | Check state DOC website  |
| Concerns about care        | State DOC Office of the Ombudsman                             | Check state DOC website  |
| Legal advocacy             | State ACLU or Prison Legal Services                           | Search online            |
| Life-threatening emergency | Call the facility back and ask for the <b>Watch Commander</b> | Use main facility number |

### What to Write Down

- Date and time of each call
- Name and title of every person you speak with
- Exact information provided
- Any case numbers, medical record numbers, or incident numbers given
- Follow-up promises made ("I will call you back by 5 PM")

## Section 2: Loved One Goes Silent (Loss of Contact)

When calls go unanswered, letters return unopened, and weeks pass without word, fear sets in. This is one of the most common and most painful crises families face.

### Possible Reasons (Not All Are Dangerous)

| Likely Cause                           | Signs   | What to Do                        |
|--|---|-----------------------------------|
| Facility lockdown                      | You hear news of incident at facility; other families report same silence | Wait 24–48 hours, then call       |
| Transfer in progress                   | Last call mentioned possible transfer; mail returned                      | Call Records/Classification       |
| Segregation/Administrative Segregation | Abrupt silence, no warning  | Call facility, ask about status   |
| Medical hold                           | Last contact mentioned health concern                                     | Call medical unit                 |
| Disciplinary confinement               | May have been in a fight or rule violation                                | Call facility, ask housing status |

|                     |   |                                 |
|---------------------|---|---------------------------------|
| Mail room delay     | Other families also experiencing delays | Wait; check with other families |
| Phone system outage | Facility-wide issue                     | Check facility Facebook/website |

## Immediate Steps

1. **Check with other families.** If you know other families with loved ones at the same facility, reach out. This is the fastest way to distinguish a personal problem from a facility-wide problem.
2. **Check facility news.** Many state DOC websites post press releases about lockdowns, incidents, or emergencies. Some facilities have Facebook pages. Search: *[Facility name] lockdown* or *[Facility name] news*.
3. **Call the facility.** Use the main line. Ask for the housing unit officer or the shift commander. Say: *"I am trying to locate [full name, DOC number]. I have not had contact in [number] days/weeks and need to confirm their wellbeing and location."*
4. **Call the state DOC inmate locator.** Each state has a toll-free number or online lookup. Check Appendix A.
5. **Contact the prison chaplain.** Chaplains often have access to inmates across housing units and can check on someone's wellbeing even when the phone system is down.

## What to Write Down

- Date of last contact (call, letter, visit)
- Date you began trying to confirm safety
- Each call made — who you spoke to and what they said
- Any incident numbers or case numbers assigned

## Section 3: Emergency Transfer or Out-of-State Move

Sometimes families learn their loved one has been transferred — sometimes days or weeks after the fact. This can feel like being cut loose.

### Immediate Steps

1. **Determine where they went.** Call the facility they were in last. Ask for Records or Classification. Say: *"I understand [full name, DOC number] may have been transferred. Can you confirm their current facility location?"*
2. **If the old facility cannot tell you:** Call the state DOC central office. Ask for Classification or Inmate Records. They can confirm the current location.
3. **Get the new facility's rules.** Once you know the new location, call them directly and ask:
  - Visiting hours and application process

- Phone system provider and how to set up an account
  - Mail address and any specific mail rules
  - Commissary/deposit procedures
4. **Update the visiting application.** Most states require a new visiting application or update when your loved one moves facilities. Do this immediately — it can take weeks to process.
  5. **Ask about property.** If the transfer was abrupt, personal property may have been left behind. Ask Records whether property was sent with the inmate or held at the previous facility.

## Special Situation: Interstate Compact Transfer

If your loved one is moved to a different state entirely — typically through the Interstate Corrections Compact — the process is managed by the sending state's DOC Interstate Unit. You can call that unit to confirm the destination and request contact information for the receiving facility.

## What to Write Down

- Date of transfer
  - Old facility name and location
  - New facility name, address, and main phone
  - Any property or mail issues
  - New visiting application status and timeline
- 

## Section 4: Parole Denied or Rescinded

A parole denial or revocation after hope had built can feel devastating. This is a crisis of emotions and logistics.

### Immediate Steps

1. **Get the written decision.** Request a copy of the parole board's decision in writing. You are entitled to see the reasons for denial.
2. **Understand the reason.** Common reasons include:
  - Nature of the offense
  - Institutional conduct (write-ups, infractions)
  - Lack of completed programs
  - Risk assessment score
  - Victim notification/input
  - Insufficient release plan
3. **Determine next eligibility date.** Ask the parole board or case manager when your family member can reapply. Write this date down immediately.

4. **Get a reentry plan checklist from the facility.** Ask the case manager: *"What programs, courses, or steps does my family member need to complete before the next hearing to improve their chances?"*
5. **Consider legal help.** If the denial appears arbitrary or unsupported by evidence, contact:
  - State Public Defender's Office
  - Prisoners' Rights Project / Legal Aid
  - Pro bono attorneys specializing in parole

## Coping After a Denial

- Let yourself feel the disappointment. This is a real loss.
- Call a trusted friend or reach out to a family support group.
- Remind yourself: this is a delay, not a permanent end. Many people are denied more than once before release.
- If you can, visit or schedule a special call to support your loved one. They are likely devastated too.
- Plan for the next hearing. Use this time to build a stronger case.

## What to Write Down

- Date of parole hearing and decision
  - Reasons stated in the written denial
  - Next eligibility date
  - Case manager name and contact
  - Programs/courses required before next hearing
  - Any attorney contact information
- 

## Section 5: Natural Disaster or Facility Emergency

Floods, wildfires, tornados, earthquakes, and other disasters can strike correctional facilities just like anywhere else. During these events, communication often breaks down completely.

### Before a Disaster (Prepare Now)

- Know which natural disasters are common in the region where the facility is located
- Save the facility's main number and emergency hotline in your phone
- Follow the facility or state DOC on social media for emergency updates
- Have a backup contact — someone who lives near the facility who can check on conditions
- Keep extra funds in your phone account for calls, as communication windows may be brief

### During a Disaster

1. **Check official sources first.** State DOC websites and social media often post evacuation information faster than facility staff can answer phones.
2. **If phones are down:** Look for facility press releases, local news reports, and social media updates from the county emergency management agency.
3. **If an evacuation is reported:** Call the state DOC central office to learn where inmates have been moved.
4. **Contact the American Red Cross or local emergency management.** They may have information about shelter locations where evacuated inmates are being held.
5. **Be patient.** During a facility-wide emergency, normal communication can take days or weeks to restore.

## What to Write Down

- Nature of the disaster and date
  - Official sources checked and what they said
  - Any updated location information
  - Date when normal communication was restored
- 

## Section 6: Your Own Crisis — When You Are Overwhelmed

You cannot support your loved one if you are falling apart. Your wellbeing matters too — not as an afterthought, but as a priority.

### Signs You May Be in Crisis

- You cannot sleep or you are sleeping all the time
- You feel numb, detached, or hopeless
- You have crying spells that you cannot control
- You feel angry all the time, especially at small things
- You are withdrawing from friends, family, or activities you used to enjoy
- You are using alcohol, drugs, or food to cope
- You are having thoughts of harming yourself

### What to Do Right Now

1. **If you are in immediate danger of harming yourself:** Call or text **988** (the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline). You matter and people care about you.
2. **If you need to talk to someone who understands:** Call a support hotline:
  - **National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Helpline:** 1-800-950-6264
  - **SAMHSA National Helpline:** 1-800-662-4357
  - **Prison Family Support Network:** Search online for peer support groups

3. **If you need a break:** Take 15 minutes. Step outside. Breathe. Drink water. You are allowed to take care of yourself.
4. **If you need professional help:** Search for a therapist in your area who works with families affected by incarceration. Some organizations offer sliding-scale fees.
5. **Reach out to your community.** Other families of incarcerated loved ones understand what you are going through in ways that friends who have not lived this cannot. Find a support group — online or in person.

## Emergency Numbers

| Resource                                      | Number                            | Description                             |
|---|-----------------------------------|---|
| <b>988 Suicide &amp; Crisis Lifeline</b>      | <b>988</b>                        | Call or text — 24/7, free, confidential |
| <b>Crisis Text Line</b>                       | Text <b>HOME</b> to <b>741741</b> | Free 24/7 crisis counseling by text     |
| <b>SAMHSA National Helpline</b>               | <b>1-800-662-4357</b>             | 24/7 treatment referral and support     |
| <b>National Domestic Violence Hotline</b>     | <b>1-800-799-7233</b>             | For those in abusive situations         |
| <b>Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline</b> | <b>1-800-422-4453</b>             | If children in your care need help      |
| <b>211</b>                                    | Dial <b>211</b>                   | Connects to local community services    |

## Section 7: Rights in Crisis — A Quick Summary

You have rights — even in a crisis, even as a family member of someone incarcerated. These are not privileges the system grants you; they are yours.

| Right                                       | What It Means  |
|---|--|
| Right to know                               | You have the right to be informed if your family member is seriously ill, injured, or dying. Most states have specific statutes requiring notification of next of kin. |
| Right to medical information (with consent) | If your family member signs a release, the facility must share medical information with you.   |

|                                    |   |
|------------------------------------|---|
| Right to contact an attorney       | If something is wrong and no one will listen, you have the right to seek legal counsel on your family member's behalf.                                    |
| Right to file a grievance          | If staff are unhelpful or abusive, you can file a complaint with the facility, the DOC, or the state ombudsman. You have the right to receive a response. |
| Right to contact elected officials | Your state representative and state senator have constituent services staff whose job is to help you navigate state agencies.                             |
| Right to emergency communication   | Even during a lockdown, you have the right to communicate about a genuine medical emergency or death in the family.                                       |

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## Crisis Contact Card (Fill This Out & Keep It)

| Item                            | Information |
|---------------------------------|-------------|
| My loved one's name             | _____       |
|                                 | —           |
| DOC number                      | _____       |
|                                 | —           |
| Current facility                | _____       |
|                                 | —           |
| Facility main phone             | _____       |
|                                 | —           |
| Facility address                | _____       |
|                                 | —           |
| State DOC website               | _____       |
|                                 | —           |
| State DOC inmate locator        | _____       |
|                                 | —           |
| Attorney name & number          | _____       |
|                                 | —           |
| Support person I can call       | _____       |
|                                 | —           |
| 988 (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline) | 988         |
| 211 (Community Services)        | 211         |

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*You are not alone. Crises pass. Help exists. Take the first step — one call, one breath, one moment at a time.*

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[End of Appendix E]

## Appendix F: Scripture & Prayers for the Journey

*This appendix offers words of comfort, strength, and hope drawn from the biblical tradition. Whether you are a person of deep faith, someone searching for words to pray, or a family member who simply needs to hear that you are not alone — these readings and prayers are for you. They are arranged by the seasons of this journey: waiting, visiting apart, encouraging from a distance, carrying the weight, and holding on to hope.*

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### How to Use This Appendix

- **Read aloud or silently** — Scripture was meant to be heard. Speaking it aloud can shift something inside you.
  - **Pray the prayers as written, or use them as a starting point** — your own words are just as holy.
  - **Share them with your loved one** — include a verse in a letter or on a card. Many incarcerated individuals keep scripture close.
  - **Return to them** — different seasons call for different passages. Let this be a resource you come back to.
- 

### Section 1: When You Are Waiting

*Waiting is the hardest work a family does. Waiting for news. Waiting for a phone call. Waiting for a hearing. Waiting for release. These passages speak into the ache of the in-between.*

#### Scripture

**Isaiah 40:31** — "But those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint."

**Psalm 27:13–14** — "I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord."

**Lamentations 3:22–24** — "Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, 'The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for him.'"

**Psalm 130:5–6** — "I wait for the Lord, my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope. I wait for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning."

## A Prayer for Waiting

Lord, I am tired of waiting. I wait for a letter that doesn't come. I wait for a call that lasts more than five minutes. I wait for a judge's decision. For a parole date. For a door to open.

You know every minute. You see every tear. Remind me that waiting is not empty time. You are at work even when I see nothing. You hold my loved one and you hold me.

Give me patience that is not passive — but a fierce, faithful endurance. I will wait for you, Lord. And while I wait, I will trust.

Amen.

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## Section 2: When You Are Separated

*Visitation booths, glass partitions, phone calls with timers — the distance between you and your loved one can feel unbearable. These words speak to the longing for connection.*

### Scripture

**Psalm 139:7–10** — "Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast."

**Romans 8:38–39** — "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

**Colossians 3:14** — "And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity."

## A Prayer Across the Distance

God who is everywhere, there is a wall between us today. Glass and concrete and barbed wire. Rules and schedules and uniformed guards.

But you are not stopped by walls. You are not bound by fences. You are not searched at the gate.

Be with my loved one right now, wherever they are. Wrap your comfort around them. Let them feel — even for a moment — that they are known and loved.

And be with me. Close this distance in my heart. Remind me that love travels where bodies cannot. In the space between visits, hold us both.

Amen.

---

## Section 3: When You Are Encouraging from the Outside

*Your words carry power. These are passages to send — in a letter, on a card, whispered on the phone — to remind your loved one that they are not forgotten.*

### Scripture to Share

**Jeremiah 29:11** — "For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.'"

**Isaiah 43:1–2** — "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze."

**Psalms 34:17–18** — "The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles. The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."

**2 Corinthians 5:17** — "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!"

**Philippians 1:6** — "Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."

### A Prayer to Send

Dear God, I pray for [name] today. Let this letter find them in a moment of need. Let these words be a lamp in a dark place.

Remind them who they are — not a number, not a mistake, not forgotten. They are your beloved child. You are not finished with them yet.

Give them strength for this day. Give them peace in this season. Give them hope for what is to come.

And use my words, Lord. Let love travel through every line I write.

Amen.

---

## Section 4: When the Weight Is Heavy

*Grief, anger, shame, exhaustion — the emotions of this journey can be crushing. These passages are for the hard days when you don't know how to keep going.*

### Scripture

**Psalms 34:18** — "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit."

**Matthew 11:28** — "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

**Psalms 55:22** — "Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous be shaken."

**Psalms 42:11** — "Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God."

**2 Corinthians 1:3–4** — "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God."

### A Prayer for the Hard Days

God, I am tired. Not just in my body — in my soul. I have been strong for so long. I have held it together for everyone else. But right now, I feel like I am falling apart.

You say you are near to the brokenhearted. I am asking you to come near to me. I don't have the words to pray. I don't have the strength to hope. So I am just sitting here, and I am letting you hold me.

Take this weight, Lord. I cannot carry it alone anymore.

Amen.

### A Prayer for When Shame Presses In

Merciful God, people look at our family differently now. There is judgment in their eyes. There are whispers in the grocery store. Sometimes I feel shame burning in my chest.

But you do not define us by the worst thing that has happened. You do not see my loved one as a crime. You see them as your child. And you see me as your child too.

Wash the shame away. Replace it with the truth — that we are loved, redeemed, and held. We are more than this moment. We are yours.

Amen.

---

## Section 5: When You Need Hope

*Hope can feel dangerous — like something that might be taken from you. But hope is also what keeps families alive through the longest nights.*

### Scripture

**Psalm 33:20–22** — "We wait in hope for the Lord; he is our help and our shield. In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name. May your unfailing love be with us, Lord, even as we put our hope in you."

**Romans 15:13** — "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."

**Psalm 126:5–6** — "Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them."

**Revelation 21:4–5** — "'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.' He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!'"

### A Prayer for Hope

God of hope, I want to hope — but I am afraid. What if I hope and nothing changes? What if I believe and I am disappointed again?

But you are not afraid of my questions. You are not threatened by my doubt. You hold all of it — my hope and my fear, my faith and my uncertainty.

Plant hope in me like a seed. Water it with your presence. Let it grow slowly, stubbornly, even in hard ground.

I will not pretend everything is okay. But I will trust that you are making all things new. Not someday. Not just in heaven. But starting now. Starting here.

Give me the courage to hope.

Amen.

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## Section 6: A Prayer for the Loved One (to Be Read Over Them, Even from Afar)

[Name], may the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you. May the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

May you know today that you are not forgotten. May you feel love that reaches through walls. May you find strength you did not know you had.

May God protect you while you sleep. May God guide you while you wake. May God bring you home — to us, and to yourself.

In the name of the One who sets captives free. Amen.

---

## Section 7: Scriptures for Specific Situations

### When You Feel...

### Turn to This Passage

|                   |  |
|-------------------|--|
| Afraid            | Isaiah 41:10 — "Do not fear, for I am with you"                  |
| Alone             | Deuteronomy 31:8 — "The Lord himself goes before you"            |
| Angry             | Ephesians 4:26–27 — "In your anger do not sin"                   |
| Discouraged       | Psalms 42:5 — "Put your hope in God"                             |
| Forgotten         | Isaiah 49:15–16 — "I have engraved you on the palms of my hands" |
| Grieving          | Psalms 34:18 — "The Lord is close to the brokenhearted"          |
| Guilty or Ashamed | Psalms 103:10–12 — "As far as the east is from the west"         |
| Hopeless          | Romans 8:28 — "In all things God works for the good"             |
| Insecure          | Psalms 139:14 — "I am fearfully and wonderfully made"            |

|         |  |
|---------|--|
| Lonely  | Psalm 68:5–6 — "God sets the lonely in families"               |
| Weak    | 2 Corinthians 12:9–10 — "My power is made perfect in weakness" |
| Worried | Philippians 4:6–7 — "Do not be anxious about anything"         |

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## Section 8: A Closing Blessing for the Family

May the God who sees you — in the waiting room, at the visitation window, by the mailbox, in the quiet of your home — bless you and keep you.

May you know that your love matters. That your visits matter. Your letters matter. Your prayers matter. That you are not just supporting someone else's journey — you are walking your own sacred path.

May you find rest when you are weary. May you find strength when you are weak. May you find community when you are alone.

And may you hold on — to hope, to each other, and to the God who holds you all.

Amen.

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*"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." — John 1:5*

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**End of Appendix F**