

Encouraging a Life of Sobriety

Failing a drug or alcohol test is the number-one reason parolees are sent back to jail or prison. That's why no reentry program is complete without addressing the issue of drug and alcohol addictions.

According to the Center for Alcohol and Substance Abuse (CASA) at Columbia University (www.casacolumbia.org), 80 percent of inmates were involved with drugs or alcohol before entering prison – and a majority of these were drunk or high when they committed their crimes.

Many ex-prisoners think they have conquered their addictions because of the months/years they have been sober while in prison. But it's pretty easy to stay sober when you're locked up and have no access to drugs or alcohol. The real test of sobriety begins the moment the ex-prisoner walks back into the free world where bars and drug dealers are as near as the next street corner.

To maintain sobriety, it is vital for ex-prisoners with a history of drug and alcohol abuse to get connected with a support group immediately after release. As a reentry ministry volunteer, it is important to know what resources are available in the community to help returning prisoners stay clean and sober.

If you live in a large city, there may be dozens of good substance abuse support groups available. Three of the mostly widely-recommended are:

- **Alcoholics Anonymous** (www.aa.org) is a 12-step program in which men and women share their experience, strength, and hope with one another that they may solve their common problem and help each other recover from alcoholism.
- **Narcotics Anonymous** (www.na.org) is a 12-step program and network of support groups for recovering drug addicts. NA is open to all, regardless of the particular drug or combination of drugs used.
- **Celebrate Recovery** (www.celebraterecovery.com) is a Christ-centered program based on eight recovery principles that helps people break free of addictive and compulsive behaviors.

Gathering Resources:

- Contact organizations and health care providers that offer substance abuse treatment and addiction support groups. Put together a comprehensive collection of resources for helping ex-prisoners deal with all types of substance abuse and addictive behavior.
- Develop a list of specific support groups (AA, NA, Celebrate Recovery, etc.) that meet in your community, noting all of their meetings times and locations. Have copies of this list ready to hand out when you meet with ex-prisoners.



- Gather and study educational materials on how to recognize signs of substance abuse and alcoholism. Consider attending workshops and seminars to become more informed. Then ask God to show you how to support those who are fighting these battles.
- Keep all of your research information in an organized database or filing system so that other reentry team members know where to find it.
- Seek to establish a good working relationship with your most frequently-used resources.

After your preliminary research is completed, you'll be ready to assist ex-prisoners who need treatment for addictions or referrals to a support group. Your main tasks will be to:

- Interview the newly-released prisoner to determine his/her needs.
- Provide accurate information about support groups that meet in your area.
- Help develop a transportation plan to help the ex-prisoner get to meetings, keeping in mind that attending daily meetings may be necessary.
- Check with the ex-prisoner frequently to see if he/she is attending meetings and working the program.
- Pray for those who are in recovery and offer frequent encouragement by calling, texting, sending a note, or visiting them.

There are many ways that your reentry team can work with your church to provide positive relationships and support for ex-prisoners recovering from addictions. Remember that coming back to the old neighborhood and seeing familiar places and former friends is likely to trigger the old cravings for drugs and alcohol. It is vital for the church to provide new friendships and meaningful activities that encourage continued sobriety.

Some of the ideas presented in this article came from the book *When Prisoners Return* by Pat Nolan.

