

Helping Ex-Prisoners Get Medical Care

To get off to a healthy start upon release, ex-prisoners need to have access to medical care. For many, incarceration was their first chance at receiving regular medical care, though the quality of care was usually minimal and inconsistent. Dental problems in prison, for example, are often solved by simply pulling the tooth rather than repairing it.

Prison inmates are often exposed to communicable diseases such as hepatitis C, HIV, staph infections, or tuberculosis. However, many of these cases go undiagnosed in prison and come to light only in post-release examinations.

Mental illness is another problem that is widespread in prison. Without effective community facilities, prisons often become a “dumping ground” for the mentally ill.

Whether inmates face medical or mental health issues, many prisons provide only a few days’ supply of their medications upon release. This means there is almost always a gap, ranging from days to weeks when ex-prisoners are unable to obtain important medications. During this time, ex-offenders – as well as those around them – are at risk.

It is in the public interest that returning prisoners get medical and mental health treatment as soon as possible. There are a number of ways that reentry ministry volunteers and churches can help. The first step is to learn what types of medical assistance for ex-prisoners may be available in your community.

Gathering Medical Resources:

- Contact churches, Christian organizations, nonprofit groups, and local government agencies that assist ex-prisoners. Begin gathering detailed information about all the possible sources of medical, dental, and mental health treatment in your locality – with special focus on those that are free or allow patients to pay on a sliding scale basis.
- Contact the local Social Security office and find out the current rules on Medicare and Medicaid benefits that may be available to ex-prisoners. Get samples of application forms and other literature this agency may offer.
- Talk with medical providers (doctors, dentists, nurses, mental health professionals) in your own church or community. They may suggest additional resources – and some may even be willing to provide free checkups for a limited number of returning prisoners.
- Set up a database or filing system for keeping your research together in one place. Make sure all the volunteers on your reentry ministry team know how to use the filing system. Update your re- source files every few months to be sure all information is current.
- Work on establishing a good relationship with frequently-used medical resources. Find out how you can help things go more efficiently when you send them a new patient. Keep these notes in your files for future reference.

After your initial research is completed, you'll be ready to start helping ex-prisoners your church or reentry team sends to you for help finding medical treatment. At that point, your main tasks will be to:

- Interview the newly-released prisoner and determine his/her medical concerns
- Provide accurate information about medical resources available in your area
- Assist with making appointments or filling out paperwork as needed
- Develop a transportation plan to help the ex-prisoner get to appointments (may require becoming familiar with local bus routes/schedules)
- Encourage the ex-prisoner to keep appointments and follow doctor's orders
- Offer to go with them to their appointments for support, if needed

Through researching local options and helping with the initial steps of getting health care, you will be providing a great service not only to ex-prisoners, but to their families, and to the community as a whole. Contact your local Prison Fellowship staff at 800-251-7411 to learn more about reentry needs in your community and to connect with others involved in reentry ministry.

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

