

For many prisoners, the months prior to release are a time of intense fear and insecurity. This time of duress is sometimes referred to as “gate fever.”

The truth is, the problems awaiting former prisoners are often overwhelming. They are not returning to the same world they left behind – things have changed.

Their family and friends have gone on with life. Neighborhoods have grown older. Prices have increased on everything. Technology has become more challenging. Nothing is the same.

For years, decisions were made for them by the Department of Corrections. They were told what to eat, what to wear, where to go, and what to do. Now suddenly the former prisoner must make a myriad of decisions about life in the free world – a place that may no longer feel like home, but more like a foreign country.

The challenge for reentry ministry volunteers is to be prepared to support returning prisoners during their long journey home. This journey actually begins months before they walk out of the prison gate.

Reentry ministry is best accomplished through a phased approach. These are three basic phases of successful reentry:

- 1. Preparation:** Beginning 6 to 12 months prior to release, volunteers focus on equipping the prisoner with skills, education, and resources needed to make a successful transition to the outside world. This usually involves coordination between in-prison ministry volunteers and reentry volunteers. The most important goal is for the prisoner to have a detailed reentry plan in place before the expected release date.
- 2. Transition:** When the ex-prisoner leaves the prison gates, reentry volunteers make sure he or she has safe housing, food, clothing, and many other key supports. During the early days of release, most ex-prisoners need daily encouragement and assistance until their initial crisis-level needs are resolved. Then they need continued weekly contact, spiritual guidance, and emotional support for 6 to 12 months as they find employment, begin to rebuild relationships, and adapt to their new life.
- 3. Stabilization:** Volunteers continue to disciple and assist the ex-prisoner toward establishing consistent personal habits, healthy relationships, spiritual growth, and church commitment. One very important sign of stabilization is when the ex-prisoner becomes involved in serving others in the community instead of expecting to be served. This phase usually takes 12 to 24 months.

Successful reentry ministry involves addressing the needs in all areas of the returning citizen’s life: social, intellectual, spiritual, emotional, environmental, and physical. It is possible for a person to be stable in one area of life, but barely surviving in another.

Reentry volunteers are encouraged to take advantage of Prison Fellowship’s online Mentor Training, which provides more in-depth information and practical tools for helping ex-prisoners through each phase of reentry.