

The moment ex-prisoners step off the bus in your community, a daunting challenge stares them smack in the face – where to find a safe place to sleep that night. Very few prisoners have a loving family waiting for them to come home. Instead, family members may have died, moved away, or made it clear the returning prisoner is not welcome. Sometimes there are legal reasons the ex-prisoner cannot go home.

As a result, many newly-released prisoners end up in homeless shelters. While these shelters are far better than sleeping outdoors, the beds are often available only at night. During the day, shelter residents are forced onto the streets carrying their few belongings with them. This time to “roam” is not good for former prisoners who are used to having every minute of their day structured.

A safe place to live is essential to a successful reentry. But most ex-prisoners have no money to pay rent and no household furnishings. Helping newly-released men and women find affordable housing is a very important part of reentry ministry.

Here's how to get started:

1. Do your research. Contact churches, Christian organizations, nonprofit groups, and local government agencies that assist ex-prisoners. Gather information about all the possible housing options available in your area for newly-released prisoners, including homeless shelters, half-way houses, and low-cost rentals.
2. Verify your resources. Call each housing option to verify the information you've received. Gather additional details about rules and requirements, making notes on the pros/cons of each housing possibility.
3. Organize your information. Set up a database or filing system to hold all the information you've gathered about potential housing for ex-prisoners.
4. Identify the top picks. Go through your files and identify the best housing solutions. Make an appointment for an on-site visit or tour of each facility to determine whether it is suitable for recommendation.
5. Establish working relationships. Get to know the decision-makers at the housing locations you plan to recommend for ex-prisoners. Ask how you can make things easier for them when you send them a “client.” Add these notes to your files.

After investing the time doing this research, you'll be ready to help the ex-prisoners your church or reentry team sends to you for housing assistance. At that point, your main tasks will be to:

- Interview the newly-released prisoner.
- Assess his or her housing needs or requirements.
- Provide accurate information about housing resources available in your area.
- Assist with the application process, if needed.
- Connect the person with resources to obtain household furnishings, if needed.
- Make follow-up calls to see how the person is doing in his or her new home.

Helping a returning prisoner find suitable housing will have a huge impact on whether he or she will successfully reenter the community as a law-abiding citizen or return to prison. 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.