



RESOURCE

# Peer to Peer: Navigating the Return Home After Exoneration



At Healing Justice, we know that freedom after a wrongful conviction is a life-changing moment that leaves many people asking, "What's next?" As your initial excitement and joy give way to questions and uncertainty, we hope that this resource provides you with a sense of direction and peace of mind.

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## Preface

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When Healing Justice was first formed, we realized that we still had much to learn from those who had lived experience with wrongful convictions and exonerations. Thus, we decided to start by *listening*.

In collaboration with the Mid-Atlantic Innocence Project, the Duke Innocence Project, the national Innocence Network, and the US Department of Justice, we held six specialized “listening sessions,” during which we spent full days hearing directly from the exonerated and their families. We then continued the conversations by following up individually with exonerees and family members from around the country.

One main, indisputable concept that grew out of these group listening sessions and individual interviews was the need for an easily accessible resource that would offer advice and recommendations from exonerees to other exonerees. We turned that concept into a reality with the creation of this resource.

The guidance offered here comes from exonerees who reflected on their experiences as they returned home and rebuilt their lives following an exoneration. Through both the listening sessions and individual interviews, these individuals provided insight into the challenges they faced and offered recommendations for addressing these challenges.

We hope that this resource will serve as a guide to you as you navigate your journey to rebuild, recover, and heal. We also hope that you will recognize that you are not alone; many people have come before you and faced similar challenges and emotions that you may be feeling now.

Finally, we hope that this handbook will be a “living resource” that will continue to grow in both content and form. With that in mind, we will continue to listen to and learn from more exonerees and their families and continue to develop more peer-led resources to help with navigating life post-exoneration.



# Acknowledgments

This handbook represents the collective voice of exonerees who shared their stories about life after wrongful conviction.\* This resource would not be possible without a variety of organizations that supported and helped organize the listening sessions and follow-up conversations.

Healing Justice would like to thank all of the individuals who collaborated with such patience and dedication to create this handbook. We owe you a debt of gratitude. Thank you for your commitment to helping others on their path to healing.

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\*The exonerees who contributed and are listed represent a variety of different case types and individual experiences. You can learn more about each of their cases on the National Registry of Exonerations.

\*\*Lamonte Armstrong passed away in 2019, after a battle with pancreatic cancer. Lamonte spent 18 years in prison for a murder he did not commit and was a founding member of Healing Justice's Board of Directors. Malcolm Bryant passed away within a year after being exonerated and only a few months after attending our fourth listening session. He spent 17 years wrongly imprisoned. Michael McAlister, who participated in our first listening session passed away just two years after his exoneration in 2015. Michael spent 29 years wrongly imprisoned in Virginia.

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## Introduction

The justice system resolves wrongful convictions and offers exonerations in a variety of ways. Some states offer the opportunity for a full pardon and exoneration by a governor based on innocence. Some states may offer a court finding of factual innocence and exoneration based on both DNA and non-DNA evidence, while others may limit that opportunity to DNA evidence alone. Other states may not make a pronouncement of factual innocence or formal exoneration at all and will simply overturn the conviction based on the results of new evidence. Sometimes people face legal action after release, such as the threat of a retrial or appeal. Others may have their freedom restricted by parole or probation. Depending on how your case was resolved and the state where you were wrongfully convicted, state or private resources available upon release will vary.

In addition, compensation statutes vary, and not every state has such a statute. Some states offer a significant amount of money along with support services for exonerated individuals. Other states may offer money with no other promise of support services. Some states offer very little money or support of any kind. Making matters more confusing, many innocent individuals whose convictions are overturned in court do not qualify for anything under their state's statute. Again, depending on how your case was resolved and the state where you were wrongfully convicted, you may or may not receive help under a compensation statute.

Another challenge of recovery after an exoneration is that release from prison following the overturning of a conviction can happen quickly. While it takes many years, even decades, for the legal case to be investigated and resolved, your attorneys and others will rightly push for an immediate release once the court, governor, or department of corrections makes a decision. This can leave you and your family with little time to prepare.

We hope that this handbook will serve as a guide to you as you navigate returning home after a wrongful conviction and exoneration. As the initial relief, joy, and excitement of exoneration and freedom eventually begin to give way to uncertainty and questions of "what next?" we hope that this handbook will provide you with peace of mind as well as practical steps that you can take to help you during this time of transition.

### Included in this handbook:

- First-hand accounts of challenges faced when returning home.
- Suggestions and recommendations from exonerees about your transition home.
- Practical resource and support information to help guide you.
- Reflections on how you might feel.
- Stories that will let you know what you can expect.

## Using This Resource

Our goal is to provide you with key information and guidance as you readjust to life after an exoneration, with action steps and relevant resources to help you along the way. We include a diversity of experiences that form the foundation of this resource. While these stories may be similar to your own, we know that everyone's experience with wrongful conviction, exoneration, and recovery is unique. Exonerees and family members tell us that there is no "one size fits all" path to healing. As such, this guidebook should be used as one point of reference along with other sources of support that can offer direction to you during this time. We recommend that you use the table of contents to search for the specific information that you need and to find the subjects that are most relevant to you.

This resource is divided into three sections: practical needs, personal growth and development, and seeking support. The "Practical Needs" section covers common challenges exonerees face immediately after being released from prison. This section can help guide you as you transition to life after incarceration. Topics include services and resources to meet immediate needs, such as getting your photo identification and accessing affordable health care and health insurance. The "Personal Growth and Development" section covers steps you can take towards rebuilding your life and is divided into the following themes: seeking employment, managing your finances, furthering your education, and using modern technology. In the "Seeking Support" section you will find helpful information on addressing the emotional and mental health challenges that might arise as you adjust to life after a wrongful conviction. In this final section, exonerees share about their challenges and offer guidance in the following areas: interacting with family members, peer support, navigating personal and intimate relationships, and addressing individual emotional harm. The guidebook concludes with detailed information about key resources that can help you as you rebuild your life.

You will find websites and phone numbers listed throughout. The most helpful way to find resources and learn more about the services they offer is to read their websites. If you do not have regular access to the Internet, most public libraries offer free internet access and other computer services.

While our resource includes many helpful ideas, we also encourage you to visit our website at [www.healingjusticeproject.org](http://www.healingjusticeproject.org) to learn more about other opportunities for support and healing.

### A Note to Female Exonerees

*While developing this resource we became deeply aware that female exonerees often have a unique set of experiences and challenges when it comes to living through a wrongful conviction and exoneration. While striving to include a diversity of experiences, we recognize that the voices in this resource are predominantly male. This handbook is meant to be broad in scope with a primary goal of accessibility and inclusion. As we continue to build our post-exoneration support programs, we plan to better address the challenges specific to being a female exoneree, through listening sessions and individual conversations. We also invite you to share your experiences and advice with us at any time.*

## Part One: Practical Needs

*"I had no health care, I had no transportation, I had no money in my pocket."*

*"There's no resources for us, as far as medical, financial assistance, or anything like that."*

*"I thought I was going to be able to get health care, that I was able to come down and get some food stamps... I didn't qualify for their program."*

There are practical things you may need in the first days and weeks after being exonerated and freed from prison. It is helpful to anticipate what these needs might be and consider sources of support that can aid in meeting them. The following sections include stories and recommendations from exonerees that provide information on practical needs that will help as you transition home.

- Accessing services and resources for basic necessities such as food, clothing, transportation, and shelter.
- Getting your photo identification.
- Finding access to affordable health care and health insurance.



## Basic Necessities

Getting new clothing, obtaining transportation, finding housing, and putting food on the table are likely to be top priorities after you are freed. Meeting these and other basic needs can pose challenges for exonerees depending on the availability of family, friend, and community support. These challenges may leave you feeling overwhelmed and vulnerable. Remember that you are not alone. Many exonerees have come before you and there are many resources available to help you. Beyond support from family and friends, there are also community organizations that offer services and programs to help meet these basic needs.



*"I received a letter under my door during lock down. You knew you needed clothes. You knew the institution, they provide you with a coat to get you out the door. But there was nothing set up. You know clothing should be considered an essential need along with housing... Something should be set up, even if it's a hotel for the first few days."*

*-Marvin Anderson, Virginia, 15 years*

## Common Challenges

### Not Having Control

Not being able to plan the timing of your release can make the process of meeting your basic needs more difficult. As Marvin shares: "I knew I was being released at some point... but there was nothing set up." He was frustrated to realize that there was no organized system to help him meet his needs.

### Feeling Overwhelmed

You may feel overwhelmed by all the things that go into establishing a life outside of prison. As one exoneree shares, "You're coming out of a controlled environment and you don't have anything. You start from square one. It ain't like we have it all laid out for us, because it's not."

### Lack of Support

Depending on the circumstances surrounding your release, you may not have a lot of organized support like others receive when they leave prison. LaMonte describes his experience, "I was out here on pins and needles for the first three weeks. Couldn't get this and that... Being out of prison going on 5 years and I realize there's way more help for a guilty man than for an innocent man." You might also feel like one exoneree who describes the struggle with having an independent life: "Independence is hard to achieve. When you get out of prison with nothing but the clothes on your back, achieving independence is a tall mountain to climb. Where are you gonna go? The doors aren't open to you."



## *Difficulty Finding Housing*

Access to housing can also pose a challenge. One exoneree describes the difficulty he had with finding housing after his release: “I found out the hard way, just looking into it, that if you don’t have somewhere with family or whatever, it’s the shelter, there’s no in-between.” He faced homelessness and lived in a shelter while he figured out how to obtain public housing.

## *Transportation Barriers*

Transportation challenges may also arise for exonerees as they navigate their newfound freedom and work towards getting their feet on the ground. David realized how challenging navigating public transportation in his new home town could be. As he describes: “I had never taken public transportation but once in my life. (I) didn’t know anything about grabbing a bus, cabs can be expensive... when my wife went to work again, I was left to my own devices and that didn’t work out well.”

## **Peer Recommendations**

### *Use Family Members as Support*

Marvin describes the support he had from his family: “Basically I had my family. They were there through my whole entire incarceration. When I came home, they helped provide me with clothing, travel arrangements, searching for jobs and all of that.” Similarly, David credits his wife with helping him make his transition back home smoother: “She had her stuff together, she really did. She had clothes waiting for me, the house was in order as far as, just certain things she knew that I liked. She was there to support me.”

### *Reach Out*

Heidi shares about the importance of remaining open to others as part of building a support network. She explains, “It’s okay to depend on others, on exonerees or others within the innocence community who know what you’re going through. You don’t have to be strong for them. Don’t be afraid to ask for help and reach out. Seek out your innocence community and other exonerees. Anybody who has experienced trauma needs a team of support.”

### *Connect with Churches and Other Places of Worship*

David recommends connecting to local churches, as many of them have well-established food banks and clothing closets. Churches often have strong community networks and can point you in the direction of other services available in your area. Keith shares that local churches are likely to offer help to those who need it. He offers the following suggestion to get in touch with local churches: “If I’m sitting there and don’t have family members but that’s the town I want to go to... If you give me 10 different churches, I would sit and write them telling them my story. It’s all about networking and having the opportunity to write people and ask people to help.”

### *Avoid Taking Shortcuts*

Joe cautions against taking shortcuts to meet immediate needs: “It can be very tempting to take a shortcut to meet our needs. Do not give in to the temptations.” For Joe, it is not worth taking a risk and doing something illegal that could send you back to prison.

## Utilize Government and Non-profit Organizations

Local government agencies and non-profit organizations can help you meet these basic needs. The first step is understanding what resources and services are available to you. As Marvin shares, "There are some agencies that the states have for regular people who can't afford anything... healthcare, Medicaid, food stamps, stuff like that. There are programs to apply for but you gotta know how." Another exoneree used a government program to find housing: while living in a shelter, he worked closely with a social worker to sign up for a Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher and was able to move into his own apartment with that help. Knowing the resources available to you, whether through religious organizations, non-profit organizations, or government programs is a helpful step in adjusting during this transition to life after release from prison.

## Action Steps

- Seek help from others. There are people, agencies, and organizations that can help you address immediate needs upon returning home. First, you have to understand what those needs are, then you can seek out information about the resources available to meet those specific needs.
- Review the resource sections at the end of this handbook to find detailed information about available programs and resources.
  - Emotional Health and Mental Health Resources (p.44). This list provides information on resources available to help address emotional health and mental health challenges, including how to find counseling services.
  - Public Assistance Information (p.47). This list outlines the publicly available programs and services that can help address the immediate challenges you might be facing, such as transportation, housing, food, and cash assistance.
  - Community Resource Information (p.50). This list provides information on how to find local non-profit agencies that provide services and programs in response to practical needs.
- If you have access to the Internet, use a search-engine website such as Google to identify non-profit organizations and public assistance agencies in your area. You can simply type: "name of city" + "identified need" to find more information. For example, if you live in Richmond, Virginia you would type "Richmond, Virginia" and "housing resources" to find organizations in Richmond that provide support and services that address housing needs.

## Identification

*“The first problem I had was getting identification.”*

Obtaining a photo identification (ID) is one of the most important things to do once you get home. While this may seem simple, it is often one of the first obstacles exonerees face. Getting your ID can be challenging as requirements for obtaining one are different in each state. Typically, states require a social security card, birth certificate, and proof of residency to apply.

## Common Challenges

### New Requirements

Changes in the requirements and rules for obtaining a driver’s license or other photo ID, as well as changes in the landscape where you live, can make this process more difficult than you might anticipate. Sabein shares his experience: “The driving school process, everything is different. A lot of the streets had changed, even where I grew up.”

### Key Documents

Obtaining required documents can be difficult when applying for a photo ID. During your incarceration you may have lost hard copies of your personal records, such as your birth certificate or social security card, and the process for getting a new one is not always easy. One exoneree’s experience was further complicated due to identity theft. He shares, “It took me a month and some change to get an ID. I had someone using my name while I was incarcerated, which brought on another challenge. So it was a total process... and it’s not something you can put off, that’s something that you need immediately, right away, and it shouldn’t be that complex.”

*“I went to obtain my birth certificate and I got the birth certificate but she spelled my name wrong. So then I go back and pay \$24 to have my name spelled correctly on the birth certificate so it don’t be spelled like that on the social security card. So that was a process. I ended up with police papers as a portion of identification to obtain a social security card... so when I got to the social security office they say, ‘Well it has to be stamped by the cop who released you’. We ended up having to go back to the social security office and by the time we got there it was 4:01, they close at 4:00.”*

*Malcolm Bryant, Maryland*



## Peer Recommendations

### Get an ID First

A photo ID is needed for many things, such as opening a bank account or applying for a credit card. As Keith shares: “I had money I wanted to put in the bank, but the bank wouldn’t accept it because I didn’t have an ID with my picture on it. It took me two weeks because I had to go through so many processes. I had to go downtown to the courthouse to get a notarized birth certificate so I could get a social security card just so I could get my ID. I didn’t even try to get my driver’s license, I just needed a state ID so I could get a credit card and bank account. And then it wasn’t even instant. I got temporary stuff everywhere I went and got my card ten days later.”

## Gather Documents in Advance

Keith shares some helpful insight on a way your family or friends can help: “If you know that you are getting ready to be exonerated and you have family members or friends who are holding some of your things, have them round up important documents such as your social security card and driver’s license.” Contact family members to try and locate these things, or have them look up the location and instructions on where and how to get these documents.

## Obtain a Photo ID Before your Driver’s License

Keith also shares that getting a photo ID was easier than getting a driver’s license. He didn’t have a driving record because of the time he spent in prison, so to get his driver’s license he had to take the driver’s test. This can be challenging when driving in an unfamiliar place as described by Sabein above.

## Action Steps

- Get a photo ID as soon as possible. You will need a valid photo ID for a variety of reasons including cashing checks, taking a driver’s license test, getting a job, applying for public benefits, and finding housing. Valid photo IDs include a state identification card, state driver’s license, and a U.S. passport. Other helpful forms of ID include your birth certificate, social security card, marriage certificate, voter registration, and court documents.
- Check what documents you need to obtain a photo ID from your local Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) office. To locate your local DMV office, visit the website: [www.usa.gov/motor-vehicle-services](http://www.usa.gov/motor-vehicle-services) and select your current state of residency.
- Gather the personal documents you might need:
  - Copy of old driver’s license or photo ID
  - Social Security Card
  - Birth Certificate
- For information on how to obtain a social security card visit [www.ssa.gov/ssnumber](http://www.ssa.gov/ssnumber) and follow the information for submitting an application.
- To obtain a copy of your birth certificate, you need to write a letter of request to your state of birth. Addresses and fees for each state can be found by clicking on your state on the following web page: [www.cdc.gov/nchs/w2w.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/w2w.htm).



## Exoneree Highlight: Getting a Photo ID

*One exoneree's experience provides a good example of the step-by-step process required to obtain identification. This exoneree discovered that his state of Maryland required one or more proofs of identity, two or more proofs of residency, and a social security card to obtain a state ID. Through asking around, he learned that proof of residency could be shown in the form of lease agreements, mail from a government agency with his name on it, bills, or a voter registration card. He also learned that his court order of release might also be accepted as proof of residency if the document included the address to which he had returned home. He found that another quick way to obtain proof of residency was to have postage stamps mailed to his home from the post office. This letter from the post office, with his name on it, counted because it was sent from a government agency. As for proof of identity, he was required to provide either a birth certificate or passport. However, he learned that, in special circumstances, government agencies might accept other proofs of identity, such as newspaper clippings with his photo or his old prison ID.*

*After gathering all of these required documents, this exoneree found that the process was fairly straightforward, although it did require a lot of patience and persistence. He found it very helpful to know what was required ahead of time, so he could spend time gathering all of the documents before applying for an ID. This saved him from having to make multiple trips to the MVA.*



## Exercise Your Right to Vote

Depending on the resolution of your case, you may be able to have your right to vote fully restored. You will want to learn about your voting rights, and about the process for registering to vote and for voting in both local and national elections. Here are some helpful tools that will teach you more about the voting process and your role in voting for local and national elected officials.

- Register to vote: [vote.gov](https://www.vote.gov).
- Find out what ID requirements your state has for voters: [www.usa.gov/voter-id](https://www.usa.gov/voter-id).
- Keep informed on the voting process: [www.usa.gov/election-day](https://www.usa.gov/election-day).

# Healthcare

Getting healthcare is one of the most common needs after being exonerated and returning home. Most exonerees need physical and dental check-ups after being wrongfully imprisoned for many years. Finding affordable care can pose a challenge and understanding the opportunities for getting health insurance through the government can be difficult. While obtaining access to health care and insurance is not straight-forward, there are programs and resources available to help.

## Common Challenges

### *Obtaining Insurance*

David describes the fear of not having health insurance: “When I got out of prison I didn’t have insurance until I actually got on my wife’s insurance which took about 9 months, because we had to wait until the sign-up period came about. I was just worried about everything, like if I get hurt, we could lose everything. If I do something it could cost ten, fifteen, twenty thousand dollars... One little slip to lose everything.”

### *Finding Quality Care*

While you may be able to obtain health insurance or access affordable medical care, these may not cover everything you need, or you may find that you are unhappy with the treatment you receive. One exoneree expressed his frustration with the lack of adequate healthcare outside of prison by comparing it to the care they received while incarcerated: “I thought I got better medical attention in prison. I don’t have insurance out of prison and doctors are less understanding.” Similarly, Dean shares, “When you do get health care, 90% of the time, it’s the worst type of assistance you could possibly have. There’s no quality at all.” Another exoneree cautions that free healthcare workers often have increased caseloads and may provide inadequate service.

### *Taking Prescription Medication*

If you take prescription medication, you may find that you are given a limited supply of medicine upon release and need to seek medical attention quickly. For example, David was only provided three days of medicine upon release, and finding affordable medical care to refill his prescription within that time frame was impossible.

## Peer Recommendations

### *Seek Guidance at a Pharmacy*

One exoneree shares that pharmacies are great places for medical information, and can answer many of your questions. While pharmacists cannot replace doctors in providing care, they can provide you with important medical information.

### *Search for Low-cost Clinics*

David shares that the university in his hometown offers low-cost medical services that cover a large percentage of the cost for those in need. He recommends that exonerees check with their local universities to see if they have similar programs.

## Stay Active

Exercising, walking, and other physical activity helped Beverly regain some normalcy in her life after being released from prison. As she shares, “Staying active has both physical and emotional benefits. It is a kind of therapy and brings me joy.”

## Maintain a Healthy Lifestyle

Chris O. shares why he incorporates specific practices to stay in good health: “I try to do what I can to protect my health, like preventative things such as eating healthy food, exercising, and using homeopathic remedies whenever possible.” By being proactive about your health, you will be less likely to have health issues and need medical care.

## Action Steps

- Obtain any medical records you can from the health services office at the prison.
  - For federal prisons, you can submit a form online by following the instructions under “Requests for Records about Yourself” on the Federal Bureau of Prisons website: [www.bop.gov/foia/#tabs-5](http://www.bop.gov/foia/#tabs-5).
  - Each state has its own laws and processes for obtaining your personal records. To learn more about the requirements in your state, you will need to conduct an internet search using key terms such as “state where you were incarcerated” + “prison” + “inmate medical records”. For example, typing “Georgia prison inmate medical records” will show you websites that will provide information on how to make a request in Georgia.
- Learn about national healthcare programs.
  - Eligibility for Medicaid depends on your income and family size and is determined by your current state of residence. To learn more about the benefit visit [www.policygenius.com/blog/a-state-by-state-guide-to-medicaid/](http://www.policygenius.com/blog/a-state-by-state-guide-to-medicaid/).
  - To find out more information about national healthcare and medical insurance you can visit the government website at [www.healthcare.gov](http://www.healthcare.gov) and follow the prompts.
- Find a doctor. Many health insurance companies will list providers that are covered. Be sure to call the doctor’s office and verify that they accept your insurance before your visit.
- If you do not have health insurance and need medical care, look for free or low-cost health clinics in your area. Many of these clinics provide medical care on a sliding fee for patients. Some offer other types of care including dental, counseling, and vision services.
  - To find a health center in your area visit [www.findahealthcenter.hrsa.gov](http://www.findahealthcenter.hrsa.gov).
  - Check to see if a local university provides free or low-cost medical services for individuals in need.
- Healthcare Bluebook is a price comparison tool to ensure you are not overpaying for medical services. It also locates cheaper services in your area: [www.healthcarebluebook.com](http://www.healthcarebluebook.com).
- Consider ways you can maintain your physical health: follow your doctor’s orders when taking medication, get adequate sleep, eat healthy foods and drink plenty of water, exercise regularly.
- Consider the mind, body, and spirit connection to maintaining good health. We provide more information about emotional and mental health later in this resource.

## After Innocence

*After Innocence is a national, non-profit organization that provides reliable, efficient re-entry assistance for the wrongfully convicted, and advocates for laws that provide them with meaningful compensation and effective reentry support. After Innocence works with more than 500 exonerees across 48 states, and collaborates with innocence organizations around the country to reach as many more exonerees as possible, whether they have been out of prison for two weeks or two decades.*

*After Innocence offers a three-part program:*

- 1. Coordinating access to health care, social services, public benefits and legal services for individual exonerees in their communities;*
- 2. Documenting exonerees' experiences after release; and*
- 3. Advocating for laws that fairly compensate exonerees for time lost and assist them with the road ahead.*

*You can learn more at: [www.after-innocence.org](http://www.after-innocence.org). You can also contact the organization directly at [jon@after-innocence.org](mailto:jon@after-innocence.org).*



## Know Your Rights

*Depending on the status of your case, you may encounter barriers to accessing services including applying for public benefits, public housing, and employment resources. It is important to know your rights as someone who was wrongfully convicted. The National Reentry Resource Center provides "myth buster" fact sheets that can provide information on policies that might affect you as someone who has been previously incarcerated. These facts sheets are available on their website: [csgjusticecenter.org/nrrc/projects/mythbusters](http://csgjusticecenter.org/nrrc/projects/mythbusters).*



## Part Two: Personal Growth and Development

*“Whatever your passion is in life, or whatever your purpose is, just be patient. It’s gonna be a struggle. Ain’t nothing gonna happen over night. Just stay focused and keep pushing.”*

*“Work allowed me to feel like I was getting back into society again, that I was actually a part of society... I mean I had to get up and get structure, and I think that’s one of the biggest problems for people who get out of prison after serving so much time. In prison, I had a pattern, a structure, that at least made me feel comfortable. I did the same thing every day... So you got to have some type of structure.”*

*“You’ve gotta do the things you have to do to carry you forward in the work you want to do, but you also have to pay bills.”*

In this section, exonerees share some of the most common personal challenges they faced when trying to navigate their newfound independence. The stories and recommendations shared focus on empowerment and self-sufficiency as you start rebuilding your life. This section includes helpful information on the following topics:

- Seeking employment:
  - Conducting a job search,
  - Building your resume,
  - Applying and interviewing, and
  - Addressing your incarceration with potential employers.
- Learning how to manage your finances.
- Opportunities for furthering your education.
- Using modern forms of technology.



## Employment

*“Work allowed me to feel like I was getting back into society again, that I was actually a part of society.” -David*

Many exonerees discuss the specific obstacles they faced when looking for a job after returning home. Such challenges might include limited job opportunities, not knowing how to explain your wrongful conviction to potential employers, and the lack of workplace experience due to your incarceration. Below are helpful recommendations from other exonerees, as well as key resources, that will help you in your search for employment.

## Common Challenges

### *Changes in the Job Market*

The current job market may be very different than what you remember, as described by Sabein: “There was a lot of stuff I just didn’t know, the job market was what it was and I didn’t know what to expect...” Your expectations might not match reality, and this can be further challenging depending on your work experience before the wrongful conviction.

### *Job Applications and Interviews*

Knowing what to say on job applications and to potential employers in job interviews about the time you were incarcerated is a common source of stress for exonerees and they often cite it as a significant barrier to landing a job. As Sabein shares, “By me being gone for so long, employers ask me where I had been and I didn’t have nothing, no record on my resume, to show for what I did during that time.”

### *Prison’s Impact on Employment*

Even though you were wrongfully convicted, the fact that you served time in prison may still pose a barrier to finding employment. Chris T. describes the red flags that your incarceration could raise for potential employers: “When they look, you got these skills, but where is your work background. That sends up red flags cause you got these skills, you got these capabilities, so either you’re a problem on the job, that’s the first thing they are going to think. They aren’t going to think you’ve been locked up, you’ve been gone, they are going to think you are a problem.”

### *Work Experience*

You may find that your lack of work experience limits your job prospects. As David shares: “The reality is you got people who are going there (to prison) and are innocent who have no skills, who are coming out with no job training, and have a real possibility of no meaningful job or a career when they get out.” Even if you have prior work experience before your wrongful conviction, or some job training while incarcerated, you may struggle to promote these experiences when you apply for employment.

## Job Expectations

Once you find employment, the expectations and demands of a new job might be different than you anticipate. One exoneree shares his experience with starting a new job: "Punching in and clocking out, I didn't know you had to do stuff like that. Certain questions... you may feel like you should already know, but at the same time if you really need some help and you don't say nothing, then you still ain't gonna know."

## Peer Recommendations

### Work with a Job Placement or "Temp" Agency

Horace found his current job after attending a job fair hosted by a local temp agency; he was hired for a temp job which led to his current line of work. Another exoneree notes that one benefit of working with staffing and job placement agencies is that they handle all of the paperwork and background checks, so they can recommend potential jobs based on your background. Another benefit of these agencies is that you do not have to describe your situation every time you apply for a new job.

### Include Prison Work Experience and Training

One exoneree recommends talking about the work you did while in prison to fill the gap in your resume: "Use what you did that whole time, do not leave a gap. I have always been very direct about what I have been through." Jerome worked as a barber during his incarceration and was able to use this training to open his own barbershop in his hometown. Sabein describes how he wishes he was aware of this when he was applying for jobs. He said he would have "put a lot of the trades that I had, even when I was incarcerated" when speaking with potential employers.

*"I have all this experience and I cannot say that I didn't get paid for this work, but this is my experience and it is what I know, what I went through. You will find that many people are sympathetic to that and it has actually helped me get jobs. I use it to my advantage. Use your experience, what you have been through, to your advantage and that will help you get jobs, and better jobs." -Exoneree*

## Be Honest

Talking about your situation openly and honestly in a job interview may feel challenging, but you can use what you have done both inside and outside of prison to your advantage when applying and interviewing for a job. As LaMonte explains, "Believe it or not, you can use some of this stuff you do in this prison system on your resume of things you were doing inside. They're gonna want to know what the hell you've been doing with your time. Most of the guys will hopefully be exonerated, but they can use that stuff if they do something productive while they're inside, unlike a couple people I know that sit around mad at everyone."

## Ask for Help and Follow Up on Leads

Chris O. recommends that you "use your resources and don't be afraid to ask for help" when creating a resume and applying for jobs. Ask a friend or family member to help you fill out job applications and write resumes.

*“My brother basically wanted me to stay on the right track so he showed me how to fill out stuff online, or he would call jobs and see if they were hiring... He was thinking of something that would give me an opportunity right away, like a warehouse. Something that I could do every day.” -Exoneree*

## Action Steps

- Network. Consider personal resources that can help you.
  - Ask a friend or family member to review your resume, help you prepare for an interview, or ask around about local job openings.
  - Your innocence organization might be able to help you network with others to help you find employment.
- Find local agencies and organizations that can offer resources, information, and assistance in job placement. Visit the National HIRE Network Clearinghouse and click on your state for more information: [www.hirenetwork.org/clearinghouse](http://www.hirenetwork.org/clearinghouse).
- Understand your rights when it comes to hiring practices before you apply. There are laws in place regarding what information companies can and can't ask for in interviews and on applications. You can learn about your rights through the National Employment Law Project Guide: <https://bit.ly/2PS1YC1>
- Create a resume.
  - Check with your local library or college to see if they have resume writing workshops and other resources.
  - The following websites also offer some helpful “how-to” guides: [www.monster.com/career-advice/cover-letter-resume](http://www.monster.com/career-advice/cover-letter-resume) [www.thebalancecareers.com/job-resumes-4161923](http://www.thebalancecareers.com/job-resumes-4161923)
- Conduct a job search to find available jobs in your area.
  - Visit your public library and ask about employment resources.
  - Review help-wanted ads in your local newspaper.
  - Many communities have government and non-profit organizations that provide job placement and training services. To find local workforce services visit: [www.careeronestop.org/LocalHelp](http://www.careeronestop.org/LocalHelp) and enter your location into the search bar.
- Know what the average salary is for the type of employment you are seeking. Find that information by typing the job type and your location into the search at [www.salary.com](http://www.salary.com).

## Checking the Box

*Policies around “checking the box” when filling out employment applications and other documents are currently being addressed and vary widely from state to state. To further complicate the problem, while your record might be legally cleared, employers and landlords often use private background check companies that do not have the most recent information and may still have your conviction on their records.*

*It is important that you know your rights and understand the implications of “checking the box.” A good starting point is to seek the advice of your lawyer and/or innocence organization whenever this situation arises. You should also consider how you might share information regarding your wrongful conviction and length of incarceration with potential employers.*

## Managing Your Finances

*This is “[o]ne of the things that exonerees need most when they are coming out. We didn’t pay bills when we left, most of us, we left as kids. So no one showed us how to use credit cards, how to do the simple things.” -Chris T.*

Getting a job may be high on your priority list in order to have a steady income and be financially independent, but other issues may arise relating to finances. Like many exonerees, you likely had very little money, if any at all, when you were released. And you likely did not receive any immediate financial support through a prison release program. Understanding current banking tools and money management can help prevent finances from being a source of frustration and stress.

## Common Challenges

### *New Banking Tools*

It is important to understand as much as you can about the modern financial world, including starting new bank accounts, obtaining and using debit and credit cards, and applying for loans. One exoneree cautions about taking out loans and recommends finding someone who can give you sound financial advice before making decisions that could hurt you financially.

### *Different Forms of Payment*

After you open a bank account it may take some time to learn how to use different payment methods. Marvin describes his frustrating experience with writing a check for the first time: “When I came home, I had to call my sister one day about how to fill out a check. I had to write a check for something, and I had never written a check. I had been in the habit of using my debit or credit card, but in this place I had to write a check. She had to explain everything to me.” Understanding the differences between debit and credit cards is also key so that you do not overdraw your account or build up debt.

### *Managing Money*

Like Marvin, you may find that prison did not prepare you to manage your finances. As he shares, “Knowing the simple things, writing a check, keeping up with finances — they don’t teach you anything about that while you are incarcerated or in a release program.”

## Peer Recommendations

### *Take a Credit Building Class*

One exoneree suggests taking a class on credit building to better understand how to manage your finances. You can check with your local public library, credit union, or college to ask about financial literacy courses offered in your area.

## Use Credit Cards Wisely

Chris O. acknowledges the importance of building your credit, but cautions individuals about the dangers of excessive credit card use and recommends not spending more money on credit cards than you can pay each month. As he shares, “Paying my car payment, my rent, that built my credit. One credit card, or two—don’t go overboard. So you can build your credit.”

## Save Money

It can be beneficial for you to consider different options for saving. One exoneree stresses the importance of saving money for retirement and unexpected expenses. She recommends that exonerees set aside money to make up time that was lost for saving while in prison.

## Track Your Expenses

One exoneree shares, “My girlfriend helped me set up a spreadsheet to tell me how much money I had to spend each month.” Keeping a budget gave him a better understanding of his finances and helped him stay on top of his expenses.

## Action Steps

- Use online tools to learn more about financial management, credit building, creating a budget, applying for and paying off loans, and much more. Some resources include:
  - [www.consumerfinance.gov/ask-cfpb](http://www.consumerfinance.gov/ask-cfpb)
  - [www.nefe.org](http://www.nefe.org)
  - [www.mappingyourfuture.org/Money](http://www.mappingyourfuture.org/Money)
- Learn more about how to open a bank account and manage a checking account online.
  - Nerdwallet blog post: <https://bit.ly/1UT0qG1>
  - Consumer Finance blog post: <https://bit.ly/2ZXBDaB>
- Open a bank account.
  - Talk to friends, family, or your law team to find out which banks they use and trust.
  - Call ahead to the bank to ensure that you arrive with the documents needed to open an account.
  - Before you open an account, ask the bank about their rates, fees, and the minimum amount of money you will need. These rates differ from bank to bank, so it is important to check ahead of time with the bank of your choice. Often banks require a minimum deposit of cash to open a new account. Credit unions often have lower fees for their accounts, so look into those as an option as well.
- Access local classes to learn about managing your finances.
  - Your bank or credit-union likely has programs or services available to assist you with your financial needs.
  - Check with your local community college or public library for free financial management courses. Many local resources such as these offer short programs on topics such as saving for retirement, using credit cards, budgeting, and more.
- Obtain a free copy of your credit report at [www.annualcreditreport.com](http://www.annualcreditreport.com). This score will determine what credit cards and other loans are available to you, and at what interest rate. This score may also be checked when you apply for a job or a rental home. The higher your credit score, the more financial opportunities you will have.

- If your score is low, you can build it by paying your bills on time and paying off any debt you might have.
- Enroll in a free credit-tracking service such as [www.creditkarma.com](http://www.creditkarma.com). While these services can be helpful, it is important to be aware of ads on websites that want to enroll you in a service that is not free. Do not provide your credit card information for “free services” without understanding the terms of the service you are registering for.
- File your taxes.
  - You may be eligible for free tax help and/or a refundable tax credit called the “Earned-Income Tax Credit”.
  - You can find local free tax-preparation services by searching using your zip code on the IRS website: [irs.treasury.gov/freetaxprep](http://irs.treasury.gov/freetaxprep).
  - Several free tools are available online to help you file your taxes. Visit [www.turbotax.com](http://www.turbotax.com) to get started.
  - Beware of scams: Some scammers might claim to be the IRS and threaten you with imprisonment. The IRS will never call you to demand immediate payment or threaten you in this way.
- Cash your checks at banks or local credit unions if possible. Many check-cashing companies and local stores charge a fee or percentage of the check for their services. Banks and credit unions will not charge you if you have an account with them.
- Be cautious about using quick cash services such as pawn shops and title loans. Be wary of businesses that advertise their cash services on neon signs saying “cash express” or “cash store”. While these services promise easy money up front, they charge extremely high interest rates on any money you receive from them.
- If you receive compensation or win a successful civil action, be sure you discuss the handling of this money with your lawyers and be realistic about how to manage these new funds over time.

## Education

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You may desire to seek further education and training opportunities upon coming home, such as obtaining a GED or a college degree. Some exonerees have run into difficulty obtaining credit for courses they took while in prison. Others have found adequate and affordable educational opportunities difficult to locate. Below are some ways to ease the stress of pursuing education.

### Peer Recommendations

#### *Use Your Prison Experience*

It is important to consider ways that the experience you gained in prison, whether it be taking a course or completing a training, can help you achieve your educational goals. Thomas H. reflects on his experience in prison: "I got my GED, did trades and got four years of college, so a lot of good came from all of this also. My degree that I got in prison is the reason why I got my job today and advanced for promotion and all of that. So I think some good things come out also."

#### *Address Your Wrongful Conviction*

In Chris O.'s experience, being open about his wrongful conviction when applying to university programs helped make his application stronger. As he shares, "For most universities, having an exoneree enrolling in their university is good. Sometimes schools will take the exonerees because it brings another experience level. You bring that diversity into the classroom. Take advantage of that exoneree status. It helped me through."

#### *Apply for Financial Aid*

For Chris O., the financial aid office at his university helped him get the funding to pay for his education. As he shares, "There are a lot of avenues for financial help. I took out some school loans. There are probably scholarships available. Use the financial aid office. That was the best resource I had." There are also government loans and other various funding options available to help you pay for your education. Chris O. shares his recommendations for individuals who are trying to figure out how to pay for school: "If they haven't used their Pell grant, I would say go to school, apply for the Pell grant, and if you don't have a Pell grant, get loans. Be wise about it."

#### *Use the Internet*

There are many free educational training videos, manuals, and other resources readily available online about many topics, trades, and skills. One exoneree recommends that you look up "how-to" videos to learn about any subject that interests you.



## Action Steps

- Write out a list of any education-based courses or specific trainings you completed while in prison and think about how they can help you in pursuing a degree. You can access these records by requesting the information from the prison where you completed the course or training.
  - If applicable, get proof of your GED or high school completion, along with proof of any courses completed while in prison.
  - For federal prisons you can submit a form online at the Federal Bureau of Prisons website: [www.bop.gov/foia/#tabs-5](http://www.bop.gov/foia/#tabs-5).
  - Each state has its own laws and processes for obtaining your personal records. To learn more about the requirements in your state, you will need to conduct an internet search. You can use key terms such as “state where you were incarcerated” + “prison” + “inmate personal records”. For example, typing “Georgia prison inmate personal records” would result in websites that will outline how to make a request in Georgia.
- Obtain any records of education completed before you were in prison:
  - If you earned a diploma before you were in prison, get a copy from the Department of Education for the state where you graduated high school: [www2.ed.gov/about/contacts/state/](http://www2.ed.gov/about/contacts/state/).
  - To obtain a certificate of a GED, you can send a request to the GED Administrator where you took the test, found here: [www.gedtestingservice.com/testers/ged-testing-administrator](http://www.gedtestingservice.com/testers/ged-testing-administrator).
- If you do not have a high school diploma consider working towards your GED.
  - Review your state’s GED eligibility requirements and testing fees here: [www.test-guide.com/ged-requirements-by-state.html](http://www.test-guide.com/ged-requirements-by-state.html).
  - Take a GED test preparation class. You can find courses offered in your area on this website: [www.gedtestingservice.com/testers/locate-a-prep-center](http://www.gedtestingservice.com/testers/locate-a-prep-center) or by calling this toll-free phone number: 1-800-626-9433.
  - Check with your local library to find free test preparation books and other materials. You can also ask them about GED test prep courses in your area.
- Consider applying for college:
  - There are different opportunities for pursuing education beyond high school including: technical college, associate’s degrees (2-year programs), bachelor’s degrees (4-year programs), and graduate school (Master’s and Ph.D. programs). Many colleges and universities also offer part-time or online classes for students who have jobs.
  - Start by contacting the closest community college and asking about their associate’s degree programs.
  - Once you’ve identified the school you want to attend, look at the acceptance requirements. You can easily find this information online, or by visiting the admissions office at the school. Typical requirements include a high school diploma or GED, completion of a standardized test (ACT or SAT), a written essay, and an application fee.

- There are many programs and resources available to help you pay for school. There are four primary resources: scholarships, financial aid (through the government), financial grants, and private loans.
  - Scholarships are awarded based on merit and other specifications. Often you can apply for scholarships at the same time you apply to a specific institution.
  - Financial aid is based on an assessment of your financial need determined by the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).  
[www.studentaid.ed.gov](http://www.studentaid.ed.gov)
  - Grants are typically distributed based on financial need and have to be paid off after completing your degree. [www2.ed.gov/fund/grants-apply.html](http://www2.ed.gov/fund/grants-apply.html)
  - Private loans are distributed by banks and other financial institutions. These usually have higher interest rates than grants and must be paid off within a specific time period. [nslids.ed.gov](http://nslids.ed.gov)
  - There are many different eligibility requirements so the best way to get the most helpful information is to talk to the Financial Aid office at your institution.
- There are many free courses for a variety of subjects available online. You can find these courses on the following websites:
  - [waybuilder.net/free-ed](http://waybuilder.net/free-ed)
  - [www.howstuffworks.com](http://www.howstuffworks.com)

## Record Expungement

*At the time of publication, except for Idaho and Alabama, all states have policies and procedures for clearing felony and misdemeanor records, including record "expungement" in which all records are destroyed, and record "sealing" in which records are made unavailable to the public. The first step towards obtaining a sealing or expungement of your criminal record is to find out the policies in your state.*

*[Cleanslateclearinghouse.org](http://Cleanslateclearinghouse.org) provides information regarding record clearance. You can use this website to look up the policies on a state and district level. The information provided will let you know if you qualify based on the status of conviction and will outline eligibility requirements, timeline, and the processes for moving forward. There is also a databank of legal service providers who work on record clearance in your state.*

*You can find further resources in your state by going to the following website and clicking on the applicable state:  
[ccresourcecenter.org/resources-2/state-specific-resources](http://ccresourcecenter.org/resources-2/state-specific-resources).*

## Technology

*“Exonerees have problems adjusting to technological advancement, because of its rapid change.” -Chris T.*

Technology has likely changed quite a bit during your incarceration. Society depends on modern technology, and it is important to know how to use everyday tools such as cell phones and computers. You may find this daunting and even frustrating, especially when it appears easy for others around you. Engaging in new modes of technology can be fun and can make your life easier. Be sure to ask for help and get direction as needed.

## Common Challenges

### *Using Computers*

You may find that you have little to zero knowledge of modern technology. You may feel similar to LaMonte when you realize how much technology has changed. As he shares, “The computer and technology stuff was like a big slap in the face when I walked out of prison.” David describes having a similar experience: “When I got out of prison I knew nothing about computers, you could have emailed me about anything and I wouldn’t know.”

### *Using Cell Phones*

The vast majority of people now own a cell phone, and most use it as their primary mode of communication. These days, many cell phones are considered “smart phones” and have other programs such as internet access, games, and social media applications. Learning how to use a cell phone can be challenging, especially if you did not have one before you were incarcerated. David shares about his experience after coming home: “I had never used a cell phone, My wife had to dial the cell phone so I could call my parents to tell them I was on my way home. I didn’t know how to use it, I had never used one.”



## Peer Recommendations

### *Visit Your Local Library*

Chris T. had a positive experience taking computer courses at his library. He found that the teachers were well-trained and made sure that the students understood the material before moving on to a new topic.

### *Ask for Help*

Jerome suggests turning to younger family members and friends for help with new technology. In addition to being better versed than many adults in this area, Jerome found that youth tended to be more respectful toward him because they had fewer preconceived notions and biases against people who had spent time in prison.

### *Be Careful Using Social Media*

Beyond an increase in our reliance on computers and cell phones, the use of social media continues to expand. Chris T. cautions new exonerees to be careful when signing up for social media sites since it is easy to be exposed to identity theft. It is also important to be careful about what you choose to share. One exoneree cautions individuals about posting negative things and warns that employers and others can often see what you post.

## Action Steps

- Consider creating an email address to increase your ability to communicate with others. You can obtain a free email address through many websites such as [www.gmail.com](http://www.gmail.com) and [www.yahoo.com](http://www.yahoo.com).
- Visit your local library to learn more about their computer classes. Libraries often offer free Internet access, computer time, and printing to the public.
- Some organizations have programs that provide low-cost computers and Internet access to qualifying individuals. Learn more about one such program at [www.everyoneon.org](http://www.everyoneon.org).
- Many popular social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and various applications for smart phones provide opportunities for connecting with others and accessing helpful information. To learn more, visit the social media quickstarter that explains how to use popular social media platforms: [blogs.constantcontact.com/social-media-quickstarter](http://blogs.constantcontact.com/social-media-quickstarter).
- Beware of scams. Now that so many businesses operate online, it is easier than ever to get scammed. Here are a few tips to avoid having your identity or money stolen:
  - Never click on a link or open an email that promises "You have just won..."
  - If anyone contacts you over the phone or via email and asks for personal information such as your address, social security number, or financial information, hang up. No bank, insurance company, or reputable business will ask you for personal information this way.
  - Never wire money to someone you don't know, even if they say your loved one is in trouble and needs you to wire cash. Call the family member in question; chances are, they are just fine.
  - The Federal Trade Commission has two useful sources that will help you spot scams: <https://bit.ly/2bgPoHm> and <https://bit.ly/2edjs9g>.

## Part Three: Seeking Support

*“I wake up every morning grateful, and am glad to be out... I am glad for the opportunities that I get, but at the end of the day there is still a lot that needs to go on with me to be considered somewhat normal for society.”*

*“When people see that I have a positive attitude they have more respect. Some people want to know why I am not bitter, because they say I have the right to be, but I learned a long time ago to not worry about what I can’t change. What happened, happened. I’ve accepted that and now I am going to move on. You have the right to be bitter and angry, but don’t let it consume you.”*

*“It gave me a false perception coming out the door thinking that I could easily make this transition. It’s a transition, so you need to know that. You need to get out there and get to work to find out how hard society has become.”*

*“Now we come home to this huge culture shock and we have to find our way in that all over again.”*

In this section, exonerees share some of the challenges they faced when interacting with family members and other loved ones, dealing with feelings of isolation and loneliness, searching for understanding, and managing emotional stress. Their stories provide helpful insight into various feelings and emotions that are a common part of the exoneree experience. Recommendations on how they coped might help you think of opportunities and sources of support in your own life, whether it be help from family and friends, connecting with other exonerees, working with community organizations, or seeking professional help.

This section includes specific information on navigating the emotional challenges in key areas, including:

- Interacting with family members.
- Finding peer support from others who have experienced a wrongful conviction.
- Navigating intimate partner relationships.
- Addressing the emotional challenges that might arise during this adjustment period.





## Family Relationships

*"Some families want the ones who did this to be held accountable... When nothing is being done about that, they get frustrated. You hate to see the frustration on their faces, because like you tell people you are doing time, but really your family is doing time too." -Thomas Haynesworth, Virginia, 26 years*

Your family members and other loved ones can be important sources of support when you return home. They are excited to have you home, want what is best for you, and want to help. However, it is important to understand that your wrongful conviction and imprisonment also had deep impacts on your family, who may be struggling with their own trauma, loss, and recovery. This is a period of adjustment for everyone, and there may be moments of frustration as you and your family members try to adjust to one another and address the harm that was caused to all. Exonerees have provided insight into how you can navigate these important relationships post-exoneration. Some common experiences are outlined below, along with recommendations.

## Common Challenges

### Relating to Family Members

You may feel like you have trouble relating to your family and adjusting to life at home. As Thomas H. shares: "When you get out of prison, no one really understands. When you go back to a family home, they have to adjust to you, like you have to adjust to them."

*"At the time you feel like a house guest, even though they are telling you, 'my house is your house,' that house guest feeling always stumbles on your stomach. You could have paid for that house before you left, and when you come back it's been in the hands of these loved ones for so long. It's like I'm a guest in my own home... When they tell you, 'What's mine is yours, this is your home,' it takes a minute for that to kick in." -Exoneree*

## Supporting Children and Other Dependents

You may have family members who depend on you for support. Perhaps you are a parent to minor children or have other loved ones living with you. These responsibilities can feel challenging while processing and handling your transition and recovery needs following an exoneration. Heidi shares about her experience jumping back into the role of mother and caregiver for her three children directly after being freed: "It was hard to try and establish a routine again when I had people depending on me to do it."

*"In my case in particular, I had children I was coming home to that were waiting for me. All of a sudden I was expected to provide meals and do the things moms are expected to do. Going to the grocery store and trying to get food that my children were going to eat for the day was almost impossible to manage... I would leave in tears because I couldn't make a decision. I felt inadequate and like a failure as a mother."*

*-Heidi Goodwin, Washington, 13 years*



## Creating Healthy Boundaries

Because family members want to be helpful and provide support to you, they may be eager to offer suggestions and advice. They may also take steps to help you or make plans for you without asking first. Sometimes these suggestions, advice, and uninvited help can be a source of discomfort and frustration. One exoneree shares their experience: "My family said that I had to chill and relax and put my feet in the air, but they had no idea that my staying active was a form of relaxation because for so long you longed to be able to do that—embrace home and be with your family." Similarly, Dean describes a time when his mom cleaned up his room without asking. In response, he became angry because he was reminded of feelings he had while in prison: "While I was away at the Innocence Conference my mom came into my room and cleaned it up and I went off on her. That's one of the main triggers for exonerees: you are given a space, this is your space and then someone comes in and moves stuff around. It's like whoa... like you've been shook down by the cops..."

*"I'm living at home... [I think of] the word coddling. It comes from a good place and I get that, but after so much you get a little apprehensive... you know, sometimes you have to go out there and make a wrong turn."*

*"Just because I was wrongly convicted and had to spend years in prison, doesn't mean I have lost the ability or never had the ability to make positive and wise decisions, and they should let me make decisions for myself."*

## Finding Personal Space

It is common to desire space and time and to feel like attention from family is crowding in on you. One exoneree shares his experience with needing space to process while feeling overwhelmed by his family, who struggled to acknowledge this need and were worried about his desire to be left alone. For the exoneree, it was not that he wanted to be completely alone; he just wanted space to process everything that was going on.



*"I would be sitting on the couch and my wife would ask me if I was alright, if I wanted to talk about it. I understand her desire to be helpful comes out of love and a really good place... She was frustrated and she wanted to help but there really wasn't anything she could do. She wanted to do something, but I needed her to be my friend and my wife and not my mom. I just spent 23 years asking someone's permission to do the simplest things. Sometimes I got to find out that I don't want to be there on my own. She's trying to protect me and I know that... I didn't need a nanny and some days it felt just like that." -David Boyce, Virginia, 21 years*

## Feeling Distant

You may feel distant from your family as you come to terms with the events you missed while you were incarcerated. One exoneree realized that he got to the point where he did not really know his family like he felt he should because of all the time he missed with them over the decades he was in prison. Such feelings are common for family members and loved ones, and, as Sabein shares, "it takes time to get to know one another again."

*"Over the course of twenty-eight years, of course you think about what you could have been doing, what you could have done with your life you, you know. You think about the things you missed out... You think about what you didn't have the opportunity to share and be a part of... It's just, you missed out on so much with your family you know... I got to the point where I really don't know them like I should know them... Sometimes I feel I was robbed of a lot of things." -Thomas Haynesworth, Virginia, 26*



## Meeting Expectations

You may find that you have changed after spending time in prison and are struggling with meeting the expectations of family members who expect you to be the same person you were before the trauma and loss of your wrongful conviction and imprisonment. You may struggle with your identity, as Heidi explains: "After several years I came to realize that I wasn't going to be the same mother that I was before. I was trying so hard to fill the shoes I had before, but I wasn't being true to myself. I had changed and I felt that my change wasn't good for my family and that they wanted me to be my old self."



## Peer Recommendations

### *Involve Your Family*

One exoneree recommends that if you do have family support, they might be able “to assist you or do certain things... they can drive you around or find out in advance what you need.” Sometimes family members just want to feel useful, so giving them specific ways to help you can be beneficial for both them and you.

### *Take Time to Process and Adjust*

As one exoneree shares, “You need time to fit back into society. There are a lot of things that you have to learn, and you’ve got to give the person the opportunity to learn. You’ve got to take time to get to know the family and complete the transition back into society.”

*“We all kind of transition at our own pace and we should be allowed to adjust accordingly... sometimes we just need to be allowed to make those mistakes so that we can learn. That’s how we learn, we make mistakes and then we know not to do it anymore, or we learn how to do it a little better... they just need to allow us to have some space to find our place... they just need to allow us to have a little bit of space to think everything through and take it all in.” -David Boyce, Virginia, 21 years*

### *Create Space for Yourself*

Your own emotional, spiritual, and physical outlets will look different depending on your situation. For Dean, this looks like getting in his truck and going for a drive so he has a chance to clear his head after a challenging conversation.

### *Make Time to Get to Know Each Other Again*

Family members may feel like they do not know you anymore because of the long amount of time you were separated from one another, and by all that you have gone through that they may not know or understand. Thomas H. describes the importance of spending time together as a way of adjusting to one another: “In a situation like that, they won’t understand us until they’ve been around us. How do they know what they need in place? They don’t get to know us, without being around us.”

### *Have Empathy for Family Members*

Be sure to remember and understand that your wrongful conviction and imprisonment have likely caused grief, loss, and trauma to your family members and others who love you. Recognizing this, and being patient and empathetic, can help create healing and unity in your relationships with loved ones. One exoneree remarks that it is important not to focus only on yourself and your recovery, but to realize that your family members have suffered trauma and loss, too, and also need time to recover. In this way, you can serve as a mutual support to one another.

*"For family members, when you're having a dialogue or a disagreement with someone, there's a thin line between an argument and a disagreement. To them it's like, 'I disagree and we are going back and forth', but to me it triggers like, 'hold up, why you talking like that. The tone, the level of your conversation, we don't have to talk that loud' and I don't hear nothing else you are saying because I'm taking it on a totally different level... Or if you have a disagreement, they try to reserve from saying, I don't think you should do that' because they don't want to rub you the wrong way. They don't want to step on your toes. You just came home, they want everything to be peachy keen when it's not... It's a process, every case is going to be different. But interacting and communicating is important." -Exoneree*

## Reclaim Your Identity

Heidi describes the power of affirming her new identity and acknowledging the ways her wrongful conviction and imprisonment have shaped her: "I came to the realization that I didn't have to be that old person... I wasn't the person I was before I went to prison, and I wasn't the person I was in prison. I was the person I am now, and I had been built from all those experiences... I don't have to apologize or feel guilty for not being who I was before."



## Action Steps

- Maintain open lines of communication with family members, especially those with whom you live. Ask for space if you need it and be open about what you are feeling and what you need.
- Be patient and empathetic and try not to rush to anger. Remember that your family wants to be helpful and supportive but is likely struggling as well.
- Find ways to decompress and opportunities for getting the space and time you need to individually process, adjust, and begin to recover.
- Consider participating in family counseling or other opportunities for support to provide a time and place for all family members to process their feelings together.
  - If you decide to seek counseling, ask your primary care doctor to recommend a therapist that takes your insurance.
  - If you do not have insurance, review the resources in the back of this handbook to find free or low-cost alternatives.

## Peer Support



*“A lot of exonerees are going to be nervous, looking over their shoulder and thinking something might happen, so it’s good to have someone to talk to who understands... someone they can talk to about being home and how they were feeling when they first came home.” -Marvin Anderson, Virginia, 15 years*

Many exonerees describe the experience of feeling like no one around them can truly understand what they went through. One common response to such feelings is the desire to connect with others who have lived through a wrongful conviction. It is evident from conversations with exonerees that the understanding that other exonerees bring is invaluable, especially in the midst of the stress and obstacles that arise after an exoneration. Whether participating in structured peer support, meeting other exonerees socially, or witnessing the broad network of individuals who speak against wrongful convictions, being around others who understand the exoneree experience can be a key component of recovery and healing.

## Common Challenges

### *Feeling Alone*

David describes how it would have been nice to have someone to talk to who truly understood what he was going through after his exoneration. For him, other exonerees “know exactly how it feels, know the frustrations, and will let them vent without being judged... it would be nice to have had a phone number of someone to call, especially in moments that were rough to take in.” Another exoneree shares, “We got all this stuff going through our heads, we got all these feelings and bitterness and all these questions, and we don’t know how to deal with life anymore because we’ve dealt with it on a much different level for 20, 30 years.” During such times, it may feel like no one but another exoneree can understand.

### *Seeking Understanding and Validation*

A desire for a connection to others who have similar experiences is common. Beverly describes the common desire for peer support: “Exonerees come home and it’s been so long and there are so many changes, and they don’t feel any sense of independence because they’re living with someone else who’s often overprotective... You need someone to mentor and buffer that. You need someone who understands and can help you gain that independence back.”

## Peer Recommendations

### Connect with Other Exonerees

One exoneree describes the importance of having someone available to talk to who has gone through a similar experience who “you might be more comfortable talking to them about certain things that come up.” Individuals who have lived through wrongful convictions and transitioned to life outside of prison are great sources for understanding and insight. As Chris T. comments: “We understand what each other is going through in those types of situations.”

*“In spite of all the knowledge we gain, all the different things, we still have our pride. You know, you don’t want to seem stupid asking somebody the question that you may think seems dumb to the average citizen but it’s not really dumb to you... It’s being able to discuss with other exonerees what you’re going through. Not as just a bitch and moan session, but more like ‘Hey look, this is how I’m feeling, this is what I am going through. How’d you deal with that?’ That’s been very helpful for me.”*

*-Chris Turner, Washington DC, 26 years*



### Ask Your Innocence Organization for Connections in Your Area

Sabein's friendship with another exoneree in Maryland offers a different type of support than what he received from others in his life. This new friend understands Sabein's experience and provides him with an example of how individuals can get their lives back on track after a wrongful conviction. Another exoneree describes the peer support he received from other exonerees in his home state. As he shares, “It helped to talk with someone who has been through what you’re going through, who knows the pitfalls and what’s coming your way.” He keeps in touch with local exonerees and feels that they have developed a strong bond over their shared experiences.



## Share Contact Information

One exoneree suggests creating a notebook of phone numbers and email addresses of exonerees you have met. He found it helpful to have an organized list of contacts and supports that he could reach out to as needed.

## Attend the National Innocence Network Conference

One place where exonerees connect to other exonerees is at the annual National Innocence Network Conference. For Heidi, the Innocence Conference is the first place where she realized she was not alone: "It wasn't until the first conference that I realized that there was a community... It was the first time I realized there were other people going through this and I had help." Beyond meeting other exonerees, there is also the opportunity to meet other professionals and allies who are there to support you.



*"I wanted to be there (at the National Innocence Network Conference) so desperately after all those years of thinking there was not much justice. It was encouraging to see how many people were dedicated to truth and justice, to see them and talk to them. I wouldn't call it peer support so much as just the fact that people were doing something. When you are going through this, having never been involved in the system before, it feels surreal that this could happen to you. And it gives you the feeling that nobody cares about justice except those of us who are fighting for our lives. It was assuring in that sense to meet others fighting against injustice."  
-Beverly Monroe, Virginia, 10 years*

## Action Steps

- Contact Healing Justice for help connecting with other exonerees. Opportunities include group healing retreats and individual peer support.
- Contact your local innocence organization to ask for support to meet other exonerees and attend sponsored events to connect with others in your area.
- Attend the National Innocence Network Conference to meet other exonerees and learn about support opportunities from different agencies and organizations.



# Intimate Partner Relationships

Many exonerees find it difficult to relate to intimate partners after being away for so long. Time, stress, and the transition from prison all take their toll on these relationships, and it may be hard to balance your needs with those of your partner. Exonerees have also found it challenging to meet new people and begin new relationships, and they often struggle with how much to share about their past when seeking partnerships.

## Common Challenges

### *Changes in Ongoing Relationships*

After coming home, you may find that your partner acts differently around you. They may feel that they no longer know you as well and may treat you differently than before. This can be especially true of romantic relationships. As Jerome shares from his experience: "People change when they are in prison. It doesn't matter if you are innocent or guilty. When you get out, people perceive you in a certain way—as a prisoner. That blocks healthy communication right off the bat."

### *Dealing with Emotions*

The emotional toll of your wrongful conviction and imprisonment can harm your existing or new relationships. As Dean shares, "You must understand that if you suffered through this, there will be anger. If you're angry with your partner, you need to know why you're angry in order for your relationship to progress." For Dean, it has been important to understand the source of his anger, channel it properly, and not take it out on his girlfriend or other loved ones.

### *Physical Intimacy*

Physical intimacy can be challenging because these romantic relationships were "off-limits" for so long. Jerome describes this as the "elephant in the room" because it can be uncomfortable and difficult to talk openly about it.

### *Starting New Relationships*

Meeting new people and beginning new intimate relationships may also be challenging. Some exonerees feel "out of practice" starting new relationships. It may be hard to trust anyone again, and also hard to explain what you have been through to new people. You may be scared that romantic involvement with another person could lead to another false accusation. One exoneree shares his experience with this: "Even to this day if I get involved with a woman and they know what I've been through and that I've been accused of rape... It took a long time for me to be comfortable around women. If there were females I would disappear like a ghost because of the things that I went through. I know how easy it is to be falsely accused of something. I'm not trying to go through that again."

## Peer Recommendations

### *See Your Partner as a Source of Support*

One exoneree shares that his girlfriend has provided much needed emotional and other support, "She has to live with me and my issues, so she is a big part of my recovery."

### *Be Open About What You Have Been Through*

One exoneree shares that it was important for him that his girlfriend knew what he went through. In sharing his experience with her, he was seeking to be understood. Likewise, Dean reflects that being honest with his girlfriend and sharing his story allowed her to understand her role as part of his support system. He recommends that by being open about your experience, your loved ones can develop an "understanding of what you went through and see that there's a whole world of others who are going through this too."

### *Be Patient and Communicate Clearly*

Your partner can only know what you are feeling and thinking if you communicate with them. As one exoneree shares, "It is important to put your pride aside. It doesn't make you less of a man to be open and to talk, to say, 'It's not you, it's just whatever I'm going through.'" Be honest with yourself and your partner about what you are experiencing and what you need from them.

### *Put Yourself in Their Shoes*

An exoneree shares about the importance of understanding your partner's perspective. As she shares, "They had a life too, and you have to put yourself in their shoes. We're not cell mates, we're partners."

### *Spend Time Together*

Dean shares that it is the things that he has in common with his girlfriend that make it easier to deal with his issues. Having a partner who shares common interests provides him the encouragement and emotional support he needs.

### *Find a Common Goal*

Remember that your partner is there to help you and support you. One exoneree describes how his partner felt like his life overshadowed theirs. To remedy this, he says it was important for them to "have a common goal, a shared aim, one destiny" that they could work toward together. This brought them closer as a couple and helped her feel like her life was important, too.

## Emotional Support

*“Everyone suffers from it, even if they don’t name it as emotional stress; stress is a big part of this. De-stressing is not easy, particularly if you’ve been through something and no one understands it. Everybody realizes cancer can happen to them, but we haven’t achieved that awareness yet with wrongful conviction or how difficult it is to recover after exoneration... what happens is that most people don’t want to talk about it.”*

Incarceration is a deeply traumatic experience, and many more layers of trauma are added if you are innocent and were wrongfully convicted. You have suffered extensive loss, grief, fear, confusion, stress, and anxiety. You may also have been the victim of violent crime while imprisoned. All of this will have a profound impact on your emotional health and may result in what is known as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Below, exonerees share about their experiences in trying to recover emotionally, from talking to loved ones to seeking professional help.

## Common Challenges

### Negative Thoughts and Feelings

While feeling joy after your release from prison, you may find that you also struggle with negative thoughts and feelings. One exoneree describes such contrasting feelings as such: “I didn’t know I was going to go through the emotional stuff, some of the stuff I go through now... like, I’m happy I’m home, but sometimes I am still depressed, sad.”

### Stress Reactions

You may have what is often referred to as a “stress reaction” after coming home. This is common to the exoneree experience as you try to adjust to a new normal. It may include experiencing upsetting dreams or memories related to your incarceration, trouble sleeping, or feeling on-edge or jittery. You may also experience physical symptoms like stomach aches or headaches. David describes this reaction as such: “I still don’t like crowds, I still get anxious at times, and sometimes have panic attacks for no apparent reason whatsoever, no understanding. I’ll just be sitting there and then the next thing you know I can’t breathe, it just feels like the whole world is crashing in on me.”

*“Even though it’s over with, I’m still going through the everyday struggle—still adjusting, trying to trust people, being able to communicate with regular people in society. Like, normal things in life—like not being paranoid and constantly looking over your back every day. I just started being able to sleep. I didn’t know that was going to be a real big problem for some people. I thought I was going to be able to sleep because I’m happy I’m home, but I couldn’t sleep for the first couple months.” -Exoneree*



## Feeling Restless

It is common to have extreme highs and lows after an exoneration. You might be doing well one day and then face some difficult challenges the next, and this is completely normal. As Heidi expresses, “On the surface everything was fine. I was working, taking care of my kids, and figuring it out. But on the inside there was a restlessness that started to build, and that’s the piece of it—you think you’re doing okay and then all of a sudden something happens and you realize you’re really not... And I kept telling myself I was ok. How could I not be now that I was out... It continued to get worse and worse, and I kept trying to extinguish it by drinking, having fun, and staying busy that I didn’t give myself time. I was exhausted.”

## Dealing with Crowds

Crowds can be an ongoing source of anxiety, as described by David: “When I first got out of prison it was crazy. I think I’ve adjusted relatively well, but I still have difficulties turning my back with crowds. You know, just allowing myself to be normal... I walk down the street and do everything I can to avoid other people bumping into me or contacting me, and I do everything I can not to touch them, just because that’s how I had to live for twenty-three years. So there are still a lot of habits I haven’t overcome yet.”

## Shutting Down

When the stress becomes too much you may find yourself shutting down, as was the case for one exoneree: “Sometimes when I was in prison, I would go days, maybe a week without talking. I would be so frustrated, crying on the inside, and I would just shut down. And sometimes, I still do it out here, just shutting down, not talking about what’s really going on.”

## Ineffective Counseling or Therapy

While emotional counseling and therapy can be deeply beneficial to recovering from trauma and loss and also dealing with daily issues, some counselors may not be familiar with wrongful convictions or the ability to understand your experiences and thus may not provide the type of care you are seeking. As one exoneree shares: “As far as healing, I get the question all the time, are you going to therapy? NO... It’s because they aren’t going to understand what I’ve been through, there’s just no possible way.”

Joe describes his experience as such, “As recent as last year, I was going to see a therapist... The restorative justice circles helped more than the therapist. Not all doctors and therapists are cut out to deal with the trauma we exonerees experience.”



*“Some don’t end up needing treatment until after they get out. Some end up needing that treatment from the moment they get in until the time they get out. I was one of those individuals and just at the time that I thought I was maintaining my sanity, I discovered and realized that you could lose your marbles about something that happened two hours ago. You might think I thought I was crazy, but that didn’t make sense, it didn’t add up. It might not be about a situation that happened ten, fifteen minutes ago. It might be about a situation that happened ten or twenty years ago and it just came back to me.” -Malcolm Bryant, Maryland, 17 years*

## Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

*If your stress reaction symptoms do not go away after a few months and do not seem to be getting better, you may have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a mental health condition triggered by a terrifying event or series of events or circumstances. It is not a sign of weakness, but an adaptation of the brain to an abnormal and stressful situation. PTSD is more common in people who have been incarcerated than the general population. If you think you may be experiencing signs or symptoms of PTSD, there are resources that can help you heal.*

### **General Information:**

- *The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) provides information on PTSD that is research-based: <https://bit.ly/2dJ6R0F>.*
- *The National Center for PTSD established by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, is the world's leading research and education center for excellence on PTSD. Under the "Get Help" link you can find information for resources including therapists, self-help, and coping strategies: [www.ptsd.va.gov](http://www.ptsd.va.gov).*

## Peer Recommendations

### *Take Time for Yourself*

Joe recommends you take things slow and give yourself time to sit back and observe. In his experience, it is important to make time for peace and quiet, which are a key part of healing and reducing stress.

### *Find What Works for You*

One exoneree shares his experience with trying different approaches to managing his stress: "When you're put out in the world, especially if you don't have the resources to readjust back into society, and you're around strange things you're not used to, it can all be overwhelming, especially with the element of PTSD. The mental health counselor diagnosed me with PTSD. I tried to be medicated but I didn't agree with the medication. I'm now handling my stress through group therapy. I feel better and more self-motivated, but it was a long, slow process."

### *Seek Professional Help*

For Dean, talking with a therapist helped give a name to what he was experiencing: "This is real. I feel like I got out of there mentally stable, but it was explained to me the reasons I was having these fits of rage. I know what's wrong with me, I calmed down and explained what's going on. If I hadn't have known that, I would have torn the place up."

### *Give Back to Your Community*

Helping others is a positive way that helps David manage his stress and anxiety: "That's how I heal, by just trying to help other people, and trying to use that experience, all the hell that we went through, to help some of these guys out. Our experiences help us relate to what they are going through. That's why I like working with people who just got out of prison." Finding ways to use your experiences to help others can positively influence your stress level.

## Take Care of Yourself

Heidi comments on how important it is to “establish some form of self-care or self-love to keep what’s true about you and about what you learned about yourself.” Exonerees have shared a variety of other recommendations for coping with and managing emotional stress, including volunteering, seeking a support group, eating healthy and exercising, avoiding unhealthy coping activities such as drinking alcohol and using drugs, and practicing mindfulness and meditation. One exoneree describes the benefit she receives from finding a place for rest: “For me, that is through being in nature, with trees and grass and quiet. It helps you get your sense of self back.”

## Action Steps

- Develop a personal support network of a few family members, friends, or mentors who can offer support and guidance as needed. Reach out to these people and share what you are feeling when you need emotional support.
- Look for peer support opportunities and connect with other exonerees in your area. You can learn more in the “Peer Support” section of this handbook.
- Take time for yourself and take care of your body, soul, and mind as a way to manage your stress and emotions.
- Locate a low-cost therapist in your area. Many of these providers offer services on a sliding scale dependent on your income and insurance. Many online tools are available to find services in your area including:
  - [openpathcollective.org](http://openpathcollective.org)
  - [www.opencounseling.com](http://www.opencounseling.com)
- More information for emotional and mental health resources are outlined below.



## Crisis Intervention

### Suicide, Suicidal Ideations, Suicidal Thoughts, Not Wanting to Live

*If you are in crisis and need immediate mental health assistance, you can connect with a professional counselor in your area any time by calling the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255). They also have an Online Chat feature on their website that can be helpful: [suicide-preventionlifeline.org/chat/](http://suicide-preventionlifeline.org/chat/).*

*The Crisis Text Line also offers free, 24/7 support from a trained crisis counselor. Text “HOME” to 741741 to get help.*

*If you feel bad and aren’t sure if you should call, do call. Resources exist to help you*

# Emotional Health and Mental Health Resources

If your feelings, emotions, or stress reactions are overwhelming and you feel like they are lasting too long, talking with a therapist, counselor, or another mental health professional can help you face these challenges. It is important to find someone who “fits” your personality and makes you feel comfortable. You may have to try out more than one therapist before you find the right fit for you. There are many stories about providers who were not helpful (or were harmful) to clients, but there are far more success stories from those who keep trying. While counseling and therapy can be costly, health insurance may help cover the cost, and there are also free or low-cost counseling and therapy services for those who do not have insurance. Below you will find information on emotional and mental health support including crisis intervention, how to find a therapist, and resources for mental health and substance use.

## Individual Emotional and Mental Health Support

- Finding a provider. Psychology Today offers a directory, searchable by zip code, of licensed therapists, treatment groups, psychiatrists, and support groups in your area. Most specify whether or not they take insurance, and provide their rate per session. Once results by zip code appear, the left side of the screen allows you to narrow the results by type of insurance, issue you would like to address, language, gender, type of therapy, and whether they offer video therapy. [www.psychologytoday.com/us](http://www.psychologytoday.com/us)
- Low-cost therapy locators. Emotional health resources can be costly and hard to find. The following resources provide information on low-cost providers near you.
  - The Open Path Psychotherapy Collective provides a search feature on their website. Enter your zip code and you will see therapists available for you at approximately \$30-\$60 per session (a significant discount). Many providers also offer remote counseling sessions over the phone or through your computer. [openpathcollective.org](http://openpathcollective.org)
  - Open Counseling provides a searchable database of counselors providing services in your area. Enter your zip code on the website to see available providers. Many providers offer remote counseling sessions over the phone or through your computer. Open Counseling also shares reviews from others who have seen each provider. [www.opencounseling.com](http://www.opencounseling.com)
- Online therapy. Some services offer online therapy through the use of video chat and other technology.
  - Better Help offers access to trained counselors and psychologists for \$40-\$70 per week. Visit their website at [www.betterhelp.com](http://www.betterhelp.com) to get started.
- Government-funded services at low or no cost. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), a federal government agency, provides a listing of low cost or free emotional health services and local support groups available in your area. These results are not individual therapists like above. They provide treatment and behavioral health resource centers with trained mental health providers. Visit [findtreatment.samhsa.gov](http://findtreatment.samhsa.gov) and type in your zipcode to find local options.
  - SAMHSA also offers a free, confidential national helpline: 1-800-662-HELP (1-800-662-4357).

## Emotional and Mental Health Information

- Mental Health America (MHA). Mental Health America is a community-based non-profit that promotes the mental health of Americans. Their search function links you to the nearest local MHA office, which can provide information on local mental health care, support groups, and peer mentoring. [www.mentalhealthamerica.net](http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net)
- MentalHealth.gov provides one-stop access to U.S. government mental health information. If you are wondering about symptoms that you or a loved one has, this site provides basic information about different conditions and concerns located under the tab "what to look for". It is not a substitute for professional help, but provides information that has been vetted. Educational resources are also provided. [www.mentalhealth.gov](http://www.mentalhealth.gov)
- Early Serious Mental Illness (ESMI) Treatment Locator. SAMHSA offers a searchable directory of ESMI treatment services. Choose your state, click "Apply", and results will appear. The program name, details, and contact name and information are included. [www.samhsa.gov/esmi-treatment-locator](http://www.samhsa.gov/esmi-treatment-locator)
- Mindfulness. Mindfulness means developing self-awareness to guide oneself toward improved health (emotional, mental, and physical) and improved relationships. There are numerous free phone apps and websites that provide tools including meditation audio and video resources and coached breathing techniques. While many companies have fees for their services, there are also a variety of free websites and apps (or sites that have a combination of free and cost items and services).
  - The Headspace app provides meditation information and practices. You can visit their website at [www.headspace.com](http://www.headspace.com) to learn more, or download the app via the app store on your smartphone.
  - Free Mindfulness Project: A website offering free downloadable meditation exercises. Includes links to apps. [www.freemindfulness.org](http://www.freemindfulness.org)
  - Mindful: A non-profit that seeks to promote mindfulness practices for all. [www.mindful.org](http://www.mindful.org)
  - Insight Timer: An app that has hundreds of free meditation tracks that you can use for a variety of issues from anger management to sleep problems to anxiety. [insighttimer.com](http://insighttimer.com)
  - Mindfulness Coach: The Veterans Administration (VA) designed an app to assist users in reducing stress, improving emotional reactions, and addressing anxiety and depression. [mobile.va.gov/app/mindfulness-coach](http://mobile.va.gov/app/mindfulness-coach)
- Self-Advocacy and Empowerment Toolkit. Developed by STAR Center (Support, Technical Assistance & Resources) and affiliated with the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), this Toolkit provides resources and strategies for achieving personal recovery goals related to mental health consumers, specifically those who have been imprisoned. <https://bit.ly/2ANzNyw>

## Substance and Alcohol Use Resources

- Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). An international organization for people with problem drinking behaviors. The 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous are a set of principles that assist people with their behaviors to move toward recovery. Visit the AA website ([www.aa.org](http://www.aa.org)) and enter your zip code to find your local chapter and the closest AA meeting to you. You can also get information about local meetings by dialing 1-800-325-8379.
- Al-Anon provides support for family and friends of alcoholics. They have meetings and resources for family members, including children, and have special services for teenagers, called Al-Ateen. Meetings can be in person or virtual. Search by zip code, distance from a location, day of the week, and type of meeting here: [al-anon.org/al-anon-meetings/find-an-al-anon-meeting](http://al-anon.org/al-anon-meetings/find-an-al-anon-meeting).
- Narcotics Anonymous (NA). An international organization for people with narcotics addiction that uses a 12 step approach to guide people toward healing. At the website below you can search for local meetings and find information for NA helplines and websites. Enter your zip code and you will receive results as close to you as possible with multiple start days and times for meetings. [www.na.org/meetingsearch](http://www.na.org/meetingsearch)
- Opioid Treatment Program Directory. SAMHSA offers a directory of state-based opioid treatment programs. Utilize the drop-down menu on their website and select your state to find local program information. [dpt2.samhsa.gov/treatment/directory.aspx](http://dpt2.samhsa.gov/treatment/directory.aspx)
- National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA). NIDA is a federal government agency that seeks to advance addiction science and provide information. They offer resources and educational materials for patients and families, first-person videos, and screening tools for different populations. [www.drugabuse.gov/patients-families](http://www.drugabuse.gov/patients-families)
- Drug-Rehabs.org. A non-profit organization that provides education and services for addiction to families and those with addiction. Visit [www.drug-rehabs.org](http://www.drug-rehabs.org) and scroll toward the bottom of the homepage to find resources in your state. You can also call 1-877-882-9275.

## Public Assistance Information

Publicly available programs and services are sources of support that can help address the immediate challenges you might face after being released from prison. Marvin shares about the importance of knowing local resources that you can contact for support. He commented, “There are some agencies that the state has for regular people who can’t afford anything—health care, Medicaid, food stamps, and things like that—that you have to apply for but you gotta know how.” The following are some resources to help you get started.

- [www.benefits.gov](http://www.benefits.gov) has a detailed questionnaire that will help you determine what public benefits and assistance programs you might qualify for. To get started, visit the website and follow the prompts on the “Benefit Finder”.

## Food Assistance

- Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Commonly known as “food stamps”, SNAP offers financial assistance to help cover grocery costs to individuals based on income, assets, and family size. This benefit comes in the form of an electronic debit card that can be used at most grocery stores to pay for your groceries just as you would use a credit or debit card. The card can be used for food purchases only. The program is operated through your state and county, and benefits differ depending on where you live. To find out more information and learn how to apply visit: [www.fns.usda.gov/snap/apply](http://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/apply) and click on your state to get started.
- The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). Offers emergency food assistance to help supplement diet for low-income individuals at no cost. Each state has its own set of eligibility requirements and criteria. Learn more by reviewing the USDA TEFAP fact sheet here: <https://bit.ly/2ViorhD>.
- Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP). Provides meals to low-income people ages 60+ who meet eligibility requirements. Learn more by reviewing the USDA CSFP fact sheet here: <https://bit.ly/2WqRTyl>.

## Cash Assistance

- Supplemental Security Insurance (SSI). Offers financial assistance to those with a medical or psychological disability or who are over the age of 65. Information can be found on the Social Security Administration at [www.ssa.gov/benefits/ssi](http://www.ssa.gov/benefits/ssi).
- Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). This program offers cash benefits to qualifying individuals. Eligibility is based on your state of residence and usually includes those who are pregnant, have minor children, or are disabled. Often, this benefit also requires that you are actively looking for employment. More information can be found at [www.benefits.gov/benefit/613](http://www.benefits.gov/benefit/613). To find your state organization or office that can provide you with more information, select your state of residence from the following website: [www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ofa/help](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ofa/help).
- Unemployment Insurance (UI). Provides temporary financial help for unemployed workers who are actively seeking employment. Eligibility requirements and benefits are determined based on your current state of residency. To learn more and find out how to access this benefit read this post on Career Onestop: <https://bit.ly/2vG5V3H>.

## Medical Assistance

- Medicaid. Medical insurance for low income and disabled individuals. Eligibility is determined by your income and family size and requirements are different in each state. Some states offer other programs that provide low-cost medical insurance to those who qualify. To learn more about the benefit and determine your eligibility in your state, visit: [www.policygenius.com/blog/a-state-by-state-guide-to-medicaid](http://www.policygenius.com/blog/a-state-by-state-guide-to-medicaid).
- The Affordable Care Act provides opportunities for individuals to gain access to affordable, comprehensive medical insurance. Your medical insurance options are based on various eligibility criteria and requirements that help make this coverage affordable. You can learn more about the Affordable Care Act and how to obtain medical insurance through the healthcare marketplace on the government website here: [www.healthcare.gov](http://www.healthcare.gov).
- Medicare. The national medical insurance program for people who are 65 or older or for those who have certain disabilities. This program helps cover medical costs for those who qualify and choose to participate. To learn more about the benefit, determine your eligibility and apply, visit: [www.ssa.gov/benefits/medicare](http://www.ssa.gov/benefits/medicare).

## Local Benefits

- One way to access community services and resources is to visit the local website of your County and/or City. To find your local government website do a simple internet search and include keywords such as: "name of your city/county and state" + "government".
  - These websites offer information about every department within the local government, including those that provide public assistance and benefits. They often list community resources, services, and programs that are broken down into various categories, along with helpful contact information for each.
  - Local government websites often include information on how to access public transportation such as trains, metros, buses, and carpool services.
  - Your local government website will likely include information on how to access local mental health, disability, and substance use services. The government agency responsible for providing mental health and substance use services is different in each state and your local government website will be able to point you in the right direction.
- The social, family, or human services department in your city or county will typically offer assistance with applying for Medicaid, SNAP, and TANF. They may also have resources for seeking employment, accessing child care, finding mental health and substance use services, housing help, and utility assistance in your community.
- Many cities have a health department or department of public health that provides services for health screenings, physicals, STI prevention and treatment, and immunizations. They will likely have information about low-cost and free medical care.



## Housing Assistance

- U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Has programs that offer low-cost housing assistance to those who qualify. These are managed by local government agencies. To locate housing resources in your location, enter your city + state into the search engine here: [resources.hud.gov](https://resources.hud.gov).
  - To learn more about rental assistance, visit the HUD webpage here: [www.hud.gov/topics/rental\\_assistance](https://www.hud.gov/topics/rental_assistance).
- Housing Choice Voucher. Commonly known as “Section 8”, this program assists low-income families with obtaining affordable and safe housing in the private market. You can read more about the vouchers and eligibility requirements on the HUD webpage here: [www.hud.gov/topics/housing\\_choice\\_voucher\\_program\\_section\\_8](https://www.hud.gov/topics/housing_choice_voucher_program_section_8).
- Many programs offer support and assistance for those facing homelessness. To learn more about programs available in your area, use this map to click on the state where you currently reside: [www.hudexchange.info/homelessness-assistance](https://www.hudexchange.info/homelessness-assistance).

## Veterans Benefits

- If you previously served in the United States military you may have access to programs and benefits for veterans. To find out more about all veteran benefits offered visit [www.benefits.va.gov/benefits](https://www.benefits.va.gov/benefits).
- To find information for your local veteran medical center visit [www.va.gov/directory/guide](https://www.va.gov/directory/guide).
- For information regarding veteran education benefits visit [www.benefits.va.gov/gibill](https://www.benefits.va.gov/gibill).
- For veteran-specific employment resources visit [www.dol.gov/vets](https://www.dol.gov/vets).

## Community Resource Information

Many religious institutions and nonprofit organizations offer a variety of programs and services to meet various needs and help individuals overcome certain obstacles and challenges. Many exonerees have shared stories about having positive experiences partnering with such organizations.

- After Innocence. A national, non-profit organization that provides reliable, efficient re-entry assistance for the wrongfully convicted, and advocates for laws that provide them with meaningful compensation and effective reentry support. Learn more at [www.after-innocence.org](http://www.after-innocence.org) or contact the organization directly at [jon@after-innocence.org](mailto:jon@after-innocence.org).
- “Justis 4 Justus”. An exoneree led nonprofit organization that procures in-kind donations from the general public to support exonerees as they transition back into society. You can learn more at [www.justis4justus.org/about\\_us](http://www.justis4justus.org/about_us) and request assistance by sending an email to [Kristine@justis4justus.org](mailto:Kristine@justis4justus.org).
- Exonerated Nation. An exoneree-led nonprofit organization that assists exonerees in California and also advocates for reforms that help the innocent. You can learn more at [exoneratednation.org](http://exoneratednation.org).
- The Center on Wrongful Convictions in Chicago has a special support group and activities for women exonerees. You can learn more about the Women Exoneree Project at: [www.law.northwestern.edu/legalclinic/wrongfulconvictions/womensproject](http://www.law.northwestern.edu/legalclinic/wrongfulconvictions/womensproject).
- Witness to Innocence (WTI). A national nonprofit organization for exonerees who served time on death row. The death row exoneree members of WTI use their powerful stories of being wrongfully convicted and sentenced to death to advocate for the abolishment of the death penalty. Their members participate in speaking tours and marches, testify in legislatures, meet with state representatives to encourage legislative action, and more. WTI also hosts an Annual Gathering that brings together exonerated death row survivors and their loved ones for empowerment, community, and advocacy work to change the system. You can learn more at: [www.witnesstoinnocence.org](http://www.witnesstoinnocence.org).
- The Innocence Network is a group of innocence organizations around the globe. You can learn more at [www.innocencenetwork.org](http://www.innocencenetwork.org) about the closest innocence organization to you, in case you would like to reach out to meet other exonerees in your area or inquire about the local organization’s capacity to connect you with social services or other support in your area. You can also learn more about the annual Innocence Network conference at: [innocencenetwork.org/networkconference](http://innocencenetwork.org/networkconference).
- The Council of State Governments Resources Map. Provides a list of organizations that work specifically with individuals returning home after incarceration. [csgjusticecenter.org/reentry/reentry-services-directory](http://csgjusticecenter.org/reentry/reentry-services-directory)
- National non-profit organizations providing a variety of services and support programs:
  - Local YMCAs and YWCAs [www.ymca.net](http://www.ymca.net), [www.ywca.net](http://www.ywca.net)
  - Goodwill Foundation [www.goodwill.org](http://www.goodwill.org)
  - Modest Needs [www.modestneeds.org](http://www.modestneeds.org)
  - Salvation Army [www.salvationarmyusa.org](http://www.salvationarmyusa.org)
  - United Way offers a variety of services and support around health services, financial management, and education. Find a United Way office in your area by entering your zip code into their search engine. [www.unitedway.org/find-your-united-way](http://www.unitedway.org/find-your-united-way)

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