

1. Introduction ¹

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From a world where all decisions big and small are made for you, to a world where every day offers you hundreds of different choices. . .

From the constant clanging of metal doors opening and shutting, keys in locks, and bells, to the sudden quiet of your own private space. . .

From institutional drab to a world of technicolor . . .

From incarceration to freedom.

The first few weeks are the hardest; on this all ex-inmates agree. The dreams and plans you've nourished inside don't quite match the realities with which you are confronted. There are questions, anxieties: Will my parole officer be of help, or will he or she hassle me? Where can I get a decent job? What'll it be like living with my spouse again after so long an absence? Will my kids accept me? How easily will I be able to meet new people? Where can I go just to be left alone and sort things out? Am I strong enough to avoid being tempted by old destructive patterns?

Answers aren't easy. . .

One piece of advice, however, suggested by many ex-inmates, never fails; and that is, proceed slowly. Take things step-by-step. First plan your priorities, devise a strategy, and then proceed. Don't try to accomplish everything at once.

Take trying to find a place to stay, for example, or getting a job. These are top priorities for most ex-inmates. Yet, given today's rental and job markets, finding your own place, or a challenging and well-paying job, may not be easy. Maybe the first Job you're offered won't be the one you've had in mind, but you'll decide to take it anyway. It will help pay the rent, and give you time to get established and readjust on a personal level. Later, when

you're "settled in" with family and friends, and have made some good contacts, that will be the time to concentrate on hunting for a better position.

The return back to society is not easy for most ex-inmates, and it may require lots of patience, endurance, and self-discipline. It may take having to make at least five phone calls, for example, and spending an entire day at various agencies just to get to the person you need. But, don't be discouraged. There are shortcuts.

Most important, try to get the name of a person you can contact at a desired agency from a group that can refer you. Referral is a service which many groups offer. It is one of which you should take advantage, because with the enormous amount of information and number of groups out there, it takes real skill for someone to match your needs with the appropriate service. And, when a referral person calls an agency in advance to arrange an interview for you with a contact person. lots of time and unnecessary frustration are saved.

Also, since many agencies require at least an identification card, a birth certificate, and sometimes a Social Security card, get these documents in order before you are released.

What about finding personal support when you get out? Some inmates immediately upon release prefer to spend their first period of time alone. Others are anxious to seek out family and friends. Almost all ex-inmates, however, express the importance of having a network of support--one person, or group of persons, who can offer understanding and moral encouragement. Sometimes, a counselor can be of help in this regard, or getting in touch with a person who knows how to listen and help you sort out feelings.

There will be difficulties, but remember, you are far more in control of your life now than you were before. So, take advantage. New York offers you a vast multitude of possibilities--if you take the challenge and plan carefully. There are lots of good people out there, people who can help you. We hope that this directory provides an important step towards reaching them.

¹ "Connections," A guide for ex-inmates to information sources in New York City, by Correctional Library Services, The New York Public Library, New York City.