



Preparing to Go Home

Going home from prison is probably one of the better days you've had in a long time. You are happy, but also worried. You don't ever want to go back to jail, but you might wonder how to do that. After seeing your loved ones and enjoying the comforts you missed, the most important thing will be to find a job. Honestly, that may scare you a little, or even a lot.

If you are lucky, you may have a job to go back to. Many women are not so lucky. Maybe you lost your job or never had one. Maybe you have been out of work for a long time. And now, with a criminal record, you wonder how easy it will be to find a job. There are many questions:

- Do you need to find a new job?
- Do you know what you want to do?
- Do you know what you can do?
- How will you explain to an employer where you have been?
- Do you have a plan for finding a job?

This *Tipsheet* will help you find answers, and eventually a job.

Before Your Release

Planning for a job does not have to wait until you are out. In fact, there is a lot you can do before you leave.

- Make a list of your skills and work history. Think of paid and unpaid work. If you took care of a child or a relative, put that on your list, too. Don't forget things you did in the neighborhood or with your church or volunteer groups.
- Make a list of all the jobs you had in jail (like making or serving food, working in the library, and so on). Add any jobs you were trained to do, too.
- For each job, write the dates, job titles, company names, and what you did. If you worked in jail, your employer was the government that ran the prison. If you can't remember everything, that is ok. You can always fill this out later.
- Make a list of all the skills you can bring to a job. This can be from work you did before or not. Come up with as many ways to tell an employer good things about yourself as you can. For example: hard working, gets along with people, good with numbers, or organized.
- A "reference" is someone an employer can talk with to learn more about you as a worker and as a person. Think about someone you can list as a reference. Plan how you will contact them and ask them to be a reference. Pick people who will say nice things. It is best if it is someone you worked for before. It could also be a co-worker, mentor, coach, or religious leader. Even a friend or family member if there is no one else.
- Think about the people you know. Who might be able to help you look for a job? The people you know are your "network." Think of old bosses or co-workers. It could also be friends, family, or neighbors.



Making a Plan

The good news is that you can find a job. But, that doesn't mean it will be easy. It takes hard work and a plan. Now is the perfect time to start. To make it easier, create a plan to follow when you get out. Setting goals and listing the steps to take will give you a guide. It will also make you feel more in control over what you need to do and how to do it.

Think about the things below as you plan next steps:

- What?** What is my job goal? What do I want to do? What kind of job do I want for now? For the long run?
- How?** How can I get this job? What do I need to do? Do I need training or more school? How can I write my resume to get this job? What will my criminal record (RAP sheet) mean for my goal?
- Where?** Where do I need to go for help in reaching my goal? Do I need to go to a job center? Will I need a job-training program? Will I need to go to community college or trade school? Is there a re-entry program or job agency that can help me?
- Who?** Who do I need to involve in my goal? Are there family, friends, or community members who can help? What about religious groups or people who have helped me before? Can I get help from mentors or other people who are working with me?



Getting on Track: Explaining Your Time in Prison

“Have you ever been convicted of a crime?” This question is one of the scariest parts of looking for a job. But, that is no reason to avoid looking for work. In general, it is best to say enough about your record to be honest but no more. Then move on to talk about the positive path you are on now and all the good things you bring to the job. Talk about your skills, experience, and hard work. Include the skills you learned doing unpaid work and while in jail – for example, classes you took, work you did in jail, and work you did before you went in.

The most important thing is to focus on how you present yourself to the employer. Be professional. Be confident, direct, and positive. Do not lie or leave things out if asked. The truth will come out if an employer does a background check. Just be honest.

When asked about your time in prison, here are some tips for your answer:

- Tell them when you were found guilty. If it was a non-violent or non-theft related crime, tell them that, too. Keep this part short. Do not tell your whole story or make excuses. Don't argue the charges like “I was framed” or “I was innocent.” Own your mistake.
- Say you are sorry you did your crime. Employers want to see that you can own your mistake and want to change. Again, keep it short.
- Tell them that you have changed.
- Show how you have changed. Describe the skills you have learned, the things you have done that you are proud of, and the experience you have gained. Explain how it will help you in the job you are applying for.

Some states have “Ban the Box” laws that mean employers are not supposed to ask about convictions. Ask about the laws in your state. If you apply for a job in a state with these laws, you will not be asked on a job application if you were ever found guilty, so you don't need to write about it. Only answer questions you are asked. These laws are there to help you. If you answer without being asked, you can hurt your chances. Also, you only have to answer questions about the times you were found guilty. Employers may not ask about arrests unless you were then found guilty. So if you have many arrests but were only found guilty once, only talk about that one time.

Talking to an employer about this might feel hard. The best way to get ready is to practice it with someone until you feel okay and can do it in a confident way.

After Your Release

Once you are out, there will be more for you to do. Now you can start looking for a job. As you begin, start by doing these things:

- Get a stable address where you can get your mail. With luck, you have a steady place to live. (Read the *Housing Tipsheet* to learn more.) Even if you don't, make sure you have an address to give an employer where you can get your mail.
- Identification (ID) is a card or paper that proves who you are. Gather the proper ID to show an employer. (Read the *Identification Tipsheet* to learn more.) You must have at least a picture ID and your Social Security card.
- Start looking at job search tools. These are websites, newspaper ads, or signs in local businesses (look at the "Resources" at the end of this Tipsheet).
- Write your resume or make sure it is up to date with all of your skills and past jobs.
- Visit your local American Jobs Center (they used to be called One-Stop Centers). Or go to another job program (read "Resources" below to learn more).
- Ask at the Job Center about a "job club." This is where people help each other look for work. They share leads and keep motivated. Some are even just for ex-offenders.
- Start planning for day care for your kids if you will need it (also read the *Family Reunification Tipsheet*).
- Contact your references and people you know. Attend events that let you meet more people from different companies or other people looking for work.
- If you don't have basic computer skills, take a class to learn. You will need to use a computer to write your resume and fill out job applications. Most Jobs Centers offer training for free. Even better, start learning before you get out. It will help you get started on your search.
- Get an e-mail address. You will need it to send and get e-mails from employers.

What I Need to Know

They say looking for a job is a full-time job. It requires hard work and patience. Many people are looking for work, so it can take many tries. Remember this as you begin your job search and if it takes longer than you hoped. Just keep at it. Get ready to be told "no." You might not even know why. You may not get every interview, and your interviews won't all lead to a job. You will probably apply for many jobs before getting one. That's normal. Remind yourself that it is not personal, and just keep applying. Stay positive and you will be rewarded in the end.

Treat your search as your job and give it the time it needs. Take time every day for your job search. Check job listings that you know about often, and learn new ways to find out about openings.

You never know when a chance might come up. So always show yourself in the best light and always be "networking." When you meet people, tell them you are looking for work and what kind. It may feel strange at first, but you never know what leads they might have for you. You will look even better if you follow up with the person later to thank them and remind them of any contacts they offered to make for you. More and more, people find jobs by talking to people instead of answering ads. For you, this is the first step in building and growing your network. Mentors can also provide good leads. (To learn more read the *Mentoring Tipsheet*.)

What to Expect from an American Jobs Center or Workforce Program

A Job Center is a great resource. You can improve your skills and learn new ones. They also help with your job search. Here are a few steps you will go through:

- **Orientation and assessment.** First, someone will tell you about the services they offer. You may be asked to sign up and tell them some basic things about yourself. For example, your work history, schooling, and where you live. You might be asked to take several surveys or "tests." Don't worry, these just help figure out what you are best at. That way they can find a good job match for you. The kind of measures they give might be reading and math, things you like to do, or your skills in a certain area.
- **Career coaching.** Career coaches will meet with you to talk about your goals. They will help you make a plan and show you tools to help you reach your goals. Coaches can help you with job skills, resumes, and to get ready for interviews. They can also help you keep a job by getting help with childcare, school referrals, and money and benefit advice.
- **Job development.** The job developer works with you on finding job leads. They may show you how to search on your own. And they may get interviews for you since they already have employers that often work with them.
- **Retention specialists.** Retention staff give you the tools you need and help to keep a job once you have it. They also help you plan to move forward and advance on your career path.

Resources (Tools)

- **American Job Center** – offers tools like job information, job skills, job center locators, and state job banks.
http://www.careeronestop.org/
- **O*Net Online** - information to learn about different kinds of jobs, like job descriptions and the training you need to do the job. http://www.onetonline.org/
- **My Next Move** - also offers information on different careers and requirements.
http://www.mynextmove.org/
- **America’s Service Locator** - helps you find job or training openings at local American Job Centers. The website gives information on many different local work-related services, such as unemployment benefits, career, and school opportunities.
http://www.ServiceLocator.org
- **America’s Career InfoNet** - helps you explore careers to make smart job and school choices. The website has easy to use information on jobs and industries, how much they pay (wages), career videos, learning resources, self-tests, and career exploration assistance. www.CareerInfoNet.org
- **mySkills myFuture** - helps workers who lost their jobs and those changing jobs to find new work to explore. You can find jobs that need skills and knowledge much like your past job. You can learn more about these suggested matches, find local training programs, and even apply for jobs. www.mySkillsmyFuture.org
- **Job Postings** -
 - www.craigslist.org
 - www.idealist.org
 - www.monster.com
 - www.careerbuilder.com
 - www.indeed.com

“ 5 things I wished they had told me before I got released...”

“I think you should always start in a program so they can help you. The training and classes prepare you for how to dress, how to act, and how to speak so you can succeed on the job” - *Paula*

“Never give up – there is always something you can do. Just keep trying and you will find it” - *Tanita*

“I struggled with computer literacy. It is very important to learn how to use computers so you can fill out an application. I am still learning, but getting training and knowing even the basics has helped a lot” - *Chasity*

“I just got my first e-mail address which was important. Having a mentor helps. Stay focused and keep going – you never know what you are capable of doing” - *Christine*

“Even though I worked before, all jobs require training since things are always changing. You have to be willing to learn new things” - *Kelly*