

Webinar Q & A: Preparing People for Re-entry During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Q: Why release inmates when basic services are scarce at this time?

A: The reasons are similar for both prisons and jails, but the threats posed by COVID-19 differ significantly in degree and characteristics. Both settings are seeking to thin out close conditions to make it possible to apply more of the CDC guidance regarding social distancing and isolation of symptomatic individuals. Once the virus enters secure facilities with communal sanitation and dining areas, it becomes extremely difficult to control its spread. At the same time, it is true that many re-entering individuals will not be eligible for stimulus payments or extended unemployment benefits. However, release may be the safer of two less than ideal choices.

In jails: An estimated 200,000 individuals enter & leave U.S. jails every week, making it almost impossible to keep the virus from entering facilities. The jail population is comprised mostly of pre-trial detainees. Many jurisdictions are releasing anyone detained pre-trial for low-level, non-violent offenses including failure to appear, failure to pay fines or fees, and technical probation/parole violations, as well as medically vulnerable inmates who present minimal risk to public safety. In some jurisdictions, evictions have been temporarily halted, and officers are issuing a summons in lieu of arrest for many minor offenses.

In prisons: Mitigation efforts include preventing/delaying the virus from entering facilities through measures such as suspending in-person visitation, halting transfers into facilities or requiring screening and 2 weeks isolation at intake, screening staff and issuing PPE, and releasing inmates nearing the end of their sentence or granting compassionate release to elderly and/or medically vulnerable inmates.

Q: Is there a checklist of what might be needed for inmates released now?

A: The RSAT website lists some resources and recommendations. The information presented in this webinar is aimed at consolidating typical key re-entry planning domains with some COVID-19 priorities for re-entering individuals who may have limited time to formulate release plans. There is no rule book for this rapidly changing situation, but it is important to keep up with state and local public health and emergency management notifications. See the [RSAT website for more information and resources](#).

Q: Is there any way of knowing the measures being taken for the different states specifically regarding the homeless situation being presented?

A: There are a few places that may have specific statewide measures and information on anything available at county and municipal levels. First, the link to the [listing of state executive orders by the Council of State Governments](#) included in the webinar allows a search of COVID-19 emergency orders issued by the governors of all 50 states, D.C., and U.S. territories. You can search by state or by topic. Several states have issued executive orders specific to providing alternative non-congregate housing solutions for the purpose of adequate social distancing. In New York and California, for example, arrangements are underway for short-term leasing of hotel rooms for placement of re-entering individuals and others without stable housing. Information may also be available on state and local housing and emergency management websites. Many jurisdictions are also working with local non-profit housing organizations.

Q: Can you give any suggestions on how we can prepare the inmates being released who have not completed any Reentry programs?

A: One recommendation for RSAT programs, especially those with a distinct re-entry phase, is to temporarily incorporate re-entry planning issues into all appropriate groups in the core treatment phase. Ensuring re-entering individuals know how to contact community corrections and have the means of communication required, as well as referrals to any transitional re-entry support available in the community are helpful.

Q: Would facilities with a dorm setting be a priority for release?

A: Most facilities with dorm settings are likely to take steps to thin out the custody population in order to eliminate or minimize the need to house inmates in dorm settings as much as possible. Also, in New York City, housing and re-entry non-profit agencies are working to eliminate use of 'barracks style' homeless shelters wherever possible.

Q: I am concerned about housing support for offenders leaving the program. It is good to hear that hotels and other housing may be available. I work in an institutional treatment center. Who would I ask about housing when an offender has no family and halfway houses may not be accepting people?

A: A good place to start is local or state housing and homeless divisions. As more jurisdictions facilitate increasing numbers of early releases of individuals in custody, more information on accommodation will likely become available. The RSAT Training & Technical Assistance team will make it a priority to monitor and share this type of information as it becomes available.

Q: If an offender is released based on the current criteria how quickly are they released?

A: Specific timelines may vary across jurisdictions, but the initial wave of releases is likely to take place as soon as possible. Some jurisdictions will continue to identify individuals who may qualify for early release on a rolling, ongoing basis.