



Homecoming Handbook: A Guide for Families and Friends



Virginia Department of Corrections

Welcome & Purpose

This handbook has been prepared for you as someone you care about begins an exciting new chapter—returning home and stepping into a future filled with possibility. Their time in confinement is ending, and with your support, this homecoming can become a powerful moment of renewal, connection, and hope. Your willingness to welcome them back speaks to your strength, compassion, and belief in their potential, and we hope this reunion brings joy and lasting positive change for your entire household.

While the transition back into the community can bring challenges, it also opens the door to fresh opportunities, new routines, and meaningful progress. This guide is here to help you understand what they may experience during this period of adjustment and to offer practical insights that can help them thrive.

Today, many individuals leaving incarceration benefit greatly from steady encouragement and a supportive environment as they rebuild their lives. After long periods away, reconnecting socially and emotionally can take time. Your patience, guidance, and perspective can become a steady source of reassurance—helping them recognize their strengths, regain confidence, and move forward with purpose.

We invite you to read this handbook thoughtfully. It is designed not only to help you assist them, but also to support you during this transition. Some homecomings unfold smoothly, while others bring unexpected turns—but with each step offering the chance for growth, healing, and new beginnings. With understanding, communication, and optimism, together you can navigate this journey and create a future filled with hope and possibility.

Understanding the Transition

Reentry is a major life change. The period immediately following release, reconnecting with daily life outside the correctional system, is a time of major change. This stage involves adjusting to routines, expectations, and responsibilities that may feel unfamiliar or long forgotten. New experiences, both big and small, can arise each day, and many of them cannot be fully anticipated in advance.

Approaching this period with patience and awareness can make a meaningful difference. Even if you stayed in touch throughout their incarceration, it can be difficult to fully grasp how different day-to-day life is behind the walls. Understandably, many people do not realize how significant this contrast is until they return to the community and begin navigating ordinary responsibilities again. What matters most is not simply that these environments differ, but that they're now working to rebuild a life with new expectations, choices, and freedoms.

Your steady presence can help bridge this transition. By offering understanding and encouragement, you can make the changes feel more manageable. Remember that they spent years adapting to an entirely different setting, and shifting away from those habits takes time. No one can instantly transform everything at once, but with your support, this new beginning can become a hopeful and successful step toward lasting stability.

Below are some ways families can offer meaningful support during this transition:

- Be patient with the process. Adjustment takes time, and progress may come in small steps.
- Encourage open, calm conversations. Listening without judgment can help them feel safe expressing concerns or frustrations.
- Set clear, respectful expectations within the household. Structure can help them regain stability.
- Celebrate small wins. Acknowledging progress—no matter how simple—reinforces confidence and motivation.
- Offer guidance, not control. Support their growth while allowing them to make their own decisions when appropriate.
- Stay aware of potential stress points. New routines, technology, and social situations can feel overwhelming at first.
- Connect them with positive resources—programs, support groups, employment help, or community services that encourage success.
- Remember: they have spent years adapting to a very different environment. No one can reverse that experience overnight. But with understanding, encouragement, and consistent support, you can help bridge the gap and make this new beginning a hopeful, steady journey toward a brighter future.



First Days at Home

Welcoming someone home is a truly special moment. You've been looking forward to this day, and now you finally get to share it together. However you choose to celebrate—sharing a good meal, catching up, visiting family, or simply relaxing—these first moments can be comforting and meaningful.

Everyone adjusts differently. Some people are eager to get out and do everything at once, while others prefer a quiet start. Checking in with the individual about what they're comfortable with can help set a positive tone. Let their pace guide the first few days.

Some individuals may be overflowing with energy and anticipation, while others may feel overwhelmed by all the new experiences coming at once. Both responses—and everything in between—are completely normal.

Most importantly, enjoy this time together. Celebrate in a way that feels right for both of you, and allow this moment to be the hopeful new start it is.

- Celebrate the homecoming, but keep it balanced.
- Ask what they want to do and respect their comfort level.
- Plan activities together
- Avoid overwhelming schedules
- Create a calm and welcoming environment



Developing a Relationship with Probation and Parole

What the Probation Team can offer the family:



A positive, respectful relationship between a supervisee's family and their probation officer can be a major source of stability during reentry. While the probation officer's role is to ensure accountability, compliance with court requirements, and safety, they are also an important resource for guidance, information, and support. When families and officers work together, it creates a stronger foundation for the supervisee to rebuild their life.

Probation officers can support families in several meaningful ways:

- **Understanding Time frames:** Time frames are important, especially when first starting supervision. Supervisees/Parolees must report in (in person or calling, based upon that office) to the Probation Office that handles their supervision, within 3 working days. This is important because this allows potential services and referrals to be made to assist with Reentry.
- Probation and Parole Officers can help families understand expectations of supervision and any court ordered obligations. By explaining the supervisee's requirements in simple, practical terms, officers give families the clarity they need to offer steady, confident support at home. Be sure to have release of information forms signed, if not, specific information about the supervisee cannot be provided and guidance will be in general terms.
- Probation and Parole Officers provide valuable insight into the reentry process. They understand the common challenges people face when returning to the community. They can help families recognize what is normal, what may be difficult, and how to respond in healthy, constructive ways.
- Probation and Parole Officers connect families to helpful services. Whether it's job training, counseling, community programs, or treatment services, officers often know where to turn for additional support that can strengthen the supervisee's success. Typically, with relapse, the most difficult times are within the first few days of

release and around day 30. Having resources in place as soon as possible can assist during critical times.

- Probation and Parole Officers encourage open communication. A good relationship with the officer creates a safe space to ask questions, share concerns, and work together toward solutions before problems grow. Many believe their officers are primarily focused on sending them back to jail, in reality, officers strive for the opposite and aim to connect people with resources, support, and referrals that can help them succeed. Also, honesty goes a long way, and most problems can be avoided if honesty is used.
- Probation and Parole Officers reinforce positive progress. When families and officers work as a team, they can celebrate accomplishments, keep goals in focus, and help the supervisee feel supported from all sides.

A good working relationship can help families in several important ways:

- It helps everyone stay on the same page. Families can better understand expectations, requirements, and routines the supervisee must follow, reducing confusion or misunderstandings.
- It gives families someone to turn to with questions. Probation officers can explain rules, deadlines, appointments, and needed documents in a clear and practical way.
- It provides insight into the reentry process. Officers often understand the challenges people face after incarceration—such as adjusting to structure, managing stress, finding employment, and rebuilding relationships.
- It strengthens the support system. When families know what they are collectively working toward, they can encourage positive habits and help prevent setbacks.
- It opens the door to community resources. Probation officers can connect families and supervisees with workforce programs, counseling, education opportunities, housing assistance, and other services that promote stability.
- It promotes trust and open communication. Families who feel informed are more confident in how to help, and probation officers can better understand the home environment and the supervisee's needs.

In many ways, the probation officer becomes a bridge between the supervisee, the family, and the community. By maintaining open communication, asking questions, and approaching the relationship with cooperation and understanding, families are able to play an active role in helping them adjust, stay encouraged, and successfully rebuild their life.

Common Challenges

Many individuals returning to the community show remarkable resilience as they navigate environments that look and feel very different from the structured world they've known while incarcerated. What might seem like simple decisions—such as choosing shampoo from a full aisle of brands or picking a meal from a menu with dozens of options—can feel overwhelming at first, simply because they haven't had access to that level of choice in a long time. Large stores with bright lights, constant announcements, and crowded aisles can create sensory overload, and situations like multiple conversations happening at once, the hum of traffic, or the unpredictable movements of people in busy public spaces may feel disorienting. In correctional facilities, movement is directed and predictable; upon release, adjusting to open environments with cross-traffic, noise, technology and fast-paced motion can take time. With patience, understanding, and supportive guidance, individuals can build confidence, rediscover their independence, and learn to navigate these new experiences successfully—often surprising themselves with how quickly they grow and adapt.

Some other common adjustment issues may include:

- Excessive sleeping or inactivity
- Difficulty finding or keeping a job
- Emotional struggles like anxiety or loneliness

How Families Can Help

- Your support matters. Encourage healthy habits and provide structure without being overbearing.
- Include them in household routines
- Offer guidance on job searches and responsibilities
- Celebrate small achievements

Special Considerations

Reconnecting With Family After Incarceration

Long separations can place real strain on families. Time apart, physical distance, and the stress of incarceration can all affect how family members relate to one another. Coming home is often filled with excitement, but it can also bring its own set of challenges as everyone learns how to live together again.

Below are some approaches that can help ease this transition and strengthen communication with your partner and children after returning from incarceration.

Give Yourself and Your Family Time to Adjust

Sudden shifts in routine can feel disorienting for everyone.

- Avoid trying to recreate an ideal version of family life right away.
- Trying to “make up for lost time” too quickly can overwhelm children or partners.
- Individuals often need space to unwind and settle back into everyday life.
- Family members may also need time to adjust to individual’s returning to live with them after the time apart.

Reintegration is a gradual process, not something that happens overnight.

Practice Open, Calm Communication

Clear communication becomes even more important after long periods apart.

- Share your thoughts and emotions honestly but do so in a calm setting.
- Try not to react impulsively during tense moments.
- Make space to hear your partner’s or children’s feelings without judgment.
- It’s okay to acknowledge that things may feel different or that you need support adjusting.
- Set clear expectations calmly
- Ask about their goals and interests
- Address inappropriate behaviors tactfully
- Honesty builds trust, especially when everyone is navigating change.

Suggestions:

Spend Quality Time Together

Shared experiences help rebuild connection.

- Choose activities the whole family can enjoy—walks, games, movie nights, or simple outings.
- Let your children help pick what you do together so they feel included and valued.
- Use this time to rediscover each other’s interests and create new memories.

These moments help reestablish closeness in a natural, enjoyable way.

Create New Routines as a Family

Structure can make the transition smoother for everyone.

- Sit down together to talk about daily expectations—meals, chores, bedtime, and family time.
- Discuss consequences calmly and apply them consistently.
- Help them to avoid slipping into a command-and-control approach; instead, encourage them to listen to what your children need.
- Remind them that your family developed their own rhythms while they were away, but you are open to blending routines. Doing this respectfully builds trust.

Working together on structure helps everyone feel secure and supported.

Reach Out for Support When Needed

Reintegration can be emotionally complex, and you don’t have to navigate it alone.

- Consider counseling or support groups if the transition feels difficult.
- Use available family resources—they exist for exactly this reason.

Seeking help early can make the adjustment smoother for the entire family.

Watch for behaviors that may indicate trouble:

- Refusing to leave the house
- Excessive drinking or drug use
- Unexplained possessions or money
- Persistent anger or withdrawal

Tips for Success

Practical advice for a smoother transition:

- Encourage patience and responsibility
- Help set short- and long-term goals
- Seek counseling or community resources if needed

Noticing and Addressing Risky Thinking:

All of us make decisions every day. Our thinking is what determines what we do. The Four Steps to Responsible Thinking is a tool that VADOC uses to help individuals understand the thoughts behind their choices.

As a support, we encourage you to help them keep using these steps regularly, so they become a natural part of their decision-making.

Follow these four steps every time you notice a risky situation:

1. **Pay attention to your thoughts.**
Notice what you are telling yourself in the moment.
2. **Notice and identify the risky thoughts.**
If you have a thought that could lead to trouble, recognize it right away.
3. **Replace the thought with one to lower the risk.**
Choose a safer, more responsible thought that lowers the risk of making a harmful or unhelpful choice.
4. **Practice these steps often.**
The more you use them, the easier they become, and the more automatic responsible thinking will feel.

Benefits of Using the Four Steps

- Builds awareness of personal thoughts and habits
- Helps identify thinking patterns that lead to risky behavior
Supports better decision-making and reduces impulsive choices
- Encourages replacing harmful or unhelpful thoughts with responsible alternatives

- Strengthens self-control and emotional regulation
- Improves problem-solving skills in stressful or high-pressure moments
- Creates consistency, which leads to long-term positive behavior change

Real-Life Examples

Example 1: Everyday Frustration

Situation: Someone is told “no” or asked to wait.

Risky thought: “They’re disrespecting me. I’m not waiting.”

Replacement thought: “This is frustrating but getting upset will only make things worse. I can stay calm and handle this the right way.”

Outcome: The person avoids an argument or rule violation by choosing a calmer response.

Example 2: Peer Pressure

Situation: Others are encouraging someone to break a rule or join in negative behavior.

Risky thought: “If I don’t go along with them, they’ll think I’m weak or state struck.”

Replacement thought: “I’m responsible for my own choices. I don’t have to follow them into trouble.”

Outcome: The person avoids consequences and maintains control over their actions.

Example 3: Emotional Reaction

Situation: Someone feels angry after a disagreement.

Risky thought: “I need to prove my point right now.”

Replacement thought: “Acting on this anger could make things worse. I can step away, cool down, and come back later.”

Outcome: The person prevents the situation from escalating and shows maturity.

Long-Term Impact

When individuals consistently use the Four Steps, the results go beyond immediate behavior:

- Improved self-management becomes automatic
- Risky thinking becomes easier to notice and interrupt
- Responsible thoughts and actions become habits
- Better relationships are established with staff, peers, and family
- Increased trust from others due to consistent behavior
- Fewer conflicts and more positive opportunities
- Stronger confidence in handling challenges without reacting impulsively

Over time, these changes support long-term personal growth and prepare individuals for successful decision-making in the community, at work, and in daily life.

Closing Message

As you move forward together into this new chapter, remember that reentry is a shared journey—one strengthened by patience, communication, and consistent support. Your willingness to walk beside them during this transition creates a powerful foundation for healing, stability, and renewed opportunity. Every encouraging conversation, every small routine built together, and every moment of understanding contributes to lasting progress.

The Virginia Department of Corrections is committed to supporting lasting success. Our mission centers on promoting positive change, reducing recidivism, and enhancing public safety by helping individuals return to their communities with dignity, purpose, and tools they need to thrive. Your partnership as family and valued support system plays an essential role in that mission.

Thank you for your efforts in making this important transition a success. Together—with steady guidance, open communication, and hope for the future—we can help ensure this homecoming becomes not just a return, but a true new beginning.



Additional resources can be found by accessing this QR Code.