

ONE PARISH ONE PRISONER

LEARNING MODULES: TEXAS

STONES



When facing release from prison, the most basic question for every incarcerated person is: *Where am I gonna live? What's my release address?*

What makes this even more pressing is that TDCJ requires an approved release address *roughly three months before their ERD* (estimated release date). You literally can't get out of prison without an approved release address. Many folks facing release just want an address to submit so they can get out, with little intention of actually living there.

We are about much more than finding an address. Incarcerated applicants to One Parish One Prisoner should be in a different frame of mind: more focused on finding the right housing that supports their healthy re-entry and gives them the best chance at starting their new life.

Already read this? Yep: as a team, you started this work in the HOUSING module a month or two ago. Has one team member already begun to take the lead on this? Maybe that's your natural candidate for this Role? This is the page for designated team member to carry this super important housing work forward. It's the role that's relevant starting right now (other Roles are more about preparing for barriers down the road).

Here's the TDCJ & HOUSING Role for your team's journey, should you choose to accept it:

BEFORE RELEASE INSTITUTIONAL PAROLE OFFICER (PO)

Institutional Parole Officers are physically assigned to TDCJ units and are employed by the Board of Pardons and Paroles. They interview incarcerated offenders at TDCJ Units, federal correctional institutions, contracted facilities, and county jails statewide to prepare Parole Case Summaries.

- If they haven't yet, ask your incarcerated friend if they can get you their Parole Officer's office phone number or email. (We're not sure yet, with TDCJ, if parish team members are able to be in direct communication with releasing friends' PO's. But let's give it a shot!)
- Reach out, introduce yourself: that you're part of a Parish Team with your Releasing Friend (use full name and TDCJ number) with a program called One Parish One Prisoner, building relationship and a positive release plan to support their re-entry into your community. Add a link to the program, if you want: oneparishoneprisoner.org.
- Ask to speak on the phone, clarify some details, confirm your friend's estimated release date (ERD), and say that you're helping with the release address/housing process.

GETTING AN ADDRESS

You can help your friend think through, contact, and secure one or two good housing situations, starting now. This is all about being in dialogue with your incarcerated friend. Print and send this page, and talk about their preferences, in order. It's good to have a backup plan.

Here are the three most common options to present and discuss with your releasing friend.

- **Live With Family** - This isn't as easy as it sounds. Many folks leaving prison don't have healthy relationships with family members. Even if they're around, well, it's complicated. Sometimes starting a new, sober life often means making a break from the very environments that helped put them in prison. Family members' addresses are sometimes not approved by a DOC house inspection (existing residents may have felony charges, firearms, known drug activity, etc). Maybe your friend has a romantic partner offering their home as a release address option, but your friend feels conflicted about whether that's the best way to start their new life.

You're not the parent or boss, but ask good questions as good friends would.
Maybe a family situation is just right. You can help communicate with the family, if nearby, and build relationship with them, too! Ask if it's OK to visit the home/family. Invite the family member or loved one to a team meeting, help them feel embraced and supported as well.

- **Oxford Houses** - These resident-run, clean-and-sober group houses are in most counties. There's no staffing, no sign out front. They are resident-run, like Twelve Step meetings. The only conditions are a strong commitment to addiction recovery and paying rent (usually around \$500/mo). There are random UA's (urine analyses), required Twelve Step meetings, and a weekly house meeting.

But there are wait lists, and applying from prison is tricky. If your friend wants it, it's a good idea to help locate local Oxford Houses on OXFORDVACANCIES.COM, mail your friend the application, and you can facilitate their "re-entry application" to get on a few wait lists months before release.

[Important: many Oxford Houses assume the only way a "re-entry" applicant can qualify is if they have a DOC Housing Voucher for the initial down payment and first month's rent. Be sure to tell your contact at the local Oxford house—and your friend, to tell their in-prison "counselor"—that part of the One Parish One Prisoner program is for your team to help cover that cost when it comes, IF there's no DOC voucher. The prison and Oxford re-entry nexus rarely sees something like you all! You have to explain your team's readiness to pay the deposit ahead of your friend's release date—so they can release into housing, smoothly. This is a major "stone" blocking the re-entry process—a stone your church can help roll away.]

- **Recovery or Transitional Home** - Many communities have some local residential recovery programs. These are usually non-profit programs, with a stronger addiction-recovery (and often faith) focus. Your friend may be turned off by a home with a manager and structured program. Or they might feel that's exactly what they're looking for—to grow, have a stable and sober environment, with some daily support to thrive.

Where would you start? Start asking around: *"Who knows of good recovery homes, good housing programs, or transitional housing?"*

It's a great chance to get to know your community more, learn about good (and some not so good) work happening close to you. Follow good word of mouth, and look out for fundamentalist outfits that have a hyper controlling feel, with poor facilities that require mouthing pieties to keep your housing. Investigate.

Individuals supervised by the Parole Division who may lack a residential release plan may be temporarily housed in a state contracted residential reentry center (RRC).

In addition to the contracted RRCs, there are agency approved alternate housing resources folks in prison may write to for acceptance to reside in when they have no other viable residence plan. The resource listing is available to the person on the unit. Your friend can contact the institutional parole officer (IPO) on the unit with any questions.

The Parole Division also utilizes Temporary Housing Assistance Program (THAP) providers, which are private vendors who have applied and been approved to house releasing inmates. These facilities can only exist in counties that do not have a state-contracted RRC (Residential Reentry Center), and eligible individuals can only be placed in THAP locations within their own

legal county of residence. Folks are automatically screened for eligibility by Parole Division staff when it has been determined they have no other residential options.

FREQUENTLY ASKED HOUSING QUESTIONS

- Why not have the One Parish One Prisoner team/church offer a place to live?

It's a good question.

When we first started our One Parish One Prisoner experiments, our hope and assumption was that every church has someone with a room or cottage or downstairs apartment or something to rent. After all, most faith communities can supply a used car, an employment connection in the congregation, etc. What better way to serve someone coming home from prison?

There's too much power in being someone's landlord. It puts you in a bind: you need to enforce basic standards of behavior, which they might fail. And if they were to relapse on an old addiction, or fail to pay rent, you are not the ones they can come to for mercy and accompaniment; instead, you're the landlord/enforcer they need to avoid. Months of deep relationship building is out the window.

Our policy is NOT offering housing directly with your church or Parish Team members.

- Who pays early rent?

This is the largest purpose of your ROLL AWAY THE STONE FUND: the first 2-3 months of rent for release housing. No more than three months, in the One Parish One Prisoner model. Once your team works with your friend to locate good housing, once you help your friend apply and get accepted, you should feel good as a team to help close that gap and pay rent for the first month or two—or three, max.

- If you haven't had the Welcome Home Event at your church to fundraise this Roll Away the Stone Fund yet, you might need to pool some money as a team or use some church ministry budget to put a down payment at a transitional house to hold your friend's spot. This is worth it. A huge door to open, or stone to roll away, early in the game.

This brings us to a preview of the second most urgent question facing folks releasing from prison into the wider society: employment. We opened that issue in the HOUSING module, also—but now you'll have one of your team members focused on the employment question. It's good for you to be in touch—TDCJ/HOUSING Role and EMPLOYMENT Role—and work as a super smooth duo, as these stones overlap!

AFTER RELEASE

PAROLE OFFICER (PO)

PO = Parole Officer. Same as the Institutional Parole Officer except outside of prison, your Role now is to *ask your friend's permission* to reach out and open a line of communication with their PO. Let the PO know who you and your One Parish One Prisoner team is, with what church, and how you're there to help support your friend's successful (they love that word) re-entry.

Every office is different. Every parole officer is different. Parole Officers are there to monitor folks released early from prison.

Most people end up on electronic monitors – either GPS which make life extremely difficult or a curfew monitor. Equipment frequently breaks or is faulty and can result in revocation hearings.

Common conditions will be payment of monthly supervision/court fees, no drugs/alcohol, weekly drug tests, bi-weekly or weekly PO check-ins, sporadic home visits, electronic monitoring.

IMPORTANT: You are not required, at all, to give the TDCJ PO any inside information, or report any slips or mistakes by your releasing friend. You don't lie or hide anything, either. It's just staying in your lane, letting them do their job, you do yours. You're not the social worker with ethical obligations. You are not "responsible" for your person's slip ups, failures, or violations. That's between them and the policing system. You are like family, you are friends, you are simply church members here to love and support and clarify *in order to help your person—never to help TDCJ*. We can be so eager to please authority systems that we forget who we're here to serve.

In John (chapter 8) Jesus handles the woman caught in adultery by 1) protecting her from the oppressive enforcers of the law. Only then does Jesus 2) privately talk with her about her poor decisions, in a context of trust and care. On the rare occasion that someone's life is in danger, or children are being hurt, yes, we need to report this for harm reduction and safety of vulnerable others. But most of the time when our friends in re-entry slip up, there are personal struggles in sobriety, curfew, stepping outside the lines, technical violations that can get them sent back into the tombs for a long time. Those violations are not our job to report, ever. That's not our relationship with POs. Misplacing our fidelity in these situations is a great way to break all your trust with your releasing friend for good.

Probation times vary, and released citizens have to periodically report to their probation officer. Any "violation," and someone on probation can get 1-3 nights in jail as a swift warning, or a month back in temporary prison if it's serious. Sometimes this is better than drifting into full relapse into addiction or new crimes, and offers a wakeup call and chance to hit re-start.

It's possible, but rare, that your releasing friend will have no probation time upon release.

REENTRY RESOURCE GUIDE

https://tdcj.texas.gov/documents/rid/RID_Reentry_Resource_Guide.pdf

Travis County list of resources: <https://www.reentryroundtable.org/get-help/>

RENTAL AGREEMENT

This is for down the road a bit. You might want to come back to this page a few months after your releasing friend is home and employed. They'll eventually be ready to move out of just a "transitional" housing situation and into a real house or apartment, paying steady rent. It's wh

That's hard to do.

And why your parish, a team of community members, is vital for breaking out of the underground. You're helping open doors of trust in the community. You know this person. You can vouch for them. Hesitant landlords will listen to you.

Many formerly incarcerated people who have done courageous recovery work, reentry work, can rarely break out of the low-income, low-quality housing sector because their rental applications show a criminal record and very slim rental history.

The work will be this:

- Look at online classifieds together for rental listings that your released friend can afford, and would apply for anyway—but where they don't have a chance at acceptance when their application is compared to others.
- Look for "mom and pop" rentals, a family who rents this one house, or two. They can hear your friend's story and make their own decision. Larger rental agencies have policies and the staff person on the phone doesn't have the discretion to take a risk on your friend.
- Do what we at Underground Ministries have done for years: we make the initial phone calls, not our released friend. This is where we leverage our social capital to open doors, roll away stones locally.
- Say this: *"Hi, my name is Susan. I'm calling about the rental listing I see posted here. Is it still available? . . . Great. I'm inquiring not for myself, but for a good friend. See, I'm a member at _____ Church and we have been walking with a family for some time, who have made really incredible steps into a new life after the father/mother has recovered from a past of addiction and trouble with the law. They have a strong job, we at our church love and support them, and they are ready to move into a better living situation. We are looking for the best setting and landlord where can continue their future together. Before I take up any of your time, does this sound like a situation that might interest you?"*

And wait. Don't say more. You'll hear quickly in their voice if they're not into it, or if they're interested. If not, say thanks, and call the next person. And the next.

- If someone says, "Well, maybe. Tell me more . . ." now you have permission to tell them about your friend. First name only, at this point. Tell all the winning details, the hard work, why you and your team believe in this person, why they're ready for a long term lease. Basically, this *is* exciting! Some landlords want to make their rentals part of something meaningful, and help their community. You are bringing them the gift of a great candidate, who comes with your whole team's support!

- Set up a meeting with your applying friend. Go together. When you get there, that's where your friend does all the talking. You've opened the door. Let the landlord be won over by this person transforming their life, and make a decision based on their personal interaction. If you get this far, many times the landlord will give the person a chance. You're there to show them it's less risky than they fear (ie, the landlord doesn't feel scammed, they see other community members are vouching for and taking time to invest in this person. *"Let's give it a shot!"*)
- You can help, if your team wants, with the (often huge) move-in fees.
- Your church can celebrate, put the word out, and have others in the congregation show up with a truck to help your friend (and anyone in their home) move. Bring pizzas.

This is the fattened calf party. This is a coming home celebration. This is where you feel the heart of God, like a parent, swelling with joy inside your veins. This isn't social work. It's more. In Jesus' parable of the wayward child who returns, the father exclaims, "My child was dead! Now he's alive!"

This is the language of resurrection.

Savor it.