

RECOVERY AMONG PEOPLE IN THE JUSTICE SYSTEM

People with mental and/or substance use disorders involved with the justice system face many challenges on their path to recovery, such as misconceptions, shortages of treatment, and difficult transitions. However, there are many effective prevention services, treatments, and supports specifically designed for individuals involved in the criminal justice system. These options should bring hope and promise to their journey of recovery.

Many people in the justice system, including incarcerated individuals and those recently released from jail or prison, have experienced the effects of behavioral health conditions, which include both mental and substance use disorders. In 2005, approximately three-fourths of people in State prisons (74 percent) and local jails (76 percent) with a mental health problem met the clinical criteria for substance dependence or abuse.¹

To address these problems, a continuum of care supports individuals in the criminal justice system before, during, and after incarceration. Some effective initiatives include drug and mental health courts, jail diversion programs, counseling interventions, medically assisted treatment, cognitive therapy, correctional therapeutic communities, and community reentry programs that include drug treatment and recovery support. These and other efforts provide support for people and families who need help for mental and/or substance use disorders.

Today, 66 percent of Americans believe that treatment and support helps people with mental health problems lead normal lives.² In addition, approximately 75 percent of people in the United States believe that recovery is possible from dependence on substances such as alcohol, prescription drugs, and marijuana.³ Guided by this widespread community support, people in recovery have found solutions to manage their conditions and inspire others to follow their lead in living healthy lives.

The 23rd annual **National Recovery Month (Recovery Month)** observance this September will celebrate the effectiveness of treatment services and the reality of recovery. **Recovery Month** is sponsored by the **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)**, within the **U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)**.

This year's theme, **"Join the Voices for Recovery: It's Worth It,"** emphasizes that while the road to recovery may be difficult, the benefits of preventing and overcoming mental and/or substance use disorders are significant and valuable to individuals, families, and communities. People in recovery achieve healthy lifestyles, both physically and emotionally, while contributing in positive ways to their communities. They also prove to family members, friends, and others that prevention works, treatment is effective, and people recover.

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As a talented point guard in high school, I had tremendous opportunities in front of me. However, the lure of the streets, with their promise of easy money, peer pressure, nightlife, alcohol, and drugs, was simply too much to overcome.

And so began an 11-year revolving door odyssey in and out of jail for typical drug user offenses. I was a poster child for recidivism. In 1990, I was again paroled and everyone, including me, believed that I would be back in jail in short order. However, in less than 1 year, I completely turned my life around and was irreversibly moving in the right direction.

Unlike before, I tapped into a combination of public-private services, training, and mentoring programs. This was the essential difference! Programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous provided guidance, direction, and moral support in addressing my underlying addictions. My sponsor provided temporary Oxford-model housing, which both physically removed me from a risky environment and provided mentoring support. Home was truly a safe place.

I was hired for my first real job as a building maintenance worker, which provided the foundation for my career. Additional study and licensing put me in a position to work as chief building engineer at three different companies. I've since worked as a real estate agent, developer, entrepreneur, and currently, in the non-profit sector.

I now enjoy the love, support, and respect of my family and friends. I have rebuilt my relationship with my high-school sweetheart, and now the same two teenagers who brought a little girl into this world in 1978 are married, responsible adults. I'm active in a spiritual program, and most importantly, support multiple community recovery organizations and volunteer at the Department of Corrections.

As I've been able to quietly, and without fanfare, give back to my community tenfold, I am ever mindful of that spiritual axiom that states that "from those who have received much, much is expected."

Recovery Month supports many of SAMHSA's **Strategic Initiatives**, which guide SAMHSA's work to help people with mental and/or substance use disorders and their communities and families. SAMHSA works to prevent costly behavioral health conditions and promote overall health and well-being for all Americans. SAMHSA's **Trauma and Justice** Strategic Initiative is dedicated to reducing the behavioral health impact of trauma and addresses the needs of people with mental and/or substance use disorders and those with histories of trauma within the criminal and juvenile justice systems.

This document details the need for recovery support services for people and their families involved in the criminal justice system, identifies challenges that exist, outlines solutions to those challenges, and provides action steps to facilitate recovery. Refer to the "**Join the Voices for Recovery**" document in this toolkit to learn about real-life recovery journeys from a mental and/or substance use disorder.

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Behavioral Health Conditions in Criminal Justice Populations

The need for treatment for mental and/or substance use disorders among people involved with the criminal justice system is critical.

Prison Populations who Experienced Mental Health Problems in 2005 *



In 2009, between 60 percent and 80 percent of adult males aged 18 to 49, under the supervision of the criminal justice system, had a substance use related issue.⁴ People may face serious adjustment problems while incarcerated or upon leaving, as a result of incarceration. These numbers illustrate the distinct public health problem in the criminal justice system – hundreds of thousands of inmates and recently released individuals are in need of mental and/or substance use treatment and support services.

Many people who are impacted by mental and/or substance use disorders and involved in the criminal justice system are young adults or adolescents, making it important to acknowledge behavioral health conditions early and obtain treatment and support before problems deepen. Evidence shows that youth who had been in jail or a detention center were more likely to have used illicit drugs, alcohol, or cigarettes in the past year than youth who had never been in these facilities.⁵ A recent study found that substance abuse or dependence in the past year was almost three times higher among youth who had been in a jail or a detention center at least once in their lives than among youth who had not.⁶

Pursuit of Recovery

Treatment and recovery support services offered by providers and peers are delivered during different stages for people in the criminal justice system. For example, services can be provided prior to incarceration (e.g., jail diversion and drug courts), in criminal justice facilities (e.g., treatment and recovery services, peer support), and post-release (e.g., transitional, peer support, and community-based services).

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Pre-incarceration services:

SAMHSA's [Jail Diversion Program for Adults](#) diverts individuals with mental illness (and often co-occurring substance use disorders) from the criminal justice system to community-based treatment and recovery-related services.⁷ Jail diversion programs are seen as a humane solution to the criminalization and inappropriate incarceration of individuals with mental and/or substance use disorders.⁸ Diverting appropriate individuals from jail to community-based mental health treatment has potential benefits to the criminal justice system, the community, and the individual.⁹

Additionally, drug courts are an example of successful collaborations among treatment, justice, and public health systems that share goals to reduce criminal behavior, improve delivery of treatment services, and encourage better productivity and independence from social services and the health system.¹⁰ Proven to lower incarceration rates, drug courts are based on the understanding that substance use is a chronic, progressive, and relapsing disorder, but with the right resources and support, it can be successfully treated.^{11, 12}

Drug courts promote a seamless path to recovery. They can:¹³

- Identify individuals in need of treatment and referral to treatment shortly after arrest;
- Diagnose a defendant's treatment needs;
- Match the defendant's need to specific treatment approaches;
- Review the defendant's progress;
- Hold defendants accountable using sanctions and rewards; and
- Provide aftercare and support services following treatment completion.

Similarly, mental health courts have recently been established in response to the growing number of people with serious untreated mental illnesses who are charged with minor crimes. Under a judge's supervision, mental health courts work with attorneys and mental health service providers to provide eligible defendants with alternatives to jail sentences, including mental health treatment and community-based supervision.¹⁴

Other services prior to incarceration may include probation with treatment options for behavioral health issues and incentives for improvement. Another option is restrictive community sentences in lieu of incarceration, including military-style boot camps, intensive supervised probation, correctional halfway houses, day-reporting centers, and home detention.¹⁵

In-facility services:

The availability of treatment and recovery services varies across correctional facilities, and the extent of these services is often limited. However, many jails provide services such as drug and alcohol awareness education and mental health and suicide screenings.¹⁶

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There are also alternative treatment options to help inmates. SAMHSA's [Roadmap to Seclusion and Restraint Free Mental Health Services](#) identifies low-cost ways to encourage recovery, including:¹⁷

- Comfort rooms, which are spaces in criminal justice facilities that are designed to help people relax;
- Development of personal safety plans, which document activities that comfort inmates (such as listening to music or reading), as well as the “triggers” that stress them; and
- Positive daily interactions between staff members and treatment recipients, which offer an opportunity to extend care and compassion.

Even if they are provided for a limited amount of time, certain jail-based support services are very effective for individuals in the criminal justice system. Job interview preparation, orientation to community resources, and financial management workshops can be offered in just a day, providing beneficial information for inmates who will soon reenter the community.¹⁸

Contingency management is also an effective method of offering rewards for attendance at counseling sessions or for negative drug tests. Rewards include institutional privileges, reduced program requirements, or goods and services that support a crime-free lifestyle.¹⁹

To support individuals reentering the community, the [National GAINS Center](#) developed the Assess, Plan, Identify, and Coordinate (APIC) model to aid in transitional planning. Although the model is targeted toward individuals with co-occurring disorders, the principles can be applied to all inmates with mental health or substance use disorders:^{20, 21}

- **Assess** the inmate's needs and public safety risks;
- **Plan** appropriate treatment and services to address these needs and risks;
- **Identify** community and correctional programs responsible for post-release services; and
- **Coordinate** the transition plan to ensure implementation and minimize gaps in care.

Post-incarceration services:

In addition to treatment in prison, research shows that continuing treatment in the community is needed to sustain a positive direction. Following prison-based treatment with community-based treatment upon release reduces the risk of recidivism, decreases substance abuse, improves employment prospects, and increases positive social behaviors. Also, case management and referral to other medical, psychological, and social services are key treatment components for many individuals involved in the justice system.²²

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The road to recovery can begin in prison or jail and is aided by peer support services, led by family, friends, or members of the recovery community. For instance, in structured forensic peer specialist programs, trained peer specialists with histories of mental illness and criminal justice involvement help those with similar histories. These peer guides instill hope and offer credible models of the possibility of recovery. Their services are offered in more than 30 States and include:²³

- Sharing their experiences of returning from jail or prison to the community, and modeling the ways they advanced their recovery;
- Helping people let go of negative attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors learned as survival techniques in prison;
- Sharing their experiences in finding jobs and housing;
- Providing information on the rights and responsibilities of prisoners returning to the community;
- Providing support by accompanying people to their initial probation meetings or treatment appointments; and
- Working alongside professional staff and training professional staff on how to engage people with a history of interaction with the criminal justice system.

The recovery journey doesn't have to be lonely. Peer support services demonstrate that others understand and have experienced the benefits of recovery from mental and/or substance use disorders and can share their recovery stories to help others. Positive reinforcement can help people recognize progress made.²⁴

Many support groups such as **Alcoholics Anonymous**, **Narcotics Anonymous**, and **Dual Recovery Anonymous** are open to all individuals with behavioral health conditions, including those mandated to attend through court orders. Local groups meet across the country and are open to anyone who wants to overcome a mental and/or substance use disorder. Often, these programs are based on "Twelve Steps" that help members accept, address, and overcome behavioral health conditions. One of the main components of peer support groups such as these is encouraging an environment of mutual understanding, which is very powerful for individuals seeking to live in recovery. There are also peer support groups such as **Al-Anon** and **Nar-Anon** for family members and friends of an individual with a substance use disorder. Mental health organizations such as the **National Association on Mental Illness (NAMI)** also have peer support groups for family members as well as the individual with a behavioral health condition.

Given the unique challenges and barriers often faced by individuals involved in the justice system, some communities have peer support programs for people who are overcoming both substance use disorders and past criminal justice involvement. Community-based services also provide some portions of the jail population the opportunity to live, work, and receive treatment services in the community, often at contracted halfway houses, in pre-release facilities, or at home under monitoring surveillance.²⁵ These programs give individuals the chance to access treatment services in a structured environment while reintegrating into the community and connecting with their families.

Transition services can also help individuals adjust to community life after serving a prison or jail sentence. These programs help people find treatment and recovery services, housing, and employment and provide individuals with the skills to make a meaningful impact within their families and the community.

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Challenges to Receiving Treatment and Ways to Overcome Barriers

Effective addiction treatment has been shown to: **



Decrease an individual's future drug use and drug-related criminal behavior



Improve family relationships



Increase prospects for employment

As the rate of incarceration has risen in recent decades, the country's prisons have become overcrowded, leading to reduced screening, monitoring, and managing of inmates.²⁶ Statistics show that only 10 percent of individuals in need of treatment for a substance use disorder within the criminal justice system actually receive treatment as part of their justice system supervision.²⁷ In addition, screening for behavioral health conditions is increasingly difficult because of prison population growth, as is allocating the necessary resources to treat them.²⁸

While there are constraints to the accessibility of behavioral health services, research shows that facilities offering treatment services in specialized settings lead to better outcomes for offenders, as measured by drug use and arrests post-release.²⁹ SAMHSA participates in the effort to support community-based services through its **Jail Diversion Program**, which seeks to redirect individuals with mental illness from the criminal justice system to more appropriate treatment and recovery support services, including primary health care, housing, job, and counseling services. To date, SAMHSA grantees have conducted more than 79,000 screenings and diverted more than 3,300 people with mental illness from jail to community treatment services.³⁰

Once released, people involved with the justice system have an opportunity to reclaim their lives and live successfully, and many are already doing so. However, barriers extend beyond the realm of the prison walls, and the path to recovery is difficult for many individuals who have been involved with the criminal justice system. For instance, about two-thirds of individuals who are re-incarcerated report active substance use within the six months prior to re-incarceration.³¹ Because of these challenges, a growing number of correctional facilities are recognizing that helping inmates successfully return to their communities is beneficial to individuals, families, and communities.³²

The following are some of the challenges and solutions for individuals with mental and/or substance use disorders who are in the criminal justice system.

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Challenge: Social withdrawal, social misconceptions

Individuals involved with the justice system may feel a diminished sense of self-worth and personal value.³³ This may lead to social withdrawal, when inmates disconnect themselves from others,³⁴ rendering social support and inclusion an important component of the recovery process and reentry to a community. In addition, the general prejudice of being incarcerated exacerbates issues of withdrawal and encourages ex-offenders to hide their past problems.

Fear of being judged for mental and/or substance use disorders often reduces the desire of individuals with behavioral health problems to seek treatment. Prejudice and discrimination are major barriers to recovery for people who have mental and/or substance use disorders, including those in the justice system.³⁵ They:³⁶

- Reduce access to resources and opportunities – such as housing, employment, and community participation; and
- Contribute to feelings of low self-esteem, isolation, and hopelessness.

Providing Some Solutions

- SAMHSA's **Resource Center to Promote Acceptance, Dignity, and Social Inclusion** (ADS Center) helps build support and restore dignity for many who face discrimination or prejudice, including those involved in the criminal justice system. The ADS Center states that recovery can mean being able to hold down a job, go back to school, and have a close relationship with family and friends. It is a feeling of responsibility for one's life and a sense of control over one's problems.³⁷
- **The Legal Action Center** (LAC) is an organization devoted to fighting discrimination against people with criminal records, as well as those with behavioral health conditions. The organization works to help these individuals fully participate in society while maintaining their dignity. To aid these efforts, the LAC helps people with criminal records access employment services and provides legal counseling to individuals with substance use disorders, as well as encourages sentencing reform and criminal justice community advocacy.
- **The American Civil Liberties Union** (ACLU) works to defend targets of discrimination, including those in the criminal justice system and ex-offenders. The organization promotes policies that ensure individuals are treated equally. The many local chapters within the ACLU help to address cases of injustice in communities across the country.

Challenge: Transitioning from prison or jail

In 2010, an estimated 1.5 million adults aged 18 or older were on parole, probation, or other supervised release from prison at some time during the past year.³⁸ While reentering society upon release from prison and jail is challenging, support from friends and family, as well as other available resources, can help people integrate back into their neighborhoods and communities. It's important to recognize that individuals who are on parole or supervised release are at increased risk for behavioral health conditions – an estimated 27 percent of these adults were current drug users.³⁹ Although these individuals are more likely than the general population to receive some mental health treatment, they are also most likely to report an unmet need for mental health treatment.⁴⁰ This finding highlights the importance of behavioral health treatment and recovery services among the criminal justice population.

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When services are available to these individuals, the benefits are widespread. Better outcomes are associated with treatment that lasts longer than 90 days, with the greatest reductions in drug abuse and criminal behavior attributed to those who complete treatment.⁴¹ Similarly, individuals involved in the criminal justice system who were treated by evidence-based interventions, including cognitive-behavioral therapy, learned social and coping skills, approaches to reinforce behavioral change, and motivational enhancement to increase treatment engagement.⁴²

However, fully capitalizing on these services comes with some challenges. While seeking treatment and recovery, individuals may be confronted with pressures to find stable housing and employment, which can complicate their recovery process.

Furthermore, individuals may be subject to other emotional factors. Stress, a feeling of emotional and physical tension,⁴³ can also impact a person's recovery following release from jail or prison and may ultimately lead to relapse.⁴⁴ For those transitioning from jail or prison, stress can be induced by a variety of reasons, including reuniting with family members, securing housing, daily decision-making, and complying with criminal justice supervision requirements.⁴⁵

Providing Some Solutions

To address these challenges, individuals and their families and friends can turn to transitional services, which are offered to help ease the adjustment from prison or jails back to the community. Transitional services are provided in the community to assist recently released individuals and have been shown to improve individuals' reentry into society post-release. For example:

- **SAMHSA's Ex-Offender Re-Entry Program** helps individuals formerly in the criminal justice system access treatment and services in alternate settings to jails and prisons. The program awards grants to provide screening, assessment, and comprehensive treatment and recovery support services to offenders reentering the community.
- The **U.S. Department of Justice's National Reentry Resource Center** provides education, training, and technical support to government, service providers, correctional facilities, and nonprofit organizations focused on prisoner reentry. The Resource Center's website includes a database of the programs that receive assistance, many of which are dedicated to behavioral health services.
- The process of finding housing and employment is often overwhelming for individuals in the criminal justice system. To address these challenges, the **National Institute of Corrections** supports the **Transition from Prison to Community (TPC)** and **Transition from Jail to Community (TJC)** projects. These projects drive collaboration between public, private, and community agencies to offer resources to transitioning individuals, as well as develop effective preparations for release.⁴⁶
- A program coordinated by the Council of State Governments Justice Center, the **Criminal Justice/Mental Health Consensus Project**, helps improve services offered to individuals in the criminal justice system with mental health problems, including local, State and Federal policymakers, and criminal justice and health care professionals. The program also maintains an **online database** of joint criminal justice and mental health services across the country.
- SAMHSA offers both a **substance abuse treatment locator** and a **mental health services locator** as a source of information for people seeking treatment for themselves or for someone else.

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Additionally, it is important to be prepared for any roadblocks that can be stressful. Managing stress includes placing an emphasis on physical health, nutrition, and emotional support.⁴⁷ Other elements of stress management include making an effort to socialize, taking regular breaks, and finding positives in negative situations.⁴⁸ [Healthfinder.gov](#) offers an extensive database of information and tools to help individuals stay healthy. The site includes health news, tips, and listings of services in local communities.

Recovery is Worth it for People in the Criminal Justice System

Through **Recovery Month**, many more people will become aware of the opportunities that make recovery possible, and will learn about the successful recovery journeys of others. SAMHSA defines recovery as a process of change through which individuals improve their health and wellness, live a self-directed life, and strive to reach their full potential.⁴⁹

Once a person begins to live in recovery, he or she may need to reach out to others for guidance and support. People in the criminal justice system can take their first steps of recovery by:⁵⁰

- Recognizing that they have a disorder and that it is a treatable problem;
- Asking family members for help beginning a treatment program;
- Asking a court or probation officer about getting help with mental or substance use disorders; and
- Asking a lawyer or a court officer about local programs.

There is no “single solution” for how to address mental and/or substance use disorders, but for every individual, every step is worth it.

Make a Difference During Recovery Month and Throughout the Year

This September and throughout the year, SAMHSA encourages all people involved in the criminal justice system to participate in **Recovery Month**. To make a difference in someone’s life:

- **Provide information about local reentry programs and resources** to individuals reentering the community. As a family member, friend, probation officer, or legal counsel to someone in the criminal justice system, consult the [U.S. Office of Justice Program State Activities and Resources](#) database to locate available resources to ease the transition from jail or prison back to the community.
- **Act as a supportive figure** to friends or family who are incarcerated, on probation, or on parole by listening to and understanding their challenges, monitoring for signs of mental and/or substance use disorders, and encouraging them to seek recovery support services, if necessary. Refer to the “[Overview: It’s Worth It](#)” document in this toolkit to learn about potential signs.
- **Share your story** if you were involved in the criminal justice system and are now in recovery from a mental and/or substance use disorder. Help others learn about treatment and recovery options, as well as provide support and encouragement for those just beginning their journey. Letting others know they are not alone has a profound effect on an individual’s will to live in recovery.

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Additional Recovery Resources

A variety of resources provide additional information on **Recovery Month**, mental and/or substance use disorders, and prevention, treatment, and recovery support services. Use the toll-free numbers and websites below to share your experiences, learn from others, and seek help from professionals. Through these resources, individuals can interact with others and find support on an as-needed, confidential basis.

- **SAMHSA's Website** – Leads efforts to reduce the impact of mental and/or substance use disorders on communities nationwide.
- **SAMHSA's National Helpline, 1-800-662-HELP (4357) – or 1-800-487-4889 (TDD)** – Provides 24-hour, free and confidential treatment referral and information about mental and/or substance use disorders, prevention, and recovery in English and Spanish.
- **SAMHSA's "Find Substance Abuse and Mental Health Treatment" Website** – Contains information about treatment options and special services located in your area.
- **SAMHSA's "Considerations for the Provision of E-Therapy" Report** – Shares extensive information on the benefits, issues, and success of e-therapy.
- **SAMHSA's ADS Center** – Provides information and assistance to develop successful efforts to counteract prejudice and discrimination and promote social inclusion.
- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, 1-800-273-TALK (8255)** – Provides a free, 24-hour helpline available to anyone in suicidal crisis or emotional distress.
- **Federal Bureau of Prisons** – Provides progressive, safe, and humane care for Federal inmates. It offers mental health services, substance abuse treatment, and other self-improvement opportunities.

Inclusion of websites and resources in this document and on the *Recovery Month* website does not constitute official endorsement by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services or the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

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