

NOAH SANDERS ADVOCACY

I AM REFORMED

A Re-entry Workbook For
People Leaving Prison



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A Noah Sanders Advocacy Program

Before You Read Page One

You are holding this book because you are getting out — or you just got out — and you want your life to be different this time.

Hear me clearly: **different is possible**. Not easy. Not automatic. But possible. I have watched people walk out with nothing but the clothes on their back and build real lives — jobs, homes, families, peace. Every one of them had one thing in common: they decided, and then they did the work, one day at a time.

This book is the work, laid out week by week. Twelve chapters. Each one covers something you actually need: your mindset, your first 72 hours, housing, work, money, health, family, staying free, your rights, and your future.

Here's what I ask of you:

1. **Work it in order.** Each chapter builds on the last.
2. **Write in it.** Honestly. Nobody grades this — it's yours.
3. **Do the action steps.** Reading without doing changes nothing. Every chapter ends with "This Week's Moves." Do them.

The statistics say most people go back. Statistics describe people without a plan. You're holding a plan.

One more thing: this book is education, not legal advice. Laws change. When a chapter covers your rights, verify the current law with Georgia Justice Project (gjp.org) or a lawyer.

Let's get to work. Your new life is waiting.

How This Workbook Works

- **12 chapters**, designed to be worked through over about 12 weeks — but go at your pace. Faster is fine. Slower is fine. Quitting is not.
- Each chapter has teaching, real talk, and exercises marked **WRITE:** — pick up a pen and be honest.
- **THINK:** prompts are for sitting with an idea for a minute. Don't skip them.
- Checklists marked with boxes are meant to be checked off in real life, not just read.
- Every chapter ends with **This Week's Moves** — concrete actions. Do them before moving on.
- Keep this book somewhere safe. You'll come back to chapters when you need them — the interview scripts, the budget worksheet, your rights. That's what it's for.

CHAPTER 1: Day One - Your New Beginning

Welcome home.

Read that again: welcome home. Not “good luck.” Not “don’t mess up.” Welcome home. You made it through something that breaks people, and you’re still standing. That counts for more than you know.

Now let’s be real with each other, because that’s the only way this works. The road ahead of you is hard. Nobody’s going to hand you an easy life because you did your time. Some doors will be closed. Some people will judge you before you open your mouth. The system you just left doesn’t disappear the day you walk out - it follows you in paperwork, in background checks, in the looks people give you.

But here’s what else is real: **you are not a statistic.** You’re a person holding a plan. And that changes everything.

The Number You Need to Know - and Forget

About 600,000 people are released from U.S. prisons every year. You’re one of them. Here’s the number everyone throws around: 68 percent are rearrested within three years.

I’m not going to lie to you about that number. It’s real. But I want you to understand what it actually means. That 68 percent isn’t describing people like you - people holding a workbook, making a plan, doing the work. It describes what happens when someone walks out with no plan, no support, no job, no housing, and nowhere to turn. Of course the odds are bad. The setup is bad.

Here’s what the number doesn’t say: **employment, stable housing, and real support cut those odds dramatically.** Every study says the same thing. A person with a job, a place to sleep, and someone in their corner is a completely different story than a person with nothing.

So forget the 68 percent. You’re not building your life on statistics. You’re building it on a plan. This book is that plan.

Prison Was a Chapter, Not the Book

Whatever you did - whatever you were convicted of, whatever time you served - that was a chapter of your life. It was a long chapter. A hard one. Maybe the hardest one you'll ever live through.

But it is not the whole book.

Too many people walk out and keep living like they're still inside. They carry the yard mentality into the free world. They let the worst thing they ever did become the only thing anyone knows about them - including themselves.

I'm asking you to make a decision, right here on day one: **the person who went in is not the person who's coming home.** Not because prison fixed you - maybe it did, maybe it didn't. But because YOU decide who you are now. Every day from here on out is a page you get to write.

That doesn't mean pretending it didn't happen. We'll get to that in Chapter 2 - owning your story honestly. It means refusing to let the past be the only story.

THINK: If someone asked you "who are you?" right now - not what you did, not where you've been, but WHO you are - what would you say? Sit with that. The answer matters more than you think.

What Re-entry Really Is

Forget the word "re-entry" for a second. It sounds like a program. It's not a program. It's a thousand small decisions, made one at a time, every single day.

It's deciding to get up and go to the job interview instead of sleeping in. It's walking away from the old crew when they hit you up. It's filling out the application honestly instead of leaving it blank. It's calling your PO back instead of dodging. It's choosing the boring, hard, right thing over and over until the boring, hard, right thing becomes your life.

Nobody does all of that perfectly. You will have bad days. You will get told no. You will want to quit. The people who make it aren't the ones who never stumble - they're the ones who stumble and get back up instead of staying down.

THINK: What's the first small decision you can make today - right now - that moves you in the right direction? Not the big stuff. The small stuff. Name it.

How to Use This Workbook

This isn't a book you read once and put on a shelf. It's a tool. Here's how to use it:

One chapter at a time. Don't rush through it. Read a chapter, do the exercises, do the action steps at the end. Then move on. The chapters build on each other.

Write honestly. Nobody's grading this. Nobody's reading over your shoulder. The exercises only work if you're real with yourself. If you lie on paper, you're only lying to the one person who can't afford it.

Do the action steps. Every chapter ends with "This Week's Moves" - concrete things to actually do. Reading about getting an ID doesn't get you an ID. Going to the DMV gets you an ID. Do the moves.

Keep it with you. This workbook is your plan, your record, and your reminder. When things get hard - and they will - flip back to Chapter 1 and remember why you started.

THINK: What do you want to be different about your life one year from today? Not vague stuff like "doing better." Be specific. Where are you living? What are you doing for work? Who's around you? Hold that picture. We're going to build toward it.

Why You're Not Going Back

Before we go any further, I need you to do something. I need you to write down why you're not going back. Not "because I don't want to" - the real reasons. The people. The dreams. The things you missed. The things you refuse to lose again.

This page is yours. When the old life calls - and it will call - come back to this page and read your own words.

WRITE: Five reasons I'm not going back:

2.

3.

4.

5.

Read them out loud. Mean them. These are your anchors.

One Year From Today

Now write it down. Make it detailed. Make it real. This isn't a fantasy - it's a target. And targets are meant to be hit.

[illegible]

The Emotional Whiplash

After years of having every hour scheduled for you - when to eat, when to sleep, when to move - suddenly having choices can feel overwhelming. What to eat. Where to go. What to do with an empty afternoon. Psychologists call it decision fatigue. You'll call it feeling lost, or anxious, or strangely like you want to go back to the simplicity of inside.

That's normal. It doesn't mean you're broken. It means you're adjusting. Here's what helps:

Keep a routine. Wake up at the same time. Eat at the same times. Fill your hours with the moves in this book. Structure is what your brain is used to - give it healthy structure instead of prison structure.

Expect the waves. Some days you'll feel on top of the world. Other days a small setback - a job rejection, a rude comment - will hit you ten times harder than it should. That's the adjustment talking. Feel it, name it, and don't make big decisions on wave days.

Talk to someone. Isolation is where bad decisions grow. If you don't have someone safe yet, that's what 988 is for - it's not just for crisis, it's for when you need a human voice at 2am. Using it is strength.

THINK: What emotion are you feeling most right now - excitement, fear, anger, numbness, all of it at once? Name it out loud. Naming it takes away half its power.

Stack Small Wins

Forget "turning your life around." That's too big. It'll crush you. Instead: stack small wins.

A win is: getting your ID. Showing up to check-in early. Filling out one application. Cooking a meal. Calling your kid. Going to bed sober. Each one is small. Each one is proof.

Here's why this works: confidence isn't something you find, it's something you build - one kept promise to yourself at a time. Every small win is a brick. Stack enough bricks and you've built a life. Nobody builds it in a day.

THINK: What's one small win you can stack today? Just one. Write it on your hand if you have to. Then go do it.

This Week's Moves

Don't just read. Move. This week:

- [] Read this chapter all the way through - done, you're doing it now
- [] Complete both writing exercises above - honestly, no shortcuts
- [] Tell one person you trust that you're committed to staying out - say it out loud to a human being

- ☐ Put this workbook somewhere you'll see it every day - not in a drawer, not under the bed
- ☐ Read your "5 reasons" list every morning this week - all seven days
- ☐ Start Chapter 2 when you're ready - no rush, but no stalling either

Day one is done. You showed up. That's how every comeback starts.

Welcome home.

CHAPTER 2: Your Story, Your Terms

You have a past. So does everybody. Yours just comes with paperwork.

Here's the thing nobody tells you when you walk out: you're going to have to talk about what happened. Employers will ask. Landlords will ask. New people in your life will ask - or they'll Google you and find out before you get a chance to say it yourself.

You can't control that people will ask. But you CAN control how you answer. That's what this chapter is about: owning your story on your terms, instead of letting it own you.

Accountability vs. Shame

First, let's get something straight. There's a difference between accountability and shame, and you need to know which one you're carrying.

Accountability sounds like this: "I did that. It was wrong. I take responsibility for it, and I've spent my time working to become someone who doesn't do that anymore."

Shame sounds like this: "I am that. That's all I am. That's all I'll ever be."

Accountability is honest. Shame is a lie that feels true. Accountability says "I did something bad." Shame says "I AM bad." See the difference? One is about an action in the past. The other is a life sentence you give yourself - and nobody handed you that sentence but you.

You did your time. The state punished you. That's done. Don't keep punishing yourself for the rest of your life. That's not accountability - that's just prison without walls.

THINK: Be honest with yourself right now: are you carrying accountability, or are you carrying shame? How can you tell? What would it look like to put the shame down and keep the accountability?

The 30-Second Version

You're going to need a short, honest way to talk about your past. Not the whole story - just enough. I call it the 30-second version, and here's the formula:

1. Acknowledge it briefly. Don't dodge, don't minimize, don't over-explain. One or two sentences. "I served time for [offense]. I take full responsibility for what I did."

2. Pivot to now. This is the most important part. "Since then, I've [what you've done - completed programs, earned certifications, stayed clean, worked, whatever is true]."

3. End forward. "I'm looking for [the job, the apartment, the opportunity] because I'm committed to building a stable life and contributing."

That's it. Thirty seconds. Here's what it sounds like put together:

"I want to be upfront with you - I served three years for a drug charge. I take full responsibility for the choices I made. While I was inside, I completed my GED and a welding certification, and I've been clean for two years. I'm here because I'm serious about working hard and building a stable life, and I'd appreciate the chance to prove that."

Notice what that does. It's honest - no excuses, no dodging. It's brief - you're not trauma-dumping on a hiring manager. And it ends with the person looking at who you are NOW, not who you were THEN.

What NOT to do: Don't lie - they'll find out and then it's over. Don't go into graphic detail - nobody needs the play-by-play. Don't blame the system, your co-defendant, or your childhood in a job interview - accountability means owning it. Don't apologize seventeen times - say it once, mean it, move on.

THINK: Who in your life right now needs to hear your 30-second version? An employer? A landlord? Someone you're dating? Picture the conversation. How does it feel to have the words ready instead of scrambling?

Who Gets What Version

Not everybody gets the full story. That's not dishonesty - that's boundaries. Here's how to think about it:

The 30-second version goes to: employers, landlords, acquaintances, anyone doing a background check. Professional, brief, forward-looking.

The real conversation goes to: people you trust deeply. A mentor. A partner. A close friend. A counselor. People who've earned the longer version by showing up for you.

Nobody's business is also a valid category. Strangers, nosy coworkers, people just being messy - you don't owe your story to everyone who asks. "I'd rather not get into the details, but I'm happy to tell you where I'm headed" is a complete answer.

The rule is simple: **the more someone's decision affects your life (hiring you, housing you), the more they deserve honesty. The less they matter, the less they get.** You decide. That's what "your terms" means.

THINK: Is there someone you've been avoiding because you don't know how to tell them? What would change if you had the words ready?

Three Things I Know Now

Prison teaches you things. Some of them are terrible lessons - how to survive, how to harden up, how to trust nobody. But some of them are real wisdom, earned the hardest way possible. Let's pull those out.

WRITE: Three things I know now that I didn't know then:

1.

2.

3.

Those aren't just sentences. That's your growth, on paper. When someone asks what prison taught you, you've got an answer - and it's not bitterness, it's wisdom.

Write Your 30-Second Version

Don't wait until you're sitting across from a hiring manager to figure out what to say. Write it now. Practice it. Say it out loud until it feels natural - because the first time you say it shouldn't be the time it counts most.

WRITE: My 30-second version:

Now read it out loud. Time yourself - keep it under a minute. Does it acknowledge honestly? Does it pivot to now? Does it end forward? Adjust it until it does all three. Then practice it until you can say it without reading.

A Letter to Yourself on the Hardest Day

Think back to the hardest day you had inside. The day you wanted to give up. The day the walls felt like they were closing in. The day you wondered if any of this was worth it.

Tell them what you know now. Tell them it was worth holding on. Tell them what's waiting on this side. Tell them the truth.

[illegible]

When They Find Out Anyway

Most employers who check will see: the charge, the conviction, the sentence. What they WON'T see: who you are now, what you've learned, how hard you're working. That's the gap your 30-second version fills - but only if you get to speak before they decide.

Two more things to know:

Not every door is closed. The City of Atlanta removed criminal-history questions from initial municipal job applications. More employers than ever are open to hiring returning citizens - especially when you tell them about the Federal Bonding Program (a free \$5,000 bond that protects them at zero cost) and the Work Opportunity Tax Credit (up to \$2,400 back in their pocket for hiring you). You're not begging for a favor. You're bringing them a deal.

Know what's actually on your record. In Georgia, cases that didn't end in conviction - dismissed, dropped, acquitted - can generally be restricted (hidden from employers and landlords). Up to two lifetime misdemeanor convictions can be restricted after four clean years. Felony convictions generally require a pardon to restrict. If you're not sure what's on your record or what can be restricted, the Georgia Justice Project (gjp.org) helps people figure this out for free. We'll go deeper on this in a later chapter - but start asking now.

THINK: Have you ever not applied for something because you assumed the background check would kill it? What if you'd brought your 30-second version instead? What's one place you'll apply this week that you've been avoiding?

Making Amends Where You Can

Accountability isn't just words in an interview. If there are people you hurt - family you disappointed, people you wronged - making amends matters. Not for them (though it helps them too). For you.

A few honest rules about amends:

Start with the people closest to you. A parent you worried sick. Kids who grew up with you gone. A partner who held it down or who you pushed away. These conversations are harder than any job interview - and more important.

Don't lead with excuses. "I'm sorry, but..." isn't an apology. "I was wrong. I'm sorry. Here's what I'm doing differently." That's it.

Some amends can't be made directly. Maybe the person is gone. Maybe contacting them would cause more harm. In those cases, you make amends by living differently - by becoming the person who doesn't do that anymore. That's real too.

Don't rush it. If you're two weeks out and still getting stable, it's okay if the big conversations wait until you can show up steady. Amends land better when they come with evidence, not just words.

THINK: Is there one person you owe an honest conversation? You don't have to have it today. But write their name down. You'll know when you're ready.

WRITE: The amends I want to make (names optional - this is for you):

This Week's Moves

- ☐ Write your 30-second version (above) and read it out loud three times
- ☐ Practice saying it to one trusted person - a friend, family member, or mentor - and ask for honest feedback
- ☐ Write down the names of 3 people who get the real conversation, and 3 situations where the 30-second version is enough
- ☐ Complete the "Three things I know now" exercise
- ☐ Write the letter to yourself - don't skip this one, it matters more than you think
- ☐ Read Chapter 3 and start building your first-72-hours plan BEFORE you need it

Your story is yours. Tell it on your terms - briefly, honestly, and always facing forward.

CHAPTER 3: The First 72 Hours

The first three days after release are the most dangerous window of your entire re-entry. Not because the world is out to get you - but because everything hits at once. Freedom, pressure, old contacts, no routine, no plan, and seventy-two hours of unstructured time.

Most people who go back don't go back in month six. They go back in week one. Not because they're bad people - because they walked out with no plan for the hours in front of them.

So let's make a plan. Hour by hour, day by day. If you're reading this BEFORE release, even better - build this plan now so it's waiting for you.

The Rule for All Three Days

One rule covers everything: **if you don't have a plan for an hour, the streets will make one for you.** Boredom, old friends, old habits - they're all waiting to fill empty time. Your job for 72 hours is simple: leave as few empty hours as possible.

That doesn't mean panic. It means structure. Know where you're sleeping tonight. Know who you're calling. Know what you're doing tomorrow morning. Hour by hour.

THINK: Right now, before you read further - do you know where you'll sleep on your first night out? Do you know the name and number of your parole or probation officer? If the answer to either is no, that's what this chapter fixes.

Day 1: Get Stable

Day one has exactly four jobs. Nothing else matters until these are done.

1. Contact your parole/probation officer - FIRST

Before you do anything else - before you see family, before you celebrate, before anything - make contact with your supervising officer. Call them, report in person, whatever your conditions require. Do it the same day you walk out.

Why first? Because your conditions of supervision are the rules of your freedom. You need to know them cold: curfew, travel restrictions, who you can and can't associate with, drug testing schedule, check-in requirements, employment requirements. **You cannot follow rules you don't know.** And violating in week one because "nobody told me" doesn't work - they told you, it's in your paperwork.

WRITE: My officer's name, number, and my check-in schedule:

2. Secure tonight's sleep

You need to know where you're laying your head tonight. Not "I'll figure it out." Tonight. Specific address, specific person, confirmed before dark.

Options, in order of best to last resort: - Family or a trusted friend's home (someone SAFE - not someone still in the life) - A transitional housing or re-entry program bed (call 211 if you need help finding one) - A shelter (better than the street, and 211 can direct you)

Never spend your first night somewhere that puts you back in the mix. The old spot with the old crew is not "just for one night." It's a trap with a welcome mat.

3. Eat a real meal

Sounds small. It's not. You've been running on institutional food and adrenaline. Your body and brain need fuel to make good decisions. Eat something real, sit down, breathe.

4. Call one safe person

One person who believes in you. A parent, a sibling, a mentor, a friend who's living right. Tell them you're out. Let them hear your voice. Let yourself hear theirs. Connection is armor - isolation is the enemy.

Day 1 checklist: - ☐ Contacted my PO/parole officer - ☐ I know my supervision conditions - ☐ Tonight's sleep is confirmed (address: ____) - ☐ Ate a real meal - ☐ Called one safe person

Day 2: Get Your Papers in Order

You can't do anything in the free world without identification. No ID means no job, no housing applications, no benefits, no bank account. This is the most boring chapter of your comeback and one of the most important.

The documents you need

State ID or driver's license. In Georgia, go to a DDS (Department of Driver Services) office. Bring whatever you have - your release papers help. If you had a Georgia license before, it's often simpler to reinstate than start over. Ask about fee waivers for returning citizens - some offices know the drill.

Birth certificate. If you don't have one, order it from the vital records office in the state where you were born. In Georgia, that's the Department of Public Health - you can request online or in person. There's usually a small fee.

Social Security card. If yours is lost, request a replacement at ssa.gov or your local Social Security office. It's free. You'll need your ID or birth certificate to get it.

Do these in this order: birth certificate first (if needed), then Social Security card, then state ID - because each one helps you get the next. Keep everything together (see the documents folder below).

Refill your medications

If you take any prescription medication - for your body or your mind - getting it refilled is a day-two priority, not a "someday" task. Gaps in medication, especially for mental health, are one of the fastest ways good plans fall apart. If you don't have a doctor yet, an urgent care clinic or the county health department can help bridge the gap. Medicaid (see Day 3) will cover ongoing care.

Check in again

Touch base with your officer or your support person. Let someone know you're handling business. Accountability isn't just for parole - it's for you. People who stay connected stay out.

Day 2 checklist: - [] Started the ID/document process (birth certificate / Social Security / state ID) - [] Medications refilled or refill appointment scheduled - [] Checked in with my officer or support person - [] All documents going into ONE folder (see below)

Day 3: Build Forward

You've survived two days. You're stable, you're documented, you're connected. Now start building.

Apply for benefits if you're eligible

SNAP (food stamps). Apply at your county DFCS office or online through Georgia Gateway. Bring your ID and release papers. Benefits can start quickly and they put food on the table while you job hunt.

Medicaid. Also through Georgia Gateway or DFCS. Covers doctor visits, prescriptions, mental health care, substance abuse treatment. If you're eligible, don't leave this on the table - healthcare is part of staying out.

Don't feel shame about benefits. They're a bridge, not a destination. You paid into these systems. Use them while you build.

Open the job search

Day three is when the job hunt starts. Not "thinking about jobs" - actually starting:

- Write down every skill you have, including what you learned inside (kitchen work, maintenance, welding, GED tutoring - it all counts)
- Tell your support network you're looking - most jobs come through people, not websites
- Start a simple list of places to apply this week (we'll go deep on employment in a later chapter)
- Remember: the Federal Bonding Program gives employers a FREE \$5,000 bond when they hire you, and the Work Opportunity Tax Credit can get them up to \$2,400. You're not just asking for a chance - you're bringing value

Rest

You've been running for three days. Take an evening to rest. Not to party - to rest. Sleep. Eat. Breathe. You've earned seventy-two hours of freedom and you protected every one of them. That's not small. That's everything.

Day 3 checklist: - ☐ Applied for SNAP and/or Medicaid (if eligible) - ☐ Started my skills list for the job search - ☐ Told at least 2 people I'm looking for work - ☐ Made a list of 5 places to apply this week - ☐ Rested - actually rested

What to Carry: The Documents Folder

Get a folder. A cheap one from the dollar store works fine. This folder goes everywhere with you. In it:

- ☐ Release/discharge papers
- ☐ Parole/probation conditions (the actual paperwork)
- ☐ State ID (once you have it)
- ☐ Social Security card (once you have it)
- ☐ Birth certificate (once you have it)
- ☐ This workbook
- ☐ A pen
- ☐ Your officer's name and number (written on the inside cover)
- ☐ Any medical records or prescription info
- ☐ Job applications or resumes (as you build them)

THINK: If someone asked you right now to prove who you are on paper, could you? Every document in that folder is a door. No folder, no doors.

People to Call

Fill this in NOW - before you need it. When things get hard at 11pm, you won't be thinking clearly enough to look numbers up.

WRITE: My people:

My parole/probation officer: Name ____ Number ____

One safe family member: Name ____ Number ____

One safe friend or mentor: Name ____ Number ____

211 (local services - call or text): ____

988 (crisis line - call or text, 24/7): ____

Someone I can call when I'm tempted to go backwards: Name ____ Number ____

The Warning

I'm going to say this plainly because your life may depend on hearing it:

The first 72 hours are the highest-risk window. The old crew will reach out - maybe the first day. Old habits will whisper. It will feel easy, familiar, almost comforting to slide back into what you know.

Have a plan for every hour if you can. And when the call comes - the one from the old life - remember your five reasons from Chapter 1. Remember the letter you wrote to yourself. Remember the person you're becoming one year from today.

You don't owe the past anything. Not a visit. Not a call back. Not "just one night." The past had its time with you. That time is over.

THINK: What's your plan for when the old life calls? Not "I'll just say no" - what's the actual plan? Who do you call instead? Where do you go? What do you say, word for word? Write it here:

This Week's Moves

- ☐ Complete the Day 1, Day 2, and Day 3 checklists above - check every box
- ☐ Build your documents folder and put your officer's number inside the cover
- ☐ Fill in every blank in the "People to Call" list - no empty lines
- ☐ Write your plan for when the old life calls (above) and read it out loud
- ☐ Apply for SNAP and Medicaid if eligible - don't wait
- ☐ Get your ID process started - birth certificate, Social Security, state ID, in that order

Seventy-two hours. That's all it takes to go from "just got out" to "got a plan and working it."
You're already doing it.

One hour at a time. One day at a time. You've got this.

CHAPTER 4: Housing - Where You'll Sleep

Nothing Works Without an Address

Let me be straight with you: before the job, before the plans, before anything else - you need a place to sleep. Not a couch you might lose next week. A real address.

Here's why. Almost everything you need on the outside requires an address. A job application asks for one. Your ID needs one. Your parole or probation officer needs to know where you live - and if you don't have a stable address, that's a problem with them fast. You can't think straight, plan straight, or stay straight when you don't know where you're sleeping tonight.

So this chapter comes before the work chapters on purpose. Housing first. Everything else builds on it.

THINK: Where will you sleep your first night out? Your first week? Be honest about whether those answers are solid or shaky.

Option 1: Family or Friends (Your Best Bet, If It's Healthy)

For most people coming home, the first stop is family - a mother, a sister, an aunt, a cousin, an old friend. This is usually your best option, and it's also the one that blows up the most. Not because people don't love you. Because nobody talked about expectations.

Here's how to do it right:

Have the conversation BEFORE you move in. Not after. Before. Sit down and agree on the basics:

- How long can you stay? (Get a real timeline - 30 days, 90 days, 6 months.)
- What do you pay, and when? (Even if it's small at first, contribute something. It changes the whole dynamic.)
- What are the house rules? (Curfew, guests, chores, noise, substances - get it all out in the open.)

- What happens if it isn't working? (Agree on this now while everyone is calm, not later when everyone's mad.)

Put it in writing. I know it feels awkward to write up an agreement with your own family. Do it anyway. A one-page paper that says "I'll stay until [date], pay [amount] by [day], do [chores], and follow [rules]" prevents ninety percent of the fights that send people back out on the street - or worse.

Pull your weight from day one. Cook. Clean. Fix things. Watch the kids. The fastest way to wear out a welcome is to sit on the couch while everyone else works around you. The fastest way to earn your place is to make the house better because you're in it.

The One Rule That Matters Most

Do NOT move in with people who are still in the life. I don't care how comfortable it is. I don't care if it's free. If the house has drugs coming through it, guns in it, or people planning crimes at the kitchen table - you will not make it. That's not weakness, that's math. You cannot stay clean in a dirty house. Your parole officer will tell you the same thing, and they'll violate you for it.

If your only family option is a house like that, skip to Option 2. Seriously.

THINK: Is there someone whose home is safe, stable, and drug-free? Have you actually asked them yet - or are you assuming the answer?

When Family Says No

Sometimes the answer is no. Maybe they're still hurt. Maybe their own situation is shaky. Maybe the last time didn't go well. Here's what to do with a no:

First, respect it. Don't guilt, don't pressure, don't burn the bridge - a no today can become a yes in three months if you handle it with grace. Say "I understand. If things change, I'd be grateful for another conversation."

Second, ask for something smaller. "Could I use your address for my mail until I get on my feet?" "Could you be my emergency contact?" A small yes keeps the door open and keeps you connected.

Third, don't let a no become an excuse. "Nobody will help me" is a story that leads straight back to old decisions. Plenty of people on this path had no family to call. They used Option 2, and they made it. You can too.

Option 2: Transitional Housing and Halfway Houses

If family isn't an option - or isn't a safe option - transitional housing is your next best move. These are structured living programs specifically for people coming out of prison. Some are run by nonprofits, some by faith groups, some by the state.

What they're really like: Don't expect luxury. Expect rules. Most have curfews, drug testing, mandatory meetings or classes, chore schedules, and limits on guests. Some take a cut of your paycheck or charge a small program fee once you're working.

Here's the truth: the rules are the point. Structure is what keeps you steady while you rebuild. The people who do best in transitional housing are the ones who stop fighting the rules and start using them.

How to find them: - Ask your case manager or reentry coordinator BEFORE release. This is literally their job - make them do it. - Call or text **211**. Tell them you're being released and need transitional housing. They'll connect you with local options. - In Atlanta, ask about programs connected to local nonprofits and faith-based reentry ministries. Start this search weeks before your release date, not the day of - beds fill up.

What to ask before you commit: - How long can I stay? - What are the rules - curfew, testing, meetings? - What does it cost, and when do payments start? - What happens if I get a job with odd hours? - What support do they offer - job help, counseling, transportation?

THINK: Would structure help you right now, or are you telling yourself you don't need it? Be honest. Most of us needed more structure than we wanted to admit.

Option 3: Shelters (Short-Term Reality)

Let's be real about shelters: they're a roof, not a home. They're loud, crowded, and you can't leave your stuff there safely. But on night one, a roof beats the street every single time.

Use shelters the way they're meant to be used - **as a bridge, not a destination**. A week or two while your housing plan comes together. While you're there:

- Keep your documents on your body or in a secure locker. Losing your ID in a shelter sets you back weeks.
- Ask the shelter staff about housing referrals on day one. They know every program in the area.
- Call or text **211** from the shelter phone if you need to. That's what it's for.

THINK: If you had to use a shelter for two weeks, what would your plan be on day 3 to make sure you're out by day 14?

Option 4: Renting With a Record

Sooner or later, you'll be looking for your own place. Yes, the record makes it harder. No, it doesn't make it impossible. Here's how people actually do it:

Be upfront. When the application asks about criminal history, don't lie - they'll run the check anyway, and getting caught lying kills you worse than the record does. A short, honest explanation in person goes further than a blank or a lie on paper. (You'll learn the exact script for this in Chapter 6 - the same approach works with landlords.)

Bring references. A letter from your case manager, a pastor, a former employer, a mentor - anyone credible who can say "this person is solid." References turn you from a background check into a human being.

Offer a larger deposit where it's legal. Some landlords will take a chance if you put more money down upfront. Ask: "Would an extra month's deposit make you comfortable?" It shows you're serious and reduces their risk.

Look for second-chance landlords. They're out there - smaller landlords, individual property owners, people who rent a room or a basement unit. They care more about "will this person pay and not cause problems" than about a perfect background check. Ask around: your case manager, your church, people in reentry programs. Word of mouth finds these landlords faster than any website.

Know what landlords actually check: - Criminal background (yes, most run one) - Credit history (evictions and debts hurt - we'll deal with this) - Rental history (did you get evicted before?) - Income (can you pay? usually they want income around 3x the rent) - References

Prepare for each one. Get a copy of your own background check so there are no surprises. If there's an old eviction, have a short honest explanation ready. If your credit is wrecked, say so upfront and show what you're doing about it.

THINK: What's the weakest part of your rental application right now? What's one thing you can do this month to strengthen it?

WRITE: My Housing Plan A, B, and C

You need three plans, because Plan A falls through more often than anyone admits. Fill this in now, before release if you can.

Plan A (best case): Where: _____ Who I'm staying with / renting from: _____ What I agreed to (rules, money, timeline): _____

Move-in date: _____

Plan B (backup): Where: _____ How I'll arrange it (who to call, what program):

Plan C (emergency - first 48 hours no matter what): Where: _____ Phone number / address: _____

Checklist: What To Ask Any Landlord or Roommate

- [] What's the total monthly cost - rent, utilities, deposits, fees?
- [] When is rent due, and what's the late policy?

- [] How long is the lease or agreement? What breaks it?
- [] Do you run a background check? (Ask so you're not surprised.)
- [] What are the house rules - guests, noise, smoking, substances?
- [] Who handles repairs?
- [] Is there a written agreement? (If not, write one yourself and have them sign it.)
- [] What's the move-out notice requirement?

This Week's Moves

1. **Name your Plan A, B, and C.** Write them in this chapter today. A plan in your head isn't a plan.
2. **Make one call.** Call or text 211, your case manager, or a family member about housing. One call moves you further than a week of worrying.
3. **Have the expectations conversation** with anyone you're planning to stay with. In writing. Before move-in day.
4. **Get your documents together.** ID, Social Security card, release papers - in one folder, on your person. No address works without ID.
5. **Ask about transitional housing** through your case manager or 211, even if you think you won't need it. Backup plans are free.
6. **Tell one person your housing plan** - your counselor, your mentor, your PO. Saying it out loud makes it real, and they may know options you don't.

A bed is not a luxury. It's the foundation everything else stands on. Get the address. Then build the life.

CHAPTER 5: Work Part 1 - Getting Hired With a Record

The Truth About the Record and the Job

Let's start honest: yes, the record makes getting hired harder. Some doors will close. Some applications will go nowhere. I'm not going to lie to you about that.

But here's the other half of the truth, and it matters more: **no, the record does not make it impossible.** Thousands of returning citizens get hired every single month - in this city, in this state, right now. Temp agencies, warehouses, kitchens, construction sites, trade shops. They hire people with records every day because they need workers and they care more about whether you'll show up than about your past.

Your job isn't to convince every employer. It's to find the ones who'll give you a shot - and to walk in so prepared they can't say no.

This chapter is about where to look and the two programs that make employers say yes. The next chapter is about the interview itself and keeping the job once you land it.

THINK: What's the story you've been telling yourself about work and your record? Is it the truth, or is it fear talking?

Where To Look First

Forget "dream job" for right now. Your first job has one purpose: a legal paycheck, fast. It proves you can work, it fills the gap on your resume, and it keeps you busy - which keeps you out of trouble. Here's where returning citizens actually get hired:

Temp and Staffing Agencies (Your Fastest First Paycheck)

This is where most people start, and there's no shame in it. Temp agencies place workers in warehouses, factories, and light industrial jobs - and many of them work with people with records

every day.

How it works: you walk in (or apply online), take a basic skills test, and they match you with assignments. Some assignments turn into permanent jobs. The pay isn't great at first, but it's **this week**, not "we'll call you."

What to do: Apply at three to five agencies in your first week out. Dress clean when you walk in. Tell them you're available immediately and you'll take any shift. Reliability is the whole game with temp work - show up, and they'll keep calling you.

Skilled Trades and Apprenticeships (The Long Game That Pays)

Electrical, plumbing, HVAC, welding, carpentry, CDL driving - the trades pay real money, and they care far more about your skill than your record. A licensed electrician or a CDL driver with a record still gets hired, because there aren't enough of them.

Look into apprenticeship programs in your area. Many are run through unions or community colleges. Some reentry programs specifically connect returning citizens to trade training. It takes longer than temp work - but a trade is a career, not just a job.

THINK: Is there a trade you've ever been curious about? What would it take to start learning it this year?

City and County Jobs (Ban the Box)

Here's something working in your favor: **the City of Atlanta removed criminal-history questions from initial municipal job applications.** That means for city jobs, they have to look at your qualifications first - the background check comes later in the process, after you've already made an impression.

Check city and county job boards regularly. Public works, sanitation, parks, maintenance - these departments hire steadily, and "ban the box" means you get a fair first look.

Warehouses, Kitchens, Construction, Landscaping

These industries hire fast and hire often. They need bodies, they work you hard, and most of them have hired returning citizens before you. Construction especially - if you can work, show up

on time, and follow directions, you'll find work.

Walk in with boots on and ready to start. That matters more in these industries than a perfect resume.

Entrepreneurship (Later, Not First)

One day, you might run your own business - landscaping crew, food truck, barbershop, trucking. Plenty of returning citizens do. But build the foundation first: a steady paycheck, some savings, and a track record. The business comes after the stability, not before it.

The Two Programs That Make Employers Say Yes

This is the part most returning citizens never learn, and it costs them jobs. There are two federal programs designed specifically to make hiring you **less risky and more profitable** for employers. Most employers don't know about them. Your job is to tell them.

1. The Federal Bonding Program (Free Insurance for Your Employer)

Here's what it is, plain and simple: the federal government will give your employer a **free \$5,000 fidelity bond** - basically insurance - that covers them if you steal or commit fraud on the job. It costs the employer nothing. It costs you nothing. It lasts for your **first 6 months**.

Why does this matter? Because when an employer hesitates about your record, what they're really thinking is "what if this person steals from me?" The bond answers that question with federal money. Their risk drops to zero.

The exact sentence to say to an employer:

"I want you to know the federal government provides a free \$5,000 bond for employers who hire returning citizens like me. It costs you nothing, it covers my first six months, and I can get the paperwork started today."

Say it with confidence. You're not begging - you're bringing them a deal.

2. The Work Opportunity Tax Credit (They Get Paid To Hire You)

The second program: employers who hire someone with a felony conviction **within one year of release** can get a federal tax credit of **up to \$2,400**. That's real money back on their taxes, just for hiring you.

The exact sentence to say:

"There's also a federal tax credit - up to \$2,400 - for businesses that hire someone with a felony conviction within a year of release. I'm within that window, so hiring me literally saves you money on taxes."

Most small business owners have never heard of this. When you walk in knowing more about their tax benefits than they do, you stop looking like a risk and start looking like an opportunity.

Write these two sentences down. Memorize them. They belong in every interview.

THINK: How does it feel to walk into an interview bringing the employer something valuable, instead of just asking for a chance?

Your Resume With Gaps

"What do I put for the years I was inside?" This stops more people than it should. Here's how to handle it:

Use a functional resume format. Instead of listing jobs by date (which screams "gap"), organize by **skills**: Work Experience, Skills, Education & Training. Put your strongest stuff first. The dates still appear, but they don't lead.

Be honest about the gap - briefly. You have options, and all of them are better than lying:

- List it plainly: "Incarcerated, [Year]-[Year]" - then immediately follow with what you did inside: "Completed [training/education]. Maintained [work assignment] for [X] years."
- Or use a single line under experience: "Career break - [Year]-[Year]. During this time I completed [GED, trade certification, substance abuse program, etc]."

What you did inside counts. Kitchen work, maintenance, laundry, tutoring other inmates, completing programs, earning certificates - that's work history. Write it like work history. "Food service worker - prepared meals for 400+ daily, maintained sanitation standards" is a real job description.

What NEVER to do: Don't leave a 5-year hole with no explanation (they'll assume the worst). Don't lie and invent jobs (background checks will catch it, and then you're done). Don't write a paragraph apologizing for your life - one honest line, then move on to what you can do.

Keep it to one page. Nobody's reading page two.

Following Up (Where Jobs Are Actually Won)

Here's a secret: most people apply and wait. Don't wait. **Follow up.**

- For walk-ins: go back in 3-4 days. "Hi, I applied on Tuesday, just wanted to check if you've had a chance to look at my application." Smile. Be brief. Leave.
- For online applications: call after a week. Ask for the hiring manager by name if you can find it.
- For temp agencies: check in every few days. The squeaky wheel gets the assignment. Agencies give work to the people they remember - be the person they remember.

Following up does two things: it keeps your name on top of the pile, and it shows the exact quality employers want - initiative. The person who follows up is the person who'll show up. They know it.

THINK: What's your follow-up plan for each of the 10 places on your list? Write the follow-up date in the chart - and actually go.

WRITE: My 10 Applications This Week

No more "I'll look for work soon." This week. Ten places. Fill in every column.

#	Place	Contact / How to Apply	Date Applied	Follow-Up Date
1	_____	_____	_____	_____

#	Place	Contact / How to Apply	Date Applied	Follow-Up Date
2	_____	_____	_____	_____
3	_____	_____	_____	_____
4	_____	_____	_____	_____
5	_____	_____	_____	_____
6	_____	_____	_____	_____
7	_____	_____	_____	_____
8	_____	_____	_____	_____
9	_____	_____	_____	_____
10	_____	_____	_____	_____

THINK: Of those ten, how many are places where you can walk in the door this week - not just click “apply” online? Walking in beats clicking, every time.

WRITE: My Bonding and Tax Credit Script

Write out, in your own words, what you’ll say to an employer about the Federal Bonding Program and the tax credit. Practice it until it sounds natural, not memorized.

Checklist: Before You Apply Anywhere

- [] I have ID and my Social Security card (or know where they are)
- [] I have a phone number where employers can reach me (voicemail set up, professional greeting)
- [] I have a one-page resume printed (bring 5 copies everywhere)
- [] I can explain my gap in one honest sentence

- ☐ I know the bonding program and tax credit sentences by heart
- ☐ I have clean, simple interview clothes ready
- ☐ I have transportation figured out for getting to work reliably

THINK: If an employer called you tomorrow for an interview, are you ready today? If not, what's the one thing you'd fix first?

This Week's Moves

1. **Apply at 3 temp agencies** in person, this week. Dress clean, bring your resume, say you're available immediately.
2. **Fill in the 10-application chart above** - and actually submit all ten. Online applications count, walk-ins count double.
3. **Memorize your two sentences** about the bonding program and the tax credit. Say them out loud ten times.
4. **Write your one-page resume.** One page. Skills first. Honest about the gap. Done is better than perfect.
5. **Check city and county job boards** for Atlanta municipal openings - ban the box means you get a fair first look.
6. **Ask one person** - your case manager, a mentor, someone from a reentry program - "Where did you see returning citizens get hired recently?" Then go there.

The record is a hurdle, not a wall. Thousands of people with records got hired this month. This month, you're one of them.

CHAPTER 6: Work Part 2 - The Interview and Keeping the Job

Getting the Interview Is Half the Battle. This Is the Other Half.

Last chapter was about finding openings and getting employers to say yes. This chapter is about the two things that actually decide whether you work: **what happens in the interview room, and what happens in the first 90 days.**

Most people obsess over the interview and coast after they're hired. Flip that. The interview is 30 minutes. The first 90 days are the real interview - and most people who lose jobs lose them there, not in the interview.

The Background Question: Your 30-Second Answer

It's coming. On the application, in the interview, or in the background check conversation - someone will ask about your record. Here's how to handle it like someone who has nothing to hide and everything to offer.

The Formula: Acknowledge, Own It, Pivot, Forward

Four steps, thirty seconds:

1. **Acknowledge** - briefly, honestly. Don't dodge it.
2. **Own it** - take responsibility. No excuses.
3. **Pivot** - to what you've done since.
4. **Forward** - to what you'll do for them.

The Script (Make It Yours)

"Yes, I have a felony conviction from [year]. I made serious mistakes, and I take full responsibility for them. Since then, I've [completed my GED / finished a trade program / stayed clean for X years / worked in the kitchen for three years inside - pick what's true]. I'm looking for a fresh start, and I'm ready to work hard and prove myself. What I can tell you is that I'll show up every day and give you everything I've got."

That's it. Thirty seconds. Then stop talking. Let them respond.

Why this works: Employers aren't really asking "what did you do?" They're asking "are you going to be a problem?" Your answer tells them: I'm honest, I own my past, I've changed, and I'm focused on working. That's what they need to hear.

Practice it until it sounds like you talking, not you reciting. In the mirror. In the car. To a friend. Thirty seconds, natural and steady.

What NEVER To Do

- **Never lie.** They will run the background check. When the lie surfaces - and it will - you're finished. An honest record beats a discovered lie every single time.
- **Never overshare details.** They don't need the play-by-play of what happened. "I made serious mistakes" is enough. Details make people uncomfortable, and uncomfortable people don't hire you.
- **Never blame everyone else.** "The system," "my lawyer," "the cops," "my ex" - even if some of it's true, blame sounds like someone who hasn't changed. Ownership sounds like someone who has.
- **Never apologize for ten minutes.** One honest acknowledgment, then move forward. Groveling makes them doubt you; confidence makes them believe you.

THINK: Say your 30-second answer out loud right now. Where do you stumble? That's the part to practice.

WRITE: My 30-Second Answer

Write your version - your words, your truth. Then read it aloud five times.

Now read it to another person - a friend, a mentor, your case manager. Ask them: "Did that sound honest? Did it sound confident?" Adjust until the answer to both is yes.

Interview Basics (The Stuff That Actually Matters)

You don't need to be slick. You need to be solid. Here's what solid looks like:

Show up early. Fifteen minutes early. Not on time - early. For someone with a record, "he was early" is the first deposit in the trust account.

Dress clean and simple. You don't need a suit. Clean shirt, clean pants, clean shoes, groomed. Look like someone who takes themselves seriously, because that's what you're asking them to do.

Phone off. Not on silent - OFF. Nothing kills an interview faster than a phone going off. It tells them you're not really here.

Bring copies of your resume. Five copies, even if they already have one. It says "I came prepared."

Shake hands, make eye contact, sit up. Basic? Yes. Skipped by half the people who interview? Also yes. This is free advantage - take it.

Ask THEM questions. At the end, when they say "any questions for us?" - have two ready: - "What does a typical day look like in this role?" - "What do your best employees do differently?" - "Is there room to grow here if I prove myself?"

Questions tell them you're serious about the job, not just desperate for any job.

Send a thank-you. A short text or email that evening: “Thank you for your time today. I’m very interested in the position.” Most applicants never do this. You’ll stand out.

THINK: What’s the weakest part of how you show up right now - clothes, transportation, phone habits? Fix that one thing this week.

The First 90 Days: The Real Interview

Here’s what nobody tells you: **getting hired is the easy part. The first 90 days decide everything.** Most employers are still deciding about you for the first three months. Here’s how to pass the test they’re giving you:

Attendance Is Everything

Show up. Every day. On time. This is the number one reason new hires with records lose jobs - not the record, not skill, **attendance.**

- Set two alarms. Have a backup ride. Know the bus route AND the backup bus route.
- If you’re sick, call before your shift - not after. “I won’t make it today, I’m sorry” at 6 AM beats silence every time.
- Don’t ask for days off in the first 90 days unless it’s a real emergency. Earn the right first.

Attitude Over Everything Else

You will get the worst shifts. The hardest tasks. The least patience. That’s the tax on starting over - pay it without complaining.

- Say “yes” to the work nobody wants. That’s how you become indispensable.
- Don’t gossip. Don’t take sides. Don’t get pulled into workplace drama. You have the most to lose in any conflict - act like it.
- Thank people who teach you things. Humility opens doors that pride slams shut.

Stay Off the Drama - Inside and Outside Work

Your coworkers will test you. Someone will try to get you to cut corners, cover for them, or get involved in something shady. Your answer is always no - polite, firm, final.

And outside work: the same people, places, and habits that got you locked up are still out there. Your job gives you a reason to say no to all of it. Protect the job like your freedom depends on it - because it does.

THINK: Who in your life right now could pull you off track at work? What's your plan for keeping distance?

While You're Waiting To Hear Back

The days between applying and hearing back are dangerous - too much empty time, too much doubt. Fill them on purpose:

- **Keep applying.** Never stop at one good lead. Pipeline beats hope.
- **Learn something.** Free videos on trade skills, interview practice, typing speed - anything that makes you sharper. An hour of learning beats an hour of worrying.
- **Move your body.** Walk, work out, help someone move. Physical exhaustion is the enemy of bad decisions.
- **Stay in your routine.** Same wake-up time, same structure, whether you have a job yet or not. You're rehearsing for employment.

The waiting period is a test of who you are when nobody's watching. Pass it the same way you'll pass the first 90 days: show up for yourself, every day.

If You Lose the Job: The 48-Hour Rule

Sometimes it happens. Laid off, fired, temp assignment ends. Here's the rule that separates people who bounce back from people who spiral:

Within 48 hours of losing a job, you apply to 5 new places.

Not next week. Not "when you feel like it." Forty-eight hours. The spiral starts with "I'll take a few days" - and a few days becomes a few weeks, and then the old life starts looking easier than the applications.

The 48-hour rule isn't about the jobs. It's about **momentum**. As long as you're moving, you're not sinking.

And while you're between jobs: keep your routine. Wake up at the same time. Stay busy. Idle hands and empty days are where trouble finds you.

THINK: If you lost your job tomorrow, do you know the first 5 places you'd apply? Write them down now, while you're calm - not later, when you're panicking.

WRITE: My First-Paycheck Plan

Your first paycheck is a test. Most people fail it - the money burns a hole, old habits whisper, and two weeks later there's nothing to show for it. Plan every dollar BEFORE it arrives.

My expected first paycheck amount: \$_____

Where every dollar goes:

- Rent / housing contribution: \$_____
- Transportation (bus pass, gas, ride): \$_____
- Food: \$_____
- Phone bill: \$_____
- Debt / fines / child support: \$_____
- Savings (even \$20 - start the habit): \$_____
- Personal / other: \$_____

The rule: housing, transportation, and food get paid first. Everything else waits. And something - anything - goes into savings. A person with \$200 saved handles emergencies. A person with \$0 saved handles emergencies by going backwards.

THINK: What's the biggest threat to your first paycheck - and I mean honestly? Old debts? Old friends? Old habits? Name it so you can plan around it.

Checklist: Interview Day

- ☐ I know where I'm going and how I'm getting there (done the route before)
- ☐ I'm leaving early enough to arrive 15 minutes ahead
- ☐ Clean clothes laid out the night before
- ☐ 5 copies of my resume in a folder
- ☐ Phone OFF (not silent - off)
- ☐ My 30-second answer rehearsed and natural
- ☐ Two questions ready to ask them
- ☐ Bonding program and tax credit sentences memorized
- ☐ Thank-you message ready to send that evening

This Week's Moves

1. **Write and rehearse your 30-second answer.** Out loud. Five times. Then to another person.
2. **Lay out interview clothes** and keep them clean and ready. Opportunity doesn't wait for laundry day.
3. **Do a practice run** to the temp agencies or job sites - time the trip, find the entrance, know where to park.
4. **Write your first-paycheck plan** above. Every dollar assigned before it exists.
5. **Set up your voicemail** with a clear, professional greeting: your name, "please leave a message," that's it.
6. **Tell your mentor or case manager** you're actively job hunting this week. Accountability keeps you moving.

The interview gets you in the door. The first 90 days keep you in the building. Show up early, work hard, stay clean, and let your record become the least interesting thing about you.

CHAPTER 7: Money from Zero

Let's talk about the thing nobody wants to talk about and everybody worries about: money.

You walked out with little or nothing. Bills are already waiting. Somebody probably already asked you for money. And every decision you make about a dollar right now either builds your new life or digs the old hole deeper.

Here's the good news: you don't need a lot of money to start. You need a PLAN for the money you get. This chapter is that plan.

Your First Paycheck Has a Job

Every dollar you earn needs an assignment before you spend it. Not a complicated spreadsheet - just three buckets:

1. Needs first (about half). Housing, food, transportation to work, court-ordered payments. The things that keep a roof over your head and you out of a cell. These get paid before anything else. Always.

2. Savings - even if it's just \$10. I know. Ten dollars feels like nothing. But here's what it really is: proof. Proof that you can keep money instead of watching it disappear. Proof that you're building something. Put \$10 (or \$20, or whatever you can) aside from every single paycheck, and do not touch it unless it's a true emergency. In six months, you'll have a cushion. In a year, you'll have options. People with options make better decisions - that's not opinion, that's just how life works.

3. Everything else. What's left after needs and savings. This is your breathing room - clothes, phone, a meal out, helping family. Spend it guilt-free, because the important stuff is already handled.

That's it. Needs, savings, rest. In that order. Every paycheck.

THINK: Where does your money usually disappear to? Be honest - what's the leak?

THINK: What would change in your life if you had \$500 saved that nobody could touch?

A Real Example: The \$1,200 Paycheck

Let's make this concrete. Say you bring home \$1,200 in a month from a warehouse job. Here's the plan in action:

- **Needs (about \$600):** \$400 toward rent (your share), \$120 groceries, \$50 bus pass, \$30 toward your court payment plan. Total: \$600.
- **Savings (\$50):** Straight into savings before you spend a dime. Non-negotiable.
- **Everything else (\$550):** Phone bill, clothes, helping your mom with a bill, a haircut, a meal with your kid. Your money, your choices - because the important stuff is already covered.

Notice what happened: the court payment got treated like rent - because it basically is. Miss it and you risk your freedom, which is worth more than any bill.

Your numbers will be different. Maybe your check is \$900. Maybe it's \$1,800. The ORDER doesn't change: needs, savings, rest. When money is tight, you shrink the "everything else" bucket - never the savings, never the court payments.

THINK: Run your own expected paycheck through these three buckets right now. What do the numbers look like?

A Bank Account Beats a Check-Cashing Place

If you cash your check at a check-cashing store, you're paying for the privilege of getting your own money. A typical fee is around 2%. On an \$800 paycheck, that's \$16 - gone, every two weeks. That's over \$400 a year you're handing to a storefront for nothing.

A bank account fixes that. But there's a catch you should know about: many banks check something called ChexSystems, which tracks closed accounts and unpaid bank fees. If you burned a bank account before you went in, a regular bank might turn you down.

You still have options:

- **Second-chance checking accounts.** Several banks offer them - they're designed for exactly your situation. Ask directly: "Do you offer a second-chance account?"

- **Credit unions.** They're nonprofits, they're community-based, and they're often more flexible than big banks. Many have low fees and real humans who will work with you.
- **Prepaid debit cards** as a last resort - better than check-cashing, but watch for monthly fees.

Your move: walk into a credit union this week and ask. Bring your ID and release paperwork. One account, direct deposit from your job. That's the foundation.

THINK: How much money have you lost to fees in your life - check-cashing, money orders, late fees? What could that money have become?

When Money Is Short: Bills Triage

Some months the money won't stretch. When that happens, you don't pay randomly - you triage, like an emergency room for bills. Here's the order:

1. Housing. Rent comes first. Losing your place unravels everything - your job, your stability, your probation address. Protect the roof.

2. Food. You can't work hungry. Groceries before restaurants, always.

3. Transportation to work. The bus pass, the gas money, the ride. No transport, no paycheck, no nothing.

4. Court-ordered payments. Fines, restitution, child support. These aren't regular bills - missing them can violate your probation and send you back inside. They outrank almost everything else.

5. Utilities and phone. Keep the lights on and stay reachable. If you're behind, call the company BEFORE they cut you off - most have hardship programs, and 211 can point you to utility assistance.

6. Everything else. Credit cards, old debts, personal loans - these can wait. They cannot put you back in prison. The court can.

One more thing: **talk to people early.** Call the creditor, the landlord, the clerk - before the due date, not after. "I'm going to be short this month, here's my plan" gets you ten times further than silence. Silence looks like you don't care. A plan looks like a responsible adult.

Child Support: Face It Fast

This one scares people, so they avoid it - and avoiding it is the worst thing you can do. Here's the truth: in many cases, child support arrears kept growing while you were incarcerated. The number might be bigger than you think. I know that's hard to hear.

But here's what matters: **the Division of Child Support Services would rather have you paying something than nothing.** Call them right away and ask about two things:

- **Modification.** If your income changed drastically - and it did - your monthly order may be able to be adjusted to match what you can actually pay now.
- **Payment plans.** For the arrears (the back debt), you can set up a plan to pay it down over time.

Ignoring it makes everything worse: suspended driver's license (which kills job options), tax refund seizures, and in serious cases, contempt charges that can put you back inside. Facing it fast is how you stay free and how you show up for your kids.

THINK: What's scarier - the phone call, or what happens if you never make it?

Fines, Fees, and Restitution

Same principle as child support: **set up payment plans early, and never hide.**

- Go to the clerk's office (or call) and ask about a payment plan. Small, consistent payments beat avoidance every time. Courts notice who's trying.
- Ask your probation officer about your options - that's literally part of their job.
- Here's something a lot of people don't know: **some Georgia courts allow community service in lieu of payments.** If money is impossibly tight, ask the clerk or your probation officer whether that's an option in your case.
- Keep every receipt. Every single one. A folder, an envelope, a shoebox - whatever works. If there's ever a dispute about what you paid, paper wins.
- If the fines feel impossible or something doesn't look right on your paperwork, **Georgia Justice Project (gjp.org)** is an Atlanta nonprofit that provides legal help and reentry services. They help returning citizens deal with exactly these kinds of barriers. It costs nothing to ask.

The rule is simple: ask, don't hide. The system punishes hiding far worse than it punishes being broke.

Old Debts and Collectors

Beyond court debt, you might have old debts - credit cards, medical bills, personal loans from before. Here's how to handle them without panic:

- **Court-ordered debt comes first.** Always. A credit card company can't violate your probation. The court can.
- **Don't pay a collector until you verify the debt is real and yours.** Ask for written proof. Old debts get sold and resold, and mistakes are common. Never give a collector your bank account number over the phone - use money orders if you pay.
- **Medical debt is the most negotiable debt there is.** Hospitals routinely reduce bills or set up tiny payment plans if you call and ask. A \$3,000 ER bill can become \$25 a month.
- **You have the right to tell collectors not to call you at work.** Say it clearly, and they have to stop.

THINK: Which debt scares you the most? Now ask: is it actually the most dangerous one, or just the loudest collector?

The Payday Lender Trap: Read the Math

When money is tight, the payday loan store on the corner looks like a rescue. It's a trap. Let me show you the actual math.

You borrow **\$500**. The typical fee is about **\$15 for every \$100 borrowed, every two weeks**. That's \$75 just for the fee - on top of the \$500 you owe back. So in two weeks, you owe \$575.

Can't pay \$575 in two weeks? Most people can't. So you "roll it over" - pay another \$75 fee to extend it. Another two weeks, another \$75. Do that for three months and you've paid **\$450 in fees** - nearly the whole loan amount again - and you STILL owe the original \$500.

Title pawns are worse: miss payments and they take your car. Then you can't get to work. Then you lose the job. See how the trap works?

If you need emergency cash: call or text **211** first. They connect you to real assistance programs - rent help, utility help, food - that don't charge you \$75 every two weeks for the privilege.

THINK: Has fast money ever actually solved a money problem in your life, or just delayed it and made it bigger?

WRITE: My First-Month Budget

Fill this in with your real numbers. Estimates are fine - the point is to see where every dollar goes before it disappears.

INCOME (money coming in): Job paycheck (monthly total): \$ _ **Other income:** \$ _ **Total income:** \$ ____

NEEDS (pay these first): Rent/housing: \$ _ **Food/groceries:** \$ _ Transportation to work: \$ _
Court-ordered payments (fines/restitution/child support): \$ _ Utilities: \$ _ **Phone:** \$ _ **Total needs:** \$ ____

SAVINGS (pay yourself - even \$10): My savings amount: \$ ____

EVERYTHING ELSE: What's left (total income minus needs minus savings): \$ ____

THINK: Look at your "what's left" number. Is it real, or did you underestimate something? Adjust until it's honest.

WRITE: My Money Rules

Rules beat willpower. Write five money rules for your new life - in your own words. Here are examples to get you thinking: "I save \$10 from every check before I spend anything." "I never borrow from a payday lender." "I call before a bill is late, not after."

My 5 money rules:

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal black lines, resembling notebook paper. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

This Week's Moves

- ☐ Open a bank account or credit union account (ask about second-chance accounts if needed). Set up direct deposit.
- ☐ Write out your first-month budget using the worksheet above.
- ☐ Contact the Division of Child Support Services about modification and a payment plan.
- ☐ Ask the court clerk or your probation officer about payment plans for fines/fees - and whether community service is an option.
- ☐ Put your first \$10 (or more) into savings. Start the proof.

- ☐ Save 211 in your phone (call or text) for emergency assistance - before you need it.

CHAPTER 8: Health: Body and Mind

You can't rebuild your life on a broken foundation. And your body and mind ARE the foundation - everything else in this book sits on top of them.

A lot of people coming home put health last. "I'll deal with it once I'm stable." But here's the truth: nothing gets stable while you're running on empty, in pain, or drowning in your own head. Health isn't a luxury for later. It's the first tool.

Your Body: The First 30 Days

Coming out, your body has been through a lot - bad sleep, bad food, stress, maybe years of it. Give it attention early. Here's your first-30-days checklist:

- [] **Get a checkup.** A full physical within your first 30 days home. Tell the doctor everything - they can't help what they don't know. If you don't have a doctor, a community health center will see you on a sliding scale based on what you can pay.
- [] **Refill prescriptions before release if possible.** If you take daily medication - blood pressure, diabetes, mental health meds, anything - do not let it run out. Talk to the facility medical staff before your release date about a bridge supply and a prescription you can fill on the outside. Day one without needed medication is a crisis you can prevent.
- [] **See a dentist.** Dental pain makes everything harder - eating, sleeping, job interviews. Community health centers and dental schools offer cleanings and basic work on sliding scales. It matters more than you think.
- [] **Sleep.** Your sleep is probably wrecked. Same bedtime, same wake time, every day - even weekends. No phone in the last 30 minutes before bed. It sounds small. It's not.
- [] **Food and movement.** You don't need a gym membership. Walk 20 minutes a day. Eat real food when you can - and if money is tight, food banks and SNAP (see below) exist so you don't have to choose between eating and everything else.

THINK: What's one health issue you've been ignoring? What's it costing you - in pain, in energy, in missed chances?

Your Mind: This Part Is Normal

Let me say something nobody might have told you: **feeling depressed, anxious, or overwhelmed after release is COMMON. It is not weakness. It is not failure. It is a normal human response to an abnormal situation.**

You went from total structure to total freedom. From being told when to eat to making every decision yourself. From surviving inside to proving yourself outside. That's a massive psychological shift, and it hits almost everybody. Some signs to watch for:

- Sleeping way too much or barely at all
- Feeling numb, empty, or hopeless
- Anger that flares up fast and outsized
- Wanting to isolate from everyone
- Thoughts of harming yourself

If any of that sounds familiar, hear me clearly: **getting help is what strong people do.** It is not snitching on yourself. It is not weakness. It is maintenance - same as fixing a car before the engine blows.

Where to go: - **Community mental health centers** - low-cost or free counseling in nearly every county. Ask 211 to connect you. - **Support groups** - free, everywhere, and full of people who get it without you having to explain. - **988 - call or text, 24/7.** If you're in crisis, if you're thinking about hurting yourself, if you just need a human voice right now. Free, confidential, always open.

What Therapy Actually Looks Like

A lot of people picture therapy as lying on a couch talking about childhood while somebody nods. Forget that image. Real counseling for returning citizens usually looks like this: you sit in a normal room with a normal person, and you talk about what's actually happening - the stress, the anger, the sleepless nights, the cravings. They help you build tools for it. Coping strategies. Plans for hard days. It's practical, not mysterious.

First sessions are mostly paperwork and "tell me what's going on." You don't have to perform or say the right thing. And if the first counselor isn't a fit, that's normal - try another one. Finding the

right counselor is like finding the right barber: when it's right, you know.

Here's what therapy is NOT: it's not snitching on yourself. What you say in counseling is confidential, with very narrow exceptions (like if you're about to hurt someone). It's not a sign you're crazy. It's what people do when they're serious about staying free and staying well.

THINK: What's the real reason you haven't tried counseling - is it the stigma, the cost, or just not knowing where to go? (This chapter just answered two of those three.)

The First Two Weeks Are the Hardest

I want to be straight with you about something: the first two weeks home are often the hardest, and that's normal. Your brain is recalibrating. Everything is loud - the choices, the noise, the people, the pressure. You might feel euphoric one hour and panicked the next. You might wonder if you made a mistake wanting this.

You didn't. What you're feeling is your system waking up after years of running on survival mode. It passes. But while it's happening, lower the bar: your only job in the first two weeks is to stay free, stay clean, and handle one day at a time. You're not supposed to have it all figured out by day fourteen. You're supposed to still be standing.

If it gets dark - really dark - that's what 988 is for. Call or text, any hour. There is no problem so big that ending your life solves it, and there is no shame in reaching for a hand.

THINK: Who in your life would you tell if your mind was struggling? If the answer is "nobody" - that's exactly why 988 and counselors exist.

Substance Use: An Honest Conversation

I'm not going to lecture you. You already know the stakes - for your freedom, your family, your life. So let's talk practically instead.

Know your triggers. A trigger is anything that makes using feel urgent: a place, a person, a feeling, a time of day, having cash in your pocket, a bad day at work. You can't avoid what you haven't named. Name them now - that's the exercise below.

Build your if-then plan. For every trigger, decide IN ADVANCE what you'll do instead. Not in the moment - the moment is too late. "If I run into my old crew at the store, then I leave immediately and call my sponsor." Decided at home, executed on the street.

People, places, things. You know the saying because it's true. The fastest way to relapse is to hang around the life and hope willpower saves you. Willpower is a terrible plan. Distance is a great one.

If you slip: tell someone within 24 hours. A sponsor, a counselor, a trusted person - somebody. Then get back to a meeting or your program immediately. Here is what I need you to hear: **one slip does not have to become a fall.** What turns a slip into a fall is shame and secrecy. Shame says "I'm already ruined, might as well keep going." That's a lie. The truth is: you stumbled, you're still standing, and you get to choose the next step right now.

THINK: What are your top three triggers? (You'll write them below - but name them in your head first.)

THINK: Who is one person you could call at 2 AM if you were about to slip? Do you have that number?

Health Coverage: Don't Assume - Apply

Here's something that trips up a lot of returning citizens: they assume they don't qualify for help, so they never apply. **Don't assume. Apply and let the caseworker decide.**

In Georgia, Medicaid expansion status and SNAP eligibility rules change over time - what's true today might not be true next year. The move is simple:

- **Apply through Georgia Gateway at gateway.ga.gov.** That's the state's benefits portal - Medicaid, SNAP (food assistance), and more, all in one application.
- **SNAP** can put real grocery money on an EBT card every month while you get on your feet. That's food handled while your paychecks build up.
- **Medicaid** can cover doctor visits, prescriptions, mental health care, and substance use treatment. That's your checkup, your meds, and your counseling - covered.
- If you're denied, ask why and whether you can reapply. Rules change. Your situation changes. Keep checking.

The cost of not applying is paying full price for everything - or going without. Neither is acceptable when the help exists. Apply.

Keep Your Health Paperwork Together

One unglamorous tip that will save you more headaches than almost anything in this chapter: **keep all your health paperwork in one place.** A folder, a zip-lock bag, whatever - just one spot.

What goes in it: - Your release medical records and any discharge summaries - A current list of every medication, the dose, and the prescribing doctor - Your insurance or Medicaid card once it arrives - Upcoming appointment cards or printouts - Any medical bills (don't ignore them - hospitals negotiate, as Chapter 7 covered)

When you walk into a new clinic with your paperwork in hand, everything moves faster. When you don't, you start from zero every time - retelling your history, waiting on records requests, missing doses in the gap. Ten minutes of organizing now saves you hours of frustration later. And if there's ever an emergency, the people helping you will bless you for having it together.

THINK: Where is your health paperwork right now? If the answer is "scattered" or "I don't know" - that's this week's fix.

WRITE: My Health Team

Nobody does this alone. Fill in your team - real names and numbers. Blanks are okay for now, but your mission is to fill every one of them.

My doctor / clinic: _____ **Phone:** ____ **My dentist:** _____ Phone: ____ My counselor / support group: _____ **Phone:** ____ **My pharmacy:** _____ Phone: ____ Emergency contact (person): _____ **Phone:** _____ Crisis line: 988 (call or text, 24/7) - saved in my phone: []

WRITE: My Triggers and My Plan

Name three triggers. For each one, write your if-then response - what you will DO, decided now, in advance.

Trigger 1: ____ *If this happens, then I will:* _____

Trigger 2: ____ *If this happens, then I will:* _____

Trigger 3: ____ *If this happens, then I will:* _____

This Week's Moves

- [] Schedule a checkup within the next 30 days (community health center if no doctor - ask 211).
- [] Make sure every prescription is filled with no gaps. Talk to facility medical staff before release if you haven't yet.
- [] Apply for Medicaid and SNAP through Georgia Gateway at gateway.ga.gov.
- [] Find one support resource: a counselor, a support group meeting, or save 988 in your phone (call or text, 24/7).

- ☐ Write your three triggers and if-then plans above - and tell one trusted person what they are.
- ☐ Walk 20 minutes, three times this week. Start the foundation.

CHAPTER 9: Family and Relationships

You can get the job, open the bank account, and follow every rule in this book - and still feel like something's missing. That something is usually people. The ones you hurt. The ones who hurt you. The ones waiting to see if you've really changed.

Here's the hardest truth in this chapter: **trust is rebuilt in drops and lost in buckets**. It took years to break. It will take time to rebuild. That's not unfair - that's just how trust works. Be patient with the process, and be patient with the people.

For Your Partner: Honesty Over Grand Gestures

If someone waited for you - or is willing to try now - don't waste it on big promises. Grand gestures are cheap. What actually rebuilds a relationship is boring and daily: showing up, telling the truth, doing what you said you'd do.

Be honest about the road ahead. "It's going to be hard for a while. I'm going to be stressed. I need you to know I'm committed to doing this right." That kind of honesty is more romantic than any speech, because it's real.

And hear this: if the relationship is toxic - if it pulls you back toward the life, if there's violence, if it costs you your freedom - loving someone sometimes means letting go. You can't rebuild your life inside a relationship that's tearing it down.

THINK: What does your partner (or the person closest to you) actually need from you right now - not what you think sounds good, but what they really need?

For Your Kids: Show Up, Keep Promises

Your kids don't need you to be perfect. They need you to be PRESENT. Here's what actually works:

- **Show up.** Be there. Consistently. School events, dinner, bedtime, the boring Tuesday stuff. Presence is the whole game.

- **Keep small promises first.** Don't promise Disneyland. Promise you'll be at the game Friday - and then BE at the game Friday. Small kept promises rebuild trust faster than big broken ones ever destroyed it.
- **Say you're sorry - once, and mean it.** "I wasn't there, and I'm sorry. You deserved better." Say it once, sincerely. Then don't keep apologizing every week - that makes it about your guilt instead of their healing. After the apology, let your DAILY behavior do the talking.
- **Let them be mad.** They might be angry. They might test you. That's okay - it's actually healthy. Don't demand instant forgiveness. Earn it, day by day.
- **Be the parent, not the buddy.** Especially at first, they need stability more than fun. Rules, routines, reliability. The fun comes after the foundation.

THINK: What's one small promise you can make to your child this week - and absolutely keep?

For the Family Who Housed You: Gratitude Plus Boundaries

If family took you in - a mother, a grandmother, a sibling, an auntie - you owe them more than thanks. You owe them respect for their home and their rules. And the best way to show it is to put the agreement in writing, even if it's informal:

- What you're contributing (rent, groceries, chores - something, even if it's small at first)
- House rules you'll follow (curfew, guests, noise, cleanliness)
- Your timeline and plan (job search, savings goal, move-out target)

Written agreements prevent 90% of family blowups. Unspoken expectations are where resentment grows. Get it on paper, shake on it, live up to it.

And say thank you - out loud, regularly. People who open their homes during your hardest chapter deserve to hear it.

THINK: If someone housed YOU during your hardest time, what would you need to hear from them?

When They Don't Want You Back

Not everyone gets a welcome-home hug. Some family members are done - burned too many times, protecting their own peace, or just not ready. That rejection hurts in a way that's hard to describe. Here's what I need you to hear:

Their “no” is about their healing, not your worth. People are allowed to protect themselves, even from people they love. It doesn't mean you're unforgivable. It means they're not ready - and “not ready” is not the same as “never.”

What to do when the door stays closed: - **Respect it.** Don't force your way in, don't guilt-trip, don't show up uninvited. Respecting their boundary is itself proof you've changed. - **Keep the door open from your side.** A short letter or message: “I understand. I'm here if that ever changes. I'm doing the work.” Then live the work. - **Build chosen family.** Mentors, sponsors, support groups, faith communities, coworkers who respect your path. Family isn't only blood - it's who shows up consistently. Go find your people, and be that person for someone else someday.

THINK: Is there a door that's closed to you right now? What would “keeping your side open” look like - without forcing it?

Boundaries Are Love Too

Here's the flip side: some family relationships are toxic FOR you. The uncle who still hustles and wants you to “just make one run.” The parent who drinks and picks fights. The cousin who mocks your new life.

Loving your family does not mean unlimited access to your life. Boundaries aren't disrespect - they're how you protect the freedom you worked so hard to get. Some examples:

- “I love you, but I can't be at the house when that's going on. I'll come by Sunday afternoon instead.”
- “I'm not lending money I need for rent. I can help you find resources, though.”
- “If you keep bringing that around me, I'm going to have to leave. No hard feelings - I just can't risk it.”

Say it calmly, once, and then enforce it with your actions. People learn your boundaries by watching what you tolerate, not by hearing what you say.

THINK: Is there a family relationship that threatens your progress? What boundary would protect you - and how would you say it with love?

Old Circles: Love Them From a Distance

This is one of the hardest parts of reentry. The friends from before - some of them are still in the life. Some of them are the reason you went in. And some of them you genuinely love.

Here's the truth: **you can love people and still not walk with them.** Loving someone doesn't mean following them back into the fire.

At some point, you'll need to have the conversation. Here's a script - put it in your own words, but don't skip the message:

"I love you, and that hasn't changed. But I'm on a different path now. I can't be around [the life / the block / the drinking / whatever it is] anymore - not because I'm better than anybody, but because I know where it leads for me. If you ever want out too, I'm here. But I can't come back in there with you."

Say it once, clearly, kindly. Then live it. Some will respect it. Some will test it. Some will disappear - and that will hurt, but it's better than the alternative.

The test: if being around someone makes the old life feel tempting, that's not friendship anymore - that's a trigger. Protect your freedom like it's worth more than their approval. Because it is.

THINK: Who in your old circle do you need to have this conversation with? What's stopping you?

Making Amends: What It Is and Isn't

At some point, you'll want to make things right with people you hurt. That's a good instinct - but do it right.

What making amends IS: changed behavior, sustained over time. Showing up different. Being reliable. Living in a way that proves the apology. This is the amends that actually heals people.

What making amends ISN'T: - Barging into someone's life to make YOURSELF feel better. If reaching out would hurt them more - reopening wounds, bringing danger, disrupting their peace - then your amends is to stay away and live right. Consider THEIR healing, not just your guilt. - A one-time speech. Words without changed behavior are just noise. - Expecting forgiveness. You can earn it, but you can't demand it. Some people may never forgive you. That's their right. You keep living right anyway.

The order matters: get stable first. You can't make meaningful amends from chaos. Job, housing, sobriety, routine - then reach out, carefully, with respect for where they are.

Celebrate the Wins (Yes, Really)

Nobody's going to throw you a parade for paying your child support on time, or for walking away from the old crew, or for making it to a Tuesday meeting when you'd rather be anywhere else. So I'm going to tell you to do it yourself: **notice your wins.**

Rebuilding a life is a thousand small, invisible victories. The job interview you showed up to. The paycheck you budgeted. The trigger you walked away from. The promise you kept to your kid. Nobody claps for those - but they're the whole game.

Mark your milestones. Thirty days free. Sixty. Ninety. Six months. A year. Tell someone. Write it down. Let yourself feel proud - not arrogant, proud. You earned every one of those days, and nobody can take them from you.

And when it gets hard - and it will - pull out that list of wins and read it. It's proof. Proof that you can do hard things. Proof that the person in the mirror is changing. Proof that this new life isn't a dream - it's a record.

THINK: What's one win you've already had since coming home? Say it out loud. Let it count.

THINK: Is there someone you owe amends to? Are you stable enough to do it right - or do you need more time first? Be honest.

WRITE: Three Relationships I'll Rebuild

Pick three relationships that matter most. For each: name the person, what broke (one honest sentence), and your FIRST step (small, specific, this month).

Relationship 1: Who: _____ ***What broke:*** _____ My first step: _____

Relationship 2: Who: _____ ***What broke:*** _____ My first step: _____

Relationship 3: Who: _____ ***What broke:*** _____ My first step: _____

WRITE: My “Different Path” Script

Write the conversation you’ll have with someone from the old life - in YOUR words, the way you’d actually say it. Practice it here so you’re ready when the moment comes.

This Week's Moves

- [] Keep one small promise to your child (or a young person who looks up to you) - and keep it exactly.
- [] If family housed you, write down your agreement: contributions, house rules, timeline. Sign it together.
- [] Say thank you - out loud - to one person who showed up for you.
- [] Have the “different path” conversation with one person from the old circle (or write it and set the date).
- [] Apologize once, sincerely, to someone you hurt - then let your daily behavior carry it from there.
- [] If you're not stable enough for amends yet, write down who and why you're waiting. Patience is part of the work.

CHAPTER 10: Staying Free

Here's a fact nobody likes to say out loud: a lot of people don't go back to prison because they committed a new crime. They go back because they missed an appointment. Failed a drug test. Left the county without permission. Stopped paying fees.

The Bureau of Justice Statistics says 68% of people released are rearrested within three years. But dig into that number and you'll find something important: **parole and probation violations - not new crimes - send a huge number of people back.** Which means staying free isn't mostly about being a good person. It's about being an organized person.

This chapter is your compliance bible. Read it like your freedom depends on it - because it does.

Know Your Conditions Cold

You have a list of conditions. Parole conditions, probation conditions - whatever your supervision is called, there's a piece of paper with rules on it, and breaking any one of them can send you back.

THINK: Can you name all of your conditions right now, without looking? Most people can't. That's the problem.

Here's what to do this week:

1. **Get a copy.** If you don't have your conditions in writing, ask your officer for one. This is your right, and no good officer will mind you asking.
2. **Read every line.** Not skim - read. Circle anything you don't fully understand.
3. **Ask about the circles.** At your next check-in, say: "I want to make sure I understand condition number _____. Can you explain what this means for me day to day?" Officers respect this. It tells them you're taking supervision seriously.
4. **Rewrite them in your own words.** (There's an exercise below for this.) If you can't explain a rule simply, you don't understand it well enough to follow it.

The Big Violators

These are the violations that send the most people back. Memorize them:

- **Missed appointments.** The number-one killer. One missed check-in can trigger a warrant. It doesn't matter why you missed it - the system doesn't grade on excuses.
- **Failed drug tests.** If you're struggling, tell your officer BEFORE the test, not after. Many officers will work with honesty. None of them work with a dirty test and a lie.
- **Leaving the jurisdiction.** Your conditions say where you can and can't go. "I didn't know" doesn't work. Know your boundaries like you know your own street.
- **Contact with felons or victims.** Your conditions may prohibit contact with certain people - including old friends, and in some cases family members. Know exactly who is off-limits.
- **Unpaid fees.** Supervision fees, court costs, restitution - falling behind can violate you. If you can't pay, say so early and ask about a payment plan. Silence looks like defiance.

THINK: Which of these is most likely to trip YOU up? Be honest. That's the one to build your strongest system around.

Systems Beat Willpower

Willpower runs out. Systems don't. You don't stay free by trying harder - you stay free by making it almost impossible to mess up.

The Calendar System

- Put **every** appointment - check-ins, court dates, drug tests, classes, fee deadlines - on a calendar. Phone calendar, wall calendar, notebook. Pick one and use it for everything.
- Set **two reminders** for each: one the day before, one the morning of.
- Every Sunday, look at the coming week. Ask: "Is there anything that could make me miss any of these?" If yes, fix it now.

The "Never Miss Twice" Rule

Life happens. A car breaks down. A kid gets sick. If you miss something once, that's a problem to fix - **within 24 hours**. Call, show up, explain, reschedule. What you never do is miss twice in a

row. One miss is a mistake. Two misses is a pattern. The system punishes patterns.

- ☐ I have a copy of my conditions
- ☐ I have read every condition and circled what I don't understand
- ☐ I have asked my officer about the circled items
- ☐ Every appointment is on my calendar with two reminders
- ☐ I know my travel boundaries
- ☐ I know exactly who I am not allowed to contact

Map Your Triggers

A trigger is anything that pulls you toward the old life: a person, a place, a time of day, a feeling. Everybody has them. The people who stay free aren't the ones without triggers - they're the ones who **planned for them**.

WRITE: Fill in your trigger map. Be specific - "stress" is too vague; "Friday nights when I'm bored and my cousin calls" is a trigger you can plan for.

Trigger 1 - People:

If this happens, then I will:

Trigger 2 - Places:

If this happens, then I will:

Trigger 3 - Times and feelings:

If this happens, then I will:

Your “if-then” plans are your armor. “If my old friend pulls up, then I say I’m on papers and I can’t, and I walk inside.” Decide it now, when you’re calm - because in the moment, your brain will not do this work for you.

THINK: What’s the situation you’re most afraid of facing? Now write the if-then plan for it. Fear shrinks when it has a plan attached.

If You Slip: The 24-Hour Rule

Let's be real. Some of you will slip. A relapse. A missed check-in. A bad decision at 11pm that felt small.

Here's what separates the people who survive a slip from the people who go back: **what they do in the next 24 hours.**

1. **Call your officer BEFORE they call you.** This is the single most important move. An officer who hears from you first hears accountability. An officer who has to track you down hears evasion.
2. **Tell the truth.** The whole truth. Lies compound - one lie becomes five, and now you're violated for the lie on top of the slip.
3. **Show the plan.** "Here's what happened, here's why, and here's what I'm doing so it doesn't happen again." Bring your trigger map. Bring proof of the step you already took - the meeting you attended, the appointment you made, the person you called.

Officers are human. Most of them would rather help someone who's honest and trying than violate someone who's hiding. Give them something to work with.

THINK: If you slipped tonight, who would you call first? Do you have that number saved right now?

Your Officer Is Not Your Enemy

Let's talk about the relationship most returning citizens get wrong: the one with their parole or probation officer.

It's easy to see your officer as the enemy - the person with the power to send you back. And yes, they have that power. But here's what most people miss: **your officer's job gets easier when you succeed.** Violating you means paperwork, hearings, and a caseload problem for them. Helping you stay free is less work for everybody.

That doesn't mean trust blindly. It means be smart:

- **Communicate early and often.** Don't wait for check-ins to mention problems. A quick call - "Hey, I wanted you to know my work schedule changed, so I might need to move my appointment" - builds a record of responsibility.
- **Bring proof, not promises.** "I'm looking for work" is a promise. A list of five places you applied with dates is proof. Officers deal in proof.
- **Never lie.** Officers have heard every lie ever told. Getting caught in one destroys your credibility for the rest of your supervision. If the truth is bad, pair it with a plan (see the 24-hour rule above).
- **Ask for help before you need rescue.** Struggling with fees? Ask about a payment plan before you fall behind. Tempted to use? Ask about treatment options before you fail a test. Officers can connect you to resources - but only if they know.

THINK: How would you describe your relationship with your officer right now - adversarial, neutral, or cooperative? What's one thing you could do this month to move it one step toward cooperative?

When You Get a Warning

Sometimes instead of a violation, you get a warning - verbal or written. Treat it like gold. A warning means your officer chose to give you a chance instead of filing paperwork. Here's how to honor it:

1. Thank them. Seriously. "I appreciate you working with me on this" costs nothing and means a lot.
2. Fix the exact thing, immediately. Not tomorrow.
3. Tell them when it's fixed. Don't assume they noticed - close the loop yourself.

A warning you act on builds trust. A warning you ignore becomes the first paragraph of your violation report.

When the Old Life Knocks

It will knock. An old friend with "an opportunity." A cousin who says "just this once." Someone who knew you before and doesn't care who you're trying to become.

Have your scripts ready - decided now, not in the moment:

- **“I’m on papers and I can’t be around that.”** (True, final, no debate.)
- **“I got too much to lose now.”** (Also true.)
- **“Nah, I’m good. Take care of yourself though.”** (Respectful exit.)
- **“Don’t come by here with that.”** (For your home - your home is your safe zone. Protect it.)

You don’t owe explanations. You don’t owe loyalty to a life that’s trying to pull you back into a cage. The people who truly care about you will respect the boundary. The ones who don’t were never your people - they were your cellmates in waiting.

WRITE: Write your own script - the exact words you’ll use, in your voice, for the person most likely to test you.

The person: _____

My words: _____

Say it out loud. Right now. It feels strange the first time. It feels like armor the tenth time.

My Conditions, In My Own Words

WRITE: Rewrite each of your supervision conditions in plain language - the way you’d explain it to a friend. If you can’t explain it, you don’t understand it yet, and that’s your next question for your officer.

Condition 1: _____

In my own words: _____

Condition 2: _____

In my own words: _____

Condition 3: _____

In my own words: _____

Condition 4: _____

In my own words: _____

Condition 5: _____

In my own words: _____

(Add more on the back of this page if you have more conditions. Every single one counts.)

This Week's Moves

- ☐ Get a written copy of all your conditions (if you don't have one)
- ☐ Rewrite every condition in your own words (exercise above)
- ☐ Put every appointment on your calendar with two reminders
- ☐ Complete your trigger map with if-then plans
- ☐ Write and practice your "old life knocks" script out loud
- ☐ Save your officer's number and one emergency contact in your phone right now

Staying free is a daily practice, not a one-time decision. Build the systems, work the plan, and give yourself the chance you fought for.

CHAPTER 11: Know Your Rights

Read this first: *This chapter is education, not legal advice. Laws change, and every case is different. For questions about YOUR record, talk to the Georgia Justice Project (gjp.org) or a lawyer. What follows is the plain-language version of what every returning citizen in Georgia should know.*

Here's something most people coming home don't know: **you have more rights than you think**. And the system counts on you not knowing them. Not knowing your voting rights means you don't vote. Not knowing about record restriction means a dismissed case keeps blocking your job applications for the rest of your life.

This chapter fixes that. Read it twice.

Your Right to Vote in Georgia

Let's start with the one that surprises almost everyone.

In Georgia, your voting rights are automatically restored when your felony sentence is FULLY complete - and "fully complete" means everything: incarceration, probation, AND parole. All done? Your right to vote is back. Automatically. No application, no hearing, no governor's signature.

Here are the details that matter:

- **You must re-register.** Restoration is automatic, but registration is not. Register at mvp.sos.ga.gov (the Georgia Secretary of State's "My Voter Page"). Do it as soon as your sentence is complete.
- **Unpaid fines, fees, and restitution do NOT block your vote** once the sentence itself is complete. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise.
- **Get proof.** You can request a **Certificate of Sentence Completion** from the Georgia Department of Community Supervision at **678-783-4337**. Keep a copy. If anyone ever

questions your eligibility, that's your paperwork.

- **Misdemeanor probation? You can vote.** People serving misdemeanor sentences - including misdemeanor probation - never lost the right in the first place.
- **Still on felony probation or parole?** Not yet. Your rights come back the day the sentence is fully complete - not a day before. Know your date. Count down to it. Then register.

THINK: Did you know this before reading it? Most people don't. Who in your life needs to hear this?

WRITE: Your voting status, in plain terms.

My sentence status: _____

My completion date (or expected date): _____

Am I eligible right now? _____

My next step (register / wait / get certificate): _____

Your vote is your voice. People fought and died for it. Use it.

One more thing: when you register, take a screenshot or photo of your confirmation. Add it to your Freedom File (see below). And tell one other returning citizen about their restored rights this month - most people coming home have no idea. You could be the reason someone votes for the first time in years.

Record Restriction (Georgia Doesn't Call It Expungement)

In Georgia, the word is **restriction** - not expungement. Since 2013, that's the legal term (O.C.G.A. 35-3-37). What it means: the record gets **hidden from employers, landlords, and the public** - but law enforcement can still see it. Hidden is still powerful. Most of what blocks your life is employers and landlords, not the police.

Here's what qualifies, in plain language:

Cases That Did NOT End in Conviction - Generally Eligible

If your case was **dismissed, nolle prossed (dropped by the prosecutor), ended in acquittal (not guilty), or you were arrested but never charged** - that record is generally eligible for restriction. This is the big one most people miss. **Arrests that went nowhere can still show up on background checks and cost you jobs.** Get them restricted.

Misdemeanor Convictions - Up to 2, After 4 Clean Years

Georgia allows restriction of **up to two lifetime misdemeanor convictions** - but only after **four years with no new convictions** (and no pending charges). The clock starts at the completion of the sentence.

Felony Convictions - Only Through a Pardon

Felony convictions generally cannot be restricted - **unless you receive a pardon** from the State Board of Pardons and Paroles. A pardon doesn't erase the conviction, but it restores rights and can open the door to restriction. It's a long process, but it's a real one. Ask the Georgia Justice Project whether your case might qualify.

First Offender Act - Automatic

If you were sentenced under Georgia's **First Offender Act** and completed it successfully, your record is **automatically restricted**. You don't have to apply. But verify it actually happened - mistakes get made.

THINK: How many arrests or cases in your history ended without a conviction? Each one might be costing you opportunities right now, for nothing.

Employment: What They Can Ask, What You Should Say

- **Employers CAN run background checks** in most cases. Assume they will.

- **Lying about a conviction that will show up is worse than honesty.** Getting caught in a lie kills the opportunity instantly. Being honest about a record - with a short, practiced explanation and proof of change - gives you a fighting chance.
- **Know what will appear.** Before you apply anywhere, know exactly what's on your record. (See the action plan exercise below.) Surprises are what sink interviews.
- **Have your 30-second story ready:** what happened, what you learned, what you're doing now. Short, honest, forward-looking. Practice it until it's natural.
- **Some employers are record-friendly.** Staffing agencies, trades, warehouses, food service, and "second chance" employers exist. 211 can point you to local ones.

Housing: What Landlords Can Do

- **Landlords can check criminal records** in most cases.
- **Blanket bans** ("no felons, ever, no exceptions") may violate federal fair housing guidance - policies are supposed to consider the nature of the offense, how long ago it was, and evidence of rehabilitation. In practice, many landlords still discriminate. Know the basics so you can spot it.
- **Private landlords** (individuals renting a house or duplex) are often more flexible than big complexes with corporate screening policies. Ask around. Relationships beat applications.
- **Have your paperwork ready:** proof of employment, references, your Certificate of Sentence Completion, any program completions. Make it easy for a landlord to say yes.

Your Rights During Police Encounters

You're going to interact with police. Traffic stops, street stops, knocks at the door. Knowing your rights in these moments isn't about being difficult - it's about being safe and smart.

The basics everyone should know:

- **You have the right to remain silent.** You don't have to answer questions beyond identifying yourself in most situations. "I am exercising my right to remain silent" is a complete sentence.

- **You have the right to refuse searches.** If an officer asks to search you, your car, or your home, you can say: “I do not consent to a search.” Say it calmly and clearly. (Note: they may still search if they have a warrant or probable cause - but your refusal is on the record.)
- **Ask if you’re free to leave.** “Officer, am I free to go?” If yes, leave calmly. If no, you’re being detained - stay calm, stay silent, ask for a lawyer.
- **Don’t run, don’t argue, don’t resist** - even if you believe the stop is wrong. The street is not the courtroom. Wrongful stops get fought with lawyers afterward, not with officers in the moment. Your safety comes first, always.
- **You can record.** In Georgia, you generally have the right to record police in public. Keep your hands visible and announce calmly what you’re doing.

If you’re on parole or probation, be aware your conditions may include search conditions or reporting requirements after police contact. Know what your conditions say about this - and when in doubt, tell your officer about any police encounter within 24 hours. They’d rather hear it from you.

THINK: Have you rehearsed what you’d say in a traffic stop? The time to decide is now, not with flashing lights in your mirror.

Where to Get Help

You don’t have to figure this out alone. These are real places:

- **Georgia Justice Project - gjp.org.** Atlanta-based nonprofit. Legal help with records, restriction, and reentry questions. **Start here for anything about your record.**
- **211 - call or text.** Connects you to local legal aid, housing help, and services.
- **Your public defender’s office.** They handled your case - they can answer questions about what happened in it and what it means now.
- **988 - call or text.** If the weight of all this gets heavy, this line is open 24/7. Free, confidential.

Keep a “Freedom File”

Start a folder - physical, digital, or both - and put everything in it:

- [] Certificate of Sentence Completion
- [] Copy of your supervision conditions
- [] Any record restriction paperwork
- [] Voter registration confirmation
- [] Pay stubs and program completion certificates
- [] Your record action plan from this chapter

When an employer, landlord, or official asks for proof of anything, you don't scramble - you open the file. **Paperwork is power.** The person with documents wins the argument before it starts.

THINK: What's the one legal question about your record you've been afraid to ask? Write it down. Then take it to someone who can answer it - that's what these resources are for.

My Record Action Plan

WRITE: List every arrest and case you can remember. For each one: what happened (the outcome), and whether it might qualify for restriction. Then write the next step. Be thorough - old cases count.

Case 1 - Charge/arrest: _____

Outcome (dismissed / convicted / First Offender / never charged): _____

Might qualify for restriction? _____

Next step: _____

Case 2 - Charge/arrest: _____

Outcome (dismissed / convicted / First Offender / never charged): _____

Might qualify for restriction? _____

Next step: _____

Case 3 - Charge/arrest: _____

Outcome (dismissed / convicted / First Offender / never charged): _____

Might qualify for restriction? _____

Next step: _____

Case 4 - Charge/arrest: _____

Outcome (dismissed / convicted / First Offender / never charged): _____

Might qualify for restriction? _____

Next step: _____

(Use the back of this page for more. List them ALL - the one you forget is the one that shows up on a background check.)

This Week's Moves

- ☐ Check your sentence status: is it fully complete (including probation/parole)?
- ☐ If yes: register to vote at mvp.sos.ga.gov TODAY
- ☐ Request your Certificate of Sentence Completion: 678-783-4337
- ☐ Complete your Record Action Plan above - list every case
- ☐ Contact Georgia Justice Project (gjp.org) about any case that might qualify for restriction
- ☐ Write your 30-second employment story and practice it out loud

Knowledge is leverage. The system is complicated on purpose - but now you know the parts that matter most. Use them.

CHAPTER 12: Building Your Future

You've made it through eleven chapters. You know how to stay free. You know your rights. Now comes the part nobody can do for you: **building the life that makes going back unthinkable.**

Here's how to think about it: **survive the first 90 days, build in year one, dream in year five.** Most people try to do all three at once and drown. Don't. There's an order to this.

The First 90 Days: Survive

The first three months out are the hardest. Everything is new, everything costs money you don't have, and old temptations are loudest when you're stressed and broke.

Your only job in the first 90 days:

- [] Stay compliant (Chapter 10 - your systems are running)
- [] Secure stable housing (even temporary - a couch with rules beats the street)
- [] Get some income coming in (any legal income - dignity first, dream job later)
- [] Stay connected to one positive person or program
- [] Handle your paperwork (ID, Social Security card, birth certificate - you need these for everything)

That's it. That's the whole list. If you do those five things for 90 days, you've done something most people don't: **you survived the danger zone.**

Money: The First 90 Days Budget

Money will be tight. That's not a moral failing - it's math. What matters is that you **know where every dollar goes.** People don't usually blow up their finances on big purchases. They bleed out on small ones they never tracked.

Keep it simple - the 90-day budget has three buckets:

1. **Must-pay (survival):** housing contribution, food, transportation to work and appointments, supervision fees, phone. These get paid FIRST, every time.
2. **Must-save (freedom fund):** even \$10 a week. This is your cushion for the car repair, the missed shift, the emergency that would otherwise become a crisis. A person with \$200 saved makes different decisions than a person with \$0.
3. **Everything else:** what's left. Be honest about what "everything else" has been costing you.

WRITE: Your 90-day budget - rough numbers are fine. The point is seeing it on paper.

Monthly income (all sources): _____

Must-pay items and amounts:

Freedom fund (per week): _____

THINK: Where did your money go last month that surprised you? What's one leak you can plug this week?

THINK: Where are you in the 90 days right now? What's the one item on that list that needs your attention this week?

Year One: Build

Once you're stable, you build. This is where most returning citizens change their trajectory - not through luck, but through skills that pay.

Education: It's Not Too Late

- **GED programs are free** - and they're everywhere: community colleges, nonprofits, churches, libraries. If you don't have a diploma, this is step one. It opens every other door.

- **Trade schools and apprenticeships** are the most underrated path in America: electrical, plumbing, HVAC, welding, commercial driving (CDL). Real money. High demand. And many trades are genuinely record-friendly - they care if you can do the work.
- **College is possible.** Financial aid rules for people with records have eased in recent years - check current FAFSA rules with a counselor, because this keeps changing in your favor. Community college is affordable and a proven launchpad.

The Trades: Real Talk

A quick word on why trades deserve your serious attention: they pay well (many journeymen earn more than college graduates), they can't be outsourced, every community needs them, and the culture is about what you can do with your hands - not where you've been. Apprenticeships pay you while you learn. Look into your local union halls and technical colleges. Ask 211 about programs near you.

WRITE: Which path pulls at you - GED, trade, college, or something else? Why?

THINK: What's one phone call you could make this week about that path? (A school, a program, 211 - just one call.)

Entrepreneurship: Be Your Own Boss

Some of you were running businesses before - just illegal ones. The skills transfer: hustle, customer service, managing money, reading people. The difference now is you keep what you earn and you sleep at night.

Start **small, legal, and simple:**

- Lawn care and landscaping
- Cleaning (homes, offices, cars)

- Food (catering, food truck down the road)
- Repair (phones, small engines, handyman work)
- Hauling and moving

Rules for doing it right:

1. **Legal from day one.** Licenses, taxes, insurance as you grow. The whole point is that nobody can take this from you.
2. **Start with what you have.** A mower, a bucket and rags, a phone - start there.
3. **Reinvest.** The first money goes back into the business, not into showing off.
4. **Your record is not a barrier here** - it's your business. Nobody runs a background check on the boss.

Getting Your First Customers

The business means nothing without customers. Here's how you get the first ones:

- **Tell everyone.** Friends, family, church, the barbershop - "I do lawns now" or "I clean houses" said out loud, repeatedly. Most small businesses start with word of mouth.
- **Do the first jobs cheap - for reviews.** Your first five customers aren't about profit. They're about proof. Do great work, ask for a review or a referral, and watch it spread.
- **Simple flyers work.** Name, service, phone number, one line about quality. Laundromats, churches, community boards.
- **Show up like a business.** Clean clothes, on time, phone answered. Half your competition fails on these three things alone.

THINK: Who are three people you could tell about your service this week?

THINK: What skill do you already have that someone would pay for? That's a business waiting to happen.

The 1-Year and 5-Year Plan

Dreams without plans are wishes. Let's make yours a plan.

WRITE: Work backwards. Start with the dream, then walk it back to this week.

In 5 years, I will be:

To get there, in 1 year I need to have:

To get there in 1 year, in 90 days I need to:

To get there in 90 days, this month I need to:

To get there this month, this week I will:

See what happened? Your five-year dream just became a this-week action. That's how futures get built - one week at a time.

Rebuilding Trust: Family and Relationships

Let's talk about the people. Coming home changes relationships - with your kids, your partner, your parents, your family. Some people held you down while you were inside. Some people moved on. Both hurt in different ways.

Here's the truth about rebuilding trust: **it's not rebuilt with words. It's rebuilt with patterns.** Not "I've changed" - but showing up, on time, consistently, for months. Trust is a savings account. Every kept promise is a deposit. Every broken one is a withdrawal. You can't argue your way to a full account.

A few honest guidelines:

- **Don't demand instant closeness.** Your kids grew up while you were gone. Your partner survived without you. Give them time to believe the change is real. Patience IS the apology.
- **Apologize once, properly - then live it.** A real apology names what you did, doesn't make excuses, and doesn't ask for anything back. Then you never bring it up again as leverage. After that, your life is the apology.
- **Respect boundaries.** If someone needs space, that's their right. Pushing past a boundary to prove you've changed proves the opposite.
- **Be consistent with your kids above all.** Call when you say you'll call. Show up when you say you'll show up. For a child, reliability is love made visible.

WRITE: One relationship you want to rebuild. What's one pattern - one repeated action - you can start this week?

The person: _____

My pattern (what I'll do, repeatedly): _____

THINK: Who held you down while you were inside? Have you thanked them - really thanked them - since you've been home?

Giving Back: The Strongest Protection

Here's something the research backs up and every old head knows: **mentoring someone behind you is one of the strongest protections against going back yourself.**

Why? Because you can't guide someone away from a cliff while walking toward it. Because being needed gives you a reason that survives bad days. Because the young person who hears "I've been where you are" from someone who's actually been there listens in a way they listen to no one else.

You don't have to be perfect to mentor. You just have to be honest and a few steps ahead. Volunteer at a reentry program. Talk to the youth at your church or community center. Be the person you needed when you were coming up.

THINK: Who could you reach back for, right now - even in a small way? What would you tell them first?

The Declaration

You've done the work. Now say it out loud - and mean it.

Read this slowly. Then sign it.

I AM REFORMED.

I am not my record. I am not my worst day. I am not what the system says I am.

I know my conditions and I honor them. I know my rights and I use them.

I am building a life - 90 days at a time, one year at a time - that makes going back unthinkable.

When the old life knocks, I have a plan. When I slip, I act within 24 hours.

I will reach back for the next one coming up behind me.

I am reformed. And I'm just getting started.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

My Next 30 Days

WRITE: Three concrete actions. Dated. Specific.

1. By (date): _____

I will: _____

2. By (date): _____

I will: _____

3. By (date): _____

I will: _____

A Final Word From Noah

If you've read this far, I want you to hear this directly from me.

I know what it costs to come home and start over. I know the looks, the applications, the doors that don't open. I know the nights when the old life sounds easier than the new one.

But I also know this: **the fact that you're holding this book means you haven't given up.** And as long as you haven't given up, it's not over. Not even close.

Your record is a chapter. It's not the book. The rest of the pages are blank, and the pen is in your hand.

Write something worth reading.

- Noah

If the weight ever gets too heavy: call or text 988, 24/7. Free. Confidential. There's no shame in reaching out - it's one of the bravest things a person can do.

MY RE-ENTRY TOOLKIT

Tear these pages out. Pin them up. Carry them with you. They work only if you use them.

My Freedom File Checklist

Keep copies of every one of these in one folder. This folder is your freedom.

- ☐ State ID or driver's license
 - ☐ Social Security card
 - ☐ Birth certificate
 - ☐ Release papers
 - ☐ Parole / probation conditions (signed copy)
 - ☐ Parole / probation officer name, phone, office address
 - ☐ Court payment plan paperwork
 - ☐ Child support paperwork
 - ☐ Certificate of Sentence Completion (request from GA Dept. of Community Supervision: 678-783-4337)
 - ☐ Medical records and prescription list
 - ☐ Resume (updated copy)
 - ☐ Housing agreement or lease
-

My Important Contacts

Who	Name	Phone
Parole / probation officer		
Safe family member		

Who	Name	Phone
Safe friend	_____	_____
Employer / job contact	_____	_____
Counselor / mentor	_____	_____
Doctor / clinic	_____	_____
211 (services)	211	211
988 (crisis)	988	988
Georgia Justice Project	gjp.org	_____

My Support Circle

Write the names of the people who want you to win. Call them when it's hard. Let them celebrate with you when it's good.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

My 12-Week Action Log

One line per week. What did you do? What moved forward?

Week	Chapter worked	Moves completed	Notes
1	Day One	_____ / 6	_____
2	Your Story	_____ / 6	_____
3	First 72 Hours	_____ / 6	_____
4	Housing	_____ / 6	_____
5	Getting Hired	_____ / 6	_____
6	Keeping the Job	_____ / 6	_____

Week	Chapter worked	Moves completed	Notes
7	Money	_____ / 6	_____
8	Health	_____ / 6	_____
9	Family	_____ / 6	_____
10	Staying Free	_____ / 6	_____
11	Your Rights	_____ / 6	_____
12	Your Future	_____ / 6	_____

My Weekly Planner

Copy this page. Fill one out every Sunday night.

Week of: _____

Top 3 priorities this week:

Appointments (officer, court, job, doctor):

- _____ **Day/Time:** _____
- _____ **Day/Time:** _____
- _____ **Day/Time:** _____

Job applications this week (goal: 5+):

1. _____ **Applied:** _ **Follow-up:** _____
2. _____ **Applied:** _ **Follow-up:** _____
3. _____ **Applied:** _ **Follow-up:** _____
4. _____ **Applied:** _ **Follow-up:** _____
5. _____ **Applied:** _ **Follow-up:** _____

Money in / Money out:

- Earned: \$__ Spent: \$__ Saved: \$__

One thing I'm proud of this week:

Certificate of Completion

I AM REFORMED

This certifies that

completed all 12 chapters of the **I Am Reformed Re-entry Workbook**,
doing the work, keeping the promises, and building a new life —
one day, one decision, one win at a time.

Signed: _____ Date: _____

A Noah Sanders Advocacy Program — noahsandersadvocacy.com

Your record is part of your story. It is not the end of it.

Notes

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Notes

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Notes

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Resources Directory

Keep this page. You'll need these numbers.

Crisis — 24/7, Free, Confidential

- **Call or text 988** — Suicide and Crisis Lifeline
- **Text HOME to 741741** — Crisis Text Line
- **Call 1-800-715-4225** — Georgia Crisis & Access Line

Help Finding Anything — Food, Housing, Health Care, Legal Aid

- **Call or text 211** — connects you to local services wherever you are

Legal Help & Records (Georgia)

- **Georgia Justice Project — gjp.org** — legal help, record restriction, reentry services (Atlanta-based, serves Georgians)
- **Certificate of Sentence Completion** — GA Department of Community Supervision: **678-783-4337** (proves your sentence is complete — useful for voting, jobs, housing)

Voting (Georgia)

- Re-register at **mvp.sos.ga.gov** once your sentence (including probation/parole) is complete

Benefits

- **Georgia Gateway — gateway.ga.gov** — apply for SNAP (food assistance) and Medicaid
- **Healthcare.gov** — health insurance marketplace options

Jobs & Training

- **Job Corps** — jobcorps.gov — free education and trade training, ages 16-24
- **Your local American Job Center** — find it at careeronestop.org or call 211
- **Federal Bonding Program** — ask any employer about it, or call 211 for details: free \$5,000 bond that makes hiring you risk-free for 6 months

Housing

- **211** — emergency shelter and transitional housing referrals
- **Your parole/probation officer or case manager** — ask about approved transitional housing

Family

- **Division of Child Support Services (Georgia)** — contact early about modification and payment plans; ignoring arrears makes them worse

For Mentors and Family Members

- Read this book alongside your person. Ask about their “This Week’s Moves.” Celebrate completed checklists. Your steady presence is the program working.

About This Program

I AM REFORMED: A Re-entry Workbook For People Leaving Prison is a program of **Noah Sanders Advocacy** — walking with returning citizens from the gate to a real life.

Through this workbook, workshops, and one-on-one mentorship, we help people leaving prison secure housing, find work, rebuild families, and stay free.

noahsandersadvocacy.com

Your record is part of your story. It is not the end of it.