

Returning from Rikers: Supports and Services Available

May 2020

Since March 16, when stay at home and social distancing restrictions started to ramp up, the number of people leaving jail has resulted in an almost 30% reduction in the jail population. While the City invests in supports to help the transition from jail, release during the time of the pandemic is different. Firstly, the rate of release has grown exponentially, as decision-makers across the criminal justice system have weighed public health and public safety concerns. Secondly, the world into which people are returning is utterly changed, as all New Yorkers are living under new restrictions. Many people leaving jail are returning to communities where many COVID-19 cases are being reported. As a result, how the City supports people returning home now has an added dimension. This brief sets out what the steps and supports are.

Before Leaving Jail:

- In New York City, reentry services are not and cannot be mandated. When and whether a person decides to use reentry services is entirely up to them. However, the process for offering services begins at admission to jail with a needs assessment process to create a reentry plan intended to ensure that each person is connected to emergency and long term housing options, transitional employment, benefits and Medicaid assistance, mental and medical health care and social supports including peer mentorship when they return to their home community.
- While in jail, individuals receive reentry planning from Correctional Health Services (CHS), a part of the City's public hospital system, Department of Correction (DOC) Counseling Unit staff and/or DOC contracted reentry providers. Depending on how long they stay and their medical/mental health needs, people who are incarcerated receive reentry services include the following: beginning the process of benefits enrollment, such as Medicaid enrollment or reactivation and housing applications, job and hard skills training, referrals to substance use and mental health treatment, family reunification support and connections to community-based transitional employment through the Jails to Jobs program. During the COVID-19 crisis, individuals may receive telephone case management from reentry providers like Fortune Society and Osborne Association, instead of in person meetings. Individuals will also receive "reentry hotline" information to connect with reentry organizations immediately after release as well as information about physical locations to go to pick up reentry supplies like a pre-paid cellphone, food and clothing.

Upon Release:

- Every person leaving jail in NYC is eligible for reentry services, or services offered by non-profit organizations that help individuals to stabilize and begin to get life back on track after being incarcerated. The people providing these services understand and appreciate that different individuals have different needs. All of the City's providers have culturally competent, well-trained, and professional staff who understand the challenges of coming home after being in jail and the complexity of the personal rebuilding process.
- When an individual is ready to be released, correctional staff work to ensure that the reentry plan created while in jail is still an accurate reflection of their needs at the time of release. Needs like housing often change over the course of time spent in jail, so DOC, CHS and reentry provider staff work to keep up with those changes and provide as smooth of a transition back to the community as possible.
- During the COVID-19 crisis, individuals are screened for COVID-19 symptoms prior to release and if they are experiencing symptoms or have a positive diagnosis, they will receive instructions for self-isolation (more below in 'Public Health' section).
- All individuals leaving City jails are also screened for housing needs prior to discharge. There are difference housing options for individuals with COVID-19 at the time of discharge. But all individuals leaving City jails during the COVID-19 crisis will be offered immediate housing (more below in 'Immediate Housing Assistance'). All individuals in need of immediate housing assistance are transported directly from DOC facilities to those housing sites.

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- Depending on health and mental health needs, individuals are also provided with walking medication and community prescriptions to be filled at a pharmacy of their choosing as well as ongoing connections to tele-health and medical care.
- Upon discharge from jails on Rikers Island, individuals will be taken to the Rikers Island Central Cashier (R.I.C.C). This is where property and commissary funds can be picked up. At this location, DOC has an information table with the fliers mentioned above to help connect individuals to reentry hotlines, find physical locations to receive reentry supplies and connect to services like emergency and long term housing assistance, transitional employment and health and mental health care.
 - Before the COVID-19 crisis, staff from reentry organizations were onsite at the Rikers Central Cashier to make connections with individuals leaving jail and offer reentry supplies like cellphones, food and clothing assistance and Metrocards. Until the COVID-19 crisis has passed, these supports are available via the NYC reentry hotlines and at limited onsite locations around NYC.

Changes due to COVID-19:

Reentry Services:

- While all of these services continue to be in place, how some of the services are delivered is now changed. Many reentry service providers are offering pre and post release telephone case management and assistance (including help with benefits enrollment, Medicaid, emergency and long term housing assistance, medication and medical appointments, treatment referrals, job training and paid transitional employment) rather than in person meetings. Some providers, however, do still have physical sites open.

Immediate Housing Assistance:

- The public health emergency created by COVID-19 requires that extra care is taken before people return to their communities. What happens when someone leaves jail now depends on their health and if they have somewhere safe to go. Following a mandatory health screening by medical staff, DOC and Correctional Health staff assess everyone leaving City jails for COVID status and housing needs and individuals receive one of the following instructions:
 - People who are not identified as having COVID-19 and who have a safe place to go are released and instructed to follow the lead of their fellow New Yorkers and stay at home.
 - People who are not identified as having COVID-19 who do not have a home to go are provided a hotel room, paid for by the City, while reentry service providers like Exodus Transitional Community work to secure longer-term housing.
 - Those who have COVID-19 and have a place to go are released and instructed to remain self-isolated so as not to infect friends, family members, or neighbors in their community.
 - Those who have COVID-19 and do not have a home to return to will be provided shelter in special Department of Homeless Services hotels, where medical staff are on-hand to provide care as needed.
- This emergency hotel program for COVID+ people has recently expanded to individuals in communities with high rates of COVID-19 infections.

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Public Health:

- All persons, including all Department of Correction staff, are screened in accordance with the latest health guidance before entering any facility.
- In response to recommendations made by the Mayor that everyone utilize a face covering at all times when in the vicinity of others, DOC expanded the scope of distribution of masks to include issuing masks to all DOC staff as well as to all people in custody.
- All people in custody are offered masks whether symptomatic or not. If a mask is damaged a replacement is provided.
- While in custody, DOC staff refer any person who is exhibiting symptoms of COVID-19 to CHS for testing and quarantine individuals who have been exposed to ensure that spread is limited.
- Upon release, support is available to make sure people receive important health updates and treatment options in their communities:
 - Universal screening for COVID-19 symptoms happen at discharge and information is provided on how people can care for themselves at home, how to receive treatment in the community (including through CHS reentry services), and guidance on self-isolation.
 - If CHS determines that people require enhanced clinical care, people are transferred to emergency facilities.
 - For patients receiving services through geriatrics and complex care units, CHS continues to stay in touch in the community, including phone calls and in-person visits, as necessary, access to medications, Medicaid and other health services.