

February  
2026



# Bridging the Gap

Aligning Policy with Lived Experience to  
Strengthen Reentry in North Carolina

---

By Samantha Richter

# Table of Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Background</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Methodology</b>	<b>8</b>
Participant selection and screening process	8
Outreach and recruitment	9
Data collection procedure	9
Success rate and retention	10
Analysis methods	11
Further research	11
<b>Findings: Challenges in Reentry</b>	<b>12</b>
1. The overwhelming nature of the first weeks after release	12
2. Housing instability and release planning gaps	13
3. Employment barriers and the search for routine	15
4. Healthcare and mental health access	18
5. Legal, transportation, and technological barriers	20
<b>Analysis</b>	<b>22</b>
Key Theme 1: Reentering community members need personalized, ongoing support	22
Key Theme 2: Location shapes access and opportunity	23
Key Theme 3: System disconnects create difficulty in navigating resources	24
Key Theme 4: Timely and attentive pre-release planning is critical for success	25
Key Theme 5: Reentry services must support long-term stability	27
<b>Effective Existing Programs and Organizations: Timely, Personalized, and Sustained Support</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Recommendations and Policy Implications</b>	<b>31</b>
1. Increase flexibility in release location	31
2. Expand pre-release planning	32
3. Improve employment and readiness programs	32
4. Implement targeted reentry housing supports	32
5. Strengthen continuity of reentry services	32
6. Invest in peer support programs	32
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>34</b>



# Executive Summary

**In North Carolina, about 18,000 people return home each year from state prisons, and thousands more from county jails.**<sup>1</sup> This transition is often not smooth. Reentry is challenging; justice-involved individuals commonly face barriers when attempting to access resources such as housing, employment, and transportation.<sup>2</sup> These challenges underscore the need for states to proactively enhance the quality and availability of services for returning community members. Successful reentry not only offers a more equitable society and a true second chance but also enhances public safety by reducing recidivism and allowing returnees to truly thrive.

This report investigates the critical gap between the reentry needs expressed by formerly incarcerated individuals in North Carolina and the services currently available to them through state, local, and nonprofit programs. We sought to capture the perspectives of formerly incarcerated individuals around what was successful, challenging, and missing in their reentry experiences. **We conducted interviews with 14 individuals who had been released from prison within the past two years.** Their responses revealed a striking disconnect: while many reentry initiatives focus on procedural requirements and short-term checklists, these individuals consistently emphasized the need for long-term, personalized support in areas such as housing, employment, identification access, healthcare, and mentorship.

Across these domains, healthcare access emerged as especially fragile. Participants described insurance delays, confusion about eligibility, and long waits to see providers, barriers that can quickly escalate health needs during a high-risk transition period. These findings also underscore a structural reality: if North Carolina's Medicaid expansion is rolled back, narrowed, or left underfunded, many returning community members' physical and behavioral health needs would go unmet, undermining reentry stability and increasing the risk of relapse, crisis, and reincarceration.

Through qualitative interviews, participants discussed challenges to their reentry experience. From those challenges, several key themes emerged:

## Key Themes

- 1. Reentering community members need personalized, ongoing support**
- 2. Location shapes access and opportunity**
- 3. System disconnects create difficulty in navigating resources**
- 4. Timely, attentive, and thorough pre-release planning is critical for success**
- 5. Reentry services must support long-term stability**

These findings have important policy implications. This report urges legislators to prioritize coordination between pre- and post-release programs, center lived experience in service design, and ensure that logistical barriers do not hinder successful reintegration. A responsive and dignity-centered approach would help individuals rejoin their communities with stability and sustained support. To support these goals, policymakers and reentry programs should focus on these key recommendations:

## Policy Recommendations:

1. **Increase flexibility in release location**
2. **Expand pre-release planning**
3. **Improve employment readiness programs**
4. **Implement targeted reentry housing supports**
5. **Strengthen continuity of reentry services**
6. **Invest in peer support programs**



# Background

Reentry—the transition from incarceration to general society—is challenging because justice-involved individuals commonly face barriers to resources such as housing, employment, and transportation.<sup>3</sup>

Recidivism, the measure of how often a person reoffends and is reincarcerated, is an important metric in assessing reentry success. An April 2022 report by the North Carolina Sentencing and Policy Advisory Commission analyzed a sample of 16,340 individuals released from prison in 2019 and found a 49% recidivist arrest rate within two years of release.<sup>4</sup> This alarmingly high rate highlights the complexities and challenges in achieving successful reentry and emphasizes the need for comprehensive support systems in North Carolina. Beyond the human consequences, the fiscal implications are substantial. The North Carolina Department of Adult Correction estimates that incarceration costs taxpayers approximately \$35,000 per person per year.<sup>5</sup> Investments in effective reentry programming therefore carry both social and economic implications.

Applied research plays a critical role in informing these investments. By centering the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated individuals, researchers can identify where formal systems fall short and where policy design diverges from real-world implementation.<sup>6</sup> The Wilson Center for Science and Justice at Duke Law’s research contributes to this effort by documenting what returning North Carolinians describe as successful, challenging, or missing in their reentry experiences. The findings aim to identify gaps in services and programs available in the state, offering insight into both community-level barriers and broader systemic constraints.

## North Carolina’s Reentry 2030 Initiative and the Joint Reentry Council

In January 2024, then-Governor Roy Cooper signed Executive Order No. 303, enrolling North Carolina in the national Reentry 2030 initiative and establishing a statewide Joint Reentry Council (JRC).<sup>7</sup> The Executive Order set goals to improve economic mobility; expand

access to employment, education, health care, and behavioral health services; ensure Medicaid coverage upon release; reduce homelessness among returning individuals; and remove structural barriers to successful reintegration, particularly for historically underserved communities.<sup>8</sup>



The Joint Reentry Council reflects a holistic approach. Rather than treating reentry solely as a criminal justice issue, the JRC brings together cabinet agencies, the Post-Release Supervision and Parole Commission, the Office of State

Budget and Management, and community stakeholders to coordinate across systems that shape reentry outcomes.<sup>9</sup> The council is chaired by the Secretary of Adult Correction and supported by dedicated staff who coordinate implementation, track metrics, and facilitate cross-agency collaboration.<sup>10</sup>

To translate strategic goals into operational action, the JRC established seven subcommittees focused on: (1) strategic planning; (2) reentry preparation; (3) career readiness and employer engagement; (4) education; (5) behavioral and physical health; (6) housing support; and (7) community resources.<sup>11</sup> Each subcommittee pairs Department of Adult Correction leadership with representatives from other agencies and community partners. This structure balances high-level authority with frontline implementation.

Accountability mechanisms have been central to the initiative. In September 2025, North Carolina launched a public Reentry 2030 Dashboard, tracking progress across 26 measurable objectives and 133 strategies outlined in the statewide strategic plan.<sup>12</sup> The state publishes annual progress reports each December, reinforcing transparency and providing performance updates to stakeholders and the public.<sup>13</sup>

## Key Developments

In recent years, North Carolina has implemented a range of reforms aimed at strengthening both pre-release planning and post-release coordination. While many of these efforts are aligned with the Reentry 2030 framework, others reflect parallel or complementary initiatives across state agencies.

- **Medicaid Enrollment:** The Department of Adult Correction (DAC) is now charged with submitting Medicaid applications for individuals nearing release, attempting to ensure they have healthcare coverage upon reentry.<sup>14</sup>
- **State Identification Cards:** DAC partnered with the Division of Motor Vehicles (DMV) to provide state identification cards to more returning individuals.



- **Expanded Reentry Facilities:** Seven additional prisons were designated as reentry facilities, offering specialized programs to prepare incarcerated individuals for the transition back into society, and bringing the statewide total to 21 facilities.
- **Community-based Infrastructure:** The Department of Commerce awarded \$750,000 in grants to support the development and expansion of new local reentry councils in three counties to connect returning individuals to housing, employment, and social services.<sup>15</sup>
- **Recidivism Reduction Call Center:** Joint Reentry Council member Kerwin Pittman founded a hotline service that connects formerly incarcerated individuals to jobs, housing, and social services, ensuring they receive immediate

support upon release.<sup>16</sup>

- **Transitional Workforce Pilot Programs:** The North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) launched transitional work programs training incarcerated individuals in highway construction, maintenance, and traffic control. Through partnerships with community organizations, formerly incarcerated individuals are being hired into workforce roles.<sup>17</sup>
- **Fair Chance to Advance (FC2A) Initiative:** In January 2026, North Carolina was selected as one of four states in the inaugural cohort of Jobs for the Future's (JFF) FC2A State Action Networks, designed to expand postsecondary education and workforce pathways for justice-impacted individuals.<sup>18</sup> Through participation, DAC will receive up to \$2.1 million over four years, including funding for planning and technical assistance.<sup>19</sup>
- **Cross-System Data Integration:** A substantial portion of FC2A funding supports enhanced data-sharing infrastructure through a partnership with the Coleridge Initiative. This secure platform will allow the state to link corrections, education, and workforce data to identify service gaps and track long-term outcomes across systems.<sup>20</sup>

Organizations in North Carolina have also developed targeted programs aimed at addressing specific reentry challenges, particularly for individuals with behavioral health challenges, disabilities, and educational aspirations.

- **Alliance of Disability Advocates Reentry Initiative:** Established to support individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities through the "Justice: Release, Reentry, and Reintegration" program, this initiative has served 125 individuals from 13 state prisons across North Carolina from its launch in April 2020 to late 2022. Notably, 86% of program participants have not reoffended or returned to incarceration, highlighting the effectiveness of personalized reentry planning.<sup>21</sup>
- **Pathways from Prison to Postsecondary Education Program:** This five-year initiative was instituted in 2013 as part of a multistate project funded by the Ford Foundation and others. It provided educational opportunities to incarcerated individuals, both during their time in prison and after release. While the program successfully expanded access to higher education, challenges included limited time for students to earn credentials before release and difficulty transitioning to community colleges post-incarceration.<sup>22</sup>

## Continuing Gaps and the Role of Research

While North Carolina has developed a robust structural framework for reentry coordination, implementation remains an ongoing process. Access to services does not guarantee accessibility in practice, and individuals returning home often navigate fragmented systems despite statewide reforms.

This study builds upon North Carolina's evolving reentry infrastructure by centering the perspectives of those directly impacted. By examining where services succeed, where they break down, and how individuals experience policy on the ground, the research aims to inform future improvements within the Reentry 2030 framework and the FC2A initiative. In doing so, it contributes to a broader effort to align structural reform with lived experience, ensuring that statewide strategies translate into tangible stability for returning North Carolinians.

# Methodology

This study aimed to identify common, unaddressed barriers in the reentry experiences of formerly incarcerated individuals in North Carolina and to develop narrative-driven recommendations that bridge the gap between existing services and expressed needs. Through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with individuals released within the past two years, the research focused on participants' personal accounts of navigating housing, employment, healthcare, and support systems during their transition back into community.

## Participant Selection and Screening Process

**The sample included 14 individuals who returned to North Carolina counties from state prisons within the last six to 24 months. The initial counties selected for outreach—Durham, Sampson, Buncombe, Pamlico, Cleveland, Stokes, Greene, and Richmond—were chosen based on criteria such as the number of individuals returning to each county from prison, urban-rural dynamics, and county demographic factors.** This selection process was guided by frameworks from Duke University's analysis in "The Democrats' Countryopolitan Problem in North Carolina" and regional classifications from the North Carolina Department of Adult Correction.<sup>23</sup>

Pre-interview eligibility criteria required participants to have been released within the specified timeframe into one of the targeted counties. Additionally, deliberate efforts were made to ensure that the participant pool closely reflected the demographic composition of the broader reentry population. Although intentional efforts were made to recruit participants from



rural counties, it was difficult to reach individuals not already connected to existing reentry services. This raises potential concerns about selection bias that will be explored further in the analysis.

Interested individuals completed an online screening survey, providing basic information including their name, age, race, ethnicity, gender, release county, and date of release. To avoid excluding individuals without internet access, phone call screenings were also available. Some individuals were temporarily placed on hold if their eligibility was pending (e.g., individuals approaching the six-month mark post-release or from newly added counties).

## Outreach and Recruitment

Recruitment was carried out in two phases: network-based outreach and targeted community outreach. The primary recruitment method involved partnerships with community organizations, reentry councils, and transitional housing programs, including [StepUp Durham](#) (employment training), [OurJourney](#) (mentorship and reentry support), and the [NC-FIT Programs](#) (community health partnerships). These partnerships allowed for leveraging trusted local nonprofits who work closely with the target population for connecting with eligible participants. Interested individuals were then invited to complete an online screening survey.

To complement this effort and broaden outreach, especially in more rural and under-resourced areas, a second phase of recruitment involved placing flyers in public spaces likely to be frequented by formerly incarcerated people. Flyer placement was coordinated primarily through outreach to transitional and halfway houses, job centers, churches, and food or clothing banks via calls and emails. This approach helped reach less urban target areas with fewer established nonprofit networks and was part of efforts to diversify the sample.

## Data Collection Procedure

After completing the screening survey and confirming eligibility, participants who consented to take part in the study provided basic demographic information. They were contacted primarily through text message or email, with follow-up and scheduling reminders sent as needed. Text messaging was the most effective communication method for maintaining engagement. Interviews were scheduled based on participant availability and conducted via Zoom. Upon completing the interview, participants received a \$50 gift card to their choice of Amazon or Walmart as compensation for their time.

Interviews followed a semi-structured format and lasted approximately one hour, centered around four main themes:

1. Pre-release planning
2. The first few months after release
3. Long-term adjustment
4. Access to key services such as housing, employment, and healthcare

While the interview guide provided a consistent thematic structure, conversations were designed to flow naturally, allowing participants to guide the discussion while ensuring that each key topic was addressed. For example,

participants were asked questions such as: “What kind of help did you receive before leaving prison?” “What was your biggest challenge in the first few months?” and “How easy was it to find housing, healthcare, and employment?” All interviews conducted over Zoom were audio-recorded, with transcripts auto-generated and later manually reviewed and corrected by multiple members of the research team.



## Success Rate and Retention

Participants were primarily released into areas such as Asheville and Durham, with others returning to locations including the broader Buncombe County, Cherokee County, and Wake Forest areas. Individuals' incarceration histories varied significantly, ranging from no prior prison time to as many as six previous terms. Their most recent incarceration terms lasted between six months and seven years, with the majority serving less than two years.

Several logistical factors influenced participant recruitment and retention. Certain interested individuals did not meet the 6–24-month post-release eligibility window, and unstable contact information made it difficult to follow up or schedule interviews. The absence of formal reentry programs in certain areas also meant individuals were largely self-managing their transitions, making them harder to locate. Consequently, recruitment was more successful in counties with more robust support systems, like Durham.

## Analysis Methods

The study used thematic analysis to examine the interviews and identify patterns and insights related to reentry experiences across participants. The process used a primarily inductive and semantic approach, allowing themes to emerge directly from participants' words rather than being shaped by preconceived assumptions. This approach was chosen to ensure that the analysis remained grounded in participants' lived experiences and focused on their expressed needs, rather than predictions or external frameworks.

A semi-structured coding process was applied, blending the framework of the interview guide with patterns that emerged organically. In a guiding codebook, “parent nodes” were created to reflect key areas such as *Mindset*, *Resource Accessibility*, *Sources of Support*, *Location*, *Environment*, *Agency*, and *Topics*. For example, the *Mindset* node captures attitudes like motivation, wanting structure, or an overarching sense of purpose—with “child nodes” such as “Routine/Structure,” “Motivation/Demotivation,” and “Religious Guiding Purpose.” The *Resource Accessibility* node included child nodes like “Clear or Unclear Information,” “Timeliness,” and “Technology Barriers,” reflecting the range of accessibility challenges faced. Cross-coding was used to trace overlapping themes, such as coding a single quote under both “Employment” and “Probation Officer” when a participant discussed job challenges connected to parole supervision.

After the initial coding process, related codes were grouped and organized into broader themes such as unmet immediate needs post-release, the importance of pre-release planning, and the persistent challenges posed by a criminal record—especially in securing housing, employment, or healthcare. Segments and quotes were then reviewed, compared, and refined to define these themes clearly and reduce redundancy. This iterative process led to the identification of several key focus areas for the final report, including the mismatch between available services and individual needs, barriers to resource access, and the importance of individualized support during reentry. These final themes, grounded in participant experiences, now serve as the foundation for the study's findings and policy recommendations.

## Further Research

Future research should build on our findings by expanding both the sample size and the scope of inquiry. A key next step is conducting longitudinal studies that follow individuals through their reentry journey over several years, capturing how these expressed needs evolve and which forms of support prove most valuable and durable over time. Expanding studies should include the perspectives of parole officers, case managers, service providers, and employers involved in the reentry process to enrich understandings of institutional or resource constraints that limit programs' effectiveness. Additionally, research should examine both the existing and potential degree of coordination between prisons and reentry organizations in more detail. Particularly how and when information exchanges occur, and whether any formal feedback mechanisms currently exist to incorporate the experiences of formerly incarcerated individuals into program design. Understanding if and where this feedback has been meaningfully used could offer useful replication models for future efforts.




# Findings: Challenges in Reentry

The quotes that follow focus on the disconnect between reentry needs and services, highlighting both the barriers encountered and areas where support systems were effective. Themes include unmet immediate needs post-release, housing instability, employment barriers, healthcare access, legal and transportation challenges, and the broader need for personalized, continuous support throughout the reentry process.


## 1. The overwhelming nature of the first weeks after release

Participants consistently described the immediate days and weeks after release as overwhelming and chaotic.

Common early needs included access to identification documents, a phone, food, and stable housing—each essential to navigating the systems of reentry.




*“Right after release? Overwhelming. There’s so much that needed to be done, like initially getting a food stamp card, finding a way back and forth to a store, setting up a cell phone... You have none [structure] and you just have to figure it out on your own.”*




*“I didn’t know where I was going to work at or nothing. But basically, I was just trying to make sure that I have an ID, a social security card, the things necessary to obtain employment. A house, somewhere to stay.”*

Several individuals emphasized the paradoxical requirements around ID and driver’s licenses. These early logistical hurdles often compounded each other. The lack of ID blocked access to housing, employment, and social services.




*“I had fines in different counties that I had to pay before I could get my license. So, there were just obstacles on how I was going to get there and how I was going to get back. And you had to pay [for] Uber and Lyft... So, that was kind of difficult to even find transportation to get to these places to get the process of getting your license back to get transportation. It was difficult.”*



*“I didn’t have any form of identification. I didn’t have my social security card, you know, didn’t have anything that I needed.”*

**Explicitly expressed need:** The need for structured pre-release programs that walk people through what to expect and how to access critical resources.



*“I think there’s a real need for a program for people, you know, within a year of getting out. People should be able to go through a program that prepares them for what to expect. You know, how to deal with probation, how to deal with, you know, getting a driver’s license, all of these things... to just function in the world.”*

## 2. Housing instability and release planning gaps

Housing was the most frequently cited challenge during reentry, and many participants felt that pre-release housing support was rushed or insufficient. Some had arrangements fall into place just days before release.

*"Housing was the biggest problem... it wasn't until like 2 weeks prior to getting out that there was actually something, you know, [set] in stone."*

Others were released into shelters or transitional housing without adequate planning.

*"They released me to a shelter. But, at the last minute, this guy called and said that they could accept me into their house. So, I mean, that was nerve wracking. I thought I was going through the shelter, but then I think a day before I got out, they found me a transitional house in Durham."*

*"I didn't even know where I was going to live until about two days before I was released. And I started 8 months before trying to get things together, like, you know, just to make sure that I had everything, like my social security card, and everything ready when I hit the streets... I didn't know for sure that any of that was going to be available until just a few days before I was released."*

Female participants emphasized that planning timelines, typically starting just 30 days before release, were particularly inadequate for women.

*"What the State tells you is that 30 days prior to release, your case manager will get with you and start assisting you with finding somewhere to go. But thirty days is not enough time, especially for women... there's not many places for women to go."*

While some participants described the benefits of accountability in recovery or transitional houses, others noted challenges when placed with unsobber or unsupportive housemates.

*"It's [a] good structure in the moment. So, you know, the accountability... and they had drug tests weekly and things like that. I needed that first getting released."*

*"The same day I got out I had a job. Because there were other girls in the transitional house, and we helped each other."*

*"The house I'm living in, my PO used to come, searched my room, and I was in a room with a guy that wasn't on parole. He found 2 liquor bottles in the closet, and it wasn't mine, but I couldn't prove that it wasn't mine. It was very nerve wracking, thinking that I could get caught up being around somebody that's not on parole... That was a big issue for me."*

For those ready to move on from transitional housing, the barriers of criminal background checks and financial instability made permanent housing feel out of reach. Many rental applications require several years of consistent employment history and often automatically disqualify individuals with a criminal record.

*"I had money, and they would not rent to me based on [my] background. So, that's a serious setback for somebody who couldn't handle 'oh my god... what am I going to do now?'"*

*"[The biggest barrier] definitely is financial, and the criminal record is just contributing to it. It's making it worse."*

*"It's a nightmare. It's a nightmare. It's so discouraging because I have [my] first month's rent, I have deposits, I have money for it, I have all this. And you're telling me no because I have drug charges. I have a felony that's almost 5 years old now and you're still holding that against me after I've done my time, I have a job, I've been employed, I own a car, and you still won't let me have housing."*

*"But when they ask the question of, you know, background checks... it was just like radio silence on a lot of the applications and things like that. Yeah. I would be talking to people for days... viewing houses and things, and you just let them know you have a background out of prison... and it stops them... it was a reality check."*

**Explicitly expressed need:** Concrete policy solutions, like housing loans or partnerships with more lenient landlords.

*"[I could have used] some financial help for, you know, sober living."*

*"If they come up with some type of reentry home loan, home buyer's loan or something. A 0% home buyer's loan for people in reentry. That would be awesome."*

*"I think that it would help if they had somebody like Step Up Durham or... a good church who knew of a realty company that [is] kind of lenient on people with criminal backgrounds."*





### 3. Employment barriers and the search for routine

Employment is seen as critical to both financial stability and personal identity during reentry. For many, work provided structure, routine, and meaning.

*"Getting up, going to work, having that routine - it helped me feel normal again. Feel like I'm just a normal person in society."*

*"The reward of being gainfully employed is what wakes me up in the morning, being able to pay."*

*"So I was going to work every day. I was working from 3 pm to 11 pm every night... And it helped me out, because, like it gave me purpose. It gave me a time and place to be."*

But over half the participants experienced repeated rejection due to their records. This type of discouragement permeated other aspects of their reentry experience.

*"I had an interview with the instructor, and everything went really well. And then they said they received my background check and they withdrew their offer. So that was really, really frustrating. I've gotten so many no's."*

*"[I decided] I'm not going to apply because they're doing a background check. And you know, I already know the results of it... me going out there applying for that job is a big risk for me, you know, looking crazy in there and knowing I got a background check."*

*"Within the first 24 hours I just started applying to a bunch of jobs, pretty much. And working with NC Works and stuff like that, going to job fairs. My, all those job fairs, none of the people ever called me back."*

*"I'm a felon. Who's going to hire me? I put in applications. Nobody would hire me. It was a big struggle. So, you know, I'm going to run out of what I had on work release, that money's going to run out. What am I going to do?... I'm going to be back in the streets."*

*"It was terrible. I applied at simple places like Arby's. They wouldn't take me. Some other places. My son had me do a resume on Indeed, and I clicked 12 or 15 jobs every day... When they found out about my background that was over."*

Technology was another common barrier in finding employment, especially for those incarcerated for long periods.

*"When I got locked up, I had a flip phone and coming out now I have this smartphone that I'm still trying to figure out how to use. Just navigating job searches online..."*

*"I had to go online and fill it [resume] out. And I didn't really know how to copy and paste, and all that stuff. It's a lot to do on the phones... coming out of prison, not knowing none of that stuff. You might as well not even come out because I mean, you don't know how to do that stuff."*

*"Lot of guys in the house that I was in, they've been [in prison for] 50 years, so they didn't even know how to work a computer or a phone."*

*"And you had to pay [for] Uber and Lyft. And, you know, I didn't even know how to work a cell phone..."*

For those who were successful in their job search, about a third credited their use of technology, apps, and websites (particularly Indeed and Labor Finders) as key tools. Many also emphasized the importance of personal connections, such as friends and family, especially when their criminal records had previously posed major barriers to employment.

Several participants described finding meaningful employment through programs that valued their lived experience. These roles were often in recovery centers or reentry programs. They not only offered stable work but also allowed them to support others navigating similar paths, creating a strong sense of purpose and connection in their reentry journey.

*"I got the job as a behavioral health technician (at a recovery center)... my lived experience is what, you know, served as an added bonus... So, they wanted me to go get my peer support certification, and then they would bring me on. So, I did, and they did. So I've been working there for over a year now."*

*"Lot of guys in the house that I was in, they've been [in prison for] 50 years, so they didn't even know how to work a computer or a phone."*

*"And you had to pay [for] Uber and Lyft. And, you know, I didn't even know how to work a cell phone..."*

*"I am a qualified mental health professional, a North Carolina certified peer support specialist, a moral reconnection facilitator, and on the way to being a qualified certified alcohol drug counselor now. I've been on both sides of the table. So, I kind of know what it takes on both sides of the table... So that's what kind of saved me. That is what saved me."*

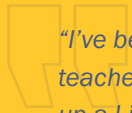
**Explicitly expressed need:** Additional job training and educational programs pre- and post-release.



*"I think training would be helpful because my resume obviously was not impressive at all... it's kind of hard to make a prison job look good..."*



*"I think that educating an inmate and allowing them to be able to legally make money is maybe the key to preventing crime... you know how many jobs I applied for since I got out?... Dudes need legal avenues to make money, but it's not as easy as people think. People like "get a job," but it's not easy. It's not that easy, and that's why people turn to drugs, robbery scams..."*



*"I've been voicing this idea of creating programs for people that are within a year or so of getting out that teaches them how to use the new technologies, how to do online searches for jobs. You know, how to set up a LinkedIn..."*

**Explicitly expressed need:** Better access to employer connections before release.

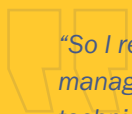


*"There needs to be a way to connect people with certain skills coming out of prison with employers who are looking for these particular skills and are willing to hire ex-felons... We should be able to interview with potential employers within a month or so, a few weeks before getting out... so that... when we hit the streets, we have a job."*

**Explicitly expressed need:** Learning to budget and save both before and after securing employment was key to building sustainable financial habits.



*"I hadn't had money in so long, like I forgot about money management. I guess, or like I never really learned it, I mean..."*



*"So I remember bringing this topic up in my IOP (outpatient treatment) group, bringing the topic of money management of people in early recovery, and we had a great discussion about money management techniques..."*

## 4. Healthcare and mental health access

Many participants reported difficulty accessing healthcare initially, especially for mental health and chronic conditions, due to insurance delays and a lack of guidance. Long wait times (upward of six months to a year) to see a provider were frequently described as a significant barrier that discouraged individuals from continuing to seek care.

*"I finally found someone, and I just had my first visit with my provider... But I've been out since... last year... that's a long time to wait to be seen by a doctor... How do I even find these people? How do I communicate my needs? Nothing prepared me for that."*

*"I had my first mammogram when I got to the prison, and it did come back abnormal... I'm still almost one year later, trying to get that biopsy done... So that process was started there, but I'm still in limbo where that's concerned."*

*"There's the struggle - who takes Medicaid? Who takes UnitedHealthcare? These ones don't, these ones do. It is a struggle if you do not have everyday needs that the real world has."*

*"So, I'm trying to navigate these websites. But they're not working very well. It's not very informative... I need a provider. So, I end up looking at a partial list of providers. And then I find out that the information that they're got on their website is out of date. And those providers aren't even taking patients anymore. So, again, there was just a lot of frustration there. I just naturally, after a while, wanted to just give up on the whole thing and go on and just deal with my health issues the best I can."*

Insurance gaps created urgent challenges for participants who relied on medication or were seeking treatment. The majority had never previously had health insurance, and many still lacked coverage at the time of the interview. Uncertainty around eligibility for Medicaid and other public benefits, such as food stamps, was common. This uncertainty was often fueled by stories of difficult application processes or past denials that made individuals hesitant to apply.

*"So, I'm waiting for my insurance to kick in... I've been waiting on that dental cleaning. I've been waiting on that."*

*"I knew I needed dental work, I knew I needed to have a regular checkup, but I didn't have anything that was like urgent care, you know, like urgent needs. So, I really just, you know, put it off until I got a job that offered health insurance."*

**Explicitly expressed need:** Quicker access to doctors and essential medications after release, or alternatively, for prisons to provide longer-lasting prescriptions to ease the transition and reduce immediate post-release health risks.

*"So, you got 30 days' worth of medication that you've been on for years, and then you have to worry about, 'okay, where am I going to get this next prescription?' And these are like mental health medications and things like that... The insurance for your health, especially mental health, coming out of prison was kind of like a big thing. And that's a worry for most inmates in there."*

*"I would have loved to have been able to contact my therapist when I left. I think that's another mistake. That until you get another therapist, you should be able to contact that one, especially if you have the HIPPA form in place. But I'm not allowed to speak to her ever again...so leaving her and having to find a new [therapist], and finding another fit - that becomes overwhelming... So, I feel like, you should be able to reach out to them for 90 days after you get out, if you need to."*

*"I went about three months without any of my medication... I left there without my meds from the prison, without any refills or anything like that."*

*"If the prisoner has any type of opioid diagnosis... they should have a referral for a MAT (Medication-Assisted Treatment) provider upon release... MAT could really like, just make your life a whole lot better than going back out and using [drugs]."*



Some participants found success through outpatient treatment programs and Medicaid enrollment—often after stumbling through the process independently or finding benefits accidentally.



*“I figured out that I have full Medicaid. I don’t know where it came from.”*



*“I was under the impression that I wouldn’t be awarded benefits... I had no idea.”*



*“She put me in connection with an organization who said, ‘hey, you can get Medicaid. You can get food stamps.’ I had no idea as a convicted felon I could get that, because 4 years ago I could not... and then I got a therapist, and I got an assessment... so you really have to utilize the resources. You have to dig deep, and you need to ask questions. But they’re out there.”*

**Explicitly expressed need:** Multiple participants either benefited from or strongly supported the idea of having reentry programs or pre-release planning processes include automatic Medicaid enrollment. Given that approval can take several weeks, completing applications before release was seen as a crucial step in ensuring timely access to care and reducing post-release stress.

For individuals in short- or long-term recovery from substance use, enrolling in intensive outpatient treatment was described as highly beneficial. Several participants noted that grants and insurance helped them access necessary medications and programs, but a major barrier remained: simply knowing these resources existed. A lack of awareness often prevented people from taking advantage of available support.

## 5. Legal, transportation, and technological barriers

The DMV and dealing with court fines were frequently cited as barriers to both mobility and employment.



*“It was just deflating every time I got on the phone... Sitting on the phone with the DMV for like 3 hours, and then reaching out to Goodwill to figure out where a certain DMV was. So, about a week to figure out just how to pay one fine.”*

Transportation challenges often compounded other reentry barriers. Most individuals were released without access to a car and had to independently learn unfamiliar bus routes and public transit systems, adding significant stress and logistical difficulty to daily tasks like attending appointments or job interviews.

*"I started running into issues with just trying to get a ride to or from the bus route, you know, it's been a source of stress and anxiety and frustration all around."*

*"[I was] definitely [worried about] transportation, because my crime made me lose my license, and it's a long process to get your license back. So, I was really concerned about transportation..."*

Individuals who had access to programs that provided transportation support or offered conditional assistance, such as helping with a car down payment for those participating in treatment or maintaining employment, expressed strong appreciation and often credited these services as critical to their reentry success.

**Explicitly expressed need:** Assistance in navigating courthouse logistics, including scheduling court dates, getting to appointments without personal transportation, paying fines, and obtaining identification. One participant also recommended providing a DMV printout or explainer prior to release, outlining the steps for license restoration, how to contact the DMV, and directions or guidance on how to get there.

*"We have [to have] some way of getting transportation to work and to appointments. I think there should be a much better program set up just specifically for preparing people coming out."*



# Analysis

## Key Theme 1: Reentering community members need personalized, ongoing support

Participants across the board emphasized the shortcomings of one-size-fits-all reentry programs or pre-release approaches. Many described case management experiences that felt impersonal or rushed, with limited attention to individual needs or histories. One participant noted, *"I just felt like I was another number... he was hearing what I was saying, but I don't think he was listening."* Others echoed that support was lacking during the critical window post-release: *"A support group, I think that'd be helpful too. Like somebody to be able to guide and lead you for at least your first 30 days out... if you don't have that support it's going to be real rough."*

Personalized peer support emerged as a strong counterexample to this gap. Participants described peer supporters with lived experience as uniquely understanding and deeply impactful: *"She had been to prison before. She knew what it was like getting out... she knew what to provide."* These relationships fostered trust and motivation. Several said seeing someone with a shared background succeed gave them hope: *"It's good to know somebody else's experience... it gives you hope... and just like someone you can relate to who's been there, you know, because she had got out like a year before I did. She had already went through highs and lows of the first year."*



Another participant emphasized this point, saying, *"Seeing people that have gone through the program and been successful is also good. Makes you know that you can do it."*

Programs that provided a consistent point of contact both before and after release were especially valued for the trust, continuity, and meaningful support they provided. *"Working with someone who'd been where I had... we had a shared experience in life. So, she gave me resources, and if I struggled with making the phone call, she would make them for me, put me on speaker phone. She did not do the work for me, but she laid the path, so it was somebody to walk with..."* In contrast, many participants described their pre-release experiences with case managers or social workers as impersonal and insufficient. They expressed a strong desire for more individualized engagement, explaining that the lack of support often left them feeling overwhelmed and alone. As one participant put it, *"You're just like thrown back out there... half of them (released individuals) I knew are back in prison now... I knew them prior to getting out, and I knew that they wanted to do good. But it's just so hard to reintegrate back into it if you are not super disciplined, you know."*

## Key Theme 2: Location shapes access and opportunity

Many participants spoke about geographic disparities in reentry support, speaking directly to some of the original research questions that framed this study. Urban areas like Asheville and Durham were repeatedly described as "resource rich," offering a wide range of services for individuals in recovery and reentry. One participant explained their decision to return to Buncombe County: *"A lot of counties only have like one or two resources in it. But I chose Buncombe because it just had a lot of different resources."* Others pointed to Durham as a hub of accessible support: *"There's a church up here to help the homeless, there's a lot of resources... I actually knew where to get clothes from, I actually knew where to go get an ID card from."* In contrast, many rural counties and smaller towns lack even basic services, forcing individuals to either return to under-resourced environments or find ways to relocate entirely.

The importance of release location and agency in that decision making process also emerged in connection to safety and sobriety. Many wanted to avoid returning to the environments associated with their crimes. *"I knew that I couldn't go back to the same environment because I would probably get the same results,"* one explained. Another interviewee agreed, saying, *"I didn't want to go back to the same... I didn't want to be around anything that could trigger me, or be not beneficial to me maintaining my sobriety."*

However, decisions about where individuals were released after prison were often made without their input, and participants reported widely varying levels of agency in the process. While some had supportive parole officers who helped them transfer to preferred locations, others were given little to no say. One person explained, *"When I went in, I was technically considered homeless, and if you're considered homeless and released from prison, they take you back to your county of conviction. I was just kind of dropped off."* Another shared, *"I didn't want to come back to Durham, but I had to because this was the crime that I committed. I wanted to go to Raleigh, which is the next county over, but they wouldn't allow me to go. They said I had to remain here in Durham."*

Interviewees often brought up this issue unprompted, emphasizing how critical release location was to their reentry success and how frequently it's overlooked in structured reentry planning. Some noted that COVID-era policy changes temporarily relaxed the usual requirements to return to one's county of conviction, offering a glimpse into how more flexible release practices could support preferable outcomes. Participants described the current system as inconsistent—not only across facilities but also between individuals—leaving many unaware of their options or unable to access them. Those who had parole officers or advocates who listened to their needs fared better: *"I said, 'Hey, I'm going to Buncombe County.' And... he allowed me to... He didn't really give me any rebuttal... But that's going to be a barrier. Some people's parole officers won't allow that, especially fresh out of prison."*





## Key Theme 3. System disconnects create difficulty navigating resources

Even when resources existed, participants often struggled to access them due to confusion, poor communication, or lack of coordination between agencies. Participants described being sent in circles, with one stating: *“My case manager would actually give me the paperwork that was slowing down the process... and he would send me by foot to go to the medical unit to get the signatures that I was requiring, and they would tell me he knows better not to send you with this. That’s not something we do. But if they weren’t doing it for me, then who was going to do it for me? So, I just hit a brick wall with that every time that I tried to do it.”*

This disconnect often extended beyond prison walls. While some organizations like NC Works were praised for coming into prisons to provide helpful information about post-release resources, these types of efforts were rare and inconsistent. *“I had a difficult time... the treatment center I’m at right now—I started the application process while I was still in prison. But they had some medical forms that had to be signed by the medical unit at the prison... every time I tried to get that done, it was like a door was slammed in my face,”* one participant shared. Many programs and resource lists were outdated or nonfunctional: *“Some of the places on the list [the counselor] gave me were outdated. Telephone numbers were wrong. They were no longer serving women.”*

Participants also reported limited access to tools meant to support them, including tablets, vocational classes, or law libraries, describing them as underused or inaccessible. *“They wouldn’t let me move around and really do what I wanted to do... I would have done the financial class, I would have done the CDL class, I would have done the blueprinting class. I wanted to do those classes, I really did.”* Without meaningful pre-release planning or reliable guidance, individuals were often left to rely on their own research or past support systems. As one person explained, *“You better have left something behind you that supports you and know[s] where you’re going, or it’s a struggle.”*

This lack of continuity between prison and post-release services left many people feeling unprepared. *“I heard about a few organizations, but they had a time limit upon my release... those 3 months just flew by.”* Another described the overwhelming nature of trying to plan ahead while managing daily survival: *“It was more like day-to-day survival... the day-to-day in itself, was so overwhelming to try to plan.”* Multiple participants explicitly expressed a need for referrals or connection to programs (such as NA/AA meetings and job resource support) during the transition from incarceration to release. The absence of these connections often led to discouragement, contributing at a vulnerable time to feelings of isolation and resignation. A recurring theme across interviews was the importance of personal mindset; it was often brought up that individuals’ motivation to succeed was shaped by whether they felt supported or left to navigate reentry alone.

## Key Theme 4. Timely and attentive pre-release planning is critical for success

Participants overwhelmingly reported inadequate or last-minute pre-release planning, with 30 days often cited as the standard but insufficient timeline. Many called for this process to begin much earlier. *“Instead of 90 days prior to release, I think you should be able to start getting ready for your release whenever you wanted to,”* one individual emphasized. Another noted, *“Thirty days prior to release your case manager will... call for you to start meeting... but 30 days itself definitely is not enough time.”*



This theme of insufficient preparation was echoed in numerous interviews, where participants described logistical delays in obtaining essentials like state IDs, food stamps, or housing plans, many of which take longer than 30 days to process. *“They help you get a state ID. They will let you put in for food stamps. Everything is 30 days. Some things take more than 30 days. So, I think 60 days is a better time to start this process,”* one person explained. Others expressed a desire for initial case manager meetings at the very beginning of incarceration to help set long-term goals and establish a concrete path forward. *“If you could meet with your case manager when you first get there and tell them what your hopes and goals are for after release... when you finally meet with them a couple of months before release, it’s not just brand new,”* one participant said. Another added, *“I wish that my stuff would have happened sooner... so that I could have got more opportunity to make those changes while I was still in prison.”* These reflections represent a widely held belief that earlier, more personalized planning could significantly ease the transition and support more successful reentry outcomes.

Despite written reentry plans being standard practice in North Carolina, not a single participant reported having knowledge of, or access to, any formal release plan. As one person put it bluntly, *“When they talk about a home plan, it’s not a plan. It’s an address... That’s it.”* Many participants described the process as a rushed checklist rather than a personalized effort to support long-term success.

A common concern was the overwhelming caseloads of case managers, which left little time for meaningful support or individualized planning. *“The prison system is so overpopulated... they don’t have the concern or time to really put in what they need to for us,”* one woman shared, noting that most case managers simply offered the bare minimum. Another echoed this sentiment: *“They just want to get the paperwork done to release you. They’re not really worried about what you’re doing after... your outcomes, your future, how to help you not come back.”* Participants emphasized the need for case managers who are not only adequately resourced to do their jobs, but who are also familiar with the services available in the communities people are returning to and equipped to help build those connections in advance.

Participants consistently identified pre-release programs—particularly work release, job training, and basic document access—as some of the most effective tools for supporting successful reentry. Work release programs were universally praised for their ability to build confidence, establish routine, and provide real-world job experience before release. Many expressed a desire for increased access to work release opportunities, emphasizing how transformative they could be. As one participant shared, *“Being able to be around hardworking people Monday through Friday... changed my life. They showed me that I could be someone that could hold a job Monday through Friday. It really helped me out a lot.”* Another added, *“I really feel like the main thing that helped me transition was probably the work release. Because, it is really overwhelming after you’ve been incarcerated for so long, like how overstimulating outside of prison is.”* These programs helped individuals save money, gain discipline, and build momentum. *“It was a chance for me to gather money, save money, and to be able to start anew... it taught me skills of working... and showed me how much the world had changed in 4 years,”* one said. Another credited work release with preventing relapse: *“Without work release, I would have probably went back home, relapsed, and been back in prison again.”*



In addition to work release, participants valued job readiness and educational programs such as resume-building classes, financial literacy workshops, and evidence-based programming. *“We did mock interviews. Hotel owners and parole officers came in and spoke with us,”* one recalled. Others emphasized the importance of resume training and professional writing: *“Fortunately, in my education, in the program I was in, I learned professional writing. I learned how to build a resume. But that was just a unique program.”* While the impact of these opportunities was clear, access was often limited. Participants described barriers like long waitlists, limited seats, and not enough instructors. *“They put up a sheet that has these classes available... it might be 50 people, and they are only gonna take 25. So, it’s just the luck of the draw,”* one said. Another added, *“If you weren’t in one of those classes, you were just sitting around doing nothing. And they were rarely available. I just really got lucky.”*

A final but critical piece of successful pre-release preparation was access to basic documentation, particularly state IDs and Social Security cards. While a few participants appreciated when prisons helped them get this paperwork in advance, others left without any identification or received a prison-issued ID that was not widely accepted. *“The ID card they gave me when I came out of prison—I kept going to the place, the Temp Agency, and they kept turning me back... They wouldn’t accept the prison ID.”* The inability to cash checks or apply for jobs without proper ID created major delays and frustrations. Several participants called for prison-issued IDs to be recognized more broadly, or, ideally, for individuals to be issued official state IDs before release. Those who did receive documents and food stamp applications before release described it as hugely impactful, giving them a crucial head start during a difficult transition.

## Key Theme 5. Reentry services must support long-term stability

Participants repeatedly stressed that reentry challenges did not end in the first few weeks, and sustained support was necessary to build long-term stability. Access to technology was vital for finding jobs and housing, and, when available, helped bridge the gap between prison resources and external services. One participant shared that having a tablet in prison allowed them to search for Oxford House openings and complete interviews before release. Others described using their devices as their primary connection to the outside world, applying for jobs, accessing reentry programs, and preparing for life post-release.

After incarceration, the role of technology remained just as critical. Participants spoke about the importance of programs that offered practical tech support, such as the Sunrise Recovery Resource Center. One person shared, *“they have cell phones that they give out to people that have three months of service. So that helped me out a lot. I was able to stay in contact with people and navigate the bus routes.”* Programs that teach technological literacy or provide access both support logistical needs and help individuals feel connected and capable.

Self-sufficiency was also framed as a central motivator. *“My being self-sufficient is what makes me keep going... You know that’s what gets me up every day. Like knowing that I count on myself and, whenever I have to count on myself to do something I feel pretty good about it, because I’m confident that I’ll get it done... I’ve never felt like that.”* said one person. But multiple participants emphasized that even the most determined individuals could relapse or return to prison without support, especially in housing or mental health care. One said: *“Basically, you’re on your own when you get out... and I believe that’s why there are so many repeated offenders.”* More continuous, customized, and coordinated support was repeatedly referenced as the clearest path to sustained reentry success.





# Effective Existing Programs and Organizations: Timely, Personalized, and Sustained Support

While many participants talked about their lack of access to helpful services, several highlighted programs and organizations that made a meaningful difference in their reentry journey. These resources were often described as supportive, responsive, and relationship driven. They provided personalized help, essential or emergency services, and sometimes even future employment opportunities.

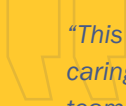
**Step-Up Durham:** described as offering job readiness training, employment connections, personal success coaches, and financial assistance for basic needs.




*“Beautiful, beautiful program.”*



*“They need more funding... they are doing it right... they got it together.”*




*“This group... just has the most loving, caring, genuine spirit. Everyone on the team just wants to support you in any way that they can.”*



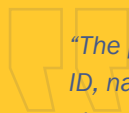
*“They just want to help people either get the skills that they need to find a job with a livable wage. Or help people to bring out the skills that people already have.”*

**Durham Justice Center:** provided help with housing (especially through landlords who accept individuals with records), budgeting, and DMV support.

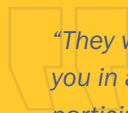


*“They told me if I need anything I can talk to them and call them. They [are] just here to guide and lead and direct me to make sure I’m doing the right thing. So that’s very helpful. I would have never expected all this.”*

**Local Reentry Councils** (including **Welcome Home Program, Durham**): assisted with license restoration, job searching, and ID acquisition; participants appreciated peer support for the first 30 days post-release.



*"The peer support helped me get my ID, navigate the city, and figure out next steps."*

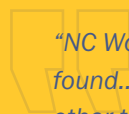


*"They were very helpful. They wanna help you in any way they can. But you just have to participate."*

**NC Works Career Centers**: connected participants with job fairs, career specialists, training programs, and even clothing for interviews.



*"I just wish I would have known about them last fall."*



*"NC Works is one of the best resources I've found... They connect you not only with a job but other training programs and free online courses."*

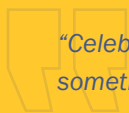
**Wheels 4 Hope**: helped participants secure affordable cars, reducing transportation barriers to jobs and appointments.



*"They got me a car for cheap. These are a wonderful, wonderful group of people."*

**Samaritan Health Center (Durham)**: described as a free charitable clinic that assisted with medication access and referrals for longer-term care.

Addiction Recovery Programs (e.g., **Celebrate Recovery**, October Road, **TROSA**, **ACDP**): provided structure, treatment, and connection. Participants especially appreciated the spiritual and routine aspects.



*"Celebrate Recovery was an even better thing. That program gave me some structure. It gave me something to look forward to and helped me stay focused."*

Operation Gateway (Asheville): focused on addressing the social determinants of recidivism, described as providing holistic and consistent support.

Goodwill Services for Formerly Incarcerated Individuals: programming in North Carolina locations was praised for their great reentry network and for providing assistance throughout the transition from incarceration to release.

Local churches (e.g. The Summit Church, Durham): helped participants get ID cards, clothing and food in a temporary sense.

*“The Summit Church was really helpful, just to know that they really cared about me and they treated me the same way.”*





# Recommendations and Policy Implications

Despite varied experiences and outcomes, participants overwhelmingly voiced the same message: success after incarceration depends on timely, personalized, and sustained support. The most significant barriers were not simply logistical hurdles like housing or employment, they were shaped by inconsistent communication, late-stage planning, and a lack of tailored services that considered each person's history, needs, and trajectory. Many systems both before and after release relied on assumptions rather than asking individuals what support they needed to succeed, leading to ineffective assistance and wasted time and money. When participants encountered programs or people who offered genuine engagement (such as a peer support specialist, a sober living home, or a success coach), they were more stable, hopeful, and motivated.

This is significant because it should shift the reentry and recidivism-reduction narrative from being centered on standardized outdated procedures to one rooted in relationship-building and responsiveness. Participants demonstrated that even modest resources, including access to a working cell phone, help with license restoration, or an earlier start for pre-release planning, could be pivotal anchors during a vulnerable transition. In many cases, the difference between stagnation and progress came down to whether someone felt listened to and guided rather than processed and dismissed. The issue is not simply about expanding services but improving how they are delivered, who extends help, and at what point in the reentry timeline.

The following section presents policy recommendations grounded in these lived experiences, underscoring both promising practices already in place and opportunities for reform. These suggestions aim to close the gap between current reentry services and actual needs by centering the voices of formerly incarcerated individuals.

Based on the findings of this research, several targeted policy changes could significantly improve reentry outcomes.

## 1. Increase flexibility in release location

Any remnants of the “forced return policy” (which requires individuals to return to the county where their conviction occurred) should be reformed to allow individuals greater flexibility in choosing their release location. This is especially important when an individual returning to the location of their offense jeopardizes their sobriety, safety, or recovery.

## 2. Expand pre-release planning

Participants consistently emphasized that 30-day pre-release planning windows were insufficient, particularly for women since less resources exist for them, and recommended beginning case management and service navigation much earlier. Ideally, this would occur within the first few months of incarceration (or whenever initially requested) and then again, more intentionally, at the 90 or 60-day mark before release. Additional policy initiatives include increasing and/or sustaining the state's current efforts to ensure individuals leave prison with official state-issued IDs, a 30-day supply of prescription medications, Medicaid reinstatement, or with a Medicaid application submitted before release.

## 3. Improve employment readiness programs in prison

Employment pathways should also be strengthened by expanding job readiness programs, resume-building workshops, digital literacy training, and employer engagement available within facilities. Participants expressed a clear interest in having job interviews arranged before release to minimize post-release unemployment and reduce recidivism risk.

## 4. Implement targeted reentry housing supports

Reentry-specific housing loans, rental subsidies, and partnerships with landlords who understand reentry challenges were identified as urgently needed policy solutions to overcome background check discrimination and financial instability upon release.

## 5. Strengthen Continuity of Reentry Services

Organizational and program improvements are equally critical. Reentry services should aim for continuity across systems—particularly between prison programs and community-based services. This can be done through proactive pre-release communication, coordinated referrals, and longer-term partnerships that bridge from the prison environment to reentry spaces. Participants also highlighted the importance of feedback loops between organizations and formerly incarcerated individuals to evaluate program impact and build trust.

## 6. Invest in Peer Support Programs

Peer support also emerged as one of the most effective strategies. Programs should centralize the hiring and training of support specialists with lived experience. To deepen this impact, individuals with direct reentry experience should be involved in shaping program design and implementation. Finally, expanding access to technology, including smartphones, tablets, and digital support, can significantly improve individuals' ability to secure housing and employment after incarceration. Even small programmatic revisions or interventions like a working phone, a trusted mentor, or a Medicaid card can dramatically change someone's reentry experience.



# Conclusion

The interviews in this report point to a consistent message that reentry success depends far less on procedural checklists than on timely, personalized support that bridges the gap between incarceration and community life. Participants described how logistical barriers compound rapidly when systems are disconnected and planning begins too late. Housing uncertainty, missing identification, transportation gaps, and repeated employment rejection created cascading crises that even motivated individuals struggled to overcome. Yet they also identified what worked. Continuity of support, practical navigation assistance, and relationships with peer mentors and organizations that treated them as individuals rather than cases made the difference between stability and crisis.

These findings reinforce the need to invest in reforms that start earlier and last longer. Expanded pre-release planning, stronger employment and digital literacy programs within facilities, targeted housing supports, seamless handoffs to community services, and peer support rooted in lived experience are not optional enhancements but foundational elements of successful reintegration. Equally critical is recognizing that healthcare access is not peripheral to reentry but central to it. Coverage delays and provider shortages directly threaten stability during a vulnerable transition. If North Carolina's Medicaid expansion is rolled back or left underfunded, the physical and behavioral health needs of returning community members will go unmet, undermining reentry efforts and increasing the likelihood of relapse and reincarceration.

Even small programmatic revisions or interventions like a working phone, a trusted mentor, or a Medicaid card can dramatically change someone's reentry experience. Ultimately, the goal is to build a more humane and effective reentry system, one that listens and evolves in partnership with those it aims to support.

# References

- 1 Rachel Crumpler, *N.C. Sets Sights on Improving Support for People Leaving Prison by 2030*, N.C. Health News (Aug. 19, 2024), <https://www.northcarolinahealthnews.org/2024/08/19/nc-sets-sights-on-improving-support-for-people-leaving-prison-by-2030/>.
- 2 Off. of the Assistant Sec’y for Plan. & Evaluation, U.S. Dep’t of Health & Hum. Servs., *Incarceration & Reentry* (2025), <https://aspe.hhs.gov/topics/human-services/incarceration-reentry-0>; Leyana Casey & Taylor Robinson, *Eliminating Barriers to Reentry for Returning Citizens: A 50-State Examination of Reentry Practices* (Cong. Black Caucus Found. & Univ. of N.C. Sch. of Med. 2023), [https://www.med.unc.edu/fammed/nctac/wp-content/uploads/sites/1256/2024/02/2023\\_CBCF\\_CPAR\\_Reentry-Practices-Final.pdf](https://www.med.unc.edu/fammed/nctac/wp-content/uploads/sites/1256/2024/02/2023_CBCF_CPAR_Reentry-Practices-Final.pdf).
- 3 Off. of the Assistant Sec’y for Plan. & Evaluation, U.S. Dep’t of Health & Hum. Servs., *Incarceration & Reentry*, supra note 2; Casey & Robinson, *Eliminating Barriers to Reentry for Returning Citizens*, supra note 2.
- 4 N.C. Sent’g & Pol’y Advisory Comm’n, *Correctional Program Evaluation: Offenders Placed on Probation or Released from Prison, Fiscal Year 2019* (Apr. 15, 2022), <https://www.nccourts.gov/assets/documents/publications/SPAC-2022-Adult-Recidivism-Report-FY-2019.pdf>.
- 5 Rachel Crumpler, *After Prison, Individualized Reentry Plans Are Cutting Recidivism*, N.C. Health News (Sept. 7, 2022), <https://www.northcarolinahealthnews.org/2022/09/07/after-prison-individualized-reentry-plans-are-cutting-recidivism/>.
- 6 Roget Guy & Roger Guy, *Applied Sociology and Prisoner Reentry: A Primer for More Successful Reintegration*, 5 J. Applied Soc. Sci. 40 (2011).
- 7 Reentry Coordination Council, U.S. Dep’t of Justice, *Coordination to Reduce Barriers to Reentry: Lessons Learned from COVID-19 and Beyond* (Apr. 2022), <https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/press-release/file/1497911/dl>.
- 8 Reentry Coordination Council, *Coordination to Reduce Barriers to Reentry*, supra note 7.
- 9 Council of State Gov’ts Just. Ctr., *North Carolina’s Reentry Council: A State Blueprint for Whole-of-Government Success* (Jan. 2026), <https://csgjusticecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/NC-Reentry-Council-Brief.pdf>.
- 10 Council of State Gov’ts Just. Ctr., *North Carolina’s Reentry Council*, supra note 9.
- 11 Id.
- 12 N.C. Dep’t of Adult Corr., *North Carolina Debuts the Nation’s First Reentry 2030 Dashboard* (Oct. 16, 2025), <https://www.dac.nc.gov/news/press-releases/2025/10/16/north-carolina-debuts-nations-first-reentry-2030-dashboard>.
- 13 Council of State Gov’ts Just. Ctr., supra note 9.
- 14 N.C. Dep’t of Adult Corr., *Reentry 2030 Dashboard*, supra note 12.
- 15 Council of State Gov’ts Just. Ctr., supra note 9.
- 16 N.C. Dep’t of Adult Corr., *Reentry 2030 Dashboard*, supra note 12.
- 17 Council of State Gov’ts Just. Ctr., supra note 9.
- 18 Jerry Higgins, *North Carolina Joins National Effort to Expand Education and Workforce Pathways for Justice-Impacted Individuals*, N.C. Dep’t of Adult Corr. (Jan. 14, 2026), <https://www.dac.nc.gov/news/press-releases/2026/01/14/north-carolina-joins-national-effort-expand-education-and-workforce-pathways-justice-impacted>.
- 19 Higgins, *North Carolina Joins National Effort*, supra note 18.

- 20 Jake Williams, *North Carolina Looks to Improve Reentry Services for Formerly Incarcerated People*, Daily Tar Heel (Feb. 2, 2026), <https://dailytarheel.com/article/city-north-carolina-incarcerated-education-workforce-20260203>.
- 21 Crumpler, *After Prison*, supra note 5.
- 22 Lois M. Davis & Michelle C. Tolbert, *Evaluation of North Carolina's Pathways from Prison to Postsecondary Education Program* (RAND Corp. 2019), [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2900/RR2957/RAND\\_RR2957.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2900/RR2957/RAND_RR2957.pdf).

## Acknowledgements

We are eternally grateful to all of the returning community members who generously shared their stories and experiences. We thank them for their candor and their trust.

## About the Wilson Center

The Wilson Center for Science and Justice brings together faculty and students at Duke University in law, medicine, behavioral health, public policy, and arts and sciences to conduct research, develop policy recommendations, and educate the next generation of criminal justice professionals to improve criminal justice outcomes.

Our work is non-partisan and evidence-informed. We engage with community organizations, practitioners, and policymakers to inform our research and develop solutions. Learn more about the Center at [wcsj.law.duke.edu](https://wcsj.law.duke.edu).

---

The policy recommendations provided in this report do not represent the institutional position of Duke University as a whole and is provided for educational and research purposes only.