

# Initial Considerations for Custodial Discharge Planning

## Why Custodial Discharge Planning is Important

Custodial discharge planning connects individuals exiting jail or prison with community resources to facilitate healing, recovery, housing stability, and an overall improved quality of life. Effective discharge planning **decreases harmful recidivism and homelessness** and promotes public safety.

## Introduction to Custodial Discharge Planning

Discharge planning can vary in scope and formality, depending on the institution's type and size (e.g., jail, prison), resources, and the client's specific needs. Housing—and the stabilizing effects it brings to clients—is essential to all discharge planning efforts. Clients impacted by the criminal legal system often face multiple formal and informal barriers to housing. **This document outlines essential components of effective discharge planning from custodial facilities for persons experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity**, including timing, partners, needs assessment, plan development, release coordination, and follow-up.

## Timeline

The timeline for discharge planning is dependent on resource availability, existing partnerships, and the extent to which the custodial entities can predict the times of release. Discharge planning can begin as early as **one year** prior to release.<sup>1</sup> Due to limited housing options and availability, evaluating viable housing options should be one of the first tasks in the process. Communicating with partner agencies and securing resources should start as early as possible.

## Discharge Planning Teams and Resource Coordination

Effective discharge planning requires collaboration. Teams should include the client, their family members or support network when appropriate; a community case manager; a housing provider specialist and/or the local homeless system of care; a clinician to support mental health, substance use, and co-occurring conditions needs; community service providers, and peer support systems.<sup>2</sup> Actively engaging clients as core members of the planning team at every stage is critical to tailor the plan to suit their unique needs and concerns, and to help build trust that the plan is not intended to restrict their freedom post-release.<sup>3</sup>

Custodial leadership and staff play an important role in discharge planning. Custodial officials and staff hold great responsibility for making discharge planning-related inreach activities safe and accessible. For example, custody can help ensure discharge planning visits are timely, safe, and private, and can expand tele-health and videoconferencing visits, and streamlining processes for entering the facility when appropriate.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [Release Planning for Successful Reentry: A Guide for Corrections, Service Providers, and Community Groups](#), p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> [The Role of Effective Discharge Planning in Preventing Homelessness](#), p. 233. See also [Life After Lockup: Improving Reentry from Jail to the Community](#) for helpful examples of discharge planning teams.

<sup>3</sup> [Release Planning for Successful Reentry](#), p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> [Life After Lockup: Improving Reentry from Jail to the Community](#), p. 41.

## Conducting a Needs Assessment

Discharge planning assessments should be strengths-based, as well as culturally and linguistically adapted to best serve clients' needs. Assessments should address:<sup>5</sup>

- **Housing** needs and resources<sup>6</sup>
- **Health:** physical & mental health history, current medication(s), post-release healthcare needs, substance use history and/or treatment, health & hygiene education
- **Benefits** eligibility and connections: veterans', disability, medical, food & nutrition
- **Education & Income:** sources of income, employment needs, educational needs
- **Family life/domestic relations:** child custody, child support
- **Outstanding civil or criminal system needs** (i.e., debt, immigration, or other cases)
- As well as life skills (i.e., financial literacy, home maintenance), transportation, identification document needs

## Written Plan

Most discharge planning processes involve a written plan produced by a case manager or clinician in consultation with the client. Plans should include:

- **Short term needs** following release (e.g., immediate shelter, transportation, clothing)
- **Longer term needs** to encourage permanency (e.g., permanent housing, expungement services, connections to faith-based or other community supports)
- **Document readiness** (e.g., photo ID, Birth Certificate, state-issued ID)<sup>7</sup>
- **Community-specific referrals** that match clients' needs and preferences based on cultural and demographic features, geographic location, clinical diagnosis, etc.
- **Benefits connections** to SSI, SSDI, Medicare, food, etc.<sup>8</sup>

## Day of Release: Timing and Resources

Coordinating times of release is essential to the success of all discharge planning. When clients are released without sufficient notices to community supports, the best-laid plans can crumble. Discharge planning teams should coordinate with the court and attorneys to ensure every client is released at an appropriate hour. Considerations include **time of day**,<sup>9</sup> **public transportation hours of operation**, **availability of a support person to meet them upon release**, and **distance to public amenities and services**. Several counties have successfully made efforts to address the heightened risks and vulnerabilities individuals face when being released.

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<sup>5</sup> [The Role of Effective Discharge Planning in Preventing Homelessness](#), p. 233.

<sup>6</sup> Examples of assessments to identify housing interventions support include [Arizona's Self-Sufficiency Matrix](#) and [Connecticut's Acuity Index](#).

<sup>7</sup> For tools to assist people experiencing or at risk of homelessness with documentation verification, please reference the [Institutional Discharge Planning Toolkit](#).

<sup>8</sup> [Life After Lockup: Improving Reentry from Jail to the Community](#), p. 46 (noting how pre-release agreements with SSA or benefits offices can expedite eligibility status for federal and state benefits).

<sup>9</sup> In Harris County, TX, individuals can be released up to 18 hours early to ensure a daylight release and address potential overcrowding concerns. [The Texas Tribune](#). Another option is a policy providing that those individuals who will be imminently released are transferred to jail facilities closer to downtown where 24/7 services are more readily available post-release.

Upon release, clients should be in possession of:<sup>10</sup>

- A **photo ID**;
- A **cellphone** with prepaid minutes and cellphone charger;
- **Weather-appropriate clothing and basic toiletries** for the initial days post-release;
- Money and a plan to access inexpensive **nutritious food, transportation, and shelter** for initial days post-release;<sup>11</sup>
- A supply of any needed **medication** up until their first scheduled post-release appointment or for the first 4 weeks post-release, whichever is longer;
- **Contact information & a scheduled appointment** with a community counselor and/or community health provider;
- An up-to-date, vetted **resource guide** of community organizations that can provide further services, including hours of operation and contact information.

## Personal Connections

The first two weeks post-release are critical—clients leaving custodial facilities are at increased vulnerability to criminalized survival activities, re-offense, drug overdose, and death.<sup>12</sup> The impact and value of human connection during this transition cannot be overstated. As often as possible, release planning should incorporate “warm” connections to supports. For example, when providing the client with resources, the discharge planning team should assist the client with calling and connecting to resources, rather than simply providing a list of phone numbers.

**It is also best practice to have someone with whom the client has already built trust and rapport—from the discharge planning team or broader support network—to be at the gate and accompany them to their release destination.**

## Follow Up

Ensuring that clients have someone trusted they can continue to reach out to immediately post-release is essential to support successful community reintegration. At minimum, the discharge planning team should provide the client with a contact from the team who can be available to them for the time leading up to their scheduled check-in appointment, in case they have any questions or experience any challenges in the interim. Additionally, the discharge planning team should develop a process to track and follow up with clients who miss scheduled appointments.

## Final Takeaways

Above all else, the single most critical component to best ensure discharge planning processes are effective and sustainable is to position people being released at the center of the decision-making process around what will help them succeed post-confinement. Successful discharge planning continuously leverages the expertise of **people with lived experience** of incarceration and homelessness at every stage of developing and implementing discharge planning efforts. While plans may vary greatly in scope and formality, all effective discharge planning requires an ongoing iterative process of communicating, coordinating, goal setting, and evaluating.

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<sup>10</sup> [Release Planning for Successful Reentry](#), p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> California prisons typically provide \$200 as “gate money” for people incarcerated for over six months. Other U.S. jurisdictions typically provide \$100. [Release Planning for Successful Reentry](#), p. 11.

<sup>12</sup> [Release Planning for Successful Reentry](#), p. 21.