

Improving Public Health and Public Safety: The Health and Reentry Project (HARP)



HARP builds safer, healthier communities by improving access to health care for people who are leaving incarceration. We bring together diverse stakeholders from health care and criminal justice, including law enforcement, corrections, and physical health and behavioral health leaders; community-based organizations; and people and communities directly impacted by crime and incarceration, to improve health and safety by building continuity of care.

CONNECTING PEOPLE RETURNING TO COMMUNITIES AFTER INCARCERATION TO HEALTH CARE

Every year, there are more than [seven million releases of people from jails and nearly half a million releases of people from prisons](#). People who are incarcerated have much higher rates of substance use disorder and mental health and chronic physical health conditions than the general population; for example, an estimated 63 percent of people incarcerated in prisons and 58 percent in jails meet criteria for a substance use disorder. And people released from prison or jail are at high risk of death, especially from overdose.

People returning from incarceration are [nearly 13 times more likely](#) than the general population to die in the first two weeks after release, and 120 times more likely to die of an overdose.

The vast majority of people who are incarcerated ultimately return to communities. [Access and connections to health care as they leave are vital in supporting people to rejoin their communities successfully](#). Yet too often, people reentering the community fall into gaps between the health care and criminal justice systems and are left to navigate a fragmented patchwork of services on their own. Lack of stable housing, employment, food, and transportation can make it even harder to secure needed health care. As a result, people often cycle in and out of the criminal justice system, at great cost to themselves and their communities—and to the health care and correctional systems.

Research shows the benefits for both [health](#) and [community safety](#) when people can access services and treatment upon release from incarceration. Access to Medicaid coverage, in particular, can support rehabilitation and [reduce recidivism](#). Improved access to post-release mental health and substance use treatment can [reduce crime](#) overall.

Ensuring that people's Medicaid coverage is active when they leave incarceration decreased risk of reincarceration by [16 percent](#) in the six months following their release, one study found.

STATES, LOCALITIES HAVE NEW OPPORTUNITIES TO BRIDGE THE GAP

Thanks in part to [policy changes](#) Congress has approved on a bipartisan basis over the past decade, **state and local leaders have new opportunities to begin addressing people's health needs while they are still incarcerated and preparing for release** and build continuity of care from jail to community when they are released.

Most notably, states can now get federal approval for [Medicaid reentry waivers](#) allowing them to provide a targeted set of Medicaid services to individuals starting before they are released from incarceration and connecting to ongoing services in the community.

Twenty-seven states and D.C. have sought or received federal approval for Medicaid reentry waivers (see map). As of July 2026, nineteen states have received approval to implement a reentry waiver.

Congress has made other nationwide changes, such as authorizing Medicaid to cover a targeted set of [services for young people](#) in every state during reentry. Recent federal law also makes Medicaid coverage more continuous by requiring that Medicaid enrollment be suspended rather than terminated when a Medicaid beneficiary is incarcerated. These are among the policies and practices that [correctional facilities](#), [community health centers](#), and other entities can adopt to improve health care access for individuals returning from incarceration.

HARP'S WORK

HARP advances policies and practices that improve access to health care for people who are returning to communities from incarceration. HARP provides expert policy analysis and also supports state and local governments to translate those policies into strong implementation approaches through technical assistance. Our experienced team of leaders helps state Medicaid and corrections agencies, sheriffs, county level health and safety leaders, and others identify implementation challenges and the most effective strategies for overcoming them.

Interested in learning more about HARP? Email Info@HealthandReentryProject.org.