

# Gate Fever

by Roland Acevedo, Esq.

There is nothing that an inmate thinks about or looks forward to more than leaving prison and returning home. Most inmates anxiously await the day that they will be released and they constantly envision what that day will be like: hugging a parent; kissing a spouse or significant other; holding a child in his or her arms; eating a home cooked meal surrounded by friends and loved ones; taking a hot bath while relishing the quiet and solitude. An inmate's release date is usually the high point of his or her incarceration. However, once released, dreams and expectations can be dashed quickly and life in the free world can become a nightmare that quickly leads back to prison.

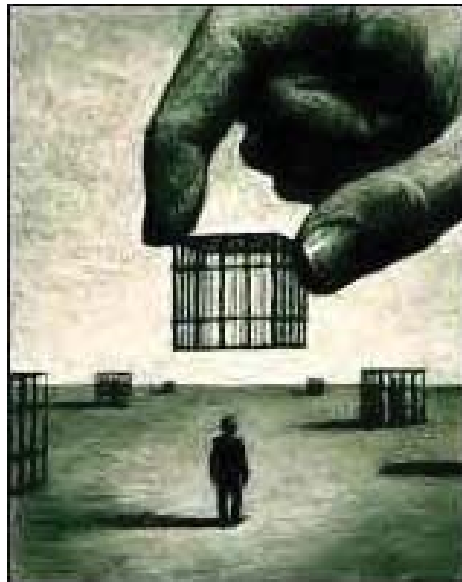
Because the world is constantly changing, things in the free world are often much different after years of incarceration. What one planned and dreamed about is often far from reality, especially after a long period of time behind bars. Loved ones and family members may have become "different" and "distant." Employment may be difficult to obtain and, even if secured, may be real drudgery with no realistic future in sight. The high rate of disappointment and disenchantment among ex-offenders is reflected in the high rates of recidivism.

One of the most often-asked questions that I

get from inmates is "What does one do to prepare for release from prison, especially after a lengthy incarceration?" Well, at the outset, you must realize that because everyone is unique, different things work for different people. There are, however, certain guidelines that will help ensure that the transition from prison to the free world is relatively smooth and successful.

... As a general rule, ex-offenders are stigmatized in the eyes of society, and having a felony conviction will most often mean that you will have a harder time trying to overcome obstacles and succeed. There are some states, like New York, that have laws that prohibit discriminating against ex-offenders when it comes to employment. . . . [But] the law still allows an individual or entity to deny...employment [under certain circumstances]. . . To determine if the state in which you plan to reside protects ex-offenders from unlawful discrimination, you should consult a local attorney or a prisoners' rights organization.

Despite the existence of laws designed to protect ex-offenders against unlawful discrimination, ex-offenders may still have a difficult time securing and maintaining meaningful employment. Putting your criminal convictions aside, it is difficult to persuade a potential employer that you should be hired if you have a poor work history. One of the keys to securing meaningful employment as an ex-offender is learning how to turn your liabilities into assets. For instance, if you have a long history of substance abuse and/or have been involved in



Source of illustration unknown.

So many prisoners experience anxiety and irritability prior to release that a name has evolved to describe this state: "**Gate Fever.**" Little to no research has been conducted to study the heightened stress levels prisoners experience prior to release.

the criminal justice system since you were a teenager, you could seek a position as a substance abuse counselor or as a counselor for troubled youth. When applying for either of these jobs, you could summarize your past and explain how those experiences will make you an understanding and knowledgeable counselor that could easily relate and communicate with the clients. In my own experience, I used my many years of working as a clerk in prison libraries helping other inmates to obtain a job as a paralegal when I was released from prison.

Aside from your personal experiences, there are other things about prison life that prepare you to be a productive employee and which may convince a potential employer to hire you. Prison is an extremely stressful environment that forces one to navigate a complex set of rules governing prison life and to interact with hundreds of different personalities on a daily basis. I have always been a firm believer that if you can survive in a high stress prison environment, you can thrive in any employment setting.

But while prison may build character and prepare you to handle any task, I strongly advise

you not to get overconfident and cocky upon release. Prison is a very controlled environment with a routine that rarely changes. In prison, inmates have a lot of idle time and often get into a habit of taking naps or reading during "count" time. Life in the free world is much less regimented, and every day of freedom may bring an unexpected and unwanted event that raises your level of anxiety. Life outside prisons walls can be a bit scary and unnerving, at least at first. I remember being released from prison and not knowing what an ATM was or how to use one. I was also shocked to learn that a hotdog from a street vendor cost \$2.00 and not the 50 cents that I remembered. My advice for a successful transition is simple: be flexible, have short-term goals, learn to compromise and develop a support network of family and friends that you can rely on during tough times. I encourage you to dream big, but take baby steps on your long journey in the free world.

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*Roland Acevedo is a lawyer, former prisoner, and regular contributor to FortuneNews. Reprinted with permission from FortuneNews, Summer 2002, Volume XXXVII, Number 2. [www.fortunesociety.org](http://www.fortunesociety.org).*

**In this country, over 630,000 people leave prisons each year. Two-thirds of them are expected to be arrested once within three years of their release. Individuals involved in pre-release programs are less likely to return to prison.**

**If you are a prisoner**

Get involved in the pre-release program in your facility, and make sure that your *discharge plan* connects you to services on the outside as well. If there is not a program available, contact your state's Department of Corrections, and ask them to put one in place, so that when the gates open you have the resources you need to make a successful transition into the community.

**Pre-release programs** are educational programs within the prison that offenders take part in before they are released. They can be about anger management, education, etc. These programs can help offenders prepare for life outside prison.

**Discharge plans** are made for each inmate before they are released into the community. It is basically a plan that helps them think about what they'll do once they're out. These plans vary according to individual needs, but generally have some sort of strategy for substance abuse treatment, education, parole, or probation meetings.

**If you are a community member**

Ask your local officials about the availability of discharge planning for prisoners in your state. Helping people make a successful transition into the community not only makes communities safer, it also saves the money that would be spent incarcerating recidivists.