

# Free as a Bird and HIV+:

## Where You Gonna Go After Prison?

by Sarah Leibel

*It was May, 1998, a warm and sunny day. She enjoyed a steak, and went with her husband to her first hockey game at Madison Square Garden. That's how Joan Rogan remembers her first day out of prison after being incarcerated in New York State for two years. A former drug user and advocate for HIV+ prisoners, Joan is now the director of Foundation House South, a transitional house in New York City for formerly homeless people with AIDS. I asked her for some tips for HIV+ folks leaving prison.*

“The first thing,” she explains, “is where you gonna go? A lot of people go home to the same old neighborhood, to the same old problems, and to drugs. You're out, you have your couple of bucks and you say to yourself, ‘what the heck?’ And you go to the corner and buy some. If you're a woman, maybe you turn a trick.”


I asked Joan what someone who is HIV+ and soon-to-leave prison can do to avoid this scenario. Before you leave, she suggests, ask for a resource book on community-based HIV service organizations and transitional housing. Listings may be outdated or they may not be local, so also check magazines like Body Poz which provide resources by state. You can get these materials from correctional medical staff, outside agencies, or prison chaplains. Many agencies have 800 numbers and accept collect calls. If you don't have access to a phone, try asking the chaplain to use his or her office phone. If that doesn't work, Joan advises, “you get a pen and a paper and a stamp and you write.”

The first 48 hours out are critical. “It's awkward,” Joan recalls. “You've been told when to eat, where to sleep, what to do. Your whole day was planned for you and all

of a sudden, you make the decisions. I knew women who deliberately got high to get sent back. They couldn't take the pressure on the outside.”

If you can work ahead of time with folks at a community organization, they may be able to meet you at the prison or bus stop, house you for that first night, and escort you to an appropriate agency the next day. Make sure you have your birth certificate, social security card, a current copy of your medical records that includes your HIV status, and an ADAP (AIDS Drug Assistance Program) application filled out by a correctional health care provider. The best thing to do, Joan explains, is to work with the agencies that are coming into your facility. Ask them where you can go for housing and medical care and if they can support you through those first few critical hours.

“I was lucky. I had an opportunity to get used to the outside while I was working at From Our Streets With Dignity [a sister organization to Foundation House South that provides HIV outreach to sex workers in the streets of New York City]. I volunteered. I stayed in the office, answered phones, made bleach kits, helped out. They started seeing that I could do things.”

If you are HIV+ and getting ready to be released from prison – be prepared! Secure copies of your paper work. Contact outside agencies. Write, call, or show up when you are released because, as Joan says, “no agency can do anything until you come to their door.” 

For further information on connecting to community-based HIV service organizations, contact Joan Rogan at Foundation House South 212.475.1200, 369 Eighth Avenue, New York, NY, 10011.

*Sarah Leibel is an HIV treatment advocate in San Francisco.*

*Reprinted courtesy of [www.PositiveWords.com](http://www.PositiveWords.com) © 2000 by Dallabrida & Associates*