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## Reentry Simulations Reveal the Challenges of Returning to Society

Her name is 'Jessica'. She served 20 years in state prison for a violent crime, firearm possession, and drug charges. While incarcerated, she earned her GED and saved \$100. Upon release, she was unemployed and living with her brother's family. Jessica was on probation, required to check in weekly, attend substance abuse treatment, and participate in AA/NA meetings. She had a Social Security card but needed a birth certificate and state ID to apply for work.

This was the persona assigned to one participant during a two-hour Reentry Simulation held at the Menard Sports Center in Wasilla on November 6, 2025. Twenty-nine community members participated, each assuming the role of someone recently released from incarceration, with varying financial, educational, and personal circumstances.

Barbara Mongar, Mat-Su Reentry Coalition Coordinator, and Cindy Yeager, Mat-Su Reentry Program Coordinator organized the event, funded by the Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority. The Mat-Su Reentry Coalition is a partnership of community members, public and nonprofit agencies, faith-based groups, and businesses, all committed to reducing recidivism among returning citizens in the Mat-Su community. The Mat-Su Reentry Coalition, along with the Mat-Su Reentry Program, is housed within Valley Charities, Inc.

### Inside the Simulation

In the exercise, every 15 minutes represented one week in the life of a formerly incarcerated individual. Participants were tasked with completing weekly obligations such as finding food, paying child support, attending treatment sessions, and meeting with probation officers—all within limited time and resources. The goal was to help participants understand the barriers that people face upon release.

One participant reflected afterward, *"Thank you for this training. It helped me understand how difficult it can be for community members reentering society."*

Jessica's story illustrates those challenges vividly. Because she had only her Social Security card, her first week was spent waiting in lines to apply for a birth certificate and state ID—tasks that consumed nearly all her time and a large portion of her limited funds. As a result, she missed her treatment session, NA meeting, and probation check-in. Fortunately, her probation officer gave her a warning and told her to try again the next week.

### Lessons Learned

After the simulation, participants gathered to reflect. Few managed to complete all the tasks on their "life cards" each week. Many were stuck in long identification lines, while others ran out of money or transportation tickets before meeting all their obligations.

*"It felt like the barriers were overwhelming,"* one participant shared. *"Without buddying up and sharing resources, I would have been screwed."* Another admitted to "paying" another participant to stand in line on their behalf.

Several participants expressed frustration about not knowing where to begin or lacking enough time and resources to stay compliant with the system's demands. A few even chose to "go back to jail" halfway through, saying it was easier than trying to survive on the outside.

These reactions mirror the real-life frustrations many formerly incarcerated people face. For someone like Jessica, the first few weeks of freedom can feel like a maze of paperwork, appointments, and impossible choices—between buying food, attending treatment, or simply staying out of jail.

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# Alaska parole rates are among the lowest in the nation. Advocates want to

By: Yereth Rosen / Alaska Beacon, November 10, 2025

The number of people approved for discretionary parole by the Alaska State Board of Parole has dropped significantly in recent years, and advocates are asking the board for explanations.

Last year, the board denied 59% of applicants for discretionary parole. In 2023, it denied 58% of applicants. In 2022, it denied 70%. An analysis by the Prison Policy Initiative, a non-profit research group, found that from 2019 to 2022, Alaska reduced the number of people released through discretionary parole by 79% — the largest percent change nationwide.

In years prior, the grant rate was much higher: Only 25% of applicants were denied parole in 2015, and 30% in 2016.

Under the law, the board must consider four factors when deciding whether an Alaska inmate is eligible for parole. These include assessing whether the person poses a threat to public safety and ensuring that releasing them would not undermine the seriousness of the crime.

The five-member Parole Board is appointed by the governor and confirmed by the Legislature to serve five-year terms. They make decisions about parole and set conditions for release. Under law, they must consider four criteria when determining if Alaska inmates are eligible for parole, including evaluating whether the individual will pose a threat to public safety. For discretionary parole, applicants must have completed part of their sentence, be in good standing and have a plan for employment, housing and continued treatment, if needed, when they are released.

How the board weighs these factors has been a focal point for advocates in recent years. Advocates want to help inmates better prepare for parole and reduce recidivism, or prevent people from re-offending and returning to prison.

Advocates raised the issue again at the Parole Board's annual public meeting on Wednesday. "Are people coming to you without a plan? Are folks coming to you not ready, not getting it, not taking it seriously? I guess I'm looking for a little advice here on the community side about how we can help further prepare folks," she said. "If there's one thing you could lock down for us to help support, what do you think it would be?"

Jason Wilson, a board member representing Southeast Alaska and the state coordinator for Village Public Safety Organizations with the Department of Public Safety, responded that many people don't seem prepared.

"I mean, there's a lot of people that come before us that don't even know what discretionary parole is, but yet they're applying for discretionary parole," Wilson said. "Having the proper programming, having the proper release plan, that's going to help them to succeed," he said. He suggested parole applicants consider community programs, like for addiction treatment, counselors and sponsors.

Other board members did not respond to questions. Through board staff after the meeting, the board declined to say why parole rates are so low, or to name factors that would increase successful applications. In the meeting, Board Chair Leitoni Tupou said the board does not make public comments. "I think this board, as far as in my experience, we are just focusing on the week or two weeks out of the month on (parole) hearings," Tupou said.

Tupou said he only provides public comment when called to testify by the Legislature. For example, he said eligibility for medical parole, or the release of an individual with severe illness, is very strict. "We are obligated to follow that law," he said. "If we feel there has to be a change that has to come through the law. From our perspective...our hands are tied," he said.

Mike Garvey, policy director of the ACLU of Alaska, called the absence of responses from the board at the public meeting an illustration of the continued lack of transparency from the parole board. "Which we've long known is a problem," he said.

In a 2024 review by the Alaska Division of Legislative Audit, state auditors also found "the board was unable to provide specific reasons why its parole approval rate decreased."

In an interview following the meeting, Garvey said the ACLU is continuing to call for more transparency. "It's not about getting more people out (of prison), we want people to be successful when they are released," he said. "We don't want arbitrary denials, and so having more transparency from the board would help not just explain the denials. It can help explain the releases too." **(Continued on page 3)**



*The entrance to the Anchorage Correctional Complex  
(Yereth Rosen/Alaska Beacon)*

# Alaska parole rates are among the lowest in the nation.

## Advocates want to know why. (Continued from page 2)

The ACLU has also pointed to the cost to the state of keeping people incarcerated, which is estimated to be \$202 per person per day in Alaska, compared to an estimated \$13 per day on parole.

According to the Alaska Department of Corrections, the daily average prison population was estimated at 4,322 in 2024. There were 3,213 people under probation or parole supervision last year. Alaska’s prison population is also aging significantly. The number of people 55 and over has increased by 50% over the last decade, according to data from DOC. Many may be eligible for geriatric or medical parole.

Shadura, as a re-entry coordinator, conducts what she calls “in-reach” to jails and prisons to help inmates apply for parole or prepare to be released. She estimated 80% of people she works with have questions about parole, and they have a hard time getting them answered. “How do I fill out my parole packet? My probation officer hasn’t returned my communication for whatever reason,” she said, in an interview following the meeting. “I was denied, what do I do next? You know, that’s a big thing I come across for pretty much every institution I do in-reach at.”

She said the parole application process is not within inmates’ own responsibility or control, but largely an internal process by DOC. Inmates also face challenges in preparing for parole because they may lack space or program opportunities for things like addiction treatment, counseling, life skills or other education programs that show an effort towards rehabilitation. She said the programs that are available vary widely by each of Alaska’s 13 prison facilities across the state.

Successful re-entry into society is also a challenge. Alaska’s rate of recidivism is defined as when someone is paroled and then violates the terms of parole or commits a crime again. Almost half returned to prison over the last three years, or 47% of discretionary parolees and 67% of mandatory parolees.

Shadura said she understands privacy and safety concerns, and the gravity of decisions put before board members. But she hopes more insights from the board might better prepare inmates to apply for parole, and to be more successful once paroled.

“It also seems like we’re doing a disservice to everybody, including the parole process, when we’re not allowing folks to at least have a basic understanding about how to go about qualifying for it, what steps you need to achieve to get there,” she said. “It makes people feel hopeless.”

## Reentry Simulations Reveal the Challenges of Returning to Society

(Continued from page 1)

### Real Impact, Real Reflection

Among the 29 participants were individuals who had personally experienced reentry. One shared that the simulation was a true-to-life reflection of the obstacles she faced upon release. “It was a good representation of how frustrating it can be,” she said. A volunteer echoed that sentiment: “The simulation was amazing—such an eye-opener for those who have never experienced life after incarceration.”

Through the Reentry Simulation, the Mat-Su Reentry Coalition provided more than just an educational experience—it offered empathy and awareness. Understanding the realities of reentry helps communities build better support systems for returning citizens, reducing the risk of recidivism and creating pathways toward successful reintegration.

As one participant put it, “If this was just a simulation and it felt this hard, imagine what it’s like for those living it every day.”

**Barbara Mongar,**  
**Mat-Su Reentry Coalition Coordinator**

## Mat-Su Reentry Events:

- **Mat-Su Reentry Coalition Steering Team Meeting**  
Tuesday, January 6, 2026  
9:00 to 10:00 AM

The Mat-Su Reentry Coalition has a virtual Steering Team Meeting on the first Tuesday of each month. All Welcome to attend.

- **Mat-Su Reentry Forum**  
Wed, Dec 17, 2025  
9:00 to 10:00 AM

The Mat-Su Reentry Forum is every third Wednesday of the month. Services Providers, Field PO’s, Case Managers, and any others in attending are welcome.

**For questions, to sign up, or for zoom links to the above events please contact Barbara Mongar at:**  
[barbara.mongar@valleycharities.org](mailto:barbara.mongar@valleycharities.org)

## Knik Tribe Events:

- **Knik Tribe Family Culture Nights** — Bi-Weekly,  
Wednesday, 5:30 - 7:30 PM;  
**Location:** 758 Shoreline Dr. Wasilla, AK; (Open to All)  
[Compact@KnikTribe.org](mailto:Compact@KnikTribe.org)  
**907-373-7991**
- **Talking Circle**—Tuesday, at 6:30 and Wednesday at 5:30;  
**Same location above;**  
**Contact Ralph Lewis,**  
**907-841-9773**
- **Women’s Talking Circle**—  
Supporting women who have been victimized by Domestic & Dating Violence, Sexual Assault, Stalking, and Sex Trafficking.  
Nov 7th & 21st;  
10:30am - 12:30pm  
**Location:**  
1001 S Knik Goose Bay Rd  
**For More Info: 907-373-7991**  
[socialservices@kniktribe.org](mailto:socialservices@kniktribe.org)
- **Youth Wellbriety Circle**  
Fridays, from 1 to 3PM;  
**Location:** MyHouse, Wasilla



## Mat-Su Reentry Coalition

The Mat-Su Reentry Coalition is a collaboration of individuals, community stakeholders, public and not-for-profit agencies, faith-based and business partners who are united and committed to reducing recidivism among returning citizens to the Mat-Su community.

### Our Mission

To promote public safety by identifying and implementing strategies that increase former prisoners' wellbeing within the community and reduce the likelihood of their return to prison through recidivating.

We will accomplish this by:

- Improved communication and collaboration between Alaska Department of Corrections (DOC) and the community.
- Building community partnerships to strengthen local services.
- Identifying barriers for those being released from incarceration and taking an active role in addressing those concerns.
- Promoting community educational and training opportunities for those releasing regarding resources.
- Work in conjunction with Alaska DOC to inform and promote reentry efforts in Alaska.



## Mat-Su Job Center Update

By: **Michele Bentz**, Mat-Su Job Center Manager

The Mat-Su Job Center staff are dedicated to supporting you and are available to assist both job seekers and employers one-on-one with employment and training needs. We are open Monday through Friday, 8 am-5 pm, at 877 W Commercial Drive in the Westside Center. Please contact our Business Connection staff, Faith Woolsey, to stay updated on current job openings in the Mat-Su area by adding yourself to the weekly email list at [Faith.Woolsey@alaska.gov](mailto:Faith.Woolsey@alaska.gov).

Mr. Norm Lingley and Ms. Rachel Patton are Employment Services Technicians at the Mat-Su Job Center. They provide in-reach services at Goose Creek, Point Mackenzie, Palmer, and Highland Correctional Facilities. In 2025, they connected with 562 inmates preparing for release. Once released, Rachel and Norm work one-on-one with these individuals as they return to the workforce. They assess their individual needs, focus on their abilities and skills, and address gaps that could benefit from additional support. Norm and Rachel provide a wide range of services and resources to help individuals overcome employment barriers and achieve success. If you are working with a reentrant that needs one-on-one assistance with any employment and training services, please reach out to Norm at 907-352-2525 or [Norm.lingley@alaska.gov](mailto:Norm.lingley@alaska.gov), or Rachel at 907-352-2518 or [Rachel.patton@alaska.gov](mailto:Rachel.patton@alaska.gov)

**Success Story:** Mat-Su Job Center (MSJC) staff assisted an individual who was released this fall. This individual was eager to complete their CDL training and find viable employment. MSJC staff assisted the individual in creating a new resume, signing up to determine eligibility for the Career

Support & Training Services grants, and providing tips for maintaining employment. The individual was hired by a local company that stated they would benefit from an employee with a Class A CDL. The individual was able to attend the CDL training with the assistance of the CSTS grant.

### December Trends:



Individuals facing barriers to employment receive priority for funding under the Workforce Innovation & Opportunity Act (WIOA) Adult & Dislocated Worker program. Our Career Support & Training staff administers this funding to help with workforce preparation, career services, training, and placement assistance. This support aims to improve occupational skills, obtain industry, recognized credentials, and secure a good job that leads to self-sufficiency. If you're interested, please call us at (907) 352-2500 or email [matsu.jobcenter@alaska.gov](mailto:matsu.jobcenter@alaska.gov).

## Monthly Highlight of Resources in the Mat-Su

- **The Mat-Su Special Santa Program:** This Special Santa Program helps to bring Christmas gifts to children in families in the Mat-Su Valley, Alaska. The Mat-Su Special Santa Program is run under the umbrella of Alaska Family Services Charity, and its goal is to spread the joy of Christmas throughout the Mat-Su Valley, Alaska. **Call:** (907) 761-3770
- **Cook Inlet Tribal Council (CITC) Christmas Basket Program:** CITC organizes the annual Family Holiday Celebration, which features various cultural activities, crafts, and games and, with its Christmas Basket Program, helps more than 500 children and their families enjoy the Christmas holidays each year. **Call:** (907) 793-3272
- **Mat-Su Salvation Army Angel Tree Program:** Angel Tree is a holiday assistance program in which an individual sponsor or group sponsor purchases new clothing and toys for deserving children (or "Angels") in need that will be receiving gifts.

**Website:** [Mat-Su Valley Corps](http://Mat-Su Valley Corps)

**Note:** For more information on the Mat-Su Reentry Coalition contact [Barbara.mongar@valleycharities.org](mailto:Barbara.mongar@valleycharities.org) or go to our Webpage at [Mat-Su Valley Reentry Program | Valley Charities Inc](http://Mat-Su Valley Reentry Program | Valley Charities Inc)