

# Preparing to Enter the Virginia Department of Corrections

A primer for inmates on what to expect and how to behave



This primer on entering prison is a project of attorney Jonathan Sheldon, Sheldon & Flood, PLC. Please contact him with any suggested additions or changes. 703 691-8410. [JSheldon@SFHDefense.com](mailto:JSheldon@SFHDefense.com)

**Table of Contents**

I. Jail to Prison Transfer ..... 2

II. Information for the Offender’s Family .....3

    A. Helpful Websites .....4

III. Book Suggestions for Offender’s, family and friends ..... 6

    A. Books from a Prison Perspective ..... 6

    B. Books from a Personal Perspective .....6

    C. Books for Litigating your Case and Prison Claims ..... 7

IV. Questions and Answers from current inmates ..... 7

    A. Is prison safe? Will I be beaten up? Coerced? ..... 7

    B. How much money do I need in commissary every month to live reasonably? ..... 12

    C. Are prison staff members trustworthy to help if offenders are in trouble?..... 15

    D. What is it like in prison? ..... 19

    E. Are there sexual relationships among inmates?.....23

    F. Additional Advice..... 24

V. Annual Reviews..... 30

**I. Jail to Prison transfer:**

1. The Department of Corrections (DOC) calls people convicted of a crime “offenders.” Offenders are supposed to be transferred from jail to the Virginia Department of Corrections within 60 days of sentencing, but that rarely happens. The custom at the local jail and DOC resources will dictate. You will be able to keep what you are wearing when you arrive at your receiving center, so wear the clothes you want most.
2. Offenders are transferred to a “reception center” for classification and assignment. The primary reception/classification centers are Nottoway, Dillwyn, Coffeewood, Haynesville and State Farm Correctional Centers. Information in the presentence report, for example identification of family members and prior crimes, is used by the DOC for many purposes including classification.
3. Offenders are allowed to use the phone once they arrive at the receiving center. Global Tel-link “GTL” just changed the pin number system to reflect the offenders Birth Month and Day. Once offenders enter the information, GTL requires a pin number change. Then the offender just has to set up the phone by adding numbers.
4. A “Jpay” account is set up when offenders arrive. The offender’s money is available to them within 72 hours as long as the jail brought their funds with them, but this rarely happens, instead the jail takes about 10 days to mail the money. Have a family member

Jpay money to you as soon as you arrive. As long as your money is available offenders will be allowed to go to commissary with their pod. Offenders normally go to commissary twice a month so you will want food, hygiene products and coffee ordered asap.

5. If you want to get a job while at the receiving center, you should ask a cadre about it as soon as you arrive.

6. One offender's experience:

- **On being transported from local jail to DOC facility**

- woken up ~2-3am. You are only allowed to take the clothes you have on your back. Anything else either has to be mailed home (at your own shipping expense) or thrown away.
- wait for transport can be up to 5 hours - you must be shackled the entire trip to the DOC facility

- **Intake**

- "demeaning process" - stripped down and sprayed down in a vinegar bath with a line of other men in order to prevent lice
- Given an "indigent kit" that "might last a week" with toothpaste, toothbrush and soap - given a new one once per month
- Brief screens from medical, psychologist, and a unit case manager - all "going through the motions"
- Hard to hide charges because trustees (employed inmates) are tasked with handling paperwork - your charges are usually known before you get to your pod
- May not get into cell placement until 7pm - phone call not guaranteed on receiving day because the intake process is so long

## **II. Information for the Offender's Family:**

Offenders are placed in particular prisons based primarily on security need and bed space.

Proximity to home is a factor that the prison strives for *after* security and bed space

considerations. There is nothing to be done to help from the family. Offenders must request transfers & they can earn them – but they can't request transfer if they've had a disciplinary problem. There are a lot of drugs in prison. Two new rules to combat drugs: offenders must change clothes for visits and all mail will be photocopied and the original shredded.

**A. Helpful Websites:**

- To track the location of someone and when they leave the jail to go to receiving use  
Vinelinek: <https://vinelinek.vineapps.com/search/VA>
- Virginia Department of Corrections information for families:  
<https://vadoc.virginia.gov/families-friends-of-offenders/>
- Standards of Conduct - Infractions / Disciplinary  
<https://www.vadoc.virginia.gov/media/1092/vadoc-op-135-1.pdf>
- The release date is a date based on the assumption of good-behavior and so reflects that the inmate will earn 4.5 days credit for every 30 days served. This can be taken away.  
Website for further information: <https://vadoc.virginia.gov/offenders/locator/>
- Time calculation / Release date  
<https://vadoc.virginia.gov/offender-resources/incoming-offenders/time-computation/>

- There are 7 Virginia community colleges that provide on-site courses. Correspondence courses can also be taken through: <https://www.adams.edu/academics/print-based/prison-college-program/>.
- To send emails, cash, pictures and videos: <https://www.jpays.com/home.aspx>
- Virginia Department of Corrections Operating Procedures (Telephones; grievance procedures etc.): [vadoc.virginia.gov/About/procedures/default.shtm](http://vadoc.virginia.gov/About/procedures/default.shtm)
- Be very respectful and *cautious* in contacting prison officials, a general rule is do not
- intervene and ask a DOC employee to help unless the offender has “grieved” the issue first. Employee Directory: [www.employeedirectory.virginia.gov](http://www.employeedirectory.virginia.gov)
- OAR family support group: [www.oarova.org/images/Family\\_Support\\_Group.pdf](http://www.oarova.org/images/Family_Support_Group.pdf)
- Virginia Cure: [www.vacure.org](http://www.vacure.org) provides information, support, and resources, to serve as
- a voice in gaining public attention for positive changes and improvements in prison policies and laws
- Assisting Families of Inmates: <https://afoi.org> provides opportunities for regular,
- meaningful visitation, referrals to community resources, and other services that help families cope with incarceration.
- Virginia Prison Justice Network: <https://vapjn.wordpress.com>

- Prison Legal news: <https://www.prisonlegalnews.org>
- Virginia Prisons Accountability Committee: [www.facebook.com/vapac/](http://www.facebook.com/vapac/)
- Restore Justice in VA: [www.facebook.com/Restore-Justice-In-VA-879392538813251/](http://www.facebook.com/Restore-Justice-In-VA-879392538813251/)
- Incarcerated Loved Ones Virginia: [www.facebook.com/groups/347208252705863/](http://www.facebook.com/groups/347208252705863/)

### **III. Suggestions of books that might be helpful:**

#### **A. Books from a Prison perspective:**

##### Newjack by Ted Conover

*Journalist Ted Conover gives a first-hand account of life inside the penal system. When Conover's request to shadow a recruit at the New York State Corrections Officer Academy was denied, he decided to apply for a job as a prison officer. So begins his odyssey at Sing Sing, once a model prison but now the state's most troubled maximum-security facility. The result of his year there is this remarkable look at one of America's most dangerous prisons, where drugs, gang wars, and sex are rampant, and where the line between violator and violated is often unclear.*

##### American Prison by Shane Bauer

*In 2014, Shane Bauer was hired for \$9 an hour to work as an entry-level prison guard at a private prison in Winnfield, Louisiana. An award-winning investigative journalist, he used his real name; In American Prison, Bauer weaves a much deeper reckoning with his experiences together with a thoroughly researched history of for-profit prisons in America from their origins in the decades before the Civil War. For, as he soon realized, we can't understand the cruelty of our current system and its place in the larger story of mass incarceration without understanding where it came from. Private prisons became entrenched in the South as part of a systemic effort to keep the African-American labor force in place in the aftermath of slavery, and the echoes of these shameful origins are with us still.*

#### **B. Books from a Personal Perspective:**

##### We're all doing time: a guide for getting free by Bo Lozoff

*A spiritual manual for living fearlessly & joyfully.*

7 Habits of Highly Effective People by Stephen Covey

*When Stephen Covey first released The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, the book became an instant rage because people suddenly got up and took notice that their lives were headed off in the wrong direction; and more than that, they realized that there were so many simple things they could do in order to navigate their life correctly. This book was wonderful education for people, education in how to live life effectively and get closer to the ideal of being a 'success' in life.*

**C. Books for Litigating your case and prison claims:**

“Virginia Law and Practice” by Va. CLE is a book with a chapter (Ch. 10) on Post-Conviction Remedies in Virginia. <https://www.vacle.org/product.aspx?zpid=4866>

*Virginia Law and Practice: A Handbook for Attorneys spans across major practice areas, as well as subjects found in almost every practice, such as agency and contracts. Combining quick reference to relevant primary law with practice pointers, it can and should be the first place you go to research a topic, get ready to meet a client, or prepare a case. It provides ongoing value to experienced attorneys, as well as new ones.*

Prisoner’s Self-Help Litigation Manual by John Boston

*An indispensable guide for prisoners and prisoner advocates seeking to understand the rights guaranteed to prisoners by law and how to protect those rights. Clear, comprehensive, practical advice provides prisoners with everything they need to know on conditions of confinement, civil liberties in prison, procedural due process, the legal system, how to litigate, conducting effective legal research, and writing legal documents. Written by two legal and penitentiary experts with intimate knowledge of prisoner's rights and legal aid work, authors John Boston and Daniel E. Manville strategically focus on federal constitutional law, providing prisoners and those wishing to assist them with the most important information concerning legal rights.*

**IV. Questions and Answers from Current Inmates**

Guidance from numerous inmates from various races/social backgrounds with different offenses and security levels as of July 2017.

**A. Is prison safe? Will I be beaten up? Coerced?**



**April 15, 2021**

**Inmate A:** Prison can be safe as well as dangerous! It's all in how one is and moves. Prison is not how it used to be. What really matters are the level and compound. It's designed backwards. The higher levels aren't as dangerous as the lower levels. No one gets beat on, unless there is some type of issue or hatred going on. If one minds his/her own business they will have a better outcome. Once one is into different things, much comes to that person. Minding your business also brings issues with the bored, or silly dudes. As long as whomever has their own everything, all should be fine. Not having to ask or borrow keeps most issues down.

**Inmate B:** Although I've been locked up for a long time, I've been in solitary most of the time so I've never really been to prison as weird as that sounds because solitary isn't prison. I would say the best thing to know about coming in is to learn to say please, thank you and excuse me. Those three sayings go a long way in prison. Do not get into anyone else's business. I would say to not get involved with what's on TV because it only leads to arguments or fights. They'll be able to get their own TV when they leave here. I think for the most part its safe as long as you mind your own business. I would say to stay away from gambling.

**Inmate C:** Reception centers are where most will be exposed for the first time to life on the inside. There is always a chance for the following to occur; fights, extortion, gang activity, drugs, but the most important thing to remember is how you carry yourself and always be mindful and respectful of others. Initial arrival to a classification and reception center is where every person first enters into the Virginia Dept. of Corrections. The duration of your stay is dependent on many factors; conviction, sentence imposed, available space at a facility that you qualify to be

**April 15, 2021**

assigned to, notoriety or publicity of your case, medical needs or health concerns, among others.

The average length seems to be 1 to 3 months. For the first 60 days you're not allowed any visitors. Depending upon where they are assigned for receiving will determine how much recreation time, inside the pod and outside, they'll receive every day. Although you're supposed to be allowed to bring your property with you from the jail, many jails deny you this opportunity. Upon arrival, your property will be inventoried and a determination will be made regarding what personal property you'll be permitted to keep. There are strict compliance issues that can be reviewed online, offender property, from the VDOC website. If necessary, you'll receive a haircut and all receive initial screening by the medical dept.

In short, I find, for the most part, Virginia prisons to be safe. This doesn't mean that bad things can't and won't happen. I have witnessed stabbings, fights (physical and verbal), seen plenty of blood, drugs, tobacco (which is illegal in prison), but at the end of the day, none of it was ever directed at me because I mind my own business, keep my nose clean, interact with a small group of friends, and always respect others, regardless of our differences. Keep in mind, I never scored higher than security level 3 points (medium security prison). Unfortunately, they chose to override me and sent me to a security level 5, maximum security state prison. The higher the security level, the greater risk for violence. Certainly, how you carry yourself helps immensely. However, if you have convictions for sex offenses, this will undoubtedly bring you some negative attention, but you simply have to rise above it all and still carry yourself in a manner that commands respect. Those that get into a lot of fights are typically those who have their hands into everything, ring up debts, have drug habits, run their mouths or are overtly aggressive. Coercion will only happen if you allow it to happen. The big game that is played, especially with new inmates, is the extortion game. Either individuals or gangs prey on those new to the system or perceived easy targets and usually try an individual to see what they can

**April 15, 2021**

get for nothing. Simply stand your ground and it will eventually go away. If someone wants to harm you, they'll just come for you, they won't make threats.

**Inmate D:** Prison is safe for the most part, just like out on the streets, but people just have to be aware of their surroundings. It is safe in here. Just watch what's going on and don't come in the DOC trying to make friends, even if they knew that person from the streets. They could've changed. My best advice is let people approach first, carry oneself with confidence and don't be scared. People only get messed with when they act scared or like they can easily be taken advantage of. Fights happen but people are not running around beating people up, they are cracking down on gang activity.

**Inmate E:** "NO" when in prison you must always be 100% alert to what's going on around you. Will I be beaten up? That depends mostly on how you carry yourself. Meaning, walk with your head held high, be confident in yourself. But don't act cocky. Because you will be tried. Will I be coerced? That depends on how strong minded you are. Meaning, if you see someone doing something wrong and they want you to join in, you have to ask yourself what will be the consequences of doing this? Will it be hurting yourself or another person? and mostly could it extend your time in prison?

**Inmate F:** It depends upon what type of charges the person has (i.e... rapist, snitches, child molesters, and etc.). But most of the time no. Nobody likes a bully in here. Friendly extortion is the thing these days. Guys will act like they're your friend just to get something out of you normally just something to eat for the night.

**Inmate G:** For the most part you are safe in prison, you still have fights and occasionally stabbing but overall the violence rate is down in here. Show respect meaning in you bump someone say my bad or excuse me it doesn't make you soft dudes will respect that, instead of you just walking off then the guy feel disrespected and want to fight you.

**Inmate H:** For the most part yes, prison is safe. However, there are lots of unwritten rules and things to do and more importantly, not do. Most people aren't beaten up or even have to fight at all provided you do things the right way. In my nearly fourteen years in prison I have not been in a fight and have never really come very close to having to fight. The overwhelming majority of people that are in fights, get jumped, or beaten wind up in these sorts of problems due to foolish conduct on their part. I'm not saying that anyone deserves to be beaten, jumped, or otherwise harmed. However, this is prison and it does happen. There is no guarantee that this won't happen to anyone entering prison but, there are lots of things a new inmate can do that will dramatically reduce the odds of being victimized. Much of it surrounds what you should NOT do. Don't ask personal questions of anyone, inmate or staff. Don't volunteer your own personal information to inmate or staff, even when asked. Don't talk about your crime, nor ask about anyone else's. Keep your eyes and hands to yourself. Minding your business is paramount. You are going to see things, disgusting things, immoral things, tragic things, exciting things, interesting things. Whatever it is, don't ask, and more importantly, don't tell. The quickest way to get beaten up is to earn a reputation for being a snitch. So, the fewer questions you ask the less you know. If you don't know anything then there is nothing for you to tell when you are asked. When something happens like a fight or otherwise (and they will happen) look away. If you can, remove yourself from the room, area, etc. Not only can it be

**April 15, 2021**

dangerous, but the less you know the better off you are. Guys will try to coerce you to do all sorts of things. Most of them petty or small, others criminal or sexual. You may be asked to do something simple like watch the door to the cellblock for staff while a guy gets a tattoo, hold homemade wine or even transport drugs. You may be propositioned by someone for sex. All of these are actually easy to turn down and for the most part guys will move onto someone else when you say no. Most guys simply don't want to hassle with someone who is unwilling because you may not do a good job. But, here's the caveat, it's hard to say "no" if you owe someone a favor. That's why you NEVER accept ANYTHING from ANYONE. Not a bar of soap, a snack from commissary, a stamp, a piece of cake from the chow hall, not even a blank piece of paper. Don't borrow a pen. NOTHING!!! This includes any favors. Favors might be something as simple as getting you a request form, lending you their commissary list, getting you in line for the phone or the email kiosk. Nothing in here is free. Nothing comes without a price attached to it, and usually with interest.

**B. How much money do I need in commissary every month to live reasonably?**

**Inmate A:** \$200 a month will allow one to be very comfortable in prison. That's \$50 a week. All compounds don't allow the commissary to be ordered weekly. Higher levels go weekly. Sussex 1 allows \$85 max to be spent weekly now. The other level 5's allow \$50 to \$75 a week. Level 3's allow up to \$120 a week. \$50 a week will allow some type of comfortability. That gives room to allow one to order hygiene as well as food. It all depends on how one eats. I myself don't eat what the state provides often. They don't feed offenders too well anymore.

**April 15, 2021**

**Inmate B:** I just wrote a couple guys from the jail to tell them what to bring. If they are coming into VA receiving I would tell them to bring up to 40 stamped envelopes. I used those to trade for food and obviously, to write people. If they want certain pictures they should bring them with them because all photos that come through the mail are photocopied black and white. You can get photos on the JP5 though. I told my cellmate at the jail to call my mom when they transferred me so she knew I was gone. I told her to put \$100 on my account through Jpay as soon as she could. I would say \$100 a month - you live reasonably, \$200 - you living comfortably. The commissary is cheaper here than at the jails and most get a job that adds 40 or 50 bucks. I told the guys at the jail to wear their best set of whites out because you can keep your t-shirt, boxers and socks, plus, thermals or sweats. I would also try and bring shorts because you can keep those too. We are allowed to buy a fan at Nottoway for \$29 but they won't be allowed to keep it if they go somewhere with AC. They are going to want a TV \$225, JP5 \$50, shoes \$66, fan \$29, shorts \$16, sweatpants and sweatshirt \$31 and probably extra socks, boxers and t-shirts. That's about \$400 to get setup, especially if they have time to do.

**Inmate C:** Typically, your money will follow you from the jail and be deposited into your account within days. However, once you've been classified and shipped to your permanent facility, your money could take up to two weeks before being credited into your account. A trick is to have money deposited into your account once your location has been updated on the VDOC website. Be prepared, some institutions only go to the commissary three times a month, plan accordingly. Some say initially don't place large orders and bring unnecessary attention to yourself. I never found this to be a problem. The maximum spend limit for commissary per month is \$400 (completely unnecessary). \$100 per month you can live very well.

Anything over \$200 per month is simply too much. There are some who choose not to eat prison food and thus will spend more with commissary in order to survive. Personal Property orders have no spend limits and are placed once a month. Any amount between \$100 - \$200 per month will provide you with all the necessary comforts you need to live reasonably.

**Inmate D:** Do yourself a favor. Start saving money now. you can live reasonably on 50 a week if you can afford it. I've learned to make it on 21 dollars a month which is what my librarian job pays. Plus, every DOC level 3 to 6 have computers and e-mail which is another cheap way to stay in contact with friends and family. Nobody handwrites letters these days.

**Inmate E:** That depends on a number of factors. 1<sup>st</sup> are you willing to work a job and protect that job at all costs. (A job) means stability for oneself. Meaning, you don't need to depend on anyone. 2<sup>nd</sup> it depends on the canteen prices which vary from prison to prison. You really have to wait and see. The number 1 thing is getting a job as soon as you possibly can.

**Inmate F:** Commissary will cost about . . . \$100-\$200.00 a month to buy vital items. First, hygiene, stationary, food, etc. Then, there is personal property: TV, jp5 tablet, shoes, trimmers, surge protector, shorts, jeans, sweatpants, thermal bottom & top, etc. which calls for a little extra money.

**Inmate H:** It depends on a few things. If you are OK with eating the food in the chow hall then you can get by on less. That depends on what facility you are at. Green Rock has decent food which minimizes your costs. Greenville serves slop three times a day so I eat off of the commissary a lot. It also depends on your job in here. If you work in the kitchen you may eat better than the rest of the population. It also depends on your tastes and honestly, what resources you have. At Lawrenceville and Green Rock, I spent about \$100 a month, give or take. That included the \$50-\$60 I earned from my job in the library, as a tutor, a property clerk, and then training dogs. I spend maybe \$150 or so at Greenville because I can't stomach the food and I'm fortunate to have the resources to do so. But, keep in mind, commissary is not just food. Its soap, shampoo, toothpaste, deodorant, laundry detergent, razors, q-tips, paper, pens, stamps, envelopes, etc. You may also want to buy tennis shoes, comfortable boots, Levi's jeans, sweats, sunglasses, a watch, an mp3 player and music to download. Again, nothing in prison is free. The VADOC does not provide you with anything beyond 3 pairs of boxers, t-shirts, socks, state jeans, and blue shirts. That's it. No toothbrushes, toothpaste, soap, shaving cream, razors, deodorant, or anything else. If you have any money on your account, you must buy this yourself. If you don't have any money you will only have the indigent supplies that the VADOC will provide. Buy a padlock from the commissary!!!!

**C. Are prison staff members trustworthy to help if offenders are in trouble?**

**Inmate A:** Being in prison is just like being in another town. Some will help and some will not.



**Inmate B:** I would say that they better be in *real* trouble if they go to a CO about someone else because word will spread and the label of snitch is not good, obviously. I've never put myself in that position so I don't really know.

**Inmate C:** Sadly, most administrations are the same at every facility and don't go out of their way to be helpful. But, the short answer is yes, however, perceived trouble is not always reality. If you mention that you fear for your safety they will put you in the hole and investigate. You lose all privileges and for what? Nothing has happened. Wait for someone to put their hands on you before you worry about whether you're in trouble. There are a lot of fear tactics that are deployed but usually in the end it's nothing but them sizing you up. Stand respectfully strong and hold your ground. Even interject some humor and that usually settles everything.

**Inmate D:** You can trust the staff. Just don't be a snitch because sometimes the staff will put you out there. Not everyone respects a snitch but if you are scared then sure, go to the staff. If someone is making wine or selling drugs mind your business.

**Inmate E:** Again, that depends on a few factors, such as if you are respectful to a c/o and staff members. Then your chances are good. But, if you're a trouble maker and disrespectful to c/o's and staff members then your chances for help will be less.

**Inmate F:** It depends on how you treat them, or if you think that it's best not to deal with them on certain matters...because some don't care what happens to you.

**Inmate G:** For the most part the prison staff will help you if you're in trouble but never just depend on them. There are a lot of inmates so watch out for yourself. There aren't really any rapes in the VA prison system, if there is a relationship going on it is most likely consented to. To live reasonably a hundred to two hundred dollars a month should do, that'll get you hygiene and food. Also, never run up tabs or gamble if you can't pay. Always live within your means.

**Inmate H:** It depends. Staff aren't and can't be everywhere all the time. Even so, there is little that one staff member can do in the event that you are being assaulted by one or multiple people. And, full disclosure, there are staff members who are corrupt, who are also gang members that will allow things to happen and turn their heads. There are even staff that will initiate these sort of activities. I once saw an inmate that reported a staff member for misconduct. The staff was suspended for a few days. When he returned the staff member went to another inmate who was serving a life sentence and asked him to beat up the inmate who had reported him. The inmate serving life did this. In exchange, the staff member was working the visiting room the next month. He allowed the inmate who was serving life to go into the visiting room bathroom with his girlfriend while the staff member again turned his back. Staff can be dirty and corrupt too. When talking to staff, male or female, officer or civilian, ALWAYS speak loud enough that

**April 15, 2021**

others around can hear what you are saying. If you can, take someone with you when you must talk to staff. This protects you from both being accused of snitching, and also of a false accusation by staff of saying something inappropriate. As a general rule, don't speak to staff unless spoken to. Be polite, but not friendly. Staff will appreciate and respect it. Remember, you are an inmate, a criminal. You don't want to earn a reputation as being a snitch by talking to staff. Likewise, staff doesn't want to be stigmatized by their peers as being an inmate lover.

Now, if you tell staff that you are in danger, yes, almost any staff will help. However, keep in mind that you may not like the help you receive. If you are in danger, it not likely that the person or people endangering you are going to be dealt with, moved, or punished. The almost certain immediate reaction is that YOU will be moved immediately, likely to segregation (which sucks regardless of facility) until they can decide what to do with you. This may be a few days, or even a couple months if you need to be transferred off the facility. Also, if the reason you are in danger is of your own doing, like you have run up debt, owe favors, said something stupid, snitched, or got into someone's business, they are going to be less sympathetic. Staff knows the unwritten rules as well as we do. And they often know if you have "earned" the danger you are in or if you simply are getting a raw deal. Either way, yes staff will help. But, you shouldn't need it if you go about your business the right way. And, again, the help you get is unlikely to be what you would like and it is likely to really suck. But, depending on the degree of danger you may just have to deal with it.

**D. What is it like in prison?**

**Inmate A:** For me, prison isn't as bad as one thinks. I'm different. I look at being in prison as a learning experience, as well as a place to better myself. I find myself. Most people don't take the time out to learn about themselves. It's really needed: To find peace with self. I try to stay busy and study. At one point in time, I used to workout. I feel one needs to work the mind and body. It keeps the stress and issues away. It gives one something to do. Prison now is sad. I'm surrounded by kids with no type of goals. It's too many looking for father figures. Majority needs to be accepted. That's why there is so much gang activity. I've been doing time since I was very young. I know how to find peace. I've been doing time since I was about 10-11 years old. I've only had one issue, and that was in March. I didn't even know it took place. I have just been myself, and don't act another way for another. Now I'm with a child, and it hurts not being there. Prison makes one stubborn and distant.

**Inmate C:** Prison is different for every individual. A lot depends on your upbringing, lifestyle, etc. It was personally very difficult for me, especially in the beginning few years. I had to learn a whole new way of life. While I have adapted to my surroundings, I still try to maintain my core values and remind myself daily to treat others as I'd like to be treated. The food was an enormous change for me from the nice restaurants I became familiar with eating at weekly. There is a lot of processed meats. All is bland and of course you have no input. Medical care is subpar and you

**April 15, 2021**

have to fight for everything. ..be prepared. Told when to wake, when to eat, when you can rec., you lose a lot of your independence and freedoms, those things in your life that you take for granted when you're in the free world. However, the sooner you accept your situation, you can slowly gain some of these losses back by finding the right employment, circle of friends, get into programs, exercise, all contribute toward putting you in a better frame of mind. I am in a good place now but it took me several years to get there. I have good days and bad but I have a good group of friends who I know genuinely care for me and are there for me when I need them. Don't look back but keep looking forward and strive to make the next day better than it was yesterday. Eventually, most will go home. I am focused on that day and will make the best of my life that I can once released.

**Inmate D:** Prison is like life: whatever we make it. Me personally, I've finished every program so I spend most my time watching tv, we have BET, TNT, AMC, USA, ESPN, History, Univision, PBS, ABC, CBS, NBC, plus we get movies on weekends (only PG13 though). Also, I listen to music on my PS or play video games. DOC have video visitation at most DOC's. More are coming soon. Red Onion, Wallens Ridge and a few others already have it. Viewing stations are in Alexandria. The phone number for more info is 804-643-240. Its for 30 min- \$30 for 60 min. That's cheap if a family has to drive 3 hrs each way to visit or longer. Plus, phone calls are cheaper now.

**Inmate E:** It's tough, it's stressful, it's full of chaos and you never know what's going to happen from hour to hour. But it's very important to focus on things that make you smile and feel at

**April 15, 2021**

peace, whether it be God or family or friends. Keep your attitude positive and things are a lot easier to deal with.

**Inmate F:** Its rough, but at the end of the day its whatever you make of it. I chose to treat my time here like a study hall. My aim every day is to strengthen my mind, body and spirit.

**Inmate G:** Prison life is what you make it. You can come in here acting stupid with the staff or inmates that will only make your time hard. Come in, try to get a job, better yourself, hang with guys who don't run around doing dumb stuff, and always use your own mind and judgement. A lot of the inmates try to get along; we all live here. Respect, manners and minding your own business get you a long way.

**Inmate H:** Some of that answer is exactly what you would expect. It sucks. No two ways about it. The food is bad. The beds are uncomfortable. It smells. Its dirty. Its loud. It is a subculture unto itself. Breaking the rules and getting over is what's valued and encouraged. If you're successful you're lauded as a hero among your peers. You get caught and you get punished in various ways ranging from fines to time in segregation. To be fair, it is not like the TV show OZ, nor is it the Shawshank Redemption. You miss the people you care about. You miss good food. Holiday cookouts. Lots of stuff like that. What I have been fortunate to find is an attitude of opportunity. Think of the things that you have wanted to do but never had the time because of your day to day obligations. That book you wanted to read, well guess what, now you have the time. The college course(s) you wanted to take, now is your chance. I have gone to college, trained dozens of rescued dogs, tutored guys to get their GED, played softball, learned another

**April 15, 2021**

language, designed an offender rehabilitation program, written articles for several publications, and sought out ways to contribute to the community even while in prison. It has been hard, especially with the restrictions I have. But, it has made fourteen years not just bearable, but fulfilling and even gratifying. Because of these activities I have built and nurtured relationships that will carry me not just through my sentence but provide me opportunities for success when I get out that I wouldn't have had otherwise. You can make your time in here productive and positive. Not to say you won't get sad, or lonely, or disappointed along the way. But, you can make those down times rare and the positives more common. You can't buy into the "us against them" prison subculture, though.

**Inmate J:**

**Drugs**

- "There are drugs in all prisons in the state of VA"
- marijuana, cocaine, seen people shoot up/snort heroin - would say 30-40% of people on the inside use
- brought in through officers and visitors
- Paid for with item trade (i.e. food) and sexual favors. "you can trade anything in prison"

**Employment**

- "highly paid" enterprise jobs are 50-80 cents per hour
- teacher aid = ~40 cents/hour
- some people paid 23 cents/hour for kitchen work, manual labor etc.
- 2 work refusals at work camp can result in altered custody level and being sent back to regular prison

**Money**

- \$100-150/month from outside sources should be enough to get by
- best to not have too much on your books at one time because you may become a target

**DOC Mailing Rules**

- 3-page limit (front and back) on incoming letters
- Photo copies are made of original content (pictures, envelope, letters) and the original is then shredded (photocopy of front of envelope counts as 1 page)

- If letter, photo(s), and envelope exceed 3-page limit, the whole thing gets mailed back to sender - DOC will not give client any part of the letter

### **General Advice**

- let families know "the person going into prison may not be the same person who comes out - for better or worse"
- "No one should get too comfortable with being in prison" - don't want to make yourself too at home there
- Encourage positive activities - reading, exercising, writing/drawing

### **E. Are there sexual relationships among inmates?**

**Inmate A:** Yes! Some are out in the open but the majority of that stuff is between those who are interested in such a life style. It's not frowned upon much anymore. The world has people accepting as if they were free. The tension behind this is less.

**Inmate C:** Yes, mostly consensual. Almost none are raped anymore in Virginia prisons but remember to avoid drugs, alcohol, debts, and you'll avoid this issue altogether unless you want to engage in a consensual relationship but, remember even that is illegal in prison.

**Inmate D:** Sex relationships between inmates do happen but against the rules! Like they say if there is a will there's a way. Also, if they are smooth enough female staff members will fall for them. I've seen so many staff members fired in my 17 yrs.

**Inmate F:** Yes, there are sexual relationships amongst prisoners but 99% of them begin with consent.



**April 15, 2021**

**Inmate H:** Yes, there are. Even between guys who are straight and would rather be with a girl. But, in my fourteen years, ranging from the maximum security of Sussex 1 to being a minimum security offender at lower level facilities, I only know of one person who was sexually assaulted and, although there is no justification for it, he broke the most basic of unwritten rules by accepting favors and incurring debt. Do remember though, regardless of your opinion of guys that live homosexual lifestyles in prison, they are coveted by many. Even a casual respectful interaction with them may be misinterpreted by others just as innocently chatting with a girl at a bar may be seen as a threat by her jealous boyfriend.

**F. Additional Advice:**

**Inmate A:** Prison is generally safe. Offenders should avoid accepting or doing favors until they get the lay of the land.

**Inmate B:** If they'll be getting a lot of money in, I'd still try and only get what they'll need, because people will see what they get and people will ask for food and its best to not be loaning stuff out. I have a hard time with that one because I have a problem saying no.

**Inmate C:** 1. When using the toilet, always wipe it down when finished and always wash your hands and wipe down the sink when you're finished. When brushing your teeth, always spit in the toilet, not the sink. Be discreet with what personal information you share. Question after question that you answer will eventually provide someone with all the info they need to look you and your case up and find out everything about you. *Be selective of who you choose to interact with.*

2. Standing counts require you to stand with the light on in the cell until the two C.O.s come by your door and count you. The first standing count is normally around 5:30am and the last is around 9:30pm, with a couple more in between.

3. Familiarize yourself immediately with the informal complaint and grievance procedures. This is imperative if you want things to get done in prison.

4. *Stay away from using the store box guys in your pod.* This is where you can go and get food when you don't have any funds. The exchange rate or payback is usually 2 for 3 or 1 for 2. This means for every 2 honey buns you get from the store box, 3 are expected in return as full payment. Or, for One deodorant, 2 are expected back as payment. In addition, stay away from gambling, smoking (cigarettes or marijuana) or other drugs. When you lose the ability to pay a debt that's owed, interest is incurred or worse, they'll expect you to pay through other means; sexual favors, etc. Learn to live within your means. If you can't get it yourself, simply go without.

**Inmate F:** My advice for those who are coming to prison is: 1.) Have your family send you this book called "The Secret" by Rhonda Byrne. It is a great book that expresses the power of the mind. Also, find something to do with your time so that you can better yourself and show how much you've changed (Programs, trades,). Sometimes if you have 5 years or more it can be a little difficult, but you can always take a correspondence course. 2.) Don't get involved in the three g's-gambling, gay activities, and gangs. 3.) Mind your own business. It keeps you out of trouble, plus, it helps you remain infraction free. 4) Upon arriving, you should speak with the Unit Manager about a job. Then, speak with the counselor about treatment programs.

**April 15, 2021**

**Inmate G:** When going to prison never show fear when you walk in the yard. You have guys who prey on the weak. But, don't act extra tough either because you have guys who will want to see just how tough you are. Just lay back, be cool, observe where you are at, and see who is who. You'll have guys who are in gangs trying to recruit, Muslims and so on. My advice is, if you do decide to join one do your homework and know who you're dealing with. That goes for anybody you deal with because people don't have your best interest in mind.

**Inmate H:** A few things to remember.... There is just about anything you will want here: drugs, booze, tobacco, gambling, prostitution. It is all available. The "booze" is just rotten fruit juice, often times laced with Benadryl. As with drugs you buy on the street, you never know what you are getting. Many guys have died in here the last couple of years from illegal street drugs. The gambling is ALWAYS rigged. The house always wins. If you're sitting at the card table and you don't know who the mark is then it's you. Other guys will lose at the table then split your lost money up later. Don't gamble at the card table, nor on the sports gambling "tickets" that get passed around every day. You WILL lose. As for the prostitution, well, there's all sorts of reasons not to engage beyond the simple morality of it. It's a good way to make other inmates jealous. When others are jealous then all sorts of things can happen to you ranging from being harmed physically to being set up. Your jealous cellmate can plant contraband in your stuff and write an anonymous note telling on you. It happens all the time and all of a sudden you are in seg and labeled by staff as a drug dealer or otherwise. The things you need to know when you arrive in prison are sort of cliché. The mental game is the hardest part. Physically prison isn't really demanding. Prison isn't very hard as far as what is expected of you from VADOC. All you really have to do is stand four times a day during standing counts. Other than that there is very little

**April 15, 2021**

asked of you by the prison staff. They don't care if you eat, when you go to sleep, if you work, if you shower, if you have friends or family visits, phone calls, etc. As long as your alive and standing at count that's all they will require of you. The hardest thing for most guys coming into the system is learning to not think that you still have any control of what happens on the street. Your friends and family are going to move forward with their lives. They may stick it out and wait for you. Hopefully they do. But, you have no control over their actions. Spending hours on the phone with them, worrying yourself about what they are doing or who they are with is only going to make your time much harder. Hopefully they have the skills and values to act in a manner that keeps them productive in their lives and better able to help you when it is time for you to return home. There is little to nothing you can do for them in prison besides encourage them and most importantly, don't make them worry or feel guilty. It will quickly turn to resentment. Your family needs to register to visit you. They can do this on the VADOC website. They cannot visit until approved. This usually takes a month in state and three months out of state. The only thing they can bring to visits is quarters for the vending machines. No folding money. There is a strict dress code too so unless they want to be sent away it is wise for them to dress conservatively. Your family and friends can email you through [jpay.com](http://jpay.com). They can send pictures through this as well. You can no longer receive photos or greeting cards through the mail. All regular mail is photocopied and then shredded and you get the photocopy. Your family can send you books, magazines, newspapers, etc. but, all must be sent through the mail from the bookstore, or other vendors like [amazon.com](http://amazon.com). Depending on what facility you are housed, your family can send you a quarterly holiday package of food from [virginiapackages.com](http://virginiapackages.com). Otherwise there is nothing our family can send or bring. When you arrive at a reception center, the first thing you should do is submit a request to attend the law library. This sounds silly, but you need

**April 15, 2021**

to learn how things work, what you are supposed to have and what is expected of you. When you go to the law library you need to ask the clerk to show you the Departmental Operating Procedures or D.O.P.'s. These govern everything in your everyday life in prison so it will behoove you to be familiar with them. Officers and staff will take advantage of you if you don't know them and they know that guys in receiving are usually ignorant of the D.O.P.'s. You will go through a bunch of medical tests etc. The dental care is pretty bad so as soon as you get in the system you need to request an appointment to get a dental plan and cleaning. If you get lucky you can get a cleaning once a year so be careful to avoid all the candy and other garbage that will ruin your teeth. If one goes bad there are no crowns or cosmetic stuff being done. They will just pull it. Keep a journal of when things happen. Log when you submit request forms, grievances, get visits, go to medical, etc. You will have the occasion to need to reference it sometime later. I promise you, it will come in handy. VADOC logs and documents everything, it will serve you well to memorialize things that matter to you also. Most importantly, create a routine for yourself. Granted, your whole life will become routine in prison. But, find a daily routine for exercise, rest, food, shower, using the restroom, etc. This will help you get along with others, especially your cellmate. Otherwise, try to find some purpose. Make sure you're better when you get out than you were when out came in!!

**Inmate I:** Most entering prison need to make some life changes and 7 Habits of Highly Effective People is a great book to allow one to take stock of his/her life. I think the biggest lessons are those about respect and responsibility. A man's word is the most valuable thing he has in prison. A man also needs to learn responsibility with personal space, hygiene, money, communication, etc. One must learn that all space is shared and no one can behave how he wishes all of the time.

**April 15, 2021**

A lot of people of a variety of ages struggle with this. I have a 47-year-old cellmate who behaved like a teenager: burping, farting, and worse. I had to teach him how a gentleman behaves but it has caused some issues. A lot of people don't know the rules and how to speak to people. I came into prison as a southern gentleman and, for the most part, I have maintained that attitude with a few adjustments of course. I learned to protect myself and when to stand up for myself. I didn't create a fake prison persona. I learned that if I was true to myself then others will respect me. I have become an unintended sage for men of all ages and a confidant for some of the most unlikely characters. I could be counseling gang leaders one day and a veteran suffering with PTSD the next. That comes from knowing who you are and owning it. Then, others know how to relate to you. Everyone can spot a liar and a fake, everyone.

**V. Annual Reviews (written by a former inmate):**

1. Annual Reviews are done each year, typically by your assigned counselor. These are men and women in civilian clothes who likely have an office in the housing unit (cellblock or dorm) in which you are housed. These reviews are critical to your daily life and potentially your release. It is critical that you not only attend your annual review, but also that you prepare for it, actively participate, and attend all meetings and hearings. If you choose not to attend then changes can be made without your knowledge and before you know it you may be transferred somewhere you didn't ask for, you may be required to take programs that are not applicable to your situation, or you may even lose your Goodtime Credit Allowance (GCA level) and your release date can get pushed back even further away.
2. The annual review process reviews three items: Security Level, GCA Level, and a COMPAS (Correctional Offender Management Profiling for Alternative Sanctions) Assessment. The security level evaluation is primarily based on your offense, years remaining to serve, and recent (5 years) institutional disciplinary history. Your security level, with the exception of high-profile cases, will almost always determine in which facility you are housed. There are very few level 4 and 5 facilities. Level 5's include Sussex I, Wallens Ridge, and Red Onion. Level 4 facilities are Keen Mountain, River North (gang unit), and Sussex II. Upon intake and reception, your initial assignment may be to one of these facilities. Your initial security level evaluation places you at a higher-level facility for the first year as a means to have tighter restrictions on you as you transition into the VADOC general population. It is imperative that you follow the rules and regulations at this initial assignment in order for you to step down to lower-level institutions that allow for more freedom and perhaps to be closer to loved ones. Receiving even a

**April 15, 2021**

minor infraction will delay your ability to request a transfer for at least a year. You will be assigned a month in which your annual review will be conducted. This month will remain the same throughout your term of incarceration. You may be seen in the first week of the month or the last, perhaps even the first week of the following month. It is important for you to prepare for this review. If you have any documents that you think should be presented, you should have copies ready. Any programs you participated in such as educational, vocational, or therapeutic should be noted in your review so be sure to bring any records of those programs with you. If you have completed a correspondence course or other outside programs you should bring transcripts or certificates with you. This program participation not only matters in your assessment, but also earns you 40 points towards earning a level 1 GCA level which is what you want in order to return home as soon as possible. If you do not engage or participate in any programming during the year you may have to ask for an override from your counselor. These overrides are discretionary, so I encourage you to sign up for and participate in something every year and take the decision out of the counselor's hands. You will be screened to consider your security level. The primary factors included in this scoring are the severity of your offense, time remaining to serve, and infractions while incarcerated. There are other variables that are included such as age, prior criminal history, employment status at the time of offense, etc. They only account for a small percentage of your score and they are primarily static factors that you have no control over. The primary score that you control is your infraction status. Again, I encourage you to remain charge free. If you are considering seeking a transfer, clemency, a pardon, geriatric parole, or perhaps hoping a new Earned Sentence Credit bill will pass the General Assembly; you must remain infraction free in hopes of gleaning the maximum possible benefit.



3. You will also be given a COMPAS assessment during your annual review. The COMPAS assessment is a two-pronged test. It will measure your General and Violent Recidivism Risk as well as determine your Criminogenic Needs. The recidivism risk portion can impact you in parole and pardon decisions, and most recently hurt hundreds if not a couple thousand offenders in VADOC because the COVID 19 Early Release Plan proposed by Governor Northam and approved by the General Assembly came with the stipulation that anyone released under the program had to be a low risk. The tool that VADOC used to determine risk was the COMPAS tool and many people who should have been going home early did not get considered because they did not pay attention to the COMPAS assessment during their annual review. It is important that you not only pay attention to the questions being asked of you during this, but also that you review the sixty plus equations that are answered by the counselor before you even get in the room. Usually, they are willing to review these with you. Most of it is static information that should not change. However, I am speaking from experience, that one counselor had my COMPAS correct for several consecutive years and then a new counselor changed some of the data and I went from the lowest possible recidivism risk to nearly the top just based on her changes to those sixty questions. My answers never changed. Yet I was suddenly a high risk for recidivism and had all sorts of criminogenic needs that hadn't existed in the years prior. This meant I was assigned to several therapeutic programs that I really didn't need. The first sixty plus questions that the counselor answers before you come into the room are things like how many arrests and convictions you have had, and yes, arrests without conviction do hurt you, even if you were found not guilty. If you have arrests that were nolle prossed, dismissed, or if you were acquitted of a charge, I recommend that you work to have those expunged from

your record. It may cost a few dollars, but it will help you in the long run. Be sure to review all of these questions and don't be afraid to challenge the answers that the counselor puts in place. You may ask for the opportunity to provide the counselor with documentation to support your claims. They have to have this information reviewed by their boss which is usually the Unit Manager for your building. At the end of the review by the counselor, they will ask if you wish to attend the ICA hearing for your annual review and if you waive your right to 48 hours' notice. ALWAYS attend and NEVER waive your rights to anything. If you don't attend anything can be changed, you won't even know, and you won't be able to go back and argue against it. Make them go through the process. When you attend you can make it painless if you are in agreement with the work your counselor did. The ICA (Unit Manager or building LT.) will ask if you have a statement. If you are ok with the review simply tell them, you have no statement provided the review is approved as submitted. If you are unhappy with the way your counselor performed your review to the ICA, this hearing is your only opportunity to voice your concerns in person. Once this is over everything is on paper through the grievance process. These are almost always losers, even when you're almost certainly in the right.

4. Take notes, ask for copies of everything, and if they tell you that you cannot have a copy, ask them what DOP (Department Operating Procedure) dictates that they cannot provide a copy and ask them to show you where in the DOP it says so. Again, it is critical that you pay attention and actively engage in the Annual Review process. It may very well determine how buried you will be in programs that you don't want or how many years you will spend in the custody of VADOC.