

Before the doors close

Protect what you've earned. Federal prison takes control of more than your daily routine. Know what is at stake while you can still prepare. Free field guide | Independent educational material, not legal advice | Reviewed September 24, 2026

At a federal prison in Virginia, a man suddenly could not speak or walk normally. He was incontinent and kept falling. His cellmate, other prisoners and line staff called for help. According to evidence presented at a federal trial, officials knew he was in a neurological crisis and failed to get him medical care over two days. After his final fall, he lay on the floor of an observation cell for an hour and 40 minutes while prisoners kept calling for help. He died of head injuries. The autopsy found that the lack of medical assistance contributed to his death. A lieutenant was later convicted of violating his civil rights by failing to obtain care; she and a nurse were convicted of lying to investigators. [1]

I served time in federal custody. I wrote this for people under investigation, awaiting trial or sentencing, preparing to surrender, and the loved ones trying to help them. None of those stages means a prison sentence is certain. I cannot tell you that what happened to that man at FCI Petersburg will happen to you or your loved one. I can tell you what the story exposes: whether you're sent to a camp or a facility with a higher security level, you cannot take yourself to an emergency room. You rely on prison staff to recognize the problem and get you care. At Petersburg, people kept calling for help while a man lay dying. And the danger is not limited to emergencies. A Justice Department audit found that the BOP lacked a reliable way to track how long prisoners waited for outside medical appointments or why those appointments were canceled or rescheduled. [9] At another federal prison, a woman still had not received surgery ten years after her condition was diagnosed. [6]

Facing federal custody yourself? [Get Time Earned: The Federal Sentence Reduction Guide](#) to learn the most effective and lawful ways to reduce the time you spend in custody and get back to living your life with your family and loved ones. Helping someone you love? Get your own copy too. The family pages help you keep records, understand the milestones and follow up on the right question from outside. This free guide shows you why that knowledge matters. The Federal Sentence Reduction Guide walks you through the details.

Rules, policies and day-to-day practices can change while a person is inside. Families who need to keep up with these changes can also join the [Time Earned Monthly Briefing](#) for a sourced monthly update and a clean copy designed to print and mail inside.



Illustration: the night before surrender, preparation is still in your hands.

This is bigger than prison violence

Federal mortality records document 7,125 deaths in BOP custody from 2001-2019. They include 342 suicides and 193 homicides; most were recorded as illness. In 2019 alone, 381 people died. [10] The Justice Department's inspector general later examined only selected suicides, homicides, accidental deaths and deaths of unknown cause from fiscal years 2014-2021. Even within that limited review, investigators found emergency-response problems in 166 cases. The BOP could not produce documents its own policies required for 149 of the deaths studied. The investigators did not conclude that the response failures caused every death. [2]

Then there is the harm that never makes a dramatic headline. In a separate investigation of releases from 2009 through 2014, the inspector general found 152 people held past their correct release dates because of staff error. Together, they served 8,917 extra days: roughly 293 months, or 24.4 years, across just 152 people. Three were held more than an extra year. Eighteen of the late releases involved people in minimum-security custody. Those days were real. [3]

The bureaucracy will control records about your sentence, your conduct, your participation, your placement and when you can move. A wrong number, a decision nobody explained or an unanswered request can matter long after the conversation is over. I learned to pay attention to what was actually written down. I want you and your family to start doing that before you have to rely on a memory of what somebody said in a hallway.

Three milestones that should never be blurred

I heard men call their halfway-house move their “release.” I understood why. Walking out of the prison and back into the community is a huge moment. But when someone tells your family you're “getting out,” which milestone do they mean?

Milestone	What you are being told	What to ask before making plans
RRC date	Movement from the prison to a halfway house.	Is it a possible date, a referral, an approved placement or the day of the actual move?
Home Confinement date	Movement to an approved home while the prison term is still being served.	Has the move been approved, or is this only an estimate?
Release date	The day the prison term ends under the current calculation.	Which current record supports it, and will supervised release follow?

The RRC date can feel like the release date. It is still a different milestone. The same goes for the Home Confinement date. In an ordinary prerelease plan, both come before the imprisonment term ends; supervised release, if ordered, follows the release date. [4] A number printed on a worksheet may be conditional. It does not mean a halfway-house place or a home move has been approved.

Here is one thing you can do without buying anything: when you hear a date that changes your plans, ask “Is that the RRC date, the Home Confinement date or the release date, and what current record says so?” Write down the exact answer. I wish every family knew to ask that before booking travel, arranging work or telling children someone will be home.



Illustration: institutional time is still time taken from a person's life.

What you may still be able to influence

There are lawful ways the time someone spends inside an institution can change. Some affect the sentence calculation. Others may affect when the remaining prison term can be served in the community. Treatment and participation can matter for some people. Conduct, eligibility, records, timing and decisions can change the answer. The opportunities are real; none is a guaranteed number of months for every person. [5]

I completed a demanding treatment program through its follow-up phase while in custody. What stuck with me was how dangerous it was to treat one milestone as the finish line. I watched people count on an expected move while another requirement or decision was still outstanding. You can do everything you know to do and still need an answer from another part of the system. The earlier you learn where those decision points are, the more time you have to ask about one that doesn't make sense.

There is a lot more behind each of those decisions than a single rule or a reassuring answer from somebody down the hall. [Open Time Earned: The Federal Sentence Reduction Guide](#) for the specific paths, the records to check and the working pages for following up when an answer changes. I cannot promise a different outcome; I can give you a way to stop managing it from rumors.



Illustration: paperwork routed from one office to another while the clock keeps moving.

What happens when nobody gives you a straight answer?

I filed a formal written request on a BP-8 form to have my RRC date moved. I waited for a response and was directed to another staff member. I followed that direction, waited again and was told to send it to someone else. Nobody needed to say “no” for the process to consume time. The RRC date I was asking about was still unresolved while I tried to find the person who could address it.

This was not just my frustration with a slow answer. In a case involving a woman seeking medical treatment at a federal prison in Alabama, the prison system had no record of her final grievance appeal. A

court initially dismissed her lawsuit for failing to complete the internal process. An appeals court later reversed that dismissal. As of reporting in June 2026, she still had not received the recommended surgery. [6]

For many prison-conditions lawsuits, federal law requires completion of available internal remedies before a person can sue. Different problems have different legal routes. A person may be trying to get help with a serious issue while also having to establish that the complaint went through the required process. [7] I tell people to keep copies of requests and responses, note when each was sent, and get legal advice promptly when a serious problem develops. A medical emergency calls for immediate medical help, not a wait for paperwork.

The release date does not end every restriction

If a court ordered supervised release, that period can begin after the release date. I saw people come back after failed drug tests and travel they had not cleared. Other violations can involve missing required reports to probation, changing jobs or addresses without giving the required notice, or failing to report an arrest or questioning by law enforcement. The conditions in your own judgment control. [8]

I would want a copy of those conditions in plain sight before the release date. Being back in the community is a victory. Knowing the rules that follow can help you stay there.

A guide gives you the foundation. The briefing keeps you current.

The Federal Sentence Reduction Guide is the place to start when you need the full framework, the working pages and the questions that matter before and during custody. But a guide captures the rules and evidence available when it is written. Federal policy, court decisions and institutional practice do not freeze while someone is serving time.

That is why I created the [Time Earned Monthly Briefing](#), a paid monthly subscription that gives families a sourced explanation of important developments, what changed and why it may matter. Each issue includes a clean printable copy that can be mailed to a loved one who cannot freely search for current information from inside.

The briefing does not replace the Federal Sentence Reduction Guide. It keeps the person on the outside from assuming that last year's answer is still the current answer. If you want an ongoing way to watch for changes and keep your loved one informed, the paid monthly subscription is available through the link above.

Start with one page, not a pile of rumors

You may be reading this before anyone has calculated a release date, proposed an RRC date or considered a Home Confinement date. Do not invent one. Before sentencing, ask your lawyer which records and truthful facts need attention now. Later, ask for the current written record behind the milestone that affects your next decision.

Your first five-minute check

Which milestone matters to me right now? RRC date / Home Confinement date / release date / not yet determined The exact date and label I was told: _____ Was that an estimate, a referral, an approval or an actual move? _____ What current record supports the answer? _____ Who can explain it, and when will I ask?

Save the answer and share the label with the person helping you outside. That is a useful start. It does not tell you which opportunities apply to your sentence or how to protect them as decisions change. That is the job of the deeper system.

Choose what you need now

Need the complete sentence-reduction guide? [Purchase Time Earned: The Federal Sentence Reduction Guide](#). It is for the person facing custody and the person helping from home. It covers the actual mechanisms, the questions that belong at each decision point, and working pages for sentence and participation records, treatment timing, conduct consequences and community placement.

Need to keep up as rules and practices change? [Join the Time Earned Monthly Briefing](#), a paid monthly subscription for families who want sourced updates they can save and print for a loved one inside.

If someone you love may be going to prison, do not wait until they lose easy access to records, research and outside help. Learn what to ask, what to save and how to help keep the facts straight now.

Sources

[1] U.S. Department of Justice, [FCI Petersburg trial evidence and convictions](#), December 23, 2024, updated February 6, 2025.

[2] DOJ Office of Inspector General, [evaluation of deaths in federal prison institutions](#), February 2024, pp. 4, 7, 33-35 and 43-44. The 344 deaths studied were those BOP identified as suicide, homicide, accident or unknown cause, not all deaths. The review excluded deaths classified as natural causes, halfway houses and contract prisons; it included some people who died after transfer to an outside hospital. Missing required records for 149 of the 344 deaths do not establish how many additional deaths, if any, went uncounted.

[3] DOJ Office of Inspector General, [review of untimely releases](#), May 2016, executive summary and Table 4. The findings concern identified staff-error cases from 2009-2014.

[4] [18 U.S.C. § 3624](#), provisions on prerelease custody and supervised release.

[5] [Federal rules on time-related participation](#), [treatment](#) and [discipline](#). My description of follow-up comes from my own time in custody.

[6] The Marshall Project and NPR, [report on medical care and grievances](#), June 17, 2026; [Eleventh Circuit opinion](#), August 6, 2025. The appellate decision addressed the exhaustion dismissal, not the merits of the medical claims.

[7] [42 U.S.C. § 1997e\(a\)](#); [*Ross v. Blake*](#), legal rules on available remedies. The case underlying Ross arose in a state prison.

[8] U.S. Courts, [standard supervised-release conditions](#) and [sample special conditions](#). The actual judgment controls.

[9] DOJ Office of Inspector General, [audit of federal prison medical-service contracts](#), March 2022, executive summary pp. i-ii. The audit examined contracts at three BOP complexes and found the BOP lacked a reliable, consistent process across facilities to monitor outside-appointment wait times and reasons for cancellations or rescheduling. The audit does not quantify the length of all individual delays.

[10] Bureau of Justice Statistics, [*Mortality in State and Federal Prisons, 2001-2019*](#), December 2021, highlights and Table 1. It records 7,125 deaths of federal prisoners in BOP-operated custody over 2001-2019, including 342 suicides, 193 homicides and 6,359 illness deaths. The 381 figure is the all-cause count for 2019, not a current rate; these figures do not determine which illness deaths involved inadequate care.