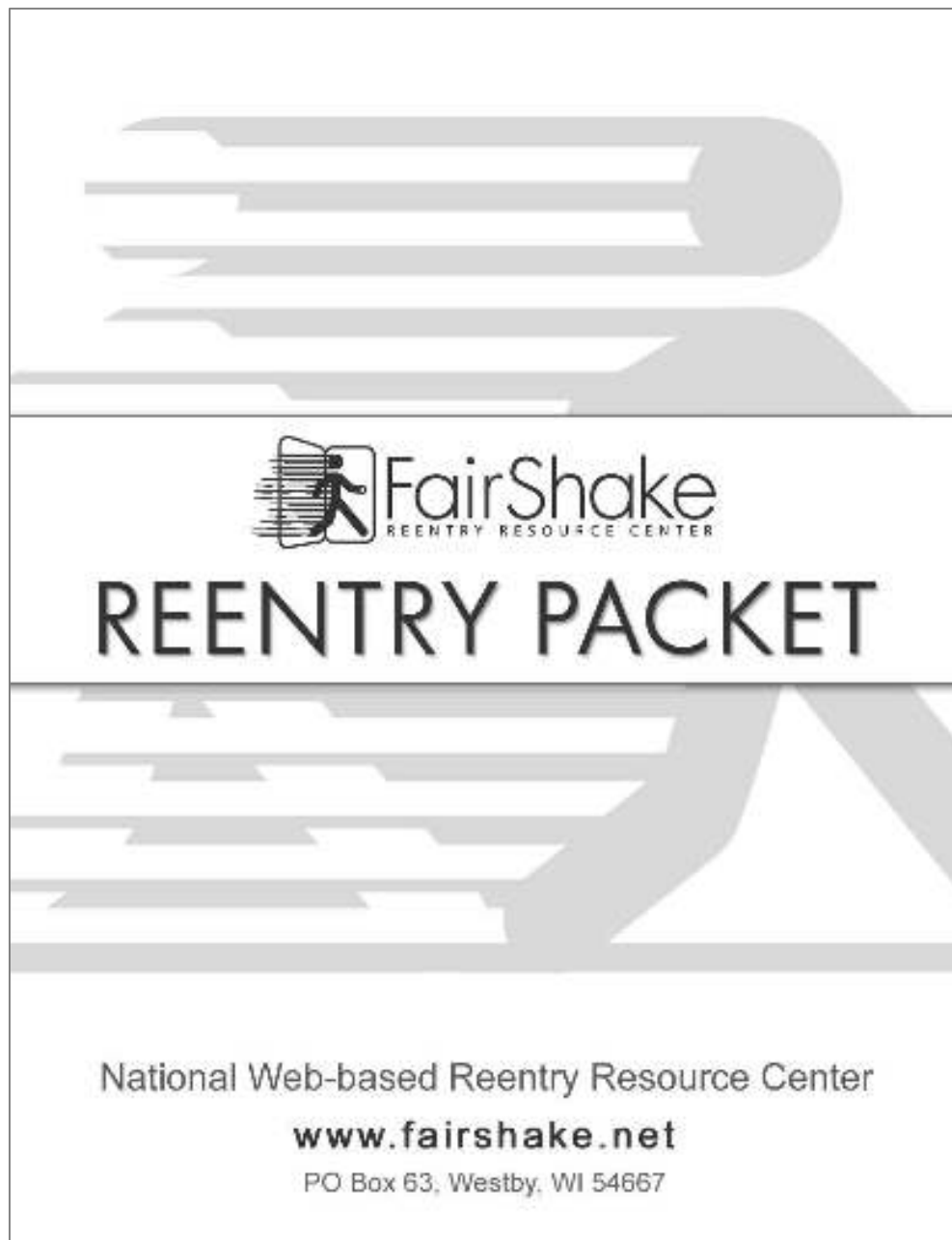


Fair Shake Reentry Packet

Peer Learning & Self-Study Guides



The End of Prison

Everything can be taken from a man but one thing; the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.

– Viktor E. Frankl

In his book *The End of Education* Neil Postman stated that he wrote the book in hopes of altering the definition of the “school problem” from a means to an end. “End” having at least two important meanings: *purpose* and *finish*.

I’m writing this introduction to the Fair Shake materials in hopes of altering the meaning of prison. I suggest that our goal should be to eliminate prisons. We must dedicate ourselves to insist on a society that is respectful, engaged, sustainable, empowered, healthy and safe so that we can transform our increasingly unhealthy relational culture to something we can all live with and enjoy.

So then the question becomes: can we close prisons? What do we hope can happen in prison that can ensure that people coming home have the tools and information to not go back?

I can offer two things: it will take society working as a community to get the most out of prison and, more importantly, the work starts with the incarcerated individual.

Let’s explore number one for a moment. For as long as I can remember I was told that nothing good goes in or comes out of prison; and that once you find yourself in prison, save for a few fortunate or lucky individuals, your life is ruined. Having a felony conviction means you’re labeled and, according to what I’ve experienced and heard throughout the years, society doesn’t readily accept your return.

Before becoming incarcerated myself, I believed that formerly incarcerated people were deemed outcasts by society unless they had obtained a highly sought-after vocational skill, or knew a business owner that would hire them. I believed this mostly for the same reasons I had believed that nothing good goes into or comes out of prison: I learned what I KNEW from those around me. Just as the *bad kid* ended up in prison, the *felon* ended up going back into the streets to meet yet another prison term or worse. If the *felon* was able to stay out, they likely worked some job that no one else wanted.

I questioned whether the kid was really *bad* or had they been convinced that they were bad through society’s opinion of them? Did the *felon* generally not adjust to or advance in life after prison due to societies’ views of them; or was society right to give up on them simply because they went to prison?

I am not an expert in these matters, however being both the *bad kid* and the *felon* I can speak from experience and share my opinion, which brings me back to my second point, the most important in my opinion.

For the sake of argument, let's say that the community played a large part in my finding myself in prison. Let's say that I knew no better than to become exactly what they said I would become. I'm here to tell you that neither of those factors need concern you as you prepare to reenter society. Although they may be true, they are not relevant today. You now have to deal with the facts of your life as you know them. It is a fact that you're sitting in prison, regardless of how you got there. It is also a fact that you can choose your perspective as you create your path from your past, through institutionalization, to a life of value and satisfaction.

For years I chose to live in prison exactly as society thought I would: continuing on a journey of self-defeat and living down to others' expectations of me. Of course, having that perspective was counterproductive to my growth. It took lots of confusion, pain, anger and falling on my face before I accepted what needed to change: me.

Changing me started with changing my perspective of prison. I chose not accept it as my fate, but as a part of my journey that was within my control. That understanding empowered me to not wait for things to play out and learn lessons the hard way, but instead to become proactive and seek what I wanted in life; to not be afraid to pursue my dreams. Prison had a place in my life because I had accepted it; it wouldn't go away simply because I now wanted to reject it.

My lawyer told me "I envy the time that you'll have to work on yourself". I thought about that statement the night he said it, but I didn't understand it until many years later. Prison had been 'Gladiator School' to me for years, but when my perspective shifted it became school, period. It went from being a place where I felt I had to react to situations to a place where I had a chance to think about my response. Instead of making me a better criminal in the fast lane, it became a place that slowed me down to help me become a better me.

Once I got to this point I no longer cared about what society thought I was; I knew what I could become. My self-confidence was bolstered as I navigated prison from the perspective of empowerment and purpose and took advantage of what the institutions offered. I even helped create things and leave a legacy of value to those coming through behind me. I learned that people, regardless of their position in life, are more inclined to help those that help themselves.

No one can define the purpose of prison in your life unless you allow them to, and it will only be finished when we work together and choose to finish it and move on to something more effective and beneficial. The end is all yours and only you can decide what that "End" will be.