



بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

# MUSLIM ALLIANCE OF INDIANA

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## How to welcome released Muslim inmates into your community

### Why is this important?

There are about a thousand Muslims in the Indiana prison system (4% of the prison population). Some 164 of them are likely to be released in 2015. When they are released, they may be vulnerable, poor, isolated and at risk. The mosque is a logical place for them to visit soon after release. Are you ready to vet them and support them?

### The reentry community--who are they and what to expect

Most incarcerated Muslims are converts who accepted Islam in prison. Most have never been in a masjid before and will have their first encounter with Muslims outside prison when they visit a mosque. In Indiana, most incarcerated Muslims (85%) are African Americans, 12% are whites, and the balance are of Hispanic or other ethnicities. The numbers of white converts is steadily increasing, however. They are mostly men, with only 11 Muslim women in prison as of August 2014. While a few have received a decent high school or even undergraduate education in prison, most need to enhance their education to be able to gain employment. Most come out of prison with almost no resources. They also tend to be shy and self-conscious, and to have lost many essential communication skills.

Indiana cities with large Muslim reentry populations include Indianapolis, Fort Wayne, Gary, South Bend, Elkhart, Evansville, Kokomo, Anderson, and Muncie.

### Being Proactive

It is best to have an individual or two in the community become familiar with the issues of those reentering society to be their first point of contact, vet them, anticipate issues, guide them towards resources, and preempt problems.

It is also useful to have a letter template to be able to quickly respond to letters from inmates seeking to get in touch with the mosque before their release. These letters should acknowledge receipt and give them the desired contact information for the person who specializes in their issues so he can be their first contact at the mosque.

Decide ahead of time on how the community should deal with aspiring members who have been convicted of sexual or violent offenses.

Several urgent needs of released inmates are met by community organizations (pantries, shelters, legal help, soup kitchens, etc.). It is important to know the location of these resources to guide those who need them. The "Handbook of Help" ([www.chipindy.org](http://www.chipindy.org)) is an important resource that lists all these resources in Marion County. Acquaint yourself with the equivalent resources in your city or county and have a printed copy on hand (resources in some Indiana cities are listed [here](#)).

## First Contact

Inmates may contact the mosque by letter before release in the hope of building a relationship with the community. If you do receive such a letter, it is important to do the following:

- ◆ Acknowledge receipt with the template letter you have already prepared and give them a way to contact the person at the mosque who is most qualified to address their issues.
- ◆ Get their legal name (it is on the envelop) and run it through the Indiana Sex and Violent Offender Registry (<http://www.icrimewatch.net/indiana.php>) to check if they have the potential to be a threat to your community.
- ◆ Possibly have the mosque's point person, if they have the appropriate clearance, interview the person in prison

Released inmates may simply drop by your mosque. In this case, do the following:

- ◆ Get their legal name and run it on the Indiana Sex and Violent Offender Registry.
- ◆ Have a package to give them: a prayer rug and a schedule of programming at the mosque.
- ◆ Put them in touch with the point person to interview them. You may want to assess their needs by learning in particular where they are living and whether they have income. Do not raise unrealistic expectations about helping them.
- ◆ Guide them to the relevant resources in your community (pantries, shelters, food stamp agencies) that may be useful to them if they require such help.
- ◆ If needed, provide clothing.

## Needs of the reentry community

- ◆ **Housing:** In some cases, those reentering society do not have a place to sleep or live. If the person needs shelter, provide them with the CHIP booklet "Handbook of Help" (Marion County only) or your prepared list of emergency shelters. The Salvation Army could also be helpful for temporary housing and travelers' aid if they need help reaching home or family.

- ◆ **Food:** Refer them to the township trustees. This office may be able to provide indigent relief. Refer them as well to the office in your county where they can get food stamps.
- ◆ **Clothing:** Refer them to a cloth pantry or ask for donations from masjid community.
- ◆ **Community:** reentry individuals often seek a community that fits with their new faith but may not know how to connect well with others. They may even have difficulty connecting with their own children. If your mosque has enough members with this background, you may want to organize a "welcome home" program, the way Masjid al-Muumineen in Indianapolis does, that gives them guidance about how to behave in a masjid, handle job applications, and write a résumé. The Masjid al-Muumineen program also has a job fair and includes basic health screening.
- ◆ **Mental health problems:** if they emerge, contact the parole officer (call the Department of Corrections and ask for their parole officer)

## Risks and challenges for the reentry population

- ◆ **Substance abuse history:** 75% of all inmates have a substance abuse history and are particularly vulnerable to relapsing once released because of the challenges of reintegration and the easy availability of drugs. If a member of your community is in such a situation refer them to a program that provides both treatment and housing (see link in resources below). Some specialized Muslim drugs programs modeled on AA, such as the 12-steps Millati Islami program (<http://www.millatiislami.org/>), which has a good reputation and provides an Islam-centric approach to address addiction. The Salvation Army also provides help with addiction services.
- ◆ **Barriers to employment:** It is challenging for poorer, uneducated black males with a criminal record to get employment. They also lack the skills to apply and interview well. Several of the success stories involve individuals who started their own businesses, which allowed them to avoid the criminal background check. One source of help is Goodwill Industries (<http://www.goodwill.org/>) which helps with job training and employment. Another resource is the Indiana Department of Workforce Development (<http://www.in.gov/dwd/>), a state agency that also helps with job placement.
- ◆ **Dependency:** many previous inmates have to adjust to moving away from an environment in which others take care of them. Self-care skills that others deem basic can be challenging to them. Inmates therefore have to redevelop basic autonomous life skills. Some programs assist with this, such as Bethlehem House (130 E. 30<sup>th</sup> St. in Indianapolis; telephone: 317-920-1519) and Homeless and Reentry Helpers (916 E Michigan St in Indianapolis; telephone: 317-635-0500). You can find others in several Indiana towns [here](#).
- ◆ **Recidivism:** 2/3 of all prisoners go back to prison within 3 years because crime becomes tempting when the challenges of reentry become overwhelming and old acquaintances encourage them to return to crime.
- ◆ **Relationship management:** previous inmates may lose considerable communication skills and be affected by the violence inherent to forceful incarceration. They have to struggle to regain self-confidence and the skills to build relationships in society.

- ◆ **Radicalization:** Most inmates convert to Islam in prison and may not have been exposed to the faith outside the context of incarceration. There is the possibility that they may be seduced by more extreme interpretations of Islam. It is therefore important to keep them involved and make them feel welcome in the masjid so they won't be influenced by extremists outside its context.

## Potential for success

In spite of all these challenges, previous inmates have managed to build decent lives, and some have even excelled. One brother received a PhD from IU Bloomington and went on to teach, another started a janitorial business that grew into a substantial company three years after his release. Another graduated from IUPUI with a business degree and is in the process of opening a business next to the university. And yet another owns his own barber shop. While the challenges are huge, everything is possible with determination and *iman*.

## Resources

- ◆ This website provides links to organizations that provide key services in different Indiana cities and towns:  
[http://www.sharenetworkusa.org/MentorMatching/match\\_client.aspx?OrgID=806&pv=true&src=resdir&refresid](http://www.sharenetworkusa.org/MentorMatching/match_client.aspx?OrgID=806&pv=true&src=resdir&refresid)
- ◆ The “Handbook of Help”: [www.chipindy.org](http://www.chipindy.org)
- ◆ Millati Islami program : <http://www.millatiislami.org/>
- ◆ the Indiana Sex and Violent Offender Registry: <http://www.icrimewatch.net/indiana.php>
- ◆ To understand the regulations governing programs in Indiana, check the *Indiana Access to Recovery Policies and Procedures Manual*, available at [https://secure.in.gov/fssa/dmha/files/INATR\\_Policies\\_and\\_Procedures\\_Manual\\_-\\_3-1-12.pdf](https://secure.in.gov/fssa/dmha/files/INATR_Policies_and_Procedures_Manual_-_3-1-12.pdf)
- ◆ Goodwill Industries: <http://www.goodwill.org/>
- ◆ The Indiana Department of Workforce Development: <http://www.in.gov/dwd/>

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*The Muslim Alliance of Indiana helps empower Indiana Muslim communities by disseminating important skills and knowledge that help them accomplish their goals. Visit us at [www.indianamuslims.org](http://www.indianamuslims.org)*