



Before You Train: Working with Incarcerated Populations

Thank you for your interest in bringing NAMI Connection Recovery support groups to jails and prisons in your community. Working effectively with people who are incarcerated requires more than your usual preparation. Typical training experiences and the trainer manual alone do not prepare trainers fully for this environment. To create the best possible experience for your trainers and soon-to-be facilitators, follow these steps first.

Determine the readiness of your NAMI community

Meet with the NAMI Affiliate board, staff and potential trainers and have an honest, open discussion about the possibility of doing this training. Just as there is stigma about mental health in our society, there is stigma about people who are incarcerated. Before you can decide whether and how to do a training, everyone involved needs to openly examine their beliefs.

Explore your feelings and attitudes towards incarcerated populations. Ask each other these questions:

- What assumptions do we have about incarceration?
- What stigmatizing beliefs do we have about people who are incarcerated?
- If anyone has faced trauma that might make them wary of trainees, staff or the facility itself, how can we adjust for this?
- Are there any criminal offenses that we'll have difficulty accepting as part of our trainees' situation? If so, how can we counteract this difficulty? How will we manage working with a trainee who is incarcerated for those crimes? How will we ensure we stay compassionate and respectful?
- Are we willing to welcome our trained facilitators when they are released from jail/prison? If we're afraid to, what are we afraid of and how can we counteract these fears? Are there any resources we can gather from other organizations? How can we provide an inclusive environment?

Your affiliate should be in a good emotional space before adapting NAMI Connection training for people who are incarcerated. NAMI Affiliates are not required to do this type of training. It is best for your NAMI organizations and for the people you're working to help, including people who are incarcerated, if you consider this carefully. Only begin this type of training when you feel confident in your ability to manage any challenges.

Recruiting trainers

Not every NAMI Connection trainer is a good fit for training people who are incarcerated. It's important to involve the right people so that everyone has a good experience. Prisons and jails can be stressful, unpredictable environments and trainers will have little control over the situation there. Trainers who are best suited to leading this training will be patient, flexible about changing plans and naturally calm under stress. It may also be advantageous for the trainer to be of the same gender as their trainees.

Consider discussing the questions below with each trainer who's interested to see whether they're a good fit. A trainer who is a good fit will be able to describe how they will address each situation below in a way that's calm, reasonable and impersonal.

How will you manage:

- A high-stress situation, such as a lockdown or physical violence?
- Self-care in a highly stimulating environment where you have little control (smells, noises, sights)?
- Difficult interactions, such as being spoken to inappropriately/catcalled by inmates or insulted by staff?
- Being told to follow orders and not ask questions?
- Not having your phone, or any other object that might be contraband?

You should also ask the trainer all of the questions presented in the board/staff discussion (see above) to see if the trainer can work with inmates in a nonjudgmental way. A positive, compassionate and humble attitude is critical to the success of the training.

Trainers should be willing and able to accompany the program coordinator to a site visit before doing the training.

Be aware that trainers who have a history of incarceration may not be allowed into the facility, depending on the facility's rules.

Arranging the training with facilities

- Making initial contact
 - Determine who is the best initial contact at the facility and market the idea of NAMI Connection Recovery Support Group to them. Offer outreach materials (see nami.org/extranet/cn and nami.org/store) and participant testimonies and be prepared to share parts of the model with them.
 - If your initial contact isn't interested, stay respectful and patient, but be persistent with your overall goal. There may be another person at the facility who is interested. Being allowed access to jails/prisons can take time and require some trust.

- Discuss facility staff's concerns with them
 - As a NAMI Program Coordinator, it's your job to discuss staff's concerns and see if NAMI Connection is a good fit for their facility. Common concerns include:
 - Medical staff may worry that support groups attempt to give professional or medical advice
 - Reassure them that facilitators do not intend to replace counseling and do not act as professionals. Assert that support groups will make their jobs easier by providing inmates with better coping skills and self-care techniques.
 - Wardens and correctional officers may worry about inmates being in a leadership role above other inmates
 - Reassure them that the facilitator role is not about being dominant or authoritative, but about creating a supportive environment for sharing and group wisdom
 - Invite staff to attend the training and watch so they can see how the training really works. This will help diminish their concerns. Consider giving a completion certificate to any staff member who completes the training (for example, NAMI Connection Champion).
- Arrange an onsite meeting and tour of the facility. This will familiarize your trainers with the layout and protocols of the location.
- Include your trainers on all communication with the facility, especially if they will not be accompanied by NAMI staff during the training
- Once you've set dates for training, continue communication with the facility to determine class size, room allocation, and facility rules. Talk with the trainers before the training to ensure they thoroughly understand the facility's rules and expectations.

Congratulations! You have a date to begin NAMI Connection training. Refer to the Cultural Competencies sheet for guidance on how to approach trainings in correctional facilities in a way that creates the most rewarding experience possible.