

The First Days

Ten things that matter most for families in the first days after a loved one is incarcerated

1 Don't panic-call the facility

Intake is chaotic and slow by design, not because something has gone wrong. Most questions get answered with a little patience — not with a dozen calls to the front desk.

2 Expect silence before you expect contact

Phone lists, mail, and visitation approval can take days to weeks to activate. A quiet stretch at the start almost never means something is wrong — it usually just means the system hasn't caught up yet.

3 Get money and ID paperwork moving early

Commissary funds, phone accounts, and visitor applications all take real processing time. Starting them the first week, even before you're sure how they'll be used, saves weeks later.

4 Learn this facility's specific rules before you show up

Dress codes, ID requirements, and visitation procedures vary by institution and change without much notice. Call or check the facility's website before every visit, not just the first one.

5 Assume every call and letter is being read

Calls are recorded and mail is screened. Keep sensitive legal, financial, or family matters off monitored lines, and never relay information on someone else's behalf without asking first.

6 Let them set the emotional pace

Many people go quiet or flat in the first weeks — it's a survival posture, not a sign they've stopped caring. Don't take distance personally, and don't force a conversation they're not ready for.

7 Take care of your own life first

You can't sustain years of visits, calls, and commissary support by running yourself into the ground in month one. Pace yourself the way you would for any long-term commitment.

8 Keep a paper trail of everything

Dates of calls, deposits, letters sent and received, and any conversation with staff. If a dispute ever comes up — about property, funds, or classification — your records will matter more than your memory.

9 Find your own support, not just theirs

A loved one's incarceration is its own trauma for the family left outside. Other families who've been through it — through a support group, a friend, or an organization like Oregon CURE — understand in a way most people won't.

10 Play the long game

A sentence is measured in years, not weeks. Build routines you can actually keep up — a regular call day, a monthly letter, a visit schedule — rather than an intensity you'll burn out on by spring.

A note for the person inside

Your family's steadiness matters too, and it's not automatic — it's something you help build together. Tell them plainly what you need and don't need. Give them room to have a hard day without assuming it's about you. And remember: the goal isn't just getting through the sentence, it's coming out the other side of it still knowing each other.