

Understanding Federal Prison Self-Surrender

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This document explains the self-surrender process, preparation timeline, intake procedures, and first-day expectations in federal prison.

For informational use only. This is not legal advice.

Self-surrender is a privilege, not a right. Judges grant self-surrender to defendants they trust to report voluntarily. Understanding the process and your obligations is essential.

Why judges grant self-surrender

Judges allow self-surrender when

- You've been out on bond without violations
- You're not a flight risk
- Your offense doesn't involve violence
- You have family and community ties
- You've demonstrated reliability throughout your case

If you violate bond conditions or fail to appear, the judge will issue a warrant and you'll be arrested rather than self-surrendering.

- Use the [Federal Prison Sentence Calculator](#) ->

Your surrender order

At sentencing, the judge tells you when and where to report. Within days, you receive paperwork from the probation office with specific instructions

- Facility name and address
- Date and time to report (usually noon)
- What to bring
- Who to contact with questions
- Consequences of failing to appear

If you can't make your surrender date

Medical emergencies or other extraordinary circumstances may warrant postponement. Your attorney must file an emergency motion explaining why you can't report and requesting a new date. Don't simply fail to appear. That guarantees arrest and eliminates future self-surrender privileges.

- Self-Surrender Date: When You Report

Judges typically give 30-90 days between sentencing and surrender. This time allows you to handle personal affairs, prepare your family, and organize for incarceration.

How judges decide surrender dates

Factors affecting your surrender date include

- Time needed for BOP designation
- Holidays and family events
- Your personal circumstances
- Court scheduling preferences
- Immediate custody risks

Standard surrender timeframes

Most defendants receive

- 30-45 days: Standard for straightforward cases
- 60-75 days: Common when more preparation time is needed

90+ days: Granted for medical issues, family circumstances, or complex business affairs

What if your facility isn't designated yet

Sometimes surrender dates arrive before BOP completes your designation. In these cases, you report to a nearby facility or the court designates a temporary location. The BOP transfers you to your permanent facility later.

- Preparing for Surrender: 90-Day Checklist

Three months before surrender, begin intensive preparation. This phase focuses on major tasks requiring significant time.

Medical and dental

- Complete comprehensive medical exam
- Address any necessary medical procedures
- Have dental work done (cleanings, fillings, extractions needed)
- Get eye exam and new glasses if needed
- Fill prescriptions you can bring (30-day supply maximum)
- Obtain copies of medical records
- Get doctor's letter listing current medications and conditions

Financial preparation

- Pay remaining restitution if possible
- Set up automatic bill payments
- Establish power of attorney for financial matters
- Update insurance beneficiaries
- Complete tax returns through current year
- Create family budget for your absence
- Close or modify accounts as needed
- Cancel subscriptions and recurring charges

Legal documents

- Execute power of attorney (financial and medical)
- Update or create will

- Review custody arrangements for minor children if applicable
- Ensure spouse/family can access necessary accounts
- Organize important documents in accessible location
- Make copies of sentencing paperwork

Family preparation

- Have honest discussions with spouse/partner about what's coming
- Talk to children age-appropriately
- Establish communication plans and schedules
- Identify family support systems
- Connect children with counseling if appropriate
- Plan for holidays and special events during your absence

Personal preparation

Read extensively about federal prison (books by Michael Santos, materials from White Collar Advice)

- Increase physical fitness through consistent exercise
- Practice meditation or stress management techniques
- Connect with others who've been through federal prison
- Mentally prepare for separation from family
- Develop plans for productive use of prison time
- Preparing for Surrender: 30-Day Checklist

One month before surrender, shift to final preparations and logistics.

Facility-specific preparation

- Research your designated facility thoroughly

- Read reviews and accounts from former prisoners (but take with a grain of salt)
- Understand security level and programs available
- Learn facility-specific rules and policies
- Contact the facility with any questions
- Confirm surrender instructions
- Create your release plan

Final medical tasks

- Schedule farewell appointments with doctors
- Ensure all prescriptions are current
- Get final dental cleaning
- Address any last-minute health concerns
- Pack 30-day supply of allowed medications in original bottles

Family affairs

- Quality time with immediate family
- Say goodbyes to extended family and friends
- Attend children's important events
- Create video or audio messages for family
- Write letters to be opened on birthdays/holidays
- Make photo albums or memory books

Business and employment

- Complete any final work obligations

- Hand off responsibilities properly
- Inform employer if you haven't already
- Collect final paychecks
- File necessary paperwork
- Tie up loose ends professionally

Financial final steps

- Confirm all automatic payments are set
- Give trusted person access to pay bills if needed
- Set up prison trust account funding with family
- Ensure family has adequate funds for your absence
- Pay outstanding debts if possible

Mental and emotional preparation

- Increase stress management practice
- Accept reality of what's coming
- Develop coping strategies for difficult moments
- Prepare mentally for first days in prison
- Practice mindfulness and staying present
- Make peace with the situation
- Preparing for Surrender: Final Week Checklist

The last week before surrender requires detailed attention to final logistics.

Final administrative tasks

- Reconfirm surrender date, time, and location
- Print all required paperwork
- Confirm transportation arrangements
- Pack carefully according to allowed items list
- Prepare money for commissary (if facility accepts it)
- Organize documents to bring

Final time with family

- Quality time with spouse and children
- Make final memories together
- Reinforce communication plans
- Reassure children you'll be fine
- Say goodbyes to close friends
- Attend any final important events

Final preparations

- Get haircut if needed
- Handle final personal grooming
- Ensure you're well-rested
- Eat well and stay hydrated
- Avoid alcohol or substances
- Practice staying calm and centered
- See the dentist

Packing

- Pack allowed items only (prescription glasses, medications, legal documents)
- Wear appropriate clothing for surrender
- Don't bring jewelry, electronics, excess cash
- Bring required identification
- Organize documents for easy access during processing

Mental preparation

- Accept what's about to happen
- Focus on getting through first 24 hours

Remember this is temporary; I promise this will end!

- Commit to making the most of the experience
- Trust your preparation
- Stay present and focus on what you can control
- What to Bring to Federal Prison (Allowed Items)

Federal prisons allow very limited personal items. Bringing unauthorized items causes problems during intake.

Items you CAN and SHOULD bring

Identification

- Government-issued photo ID (driver's license)
- Social Security card
- Birth certificate (recommended)

Legal documents

- Sentencing order and judgment

- Self-surrender instructions
- Attorney contact information
- Copies of important legal documents related to your case

Medical items

- Prescription medications in original bottles (30-day supply maximum)
- Prescription eyeglasses (no designer frames)
- Prescription contact lenses (limited supply)
- Doctor's letter listing medications and conditions
- Medical records for serious conditions

Money

- Cash for commissary deposit (facility-specific, often \$25-\$300)
- Check the facility's policy on accepting cash at intake

Clothing to wear

Simple, modest clothing (no designer labels, logos, colors suggesting gang affiliation)

- Comfortable shoes (no steel toes, will be taken)
- Wedding ring (plain band only, may be stored or worn depending on facility)

Nothing else. Any books, photos, letters, or personal items will be rejected and mailed home at your expense or discarded.

- What NOT to Bring to Federal Prison

**Bringing prohibited items causes delays, rejection, and problems.
Don't bring any of the following**

Absolutely prohibited

- Cell phones or any electronics

- Jewelry except plain wedding band
- Weapons of any kind
- Drugs or alcohol
- Tobacco or cigarettes
- Excessive cash (over facility limits)
- Credit cards or bank cards

Items that will be rejected

- Books or reading materials
- Photos or pictures
- Letters or cards
- Personal grooming items (provided by facility)
- Clothing beyond what you're wearing
- Food or snacks
- Vitamins or supplements
- Over-the-counter medications
- Religious items (except approved religious medallion)

Items causing problems

- Designer clothing or shoes
- Clothing with offensive words or images
- Anything suggesting gang affiliation

- Expensive watches
- Multiple rings or earrings
- Piercings (remove before surrender)

Everything you bring will be inventoried. Unauthorized items will be mailed home (if possible) or thrown away. Don't create problems on day one by bringing things you shouldn't.

- Self-Surrender Day: What to Expect

Understanding the surrender day process reduces anxiety. Here's exactly what happens from arrival to first night.

Arrival at the facility

Arrive on time (usually by noon). Don't be late. Pull up to the entrance and identify yourself to staff. Your family can accompany you to the facility but cannot enter with you. Say your goodbyes in the parking lot.

Initial check-in

Officers verify your identity and surrender paperwork. They confirm you're expected and have proper documentation. This takes 15-30 minutes. You wait in a holding area during initial processing.

Property inventory

Staff inventory everything you brought. They determine what's allowed and what must be sent home. Authorized items are stored or issued to you later. Your clothing and shoes are taken. You receive prison-issued clothing.

Strip search

You'll undergo a complete strip search. This is standard security procedure for everyone entering the facility. Officers are professional but the process is uncomfortable and humiliating. It's necessary for institutional security. Stay calm and follow instructions.

Medical screening

Medical staff conduct basic screening including

- Vital signs check
- Brief medical history
- Verification of medications

- Screening for contagious diseases
- Mental health screening questions

Be honest about medical and mental health issues. Don't minimize conditions requiring treatment.

Photographs and fingerprints

You're photographed for your prison ID and fingerprinted for records. This is routine administrative processing.

Initial housing assignment

You're assigned to temporary housing in R&D (Receiving and Discharge) or a holding unit. This isn't your permanent housing. You'll move to regular population after processing completes.

First evening

You receive bedding, hygiene items, and prison clothing. Staff explain basic rules and count procedures. You're exhausted, disoriented, and overwhelmed. This is normal. Focus on getting through first night.

- Transportation to Federal Prison

Getting to your designated facility requires planning. You're responsible for arranging transportation.

Who drives you

Most defendants have family members drive them to the facility. This allows final private time together and emotional support. Saying goodbye in the parking lot is extremely difficult but provides closure.

Driving yourself

Some defendants drive themselves and leave their car in the facility parking lot or nearby. This works if you have someone who can retrieve your vehicle later.

What to tell family about the drive

The drive to the facility is emotionally intense. Prepare family for

- You may be quiet or emotional
- Final conversations and reassurances
- Saying goodbye in the parking lot
- What happens after you walk through the doors

- When they should expect your first call

Arriving on time

Arrive 15-30 minutes before your surrender time. Don't be hours early. You'll wait in the parking lot. Don't be late. Late arrival causes problems and looks bad.

What happens to your car

If someone drove you, they take the car home. If you drove yourself, arrange for someone to pick up the vehicle shortly after you surrender. Most facilities don't allow cars to sit in parking lots long-term.

- Processing and Intake at Federal Prison

R&D (Receiving and Discharge) processing takes 2-5 days. During this time, you're evaluated, classified, and oriented to the facility.

What happens during R&D

Day 1 (Surrender day)

- Initial check-in and strip search
- Property inventory
- Medical screening
- Photographs and fingerprints
- Temporary housing assignment
- Basic orientation to immediate rules

Days 2-3

- Comprehensive interviews with staff
- Psychological screening
- Substance abuse assessment (important for RDAP eligibility)
- Education level verification

- Work skills assessment
- Security classification review
- Financial responsibility program enrollment

Days 3-5

- Orientation sessions on facility rules
- Safety information and emergency procedures
- Program opportunities explained
- Commissary and phone account setup
- Email account creation (TRULINCS)
- Final housing assignment
- Move to permanent housing unit

Information you'll provide

Staff will ask detailed questions about

- Your offense and criminal history
- Substance abuse history (be honest for RDAP eligibility)
- Mental health history
- Education and employment background
- Family and emergency contacts
- Medical needs and conditions
- Religious preferences
- Gang affiliations (answer "none" unless true)

Be completely honest during screening. What you say affects program eligibility, security classification, and services you receive. As explained in the RDAP program guide, honest disclosure of substance abuse during intake is critical for RDAP acceptance.

- **First 24 Hours in Federal Prison**

Your first day in prison is overwhelming. Understanding what happens helps you handle it better.

First hours after surrender

You're exhausted from the emotional toll and stress. Processing takes hours. You may not eat until evening. You receive basic necessities (bedding, soap, toothbrush, prison clothing). Staff explain immediate rules: when counts happen, how to address officers, basic movement restrictions. Regardless of how you feel, do not make this mistake.

First count

Count procedures happen multiple times daily. Everyone must be in their assigned location, standing or sitting quietly. Officers walk through and count inmates. This takes 15-30 minutes. Don't talk or move during count.

First meal

Prison food can be good or bad. First meal is often dinner since you will get to the prison in the early afternoon. The cafeteria aka dining room is loud and chaotic. Eat what you can. Don't comment on food quality or complain. Stay quiet and observe.

First night

Sleeping can be difficult. You're in a new environment, stressed, missing family, and surrounded by noise. You're issued a thin mattress, sheets, blanket, and pillow. The lights don't go completely out. Other prisoners snore, talk, and move around. You may not sleep well. That's normal.

First morning

Wake up early, around 5:00-6:00 AM. Focus on your release plan, your 1,000 minutes. Attend any required orientation sessions. Follow all instructions immediately. Stay quiet and observe everything. Study your environment, lay low.

Emotional state

You'll feel

- Confused, but optimistic if you prepared properly
- Anxious to start implementing your plan
- Gratitude, if you planned well

- Overwhelmed by rules and procedures
- Worried about family

Confident in your ability to thrive in prison, if you prepared properly. If not, more pain to come. Every prisoner experiences some of these feelings. them. Embrace them and prosper.

- Calling Family After Surrender

Your first call home reassures family you're okay but may not happen immediately.

When you can call

Most facilities allow you to set up phone access during R&D processing, usually within 24-48 hours (I called home the day I surrendered). You need to

- Create a PAC number (PIN for phone system)
- Register approved phone numbers
- Have money in your phone account
- Find an available phone

How the phone system works

The first 300 phone minutes are paid for by the prison if you are pursuing First Step Act programming. Additional minutes you pay for. You will have 510 minutes a month, or about 17 minutes a day. The call from prison will show up as either a private caller block or 202 number. Only you can call out!

Your first call home

Keep it brief and positive

- Tell family you're okay
- Explain you're going through processing
- Give them basic information about how to reach you
- Reassure children you're fine

- Don't discuss your case

Don't complain about conditions and do not talk too loudly on the phone.

Keep it under 15 minutes, if lines are forming.

- Mental Preparation for Self-Surrender

Mental preparation matters as much as practical preparation. Defendants who prepare psychologically handle surrender better.

Accepting reality

Stop thinking "maybe something will happen and I won't have to go." You're going. Acceptance reduces anxiety. Fighting reality creates suffering.

Managing fear

Your fears about prison are probably worse than reality, especially at minimum security camps. Yes, parts of prison are difficult. No, it's not the nightmare you're imagining. Most people at camps are focused on getting home, just like you.

Common fears vs. reality

Fear: Constant violence Reality: Violence is rare at camps and low security facilities. You're more likely to be bored than attacked.

Fear: I won't survive Reality: You will survive. Millions of people have done this. You will too.

Fear: My family will fall apart Reality: Families are resilient. Yours will adjust. Staying connected helps everyone cope.

Fear: I'll lose everything Reality: You'll lose time and freedom. Everything else can be rebuilt after release.

Focusing on what you can control

You can't control when you surrender or how long you serve. You can control

- Your attitude and mindset
- How you use your time
- Staying connected to family
- Maintaining dignity and integrity

- Preparing for life after release

Visualization

- Practice visualizing yo