THE #FKLM FAMILY BLUEPRINT

Locating an Incarcerated Loved One

Legal & Policy Literacy · Staying Connected During Incarceration

How federal and state locator systems work, and what to expect from each.

IN THIS GUIDE

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- Information you need before you search
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A free guide from My Fairy GodParents — for youth impacted by parental incarceration, justice-impacted youth, and the caregivers and families who support them.
myfairygodparents.org/resources/family-blueprint

Print, write on it, and share it with the people helping your family.

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THE DIFFERENCE THIS MAKES

One of the first and most disorienting tasks a family faces is simply finding out where someone is being held. Custody status changes fast in the early days after an arrest — a person can move from a local jail to a county facility to a state or federal system within days — and information does not always travel to family members automatically.

The system you need to search depends on who has custody: local and county jails, state departments of corrections, federal Bureau of Prisons, and immigration detention are separate systems with separate locator tools, and a search in the wrong one will simply come back empty rather than telling you to look elsewhere.

This lesson lays out the general locator paths so you know where to start and what information you need on hand. It cannot tell you where a specific person is being held; only the relevant system can.

MATCH THE SEARCH TO THE LIKELY CUSTODY LEVEL

If someone was recently arrested, start with the county or city jail's own inmate locator, often available on the county sheriff's website. Many counties also run a phone line for this purpose. This is the right first stop for anyone in the days immediately following an arrest.

If the person has been sentenced or transferred to state custody, the relevant search is the state department of corrections' inmate locator, usually a searchable database on the department's website. Every state runs its own, under its own name.

If the case is federal, the Federal Bureau of Prisons maintains an online inmate locator that covers people in federal custody, including those recently sentenced who may still show as awaiting designation to a specific facility.

If the person may be in immigration custody, search is done through U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's online detainee locator, which is a separate system from criminal custody and requires different identifying information.

+ INFORMATION YOU NEED BEFORE YOU SEARCH

Full legal name as it appears on identification, including any middle name — locator tools often require an exact or near-exact match and can miss a person searched under a nickname.

Date of birth, which most locator systems use to narrow results when a name is common.

If you have it, a booking number, inmate number, or case number from an arrest report, court document, or bail paperwork; this makes the search faster and more reliable than name alone, though it is often not yet available in the first hours.

Approximate date and location of arrest, which helps you identify which county or jurisdiction's system to search first.

+ WHEN ONLINE TOOLS DO NOT TURN UP AN ANSWER

Some jails update their locator systems on a delay, so a person may not appear online for the first day or two after booking. If nothing appears immediately, that does not necessarily mean the information is wrong — it may mean the system has not caught up.

Calling the county jail or sheriff's department directly, and giving the full name and date of birth, is a reliable fallback when the online tool comes up empty. Court clerks can also confirm whether a case has been filed and where, which points to the custodial agency.

A public defender or private attorney assigned to the case, once known, is often the fastest source of current custody information, since they receive it directly from the court and jail.

+ ONCE YOU FIND THEM, CONFIRM YOU HAVE CURRENT INFORMATION

Custody status and location can change again — a transfer, a court date, a plea, or a sentencing can move a person to a new facility with little notice to family. Treat a located result as current only as of the date you checked it, and check again before relying on it for a visit or mailing.

Write down the exact facility name, address, and any identification number as soon as you find them; mail and phone accounts are often set up using this exact information, and small discrepancies can delay both.

+ THREE SYSTEMS, ONE WEEKEND

A woman's nephew was arrested on a Friday night. She searched the county jail's online locator Saturday morning and found him listed, with a booking number, held on local charges. She used that booking number to set up a phone account that afternoon.

By Monday he had been transferred to state custody on an unrelated outstanding warrant, and the county jail's site no longer listed him. She called the county jail directly, was told he had been transferred, and was given the name of the state agency to check next.

She searched the state department of corrections' locator that afternoon and found his new facility. The whole process took a confusing weekend, but each step — the county site, the phone call, the state site — was the right next move given what she knew at the time.

+ WORDS YOU CAN USE

Calling a county jail to ask about a recent booking

"I'm trying to confirm the custody status of [full legal name], date of birth [date]. Can you tell me whether he or she is currently held there, and if so, what the booking number is?"

Calling after someone no longer appears in a jail's system

"I previously located [name] at your facility and he or she no longer appears on your online system. Can you tell me whether there was a transfer, and if so, to which agency or facility?"

Asking a court clerk where a case is filed

"I'm trying to find out which facility is currently holding [name]. Can you tell me whether there's a case filed under that name in this court, and which agency has custody?"

Asking a defense attorney for current location

"Can you confirm where [name] is currently being held? I want to make sure our mailing address and phone account information are current."

+ LOCATING SOMEONE IN CUSTODY

- [ ] Write down the full legal name, date of birth, and any booking or case number you have.
- [ ] Identify the likely custody level: local/county jail, state, federal, or immigration detention.
- [ ] Search the matching locator: county sheriff's site, state department of corrections, federal Bureau of Prisons, or ICE detainee locator.
- [ ] If nothing appears, wait a day and try again before assuming the information is wrong.
- [ ] Call the county jail or sheriff's department directly if the online tool does not return a result.
- [ ] Ask a court clerk to confirm where a case is filed if custody status is unclear.
- [ ] Record the exact facility name, address, and identification number once found.
- [ ] Re-check location before relying on it for a visit, mailing, or phone account setup, since transfers happen without notice to family.

REFLECT AND WRITE

Do I have the full legal name, date of birth, and any identifying numbers written down in one place?

Which custody system is most likely to have current information right now?

Have I confirmed the facility information recently, or am I relying on something I found weeks ago?

Who else — a court clerk, an attorney, the person themselves — could confirm this faster than searching alone?

YOUR NEXT STEP

Identify whether the facility is federal, state, or county before searching further.

WHERE THIS COMES FROM

Source: Federal Bureau of Prisons — verified August 2026. Curated and summarized by MFGP.
https://www.bop.gov/inmateloc/
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You do not have to do this alone.

More free guides, scripts, and checklists:
myfairygodparents.org/resources/family-blueprint