

# Va. organization helps formerly incarcerated people get fresh start

By [Liz Anderson](#) | May 13, 2018 11:26 pm

WASHINGTON — As returning citizens transition into society after serving time, it can be an uphill climb for those determined to rebuild their lives. FailSafe ERA, a Fredericksburg, Virginia-based organization, was started to help ease the path.

FailSafe ERA was born of a mother's pain. It stemmed from her firstborn child's mistake — right as his adult life was supposed to begin.

"He had graduated from high school, made a bad decision, and as a result of that bad decision he lost a basketball scholarship and wound up serving three years in federal prison," FailSafe ERA founder Juanita Shanks told WTOP. She started the organization in 2009, two years after her son's three-year prison sentence ended.

Even though the [Pew Research Center reports the incarceration rate in the U.S.](#) is at a two-decade-low, there were more than 2.2 million people behind bars at the end of 2016. [According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics](#), 57,000 of those people were incarcerated in Virginia's local jails and prisons during that time frame.

ERA stands for educate, reform and align.

Each of FailSafe [ERA's programs aims](#) educate clients and their family members who have been affected by incarceration, while helping to reform those who are willing to seek a new, positive trajectory and to align the formerly incarcerated person with values that will help them to be more productive in their new lives.

"As we walked through this process, we didn't have a FailSafe ERA out here to help us understand how much it costs to pay for a lawyer, what lawyer is a good lawyer, how do you even cope with having an incarcerated son," Shanks said. "So as I searched for other organizations (and) other people who might be able to help me walk through this process, there were none."

Shanks said she eventually paid attention to her internal instinct, "which is my God." That instinct urged her to do something to fill the void she discovered while

grappling with life before, during and after her son's incarceration. "And that something was to start an organization to help people who are like me."

But there was a learning curve.

"What I had to learn was that in order for me to really, really get to the family members, I had to reach the inmate first." So she started going into the jails to connect with them.

As a result, "I was able to get more family member involvement, not necessarily to come to a support group, but they wanted to become more involved in the organization to make a difference for their family member that's incarcerated," she said.

Counseling for returning citizens and their families is one of Failsafe ERA's key programs, along with [Personal Resiliency training](#) that, according to the FailSafe ERA's website "will ultimately address the top (8) criminogenic factors ... which causes individuals to return to prison, according to the Virginia Department of Corrections."

They also help clients search for work.

"We have job fairs for people who are looking for employment who are returning citizens, and we have employers there who are willing to hire these people and give them a second chance," said James Baron, the organization's director of communications.

FailSafe ERA also helps returning citizens get back on their feet in myriad other ways — from basic transitional housing and transportation and even a Toastmaster's program.

"As we might know, when they're incarcerated, they learn a whole new language," Shanks said. "This helps them with their speaking and leadership skills."

There are also educational scholarships opportunities for returning citizens and their families.