

Use the talking points and/or sample letter below to persuade your member of Congress to eliminate a harmful ban on food stamp eligibility for people convicted of felony drug offenses.

Call the Capitol Switchboard at (202) 224-3121 or email your [Representative](#).

### **Talking Points**

I urge you to co-sponsor the Food Assistance to Improve Reintegration Act of 2009 (H.R. 329) in the U.S. House of Representatives.

- 1) Since the 1996 passage of the welfare reform act, by law a person may not receive benefits through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (commonly known as food stamps) once he or she has been convicted of a drug felony. H.R. 329 would eliminate this provision of the act.
- 2) The ban on eligibility for people with drug convictions lasts a lifetime unless a state legislature modifies the ban to apply only in certain circumstances, or eliminates the ban entirely. No other criminal conviction results in such a ban.
- 3) According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 11 states maintain a lifetime ban for food stamp eligibility for people convicted of drug felonies, for offenses including possession, use and distribution. Twenty-one states maintain partial bans, such as permitting eligibility for persons convicted of drug possession but not sale, or for persons enrolled in drug treatment programs.
- 4) Denying food stamp benefits to people convicted of drug offenses is an excessive and ineffective crime control strategy. The policy increases the risk of recidivism by making it more difficult for people to transition into the community after incarceration and become rehabilitated.
- 5) Women with children are especially impacted. Mothers in prison are usually the primary caregiver prior to incarceration. Without food assistance after incarceration, reuniting with their children may be more difficult and prolong the reintegration process.
- 6) The ban undermines drug treatment by taking money away from substance abuse centers that depend on that assistance to cover nutrition costs for its residential treatment programs.

### *Sample Letter*

Dear Representative:

I am writing because I am concerned that the federal government is permanently denying those who have been convicted of felony drug offenses, and served their time in prison, access to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, commonly known as food stamps. The Food Assistance to Improve Reintegration Act of 2009

(H.R. 329), sponsored by Representative Barbara Lee, seeks to eliminate this overly punitive ban. I urge you to support successful reintegration for people convicted of drug offenses by co-sponsoring H.R. 329.

Since 1996 federal law has denied some of the poorest and most vulnerable people access to food stamps and therefore, access to a second chance after incarceration. People convicted of felony drug offenses, including possession, use and low-level distribution, are subject to a lifetime ban on food stamps under the welfare reform act. The ban may only be lifted if a state legislature eliminates it or modifies it to apply only in certain circumstances. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 11 states maintain a lifetime ban for food stamp eligibility for people convicted of drug felonies and 21 states maintain partial bans.

Those denied food assistance have already served their time and paid their debt to society. Now, after they've been released and are trying to get back on their feet the federal government has taken away one of the most important tools that could help them reintegrate and become productive members of society. This ban affects only low-income persons with a drug conviction, not wealthy drug offenders who would not require food stamp benefits. Moreover, women with children are especially impacted. Mothers in prison are usually the primary caregiver prior to incarceration. Without food assistance after incarceration, reuniting with their children may be more difficult and prolong the reintegration process.

The food stamp ban also undermines drug treatment for two reasons. First, most under-funded substance abuse centers depend on the money from residents' food stamps to pay for the residents' food while at the facility. Second, people newly released from prison often face significant financial hardships, including finding employment and housing, accessing medical and mental health treatment and affording nutritious foods. Denying basic needs to this vulnerable population may contribute to crime and incarceration.

I support the Food Assistance to Improve Reintegration Act because it would eliminate the federal ban on food stamp eligibility for people convicted of a drug felony. Denying food stamp benefits to people convicted of drug offenses is an excessive and ineffective crime control strategy.

At this time of economic hardship, eliminating this unjustifiable ban on food stamp assistance is the right thing to do. Congress must act now. Please co-sponsor the Food Assistance to Improve Reintegration Act of 2009 (H.R. 329).

Sincerely,

[Name]