



A big win for second chances: The end of Alabama's lifetime SNAP and TANF bans

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It's a quiet win for thousands of Alabamians seeking to rebuild their lives and provide for their families: Alabama is joining the majority of U.S. states by allowing people with a past felony drug conviction to receive SNAP food assistance and TANF financial assistance, as long as they are otherwise eligible. The effective starting date for this change is Jan. 30, 2016.

Alabama's lifetime public assistance bans grew out of the 1996 federal welfare reform law. The law bars anyone convicted of a drug-related felony from ever receiving benefits under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), commonly known as food stamps, or the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, often called welfare. But the law does allow states to request a waiver from this restriction, and most have done so. Alabama's change was included in the 2015 prison reform law sponsored by Sen. Cam Ward, R-Alabaster, thanks to a floor amendment offered by Sen. Linda Coleman, D-Birmingham.

Both SNAP and TANF still place special conditions on people who have a drug felony in their past. To receive assistance, applicants must have completed their sentences or be in compliance with any probation requirements. A person with a drug conviction in the last five years may be required to pass a drug test to receive TANF benefits in Alabama. (Federal law prohibits drug testing of SNAP recipients.) And of course, an applicant must be otherwise eligible to receive SNAP or TANF benefits and must comply with the same work or reporting requirements required of any recipient.

People who previously were denied SNAP or TANF benefits because of a felony drug conviction can apply at their local Department of Human Resources (DHR) office any time after Feb. 1. Households that already receive SNAP or TANF but have a household member who is not included in the "assistance unit" because of a drug conviction can report the newly eligible person to their caseworker for inclusion in the unit. The increase in the number of people in the unit could increase benefits, though any income from the newly eligible person also would be counted when calculating benefits.

The end of Alabama's SNAP and TANF bans is good news for state budgets and for families. This policy change will help cut corrections costs in the cash-strapped General Fund budget by making it easier for released prisoners to reintegrate into the community, which will help reduce recidivism. Importantly, restoring SNAP and TANF benefits also will help prevent hunger and homelessness among some of Alabama's most vulnerable families.