

Georgia Should Allow Ex-Drug Offenders to Receive Food Stamps

By Dr. Brian McGregor

ATLANTA - Spending on corrections exceeds \$1 billion a year in Georgia, while education and other social services are absorbing significant cuts. It's time to reform the correctional system that is in the top 10 of the highest incarceration rates in the country by making wiser decisions on sentencing and on how ex-offenders are re-entered into their communities.

The State Legislature should take swift action on an important measure that wouldn't cost the state a dime, but would be very beneficial. By joining other states in allowing drug felons to receive food stamps, Georgia could reduce its future prison population, while increasing the likelihood that former drug offenders will be productive members of society once again.

Today, Georgia is one of only 10 states along with Alabama, Alaska, Delaware, Mississippi, Missouri, South Carolina, Texas, West Virginia and Wyoming that don't allow drug offenders to receive food stamps. When welfare reform – the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act - was enacted in 1996, it included provisions preventing drug offenders from receiving food stamps (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) and cash assistance (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families). The reasoning was that these lifetime bans would prevent substance abusers from using public assistance for drugs.

But over time, most states have concluded the bigger risk is that withholding food stamps and benefits creates an environment in which drug offenders are more likely to return to crime to feed themselves and their families. Furthermore, the restrictive bans fail to consider that some ex-offenders have been rehabilitated. Many women are impacted because they return from prison without the resources needed to help feed and care for their families. With federal law allowing states to opt-out of the bans, 15 states and the District of Columbia now allow drug offenders to be eligible for food stamps; 25 others have made modifications that allow eligibility if certain conditions, such as receiving treatment, are met. A similar number of states also allow drug offenders to receive other forms of public assistance.

Georgia lawmakers may have concerns that removing the ban would increase the federal budget deficit by expanding the food stamp program, but the money would be well spent: it would help reduce state spending on corrections. Drug offenders may be less likely to be re-incarcerated for new crimes if they have assistance in feeding themselves and their families. In fact, the average cost per year for the food stamp benefit in Georgia is \$3,639 per household, while it cost the state \$17, 505 a year for each prison inmate.

Clearly, Georgia must find effective ways to reduce the number of repeat offenders and the costs associated with maintaining correctional facilities. But to accomplish that goal the state must reduce the barriers that people face upon reentry to their communities. The nation's recidivism rate of 50 percent underscores how difficult it is to prevent ex-offenders from

returning to prison. In Georgia, 29% of drug-users who served time in state prison are re-incarcerated.

Ex-offenders face many challenges when they are released.

They are routinely released into environments where they are unemployed, in need of medical care and returning to families already suffering financial strains. Some have health problems, such as diabetes, that worsen without proper nutrition. They often become an added burden in their homes, another mouth to be fed, until they can find work. Food stamp eligibility, as well as other public assistance, could ease their transition and reduce family tensions.

Georgia lawmakers are expected to file legislation this year allowing drug offenders to be eligible for food stamps. There is very little cost for states when expanding food stamp eligibility, yet much to gain. Food stamps are 100 percent federally funded, with the federal government also sharing the administrative costs.

What's clear is that taxpayers in states, such as Georgia, can no longer afford mass incarceration. Data shows that 753 out every 100,000 people in the U.S. are incarcerated at a total direct cost of about \$75 billion a year.

Across the country, nearly one million inmates a year are released into their communities, a number expected to grow. The overwhelming majority need education, training and counseling to find jobs and overcome other challenges. It is less expensive for states to invest in improving reentry assistance, than continuing to build prisons.

To be sure, providing access to food stamps and public assistance is just one step in creating an environment for successful reentry. But it can be an important step in helping drug offenders reconnect with their families, while becoming productive in their community.