

Re-Entry & Access to Food Stamps

The Texas Catholic Conference **supports** efforts to assist in the **transition of ex-offenders into society, including the opt-out of ban on drug felons receiving food stamps and student loans.**

We are still a long way from the time when our conscience can be certain of having done everything possible to prevent crime and to control it effectively so that it no longer does harm and, at the same time, to offer to those who commit crimes a way of redeeming themselves and making a positive return to society. If all those in some way involved in the problem...perhaps humanity as a whole could take a great step forward in creating a more serene and peaceful society. *(Pope John Paul II, Jubilee in Prisons)*

A Texas Bishop Speaks:

"Above all it is important that steps be taken so that the ex-offender may return to the community and a normal life. Local communities will need assistance from persons of good will to learn to accept the ex-offenders back into their midst."



-Bishop Mark Seitz, Diocese of Dallas

Church Teaching

- ★ Since nearly all inmates will return to society, prisons must be places where offenders are challenged, encouraged, and rewarded for efforts to change their behaviors and attitudes, and where they learn the skills needed for employment and life in community. We call upon government to redirect the vast amount of public resources away from building more and more prisons and toward better and more effective programs aimed at crime prevention, rehabilitation, education efforts, substance abuse treatment, and programs of probation, parole, and reintegration. *(USCCB, Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice)*
- ★ To make prison life more human it is more important than ever to take practical steps to enable prisoners as far as possible to engage in work which keeps them from the degrading effects of idleness. They could be given access to a process of training which would facilitate their re-entry into the workforce when they have served their time. Nor should the psychological assistance which can help resolve personality problems be overlooked. Prison should not be a corrupting experience, a place of idleness and even vice, but instead a place of redemption. *(Pope John Paul II, Jubilee in Prisons)*
- ★ Persons suffering from chemical dependency should have access to the treatment that could free them and their families from the slavery of addiction, and free the rest of us from the crimes they commit to support this addiction. This effort will require adequate federal, state, and local resources for prevention and treatment for substance abusers. Not providing these resources now will cost far more in the long run. Substance abusers should not have to be behind bars in order to receive treatment for their addictive behavior. *(USCCB, Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice)*

Resources

- ★ **Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice** (USCCB) (www.usccb.org/sdwp/criminal.shtml)
- ★ **Restore Justice** offers resources and services and educational information for anyone who is affected by crime (www.RestoreJustice.com)
- ★ **Texas Department of Criminal Justice** (www.tdcj.state.tx.us)

The Texas Catholic Conference (TCC) is the association of the 15 Roman Catholic dioceses of the State of Texas, and is the Official Public Policy Voice of the Catholic Bishops of Texas.

Andrew Rivas, Executive Director • Jennifer Carr Allmon, Associate Director • Margaret McGettrick, Education Director

Re-Entry and Access to Food Stamps and Federal Student Loansⁱ

We must ensure that previously incarcerated individuals have what is their basic human right, that which is needed to live a dignified life, including transitional housing, food, and health care. We must in particular address the needs of the poor, because former offenders living in poverty without their basic needs met may be driven towards recommitting crimes. We must ensure the common good, by providing former offenders with career training, mental health services, basic needs, and family support that will allow them to avoid committing new crimes and instead lead productive, healthy lives.

Each year since 1998, more than 630,000 prisoners reenter society with a chance to begin again and build a new role for themselves in their communities (U.S. Department of Justice). Yet, because few of them receive quality, continuous rehabilitation and support services both in prison and as they transition back to life in the community, nearly two-thirds are arrested for a felony or serious misdemeanor within three years of release. These men and women often face a multitude of difficulties upon reentry, including lack of food and clothing, job skills, affordable housing, ties to family and friends, health care and prescriptions, or mental health services. It is little wonder that many find reentry daunting and are pulled back into a familiar pattern of criminal activity.

Currently, Texans with prior drug felony convictions that occurred after August 22, 1996 are banned from ever receiving food stamps or TANF cash assistance. Unless states enact legislation to opt out of, or modify, the ban, federal law requires states to impose a lifetime ban on the receipt of TANF cash assistance and food stamps for those individuals who have been convicted of drug felonies for conduct that occurred after August 22, 1996. This is a lifetime ban—even if an ex-offender has completed his or her sentence, overcome an addiction, been employed but got laid off, or earned a certificate of rehabilitation. This ban clashes with the Christian concepts of forgiveness and mercy, and reduces the human dignity of those who are banned from receiving aid. In addition, this ban affects the children and sometimes spouses of those prohibited from receiving assistance, as dependants cannot claim assistance on their own. In addition, the need for nutritional assistance does not go away, and these individuals seek assistance from other state and local resources which are already being stretched in attempts to meet the need of others. Since the food stamp program is 100% federally funded, requiring no state match, this would help individuals with prior felony drug convictions who have taken necessary steps toward rehabilitation to meet their nutritional needs without having to access assistance from limited state or local resources.

Failed reentry costs our communities by straining family relationships, consuming tax dollars, and threatening public safety. There are currently more than 2 million children separated from an incarcerated parent. Each of these parents cost society an average of \$22,650 a year to hold in prison. Around 75% of those leaving prison have a history of drug or alcohol use, yet few receive treatment services. Despite the great need, only 6% of prison budgets were spent on treatment, education and vocational programs in 1996. Successful reentry programs, especially those that strengthen family and community ties while providing prisoners with services and mental health or substance abuse treatment, can make all the difference for these former prisoners and our communities.

The Texas Catholic Conference supports:

- Access to food stamps, as well as student loans, for those with previous drug felonies, Legislation to remove barriers to reintegration including the areas of (a) educational and/or vocational training, (b) transportation, (c) financial difficulty, (d) housing, (e) locating support services, (f) rehabilitative services and/or aftercare, and (g) obtaining identification.
- Policies to rehabilitate ex-offenders and prevent recidivism.
- Funding for substance abuse and mental health treatment and prescription drugs for those exiting the prison system.

(Last updated August 10, 2010, 82nd Legislative Session)

ⁱ"Special Populations: Prisoner Re-Entry." *Catholic Charities USA - Working to Reduce Poverty in America*. Web. 11 Aug. 2010. <www.catholiccharitiesusa.org/NetCommunity/Page.aspx?pid=654>