

May 23, 2013

The Honorable Harry Reid  
Majority Leader  
U.S. Senate  
S-221, The Capitol  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow  
Chairwoman  
U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry  
328A Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

RE: Diverse Organizations Oppose Ban on Food Assistance for People with Certain Convictions

Dear Leader Reid and Chairwoman Stabenow:

Our diverse civil rights, labor, and criminal justice advocacy organizations, representing the interests of individuals and families throughout the United States, strongly oppose Senator Vitter's amendment 1056 to S.954, the Agriculture Reform, Food, and Jobs Act. This hastily considered amendment would deny food assistance through SNAP, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, for life to anyone ever convicted of certain offenses. In addition, it would result in lower SNAP benefits for children and other family members of people convicted of such offenses. Our organizations urge you to reject this cruel and unjust amendment before voting on final passage of the Farm Bill this week. This is not an issue that should be addressed in conference between the House and Senate on the Farm Bill. It is something that needs to be fixed right now in the Senate's version of the Farm Bill.

Vitter amendment 1056 would impose a burden on thousands of seniors, children, and working families hardest hit by the nation's economic downturn. Because it is retroactive, an elderly person who long ago completed his or her prison sentence could lose SNAP benefits under this amendment. A grandmother who decades ago was implicated in a violent crime could lose food stamps for her household. A family working to make ends meet upon a relative's reentry from prison could be denied a lifeline and plunged further into poverty.

Moreover, this amendment would have a harsh impact on communities of color – African Americans and Latinos in particular – who are disproportionately affected by the criminal justice system. Research documents that race continues to play a role at each stage of the criminal justice system in driving unwarranted disparities.

Finally, the amendment is counterproductive, as it places yet another hurdle before formerly incarcerated individuals struggling to reenter society. Individuals with criminal records already confront thousands of federal, state, and local legal and policy barriers to employment, education, housing, and public benefits. Because of these and other barriers, unemployment is particularly high among this population, and many individuals struggle to provide for themselves and their families. The Interagency Reentry Council has urged federal agencies and state attorneys general to reduce or eliminate counterproductive collateral consequences that do not enhance public safety, such as barriers to public

assistance that make it harder for people to meet their most basic needs. Amendment 1056 would add another such counterproductive barrier to the federal code at a time when a bipartisan consensus is forming around the need to support successful reentry strategies.

Our organizations urge you to reject this harmful and racially discriminatory amendment so that it does not become law.

Sincerely,

All of Us or None  
American Civil Liberties Union  
Beyond Bars  
Brave New Foundation  
Center for Community Alternatives  
CLASP  
College and Community Fellowship  
Community Service Society  
Desiree Alliance  
Direct Action for Rights and Equality  
Families Against Stop and Frisk  
FedCURE  
Heartland Alliance for Human Needs and Human Rights  
International Community Corrections Association  
Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights of the San Francisco Bay Area  
Legal Action Center  
Legal Services for Prisoners with Children  
Michigan League for Public Policy  
NAACP  
NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc.  
National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers  
National Association of Social Workers  
National Employment Law Project (NELP)  
National H.I.R.E. Network  
National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty  
National Transitional Jobs Network  
National Workrights Institute  
North Carolina Justice Center  
Robert F. Kennedy Juvenile Justice Collaborative  
Sargent Shriver National Center on Poverty Law  
The Sentencing Project  
Solano County Health and Social Services  
Solano County Public Defender's Office  
Southern Coalition for Social Justice  
TASC, Inc.  
University of Maryland Francis King Carey School of Law Reentry Clinic