

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE



REPRESENTATIVE GERAN TARR

H.B. 347

“Allowing Food Stamp Benefits for Rehabilitated Felons”

Sponsor Statement

As part of the landmark welfare reform of 1996, President Clinton enacted a punitive measure permitting states to deny welfare benefits and food stamps to people convicted of felony drug crimes. Individual states were given the option to opt out and provide full public benefits to felony drug offenders; states could also partially opt out by only denying benefits for a limited time or by requiring drug and alcohol treatment. The provision was enacted based on reports that people were selling or trading food stamps for drugs. Notably, it does not affect benefits for those convicted of murder, armed robbery, rape, or child abuse.

Fast forward a decade and times have changed dramatically. Food stamp benefits are now distributed electronically and accessed via debit cards which are widely accepted at grocery stores, farmers markets, and corner stores. These cards make selling or trading benefits challenging and makes tracking or tracing the cards easier. Furthermore, many states, including Alaska, are facing high budget deficits and recidivism rates. Convicted felons already have trouble finding steady employment when economies are healthy, and food stamps and other assistance provide crucial support during the transition period. Without this support, these individuals are more likely to return to criminal activity and drug use.

Over the course of time, approximately forty states have fully or partially opted out of the denial of benefits. Currently, only ten states still have the full ban, including Alaska. This bill would make Alaska a partial opt out state by allowing benefits for released felony drug offenders taking active steps towards rehabilitation.

As of March 2014, there are 276 incarcerated felony drug offenders in the state of Alaska. Last year alone, 637 people were convicted of felony drug offenses, with an average sentence of 888.6 days and an average time served of 334.54 days. In other words, these offenders are generally sentenced to less than three years in prison and serve less than a year of that sentence. This small period of time served will now change the lives of the 546 people released in 2013, the 511 people released in 2012, the 493 people released in 2011, and the 408 people released in 2010, because they will never be able to receive food stamps to get back on their feet.

In an effort to reduce Alaska’s recidivism rates and save state funds, I ask you to support a partial opt-out of the current ban on food stamp benefits for felony drug offenders.