

# States Reconsider Ban on Food Stamps for Drug Offenders

Nebraska, other states reconsidering rule, which doesn't withhold benefits from others with felonies

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LINCOLN, Neb. (AP) — Nebraska is desperate to stop the runaway growth of its prison population, but doing so depends a lot on people like Ronald Tillman. Tillman, 54, a paroled drug dealer who suffers from bipolar disease and a debilitating back injury, has lived since his 2013 release solely on his monthly \$733 disability check. When his food runs short, he faces a choice that has costly implications for the state— if he gets caught.

“Sometimes when you need food, you have to steal it,” said Tillman, a Navy veteran. “I’ve shoplifted a couple of times, just to eat that night and maybe the next morning.”

Nebraska is among a dwindling number of states that still enforce a lifetime ban on drug offenders receiving food



In this Monday, March 21, 2016, photo, Ronald Tillman stands outside of his apartment in Lincoln, Neb. Tillman, a Navy veteran, spent three years in prison for selling morphine pills to a police informant, and is now ineligible for food stamps despite his bipolar disease and a debilitating back injury that have made it hard for him to work. Nebraska is among a dwindling number of states that still enforce a lifetime ban on drug offenders receiving food stamps. (AP Photo/Grant Schulte)

to end or scale back the federal food stamp ban, which each state has the option to do.

Georgia is expected to end its ban soon, leaving only eight states with a lifetime prohibition — Alaska, Arizona, Florida, Indiana, Mississippi, Ne-

braska, South Carolina and West Virginia. A bill to lift Nebraska’s ban was thwarted by a procedural move after receiving majority support this spring, but proponents hope to bring it back again next year.

“I get it. These people who have drug problems did a bad thing. I’m interested in reducing recidivism and I don’t think it’s warranted to deprive them of benefits that other convicted felons get

stamps. If Tillman had been convicted of robbery, burglary or another crime, he could be eligible for the federal assistance. Now, Nebraska is wrestling with whether it can still afford the restrictive policy even though many residents take a dim view of giving public benefits to drug felons.

Eager to help more drug law convicts stay on the streets without committing crimes — those offenders can account for more than a quarter of those released — Alabama, Texas and a number of other states have decided in recent years

Nebraska’s prison population increased about 50 percent from 1997 to 2014, in part because of tougher sentencing laws, and now totals roughly 5,300 inmates, about 165 percent of the system’s designed capacity.

Overcrowding was blamed as a factor in a prison riot that left two inmates dead last year. Corrections officials this year sought \$26 million for prison improvements and expansions, but even that might not be enough.

Ricketts has called for more counseling and other services to help released inmates stay out of prison, where each costs about \$30,000 a year to house.

About a third of Nebraska’s ex-cons end up back behind bars, and nearly 28 percent of those re-

leased were primarily drug law violators. “These are more or less nonviolent crimes,” said Nebraska state Sen. Les Seiler, the Republican chairman of a prisons oversight committee, who said the goal should be to “get them a job, so they’re not just sitting in prison.”

ment pays the entire cost of food stamps. “It’s free money, right?” said Marc Mauer, executive director of the Sentencing Project nonprofit group.

In Nebraska last year, the state turned away 676 applicants with drug convictions, but many more likely didn’t apply because they knew they would be rejected.

Destenie Commuso, of Lincoln, who was arrested in 2006 on drug manufacturing and delivery charges, said food stamps helped her rebuild her life in the community after her release. She participated in a drug court program that let her avoid a felony conviction.

“The food stamps really gave me the opportunity to not have to worry about how I was going to eat” during the six months it took to land a job, said Commuso, who now supports two children and no longer receives aid. “It took that burden off and let me focus on my recovery.”

Alabama lifted its prohibition after its inmate population reached 30,000, about twice the prison system’s intended capacity.

“You had some people where, it was a tough bill to swallow,” said Sen. Cam Ward, a Republican who heads the Senate Judiciary Committee. However, “Finances drive it.”

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