

September 12, 2013

The Honorable Frank Lucas  
Chairman, Committee on Agriculture  
2311 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow  
Chairman, Committee on Agriculture  
133 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Collin Peterson  
Ranking Member, Committee on Agriculture  
2109 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Thad Cochran  
Ranking Member, Committee on Agriculture  
113 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

**RE: Oppose Ban on Food Assistance for Convicted Individuals and their Families**

Dear Chairman Lucas, Chairwoman Stabenow and Ranking Members Peterson and Cochran:

Our diverse civil and human rights, labor, and criminal justice advocacy organizations are writing in strong opposition to the Vitter Amendment to the Farm Bill, and we urge you to reject this provision in conference. The Vitter Amendment harshly punishes people who committed a single violent crime years or decades ago, complied fully with the terms of their sentence, and have been law-abiding citizens ever since. Individuals convicted of one of a number of crimes would be barred from SNAP for life. Furthermore, SNAP benefits for other members of their household, including children and seniors, would be cut dramatically.

This provision would jeopardize public safety and could lead to more crime by making it harder for formerly incarcerated individuals to safely reenter society. To enhance community safety, many states and federal agencies, including USDA and the Department of Justice, work to assist those returning from prison and jail to become productive citizens. Individuals who receive reentry assistance, including housing and employment, are less likely to return to the criminal justice system and more likely to successfully re-integrate with their families and communities. Food assistance, in the form of SNAP, is an important component of reintegration programs. These efforts save taxpayer dollars by reducing the costs of incarceration. A permanent ban of food assistance for individuals convicted of a violent offense would undercut their rehabilitation and impose greater chances of recidivism.

The provision also penalizes the families of those with a criminal conviction in their past. Under the amendment, even though someone is prohibited from participating in SNAP, their income would be counted when calculating the amount of food assistance benefits of other household members. This can decrease a household's SNAP benefits, increasing food insecurity for poor children and other family members.

Moreover, the Vitter 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.

Unlike the SNAP ban for individuals with felony drug convictions, the Vitter Amendment does not give states the option to drop the ban if they so choose. If the ban remains in the Farm Bill, states should be given the opportunity to determine if they want to implement it since they will be the entities that bear the additional costs associated with increases in crime, including law enforcement and court costs, costs to victims, and the costs of additional incarceration and supervision when the desperation that will be caused by this ban leads more individuals to recidivate.

Our organizations urge you to ensure that this harmful and racially discriminatory provision is not included in the final Farm bill and does not become law.

Sincerely,

American Civil Liberties Union  
The Bronx Defenders  
Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice at Harvard Law School  
Council on American-Islamic Relations  
Faces and Voices of Recovery  
FedCURE  
Grassroots Leadership  
Human Rights Defense Center  
Human Rights Watch  
International Community Corrections Association  
Justice Policy Institute  
The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights  
Legal Action Center  
NAACP  
National African American Drug Policy Coalition, Inc.  
National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers (NACDL)  
National Association of Social Workers  
National Coalition for the Homeless  
National Council of La Raza (NCLR)  
National Employment Law Project  
National H.I.R.E. Network  
National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty  
National Workrights Institute  
One Million Americans, Ltd.  
Oriana House Inc.  
Reentry Central  
Robert F. Kennedy Children's Action Corps  
Robert F. Kennedy Juvenile Justice Collaborative  
Safer Foundation  
The Sentencing Project  
StoptheDrugWar.org  
Treatment Communities of America  
United Methodist Church, General Board of Church and Society  
WestCare Foundation, Inc.