

PA Expands Food Stamp Eligibility

The 3-year effort to lift a federal ban on food stamps for persons with a drug felony conviction ended successfully in late December with passage in the General Assembly of HB 44. Pennsylvania thus becomes the 33rd state to permit drug felons to receive food stamps benefits on the same basis as everyone else: need.

Success has many parents and this success is no exception. Certainly Rep. Frank Oliver (D-Phila.) and Sen. Jane Earl (R-Erie) deserve our gratitude for providing leadership in the General Assembly. So do the many pantry and cupboard volunteers who repeatedly wrote letters to their legislators asking that this unjust ban be lifted. Other highly effective allies included the Women's Law Project and the PA District Attorney's Association. Governor Rendell took the final step when he signed HB 44 into law.

In another less dramatic but equally important development, the PA Department of Public Welfare (DPW) announced in January that able-bodied adults without dependants (ABAWDs) also will be eligible to enroll in the Food Stamp Program on the same basis as everyone else. In other words, the rule that had limited this group to only a few months of help every three years is eliminated.

Congress established a 3-month time limit on food stamp eligibility for able-bodied adults in 1996. The public outcry that ensued caused Congress to soften the limit, first through a waiver in counties with high unemployment and then via authorization for states to exempt another 15 percent of persons affected. DPW began utilizing a portion of this authority when it excluded adults age 47, 48 and 49 years from the time limit. The new policy fully utilizes the authority Congress provided and enables DPW to apply the same rules across all counties.

The change in policy is expected to have an immediate impact in 35 counties. Able-bodied adults residing in the remaining 22 counties had previously not been subject to the time limit because of the high unemployment waiver.