

HOUSE BILL REPORT

HB 1554

As Reported by House Committee On:
Children & Family Services

Title: An act relating to food stamp eligibility.

Brief Description: Concerning food stamp eligibility.

Sponsors: Representatives Pettigrew, Veloria, Darneille, O'Brien, Upthegrove, Miloscia, Cody, Hunt, Chase, Simpson, Haigh, McDermott, Flannigan, Kagi, Sullivan, Kenney, Schual-Berke, McCoy and Santos.

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Children & Family Services: 2/10/03, 2/19/03 [DP].

Brief Summary of Bill

- Allows individuals who have been convicted of a felony offense to receive benefits under the food stamp program.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN & FAMILY SERVICES

Majority Report: Do pass. Signed by 7 members: Representatives Kagi, Chair; Darneille, Vice Chair; Bailey, Dickerson, Miloscia, Pettigrew and Shabro.

Minority Report: Do not pass. Signed by 2 members: Representatives Boldt, Ranking Minority Member; and Roach, Assistant Ranking Minority Member.

Staff: Sonja Hallum (786-7092).

Background:

The goal of the federal food assistance program is to help low-income households to obtain a more nutritious diet by supplementing their income with food stamp benefits. The federal government provides funding to the state to administer the program to residents within the state.

The federal government has enacted legislation to deny assistance and benefits to persons

convicted of certain drug-related offenses. Under the federal statute an individual convicted of a felony offense involving a controlled substance is not eligible for benefits under the food stamp program.

The federal law which restricts the food stamp benefits contains a provision allowing individual states to opt-out of this federal law. The individual states may enact a law to exempt persons from the federal restriction so that they can receive food stamp benefits.

Summary of Bill:

The Legislature finds that it is important in these dire economic times to maximize federal food assistance funding to low-income individuals.

Washington is utilizing the opt-out provision in the federal statute restricting access to food stamp benefits. In Washington an individual who has a felony conviction involving a drug-related offense will not be prohibited from receiving benefits under the food stamp program.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Testimony For: Eleven other states have already taken advantage of the opt-out provision. A significant barrier to people seeking food stamps is the automatic disqualification of people who have been convicted of a felony drug offense. Providing food stamps provides support people need so they can become productive members of society. No other felon is being denied food stamps. Murderers and molesters can get food stamps, but people with a felony drug conviction can't. After being convicted of a drug offense, and serving time, to then be denied food stamps is unfair. People can't get a job if they are hungry. There are people who make it out of addiction who can benefit greatly from food stamps. Washington uses an entirely electronic system for the food stamp program and it can only be used to purchase food. The federal government funds the federal food stamp program and this will bring money to the state. In recent studies, Washington had the second highest rate of hunger in the nation. Many people with mental illness have drug issues as well and they have increased issues with no access to food.

Testimony Against: None.

Testified: Representative Pettigrew, prime sponsor; Joshua Welter, Congressional Hunger Center; Shelia Floyd; Ursula Bestgen, Street Outreach Services; Bill Monto, Washington Citizen Action; Jerry Sheehan, American Civil Liberties Union of Washington; Tony Lee, Fremont Public Association; and Andrea Stephenson, The Empower Alliance.