

## Support SB 51, HB 214 & HB 1401: Help Women In Recovery From Drug Addiction!

Women who are recovering from drug addiction are doing their best to rebuild their lives and their families. Each year, about 1,100 women in Pennsylvania are convicted of felony drug offenses that they committed while they were in active addiction.

Under the federal welfare law, unless Pennsylvania passes legislation after August 22, 1996 to support women in recovery from drug addiction, any woman with a felony drug conviction is barred from ever getting cash assistance or food stamps for the rest of her life, no matter what else she does.

The Pennsylvania legislature decided in the Spring of 1996 that people with convictions are ineligible for benefits while they are in jail, but can get benefits after they have completed their sentences. The legislature needs to pass this provision again, for it to be effective.

Many women with drug convictions seek drug treatment in jail, or after completing their sentences. They want to move forward with their lives, but they need our help.

At least 30 other states, including Illinois, New Jersey, New York, Connecticut and Ohio, have decided to take the option to help these women move forward with their lives, by opting out of the federal lifetime ban on benefits.

Denying women benefits hurts drug treatment programs, which need the benefits to house and feed women in treatment. It also hurts children, who are more likely to be placed in foster care, or need to stay longer in foster care, because their mothers can not afford housing.

Taking away benefits—the additional strain of severe poverty—makes it harder for a woman to stay clean and to stay out of jail. As one woman put it, “now it matters because I’m trying to do the right thing.”

Please help women in recovery by supporting SB 51, HB 214 & HB 1401 which take the option to allow women with drug convictions to get benefits if they are otherwise eligible. Lift the ban!

## Facts About Women with Felony Drug Convictions

A recent study of women with felony drug convictions in Pennsylvania<sup>1</sup> found that:

- ◆ most of the women had no prior drug convictions, and were convicted for very small amounts of drugs (\$5 or \$10 worth);
- ◆ they began their drug usage as children or teenagers, often in direct response to being sexually and/or physically abused, or when they ran away to escape the abuse;
- ◆ jail was the first place anyone had talked to them about the abuse they had experienced, or offered them drug treatment;
- ◆ all of the women committed their crimes while they were in active addiction;
- ◆ many have serious mental illness and most have multiple physical and mental health problems;
- ◆ they have very limited educations and limited literacy;
- ◆ they have been homeless and have very few economic resources;
- ◆ they are trying to rebuild relationships with their children, and their families;
- ◆ employers are often reluctant to hire them;
- ◆ they want to work, but need drug treatment, education, cash assistance and food stamps until they are able to work.

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<sup>1</sup> A. Hirsch, "Some Days Are Harder Than Hard:" Welfare Reform and Women with Drug Convictions in Pennsylvania, Center for Law & Social Policy (12/99).