



Southern Poverty Law Center
400 Washington Ave
Montgomery, AL 36104
splcactionfund.org

April 5, 2023

The Honorable Debbie Stabenow
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Re: Farm Bill Priorities

Dear Chairwoman Stabenow:

On behalf of the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) Action Fund, we thank you for your strong leadership in protecting and expanding civil rights and economic opportunities for all.

As a public interest advocacy organization working in the Deep South to eliminate the structural racism and inequalities that fuel the oppression of Black, indigenous, and other people of color, we understand the critical role federal legislation plays in addressing systemic issues that have had a generational impact on access to nutrition, economic advancement, and wealth generation. This insight informs our recommendations for the next Farm Bill.

Repeal the SNAP Felony Ban

For nearly two decades, residents in Georgia with drug-related felony convictions were banned for life from receiving food stamps. Georgia has one of the largest populations under correctional control. There are approximately 10,400 people released from state custody each year in Georgia who have drug felony convictions.¹ Prior to lifting the ban, approximately 555 individuals were denied food stamps each month in Georgia due to a felony drug conviction.² In Florida, a study released in 2018 revealed that the state's ban on SNAP benefits for individuals convicted of drug related felonies led to increased recidivism for those individuals and their new offenses were primarily financially motivated.³ Georgia, Alabama, and Florida still retain a partial ban, which limits the lifetime ban to certain classes of drug felonies, imposes time-restricted bans, or requires enrollment in a drug education or treatment program. A repeal of the federal ban on SNAP benefits for felony drug convictions would allow thousands of residents across the Deep South access to critical nutritional support and make them eligible for

¹ Teresa Wiltz, STATES EASE ACCESS TO WELFARE AND FOOD STAMPS FOR CONVICTED DRUG FELONS PBS (2016), <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/states-ease-access-welfare-food-stamps-convicted-drug-felons> (last visited Mar 30, 2023)

² Id.

³ Zaid Jilani, Banning drug offenders from food stamps ended up backfiring, new study finds The Intercept (2018), <https://theintercept.com/2018/06/01/food-stamps-drug-conviction-snap-welfare/> (last visited Mar 31, 2023).



employment, training, and related supportive services under the SNAP Employment & Training program.

Use Broad Income Eligibility Criteria and Increase Purchasing Options for SNAP Benefits

We support additional improvements to the SNAP program such as requiring states to use broad income eligibility criteria, encouraging alternative ways to submit applications, increasing the monthly allotment, and increasing purchasing options.

Under the current SNAP program, participants in the program can earn up to 200 percent of the federal poverty level and create a savings account without losing eligibility for assistance. However, Florida has proposed limiting eligibility criteria for the program. If a participant or household's income or savings account exceeded 130 percent of the federal poverty level of \$2,250, they would become ineligible for SNAP benefits.

Under the current SNAP rules, individuals are not allowed to purchase hot food, food kits, food from online vendors, or restaurant meals. These restrictions were implemented without consideration of the lack of supermarkets and fresh food in rural areas and some urban neighborhoods. For individuals living in rural areas, individuals with disabilities, or individuals who lack transportation or live in an area without public transportation, access to prepared food in supermarket or hot meals through expanded SNAP purchase options could provide relief from a food desert or accessibility barrier.

Providing Financial Assistance to Borrowers Who Have Faced Discrimination

Black farmers receive a disproportionately lower share of direct loans from the USDA. In 2022 the department granted direct loans to only 36% of farmers who identified as Black, however the agency approved loans for 72% of white farmers who applied for the program.⁴ 16% of Black farmers applications were rejected, only 4% of white farmers applications were rejected, and nearly 48% of Black farmers withdrew their applications.⁵ Increased outreach and providing technical assistance from the USDA is necessary to remedy these disparities in the loan program. Similarly, outreach and technical assistance for Black farmers is necessary to administer the debt relief funds under Section 22007 of the Inflation Reduction Act.

Ensuring the USDA Community Facilities Direct Loan and Grant Program Supports Rural Healthcare and Prohibits Expenditures on Rural Prison Construction

The USDA Community Facilities Direct Loan and Grant program was established in the 1970's to subsidize "essential community facilities" which were defined as a public improvement, operated as a nonprofit, needed for the development of a rural community with a population of

⁴ Ximena Bustillo, In 2022, black farmers were persistently left behind from the USDA's loan system NPR (2023), <https://www.npr.org/2023/02/19/1156851675/in-2022-black-farmers-were-persistently-left-behind-from-the-usdas-loan-system> (last visited Mar 31, 2023).

⁵ Id.



20,000 or less. Physical structures and services to residents or businesses are eligible for grants or low interest loans, whereas maintenance costs are not eligible for funding. The Program was meant to fund essential facilities including hospitals, mental health clinics, fire stations, community centers, and childcare centers. However, in 1996 the USDA used this funding stream to build a jail in Alabama. Between 2005 and 2019 more than 150 rural hospitals have closed nationwide⁶, however the USDA has spent more than \$365 million on jail and prison construction through the Community Facilities Direct Loan and Grant Program from 1972-2019.⁷

We support amending the Farm Bill to prohibit the use of these funds to increase number of multi-use public safety facilities which include jail and prison beds and stand-alone rural jail and prison projects. Such an amendment to the legislation would support the original legislative intent for these funds to prioritize projects that combat substance use disorders and support healthcare needs in rural America.

Thank you for your continued support for key programs and reforms in the Farm Bill. Please contact Nina Patel, Senior Policy Counsel, Decarceration and Criminal Legal System Reform, at Nina.Patel@splcenter.org if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Nina Patel'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

Nina Patel
Senior Policy Counsel
Decarceration and Criminal Legal System Reform
SPLC Action Fund

⁶ Hundreds of hospitals could close across Rural America, <https://www.usnews.com/news/health-news/articles/2023-01-16/hundreds-of-hospitals-could-close-across-rural-america> (last visited Mar 31, 2023).

⁷ U.S. Department of Agriculture Investments in local jails, , <https://www.vera.org/downloads/publications/usda-fact-sheet.pdf> (last visited Apr 11, 2023).