

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Senators Approve Bill Allowing Drug Felons To Receive Food Stamps

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ST. THOMAS -- Convicted drug felons in the U.S. Virgin Islands who have served their time will soon be able to receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits, also called food stamps, if a Senator Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly-sponsored bill -- vetted in the Committee on Health, Hospitals and Human Services -- becomes law.

Senators also approved a bill that would give \$4,000 to every surviving centenarian -- a person who is one hundred or more years old -- and they held in committee Bill No. 31-0308, which sought to designate the Virgin Islands Developmental Disabilities Council, Inc. as a private agency, which would allow the council to receive federal dollars.

On the food stamp measure, sponsor Rivera-O'Reilly cited the difficulty in reintegrated oneself into society after serving time in prison, and pointed to states that have already created laws to allow those persons to receive SNAP assistance. And she drew attention to the bias of the law, stating that the federal ban does not apply to persons who've



Senator Nereida Rivera-O'Reilly.

"Many states have seen the need to lift the ban for very good reasons, because when individuals have an arrest record and have served time, they face many obstacles when they reenter society. Primarily they leave the system with very little rehabilitation, if any at all. They do not leave the system in any better position financially, morally, emotionally, or physically than when they went in. They are banned or blocked from employment because of their history, and by not having access to SNAP, now they have no access to food," Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly said.

"And so what happens is we say that we rehabilitate in our corrections system but we really do not. Because when they live and they are not able to feed themselves, they become either a financial burden on their family that's already financially strapped, or they resort to the streets," she added.

The ban on food stamps for persons convicted of drug-related crimes came 20 years ago as part of former President Bill Clinton's welfare reform law dubbed The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996.

Senators unanimously supported the measure, many of them understanding the dilemmas cited by Mrs. Rivera-O'Reilly of those trying to blend themselves into society after serving time.

"Denying [an] individual the basic necessity to eat weighs heavy on me," Senator Novelle Francis said. "A hungry man is an angry man. And I have seen this time and time again where individuals that come out of prison have been forced back into the same environment that got them there in the first place. And the tendency is that the crime gets worse, and worse and worse."

Attorney General Claude E. Walker, testifying at yesterday's hearing, said he supports the measure but called for an amendment that would tie conditions to benefits, including the completion of substance abuse programs and drug testing; suggestions that Dept. of Human Services Commissioner Vivian Ebbesen-Fludd said would not be easy to enforce, and may be costly as well.

The USDA Food and Nutrition Service [reports that](#) as of September 2014, there were around 46.5 million individual food stamp recipients (22.7 million households) receiving an average benefit of \$123.74 each (around \$257 per household).

In the territory, the annual USVI KIDS COUNT Data Report [revealed in 2015](#) that 67 percent of the youth receive food stamp benefits; up from 37 percent in 2008.

The measure was supported 6-0 after being amended, and forwarded to the Committee on Rules and Judiciary for further vetting.

Bill No. 31-0334 -- Centennial Living Treasures Award Program, sponsored by Senator Janette Millin Young, would award \$4,000 to Virgin Islanders on their hundredth birthday. The measure --which won full Senate support as well -- would also make available \$1,000 upon the death of centenarians to aid with burial.

"Government exists to take care of, among many other things, the needs of our elderly, our children -- those who cannot do for themselves. And so when we speak about senior citizens and needing, imagine those who have arrived at the ripe, old age 100 years," Mrs. Millin Young said. She later stated her intention of making the bill retroactive.

Senator Kurt Violet, chairman of the committee in which yesterday's bills were heard at the Earl B. Ottley Legislative Hall, said while he supports the measure, it should include safeguards to assure that the funds are not stolen by the centenarians' family members.