Reentry from the Inside Out:
New York's Access to Public Benefits for Reentry Act (S5265a/A3399a)
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This bill aims to reduce systemic barriers for individuals returning to the community from incarceration by requiring the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS) to provide proactive support in accessing critical public benefits and safety net programming. DOCCS would assist people in applying for a range of benefits *prior* to release, ensuring their access to stabilizing supports during the first weeks and months of reentry. People are at their most vulnerable in the period immediately following their release and need help navigating unfamiliar systems and technology as they try to reintegrate into the community. To promote transparency and accountability, the legislation would also require DOCCS to provide detailed reporting on application outcomes, eligibility rates, and unmet needs, thus helping to identify gaps and areas for improvement in reentry services.

Why This Legislation Matters

People being released from incarceration face a daunting set of challenges: they must find jobs, secure housing, reconnect with loved ones, and rebuild their lives—all while navigating a multitude of logistical barriers, struggling to use technology, and burdened with the stigma of a conviction. As a result, at least 60% of formerly incarcerated individuals experience unemployment for up to four years post-release, a rate four times higher than the general population's peak unemployment during the pandemic.[1] On top of this, many people lack support in navigating complicated benefits applications, leaving them without vital resources like SNAP (food assistance), Medicaid, or HEAP (energy assistance).[2] Delays in securing these supportive resources mean many people's basic needs such as food, housing, healthcare, and transportation are not met, which only compounds their instability during this particularly vulnerable time.[3] Too many recently released people are thus forced to turn to emergency services like shelters, crisis intervention programs, or emergency departments, which are primarily designed as stopgaps in urgent situations but do not provide long-term solutions.

If New York truly believes in rehabilitation and wants people to reenter society as capable, productive community members, we must provide a solid foundation for success rather than a minefield where people can easily fall through the cracks and back into the costly and destructive cycle of economic

[1] U.S. Chamber of Commerce. "The Workforce Impact of Second Chance Hiring." 2024.
[2] Wolkomir, E. "How SNAP Can Better Serve the Formerly Incarcerated." *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*, 2018; McKernan, P. "Homelessness and Prisoner Reentry: Examining Barriers to Housing Stability and Evidence-Based Strategies." *Journal of Community Corrections*, 2017.
[3] Urban Institute. *Housing Instability and Reentry: A Critical Link.* Policy Brief. Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2024.

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insecurity, poor health, and reincarceration.[4] By providing proactive support and benefits navigation *before* release, not only does this legislation help ensure timely submission of applications for safety net programming, it helps create a clear and stable reentry pathway so individuals can successfully rebuild their lives and fully reintegrate into society.

How Access to Public Benefits Improves Reentry Outcomes

Access to public benefits during reentry is essential—not just to meet people's immediate needs, but also to stabilize them so they can take advantage of key opportunities to grow their independence and strengthen our shared communities. In addition, individuals who are connected to benefits will be less of a financial strain on their families, who are likely to already be struggling to make ends meet, and may thus increase the likelihood of family reunification.

Timely access to programs such as SNAP, WIC (assistance for women and children), and Public Assistance ensures individuals can begin to meet their basic needs while looking for employment, complying with their parole mandates, and trying to reunite with family. For example, individuals enrolled in SNAP are 22% less likely to experience food insecurity,[5] and for women and children, WIC provides essential nutritional support proven to boost maternal and child health during reentry.[6] Studies show that individuals with access to these public benefits are more likely to achieve stability and successfully reintegrate into society, reducing their risk of further justice system involvement.[7]

Moreover, when people achieve stability and successful reentry, the benefits ripple outward, creating positive change for their families and neighborhoods. This legislation is thus integral to reducing systemic inequities and strengthening communities at large.

Support this legislation to promote individual and family well-being and stability, enhance public safety, and build a stronger and more equitable New York for all.

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[4] Vera Institute of Justice. *The Cost of Incarceration in New York State.* 2021; Western, Bruce, and Pettit, Becky. "Housing Instability and Increased Recidivism Risk: A Multivariate Analysis." *Public Health Reports* 137, no. 5 (2024): 22-30.
[5] New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance. *SNAP Participation and Benefits Impact Report.* Albany, NY: NYS OTDA, 2023.
[6] Food Research & Action Center (FRAC). *The Role of WIC in Supporting Maternal and Child Health.* Washington, DC: FRAC, 2023.
[7] Prisoner Reentry Institute at John Jay College. *Building Community through Reentry Support in New York City.* New York, NY: John Jay College, 2023.

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