



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE - 7/31/2015

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Prisoner Advocates Applaud Obama for Restoring Pell Grants for Prisoners

President ends 20-year ban on educational grants for people in cages

After almost 20 years of advocacy by formerly incarcerated people, including national delegations of formerly incarcerated leaders to both the White House and the US Justice Department, the Obama administration is expected to announce today that people currently incarcerated in state and federal prisons will regain eligibility for Pell Grants to pursue advanced degrees while incarcerated.

“I’m grateful for the consistent work of Rev. Vivian Nixon with the Education from the Inside Out Coalition, and for the delegation of formerly incarcerated people who met with the Justice Department on the issue of Pell Grants in October of last year,” said Dorsey Nunn, executive director of Legal Services for Prisoners with Children. “I am extremely pleased that members of the Attorney General's Reentry Counsel could hear our pleas for education for incarcerated people.”

From 1972 to 1995, prisoners could apply for Pell Grants. In 1994 an amendment to the 1965 Higher Education Act reversed this policy. The total funding for prisoners’ Pell Grants in 1994 was \$34.6 million out of \$5.3 billion for the program overall. This very small percentage of funding made an outsized difference.

Prisoners who participate in correctional education programs are 43 percent less likely to return to prison and 13 percent more likely to have a job after finishing their sentence, according to the RAND Corporation. Since 1995 our state and federal prison population has increased by over 50 percent from 1 million to over 1.5 million today (excluding over 700,000 people in local jails).

In May 2015 Congresswoman Donna Edwards introduced the REAL Act (HR 2521) to restore Pell Grants for current prisoners to access education; 26 other Congressional cosponsors signed on. Legal Services for Prisoners with Children is one of the bill’s original supporters.