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August 24, 2021

The Honorable Steve Cohen
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

RE: ASAM Support for the Making Essentials Available and Lawful
(MEAL) Act of 2021

Dear Representative Cohen:

On behalf of the American Society of Addiction Medicine (ASAM), a national medical specialty society representing more than 6,600 physicians and associated health professionals who specialize in the prevention and treatment of addiction, I write to provide ASAM's support for the [Making Essentials Available and Lawful \(MEAL\) Act of 2021](#) (H.R. 2837). This important legislation would repeal the lifetime federal ban on individuals with felony drug convictions from receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and/or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits. In addition, it would allow individuals who are incarcerated to apply for SNAP benefits up to 30 days prior to release. I am heartened by your introduction of this legislation and the Biden-Harris Administration's commitment to facilitating reentry for individuals who have been incarcerated due to a drug-related felony, by ensuring that they are eligible for SNAP benefits, as outlined in the American Families Plan.¹

The "War on Drugs" has highlighted this nation's racially biased response to drug use. Federal and state responses to crack use in the 1980s and 1990s heavily invested in law enforcement approaches, which disproportionately impacted Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC). Conversely, three-quarters of federal funding to address the recent opioid epidemic, associated more closely with white people, has gone to research, treatment, and prevention.² To this day, BIPOC continue to be over-policed, targeted, and charged with felony drug violations and are then unable to access basic social services once released from incarceration.

This is particularly problematic because individuals who have been recently released from incarceration tend to be more vulnerable to food insecurity and other material hardships. One study in Rhode Island found that 70.4 percent of those on probation experienced food insecurity, compared to 12.8 percent of the general population.³ Furthermore, felony convictions dramatically impact

employment opportunities. After release, only 55% of individuals who were formerly incarcerated have any earnings; those that do manage to secure a job tend to earn less than the pay of a full time job at the federal minimum wage.⁴ This food insecurity and struggle to maintain gainful employment affect not only those who have been previously incarcerated, but also their children.⁵

By repealing the federal ban on TANF and SNAP benefits for those who have been convicted of a drug-related felony, Congress can improve the lives of millions of Americans. The SNAP program is one of the federal government's most powerful tools for fighting poverty, with one analysis finding that it kept 7.3 million people out of poverty in 2016, including 3.3 million children.⁶ Similarly, TANF has proven itself to be a critical tool in filling gaps left by other social services programs.⁷ It is time for Congress to improve access to these programs for those incarcerated due to felony drug convictions, so that their crimes do not permanently hinder their ability to lead successful and healthy lives.

Thank you for your leadership on this legislation. ASAM stands ready to work with you to ensure that more Americans reentering society can access the social services and support they need to succeed. Please reach out to Kelly Corredor, ASAM's Chief Advocacy Officer, at kcorredor@asam.org, with any questions.

Sincerely,



William F. Haning, III, MD, DLFAPA, DFASAM
President, American Society of Addiction Medicine

¹ The White House. Fact Sheet: The American Families Plan. (April 2021). Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/04/28/fact-sheet-the-american-families-plan/>

² Mullen S, Kruse LR, Goudsward AJ, and Bagues A. CRACK VS. HEROIN: An unfair system arrested millions of blacks, urged compassion for whites. *Asbury Park Press*. December 2, 2019. <https://www.app.com/in-depth/news/local/public-safety/2019/12/02/crack-heroin-race-arrests-blacks-whites/2524961002>

³ Kimberly Dong, Alice Tang, Thomas Stopka, et al. Food acquisition methods and correlates of food insecurity in adults on probation in Rhode Island. *PLOS*. June 2018. <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0198598>

⁴ Adam Looney and Nicholas Turner. *Work and Opportunity Before and After Incarceration*. The Brookings Institution. March 2018. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/work-and-opportunity-before-and-after-incarceration/>

⁵ The Center for Law and Social Policy. *No More Double Punishments: Lifting the Ban on SNAP and TANF for People with Prior Felony Drug Convictions*. January 2021. Available at: <https://www.clasp.org/publications/report/brief/no-more-double-punishments>

⁶ Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. Policy Basics: The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). (June 2019). Available at: <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/the-supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap>

⁷ Center for American Progress. TANF Is a Key Part of the Mix of Aid Programs Supporting Families During COVID-19 Crisis. October 2020. Available at: <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/poverty/reports/2020/10/07/491263/tanf-key-part-mix-aid-programs-supporting-families-covid-19-crisis/>