



Human Rights Defense Center

DEDICATED TO PROTECTING HUMAN RIGHTS

February 23, 2018

SENT VIA EMAIL

Senator Patty Murray
United States Senate
154 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Representative Susan A. Davis
U.S. House of Representatives
1214 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

RE: Pell Grant Eligibility for Prisoners / Support for S.1136, H.R.2451

Dear Senator Murray and Representative Davis:

I am contacting you in my capacity as executive director of the Human Rights Defense Center (HRDC), a Washington State-registered non-profit that advocates for the rights of people held in prisons, jails and other detention facilities within the United States.

I am also contacting you as a former Washington State prisoner who participated in education programs while incarcerated.

HRDC supports the expansion of educational and vocational programs for prisoners, including those that provide college courses and credit. Therefore, we support your legislation, S.1136 and H.R.2451, which would restore Pell grant eligibility to incarcerated students.

I was imprisoned in Washington State from 1987 until 2003. During that time period I saw a modest but practical prison education system be largely eliminated as a result of actions by the state legislature coupled with the elimination of Pell grants for prisoners. Prior to 1995, Washington's prison system had extensive vocational and educational programs which allowed prisoners to obtain training in a variety of fields that would help them find gainful employment following their release. While incarcerated I was able to obtain a vocational certificate from

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Edmonds Community College in office technology (computers). This training was incredibly useful to me in terms of being able to function as a journalist and nonprofit executive once I was released from prison. Sadly, after 1995 these modest educational programs were largely gutted due to the lack of Pell grant funding and adverse legislative action at the state level.

The benefits of prison education classes in general – and college coursework in particular – have been well-researched and are widely acknowledged. The more education a prisoner receives, the lower their rate of recidivism, the greater their chance of obtaining post-release employment and the greater cost savings to our communities. A 2016 [meta-analysis](#) of prison education programs published by RAND Corporation, “Evaluating the Effectiveness of Correctional Education,” summarizes past research on that topic.

For decades, every study that has been conducted on the subject has found the more education prisoners receive, the lower their recidivism rates. If Congress is serious about reducing our nation’s prison population and enhancing public safety, then Pell grant eligibility should be immediately restored to all state and federal prisoners so they have access to higher education.

I have advocated for the rights of prisoners – including the right to an education – for over 30 years. The United States spends untold billions of dollars educating children and young adults, realizing it is an investment in our nation’s future. Yet depending on the state, an estimated 60 percent of the prison population is functionally illiterate. According to some criminologists, the biggest predictor of who goes to prison is not race but whether or not someone has graduated from high school. It is never too late to interrupt the cycle of incarceration and recidivism, and investing in higher education for prisoners is one of the surest ways to protect public safety by increasing the chance that released prisoners will become productive members of society.

HRDC’s associate director, Alex Friedmann, also had personal experience with post-secondary education while incarcerated in Tennessee’s prison system from 1992 to 1999. Pell grants were no longer available to prisoners when he began taking college courses, having been banned by the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, signed into law by President Clinton. Therefore he – like other prisoners – had to pay for the courses himself, which was difficult considering the low wages that prisoners earn, ranging from \$.17 to \$.50 per hour for most job positions in Tennessee’s Department of Correction.

A friend outside of prison paid for three classes from Ohio University’s College Program for the Incarcerated, and Alex completed nine credit hours before he was released. Had Pell grants been available to fund his college studies, he could have completed a degree program during the time he served in prison, increasing his employment opportunities after he made parole.

In closing, we are encouraged by recent developments with respect to reinstating Pell grant eligibility for prisoners, including the Second Chance Pell Grant pilot program instituted during the Obama administration. Additionally, Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos has referred to reinstating Pell grants for prisoners as “a very good and interesting possibility.”

Both Mr. Friedmann and I are available to provide testimony at any Congressional hearings that are held on S.1136 and H.R.2451. If you have questions or require additional information, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,



Paul Wright.
Executive Director, HRDC

cc: Senator Lamar Alexander