

# Fighting Recidivism with Food Security: *A Policy Impact Brief*

Khalil Rushdan & Roychelle Hicks, Arizona Village Network

OCTOBER 2024



## ABOUT THE ARIZONA VILLAGE NETWORK

The Arizona Village Network (AVN) is a non-profit organization led by individuals directly impacted by incarceration and dedicated to empowering formerly incarcerated individuals and their families. By **supporting people to successfully reintegrate into society with dignity, purpose, and hope**, AVN seeks to break the cycle of recidivism in Arizona.

AVN envisions a just and compassionate Arizona, which we can achieve through advocacy, awareness campaigns, and direct community support.

The Village fosters **a holistic support system** (or, “village”) through community partnerships, resource referrals, and direct services, including civil rights restoration, driver’s license processing, community meals, and help navigating housing, employment, education, healthcare, and nutrition assistance.

## SUPPORTING RE-ENTRY BY MEETING BASIC NEEDS

Exoneree Khalil Rushdan founded the Arizona Village Network in 2024, after more than a decade of community organizing, counseling, and mentoring individuals re-entering their communities after years in prison. Rushdan was wrongfully convicted in 1997 and served 15 years of a life sentence. In 2012, with the help of the AZ Justice Project, Rushdan’s conviction was overturned, and he was freed. Since his release, he has served his community as a leader and trusted advocate to end mass incarceration through systemic change.

Based on evidence and experience, Rushdan championed basic needs security as a path to successful re-entry. In addition to facilitating emergency food assistance, Rushdan partnered with the Arizona Food Bank Network (AzFBN) to raise awareness of a partial repeal of the SNAP Drug Felony Ban<sup>1</sup> that went into effect statewide in 2018 (see [ARS 46-219](#)). In coalition with other nonprofit organizations focused on legal reform and basic needs access, AVN and AzFBN continue to advocate for the ban's full repeal at the state Legislature.

## SNAP & THE DRUG FELONY BAN IN ARIZONA

In August 2024, more than 955,000 people in Arizona participated in SNAP—nearly 75 percent children, older adults, and people living with disabilities.<sup>2</sup> People with drug felony convictions are typically considered “work eligible adults” in SNAP terminology, but ironically are prevented from participating in this critical food assistance program at a time when they are actively seeking employment.

Although Arizona has modified the full ban—allowing people with prior use and possession felonies to access SNAP if they agree to mandatory drug testing, participate in a substance abuse treatment program (or are determined by a licensed medical provider to not need such treatment), or comply with probation—these added hurdles create real barriers to food. They present logistical challenges, financial burdens, and perpetuate stigma. If a person has to randomly leave an hourly wage job to submit a urinalysis, how can they sustain employment and maintain an income? Available treatment programs are often demoralizing and force people to relive the trauma that is and accompanies substance use disorder (for example, domestic violence, homelessness, and sex trafficking), and drug testing sites are often dehumanizing. If a person has completed their legal obligations, why should they continue to be punished and treated differently than anyone else in need of food assistance?

This policy, even in its modified form, disproportionately affects low-income communities of color, exacerbating existing disparities in access to food and resources and reinforcing stigma and exclusion. It affects entire households, especially when justice-involved individuals return to families with children. AVN advocates for the complete repeal of this ban as a path toward successful reintegration for people with drug felony convictions.

## BENEFITS CLIFFS & POVERTY TRAPS

AVN also advocates for changes to policies that create “benefits cliffs,” where a small raise—say, an additional 25 cents an hour—can disqualify a person from SNAP, Medicaid, or other public benefits regardless of whether the raise allows that person's household to be financially stable enough to absorb that loss of benefits. Formerly incarcerated individuals often face a reduction or loss of SNAP benefits when they secure employment. Justice-involved individuals often obtain low-wage, temporary jobs that don't fully cover living expenses; at a time when food inflation has risen by 25 percent in only the past five years,<sup>3</sup> reducing SNAP benefits often forces people to choose between paying their bills or buying groceries. A Harvard study found that drug offenders with access to SNAP are 13 percent less likely to reoffend within one year of release.<sup>4</sup> An abrupt loss of food assistance not only impacts cycles of recidivism but also has a negative impact on family stability, disincentivizes long-term attachment to the workforce, and prevents people from disentangling from a complex and opaque system.

## SNAP EMPLOYMENT & TRAINING

SNAP Employment & Training (SNAP E&T) is a program that helps SNAP participants gain skills and find work that moves them toward self-sufficiency. Arizona operates a non-mandatory E&T program called the SNAP Career Advancement Network (SNAP CAN) through the Department of Economic Security (DES), the state SNAP agency. While a few of the providers listed in the DES Federal Fiscal Year 2024 SNAP CAN State Plan operate programs that work with felons—namely St. Mary's Food Bank's Community Kitchen culinary training program in Phoenix and GAP Ministries' Career Plus program in Tucson—the barriers that people with prior drug felony convictions face in receiving SNAP coupled with the barriers that former felons face in career placement generally make success difficult. Stakeholder focus groups on how to make non-mandatory SNAP CAN programs more accessible statewide (not just in major metropolitan areas) for individuals with prior drug felony convictions while also addressing the “hunger cliff” described above are critical to successful re-entry and overall well-being.

## ADVOCACY & LIVED EXPERTISE

AVN addresses food insecurity as part of its vital role in assisting justice-involved individuals and their families. Through personal storytelling, individuals like **Roychelle Hicks, a paralegal and member of The Village**, share their experiences to raise awareness of the negative effects of the felony drug ban. Hicks leads the AVN Legal Advocacy Clinic, helping justice-impacted individuals restore their civil rights.



**Roychelle Hicks** suffered from substance use disorder and served a nine-year prison sentence for drug possession. After transforming her life while incarcerated, she was faced with challenges upon her release when she was denied SNAP benefits due to her drug charges. Hicks was ultimately able to obtain SNAP, after pushing back against her initial denial, and was told that she needed to prove she was in a substance abuse program. She was subjected to the humiliation of having to bring a programs support staff person to her treatment program as proof that she was participating.

As a direct result of her own experience, Hicks has become a powerful advocate for criminal justice reform and reentry community support. She organized community meetings and partnered with local advocacy groups to bring attention to this issue. Her efforts led to awareness to ensure fair access to benefits for those in recovery or rehabilitation programs.

Understanding the challenges faced by individuals reentering society after incarceration, Hicks attends weekly orientations at the Arizona Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation, and Reentry, serving as a mentor to other formerly incarcerated women upon release and offering a support network within the community. In addition, she is a paralegal for the Arizona Village Network, assisting people to restore their civil rights as well as providing resources for job training, housing assistance, and counseling services for people transitioning from prison.

Hicks's journey from addiction and incarceration to community advocacy exemplifies resilience and determination in overcoming personal struggles while championing systemic changes for a more just and supportive society. Her leadership inspires others to work toward a better future for all.

## 2024 ELEVATING VOICES POWER SUMMIT

Representing the Arizona Village Network and their own personal journeys, Rushdan and Hicks were invited to participate in Feeding America's Elevating Voices Power Summit in Washington, DC, on July 12–14, 2024. The Summit brought together community leaders, policymakers, and directly impacted individuals to discuss barriers to food security and explore actionable solutions. Participants had the opportunity to learn effective advocacy strategies, including legislative engagement and coalition-building, while sharing experiences and insights on food insecurity challenges. While the range of participants was broad, Rushdan and Hicks amplified the specific challenges faced by individuals affected by the criminal justice system, focusing on federal efforts to repeal the SNAP drug felony ban and eliminate benefits cliffs.



## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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AVN's advocacy efforts, bolstered by insights gained at the 2024 Elevating Voices Power Summit, focus on addressing food insecurity among justice-involved individuals. Key recommendations include:



**REPEAL THE SNAP DRUG FELONY BAN:** Urge lawmakers to fully repeal the ban, promoting food access and dignity for formerly incarcerated individuals.



**ADDRESS BENEFITS CLIFFS:** Propose policies that allow a person to gradually taper off benefits as they secure employment or higher wages, allowing for a smoother transition and reducing economic instability.



**STRENGTHEN AND ELEVATE COMMUNITY COALITIONS:** Build partnerships with regional organizations to amplify advocacy efforts and educate the public about the challenges faced by justice-impacted individuals.



**EMPOWER ADVOCATES WITH LIVED EXPERTISE:** Provide training for formerly incarcerated individuals to share their stories in public forums, fostering understanding and support for policy changes.



**DEVELOP EVIDENCE-BASED POLICIES:** Engage state lawmakers to pass policies grounded in research and data, highlighting the necessity of addressing food insecurity within the justice-involved community.

Through these initiatives, AVN aims to create a compassionate Arizona where individuals have the resources and opportunities needed to thrive post-incarceration.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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**Khalil Rushdan** is the founder and CEO of the Arizona Village Network. **Roychelle Hicks** is the paralegal at the Arizona Village Network.

*This publication was supported by the Arizona Food Bank Network and Feeding America.*

## ENDNOTES

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1. The federal *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996* (PRWORA, or the 1996 Welfare Reform Act) imposed a lifetime ban on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly food stamps) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF, or cash assistance) for people with a previous drug felony conviction. States were given the option to modify or remove the ban, and, to date, all states except one have done so for at least one of the programs. See *No More Double Punishments: Lifting the Ban on SNAP and TANF for People with Prior Drug Felony Convictions*, a policy brief published by the Center for Law and Social Policy in April 2022. States were given the option to modify or remove the ban, and, to date, all states except one have done so for at least one of the programs. See [\*No More Double Punishments: Lifting the Ban on SNAP and TANF for People with Prior Drug Felony Convictions\*](#), a policy brief published by the Center for Law and Social Policy in April 2022.
2. Arizona Department of Economic Security (DES), Family Assistance Administration (FAA). *August 2024 DES Family Assistance Administration Monthly Statistical Plan Bulletin*.
3. USDA-ERS (United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service). *Food Prices and Spending*. [www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/ag-and-food-statistics-charting-the-essentials/food-prices-and-spending](http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/ag-and-food-statistics-charting-the-essentials/food-prices-and-spending). Last updated 27 June 2024.
4. Yang, Crystal. "Does Public Assistance Reduce Recidivism?" *American Economic Review*. May 2017. 107(5): 551–555.