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Editorial

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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March 6, 2008

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ATTN: EDITORIAL/OPINION EDITOR

Senate Bill 764 is an Economic Benefit to the State

JEFFERSON CITY: Debate was heated in the State Capitol this week as Senate Bill 764 was heard. Some of the debate included inaccurate and misleading information about the bill. Missouri Association for Social Welfare would like to set the record straight on what this bill would actually do.

If passed, Senate Bill 764 would opt Missouri out of a lifetime ban (created by the Federal Government) placed on ex-drug felons from receiving the Food Stamp benefit. When it enacted the “drug felony provision” in 1996, Congress also gave states the option to “opt out” of the ban and allow ex-drug felons in their state to qualify for Food Stamps.

Missouri is one of only 14 states that continue to follow the Food Stamp ban on ex-drug felons. Because Missouri has failed to opt out of the ban, the State is not eligible for millions of federal

“THE WELFARE OF THE PEOPLE SHALL BE THE SUPREME LAW”

dollars that other states are receiving because they opted out of the ban. During the debate in the Senate, some stated that this bill would cost the State of Missouri millions of dollars. While it is true that there will be some cost to the State for the administration of the Food Stamp program, the entire cost of the Food Stamp benefit is paid for by the Federal Government.

Our estimates show that by opting out of this lifetime ban, Missouri could potentially bring an additional \$26 million in federally-funded Food Stamp benefits into our State. Food Stamps are recognized by the Federal Government as an excellent way to spur economic activity (every \$5 in Food Stamps results in \$9.20 in economic activity) because Food Stamp benefits would be spent at local grocery stores, thereby supporting our local farmers. Thus, with this one new law, Missouri could infuse millions more in Federal Food Stamp dollars into our local economies and spur millions more in economic activity across the State.

In the debate, it was also said that the Senators rejected the idea of giving Food Stamps to those who have broken the law. Under federal law, the Food Stamp benefit cannot be denied to any other ex-offender. This means that a person can commit a violent crime (a murder, a robbery, or treason), serve their time and, upon their release from prison, could potentially receive Food Stamps. However in Missouri, if anyone has been convicted of even **one** drug related felony, that person is banned for life from getting Food Stamp benefits.

We should be encouraging this population to become active members of our society after they have successfully served their time, instead of punishing them again for their crime after they are released from prison. By providing support to them in their efforts to become addiction-free through drug treatment programs and offering them some assistance to get back on their feet (i.e. employment programs, educational programs, assistance programs, and Food Stamps) these individuals are much more likely to succeed than if we do nothing. Senate Bill 764 will help reduce the cycle of recidivism in which drug offenders tend to get caught. By reducing recidivism we are also decreasing our

criminal justice costs – a large piece of our State’s budget – and potentially decreasing our foster care costs.

Finally, opting out of the ban would not automatically give every ex-drug felon access to the Food Stamp program. As the bill states, individuals would have to successfully complete a drug treatment program and/or successfully complete any requirements that the court has set forth. After that, the individual would also have to apply and qualify for the program, including meeting the financial eligibility requirements of the program.

This bill gives Missouri the opportunity to do what 36 other states have already done – bring more of Missouri’s federal tax dollars back into our local economy. By passing this bill, the Legislature would assist ex-drug felons who have completed drug treatment, have served their time and are working to better themselves. Finally, passing this bill will enable the State to help keep families together and lower prison costs by decreasing recidivism rates for ex-drug felons. It is a win-win situation, one that needs to be looked at more closely by our State Legislators.

A careful, objective analysis demonstrates the positive impact of SB 764. The General Assembly should take advantage of this opportunity to take an important step forward to alleviate hunger among our poorest citizens and help to rehabilitate destitute Missourians who have already paid for their mistakes. However, continuing to subject them to an arbitrary form of “double jeopardy” for the sake of politics is unwise for our state.

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