

## Pell grants for prisoners: Obama to give inmates a second chance at college

[Gregory Korte](#), USA TODAY 12:06 a.m. ET June 24, 2016



President Obama meets with formerly incarcerated individuals who have previously received commutations on March 30: From left to right: Serena Nunn, Ramona Brant, Obama and Phillip Emmert.(Photo: NICHOLAS KAMM, AFP/Getty Images)

CONNECT [TWEET 183](#) [LINKEDIN](#) COMMENT EMAIL MORE

WASHINGTON — The Obama administration will give Pell grants to about 12,000 inmates in an effort to help them transition to life after prison — despite a law prohibiting inmates from receiving financial aid under the program.

The \$30 million Second Chance Pell Grant program will be available to inmates at 141 state and federal correctional institutions, who will be able to use a federal Pell grant of up to \$5,815 to pursue a two- or four-year degree from one of 67 approved colleges and universities.

State and federal inmates haven't been eligible for Pell grants in 22 years, a vestige of the [1994 crime bill](#) in which Congress explicitly prohibited inmates from receiving them: "No basic grant shall be awarded under this subpart to any individual who is incarcerated in any Federal or State penal institution." At the time, 0.6% of Pell grants were going to inmates.

But the the Department of Education is using a separate provision that allows it to conduct pilot programs: "The Secretary is authorized to waive, for any institution participating as an experimental site ... any requirements in this title, including requirements related to the award process and disbursement of student financial aid."

"We have called for Congress to reverse the mistake that was made in the mid '90s," Secretary of Education John King told USA TODAY. "That ban remains in place until Congress acts. We are using our experimentation authority under the Higher Education Act."

Leading the charge for the Second Chance Pell Grant program has been Dallas Pell of the Education from the Inside Out Coalition. It was her father, Sen. Claiborne Pell, D-R.I., who authored the popular college grant program. "We already know from statistics that access to education while in prison is hugely beneficial for the individual and the community," she said Thursday.

The Pell grants were one of a number of executive actions the White House is announcing Friday in an effort to keep up momentum on reintegration of convicted felons while Congress considers a number of criminal justice reform proposals. The Department of Labor is also announcing more than \$72 million in grants to give training and job search assistance to convicts — or young people at risk of becoming convicts.

"We're squandering opportunity by not giving people with a criminal record a second chance," said Secretary of Labor Tom Perez. "Many of the people we're trying to help, frankly, didn't have a fair first chance."

###