

**Congresswoman****Sheila Jackson Lee**

18th District — Texas

For Immediate Release
March 10, 2005

Contact: Rebecca Gale
202 225 3410

Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee's Joins Supporters to Demand Changes to the Higher Education Act

Washington, D.C. - Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee, chair and founder of the Congressional Children's Caucus, joined the NAACP, Congressman Barney Frank and additional cosponsors to urge lawmakers to repeal the Drug Provision in the Higher Education Act.

"We must start reaching across the aisle to our Republican colleagues and pass this bill out of the Education and Workforce Committee to bring it to the House floor for a vote," said Congresswoman Jackson Lee. Right now, there are 51 original cosponsors of HR 1184, the RISE Act, Removing Impediments from Students' Education, and they are all Democrats.

Congresswoman Jackson Lee continued, "The Free Application For Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) asks only one question to implicate students for prior crimes. It asks, 'Have you ever been convicted of a drug offense?' Nowhere on there is any question of rape, assault, murder or any grievous felony. Its one simple question and it is ruining the lives of many aspiring students based on a past mistake that would have been resolved in the courts."

Since the Drug Provision was added to the Higher Education Act in 1998, more than 160,000 students have been ineligible for federal educational aid as a result of their response to the question about drug convictions on the FAFSA. This number does not account for students who the question deterred from applying for aid in the first place.

"This is even more unfortunate because the HEA Drug Provision hurts the children of low- and middle-income families - the same people the HEA is intended to assist. Minorities are disproportionately affected by the HEA Drug Provision." While African Americans make up 13% of the population and 13% of drug users, they account for 55% of all drug convictions. Congresswoman Jackson Lee continued, "Accordingly, minority groups have far higher percentages of their members who are ineligible for federal financial aid than whites. Currently, more African American men are in prison than in college."

"This is only crime that a student is held liable for and can lose their federal financial aid. We must keep drugs in the courts and not in the education system, and not make our students pay for their crimes twice. We must repeal this provision now," concluded Congresswoman Jackson Lee.