

WASHINGTON -- Today Congressman Sam Johnson (R-TX) and Congressman John Larson (D-CT) introduced legislation that would prohibit the IRS from taxing compensation awarded to people who have been wrongfully convicted of a crime and subsequently exonerated.

“As a former Prisoner of War in Vietnam for nearly 7 years, I know what it is like to have years of your life robbed,” said Johnson, who spent nearly half of his captivity in solitary confinement. “While we can’t return the years lost as a result of wrongful imprisonment, we can make sure that those individuals don’t suffer the additional injustice of being persecuted by the IRS for taxes they shouldn’t have to pay.” Dallas County, which includes portions of Johnson’s district, is a leader in exonerations.

Since the first DNA exoneration in 1989, the wrongfully convicted have served more than 3,809 years in prisons across 35 states before being exonerated. The nearly 300 DNA exonerees served an average of 13.5 years in prison, ranging from less than one to 35 years.

Johnson and Larson believe this bill represents a bipartisan effort in Washington to ensure that the federal government does its part for those who have been wronged by the justice system.

“In Connecticut, with the exoneration of James Tillman, we’ve seen firsthand that wrongful convictions are an unfortunate reality,” Congressman Larson added. “Though we can never give the wrongfully convicted the time back that they’ve had taken from them, they certainly shouldn’t have to pay Uncle Sam a share of any compensation they’re awarded. This bill will make sure they don’t have to suffer that insult on top of their injury.”

Specifically, the Wrongful Convictions Tax Relief Act proposes to allow exonerees to keep their awards free of tax.

Compensation awards are meant to provide exonerated prisoners with much-needed economic support. Many exonerated individuals experience severe hardship acclimating to society, finding jobs and housing and reconnecting with family. With no money, housing, transportation, health services or insurance, the punishment lingers long after the exoneration.

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