

## **Restoring felons' right to vote sensible, fair Stake in Society An Incentive to Reform**

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By Carl Wicklund

Kentucky recently came one step closer to ensuring that voting is a fair and democratic process. Gov. Steve Beshear announced this month that he was removing some barriers to voting for people with felony convictions.

As someone with 35 years of experience in the criminal justice field, I support Beshear's decision. Full civic participation by citizens living in our community protects public safety.

Beshear, with the support of Secretary of State Trey Grayson, eased some of the most cumbersome requirements of the vote-restoration process imposed by Beshear's predecessor.

Previously, in addition to submitting a written clemency application, people who had completed their felony sentences were required to pay a fee, write an essay and submit three personal recommendations to regain the right to vote.

In removing these barriers, Beshear said the policy change "is about treating people fairly and about welcoming back people trying to put their lives together again and become good citizens."

Despite this progress, Kentucky maintains a highly restrictive policy of lifetime disenfranchisement. Laws that disenfranchise people with felony convictions exist in 48 states (all but Maine and Vermont), but Kentucky maintains the distinction of being one of only two states (along with Virginia) that permanently disenfranchises all citizens with felony convictions for life unless they gain a reprieve directly from the governor.

Nearly 129,000 adults have completed the obligations of their criminal sentences but are still barred from voting in Kentucky. The overall disenfranchisement rate among African-Americans is the nation's highest, with nearly one in four (23.7 percent) adults barred from voting.

As the executive director of the national association that represents the probation and parole agents who supervise more than 4 million people across the country, I understand the importance of connecting people released from prison with positive institutions in the community, including employment, education, housing, and also voting. There is absolutely no credible evidence showing that continuing to disenfranchise people after they have returned to the community serves any legitimate law enforcement purpose.

To the contrary, when people feel they have a stake in their community they are less likely to engage in antisocial behavior. We would all be better served if people living in the community have both the rights and obligations expected of all citizens.

Legislation introduced by Rep. Jesse Crenshaw seeks to amend Kentucky's constitution and automatically restore voting rights to citizens who have completed their prison terms and probation or parole for a felony conviction. Attempts by some legislators to place limitations on who would qualify, however, are misguided.

An overly complex system with different eligibility requirements for voting makes the registration process cumbersome and error-prone. Parole and probation officers who seek to educate eligible clients about their voting rights, along with local election officials, would encounter a system that is complicated to explain and difficult to administer if different rules apply to different people. One system of equal eligibility is far more practical.

Beshear and Grayson have demonstrated that second chances and democracy are valued bipartisan principles. I am encouraged by their thoughtful comments, but Kentucky remains out of step by maintaining a policy that produces high rates of disenfranchisement and little room for redemption.

The legislature and governor should move quickly to pass Crenshaw's legislation without amendment.

As the November presidential election approaches, I am reminded that thousands of fellow Kentuckians will stay home because they are unable to vote. Children will not benefit from their parents' political voices, and community interests will be overlooked because they are not fully represented at the polls. This scenario is a reality for far too many in Kentucky. Action to end it is sorely needed.

### **About the author**

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