

January 3, 2011

Governor-Elect Terry Branstad
P.O. Box 3747
Urbandale, IA 50323

Dear Governor-Elect Branstad,

As nonpartisan non-profit and faith-based organizations committed to fairness, equality and representative democracy, we write to urge you to uphold Executive Order 42 and continue to automatically restore the right to vote to all Iowa citizens who have completed their criminal sentences. Since the policy was enacted in 2005, it has extended the right to vote to thousands of Iowa citizens, and has been implemented without any reported problems. We welcome a meeting with you to discuss this important issue.

We believe that the right to vote is integral to an individual's reentry back into the community. People transitioning out of the criminal justice system are expected to reintegrate themselves fully back into society. This will be made far more difficult if we brand them as second-class citizens. Once a person has completed the terms of his or her sentence, he or she should receive both the rights and responsibilities that come with that status. We believe that voting is not just a right, it is also a responsibility.

Denying the right to vote to people with criminal convictions in their pasts not only harms the disenfranchised individual – it harms families and entire communities. Studies show that denying the vote to one person has a ripple effect, impacting the political participation far beyond the individual. Research has also shown that people who vote are more likely to participate in other community activities.

We also believe that the right to vote should never hinge on one's wealth or ability to pay. Making the right to vote contingent on payment of court-imposed fees, fines and restitution is contrary to the fundamental principles of our democracy. Our democracy stands for the ideal that each citizen is entitled to cast one vote, and each vote counts the same regardless of who casts it. While persons with criminal convictions should be expected to satisfy their debts to society, making voting contingent on such payments essentially creates a modern-day poll tax, allowing wealthy individuals to vote while those who are struggling to pay off their debt remain disenfranchised.

We fully support Executive Order 42 and the principles for which it stands: that Iowa believes in providing a second chance, and that we as Iowans welcome our neighbors back to our communities as full and equal citizens. We urge you to continue the policy of automatically restoring the right to vote to people who have completed their sentences. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

ACLU of Iowa
American Friends Service Committee
Beacon of Life
Board of Christian Social Action of Plymouth United Church of Christ
Criminal Justice Ministries
Crossroad Bible Institute
Des Moines Iowa Winner's Circle
Friends of Iowa Women Prisoners
Hanson House of Hospitality
Interfaith Alliance of Iowa Action Fund
Iowa Citizen Action Network
Iowa Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church
Iowa Coalition 4 Juvenile Justice
Iowa CURE
Iowa Developmental Disabilities Council
Iowa NOW and Des Moines NOW
Justice Reform Consortium
League of Women Voters of Iowa
Methodist Federation for Social Action
National Association of Social Workers, Iowa Chapter
Sister Johanna Rickl, Congregation of the Humility of Mary (Davenport)
Sister JoAnne Talarico, Congregation of the Humility of Mary (Davenport)
Sister Mary Rehmann, Congregation of the Humility of Mary (Davenport)
Trinity United Methodist Church
United Methodist Church, Iowa Annual Conference
Voices to be Heard
Women's International League of Peace & Freedom, Des Moines