

Support Efforts to Restore Voting Rights

One of every 11 Kentucky citizens of voting age, or 312,000 people, cannot vote according to *Felony Disenfranchisement in the Commonwealth of Kentucky*, an updated 2017 report of the Kentucky League of Women Voters. In Kentucky, persons convicted of felony offenses permanently lose their right to vote. Because of this restriction, 26 percent of African Americans of voting age are disenfranchised, meaning one in every four members of the African American community are excluded when it comes to electing their representatives at the local, state and federal levels.

Since publication of the League's 2006 report which showed disenfranchisement of 186,000 persons, another 126,000 citizens, an increase of 68 percent, have lost their voting rights.

Kentucky is one of only four states that ban former felons from voting, ranking third in the rate of disenfranchisement overall and first in disenfranchisement of African Americans. Many states allow persons to vote once their sentences have been served and some never take away voting rights, allowing prisoners to vote.

In Kentucky, former felons may appeal to the governor to have voting rights restored, but the number of persons regaining that right is left to the discretion of the governor and has varied widely.

In 2016, the legislature enacted House Bill 40, expanding the opportunity for former felons to seek expungement of their felony convictions, which would also restore their right to vote. The application requires a five-year waiting period and a \$500 fee. In the first six months after HB 40 became law, fewer than 400 applicant requests for expungement were granted, representing a fraction of the 312,000 citizens who have lost their right to vote. Many of these persons made a mistake as a young person. They are now working, paying taxes and participating as citizens in everything but the most important aspect of being a U.S. citizen – voting. The League reports that the restoration of voting rights promotes rehabilitation and reintegration into the community and cites public opinion surveys showing eight in ten U.S. residents support voting rights for citizens who have completed their sentence.

We applaud Governor Matt Bevin, Justice Cabinet Secretary John Tilley and Senator Whitney Westerfield, who are promoting Senate Bill 120 to provide supports for former felons to make a smooth and successful transition from prison to their communities and employment. We would suggest, however, that restoring the right to vote should be included in the many ways SB 120 helps felons re-enter society. Restoration of voting rights is another way to help these citizens become contributing members of their communities and to reduce recidivism, thus saving the state the high cost of additional convictions and incarceration.

We support Senate Bill 120. We also support legislation that would expand the opportunity for expungement of felonies and reduce application fees. We ask the governor to expeditiously restore felons' right to vote by issuing executive pardons to those who have applied. In addition, we ask legislators to support Senate Bill 69 or House Bill 170 which would put a constitutional amendment on the ballot allowing citizens to decide whether to automatically restore voting rights to those who have made mistakes but paid their debt to society.

Terry Naydan
Nita Smith
Co-Presidents
League of Women Voters of Kentucky

The League's report, *Felon Disenfranchisement in Kentucky*, can be found at <https://lwvky.org/about/publications/>