

Sue Legg: Restore voting rights to former felons

Thursday Posted Aug 4, 2016 at 2:00 AM

By Sue Legg Special to The Sun

Denying the right to vote to individuals convicted of a felony after they have completed their sentences and re-entered the community is contrary to a foundational principle of the League of Women Voters — that every citizen should have the right to vote.

Approximately 10 percent of Florida's citizens are barred from voting due to a felony conviction. Most states grant a former prisoner the right to vote immediately upon completion of his or her sentence and any period of probation or parole or, in some states, upon completion of the sentence. Florida is one of only a few states that require an individual convicted of a felony to apply for and be granted restoration of his civil rights in order to vote.

A 2014 New York Times article by Brent Staples described Florida as “leading the pack” in felony disenfranchisement, with “[m]ore than one in ten Floridians — and nearly one in four African-American Floridians” unable to vote. The disparate impact on African Americans is not surprising since, according to the Brennan Center for Justice, constitutional felony disenfranchisement was adopted in Florida in 1868 as a means to suppress the voting power of former slaves.

In 2007, the governor eased Florida's process for restoration of civil rights. As a result, more than 150,000 individuals had their rights restored. However, after taking office in 2011, Gov. Rick Scott made the process more difficult. Currently, a former prisoner must wait either five or seven years after completion of all sentences and conditions of supervision before applying to have his civil rights restored. Worse, there is no guarantee that the application will be timely reviewed. In 2015, 2,354 applications were filed but only 427 were granted and 109 were denied. As of May 1, 10,579 applications were pending.

In February 2014, U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder urged state leaders to pass reforms restoring voting rights to former prisoners who have completed the terms of their sentences. Holder noted that disenfranchisement does not further any criminal justice objective and stigmatizes and isolates formerly incarcerated individuals, rather than encouraging them to become the productive and law-abiding citizens that we expect them to be. Holder pointed out that a study conducted by the Leadership Conference Education Fund found evidence that restoring voting rights to former prisoners significantly increases the likelihood that they will not re-enter the prison system.

In May, the League of Women Voters of Florida sent a letter to Gov. Scott expressing concern with Florida's lack of progress in restoring the voting rights of individuals with felony convictions. The League also supports amending Florida's Constitution to restore voting rights upon completion of all terms of a sentence.

— Sue Legg is president of the Alachua County League of Women Voters.

