



# Press Release...

*from State Representative La Shawn K. Ford*

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**FOR MORE INFORMATION:**

State Rep. La Shawn K. Ford

773-378-5902

## **Ford Joins Ex-Offenders to Announce Illinois Voter Registration Drive for Ex-Offenders**

**CHICAGO** – Illinois State Representative La Shawn K. Ford (D-Chicago) and interested stakeholders held a press conference on January 18, 2018, to announce a voter registration drive for ex-offenders and to call on candidates for governor for the state of Illinois to make ex-offenders and their re-entry back into society a major agenda item once they enter office as governor. Stakeholders included: Westside Health Authority, Safer Foundation, A Safe Haven, NAEFI Keeping It Real Project, NLEN National Black Agenda Consortium, Roy Flowers - Chair of 8th District Reentry Committee, Raymond Richard, Womens Prison Ministry, Inmates for Change, Chicago Votes and ex-offenders.

“In Illinois it is so very important that people with felonies recognize that, when they’re out of prison, they have a right to vote. Other states - in the South - people with felonies - they don’t have that right,” Ford said. “In Illinois, there are 4.1 million people with some form of a background that have a right to vote. This is a large voting bloc that can elect the next governor of Illinois. Family members of ex-offenders and ex-offenders themselves are strong power bases for any candidate running to be elected to office,” Ford continued.

Quiwana Bell, chief operating officer of the Westside Health Authority which runs a re-entry center in the Austin community which provides services for people returning home from prison, said, “Those 4 million people need to know they can vote, and they need to vote.”

“A lot of brothers and sisters that’s coming home from prison in Illinois don’t even know that they have the right to vote,” said Clifton “Booney” McFowler, an ex-offender who now works as a case manager with BUILD Chicago, an outreach group which specializes in gang intervention, prevention, and youth programs for at-risk teens in the Chicago area.

Compared with many states, Illinois has a more lenient view toward ex-felons being able to get their voting rights back after they have served their prison time. While anyone incarcerated because of a felony cannot vote, voting rights are instantly reinstated upon release from the prison system. In addition, anyone who is on probation or parole is able to vote.

Ford said, “In this last presidential election, the president won the White House with 62 million votes. There are over 100 million people across America with some type of criminal record or background. The re-entry community could elect the next president of the United States,” he said. Ford said that ex-offenders can be a powerful voting bloc, if all ex-offenders were given the right to vote.

Ford also said there needs to be a process to eventually clear the criminal records of even violent ex-cons, saying, “We have to say this to people who are returning from prison: If you have served your time and if you are reformed, we will clean your record, and you have a right to start all over.”

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“When people are released back into the community from prison, they often face serious barriers, such as physical or mental health problems, no place to stay, or a lack of education or qualifications to hold a job,” said Ford. “If we want to end the street violence in Chicago and across Illinois, we must open the gates to opportunities for those with criminal records.”

Forty-eight percent of ex-offenders in Illinois end up back in prison within three years of release. “We must improve the prospects of people’s second chances and provide the opportunity to re-enter society as productive citizens, encouraging continuing support of these returning citizens as they re-enter their communities, if we want to lower the recidivism rate,” said Ford.

“Unfortunately, when ex-offenders have served their time and are released back into the community, the system does not give them a fair shake,” said Ford. “A criminal background in America is a disability that prevents citizens from living a productive life in America. Even those who were wrongfully convicted have to carry the burden of a negative image on their shoulders. This is causing us to see a repeated cycle in our prison system and communities. We must not turn our backs and pretend this is not an issue with our family, friends and community,” said Ford.

In the United States, more than 100 million people have some form of a criminal record. According to the Brennan Center for Justice, every arrest comes with a sentence: guilty or not guilty. A 2012 survey by the Society for Human Resource Management, found that eighty-six percent of employers use criminal background checks on at least some candidates, with the majority - sixty-nine percent - checking all candidates. In a similar 2010 survey by the same group, thirty-one percent of respondents said an arrest without conviction would at least be “somewhat influential” in their hiring decision.

“So many people who have paid their debt to society still struggle to find ways to clear their names - struggling for total freedom and the opportunities they deserve,” said Ford. “It’s not a surprise that a high level of violence happens in communities where the most people are released from Illinois’ state prisons. We can no longer shut American citizens out of the work force, education, and housing in Illinois. Candidates running for governor of Illinois should see re-entry issues and reforms of our corrections system as priorities if they are asking for our votes,” said Ford.

For more information, please contact Ford’s constituent service office at 773-378-5902 or visit [www.lashawnford.com](http://www.lashawnford.com)