



April 26, 2016

The Right to Vote

We should celebrate the actions of Virginia's Governor Terry McAuliffe, who last week signed an Executive Order which will allow more than 200,000 ex-offenders in Virginia to register to vote in the upcoming presidential election, one of the biggest actions taken by a state to instantly restore voting rights.

According to The Washington Post, the change applies to all felons who have completed their sentences and been released from supervised probation or parole. The Democratic governor's decision particularly affects black residents of Virginia: 1 in 4 African Americans in the state has been permanently banned from voting because of laws restricting the rights of those with convictions.

"Once you have served your time and you've finished up your supervised parole. . . I want you back as a full citizen of the commonwealth," McAuliffe said. "I want you to have a job. I want you paying taxes, and you can't be a second-class citizen."

Along with restoring voting rights, the governor's action restores the right to serve on a jury, run for office and become a notary public. The new rights also apply to felons convicted in another state and living in Virginia.

In Illinois, people in prison cannot vote, but everyone else can vote, including ex-offenders. We should take every advantage of our right to vote to express our views, electing those who will best represent us. In this legislative session, I passed House Joint Resolution 76 which supports amending the United States Constitution to explicitly guarantee an individual's right to vote. A referendum that I introduced which asked, "Should the United States Constitution be amended to include an explicit right to vote?" was overwhelmingly supported by the voters in the 29th Ward in the March 15th primary election.

Across the country, state laws vary on the right to vote for ex-offenders. According to the American Civil Liberties Union, about 5.85 million Americans with felony convictions (and misdemeanors in several states) cannot vote. The Sentencing Project estimates that 1 in 13 African Americans are prohibited from voting. All people with felony convictions in three states - Iowa, Florida and Kentucky - are still permanently banned from voting. Some people with felony convictions cannot vote in 6 more states. Again, we are fortunate that here in Illinois, people who are not in prison have the right to vote.

Last week, our country made a great step forward with the decision of Virginia's Governor McAuliffe. It was just the right thing to do.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'LSF', written in a cursive style.

La Shawn K. Ford
State Representative-Eighth District