



February 12, 2020

Mandela and Voting Rights

Nelson Mandela, the first President of the new Republic of South Africa, was released from prison 30 years ago on February 11, 1990. He had been imprisoned for 27 years. To recognize the anniversary of his release, President Obama said, "I remember the hope we all felt watching Mandela's release from prison. The gift of a new way of seeing. The chance to participate in the work of building a better world. The ultimate example of perseverance and faith for each new generation to follow."

Part of the chance to participate in building a better world is exercising our constitutional right to vote to choose the leaders who will work for us by passing laws that affect our lives and also choosing judges and others who will work for justice.

This right to vote is so important that I was House Co-sponsor of legislation that was signed into law last August 21, 2019, that became Public Act 100-0442, which became effective January 1, 2020. This legislation creates a way for eligible voters who are confined or detained in jail and not convicted of an offense to exercise their right to vote. Outside of Cook County, this means that a system must be set up so eligible voters may vote by mail, and in Cook County, temporary branch polling places must be set up inside Cook County Jail. The system will allow a voter to vote in the same elections that the voter would be entitled to vote where the voter resides. This law requires each election authority to collaborate with their respective county jail to facilitate registration of eligible confined individuals. Additionally, county jails are required to provide a voter registration application to (1) any person in custody who requests one and is eligible to vote; and (2) any person being released from custody.

This legislation goes further. Individuals who are in jail or prison on a criminal conviction have their voting rights suspended during their sentence, but regain the right to vote at its conclusion. In order to exercise that right, they must first reregister. This new law requires that upon discharge of a person who is eligible to vote from a county jail, the county jail shall provide the person with a voter registration application. They will also receive detailed printed information regarding the voting rights of a person with a criminal conviction. Also, upon release of a person who is eligible to vote on parole, mandatory release, final discharge, or pardon, the Department of Corrections shall provide the person with a form that informs him or her that his or her voting rights have been restored and a voter registration application.

This law is so important for those people living on the West and South Sides who are disproportionately jailed. On January 1, 2020, there were 5,616 individuals at Cook County Jail. The self-reported Zip Codes for those in custody on 1/1/20 are mostly on the West and South Sides. Here is a list of the number of people in Cook County Jail from the top 15 Zip Codes:

Zip Code	No.	Frequency %
60623	252	4.50%
60624	236	4.22%
60628	218	3.90%

60644	206	3.68%
60651	198	3.54%
60619	190	3.40%
60620	188	3.36%
60621	173	3.09%
60617	158	2.82%
60636	156	2.79%
60637	126	2.25%
60629	122	2.18%
60649	117	2.09%
60411	104	1.86%
60612	101	1.81%

We can honor the legacy of Nelson Mandela, including his release from prison 30 years ago, by doing all we can to make sure that people who have the right to vote have a chance to exercise that right. We also need to give everyone the information they need so they can make their individual choices in the voting booth. This is especially important now as our Illinois Primary Election Day is coming up on March 17, 2020. Let's all exercise our right to vote!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'L. Ford', with a stylized flourish at the end.

La Shawn K. Ford
State Representative-Eighth District