** Restoring the Right to Vote**

In most states convicted felons may vote after completion of their sentences. However, in Florida a past felony conviction can mean a permanent loss of the right to vote. Florida is one of just 11 states that continue to restrict voting rights even after a person has completed probation or other terms of a sentence. In Florida that loss of civil rights also takes away the right to hold public office, serve on a jury, and hold certain types of state job licenses. Only three other states have rules as strict as Florida’s.

Florida used to have a simple path to restoration, but in 2011 the state ended the common practice of automatically restoring the voting rights for non-violent ex-felons who had served their time, and paid all fines and fees. Instead all individuals convicted of any felony now must apply for executive clemency after a five year waiting period. Since then, more than 50,000 people a year are being added to a list of other ex-felons who just want their rights back.

But a person with a past felony conviction loses these civil rights permanently until and unless he or she is granted restoration of civil rights by the Board of Executive Clemency. The Board of Executive Clemency is comprised of the Governor, Attorney General, Chief Financial Officer, and Commissioner of Agriculture and Consumer Services.

How many voters are affected? About 10 percent (1.5 million) of Floridians are barred from the voting booth by a past felony conviction. It hits hardest upon the minority populations—a shocking 23 percent of Florida’s African Americans are disenfranchised. In Florida, both serious crimes and less serious ones may take away voting rights for life.

What remains less known is how broken the system for restoring voting rights has become. Due to the backlog, Individuals may wait as long as 13 years after completing their sentences to get a hearing on having their rights restored. Even then, they have less than a 1 percent chance of having their rights restored, according to the Florida Rights Restoration Coalition.

The League of Women Voters of Florida and the coalition group Floridians for a Fair Democracy, are currently circulating a petition for a 2016 ballot initiative to address this injustice. The Voting Restoration Amendment would allow Floridians who have served their felony sentences, but are not convicted of murder or sexual offenses, to have their voting rights back as soon as they complete their sentence, including parole or probation.

Right now, you can go online and sign the petition to get the amendment on the 2016 ballot. Download the petition here: http://election.dos.state.fl.us/initiatives/fulltext/pdf/64388-1.pdf

Let us know if you would like to help distribute these petitions. Email: lwvmanatee@yahoo.com

**Ballot summary:** This amendment restores the voting rights of Floridians with felony convictions after they complete all terms of their sentence including parole or probation. The amendment would not apply to those convicted of murder or sexual offenses, who would continue to be permanently barred from voting unless the Governor and Cabinet vote to restore their voting rights on a case by case basis.

*From the Manatee County Voter, Dec 2014*