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Restoration of rights should be automatic for ex-felons

By Desmond Meade | Guest columnist

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About 1 million taxpaying citizens in Florida are prohibited by law from voting.

Read that again, please. Taxpaying citizens. Prohibited by law. From voting.

There's a lifetime ban on voting and exercising other civil rights in Florida for anyone convicted of a felony. There is an option to apply to have your rights restored, but that process takes years and most former felons don't bother, which means Florida has essentially locked in a two-tier system of citizenship: those who may vote and those who may not.

Until this year, this lifetime punishment also carried another penalty. Hundreds of jobs and careers were off limits to former felons because Florida made the restoration of civil rights a condition of qualifying for many business and occupational licenses. As many as 40 percent of all Florida jobs — occupations such as dental hygienist, physical therapist, pest exterminator and bartender — were permanently out of reach.

Policymakers have known for years that lack of a steady job is one of the surest signs a former offender will break the law again. Sending Floridians to prison over and over again is a waste of tax dollars and human talent. So it never made sense to have a law effectively barring those released from prison from finding good jobs.

Many people would have expected former offenders and civil liberties groups to celebrate when Gov. Rick Scott signed Senate Bill 146 in June, officially breaking the link between voting and civil rights and eligibility for business or occupational licenses (a policy known in Tallahassee as "decoupling").

The change was overdue and will help former offenders find work and stay out of the criminal-justice system. Florida Attorney General Pam Bondi, a supporter of the decoupling effort, said S.B. 146 would "help felons reintegrate into society and enhance public safety."

She's right, of course, but instead of celebrating decoupling, many of us see it as little more than shameless window dressing for the ongoing, intentional effort to make complete restoration of our voting and other civil rights harder to attain.

A new voting-rights plan was passed this year, written by Bondi and approved by Scott and the elected Cabinet. It added new mandatory waiting periods and other delays and

obstacles to an already-complex and slow process for full rights restoration. Their new rules essentially force an individual to wait as long as 13 years after completing a sentence to even get a hearing to determine whether or not he or she will be able to become part of society again.

While some see the new rules and procedures as more strict, others like me see them as impossible — permanently barring full community and civic participation for all former felons.

Now thousands of former felons will spend years as second-class citizens — paying taxes and living under rules made by those they had no voice in selecting — while even more won't even bother with the newly complex process.

If, as Bondi says, reintegration of former felons into society enhances public safety (and it does), complete and equal reintegration is better than any half measure. And yet, Bondi and the governor knowingly made full reintegration more difficult.

Bondi's statement about the importance of reintegration in decoupling makes the actions to bar the door on voting rights and full reintegration seem like calculated politics based on the presumed political leanings of former felons. And it makes the "victory" of decoupling look more like cheap political cover for a broader goal of stacking the deck in upcoming elections.

To many Florida former offenders, passing decoupling feels like a corrupt payoff — the promise of more job options in exchange for a longer, more-difficult path to full, restored citizenship.

Decoupling would be unnecessary if Florida would do what 47 other states already do and implement a simple, automatic path to the restoration of full civil rights for former offenders. An automatic system of rights restoration is certainly cheaper than the slow, cumbersome process Florida has now.

Florida remains stuck in the distant past. Even with a new decoupling law, Florida continues to move ever more backward on voting rights — placing true reintegration further from more and more citizens.

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