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## Lawmakers continue push for felon voting rights

By **JOE BIESK**  
Associated Press Writer

FRANKFORT, Ky. (AP) -- He goes to work and pays taxes like most people, but since Mitch Ford was convicted of a felony in the early 1990s, he hasn't been allowed to vote.

Ford, a 31-year-old Louisville resident, said he's in the process of asking Gov. Ernie Fletcher for a partial pardon that would give him back the right to vote. Ford lost that right after being convicted of felony theft by deception and serving prison time from 1993 to 1999.

He hasn't had a voice at the ballot box since.

"It's kind of like being double-punished for something you did a long time ago," Ford said Wednesday at a news conference in the state Capitol.

Kentucky is one of three states, along with Florida and Virginia, that automatically revoke felons' voting rights. More than 180,000 people in Kentucky are currently disenfranchised because of a felony conviction, according to a recent study by the League of Women Voters of Kentucky.

Under Kentucky's constitution, felons must appeal to the governor in power to ask for the reinstatement of their rights, such as to vote, hold office or bear arms.

Since taking office, Republican Gov. Ernie Fletcher has required felons seeking a partial pardon to submit references and a written explanation. Administration officials say Fletcher has reinstated voting rights to more than 730 people since he took office.

Ford, however, said the current administration's process seems too "long and drawn out" for his liking. He also doubted the priority his application, or others like his, would receive.

"I shouldn't have to go through all that to get my rights back," Ford said. "It's my right."

Two Democratic lawmakers proposed legislation Wednesday aimed at bypassing the governor's office when it comes to restoring felons' voting rights.

State Sen. Gerald Neal of Louisville and Rep. Jesse Crenshaw of Lexington said they were pre-filing bills in the General Assembly calling for a constitutional amendment that would automatically restore voting rights to felons after they complete their sentence.

"Voting is one of the most important rights that a citizen can have, and to restore one's right to vote is fair," Crenshaw said. "We talk about rehabilitation, we talk about redemption, we talk about treating our fellow human beings fairly - this is one of the ways that we can do that."

Crenshaw's proposal would automatically give all felons the right to vote after completion of their sentences.

Neal offered a different plan that would create a tiered system of reinstatement. Felons with prison sentences between one and five years would have automatic restoration after completing their obligations, Neal said. Those with five- to 20-year sentences wait five years after completion of their sentence, while those with more than 20 years would have to receive a partial gubernatorial pardon, he

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said.

"I would consider the current situation a blight on our democracy," Neal said.

Fletcher spokeswoman Jodi Whitaker said the governor would evaluate the proposals.

Fletcher administration officials have defended the governor's policy, claiming the current process was reasonable and that the governor's office provides assistance to applicants seeking help.

Tayna Fogle, a former University of Kentucky basketball player, has had her voting rights restored under two different governors: former-Gov. Paul Patton and Fletcher. Fogle, a 46-year-old Lexington resident, was sentenced to 10 years in prison after she was convicted of forging checks and cocaine possession.

Fogle, who served more than six years in prison, said Patton restored her rights before the 2004 presidential election. In 2005, she found out that only one of her felonies had actually been pardoned and she needed to reapply with the Fletcher administration, Fogle said.

When asked to compare her reinstatement under Patton to Fletcher's procedure, Fogle said it was currently more difficult.

Earlier this year, Fletcher restored her rights allowing her to vote in the November general election, Fogle said.

"I'm telling you, it was an awesome feeling to know that I could make a decision in my community," Fogle said. "What an awesome feeling to tell my grandkids this is what we do."

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