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Group pushes voting rights for ex-felons

By Elisabeth J. Beardsley
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The Courier-Journal

The League of Women voters is calling for a constitutional amendment to automatically restore the voting rights of ex-felons upon completion of their sentences.

"We believe voting is the most fundamental expression of citizenship," Teena Halbig, president of the Kentucky League, said Thursday during a press conference in the state Capitol rotunda.

The Kentucky constitution imposes a lifetime voting ban on ex-felons. Two other states - Virginia and Florida - impose such bans, she said. The only way to get voting rights restored is by gubernatorial pardon.

There are now 186,348 Kentuckians who can't vote because of a felony conviction, according to a new report the League released Thursday.

That gives Kentucky the 6th highest rate among the states of voter disenfranchisement, the report says. Kentucky is first in disenfranchisement of African-Americans, it says.

In 2004, Gov. Ernie Fletcher changed the process for applying for restoration of voting rights to require felons to submit a written statement and character references.

Former state Sen. Georgia Powers said that change has discouraged ex-felons from applying.

"This governor has made it more difficult," Powers said. "It's so difficult to get them restored that they just don't bother."

Fletcher's deputy general counsel David Fleenor said the new process has not slowed the rate of application approvals. He said the governor has restored voting rights to 840 people out of 1,059 who submitted completed applications since the process change in 2004.

The other applications have been shelved, not rejected, and will be reviewed again at a later date, Fleenor said.

"We haven't turned anybody down," Fleenor said.

Fleenor declined to comment on the question of a constitutional amendment.

Fletcher spokeswoman Jodi Whitaker was not immediately available.

Louisville NAACP President Raoul Cunningham said he expects legislation proposing a constitutional amendment to be filed for the next legislative session that starts in January.

Cunningham urged organizations like his own and the League to canvass legislative candidates over the weekend to get their positions on the constitutional amendment before next Tuesday's elections.

He said the rate of African-American disenfranchisement is unacceptable, and noted that they constitute 30 percent of the current incarcerated population.

"For us, it's very severe," he said.

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The League's new report also recommends that felons be given technical assistance on the application process three months prior to completion of their sentences. It also urges several state agencies to conduct public education campaigns.

Reporter Elisabeth Beardsley can be reached at (502) 875-5136.

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