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May 22, 2007

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## Proposal Would Restore Voting Rights for People with Felony Convictions Who Have Served Their Time

*Rights are currently restored after completion of probation or parole;  
Proposal would restore rights upon release from incarceration.*

State Representative Joe Parisi (D-Madison) today introduced legislation that would restore voting rights for people with felony convictions upon their release from incarceration.

Currently in Wisconsin, a person's right to vote is restored once he or she has been released from incarceration and has served out the term of his or her probation or parole. Under Parisi's proposal, a person's voting rights would be restored immediately upon release from incarceration.

Parisi said his proposal is similar to a policy recently enacted in Florida at the urging of Republican Governor Charlie Crist, who said he believed it was 'simple human justice' that when 'someone has paid their debt to society, it is paid in full.'

"I agree with Governor Crist; once a person has served their time, they should be encouraged to become productive and contributing members of society. One of our biggest challenges in corrections is reducing recidivism, and one of the most important aspects of this process is reintegrating a person back into mainstream society after they leave prison. Restoring a person's voting rights is one tool we can use to help us reach that goal. It's re-integration or alienation," Parisi said.

"Certainly this is no panacea for the issue of successfully re-integrating former felons back into society, but it is important both practically and symbolically," Parisi added.

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Parisi pointed out that the current practice of revoking voting rights falls disproportionately on African American males.

“3.9 Million people nationwide -- one in fifty adults and one in eight African American men -- are unable to vote due to felony convictions,” Parisi said.

Parisi said that in the State of Wisconsin we have the highest per capita incarceration rate for African American males in the entire country.

“Until we can get to the root of why Wisconsin’s incarceration rate for African Americans is the highest in the country, and until we can guarantee that our justice system is colorblind, any laws that single out felons will fall disproportionately upon African Americans. We have to keep that fact in mind when examining this issue,” Parisi said.

Parisi, who served eight years as Dane County’s chief elections officer, also addressed the administrative costs and problems that result from the current system.

“We spend a lot of time and tax dollars updating voter lists in order to keep track of whether formerly incarcerated felons have or have not completed their probation and parole in order to determine if they can legally vote. This cumbersome process uses up precious resources that could be better utilized elsewhere,” said Parisi.

Parisi said the current system also makes Election Day administration more difficult for volunteer poll workers who must try to keep track of whether a person showing up to vote is a felon, and whether that person has successfully completed their probation or parole.

“Now, in addition to all of their other responsibilities, poll workers have to contend with enforcing the prohibition on voting. This increases the potential for mistakes, greater stress and longer lines at the polling place,” he said.

“Sometimes the most straight forward solution is the best answer; this is one of those times. A policy that allows people to vote once they have served their time will save tax dollars, reduce wasteful spending and red tape, and help to re-integrate former offenders back into society,” said Parisi.