

Voting rights for felons wins support

By MICHAEL A. FLETCHER
THE WASHINGTON POST

TAMPA — Alarmed by the staggering number of people who are barred from voting because of past criminal convictions, legislators in an increasing number of states are advocating proposals to allow felons to return to the voting booth.

The issue, long touted by prisoner rights advocates, is finding support among mainstream civil rights organizations and political leaders who argue that the crazy quilt of state laws that bar felons from voting not only constitutes unfair punishment but also has the potential to shut entire communities out of the political process because such a large proportion of their citizens cannot vote.

That is especially true for African American men, 13 percent of whom are ineligible to vote because of criminal convictions, according to a recent study conducted jointly by the Sentencing Project and Human Rights Watch, both well-known research organizations. In 10 states, more than one in five black men are barred from voting because of their criminal records.

Winning back voting rights for those with felony convictions, from murder to passing a bad check, will not be a simple task. Indeed, it is already evident that the effort faces stiff opposition from those who reject the notion that criminals are entitled to the same voting rights as everyone else. But it is also clear that, in several states, the momentum to change the system has never been stronger.

In Florida, a bill has been introduced in the state legislature that would allow felons to regain their voting rights automatically one year after they complete their sentences, including probation. Currently, felons in Florida are barred for life from voting unless their rights are restored by a governor's pardon.

That state is a prime target for civil rights groups because one-third of the nation's disenfranchised felons reside there and an estimated 31 percent of the state's black men are barred from voting. "The numbers just sort of leap out at you," said Florida state Sen. James Hargrett (D), a co-sponsor of the legislation. "They are really shocking."

Supporters say the proposal is beginning to gain support, including the qualified backing of Republican Gov. Jeb Bush. The new governor, who benefited from high-profile black support during his election campaign last year, has voiced support for the measure as long as it leaves the state with the discretion to withhold rights from felons whose crimes were deemed particularly egregious.

Although restoring voting privileges has more support among Democrats than Republicans, the sheer scope of the problem is beginning to draw interest to an issue long championed mainly by liberals. Many moderates in both parties are also reluctant to reject the idea for fear of appearing racist, given the felony voting laws'

disproportionate effect on minorities.

To appeal to these legislators, advocates argue that disenfranchisement laws conflict with basic notions of justice and discourage what society ought to be promoting: that criminals who have completed their sentences be allowed to return to society as productive citizens. Still, supporters acknowledge that the issue faces an uphill fight, if only because it can easily be misconstrued as soft on crime at a time when the general public sentiment is moving in the opposite direction.

"You probably are going to see a cautious approach to this, even among most of the Democrats," said John F. Cosgrove, the second-ranking Democrat in the Florida House of Representatives, who generally supports the measure. "The Republicans will be less inclined to do anything."

Cosgrove said Florida's current system, which allows felons to apply to have their voting rights restored, is cumbersome and in need of change.

"This could be a real test as to whether compassionate conservatism works in the marketplace," he said.

The legislation in Florida, where several public interest lawyers are exploring civil rights lawsuits to challenge the constitutionality of criminal disenfranchisement laws, mirrors efforts elsewhere. Texas, where an estimated 4.5 percent of the adult population and 21 percent of the black male population are disenfranchised, has eliminated the two-year waiting period previously required before a felon could apply for restoration of voting rights.

In Alabama, where 7.5 percent of adults and nearly 31.5 percent of African American men are banned from voting, legislation to make it easier to restore voting rights for felons failed on a tie vote in the lower chamber of the state legislature last year. Sponsors say they are optimistic that a similar measure will succeed this year.

Rates of disenfranchisement vary widely from state to state. In 46 states and the District of Columbia, felons are prohibited from voting while in prison. In addition, 32 states prohibit offenders from voting while on parole and 29 bar voting while on probation. Felons are barred for life from voting in 14 states, a prohibition that can be waived only through a gubernatorial pardon or some other form of clemency. Only four states — Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Vermont — allow prison inmates to vote.

Fifteen percent of Maryland's black men are barred from voting. Virginia permanently denies felons the right to vote, a prohibition that disenfranchises one in four of the state's black men.

The practice of stripping criminals of their civil rights is rooted in ancient Greek and Roman traditions and has always been a part of U.S. law. Some scholars have pointed out that in several states those laws were honed with racist intent.

"Many southern states tailored their criminal disenfranchisement laws, along with other voting qualifications, to increase the effect of these laws on black citizens," Andrew L. Shapiro wrote in a 1993 Yale Law Review article. Shapiro said that toward the end of the last century, disenfranchisement laws were often crafted to include crimes that blacks supposedly committed more frequently than whites.

In recent times, the increasing racial disparity among the disenfranchised has been a consequence not of racist laws but of the dramatic rise in the number of African Americans being incarcerated.

Since the widespread imposition of mandatory minimum sentences, "three-strikes" laws and other anti-crime measures over the past decade, the proportion of black men who are incarcerated has increased 10 times faster than for whites. The biggest contributor to the explosion in the prison population has been people convicted of drug charges. Those arrested on drug charges were almost five times as likely to be sent to prison in 1992 than in 1980, and drug arrests almost doubled during that time period, according to the Justice Department.

While national surveys have found that drug use and distribution cut across racial lines, blacks are arrested for drug crimes at six times the rate of whites. From 1990 to 1996, 82 percent of the increase in the number of black inmates in federal prisons was due to drug offenses, the Justice Department said.

"The statistics on this issue are really frightening...With the huge number of people disenfranchised, you're really not open to all of the citizenry in making decisions," said Alabama state Rep. Yvonne Kennedy (D), who has filed a bill to make it easier for a felon to regain voting rights in Alabama. "That is very alarming. I think that is getting the attention of many legislators."

Kennedy called the current process for restoring voting rights in Alabama needlessly restrictive. A felon in Alabama can have voting rights restored only after completing all the terms of the sentence and then filing a three-page application with the state's Board of Pardons and Paroles, which also requires a blood sample for a DNA test.

Calling the form intimidating, Jerome A. Gray, an official with the Alabama Democratic Conference, an activist group working to make it easier for felons to regain the right to vote, said, "The question is: At what point does the state's hold on inmates cease?"

Others, however, say it is fair to treat felons differently from the rest of society.

"It is not asking too much for these folks to petition to have their rights restored," said Alabama state Rep. Michael D. Rogers (R), who last year opposed efforts to ease the process for restoring felon rights.

The sharp increase in the num-

ber of disenfranchised people has prompted major civil rights groups, including the Rev. Jesse L. Jackson's Rainbow/PUSH Coalition and the NAACP, to make restoring voting rights for felons a priority. The effort also is supported by a panoply of national religious organizations, including the United Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church USA and the National Council of Churches.

But they face difficult hurdles, not only among legislators who see such measures as soft on crime but among Republicans who see little incentive to empower a potential group of voters who, if they follow established patterns, are likely to vote Democratic.

Recently, Virginia legislators killed an effort to liberalize that state's process for restoring voter rights. Similar bills have met the same fate in past years. Likewise, several congressional efforts aimed at standardizing the process states use to restore voting rights for felons in federal elections have failed in recent years.

But supporters believe those measures will be taken more seriously once legislators fully realize the huge number of people being pushed off the voter rolls because of their criminal past.

"The process of voting is one of the most sacred processes in our democracy," said Hilary Shelton, director of the NAACP's Washington Bureau. "Our hope is that former inmates will participate fully in our democracy, take ownership of their communities and become law-abiding citizens. The right to vote is fundamental to that."

The Chronicle's e-mail address is: wschron@netunlimited.net

If You Worked or Applied to Work for NightRider Overnight Copy Services or IKON Document Services, Legal Document Services Division

Please Read This Notice

There is a proposed settlement to a class action lawsuit that involves:

AFRICAN AMERICAN AND HISPANIC PERSONS WHO FROM APRIL 24, 1994 TO NOVEMBER 1, 1998 WERE: EMPLOYEES - OR - APPLICANTS

THE CASE

Plaintiffs allege that IKON/NightRider discriminated against African American and Hispanic applicants and employees because of their race and national origin in certain employment practices. IKON/NightRider denies these allegations and maintains it has not discriminated against any Settlement Class Members.

THE SETTLEMENT

The Court has preliminarily approved the Settlement which requires IKON/NightRider to pay the sum of \$4.15 million to settle all claims and to commit to the continued implementation of specific programs that promote equal employment opportunities.

YOUR RIGHTS

Complete information about your rights as a Class Member and the Settlement Approval Process is available in the Notice of Settlement including:

- how to exclude yourself ("opt-out") from the Settlement Class,
- how to object or comment on the Settlement, and
- how to make a claim, including important deadlines.

For further information and the Notice of Settlement:

Call: 1-800-265-6531

Or Write: Clerk, United States District Court, District of Texas, Dallas Division, c/o Sprenger & Lang, P.L.L.C., P.O. Box 19500, Washington, DC 20036.

PLEASE DO NOT CONTACT THE COURT.

DATED February 2, 1999. Judge Sam A. Lindsay, United States District Court for the Northern District of Texas, Dallas Division

Big Yield Add-On* CD

Rate: 5.45% APY: 5.60%**
Term: 13 mos.

* You may add to the amount of your certificate of deposit during the term of the certificate. \$50 minimum per additional deposit.
** Annual Percentage Yield. Penalty for early withdrawal. \$500 min. deposit. Maximum balance of \$99,999. Rates subject to change without notice.

Southern Community
BANK AND TRUST
Small Enough To Care

Winston-Salem - 768-8500 (All locations)
4701 Country Club Rd. • 536 S. Stratford Rd. • 3150 Peters Creek Pk.
Yadkin County
532 E. Main St. • Yadkinville • 679-4121
www.scbtrust.com • Touchtone Banking 1-800-258-7093



With FHA's new

higher loan limits,

you can buy your

dream home.

How's that for a housewarming gift?



Since 1934 we've helped over 26 million Americans get into new homes. And starting this year, HUD can help you get a home loan for up to \$208,800. Be sure to check with your lender to find out what the FHA-insured loan limits are in your area. We can also help you with any questions you might have. Just call 1-800-HUDS-FHA and ask for our free 100 Questions and Answers brochure. It'll tell you how to get an FHA loan for as little as 3% down. How to choose the right lender. How to prepare yourself for the homebuying process. And much more. In fact, if you're looking for a home, it's all the information you need.



HUD and FHA are on your side.



1 800 HUDS FHA

Central offers new degree

Students can earn BS in hospitality and tourism

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

DURHAM — North Carolina Central University has become the first historically black college in the state to offer a four-year bachelor of science degree in hospitality and tourism.

The new program will provide career opportunities in an industry that often attracts minorities into low-paying entry level positions, school and industry officials said.

"It will open the door to promotions that weren't available, breaking the stereotype," said program director Beverly Bryant. The mission is to prepare students to assume leadership and entrepreneurial roles in the industry.

The 35 students enrolled in the program are targeted for

graduation in 2002. They will get on-the-job training, an internship and classes in accounting, food preparation, purchasing and geography.

Graduates will be able to begin their careers as front desk or food service managers instead of as maids and janitors, officials said.

The program eventually will include a campus ticket agency through Midway Airlines and a student-run cafeteria.

Bryant said the program's aim is to provide career opportunities in a growing job market.

The hospitality industry is the second fastest-growing industry in the state, behind biotechnology, according to T. Jerry Williams, president of the N.C. Restaurant Association. There are 189 hotels and more than 1,000 restaurants in Wake, Durham and Orange counties alone.

According to Census Bureau

figures, 80 percent of lodging and restaurant managers in North Carolina are white, 15 percent black, nearly 3 percent Asian and less than 2 percent Hispanic.

As-hospitality clients become more diverse, it is important to have ethnically diverse people checking customers into hotels and deciding which meals will be served in dining rooms, university officials said.

"We don't care if they are male, female, black, or white. Things are not as simple as they used to be," Williams said, one of 20 executives on the program's advisory board.

The NCCU program, based on ones at Cornell University and Michigan State University, has an operating budget of only \$100,000, Bryant said. Advisory board members plan to lobby for more funds from the General Assembly.



Busy day?
Relax tonight and read
THE CHRONICLE
Published every Thursday.
Subscribe Today: 722-8624