
Bills introduced to ease determination of eligibility of returning citizens

Contact: Bri McLarty Huppert at (210) 912-4826

Bri.mclarty@nereform.org

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A recent bill introduced by Senator Justin Wayne of Omaha seeks to eliminate the two-year waiting period to register to vote for returning citizens that have successfully completed their sentence. According to a recent report from the Sentencing Project, approximately 7,069 individuals with felony convictions have successfully completed their sentence, but were unable to vote in 2016. Under current Nebraska state law, returning citizens must wait two years after the completion of their sentence, including any probation or parole term, before they are eligible to register to vote.

“Voting helps to improve public safety,” says Nicole D. Porter, director of advocacy for the Washington DC based The Sentencing Project, a national research and advocacy group. “Studies have found that voting is a pro-social behavior linked to reducing crime,” she said.

For Omaha native Shakur Abdullah, the two-year wait is an agonizing barrier – he’s waiting for his opportunity to cast a ballot for the first time. “When I entered prison I was a minor, I wasn’t eligible to vote,” Abdullah explains. “It’s been forty years, I completed my sentence, and yet I’m still ineligible. I’m still waiting to exercise my right to vote”.

Prior to the 2005, returning citizens were required to obtain a full pardon from the Board of Pardons before their right to vote would be restored. A bill brought by Senator DiAnna Schimek of Lincoln in 2004 sought to make restoration of the right to vote automatic.

“At the time that bill passed, Nebraska was on the forefront of states looking at automatic restoration,” states Bri McLarty Huppert, director of voting rights with Nebraskans for Civic Reform, a nonpartisan advocacy nonprofit. “The two-year waiting period was a political compromise to get the bill to the floor. It’s been 12 years, a lot has changed, and it is time to revisit the issue.”

McLarty Huppert points to the lack of policy reasoning behind the two-year waiting period, arguing instead that encouraging the civic engagement of returning citizens could be another tool in reducing recidivism, as well as reducing confusion of county election officials trying to determine eligibility.

Danielle Conrad, executive director of ACLU of Nebraska, agrees, “A recent ACLU of Nebraska investigation found that the two-year waiting period is causing confusion among county officials. Eliminating the two-year waiting period will not only give more Nebraskans a chance to participate in our democracy, but will simplify the jobs of the hard-working county officials.” Conrad continues, “No eligible Nebraskan should be turned away because of confusion around the law. This bill is a win-win for both proponents of civic participation and our county officials tasked with implementing our voting laws.”

Please contact Bri McLarty Huppert, Director of Voting Rights, Nebraskans for Civic Reform, via email bri.mclarty@nereform.org or please call her cell at (210) 912-4826.

Nebraskans for Civic Reform is a nonpartisan, non-profit organization dedicated to increasing K-12 civic engagement and community engagement, veterans job readiness, and protecting voting rights for all Nebraskans. NCR works to create a more modern and robust democracy for all Nebraskans. More information on NCR's programs is available at www.nereform.org