



July 16, 2020

Office of the Governor
State Capitol
1007 East Grand Ave.
Des Moines, IA 50319
Kirby.Connell@iowa.gov

Via E-Mail

RE: RESTORING THE RIGHTS OF FORMERLY INCARCERATED IOWANS

Dear Governor Reynolds,

We are writing on behalf of Quad Cities Interfaith (QCI) and Advancement Project National Office to support the call for restoring voting rights to all formerly incarcerated Iowans immediately. We support local organizers protesting in defense of Black lives who have made this demand amidst recent police murders and systemic racism. Our organizations too are rooted in criminalized communities of color and we believe that those directly impacted by state violence must be enfranchised in our democracy.

Iowa is the only remaining state that permanently disenfranchises people with felony convictions. The only exception permitted is by individual approval from the Governor, a process that your administration has streamlined. But we must not use this last-in-the-nation position to justify half-measures. We are calling on you to sign an executive order immediately that authorizes all people convicted of felonies to vote as soon as they leave prison or begin probation, parole, or other community supervision. This right to vote must exist regardless of the voter's offense or outstanding legal financial obligations (LFOs) including restitution, fines, fees, or court costs.

Our organizations further support legislation to amend the Iowa Constitution to make this legal change permanent. We share your concern that an executive order can be rescinded in following administrations, as Governor Vilsack's 2005 rights restoration order was in 2011. Quad Cities Interfaith supported H.J.R. 14 last legislative session and will continue the fight for constitutional change. We do not support the carve-outs/exceptions delineated in S.F. 2129. Conditioning voting rights on payment of restitution means simply that for two people in the same legal circumstance, income and wealth will determine who can vote. The ballot should never be granted or denied on the basis of wealth.

The vote is a fundamental American right and a critical tool for formerly incarcerated people rejoining their communities. Registering and voting have been shown to help returning citizens adjust to civic life at large. Our entire society benefits when formerly incarcerated people can



vote and run for office with the lived experience of the criminal legal system. Conversely, the denial of voting rights worsens isolation that can come with the thousands of collateral consequences of incarceration, including discrimination in employment and housing. Beyond its communal and political effects, re-enfranchisement is a matter of human dignity. Many of the directly impacted people we have collaborated with over the years report a feeling of whole personhood upon restoration of their voting rights.

We follow in the legacy of Black civil rights organizers who for generations have fought and died for the ballot. According to the Sentencing Project in 2016, Iowa's felony disenfranchisement laws disenfranchised 2.17% of the total population but 9.84% of the African American population.¹ That makes **one in 10 Black Iowans banned from voting because of a felony conviction**. This results from a state prison population that is 26% Black while Iowa as a whole is only 4% Black.² Incarceration and felony disenfranchisement have silenced entire neighborhoods targeted by the criminal legal system. Fully enfranchising Black voters requires enfranchising formerly incarcerated people.

COVID-19 has already upended primary elections across the country. States and localities have struggled to implement mass vote by mail and keep sufficient polling locations open with contagion precautions. This pandemic follows decades of restrictive voter ID laws, purges of the voter rolls, and court decisions that license discrimination and procedural hurdles for voters. Felony disenfranchisement is one of many barriers to the ballot box that disproportionately hurt Black voters and voters of color. The returning citizens of Iowa need the executive order to come quickly and apply broadly. Designating the clear, wide category of all voters with past felony convictions eligible to vote allows Iowa's civic groups like Quad Cities Interfaith to do accurate voter education and registration before the November elections, in alignment with the Secretary of State's office.

Quad Cities Interfaith (QCI) is a nonpartisan, non-profit organization of congregations and community groups whose purpose is to build local leadership and address community issues in the Quad Cities region of Illinois and Iowa. QCI strives to improve the quality of life in our region by developing community leadership in congregations and other institutions, so as to bring our values into public dialogue, and work together to speak with a strong, unified voice in the decisions that affect our lives. QCI has led the implementation of the Scott County Mental Health Court as a diversion program. We have participated in statewide coalition efforts for the past 36 years, and have recently launched our Unlock the Vote Campaign and participated in the Voting Rights Restoration Lobby Day this February.

¹ Christopher Uggen, Ryan Larson, and Sarah Shannon, *6 Million Lost Voters: State-Level Estimates of Felony Disenfranchisement, 2016*, The Sentencing Project (October 6, 2016) <https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/6-million-lost-voters-state-level-estimates-felony-disenfranchisement-2016/>

² Kira Lerner, *Why the Iowa Caucuses Are Even Whiter Than You Think*, The Washington Post (January 30, 2020) <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/01/30/why-iowa-caucuses-are-even-whiter-than-you-think/>



Advancement Project National Office is a next generation, multi-racial civil rights organization. In addition to our voter protection work that has eliminated barriers to the ballot for voters of color, we have supported successful campaigns to restore voting rights in Virginia and Florida. In Iowa, our past work has included examining executive authority to restore voting rights and prevailing against a lawsuit challenging Governor Vilsack's authority to issue his 2005 executive order.

Our organizations have met with partners throughout the country who have secured legislation and executive orders on rights restoration in their states. Advancement Project has also supported some of these partners and states in implementing changes in voter registration and documentation. If you have any questions on how to apply these lessons in Iowa or the other content of this letter, please reach out to Quad Cities Interfaith by emailing Dwayne Hodges at Dhodes71@gmail.com or Amber Bordolo, Executive Director, at Amber@qcinterfaith.org. We are steadfast in our commitment to re-enfranchisement for all formerly incarcerated Iowans and look forward to hearing back from your office on how the state will secure this right.

Sincerely,

Amber Bordolo
Executive Director
Quad Cities Interfaith

Judith Browne Dianis
Executive Director
Advancement Project National Office