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Restoring rights to freed felons is gaining

By Lourdes Medrano
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Convicted felons who have served their sentences face many barriers in their quest to start over, including an inability to vote, serve on a jury or hold public office.

Some Tucsonans think that's just wrong.

"We are in effect, punishing people for the rest of their lives," said Caroline Isaacs, of the American Friends Service Committee. "We want people to live productive lives and be good citizens and then we don't let them do that."

In step with a national trend, the advocacy group has joined a broad coalition of Tucson organizations embarking on a campaign to restore the rights of thousands of Arizonans with felony convictions.

The first in a planned series of public forums drew nearly 200 people Thursday night to the Desert Vista Campus of Pima Community College. Many, including Carlos Crumedy, were convicted felons.

"I'm rebuilding my life, and I should be allowed a second chance," said Crumedy, who moved here from Texas four years ago.

At 18, Crumedy said, he was convicted twice of burglary. He said he completed his sentence and left crime behind.

Now he wants to regain his rights to get rid of some of the stigma associated with being a convicted felon.

"I'm an honest person, I'm married and I have a job," he said. "I'm part of this community."

While state law grants automatic restoration to first-time felons after they serve time and pay fines, those with multiple convictions must file a court petition for reinstatement.

But state Rep. Ted Downing said most people never seek restoration because they don't know they're eligible. That leaves entire communities without a political voice, he added, particularly blacks and Hispanics who are imprisoned at disproportionately high rates.

"The reason people favor sanctions is because they're trying to protect society," he said. "But what kind of a society is it when we deny people the right to vote?"

Laws governing restoration of citizen rights vary widely among states, and private citizens and politicians recently have taken steps to make changes. Arizona ranks high in "creating difficulties for people to be forgiven," Downing said. Next year, he plans to reintroduce a bill that died in the last state legislative session. If passed, it would automatically reinstate all rights, except to bear arms, for all felons.

Convicted felons living as law-abiding citizens deserve a helping hand, said Sam Newsome, president of the Southern Arizona Chapter of the A. Philip Randolph Institute, which handles voter registration and voter education for the AFL-CIO.

More info

- For more information on restoration of rights for people with felony convictions, contact Caroline Isaacs at the American Friends Service Committee, 623-9141, or cisaacs@afsc.org.

"Our hope is to help as many people as possible get their civil rights restored," he said.

But some critics say convicted felons are undeserving of having all rights restored.

"If you're not willing to follow the law, then you should not demand a right to make the law for everyone else," said Roger Clegg, an attorney for the Center for Equal Opportunity, a conservative think tank in Sterling, Va.

It would be more prudent to wait a couple years after prisoners are released to ensure that they indeed are rehabilitated, Clegg said.

"Just because you've served your time, society doesn't have to forget that you've committed a serious crime."

Like other opponents, Clegg sees the national movement to restore felons' rights as tinged with political overtones. "But I don't see it as a racial issue," he noted.

Society should not have to change minimum voting standards "just because it may have a disparate impact on this group or that group," Clegg said.

According to The Sentencing Project, a criminal justice advocacy group in Washington, D.C., about 4.7 million Americans - or one in 43 people - have lost their voting rights because of a felony conviction.

Roughly 1.4 million are black men, who lose the right to vote at a rate seven times the national average, according to a group report.

"Given current rates of incarceration, three in 10 of the next generation of black men can expect to be disenfranchised at some point in their lifetime," the report states.

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